



## The Book

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For any inquires:

[olivierwright@gmail.com](mailto:olivierwright@gmail.com)

Thank you.

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To be continued...



It is Monday, December 22, 2014. 8pm. I was supposed to meet up with a friend, but at the last minute, she cancelled. So, with the evening now free ahead of me, I decide to go up to the roof and smoke a cigarette. I've never been a smoker, but for some reason, I have taken up the habit these past few weeks. No more than a few a day. I know it won't last. I don't particularly enjoy cigarettes, but it gives me a reason to go to the roof and stay there for 10 minutes. I sometimes get the feeling that it stimulates my brain – I have noticed that every time I go to the roof and smoke a cigarette, I have some epiphany for my film.

So I sit down on a chair that has been left here and gaze ahead at downtown Los Angeles. I start thinking about what I'm doing here, about my film, about the past 10 months during which I have been pursuing this project. I have been in LA for three weeks now and only have a week left before leaving. I mentally run myself through what I must do the next day: I have rented a car and have a list of locations I am going to shoot at. This leads me to start stressing about the next step: I haven't yet shot a single second of footage on Skid Row, which is precisely what I came here to do. Time is running out. My mind wonders a little further down the road: what's next? I return to Paris, and still have to go back to Helsinki and London. I guess I'm about half way through the filming.

A neighbor comes to the roof and sits next to me – we chat for a few minutes, he asks me where I'm from, what I'm doing in LA. When I tell him about my film, he seems intrigued. He's in LA to become a filmmaker too, but has found it so hard he's considering quitting to become a chef.

But he wants to know more about my project and how I got here. It seems to be rekindling in him a spark he hadn't felt in too long. He asks if I have been filming a behind the scenes. I haven't. Shame, he says, before giving me his number, asking to meet the next day and leaving.

I stubbed out my cigarette, headed back to the apartment and started writing this book.

What if that neighbor had not come to the roof? What if my friend had showed up as planned and we had gone out? What if *what was supposed to happen* had happened? This book may not exist.

PART 1  
PRE-PRODUCTION

## Chapter 1

### Deciding to make a film

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After spending New Years of 2014 in Copenhagen with some friends, I returned to my tiny *chambre de bonne* in Paris with a severe hangover and no resolutions made. At the time, I was studying at *La Sorbonne* University, pursuing a Master's degrees in International Relations and another one in Philosophy. Both were demanding and I was facing a double-dose of second semester classes and two different dissertations to write by the end of the summer. If I worked hard enough, I would probably continue with a PhD in one field or the other.

How had this happened? How was it that, ever since I was a kid, I wanted to be a filmmaker and yet here I was, pouring all my energy into becoming an academic in political science or contemporary ethics? I felt like the past 8 years of my life, I had been coasting half-asleep on a highway and had completely lost focus of where I wanted to be going – a bit like my drive back from Copenhagen. A change of direction was needed. Urgently.

Another thing was setting off this existential alarm-bell: a few months later, on March 4<sup>th</sup>, I was going to turn 27. That's a tricky age. It's the kind of age where if you say you're still "searching for yourself," people start looking at you a bit funny, as though they couldn't decide whether to empathize with you or loath you a little bit. Plus, having read the Wikipedia biographies of most filmmakers whose

films I like, I was acutely aware that approximately between the ages of 26 and 32, most of them released their first major film. Paul Thomas Anderson was 26 when he made *Hard Eight* and 27 when he made *Boogie Nights*; Jason Reitman, 28 when he made *Thank you for smoking*; Darren Aronofski and Guillaume Canet were both 29 when they made *Pi* and *Mon idole* respectively; while Christopher Nolan had made *Following* and *Memento* by the time he was 30, an age at which Guy Ritchie made *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. This, of course, is discounting freaks like Xavier Dolan, who can crush the morale of any aspiring filmmaker who happens to be born before 1989.

On January 3, I made a decision: I need to *do something* in order to steer my life back in the direction of filmmaking. I had a feature screenplay written and a ton of other film ideas to write, but hardly any directorial experience. So if I was ever going to find a production company that would not only be interested in buying my screenplays but also taking me on as the director, I had to be more than a guy with a couple of good stories. I had to have some experience directing. I *had* to shoot something.

Obviously, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. At first, this was more of a strategic move: I needed to shoot something that looked good and that would be like a calling card anytime I sent out my screenplays. I thought I'd spend about a 6-to-12 months working on it, and have a decent 6-to-12 minute short that would showcase my potential.

At the same time, I was also really excited about the whole thing. I was itching to shoot. I had typed on keyboards

almost every day since I was a teenager, but I hadn't looked through a lens for years and I missed it. I love motion picture. Always have. When I was a kid and I played with my toys, I used to make up action sequences that I would play and replay, each time repositioning my head like I would move a camera, looking for the best viewing angle – and once I had designed a good sequence, I would play the action for myself as though I was watching a movie.

As a teenager, this desire to create things shifted away from toys and moved towards writing. I knew that my brain was wired in such a way that ideas would pop-up in my mind and develop into stories I thought could be interesting. Over the years, I jotted down hundreds of concepts for films, some of which were really stupid and have since been abandoned, others which have stood the test of time and are still in the queue.

My parents divorced when I was 12 and from then on I kept to myself a lot, spending most of my evenings writing. I don't think the divorce caused any sort of trauma that fueled my need to write, but what it did do was give me a lot of time and independence. With no family unit, I was doing my own thing most of the time, and because I was a sensible kid with good school grades, my parents pretty much let me take care of myself in terms of managing for work and leisure.

Therein were the first seeds of an existential choice that defined the rest of my life: work or leisure. As a kid, most of my free time was spent writing. And because at that age there isn't much at stake yet, I could easily manage school work and my writing. School was like this continuous, day-

to-day chore that would end there if satisfied, but was clearly second on my priority list. As I grew older, though, studies inevitably became a bigger and more future-oriented part of life, and so the choice of where to allot time and effort became more consequential: should I develop my creative streak and pursue a risky artistic life, or use my brains and get a solid career in a secure field?

Fittingly, the split between my parents embodied in some ways this dilemma: on one hand my father was pushing me to prepare to be a filmmaker as though it was just a matter of time and there was nothing to worry about, and on the other my mother kept reminding me that most filmmakers aren't making millions in Hollywood but chasing paychecks wherever there's work. As a teenager, it's easy to guess which parent was winning this battle of inspiration.

Throughout my teen years, my father wanted me to get a head start: he bought me tons of books on filmmaking and sent me several times to the screenwriting seminars of Hollywood guru Robert Mckee. Many people criticize his seminars for their formulaic appearances, but I found them to be incredibly inspiring, probably because of my young age. I was 14 the first time I attended his "Story" seminar and so I wasn't there with any particular pressure. The big takeaway for me was really that screenwriting is a craft with rules that must be known and mastered (if only to expand on them and break them), a craft that requires a lot of determination, patience, discipline and suffering too. It instilled in me an admiration for good character and plot design, and yet, because I hadn't been to his seminars like a student going to class or a writer struggling with writer's block, I didn't feel

bound by his teachings – which is why I have written things that would quite probably get a beating if he were to review them.

Throughout middle school and high-school, unlike most of my classmates who had no idea really what to expect in the adult world or what to answer to the question “*tu veux faire quoi quand tu seras grand?*” (French for: “*what do you want to do when you grow up?*”), I never had a doubt: I was going to become a filmmaker and I was going to go and study and work in Hollywood. This unwavering belief had a great impact on my formative teen years – but mostly in a negative way.

The first decision this had a bearing on came with the choice of specialty in high-school. In France, when you turn 16, you must choose a specialty track in which you will graduate from high-school: S (for Scientific), L (for Literary) and ES (for Economic & Social Sciences). You’d hope that they were all in equal standing, each preparing the best in their respective fields, but truth is, S is for the smart kids (the one that “opens all doors” as they say), ES is for those not good enough to get into S, and L is for the rest, the poets and the stoners. Each restricts a little more the options for further studies and of course, further down the line, for job opportunities. When the time came for me to choose, I was offered a spot in S, but instead I chose L because I thought that this was more in tune with my desire to be a screenwriter. What use was math going to be to me anyways? My math teacher and my literature teacher argued over my case, the former claiming it was irresponsible of the latter to encourage me to prioritize the arts over science. Looking

back on it now with my adult brain, I wish I had had more sense.

The bright side of choosing L is that it led me to meet Aline, who had also intentionally chosen L. We quickly became best friends throughout high-school. She and I once teamed up on a semester-long project called TPE (*Travaux Personnels Encadrés*). Aline came up with the subject: “Utopia and architecture.” While she provided the philosophical underpinnings and architectural insights, I designed the presentation using my filmmaking and editing skills. I took my Hi-8 Sony Camcorder and shot footage of a building by French architect Le Corbusier in Rezé, a suburb of Nantes about an hour away from where we lived, and edited it to Antonin Dvorjak’s *New World* symphony. The building, called “*La cite radiense*” (“The radiant city”) had been designed as an urban embodiment of a utopia. I also edited pictures of Brazil’s capital, Brasilia, and its architects Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, to Carl Orff’s *O Fortuna*. We nailed our presentation: the teacher gave Aline a 20/20 grade. I got a 19/20. As I write this, I’m reminded of a study where two chimps perform the same task but one gets rewarded with a raisin and the other with a rock, and the one who gets a rock sees the other get raisins and goes ballistic. At the time, that’s how my chimp brain was reacting. But eventually I came to see that actually, I had been lucky: Aline was the brains of that operation, I was just the nerd with a camcorder and a computer with editing software. Back then, I had little interest in philosophy and even less in architecture, so I remember finding the subject pretty pretentious actually. It’s amusing to me now, thinking back on this small project. Since then, of course, I have developed

a love of philosophy and an interest in architecture. *Psi* is kind-of like my high-school project on steroids. I guess it took my brain a few more years than it did Aline's to appreciate the substance as much as the form, but the seeds were already there. Perhaps she planted them.

For everyone, the high-school years are those where everything ahead is still seems possible. All major life-decisions are yet to be made. And when I do think about that period of my life, I think of Aline a lot, because, while she was the person who was the most like me, there was one crucial difference between us: she had been much smarter and receptive of advice than I had about what was to come. And it paid off for her: after getting the Baccalaureate, she went to Science Po Paris, then La Sorbonne, then Harvard, where she recently finished her PhD in political history. And a bit shamefully, whenever I question my past, I always look at her as a beacon for a path I didn't take and think, "If she did it, I could have done it too." If I had prepared myself in the same way, if I had worked just as much as she did, I, too, could have done a PhD at Harvard. I don't like catching myself thinking like this, to be honest, because it reveals a weird fascination of mine with elite universities... But more importantly, it's complete fantasy. It's basically saying: "If I had been a different person *then*, I would be a different person *now*."

But no, for me, throughout high-school I was so certain of becoming a filmmaker in Hollywood that I never considered any alternative paths. Every time my school gave us presentations about universities and careers, I would ignore them. I was so confident that I didn't need this information

that I would either skip the meeting or sit in the corner working on a story. When I left high-school, I had paid so little attention and given it so little thought, I didn't know how the University system worked, didn't know the difference between prep-schools and Colleges and *Grandes écoles*, didn't understand the difference between public and private schools, had no idea how scholarships and public grants worked. I came out of high-school just about as prepared for the adult world as a 12 year-old.

My problem here was compounded by the fact that France is an extremely diploma-driven society. Your success in life depends greatly on the coherence of your academic path. Consequently, there is tremendous pressure on high-schoolers to decide, by the time they are 18, what career they wish to have for the rest of their life, in order to start off on the right academic path from the get-go - what the French call "*la voie royale*", meaning "royal path" (figure where that came from). Deviating from it comes at the cost of some explicit professional prejudice as well as some unspoken social stigma. The big question I mentioned before was routinely asked in more adult terms: "*Qu'est ce que tu vas faire de ta vie?*" ("*What are you gonna do with your life?*"). Of course, I had my ready-made answer: "I'm gonna be a filmmaker!" But most people didn't have the slightest clue, which meant they listened to those giving them navigation tips.

Looking back on it now that I'm 10 years older, I find it quite a tall order to expect 18-year-olds to confidently answer such a life-determining question given their lack of real life experience, especially when the system is not built to allow those who aren't sure to figure it out. In France, barring

prep-schools (which themselves are high-level schools designed to get you into higher specialized elite schools), you usually start your career education at 18. You start law school, or med school, or business school, when you're 18. Unsurprisingly, the pressure is immense and the potential for mistake and, down the road, for frustration, failure and disappointment is equally great, because once you have chosen a path, it's extremely difficult to change. Any academic switch on a CV is always seen as the sign of some kind of weakness of will, of muddiness of vision, and points to some necessary lack of knowledge and experience relative to other same-aged people who didn't switch lanes. While to some extent this may be the case in other western countries, there are places where it is mitigated; in the USA, for instance, undergraduates go to College precisely to figure out what they want to do, spending four years testing courses and disciplines *before* starting law school or med-school. To the French, this would seem like four years wasted on dilly-dallying.

In my case, the summer after high-school, my father left France and with him went my plan of film school in the USA. My confidence in my future rested wholly on his assurances that it was guaranteed and when the time came for it to happen, I learnt that the money was not there and that I should have been better prepared. I had obviously been too naïve, not taking charge of things earlier for myself, but until that point I had focused on school and writing and not dealt with what came afterwards. So when I realized I wasn't *actually* going to Hollywood, I had to grow up fast and improvise. I was like one of those cartoon characters who overruns the edge of a cliff and only realizes it when he's in

mid-air. The only possible option in my mind was still film school, but this time in Paris. So, in the summer of 2005, I enrolled in a private (read expensive) film school in Paris, called EICAR. This was the closest branch I could cling onto.

Although at first I was relieved to have been able to keep my plan alive, I quickly discovered that film school wasn't for me either. It's not that I didn't like being on student sets, but I found the general environment of film school way too self-indulgent and, contrary to what I expected, rather uncreative. For one, film school is not an environment for someone who, like me, has never been a film-buff. Not to say that's a bad thing, it's just I have limited time and many interests. And in film school, I found myself surrounded by people who had either seen every Godard film or who thought that seeing every Godard film was necessary to become a good filmmaker. And I'm obviously not saying that there's no advantage in watching all those films, there is. But for one, you can't see everything! And secondly, the obsessive extent of knowledge that film schools demand and that students expect from each other is completely unnecessary, unrealistic and often tinted with a hint of snobbery.

This directly played into the second reason I disliked film school: it was extremely insular, intellectually speaking. I was surrounded by people who lived in a world of cinema, 24/7. At school we would study cinema, after school we'd watch movies, after that we'd talk about them and the next day we'd be back in class analyzing films and the cycle would continue. Inevitably, I felt like all we produced at school were clichés. This was the first seed of an ever-growing

conviction that if I wanted to have stories to tell, I had get out of the film world and live other things.

This sentiment was brought to the fore one night when I had dinner with Aline and some of her friends from Science Po. They were discussing social issues and politics - one of them who was the son of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur announced the impending arrival in Europe of a new Internet application that would revolutionize the way we view content, called YouTube. I was skeptical. But I realized that in only a few months since leaving high-school, the gap between Aline and me had become huge. I was a kid at the grown up's table. I left that dinner wanting to be able to hold my own in a conversation about other things than the box office or what kind of mandarin works best.

Around that time I came to seriously question the whole point of filmmaking itself, and the more time I spent in film school, the more disenchanted with it I became. This feeling was compounded by the fact that in 2005, a wave of riots broke out in the northern suburbs of Paris – right where I was living. These riots confronted me with social, economic and political realities that made our little cocoon of expensive artistic struggles feel grotesque. Towards the end of the academic year, I remember having a one-on-one meeting with the head of my department, Jeffrey Goldberg, and asking him: if a calamity struck mankind, what kind of activities would we stop doing first and which ones would we uphold? I could tell from his beaten shrug that he could see what I was getting at: sure, in the grand scheme of things, what we were doing here was pretty low-priority. Film is at best an intellectual stimulant, but mostly just entertainment.

It is totally dispensable. Looking at my school, at my teachers, at my classmates, I felt like we were all clowns, selfish in wanting to do this for a living while most others worked hard keeping society running, doing jobs they didn't necessarily chose or even like. I convinced myself that film is the privilege of the comfortable. Spielberg is only celebrated because we have a society that's functioning correctly. Without doctors and law-makers and entrepreneurs and administrators, Spielberg would either not exist, or would be someone we would collectively bemoan as a misuse of funds. This cynicism would disappear later, as I'll explain; but during that conversation with my teacher, I realized that I would be leaving film school at the end of the first year.

What I had been secretly looking into as a plan B to film school the, quickly became my new plan A, and of course the warnings that my mother had given me earlier had come back to haunt me with full force. After completing my first year in film school, I enrolled in Paris's most demanding law school, Université Panthéon-Assas. This was a radical change of pace. I found myself studying French law, European law as well as English and American common law. For the next few years, I became a typical university student in Paris, going to class, reading books, writing papers, preparing presentations, studying for midterms, being nervous about grades and, of course, wasting days in cafés and nights in bistros. After two years of law school, I shifted gears and got a Bachelor's in Political Science. This initial 3-year run of University had given me a broad grasp on how the world functions politically, but I still felt like I needed more tools to go beyond that and question it. This originally led to my interest in philosophy. A couple years later, I moved to

England and studied ethics at King's College London, before then returning yet a few years later to Paris to do research in contemporary philosophy and international relations.

Most of my friends, who for the most part have stuck to one academic path and have now begun their careers, often joke that I am going to be a “student for life.” And I know what they mean - that I am just going to continue doing Master's degrees all my life – but I take that as a compliment: yeah, I *will* be a student for life, just not a “University student for life.” Honestly, I loved University. And I felt like my blend of studies had given me what I was so desperately lacking after high-school: an understanding of how society works, doesn't work and should work. On top of that, I had new stories to tell, and felt better equipped to tell them in the context of the world we live in.

Ironically perhaps, it was all these years of intense university studies that allowed me to understand the beauty and significance of cinema and rehabilitated my respect for filmmaking. I admired university professors because they had a regular 2-hour slot during which students were (mostly) intellectually invested in what they were talking about. They were in a position to share with an audience something that was important to them and therefore influence behavior and shape the world. If you think about it, 2 hours of listening to someone drop some knowledge on you is a long time – and multiply that by the number of classes, and you have some pretty strong brain-to-brain communication going on there. And then somewhere along the way, I'm not sure exactly how I came to see this, I realized that when people watch a film, not only are they intellectually invested, but they are

also emotionally invested. And there is currently *no other* activity where people will commit all of their attention, both intellectual and emotional, for over 90 minutes to one other person's mind, the writer/director. And therein laid the real power of the filmmaker. Filmmakers have a privileged access to people's minds, to share a feeling, an idea, a message. Spielberg *had* touched more people and influenced society more than any one lawyer or judge or doctor or politician.

This, actually, should have been very clear to me from the start, for Spielberg is *directly* responsible for my own desire to make films. In the summer of 1993, my parents took me to a Cineplex in the north of England to see *Jurassic Park*. And I'm in no doubt: I can pinpoint this experience as the moment that sharply put into focus one of the many possible futures that were open to me at that stage. I had no idea what making a movie entailed but I knew that what I had just witnessed was awesome, that I wanted to experience again and that I would learn how to replicate it for myself and for others. I sometimes wonder: what would have happened if my parents had decided to see *Life with Mickey* or *What's Love Got to Do with It?*

Beyond my particular case, think for a moment of how films actually shape our common world. Suppose I asked you: What does an astronaut do? What's his life like? What struggles does he go through, professionally and personally, back home and in the spaceship? Most of us will have answers to these questions only through what we have seen in movies – *2001, A Space Odyssey*, or *Apollo 13*, or *Gravity*, or *Interstellar*. Or what does it feel like to be criminal? Most of us will never know for real because we don't want to go to jail,

but we can all test it, we can all become gangsters for a couple hours: just watch *Goodfellas*, or *Once upon time in America*, or *The Godfather*, or *Scarface*, or *Snatch*.

Cinema is *not* just entertainment or even a fleeting intellectual stimulant: it's a space-time machine, a device to travel the multiverse and live other lives. A film is a short, safe and secure opportunity to live another life and wonder: what would I do in that situation? How would it feel to be that person or to live that experience? As such it's a real-world shaping tool, because it expands our senses within it and broadens our individual experience of it. Just try to think what your life would be like and what your understanding of the world and of other people would be if you had never been exposed to one film in your life (whether film of television). Sure, you would have books, but the same argument applies there too. Suppose there were no books or films. Just imagine how restricted our awareness of the world would be: anything outside our individual, immediate experience would exist only through tales spoken to us from others. This is why throughout human history, storytellers have always been around and important individuals in any society: they expand the mind. Filmmakers are just at the end of a long lineage of storytellers that expand our consciousness beyond what is immediate.

Think for a moment of who we are: our expectations and behaviors with regards to making friends, dating, having sex, falling in love, falling out of love, getting married, being married, pursuing a career, having children, becoming old, being old, dealing with birth, dealing with death, etc. All these various aspects of life have been just as much, if not

more so, shaped by movies and TV as they have been by any formal education or social conversation. We behave by mimicking others – our parents first, then those around us, and we construct our vision of the world with what is shown to us by those we can observe. And in this respect, film is probably the most diverse and complete source of models and information. Take a TV show like *Friends*, for instance. Given how popular it was when I was growing up and how cherished it still is by almost everyone I know, I'm almost certain this show played a big part in shaping our view of friendship and romantic pursuits and so, through its viewers, in fact shaped society in its image; imagine if *Friends* hadn't existed (and that there was no other similar substitute): perhaps society would be a little different, perhaps we wouldn't date the same way, or balance leisure and work in the same way, or enjoy coffee shops just as much. People who want to become lawyers don't wake up one morning and think that going to court every day would be fun; no, they mostly will have been inspired one day by some work of fiction depicting the experience of a lawyer or judge, and enjoyed the feeling of *being* that character. They projected themselves into that story and in return that story helped shape the real-life trajectory of an actual human being.

The flipside is that writing a film is like creating a small life. You birth it, and everything in it. And in a weird way I think this is one of the reasons why I enjoy writing: I get to create another life, one that I can control and determine in all aspects from beginning to end. This actually raises an interesting thought about character: many films are what we call "character-driven", as opposed to "plot driven", meaning that what makes the story move along is the

character's goals, personality, psychology, etc. And sometimes, you hear of writers who say that their characters have become so well defined that they don't control what happens anymore: the characters take over, they override the writer's power and take on a life of their own. The writer is just there to report this imaginary world that is unfolding by itself, with characters who are acting as if *of their own free will*. But what makes the character "him" or "her"? If you're writing a story with a strong character, let's say a female protagonist, usually you will start by developing her backstory, where/when she was born, who her parents were, what her childhood was like, what she likes/dislikes, her character traits, is she shy, outspoken, smart, silly, adventurous, naughty, etc. Basically you are defining her determinants. What *kind* of person is she when we meet her at the beginning of the story? And this gives you some sense of what kind of decisions she will make as the story unfolds. Suppose then there comes a first turning point in the film where the protagonist faces a choice. As I said, some writers will say that their characters are so well drawn out that there can be no doubt about what the character will chose: she will say "Yes." But as a writer, you still have control - you could very well write that this protagonist says "No." Then what? If saying "no" is so blatantly inconsistent with the protagonist's character up to that point, then people won't buy into it. But there are surely cases where two different, even opposite choices can be made, without either one seeming out of character. What are we to make of this protagonist now? How can we ever say that we are dealing with the same person to begin with? If facing a choice with high stakes, a person decides to lie rather than tell the truth, or to kill rather than let live, doesn't that fundamentally

change who this person is, and always was? Or does it create two new identities who happen to share a common past? One of the guiding principles of good storytelling is to reveal character through choices – the higher the stakes of the choice, the truer the character reveal, the stronger the reward for the audience. But are we revealing character through choice, or creating it? Or both? The problem is that each choice point in writing a story is like a moment of existential crisis, for me – because I don't write characters who tell me what to do. And so even though my characters obviously have a past that narrows their consistently possible futures, I'm always looking at alternatives to explore. And sometimes, they carry me towards conclusions that are different than I was originally aiming at and they force me – for better or worse –to change course. But so what of our own choices? Every time we face a decision, is our relationship to that decision the same as the writer's, who could literally do anything he wants, or as the character's, who is going to do what his determinants tell him to do?

It's probably a mix of both. When I look at the origins of Psi, there were many turning points that led me to want to make it. Why did I want to make films? Why was my mind never willing to let go of that ambition? Could I have really done anything else? Again, it's probably a combination of both: some things that were totally out of my hands, and some points of decision where I could quite possibly have done two contradictory things. And this seems to hold in the case of my project. If I look back and wonder what directly led me to begin it, there are really two major factors, one based on a decision, and the other based on chance.

I'll first explain the "chance" part. In September of 2012, I moved to Argentina with my girlfriend of the time, Ellen. We had both wanted to discover South America for a long time and so we spent the first few months backpacking through Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Chile and the Argentinian Patagonia. Eventually, in early 2012, we made our way to Buenos Aires where we hoped to settle down for a while. However, after our adventures, we had almost no money left. We had just enough to rent a room for 2 weeks and found ourselves with our backs to the wall: we each had to find a job otherwise we'd have to leave. The job market in Buenos Aires wasn't great, especially for two people who didn't speak Spanish well enough for any professional environment. The first week, we were sending resumes left and right with hardly any response. And then, at the last minute, a private middle school replied to Ellen offering her a position as an English teacher and I found the following listing on Craigslist: "*In-House French/English Translator Wanted.*" Just days before we would have had to leave, we both secured jobs and moved into a house in the Palermo neighborhood. We stayed there for another 6 months. During this time, I had a 9-to-5 job at a translation company where I was responsible for translating, editing and proofreading documents in English and French.

When eventually the time came to leave Argentina, I resigned from my job and they offered me a position as a freelance translator. Little did I know then, this proved to be crucial for everything that came afterwards. This freelancing job became the means to achieve everything, including this film: I found myself with a job that paid relatively well and more importantly a job which I could perform wherever I

wanted, whenever I wanted. All I needed was my laptop and an internet connection.

Had this translation company not put out that ad on Craigslist in Buenos Aires, I would never have become a freelance translator, and, upon returning to France, I would probably have ended up in a regular office job, with no time or money to make this film. Instead, throughout the production, I would be translating almost every day, at night, on planes, on trains, in hotel rooms, in coffee shops, making money whenever I had at least 20 minutes to kill – and often I'd look around at where I was, doing what I was doing, and think how lucky I was to have this job.

But was it really all chance? It could equally be said that, while I indeed had no control over the existence of this job opening in the first place, I *did* make the effort to find it. I was the one who looked for it, found it and applied for it. That, right there, is a willed effort on my part, something I decided to do and that I can take credit for, right? Well, sure, no one else applied to this job for me, but can I take credit for being hired? After all, I didn't choose to be bilingual! I was raised that way and spoke both languages before I could have even chosen differently. So really, I was lucky to begin with.

In any case, this piece of luck is only half the story, as there was a clear element of willed decision-making that led to the coming-into-existence of this project.

When we settled in Buenos Aires with our jobs, Ellen and I had been together for almost two years. We lived just blocks away from *Plaza Serrano*, which was connected to the street named after Jorge Luis Borges, the great author of *The Garden of Forking Paths*. Fittingly, our relationship was

itself approaching a serious crossroads. We both knew we were eventually going to leave Argentina and would have to decide what to do then: would we walk hand in hand on the same path in the garden or take different paths at the fork? This question had always been central to our relationship: I was a French citizen whose base was in Paris, she was an American citizen whose base was in Seattle and we had met while studying at University in London. If you have ever seen Drake Doremus' painfully accurate indie film *Like Crazy*, you'll have a solid sense of what our life was like at times.

As winter approached in the southern hemisphere, we were told that we would have to leave our house on the last day of June. The fork had arrived quicker than we had anticipated and this precipitated the decision. At that point, although we weren't unhappy together, we both felt like there were good reasons to let it end. We both had some growing up to do before becoming adults who are able to commit to each-other for the long-run. For my part, my gut was telling me that I had not yet lived what I had to live before settling down with someone. I still had strong desires to return to university in France and I also knew that somewhere down the road I wanted to pursue my ambition to be a filmmaker. So when I imagined how the future would go if I stayed with Ellen, I saw myself moving to Seattle, finding work there and settling into a stable life where, for better or worse, I would distance myself from these goals. She probably imagined some similar version of the future where she came to France and distanced herself from her own personal goals too.

This gave us a sense of purpose, a reason not to fight the separation and let it happen. On our last day together in

Buenos Aires before flying off in different directions, we decided to visit the one place we hadn't yet been: *la Boca*. There's a moment from that day which is burned in my memory, probably because I knew I would need it later to cope: while we were on the bus, Ellen was sitting on my knees and I was looking out the window, watching the streets going by, realizing that our countdown had less than 24 hours left, and just repeating to myself: "What is happening is good for you. It's gonna be hard, but this is good for you." "Hard" turned out to be an understatement; but so did "good" I guess. It was traumatic, but necessary.

For several weeks after we parted ways, neither of us wanted to break up and so we kept up an illusion of a couple between Paris and Seattle. But in the end we let distance and time do their job and numb our connection. Strange how your own gut can take you away from something your heart wants. I just couldn't come to terms with the fact I was willingly walking away from something that I still wanted so much. And the separation *must* have been willed, because in truth it would not have been hard for us to stay together: all we had to do was get married and chose a city. But while at first we both toyed with the idea, we both kept each other at bay. When I offered to move to Seattle and work it out, she resisted; when she expressed a desire to move to Paris, I discouraged her. Each of us was torn, one part responding to emotions and wanting to stay together, the other part reasoning rationally and pulling away.

Perhaps this is a symptom of our generation: with endless opportunities to go out in the world and explore who we want to become, the romantic imperative becomes even more secondary than it could ever have been before. Don't settle with someone else before you have settled with

yourself. Don't let another person be a factor in who you become: define yourself first, then find someone who fits into your own self-made picture. Maybe, after all, we made the sensible, mature choice. I like to think we did. We realized that if we did stay together, one of us would necessarily be sacrificing part of themselves at too-early a stage in their life for the sake of someone else, and that we would both be happier down the road if we sacrificed our relationship and individually formed ourselves fully first. The tricky thing, of course, is being able to recognize when you are sufficiently formed to be in a position to hold onto the right person at the right time.

To this day, I often wonder what my life would be if we had stayed together, if, for instance, I had flown to Seattle and given it a shot. Maybe it wouldn't have worked out, or maybe we would be happily married, doing whatever life would have brought us. Looking back, I can't regret the decision, but I certainly feel extremely sad that it is a life-path that had to be interrupted. Somehow, it's a life-path that I hope another version of myself, in some parallel world, got to live out.

If torn decisions are the mark of our free will, the moments in life when we actually have a say in forming who we later become, then deciding to not pursue that relationship, despite the cost of losing a person who had been such a positive influence on my twenties, was one of the most defining acts of self-formation of my life. Ultimately, following my instinct back to France, I enrolled in university to pursue the research I was interested in and ended up in the position where I decided to make this film.



## Chapter 2

### Coming up with the idea

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When I decided I wanted to shoot something, I already had some short ideas I could shoot – spec adverts and short films. But once I took a closer look at them, I noticed they all needed a level of production which I simply couldn't afford: actors and sets and lighting and boom operators and dollies and steadycams. And if I was going to shoot any of them, I would want to do them correctly, with all the money and equipment that was required.

I had to come up with something new that could be shot with what was at my disposal. This established the first, determining question: what resources do I have that I can safely rely on? This is often how independent filmmakers, especially those working on next-to-no budget, will approach their project: work backwards from what you have to build your story, reverse-engineer the end from the means.

What did I have? A few thousand dollars. What didn't I have? The two main things you need if you want to get any film off the ground: equipment and people. For a brief moment, I considered renting both, but when I discovered I could only afford a shoot that lasted about one afternoon, it was settled: I was going figure out how to shoot a film with whatever resources were at my disposal.

On the equipment front, with the money I had, I could perhaps afford some equipment, but not much. So whatever

happened, I had to write something that required minimal equipment and set-up. I didn't want to have to install rigs and lights, with multiple actors and a plot that would make continuity an issue. I needed something easier to shoot, that allowed for guerilla-style filmmaking, on the fly in natural light.

On the people front, I had my own time and energy. It's not like I was part of a filmmaking community where I could quickly assemble a team of competent friends to shoot a film. Most of my classmates from film school were by now spread around the world, many of them not even in films anymore, and the few contacts I still had weren't close enough that I could call in a favor. So I knew that whatever I did, I would be mostly filming myself and relying on my closer friends who had never held a camera before.

With these constraints in place, the most important question was: what story do I want to tell? As I developed several ideas, they all revolved around the same premise I had been steadily growing obsessed with for several years already: what if you could meet yourself in another life, having made a different decision at some point? Each time, this narrative device was just a way of exploring many things I was personally preoccupied with: what if I had chosen this instead of that? Who and where would I be right now? Would I be happier or more successful? Would I envy or pity my other selves, would we become friends or hate each other? The next logical step in this kind of questioning was whether or not I actually could have done any different than I did. Was I entirely determined to do what I did, and if so,

what does that say about my successes and failures, the times I think I was lucky or unlucky, my regrets, and so on?

I somehow knew that this general theme of freedom was what my film would be about, although at that stage it was more of a general direction than anything precise in terms of content. This is when I honed in on the main asset I had at my disposal: travel. I had friends and relatives in different places around the world and so, thanks to my freelancing job, I could easily travel to these various locations and shoot there. Not only would this be an easy way of adding production value to the film, I knew it could serve the theme: I could tell the story of a character who, through different life choices, ended up living in different locations.

But where? First of all, I live in Paris - so that was the first city on the list. London is close-by, I know the city well and my best friend from high-school, Thomas, still lived there, so I knew I could stay with him. Where else? Another high-school friend of mine, Paul, had just moved to Helsinki, Finland, for work. That could be a third location. Then my best friend from university, Marie, had been living and working in Jerusalem for a year and I was adamant that I would go and visit her before her contract was up. This would provide me with a fourth place to shoot. And finally, my father lived at the time in Las Vegas, so I knew I could go over there as well. It's only later, when I developed the idea for the story, that I switched Las Vegas to Los Angeles.

During the shoot, I often got asked: why did you chose *these* 5 cities? And I suppose my answer was a little underwhelming: I didn't *choose* them, they chose themselves, out of convenience. Had I been able to actually choose any 5 cities in the world, it may very well be that I would have

selected a better or more interesting combination of 5 cities to put together. But I had to do my best with what I had, and in a sense, this led to some interesting creative moments. Settling on these 5 cities meant I could spend a lot of time researching how best to exploit them. It was like I had been given the clay to play with and it was up to me to figure out how best to use it.

With the different locations in place, I sketched out an outline for the film: 5 alternate lives of the same character, each in a different city, having all branched out at some point from a common past. To tie them all together and justify the documentary style of shooting, the film itself would be construed as part of a research experiment, conducted by a psychologist in a 6<sup>th</sup> world – the original world – where the means to scope and travel parallel universes had been discovered. This would serve as the narrative device to bookend the plot, anchor the 5 lives and provide a narrator to carry us along the way.

The downside, though, of shooting in different countries with the same protagonist, was that I couldn't afford to bring an actor with me everywhere I went, especially given the flexibility, time-wise, that this shoot was going to require. That's why pretty quickly I just decided to play the character myself. This didn't appeal to me at first, because I have never seen myself as an actor and I didn't particularly want to expose myself to the charge of being a narcissist for casting myself as the lead in my own movie. However, it was a necessity, so I quickly just accepted it and chose to make the most of it. The reassuring thing was that I knew I wouldn't be writing scenes that really required much acting per se – it would just involve trying to be as natural as possible in doing some regular aspect of life like working, or

eating, or playing sports. On the flipside, the advantage at playing the role myself was that I was could then blur reality and fiction by drawing on my own life to build the character.

When came the time to actually write down exactly what lives I would be leading in these different cities, I once again established first what resources I could rely on in each and then sought to draw up a believable situation. For instance, in London, Thomas worked at the Hawley Arms pub in Camden, and so I thought perhaps the pub could be a great location. When his manager agreed to the shoot, this led me to write the “London life” as one where I become a bartender – which, in itself, is completely believable. Back in 2010, I was a bartender in Islington. Similarly, my friend Marie, in Jerusalem, was working for the French consulate, in charge of relations with NGOs and supervising French development projects in the region. I immediately realized the great potential for me to learn about her work and draw inspiration from whoever I would meet over there – that’s how I built the “Jerusalem life” as one where I work for a UN agency. Again, this is a believable outcome: I studied political science with Marie in University and later worked for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

One thing I was wary of, however, was that using different locations could be seen as a gimmick. And I didn’t want it to be this way. I wanted them to be reflections of the film’s theme, with visual connections between the cities which could represent it. To do this, I thought of filming relevant architecture and artwork in the cities, as a way of showing how different locations can have similar characteristics, how the same premise can become played out differently in different contexts, how things can take on new

significance if looked at under a new light. I set off on this idea with one main rule: the connections I would film had to be things I could see from the street or that were outdoors in publicly accessible spaces.

At that point, however, I wasn't at all thinking about the legal aspects of these shots. I was just so excited by the prospect of adding these ingredients to the whole mixture that I just didn't question whether or not I would be allowed to do so. I was only interested in whether it would be artistically interesting. I also felt completely unrestrained because at that point this project was still meant to be nothing more than a personal challenge and passion project, something that in the end would probably not have any other purpose than to be a reel, and so issues pertaining to image rights were not even on my mind. As I explain in a later chapter, the question of intellectual property rights attached to the architecture and artwork present in the film would turn out to be one of the biggest headaches this project would come to face.

But in the beginning, when everything felt like pure exploration, the research phase was an extremely interesting part of the pre-production. To get started, I made a massive chart on my computer that listed the pictures and addresses of all the places that represented interesting parallels between the cities. I started by inputting those that I already knew from my own experience, mainly in Paris, London and some in Los Angeles, and once I had exhausted my own memories, I turned to the internet: I'd go on Google and search for words like "Public sculpture", "Statue", "Architecture in [city]", etc. I'd look at the results in the pictures to see if anything looked similar. Finally, when Google Pictures wasn't offering anything new, I'd go directly

into Google Maps and Google Earth and virtually visit the five cities. Doing so, I came to learn a lot about the five cities, their history, their architecture, their art, and many amazing connections I hadn't anticipated appeared. For instance, I had no clue at the beginning of the shoot that there were three very similar, giant red iron sculptures, all by American sculptor Alexander Calder, in 3 of my 5 cities: in Los Angeles there is the *Four arches*, in front of the Bank of America Center; in Paris, there is *The red spider* in the La Défense neighborhood; and in Jerusalem, there is *Homage to Jerusalem*, on Mount Hertzal. This is but one example of the many interesting connections that emerged from the initial random selection of cities.

Before shooting, I also needed to have some sense of what the film's visual language and atmosphere would be like. On the one hand, the film's look was always going to be a result of the limitations: handheld, natural light, improvisation, etc. But even before I bought any equipment, there were many films I admired and that were swirling in my mind as inspirations for the visual vocabulary I wanted to use myself. For instance, I've always been a fan of Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*. This is a film that is so unashamedly unique in its intent and style, with no separation between the visual language and the message. It was also the first time I had seen a "drive-lapse," a type of shot where the camera is rigged to the front of a vehicle and just films the road ahead. For some reason, I fell in love with this kind of shot and always wanted them to last longer. I think they subconsciously put us in the same reflective state that we find ourselves in when we are driving or aimlessly staring out the window. In the months that lead up to the beginning of

this project, I also discovered Ron Fricke's *Baraka* and *Samsara* (Ron Fricke was Reggio's cinematographer) – these two beautiful films showed me how careful selection of locations and editing choices can create a new meaning out of things that, individually, have an entirely different significance. I liked how the patience it had in just showing us beautiful places that perhaps we were already familiar with but hadn't taken the time to admire, offered a different perspective on the world, allowing us to form connections and learn new things from familiar sights. All this made the film feel like an experience more than a movie and gave me confidence that it was possible to take this contemplative approach and yet still keep the audience engaged. In the same vein, Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey* is one of those films that blew me away by the sheer confidence it had in subjecting its audience to a meditative, trippy voyage while handling profound themes.

But perhaps the film that influenced me the most in making *Psi* is Terrence Malick's *Tree of life*. This film was actually a turning point for my appreciation of film as an art form. When it came out in 2011, I was working as an usher at the Odeon movie theatre in Leicester Square and therefore had free tickets to go and see any movie I wanted. One night, I took my girlfriend to see *Tree of Life*. We managed about 10 minutes and walked out, thinking we had avoided the longest and most boring film ever. A couple years later, I came across *Tree of Life* again, and this time, I just felt like watching it. I can't explain why, the time was right. I sunk right into it and drifted along for 140 minutes like I was being carried on a gentle river. *Tree of life* became the first film which actually made me think of my life for several days after it ended. Its general feel stayed with me and still I often

catch myself experiencing a moment in the day as though somehow it was in Malik's world, with the same pace and movement. As I developed the film, particularly in the editing phase and when I was writing the narrator's lines, I made several explicit references to *Tree of Life*, because in a way, I like to think of Psi as a sort of response to it – both are asking many of the same questions, but each offering very different paths to answer them.

All these films had one thing in common: they forced people to think and gave them the space to do so. But in every case, the food for thought came mainly from a combination of the imagery/music, the dialogue/narration and the plot/themes. This is perhaps where I wanted to take a slightly different route with Psi: I thought it would be interesting for the important information to be delivered not through things that would be created by me (dialogue/narration) but from authentic, real-world voices worth learning from. If I could get some philosophers and scientists to talk about human freedom, I could edit their words into a narrative framework. My hope was that by peppering real expert insights into an imaginary, high-concept setting, I could provide an engaging, emotional blanket in which to do some serious brain work.

However, when I first thought of this idea, I never dreamt I'd ever be able to reach top American and British thinkers, some of whom were famous beyond the academic world. I originally rested mainly on the confidence that I could count on my own philosophy professors in Paris, who knew me personally and had worked with me on various research projects. And yet, when I approached them, they declined with a briefness that signaled at best a form of

shyness or modesty, and at worst a patronizing unwillingness to indulge one of their students in something non-academic (worse, something artistic). Compare that to the intellectuals from the English-speaking world who I solicited *via e-mail*, and who *all* replied either to agree to an interview or to request more information: Dan Dennett, Max Tegmark, Barry Schwartz, Alfred Mele, Mike Gazzaniga, Bob Kane, Bob Doyle, Griogrio Coricelli, Galen Strawson. Others who had initially shown interest include astrophysicist Michael Duff and even Brian Greene, one of the faces of popular science in the USA. Even Steven Pinker replied to me personally - albeit to decline for lack of time - but at least he took the time to apologize for being swamped and wish me luck. This openness and willingness of the English/American to be involved really struck a chord with me and, sadly, cast the French academics in a rather distasteful light.

Obviously, once I had secured my 9 experts, I was overjoyed and impatient to meet them. My only regret was that I wasn't able to diversify the cast. While I did contact some women, they were hard to find and they either didn't get back or declined, and unfortunately, aside from some extremely public "A-list" intellectuals (such as Michio Kaku or Neil deGrasse Tyson, who I just didn't even attempt to get in touch with) the high academic and scientific fields into which I dove in my quest for interviewees seemed to have a rather telling shortage of non-Caucasians and women.

In any case, securing the involvement of the 9 experts who responded positively was a watershed moment for me, because I realized for the first time that my project was more than a short film. If I successfully interviewed them all, I would surely have enough content to fill 90

minutes of film. I was far from imagining that they would eventually also fuel a 9-episode Web Series.

Often when people ask me about my film and how I came to make it, the expression I use to best capture how it went is that it “snowballed.” Originally, I was only thinking of doing a short film with no other purpose than displaying some directorial skills. But, little by little, it grew: first, deciding to center this film around the concept of meeting alternate lives planted a suspicion in my mind that this was too broad and rich a subject to be fully explored in under 15 minutes; then, the idea of establishing visual connections between the 5 cities brought more meat to the enterprise; and finally, the prospect of interviewing experts for the film made it difficult to not expand the scope of the project further. Not only did these various steps lead me to believe my film could be a feature film, but they also made me *want* to make this film in its own right. It was no longer an exercise in order to get my first film produced. It *was* my first film.

## Chapter 3 Budget & Equipment

As I was sketching the structure of the project, the main factor shaping the direction it could take was money. I had a few thousand dollars set aside, and that's all I had to work with.

You may wonder why I never looked to get funding? Well, in fact, I did. I tried, about a year earlier, admittedly for a different project. I had written a short script which I thought was one of my best pieces of work. It told the story of a beaten housewife whose only escape from her home and husband was going to the supermarket where she had a passionate affair with one of the employees. I sent it to the CNC (*Centre National du Cinéma*), a French public agency that selects every year a certain amount of projects that it then helps to fund, sometimes with grants of up to 100,000 euros. They rejected it. Perhaps the script wasn't good enough to get selected, that is a matter of judgment, but my own situation didn't play to my advantage: I was a nobody, I had no previous experience they could draw upon, there was no production company backing me, and I knew nobody on the inside who could put in a good word for my project. I was, for all intents and purposes, an unattractive investment.

And fair enough, that makes sense. But this rejection reinforced my somewhat cynical, somewhat realistic belief that when you don't already have a foot in the door, it's very hard to even find the door. This is how I viewed the industry loop: to find the door, you need an agent; to have an agent, you need to be recommended; to be recommended, you need previous work to be recommendable; and to have

recommendable work, presumably, you need to already have been through the door. Where do you start if you're not already somewhere in the loop? The only step in the loop I felt I could hack and get around was the first one: to find the door, you need an agent. Maybe I could find the door myself. A little begrudgingly perhaps, I felt like the only people who got anywhere from nowhere were those who, at some point, stopped depending on others to extend a hand or waiting for the loop to come and scoop them up, and figured out a way to shimmy their way in there themselves.

For a while, I thought about crowdfunding, only to abandon that idea very soon. While I think that crowdfunding is a great idea that is suitable for many projects, it just didn't suit mine. To do a crowdfunding, you need to have a budget that you can determine in advance and set as a goal. I didn't know how much my project was going to cost at the onset, so I couldn't determine a budget to aim at. Also, managing a successful crowdfunding campaign is almost a full-time job in itself. I didn't want to spend several months building and sustaining a crowdfunding campaign that had no guarantee of even generating the funds. Plus, to be honest, I didn't want to "owe" anyone anything – not money wise, but result-wise. When a lot of people publicly invest in your project, then you have some form of moral obligation to deliver. I didn't want to have this kind of pressure. I didn't need it. I had enough money to buy my equipment and travel to the different locations, and I was still working as a freelance translator, so I'd still be making money along the way. I just wanted to get the ball rolling and do the best I could, on my own terms. Eventually, I did hold a small crowdfunding page, but it was more a place for

friends and family to be a part of the adventure if they felt like it. About 15 people chipped in, generating around 1000 euros.

Between those contributions and my savings, I had at that point about 6.000 dollars to spend, and the first thing I needed was equipment. Buying my own equipment actually made a lot of sense. What I really wanted to do was to learn, to teach myself the basics of photography and practice them with the camera. By owning my own gear, I could play around with the equipment as much as I wanted. If I rented equipment, I would have no time to be a learner and any mistake would cost a fortune.

I spent three months extensively researching all the equipment I could need, and not only comparing products, but trying to understand each one as best I could so I knew what to look for. And one thing I learnt then was this: when you have to balance the desire for good equipment with the restrictions of a limited budget, you quickly become an expert, both on the products and on where to buy them.

I spent hours upon hours reading reviews and watching tests on websites such as [nofilmschool.com](http://nofilmschool.com), [phillipbloom.net](http://phillipbloom.net), [kenrockwell.com](http://kenrockwell.com), [camerarocket.com](http://camerarocket.com), [learningdslrvideo.com](http://learningdslrvideo.com), [DigitalRevTV](http://DigitalRevTV) and [Film Riot on YouTube](http://Film Riot on YouTube), [dslrfilmnoob.com](http://dslrfilmnoob.com), [cheesycam.com](http://cheesycam.com), [dslrvideoshooter.com](http://dslrvideoshooter.com), and many others. I discovered a whole ecosystem of DIY filmmakers offering tips and cost-saving tricks. I was picking up bits and pieces of information left and right, making notes, comparing information, hoping that after crunching

all these reviews and opinions, some truth would emerge and point me in the right direction as to what I should buy.

The first thing I had to figure out was: which camera should I buy? This is the big question. The one thing I knew for sure was that I wanted to get a camera that could produce the “cinematic look.” This expression is thrown around by all aspiring filmmakers because everyone wants to make a film that looks like it was produced in Hollywood. And this might sound a bit conceited, but it also makes total sense, because if the picture looks terrible or the quality of the camera is clearly poor (unless this is an intentional effect relevant to the story), no matter how awesome your story is or convincing the actors are, the audience will be irritated by the picture and their mind will stop at the screen instead of going beyond it. I recently watched the extras on the DVD for Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs*, and there are excerpts from an early test shoot where Buscemi and Tarantino play out their scenes in what looks like someone’s house and on video camcorders; it was correctly staged, the cameras were set up on tripods and the footage was edited like a normal film. But it looked like what it was: cheap (and of course it wasn’t meant to be anything else). Right there, you had a Tarantino screenplay played out by great actors, and there’s no way, as a spectator, I would have sat through 90 minutes of it. You can think of it in terms of music: you could have a great song, with the best lyrics, a brilliant melody and catchy hooks, but if you record it with cheap MIDI instruments and sing with a mediocre voice, the quality won’t show, people just won’t listen to it. Get it produced in a professional studio, with a real singer and good mixing, and you have a potential hit. Of course the job of producers is to see beyond

the superficial “cheap look” of amateur films and decipher the potential talent of the creator who could be better served with more money. But what also attracts the attention of producers is work that has already attracted the attention of an audience, and for the general public, shitty image often becomes a shortcut to shitty movie. Good form is necessary to appreciate good substance, just like a clean window is necessary to look at beautiful scenery.

I think my unwillingness to compromise too much on the quality of the picture was born out of my experience at film school. At that time, discounting the rare occasions when we shot on 16 mm, we would primarily use DV cameras. The quality was just terrible – no matter how much effort you put into the production value, whether it was expensive lighting or heavy-duty dollies, your film looked like a soap opera made for some local television channel. The result felt like a complete waste of time and energy.

Luckily for me, by early 2014, the DSRL (Digital Single-Lens Reflex) market had been in full explosion. Ever since the Canon 5D Mark II came out in late 2008, independent filmmakers and hardcore amateurs suddenly could afford to make high quality video. And by that I mean they could go out and shoot anything and it could look like it had thousands of dollars of equipment behind it. I’m amazed how the whole “DSLR filmmaking world” was an unforeseen side-effect of the photography market. These cameras were not meant for motion picture, but for stills. It’s people, users themselves, who played around with the cameras and found a way to make them far more valuable than originally intended. These cameras were being equipped

with functions that, in the video market, would cost way more for any device which displayed them: large and extremely high resolution sensors, great low-light capabilities, the ability to interchange lenses, the compact size, etc. These cameras were able to take amazing photographs and as soon as the DSLR manufacturers added a “video mode” to them, essentially enabling them to take at least 24 high-quality pictures per second, all these functionalities became “unlocked” for the filmmaker to take advantage of. It suddenly became affordable to have a camera that could produce the “cinematic look.”

After comparing all possible cameras on the market, I narrowed my selection down to three models which all had various advantages and disadvantages:

- the Canon 60D: not only was it the cheapest (around 500 euros), but it was the only one to have a swiveling flip screen, which I thought would come in handy. However, it was a crop sensor (i.e. not the largest type of sensor, I'll explain shortly) and had the lowest specs compared to the others.
- the Canon 7D: this camera had a great reputation for being sturdy, for allowing practical sound recording, and was still very affordable (around 1000 euros). However, it was also a crop sensor.
- the Canon 6D: this camera had the highest specs of them all, and especially, it boasted a full-frame sensor. No surprise, it was the most expensive (around 2000 euros).

You'll notice they're all Canon; this is just a coincidence and a little bit of personal bias. My father was a photographer and he worked with Canon equipment, so I was used to seeing Canon gear around the house since childhood. Besides, I felt like there was probably not much difference in quality, for similar-range cameras, between Canon and their main competitors such as Nikon or Panasonic or Sony. So by picking a brand at the onset, I just saved myself the pain of comparing each camera-type across different brands.

However, I knew that the more I spent on the camera, the less I'd be able to spend on other things, such as the lenses; inversely, if I got a cheaper body, I could afford better glass. And one thing I kept reading on the online forums was that the quality of the picture had more to do with the lenses than with the body or the sensor.

I soon eliminated the 60D simply because I thought I'd need to get an external monitor anyways, so the flip-screen would be of little use. Comparing then the 7D and the 6D, the big difference was the size of the sensor. The 6D's sensor is full frame, meaning that it corresponded to a 35 mm film, whereas the 7D's sensor is an APS-C "crop sensor", which is smaller. What this means is that, using the same lens, the full-frame sensor captures more of what is to be seen. If you position a full-frame camera on a tripod and take a picture, then position a crop-sensor camera (with the same lens and on the same tripod), the crop-sensor picture will look exactly like the first one but with a few centimeters "cropped off" on the edges, as though you had zoomed-in on the full-frame picture. This bugged me; I knew I wanted to be able to shoot extra wide angle footage and so necessarily the crop sensor

would limit the desired effect. The other advantage of the full frame sensor is that it has a lower pixel density, meaning it generates less noise in low-light conditions. Given that I was going to shoot with natural light, this was another very valuable asset.

However, just as I was feeling comfortable with the Canon 6D, another camera showed up in my Internet research and almost caused a last minute change of heart: the Blackmagic Cinema Camera. For about the same price as the 6D, the image quality of this camera was supposedly far better, almost as good as the Red cameras (these are the hallmark of professional digital filmmaking, with models costing anywhere between \$10,000 and \$50,000). Online forums unanimously claimed that this was a better camera than any DSLR for shooting video. For a couple days, I was convinced this was the camera for me, until I realized that the Blackmagic shoots in RAW format, which means that every frame of footage contains the highest possible amount of information (as opposed to other formats, such as those taken by DSLRs like the 6D, that contain a certain amount of compression). While this is what allows its image quality to be much higher, it also requires both much more storage space and incredible processing power for all the post-production (editing, color grading, etc.). Given that I wanted to edit on my Dell laptop, working with RAW footage would force me to buy a new computer and new software. Perhaps the 6D would yield a lesser image quality than the Blackmagic, but only a trained eye would probably notice the difference, and it would spare me many headaches down the road.

So, in March 2014, I bought the Canon 6D. This was (until post production and music) the single biggest expense I had to make, and as soon as I confirmed the purchase, I knew there was no turning back. Seeing those 2,500 euros disappear from my account was at once frightening and exhilarating, because it meant I was committed. If I didn't continue my spending spree and shoot a film, I had just wasted money on an expensive gadget.

The next decision I had to make regarded the lenses. The camera came in a bundle with a kit lens, the Canon EF 24-105 mm F4 with image stabilizer. I knew this would be an extremely handy lens, as it started fairly wide and covered a great number of focal lengths. It's only limitation, really, was that the aperture couldn't go any further than F4 (meaning it won't let in extreme amounts of light, which in turn means that the depth of field will be limited).

I knew I needed at least another lens, first and foremost, one that could give me a very shallow depth of field, which meant looking at a prime lens – this is a lens that is set at one focal length only (as opposed to being a zoom lens), but that can let in a lot more light. When I looked at the different lenses which were available, compared to the price I was willing to pay, I quickly honed in on the three Canon 50 mm lenses, each one having different apertures. The insane thing I discovered is that the ability to let in just a little bit more light costs *a lot* of money. To give you an idea, the three lenses are all 50 mm, the main difference being their aperture, meaning that at their most open, they can let in more or less light:

- The first is f/1.8: of the three, this one is the one that can let in the least amount of light, even though on the scale of things, compared to all lenses, it lets in a lot of light, thus allowing very shallow depth of field. This retails usually around \$100.
- The second is f/1.4: this one is bigger and sturdier than the previous one and lets in more light. It retails usually around \$350.
- The third is f/1.2: this lens is widely considered to be one of the best lenses on the market. But it costs a whopping \$1,500.

Again I thought that the result would be insignificant to the untrained eye and so I happily went with the 50 mm f/1.8, otherwise known as the “plastic fantastic” for its cheap plastic build.

When I got the camera and tested the zoom lens, I knew the 24mm would sometimes not be wide enough for my taste. So I did so more research online and discovered the Rokinin 14mm T3,1 lens – this sounded like the perfect wide angle lens. However, sometimes just reading up on lens specs isn’t enough, and so, once again, the magic of Internet played its part: I found samples on YouTube of people using it. Yes, there are people out there who will take the time to buy a lens, shoot some footage with it, and then post a video which has no other purpose than to display what picture this lens gives. Seeing these videos was like being able to test the lens before having it. And despite some aberrations in the corners, it looked pretty good, and more importantly, it cost

“only” 375 euros, which made it one of the cheapest wide angle lenses out there.

That was my kit, complete. Overall, the 24-105mm lens is the one I have used the most. Probably 70% of the film is shot with this lens. The 50 mm lens was my second most used lens, mainly for scenes following the character in his different lives, and I used the 14 mm lens for some of the driving sequences and all the scenes at the beach with the child.

After buying lenses, you naturally turn to filters. The first trick I learnt is that if you have lenses with diameters of varying size, then there’s no need to buy a filter for each different one: just buy filters for your biggest lens, and then buy lens adapter rings which will fit onto any of your lenses and allow you to use the same filters on all of them. With regards to the type of filters, there are so many out there that it quickly becomes frustrating trying to work out what will be useful or not. In the end, I only bought two: a polarizing filter and a variable ND filter. And while the polarizing filter was only useful for filming myself driving from the outside (its purpose is to filter out certain wavelengths of light and thus eliminates most reflections from windows), the variable ND filter proved to be one of my most important buys overall. Originally, I honestly didn’t really understand what it did or how it worked. I just kept reading everywhere that it was essential. It’s sometimes hard to grasp the use of something until you are actually confronted with a situation where it becomes critical. And so it wasn’t until I was trying to shoot with my 50mm lens at f1.8 (meaning that I was letting in a maximum of light in order to get the shallowest

depth of field) that I understood, because without the filter, the image was completely overexposed. I couldn't close the aperture, because if I did, while I would progressively start getting a readable picture, I would lose the depth of field. So, by putting on the ND filter, you can keep the aperture wide open and get a correctly exposed picture with a shallow depth of field. In short: no ND filter, no shallow depth of field during the day.

The next thing which is essential, the cost of which I completely underestimated, was a tripod. The research for this was fairly straightforward: I went with the tried and trusted brand, bought a Manfrotto055XPROB tripod (150 euros) and a Manfrotto MVH500AH fluid head (125 euros) for smooth panning and tilting. Next, I needed some form of "mobile" support for the camera, and there are basically two types, each for distinctive visual languages: the shoulder mounts for "handheld" effect, and the steady-cam mounts for fluid movements. I wanted both and knew that this could potentially cost a lot of money. But part of my restriction was that my equipment had to be small and light enough to fit in my luggage, so, for instance, when thinking of a steady-cam set-up, I was never going to buy a whole body-strap with an arm. Instead, I bought a second-hand Glidecam HD 2000 from a guy I found online in Paris, for 340 euros. I'm still not sure whether it's worth that kind of money, but cheaper alternative models just didn't have reassuring reviews online, while mechanical gimbals like the Ronin were just way too expensive back then.

When I then looked at shoulder mounts, I discovered that what I thought was a simple piece of equipment was actually far more complex: it had plenty of

add-ons, like a focus-ring puller, or a cage for magic arms to attach monitors and mics and bars to put filters or a matte-box. All these things were adding up and some all-inclusive shoulder rigs cost more than \$1000. While doing my bargain hunting, I was of course looking at the cheaper models, knowing that there was a chance the quality would be poor. I eventually found one product on Amazon, the “CamSmart DSLR Rig,” which had all these pieces of equipment for only 155 euros. While my “too-good-to-be-true” alarm was ringing, I bought it: it was indeed cheap, but over time I learned to make the most out of it, and I didn’t even use most of the add-ons. The focus-ring puller and matte box are both in a drawer and haven’t been used at all. Too much hassle for what they provide.

The next item on the agenda was the monitor. The small screen on the back of the camera is just not big enough to use while shooting, plus it may just be impossible to see because of the angle or because of the sun reflection. The problem is that external HD monitors cost a lot of money, several hundred dollars. Here again I found an effective cost-saving solution: I bought a Nexus Tablet (about 100 euros second-hand) which I could connect to the camera using the USB port and an OTG (on-the-go) adapter, and downloaded an app called “DSLR controller” (costing less than \$10), which allowed me to get a live feed and also to remotely control all the functions of the camera from the touchscreen. To go with it, I bought a plastic clamp designed for in-car use, which I rigged to the shoulder mount, and then I used the cardboard box in which the tablet was shipped as a sun-screen for the tablet – it was already the right size and worked perfectly. By the end of the shoot though, I ditched

the whole monitor set-up. It was clunky, the cable was glitchy and I had become used to the camera enough to just use the back-screen. To block out the sun, I just made a small cardboard flap that I taped to the back of the camera and it did the job.

Buying sound equipment was also interesting. I first knew that I would need a go-to mic, one that could either sit on top of the camera or be used closer to the action. For this, I essentially went with the trend and bought the Zoom H4N Handy Recorder. However, as I developed the idea for the film and saw that most of the voice sound I'd be recording would come from interviews, so I also needed a lapel mic (which is a small mic that can be clipped to someone's shirt or vest). The online comparisons of mics didn't speak to me and the audio tests that I found of different lapel mics didn't show much of a difference between the cheapest and most expensive ones. So I went with one of the cheapest models on the market: the Audio-Technica ATR3350, costing only 29 euros. Every single interview in this film was recorded on this tiny lapel mic (except the Galen Strawson one, when it decided to stop working). While this worked okay, possibly the biggest mistakes I made with regards to equipment is not buying an "on-camera" mic. Having bought the Zoom, I thought I was covered: I would rig it to the shoulder mount and use it whenever I needed it. But because it was an external device, it required a few extra steps to use (I would have to set it up, press record/stop independently from the camera, and then later synch up the sound), and this hassle caused me to not do it. Therefore, for most sequences, there was no direct sound recording. At first, I didn't think this would be an issue, as I just thought the film would be all

music and voice-over, and because I originally intended to make a short film, I brushed off the concern by thinking that it wouldn't be that big a deal. But as the project grew into a feature film and I got to post-production, I realized that the film severely lacked the direct sound from the takes. This is why we had to recreate, with Julien the sound designer, all of the environmental sound in post. Not only was this a long and hard process, but it also means that the film's sound design feels a little detached from reality. While this sometimes creates an interesting atmosphere, overall we would have been better off having the original sound. So if I could go back, I would definitely buy a mic that would fit on the camera (essentially replacing the camera's own mic, which is just terrible quality) and record sound with the footage at all times.

The last piece of equipment which I bought was a rig to mount the camera onto a car. This was something I had just not really thought about, but which was indispensable for some of the shots I wanted to get: the driving shots. My initial belief on the matter was that this equipment cost so much money that I would probably do best to just rent a mount in the different places I was going to shoot. However, when I looked up the rental prices, I realized it would cost me anywhere between \$30 and \$120 per day, depending on the available gear. Given that over the course of the film, I would be using this mount for at least 5 days (1 in each location), it seemed to me like renting it would rack up to an unpredictably hefty sum. So I went online and looked at how much they actually cost to buy. Amazingly, I found that some very sturdy models with great reviews were available for less than \$300. So, after some bargain hunting, I found

the \$150“Camtree G-51 Gripper Suction Car Mount,” which really turned into one of the best pieces of equipment I have. It came in a black briefcase with all the parts held in foam compartments and looking seriously like an elaborate bomb. This actually worried me a little when travelling, as I thought the Americans and the Israelis would quarantine my suitcase and bomb-squad it.

All in all, with the addition of a few other things (SD cards, an external hard-drive, a few extra quick-release plates, etc.), I spent, on equipment, just over 4900 euros (approx \$5900). The important thing is that all of this equipment could fit in my 3 travel bags: my large suitcase, my trekking backpack and my carry-on bag – along with my clothes. This meant I could take it all with me on my travels.

I was ready to go.

PART 2  
PRODUCTION

## Chapter 1 Helsinki

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My first location was Helsinki. I flew there on March 21<sup>st</sup> 2014 and spent a couple weeks, staying with my friend Paul and his fiancée Julie.

Paul and Julie had been engaged for a few months and asked me if I would shoot a “save the date” video to announce their wedding the following year. I saw this as a useful exercise to test my equipment before shooting any footage for my film. We spent the weekend filming their video. I was quite rusty, but I had prepared well and this short experience allowed me to practice with the camera’s functions and core settings, such as frame rate, shutter speed, ISO and white balance. The few mistakes I made while shooting their video were mistakes I avoided when starting the shoot for Psi.

In Helsinki, I also reconnected with an old friend of mine, Antti, a Finnish guy who had studied with me at film school in Paris. He introduced me to a couple friends of his, Petri and Mikko, who worked as cinematographers in Finland. They liked my project and helped me film the scenes where I’m portraying my “Helsinki life.” I was a little nervous about these encounters at first, because I knew they would set the tone for what was to come; I thought that if they didn’t go well, it would mean that I had overestimated how much I could count on others to help me make this film. But, fortunately, these professional guys, who I had never met before, were happy to lend a helping hand without even

being paid. I explained my budget constraints and offered to sign a deferred payment contract, whereby I would pay them a certain sum if the film made a profit. They politely laughed it off, claiming that being part of the project was fun enough for them. This was an encouraging start, as I knew I would be often relying on good-willed people to work the camera. To be honest, this confidence was perhaps a bit skewed, as I came to discover that the Fins are unnaturally nice and helpful people in general anyways. Almost too nice for their own good, sometimes. I had never been to a place before where even a 3am, under the snow and with no cars in sight, people will wait at the crosswalk for the little man to turn green.

Getting the first shots in Helsinki was extremely exhilarating: the life-story in Helsinki is one where I am professionally successful, but deeply unsatisfied and in denial about it. Most of the shots are of me walking around a gloomy, cold city, during a normal day of work. Because I hadn't been able to travel to Helsinki beforehand and do any location scouting, most of it was improvised. With either Petri or Mikko, we would walk around and be like: "Hey, this is a cool place to shoot, let's shoot here." And so we'd adapt my character's day as we saw a location that could be interesting or relevant (such as the bridge over the train tracks). I got here my first hands-on impression of how a day's filming on this shoot would be like, and it was at once messy and enthralling. We were constantly on the edge of nothingness, because often I didn't know exactly what shot we would do next, and this forced me to be looking to use the surroundings to think up new scenes, all the while constructing and maintaining some coherence to everything

in my head. The only issue I had during my time in Helsinki is that I couldn't find an office environment in which to shoot. Paul and Antti's offices wouldn't allow a shoot, and so eventually, we shot the office scenes over a year later, in a co-working office space in Paris.

Towards the end of my stay in Helsinki is when I found the first inspiration for the film's music. I had already decided that the film would be heavily sound-tracked. But I hadn't really yet thought of options for music. One evening at Paul's place, I heard him playing some piano and when I asked where the music came from, he replied that he had just improvised it. I immediately asked him if he would record it for my film and within minutes we were discussing the possibility of him composing the soundtrack to the film. Paul is a classically-trained pianist and composer, and fittingly, he is a guy who, like me, had been torn as a teenager between the artistic and the responsible paths. Where I saw an opportunity for getting my film's music, he saw an opportunity to fulfill one of his dreams. However, as I'll explain later, this plan to work on the film's music with Paul turned out far more complicated than we thought.

Looking back on the Helsinki shoot, I can see the progress I made over the following year. For instance, back then, I still hadn't figured out the optimal way for me to shoot this film. When I wandered the streets, going to the different locations I wanted to shoot (statues, buildings, etc.), I hauled around my trekking backpack containing my tripod, all my lenses, the monitor, the sound equipment, etc. At the time I wanted to stay on the safe side and my inexperience meant that I didn't yet know what would be useful and what

would be surplus. By the end of the shoot, my kit had been streamlined: I wore only a smaller backpack holding my camera and lenses, and usually no tripod (I would stabilize in post). I took nothing more than what I knew I needed.

On the final weekend before leaving, we sat down with Paul and Julie and watched the rushes. Seeing them for the very first time was a great feeling, and playing Paul's music while reviewing them gave me the first glimpses at how the final film could be. At that point I knew that getting shots from the second location, and intercutting them with those of Helsinki, would elevate this experience to another level.

## Chapter 2

### Jerusalem

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After Helsinki, I flew back to Paris only for a few days to repack and then left to Jerusalem. I landed late at night, around 1pm, and took a *sberout* from Ben Gurion airport to Jerusalem. My meeting point with my friend Marie was at Jaffa Gate, one of the entry points into the Old City. As I entered, I noticed two big trucks being loaded with film equipment: lights, dollies, cables, etc. I had recently heard that Natalie Portman was shooting in Jerusalem her directorial debut, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, and so I wondered if this could be her crew packing up. Before I had time to find out, my friend Marie came racing up from a dark alley and whisked me away through a maze of narrow streets. Her apartment was in the heart of the Old City, a stone's throw from the Dome of the Rock and the Western Wall. Marie had set up a mattress in the small veranda at the back for me to stay, but as it was night, I didn't pay much attention to what lay beyond the windows; all I could see were a collection of green neon lights here and there in the distance. The next morning, however, I was awoken to one the most striking sights I have ever experienced, overlooking the sun-soaked rooftops of the Old City from which echoed the wailing cries of Orthodox Jews in nearby Yeshivas and the hypnotizing *Adhan* prayers of imams atop their minarets.

I have been a non-believer my whole life, but this place truly struck me with a taste of religious fever. The collective air of mysticism in which the whole city and population basked

made it instantly intoxicating. Everything seemed to be moving in chaotic order. My first day there, I simply wandered through the Old City, getting lost between the different quarters. I felt an intriguing reverence to the buildings I passed by, knowing that every brick was steeped in centuries of religious history, political controversy and personal tragedy. While nighttime in the Old City was fresh, empty and silent, in the daytime it became a feverish trip: it was gorged with warm sunlight, filled with smells of bread, spices and cooking falafels, pulsating to competing Hebrew and Arabic beats, bustling with energy among the exhausting crisscrossing of religious tourists, orthodox Jews pacing head-down to and from their prayer, cheeky Arab kids running around and riding bicycles, machine-gun-wielding IDF soldiers patrolling between check-points and merchants fearlessly pushing carts up and down stone stairs. While it was impossible to not be aware of the ongoing political conflict, it was bizarrely enthralling for an outsider like me to feel just how much this crazy microcosm was buzzing with tension.

I had originally planned to stay in Jerusalem for 3 weeks; but I was so fascinated with this place and the people I was meeting that I kept pushing my flight back. Eventually, I ended up staying 3 months. This would not have been possible if I didn't have a friend like Marie, a person gifted with endless energy and generosity, someone who not only encourages you to do things, but also enables you to do them. Every time my flight would be approaching, she'd yell: "Push it back! Stay here until the summer!" Dear reader, if you don't already have a friend like that, get yourself one.

The great thing about being with her in Jerusalem was that she introduced me to so many people, both on the Israeli side and the Palestinian side, working in all kinds of different fields: journalism, diplomacy, UN, NGOs, health, construction, military, etc. It is through a friend of hers, an ICRC delegate, that we went to shoot with Bedouins in the West Bank. My time in Jerusalem turned into so much more than just shooting a film; every day was like a master-class in the historical context of the region. While over the course of the three months, I came to understand the conflict so much more, I was no closer to forming a solid opinion about what solution I should feel supportive of. It was like the puzzle had just grown a thousand more pieces. This, in itself - the sheer complexity of the situation - was rather depressing. Every dinner we had with people who lived and worked there day-in day-out, would inevitably veer into arguing about the conflict, and, sure enough, just like most peace negotiations, agreements would be reached here and there before ultimately the whole thing would collapse and return to the status quo of initial disagreements and contradictions. Just in time for desert.

Marie often had to travel to the West Bank for work and during my stay I had the chance to go there quite often. What I found there was perhaps what struck me the most overall: the huge difference between my expectation, which relied on years of media coverage, and the reality. To me, words like “West bank” and “*Cisjordanie*” (the French word for West Bank) were associated with images taken from a post-apocalyptic movie, with a big concrete wall separating rich from poor, deadly militarized check-points, overcrowded refugee camps, terrorist-ridden villages, and

general war, destruction and misery. So before going for the first time, I must admit I was a little worried – and my relatives back home were too. All had some version of the similar warning: “The West Bank? Hum... Are you sure? Isn’t there a war going on? Don’t get on any buses... Be careful...” When I questioned Marie on whether it was safe to go, she looked at me with a half-amused, half-disappointed smile, like a swimming instructor would look at a kid who’s asking if the pool is safe. And, while of course the consequences of the conflict are visible, the West Bank turned out to be a remarkably pleasant place – we wandered the market and had *knafé* in Nablus, enjoyed Taybeh beer at Snow Bar in Ramallah, ate *makloubé* in Jericho and relaxed at the Hosh Jasmin organic farm-restaurant by Bethlehem. I’m under no illusion that my experience there was cotton-wooled in the privilege of ignorance (having no pre-existing emotional ties in the conflict) and being a white tourist guided by a well-connected and fearless diplomat in a time of relative tranquility. I had by no means experienced the harshest and perhaps more common life of the West Bank (not to mention Gaza, where I didn’t go), as we drove through many run-down areas, butterflying from safe place to safe place. But the simple fact that such a trip was possible was eye-opening to me.

Of course, there was undeniably a huge difference – not just culturally, but economically - between the Palestinian side and the Israeli side. This was no clearer than when driving through Ariel, one of the largest Israeli settlements cutting through the West Bank between Nablus and Jerusalem. Driving north to south, we first went through several old Palestinian villages, all in the bottom of valleys, before

driving up the mountain to the gates of Ariel, and all of a sudden, we were in a different world, one that looked very much like the suburbs of an affluent American city. It was like being teleported, on the same road, from *The Hurt Locker* to *The Truman Show*.

Weirdly, I had felt a similar feeling when travelling through South America. After spending three weeks in Bolivia, sleeping in rural guest-houses, crossing paths with modest farmers, travelling in old 4x4 jeeps through the desert on dirt roads, we finally arrived at the border crossing to Chile, high in the southern mountains. On the other side of a comically isolated road barrier, we climbed into an air-conditioned bus and were on our way down an immaculately asphalted road to San Pedro de Atacama; later, on our way to Santiago, we discovered a country that was, at least to the naked eye, extraordinarily similar to California: big highways, big trucks and big malls with food-courts.

When I was studying ethics in London, my Human Values professor, philosopher Jonathan Glover, asked our class on the first day to reflect on who we were, and ask ourselves: what if we were born a woman/man, or what if we were born in China, or what if we were born in 1859? And what if, even, we were born a Chinese woman/man in 1859? The point of this discussion was for us to realize how much of our current selves – our mentality, our values, our prejudices, our ambitions, our rights, etc. – were, to a large and irreducible part, dependent on things that were out of our control and arbitrarily determined by how, where and when we were born.

This was something that had long troubled me and still does, because the world is a patchwork of immense inequality and disagreement. And this is brought into sharp focus in places where extremes are in such close proximity, such as Chile/Bolivia and Israel/Palestine. Putting aside the history, the economics, the wars, the genuine claims that must be satisfied to reach a resolution and the efforts that beckon, it remains tragically unfair that a person's chances for well-being are so radically different, depending on which side of a mountain or a wall they happen to be born on. And I did say *chances* for well-being, because of course, I'm not saying there are no happy Palestinians or Bolivians, or that there are no unhappy Israelis or Chileans. It's a matter of equal opportunity to access the goods on which human well-being relies: security, health, education, and so on. And this seems like something that should cut through all the contingencies of past generations and be safely and equally available to all those who are brought into this world. Parents' gripes shouldn't determine their children's strife.

Of course, I count myself among the lucky ones. I was born in a peaceful country, with the 5<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world, universal healthcare and free education. We all know about the insane statistics of wealth inequality, with the 1% richest reportedly owning half the world's wealth. But what is less known, and came as a bit of a shock to me, is that, if I am to believe some such studies, my parents, who I wouldn't ordinarily call "rich," rank as members of the 10% wealthiest people in the world, given they have at least \$61,000 to their name; in fact, given that my mother owns a house and an apartment, together surely worth more than \$500,000, she may even be part of the top 1% richest in the world. This to

me (and to her too, I'm sure) sounds insane. Whether this is *actually* the case or not isn't really the point. What matters is to realize that most of us evolve in a pool of people – with all our struggles, inequalities and injustices – that is not aware of its tiny proportion in relation to the greater pool of humanity. We live in our own little universe, unaware of the unfathomable size of what and who exists beyond it, and therefore with a stunted ability to put our own situation into perspective. As a consequence, people like myself are surely not sufficiently sensitive to the tremendous amount of luck we are initially endowed with to start off in life, given the odds of being born at a different and less privileged place (or time). This is worrying, because a greater awareness of such initial good fortune would be, according to Barry Schwartz, an extremely beneficial thing, psychologically speaking. He calls for being more “thankful” for what we have, identifying “downward counterfactuals” (i.e. thinking how our situation could be worse) as a potent source of everyday satisfaction and a weapon to counteract the more common and easily indulged “upward counterfactuals” (i.e. thinking how our situation could be better) which causes much self-doubt, dissatisfaction and regret.

Part of our “initial endowment,” of course, extends to what type of society we are born in, and what kind of parents we have. I was made to think about this a lot more in Jerusalem, given the overwhelming presence of one religion or another. If you are born in a religious family, you will be inevitably determined by this belief to some degree and if at some point in life you are to detach from it, it will require tremendous amounts of strength and sacrifice. Religious affiliation is one of those “cards” that you are dealt at birth

and over which you have little control. I didn't decide to be born to non-religious parents. The reason, however, I find this card to be of special interest in the whole deck of initial endowments, is that it directly affects one's perception of the world, of oneself, and, in particular, one's own sense of control over one's own life. I have always been fascinated and a little puzzled by how people can commit their life to religion (or rather, how people can find themselves committed to religion). This is pushed to the extreme in some cases, whether it is orthodox Jews, fundamentalist Islamists or evangelical Christians. All three live "by the book" and in a sense have voluntarily given up their free will to an external, higher will. I'm aware of course that the vulnerability to and devotion for religion can be multiplied by many factors in a tense and painful conflict situation. Yet, the fact remained that Jerusalem had three major groups of people following differing sets of rules – but all like clockwork, as though the same watch had three different mechanisms, each running on a different time. Free will has always been an important theme in religion, because this concept is a perfect vessel to legitimize moral responsibility and to signal the presence of a soul. Yet, not only does the concept of free will give rise to an inherent paradox in the context of an all-controlling deity, but in a practical sense, religions, by their very nature, rob their followers of any useful sense of free will by imposing the adherence to a set of beliefs, the observance of a set of practices and the subjugation to a higher will. How is a person's will to be free if it is constantly obeying commands? This is a problem I have never quite been able to resolve despite the best attempts of my religious friends. Instead, they argue that they are precisely making use of their will by following these rules

every day. In fact, according to them, there is no higher act of will than to choose to have faith and follow their particular creed. Every time I hear this, I don't know how much of it I can accept, because it always sounds to me like a clever wiggle out of a tight spot. I can see how it may be liberating, in a way, to willingly follow certain restrictive rules; living freely requires making choices, which is a lot of work. It implies thinking about reasons and consequences and requires taking responsibility for a decision, under the threat of (human) punishment or regret. Following (divine) rules without questioning them, in other words giving up (even willingly) the exercise of one's own practical free will in the conduct of daily life, could be a way of simplifying one's mental workload by subtracting oneself from the need to think about certain decisions. This is what Barry Schwartz calls "second order decision" – religion gives you a set of rules that you follow automatically, thus freeing your mind to focus on other things. And, at face value, this is fine. In more secular scenes, actually, many people do this very same thing to good effect. Successful businessmen such as Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg have been known to stick to one outfit so that their brains are free from the need to think about something as inconsequential as what clothes to wear, liberating those particular brain cells so that they can be dedicated to more important matters. Even President Obama remarked: "You'll see I wear only grey or blue suits. Because I have too many other decisions to make. You need to focus your decision-making energy. You can't be going through the day distracted by trivia." So in principle, I can understand the usefulness of religion in this regard, but what bothers me still with many of the rules that religions offer to take care of are the *reasons* behind each choice they claim to

settle. For instance, a common rule for Jews and Muslims is “No pork.” To which I automatically think: fine, but why? Sure, your mind is free from ever having to ponder “Should I eat pork or X,” but there are hardly any good sanitary reasons nowadays to not eat pork. That’s not to say there aren’t any good reasons not to eat pork; if the religious rationale was more in tune with ethical claims about animal welfare, then I would have more sympathy for the aversion to pork, but then consistency would require going all the way and becoming fully vegan (which is something I am completely conflicted about, because my culture and culinary preferences clash with my ethical reasoning, leaving me in a rather unsavory position). I’m aware of course that I’m arguing myself into a corner here because adherence to a religion doesn’t always rest predominantly on the reasons behind each belief and practice, but on the whole experience and all subsequent benefits, such as having an answer to existential questions or the sense of belonging to a community.

However, I stand by my reliance on reasons, because they are truly what matters most. “Why?” is a question we should all continuously ask about everything, including the answers we are offered in return. We are all naturally endowed with this desire for justification: just think of kids who will naturally keep on questioning adults with endless curiosity and skepticism, asking “but why?” to every one of their explanations. While this may be annoying for the explainer, it is the indication that we as a species are configured to question the world and to then only buy an explanation that we worked for and earned, not one that was just offered to us.

When I look back on my time in Jerusalem, I'm amazed at how quickly you can establish a life somewhere. In only three months, I already had a stronger unit of friends and contacts – from Tel Aviv, to Jerusalem, to Ramallah - than I did in Paris. I could easily have continued living there. But my “real life” was calling and, somewhat sadly, I learned that soon after, most of that group of people in Jerusalem also departed, with their contracts ending and getting jobs elsewhere. I was saying earlier in this book that films are like small lives one could safely live and explore, well, on the flipside, some episodes in life can truly feel like a film. They start, build, develop, climax and end just as quickly. Sadly, unlike movies, you can't rewind and experience them again.

## Chapter 3

### London

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Shortly after coming back from Jerusalem, I went to London and stayed with my high-school friend Thomas. Caroline, the only professional actor in the film, also joined us from Paris for a week. While writing the film, I wanted to have a character who would be present in several lives, to see how the same relationship could evolve differently. This is how Caroline's character was written – and, for convenience, the two lives in which I included her physically were the ones in Paris and London.

Unlike in the film, where Caroline is my best friend from high-school and lifelong soul-mate, in reality, I only met her shortly before starting the film, at a party thrown by a mutual friend, Zoe Wittock, who I knew from film school. A few months later, I contacted Caroline and told her I would like her to act in a film project I was preparing. Foreshadowing what was to come, we met up completely by chance at the Finnish Institute café in the Latin Quarter. When I told her I wanted to shoot a feature film set in five different countries and with no budget, I'm sure her initial thought was "Well at least the coffee here was good." But as I continued my pitch, the concept of the story and the questions it raised hooked her. I can imagine her main hesitation at that point was with me: was I in over my head? All talk and no action? She accepted in principle, and I believe that her commitment grew as I went to Helsinki and Jerusalem. She could see that this thing was happening and my "can-do-go-do" attitude

filled her with confidence too. So when the time came for her to join me in London, I knew she was genuinely excited to be a part of this project.

The reason I mention this is because I have found it extremely enriching to have such a positive attitude: not only does it rub off on other people, but it also reinforces itself in a feedback loop. I wasn't always like this, it's something that doesn't happen overnight and also it's something that can switch off for no reason. In short: by doing, you get the will to do more; if you stop doing, you also lose the will to do more. It's like in physics: objects that are motionless stay that way unless another force gets them moving, and once they are in motion, they can build up momentum. The tough part is to go from stagnation to movement. If I could go back in time, meet myself on the day I decided to make a film and explain all that was to come, *past me* would probably feel so overwhelmed and discouraged that he may not even start. That's why: a little bit of confidence brings a little bit of success, which in turn brings a little bit more confidence and a bit more success, and the cycle continues. What you need to begin with is a little bit of determination, to force yourself to have the confidence required to set yourself in motion.

Filming in London was a lot of fun and yielded some unexpected results. Over the course of the week, several different people took charge of the camera – Tom's girlfriend of the time, Nelly, or our buddies Mike and Emile, and sometimes Tom himself - they were all fairly inexperienced, but we got good results. I would set up the shot, explain to the person what to do, we'd shoot and then check the shot. Almost every time, we'd be pleasantly

surprised by the result, at how the inexperience of the camera holder transpired into the shot as something fresh and natural.

By mid-July, my academic obligations became more pressing. I was still enrolled in two Master's degrees at University and the deadline for my two dissertations was the second week of September. Although I had been working on them in Jerusalem, I was nowhere near finished. However, we had planned with Tom to meet up with Paul and Julie in Helsinki, then rent an RV and go on a road trip through Norway to the Lofoten Islands. And so, facing my two dissertations, I had to decide: go home and work on my dissertations or go to Norway? I went. It was too good to pass up on. When would I ever get the chance to go with my best friends in an RV trip through Scandinavia to see the midnight sun? Probably never. And so, every day I'd be on my laptop, sitting at the RV's table, writing my dissertations.

I think this is one of the biggest sources of frustration and regret in people's lives: balancing what they think they have to do (studies or work) with the things that they want to do (leisure). And I don't mean this just in relation to which activities to prioritize on a day-to-day basis, but also which life to lead in the long run. This conflict between what is expected, what is forced on you in some ways, and what is actually desired, intended, willed, always bugged me. During my early twenties, when my friends were getting their first jobs, I always felt a certain discomfort at the fact that many times, they "stumbled" into a job that may or may not be satisfying to them. They hadn't *decided* to go and do something that they initially wanted, they had *accepted* what

had showed up on their way. I remember a guy who had studied international business. When he had to look for an internship, he found one working for bread manufacturers in Germany and after the internship, he got hired. Two years later, he was a specialist in the German bread market and a fairly successful one at that. At a party, I asked him: “Three years ago, did you wake up and think to yourself: I want to be an expert in the German bread market?” And of course, he said no. But then he preempted my next question: “But that’s not the point. I wanted to be a salesman, and be an expert salesman, whatever the product, whatever the market. So I am doing what I want.” Still, committed to being the party asshole, I took it one step further and asked: “But before you started studying business, did you actually want to be a businessman?” He looked down and shook his head as though I didn’t understand how life worked. I insisted: “Why did you study business?” He answered: “My grades, and because I thought I’d be good at it.” Again, I felt I was onto something: he had never originally *wanted* to be a salesman, much less one who specializes in the bread market. He studied business because his academic background up to that point had narrowed his options, out of which he chose business, not because he was aiming at it, but because it was the most viable avenue. Further, he got this job as a bread salesman not because he wanted to be a bread salesman, but because this was an option that the Universe randomly happened to make available to him. And at the end of the day, there’s nothing inherently wrong with all this – he’ll probably have a very satisfying life. But I just kept imagining him as a retiree, after a very successful life, sitting in his living room, surrounded by bread-related memorabilia, staring proudly at a plaque awarded to him by the national

bread-maker's society, reminiscing with great pride on a life of achievement, and thinking: why not tires? or dildos?

Is this wrong of me? I can't tell. I've re-read this paragraph several times and can sense that something in my thought process makes me sound like a privileged asshole. But still, I want to stand by it: shouldn't we be assholes about this? What's the alternative? Not being able to lead a life where we do something we have chosen? Is this something we should value? Is there something noble in having limitations or not controlling things?

Anyways, after the London shoot and trip to Scandinavia, I returned to Paris to focus on writing my dissertations; I put the film on hold for three months, locked myself in my room and finished writing them. While my research in International Relations is of little interest here (my paper was about understanding the current negativity in academia and public discourse towards the idea of a global government), my research in Philosophy raised some interesting questions related to the themes of *Psi*. My subject matter was radical human life extension, and whether there are good reasons to believe that in a future world where humans could live indefinitely, our motivation would be negatively impacted to the point where we would no longer do anything. Part of this study led me to research the effect of time constraints on behavior and decision-making, and extrapolate that to the effect of biological deadlines (old age and death) on how we conduct our lives and chose to do what we do.

One intuitive objection to an infinite time which is of particular relevance here is that if we were to overcome natural death and thus had *all* the time in the world to do *all*

the possible things that may be available to us, we would end up doing nothing at all. Paralysis would be the consequence of freedom. People usually come to this conclusion by one of two avenues: the first, and more common fear, is that with no deadline, there would be a lack of time pressure, and so we would continuously procrastinate, get bored, lose interest and end up doing nothing out of laziness; the second is that by suddenly facing an infinite amount of possibilities, our problem would no longer be which ones to choose and which ones to give up on, but where to start, and given that the loss of opportunity scarcity would rob each choice of its relative value (thus making it hard to construct preferences), we would become locked in a paralysis, never knowing where to start. Consequently, the underlying assumption here is that we are either naturally *will-less* or *weak-willed*.

This common view of human will seemed to me completely misguided, which is why I wanted to study it and hopefully debunk it. First of all, if we had much more time to live, we would no longer face the obligation of “choosing one life,” meaning we could conceivably be a doctor for 50 years and go back to school and become an engineer for 50 and then, why not, be a painter for another 50 years. Paralysis in the face of a choice only makes sense if the choice entails giving up on the forsaken options. Indeed, the paralysis that people fear stems from the fact that many choices are mutually exclusive. If you can only afford one trip but you’re hesitating between Australia and Patagonia, or you can only pursue one career but you’re hesitating between doctor and footballer, the fact you can’t do both can realistically lead to a form of paralysis – out of fear of regretting the chosen path and never being able to experience the forsaken one. But these are mutually exclusive

only because of time scarcity: if you had more time, you could conceivably do both and so they are not mutually exclusive anymore. If you knew you could do both, one after the other (and while there may be tricky decisions to make in order to decide which to do first) I fail to see how one would end up choosing nothing rather than both, or, indeed, everything.

In fact, most of the existential dilemmas we face, I believe, stem directly from the limited amount of life-time we are allotted, which is why overall I am a strongly in favor of life extension (other challenges associated with this perspective are admittedly far more consequential and worth thinking about – such as economic inequalities and long-term overpopulation). Were we to have more time, inevitably new sources of stress and complexity would arise (the biggest issue I can see would be with mental fatigue), but I believe it would be a beneficial revolution for people whose will is strong and inexhaustible. And this I contend is the case for everyone, despite what many may themselves think, because most of the reasons why they suspect that they would be lazy or paralyzed with infinite time come from the very effects that our current limited time has on our will, namely that it rushes it with the chase and urgency it imposes (thus tiring it and making us want to rest) and forces it to make compromises it doesn't want to make or simply can't resolve (thus breaking it and making us bad decision makers).

## Chapter 4

### Los Angeles

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On November 5, 2014, I flew to Las Vegas to my father's place. The Los Angeles segment was, with the Paris film set scenes, the most challenging part of the project, because it was the one in which I had the least amount of existing resources to rely on: I knew no one in Los Angeles, had no place to stay, and didn't yet know if I would even be able to find the right location to shoot in.

All I knew is that I could get myself to that area, because my father lived in Las Vegas. I had originally thought of setting the film there, but I quickly relocated the story to Los Angeles, for two main reasons: first, visually, Los Angeles offered a lot more interesting connections to the other cities than Las Vegas did. Sure, Las Vegas has a replica Paris, but other than that, there were little to draw on. Secondly, and more importantly, Los Angeles made far more sense in terms of the story, as it is the home of Hollywood and the symbol of filmmaking success. I immediately thought it interesting to explore a life where Hollywood is the backdrop for a failure, and a possible rebirth. Instead of having my character go there and "make it," he would discover a life far removed from his initial hopes and expectations.

The biggest challenge for me then was to find a place to film the character's story. Having decided that in this life, he would become homeless and would be recovering in a shelter, I needed to find such a location to film in. And so,

while still in Paris, I did research on Internet, listed as many shelters in Los Angeles as possible and e-mailed them, explaining my project and offering to volunteer for a month or so. Of the dozen organizations I contacted, 4 agreed to meet with me: The Midnight Mission, The Salvation Army, the Union Rescue Mission – all three of which are on Skid Row – and Ascencia, which is Glendale.

Mid-November, I booked a few nights in Los Angeles and hopped on a bus, hoping to meet with them in person. It just so happened that my bus from Las Vegas to Los Angeles dropped me off on Maple Avenue, right in the heart of Skid Row. Although I had researched this neighborhood, I wasn't prepared for the initial shock of physically being there. Perhaps a little naively, I had imagined that what I had seen or read was an exaggeration, and that things must have gotten better. But no: the streets were indeed crowded with tents and tarp shelters, littered with trash and left-over food, with the odd shopping trolley filled with all kinds of necessities and junk. Gangsta-rap was roaring from ghetto-blasters, the smell of weed whiffing from most street corners and crack addicts passed out on the concrete. Walking down the crowded sidewalks, I didn't exactly know how to behave: should I act as though I was walking on any other normal street? Should I avoid making eye contact? Will they get angry if I ignore solicitations? Will they take offence if I step off the curb and walk on the road? Part of me felt bad for even asking myself these questions, but I was soon leaving the busiest intersection of Skid Row – San Pedro and 6<sup>th</sup> – and slowly but surely heading to more “normal” streets. This actually was the other thing that struck me: Skid Row was so close to both downtown – with its major business

headquarters – and just a few blocks away from hipper, gentrified neighborhoods, such as the Japanese quarter.

Over those few days, The Salvation Army and the Union Rescue Mission pulled out before I had the chance to meet with them. I realized that I had chosen the worst possible time to show up with my film project: with Thanksgiving and Christmas coming up, this was the busiest time of the year for organizations helping homeless people. I did, however, meet with the Midnight Mission. Joey, in charge of volunteers, gave me a tour of the Mission and explained to me how it worked. He was himself a resident of one of the dorms in the Mission and had been following the program for 9 months already. I told him about my film and insisted on the fact that I had set the whole month of December aside in order to come and volunteer at the shelter as much as possible, in order to get to know the place, the people, and also just simply to help out. I didn't just want to "give something back" for being allowed to film, I genuinely wanted to immerse myself in this world and try to contribute something useful. I think my commitment and desire to volunteer probably gave them some reassurance that my project was coming from the right place and not seeking to be exploitative. Joey liked my idea and penned me in for some volunteering shifts. However, he couldn't yet guarantee that I would be able to shoot anything, because he wasn't the person who would have the final say on the matter. At this stage, I was being vetted.

I returned to Las Vegas for the remainder of November with one crucial problem to solve: finding accommodation for a month in Los Angeles. When I looked online at possible

accommodation on AirBnB and Craigslist, places were either very expensive or in neighborhoods that I had been told were to be avoided. I'm usually not paranoid about spending time in locations labeled as dangerous, simply because I've lived in enough places around the world to know that these warnings are often a little exaggerated, but this time, I had all my film equipment that could potentially get stolen and didn't want to take any chances. So I put out a post on Facebook and Internet magic operated: a friend of a friend was going away for the month of December. So, on December 1<sup>st</sup>, I moved into her apartment by Vermont and Beverly. There were now just two "issues" on my mind: first, making sure I could shoot at the shelter, second, finding a cameraman.

On December 2<sup>nd</sup>, I went for my first volunteer shift at the Midnight Mission. Joey greeted me and got me straight to business: I put on a plastic apron, hairnet and gloves, and started helping out in the kitchen.

I then spent about two hours unloading pallets of donated food boxes into the giant walk-in fridges, and for this task I was paired with Tobey, another resident of the Mission. While unpacking milk cartons and candy bars, we got to know each other a little bit. He had been at the shelter for several months and was good friends with Joey; they were even bunk-neighbors in the dorm. He told me of his years on the road, traveling through every State in the USA, doing dozens of different jobs. For a while he had worked as a videographer for various gigs, using DSLR cameras. When I got round to explaining why I was in LA, he was immediately excited about the film and so I asked him if he'd like to do the camera work. Without skipping a beat, he

replied: “Sure! I’ll do it!” If one day I have a successful filmmaking career, I will look back at where it all started and remember that one of my first DP’s was a recovering drifter I met in fridge!

Over the next month, I volunteered a few times per week at the mission, usually for a lunch or dinner service. Spending time there, I came to learn a lot about the areas’ inhabitants. Most of the people on Skid Row are either addicts (mostly crack) or mentally disabled. That’s usually why they’re still on the streets, because they just don’t have the resources – financially and/or mentally - to stay off it. But one thing became very clear to me while working at the Midnight Mission: there *were* solutions to get off the streets if you had the strength of will to stay clean.

The guys living at the Midnight Mission were all fairly open for conversation, well-spoken and mild-mannered. While some still bore the effects of years of heavy drinking and drug abuse, others seemed like regular guys. Some told me how a few years earlier, they were living normal lives, were married and had jobs, and explained how losing one led to losing the rest and before they knew it, they didn’t have a place to go. Many lived in their cars for a while before eventually ending up on the streets. Listening to their stories made me realize how close we all potentially are to slipping off the cliff. One unfortunate event unravels the scenery of normal life and reveals the true nature of people, both those who you know (usually for the worse) and of strangers (sometimes for the best).

Midway through my month in LA, I still hadn’t shot anything and realized I had to get moving on the location shots. While in Helsinki I had been able to walk everywhere

and in London public transport was good enough to get around, in LA neither was an option. The city is just too spread out and requires having a car. So I made a long list of locations where I needed to go and rented a car for a weekend. On the first day, I focused on downtown LA, where most of the things I wanted to see were located. The next, I went to Beverly Hills and managed to shoot some of my favorite footage of the whole film: I attached the suction-cup rig to the hood of the car, set up the camera which was connected to the tablet with the wire running through the window, and put the tablet behind the steering wheel. The great thing about Beverly Hills is that the roads are extra smooth, there's very little traffic, and some of the streets are lined with the most amazing trees. So I spent hours driving around, in particular up and down North Canyon Drive, North Rexford Drive, North Alpine Drive and North Maple Drive. I was almost certain someone would call the cops and report a strange car with a device on the hood stalking the streets, but nothing of this sort happened.

On Christmas morning, I returned to the Midnight Mission for the Christmas event. I was growing concerned that my days in LA were running out and I still hadn't filmed anything. That day, I reminded Joey of my project and he led me to the communications and media manager, Ryan Navales, also an ex-resident. He welcomed me in his office with a sturdy handshake and set the tone by telling me I should feel fortunate to have already made it this far. They receive dozens of professional film requests a year, and usually guys who show up with a smile on their face and no money to put on the table wouldn't get very far. But Joey had reported positively on my project and it was thanks to his vetting that doors were opening for me. Ryan's main

concern before green-lighting anything was to make sure that I wasn't here to take advantage of the residents. He had already been tracking my volunteering shifts and knew I had developed a good relationship with Joey and Tobey, as well as some of the guys in the kitchens, but he wanted to hear it straight from me. His other question was whether I intended to show the Midnight Mission as a generic homeless shelter, or if it would be presented as the Midnight Mission itself. I knew this was kind-of a trick question, for there could be good reasons why he may want to hear either answer, so I told him the truth: I wanted it to be the Midnight Mission, because I wanted to set the story in something real. I believe this is the answer he wanted to hear; it meant that my film would serve as a vessel to candidly come into the mission, show how it works and tell the story of a successful recovery. Our meeting ended with Ryan telling Joey that we could shoot any time that Joey deemed appropriate. So, we got together with Joey and Tobey and filmed on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of December at the mission.

To be honest, when I left Los Angeles, I felt a little pinch and somewhat emboldened by the past few weeks. With the help of people whose life is (and was before I arrived, and will perhaps continue to be after I leave) a struggle, I had got what *I* wanted, something trivial, some scenes for a film. I felt humbled. My perceptions had been changed by coming into contact with this world which quite frankly, at the start, scared me a little. Upon leaving, I felt at once relieved, like the kid who had wandered into the beasts' den and escaped with a treasure, and sad, because the beast had turned out to be a welcoming, helpful giant.

## Chapter 5

### Paris

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I had always planned for Paris to be the last segment I would shoot. Given that Caroline and I lived in Paris, I assumed it would be fairly easy to organize and shoot.

I was wrong.

First of all, I had a much harder time than expected finding a stylish, modern apartment that would immediately convey a certain standard of living for the Paris life in which I'm a successful filmmaker. Most people I know live in tiny studio apartments. Around that time, I met up for coffee with an old friend from law school, Marie-Eve. When we had first crossed paths several years earlier, she, like me, was someone who was conflicted about who to become in life, caught between the allure of a free artistic life in the image of her mother, who's a painter, and the fulfillment of the money-making expectations of her father, a senior VP in one of the most prestigious hotel chains in the world. Now, she was married to a diplomat, carrying her 1-year-old daughter in one arm and a forthcoming son in her belly. Over the years, despite time and distance, we had remained rather fond of each-other, and I had also become good friends with her parents, particularly her mother, Natalie, who I suspect viewed me as a bit of an interesting anomaly in her daughter's entourage. When Marie-Eve and Natalie learned of my predicament regarding my location scouting, they

offered their family apartment: a beautiful top-floor duplex in the Port Royal area of Paris.

The next challenge was finding a DP. Caroline introduced me to a friend of hers, Adil, a photography and lighting aficionado, who stepped-in as cinematographer and, as every time non-professionals lent a helping hand, he did wonderful. We had two full days in the apartment, and while the first day went according to plan, the second day made me think perhaps the plentiful stock of luck this project had enjoyed from the start was beginning to hit its last reserves, as we encountered the one problem that can mess with all shoots from the tiniest back-yard project to the biggest multi-million dollar production: weather. The apartment, boasting huge veranda-like windows, was designed to be gorged in sunlight, but on our second day, the sky was covered by dark clouds and pouring constant buckets of rain. Not only did this ruin the desired atmosphere, but it caused a continuity disaster with what we had shot the day before.

I felt terrible because on the one hand, deep down, I instantly wanted to postpone the shoot until a better day; but on the other, Caroline and Adil had showed up on time, with no pay, and I didn't want to ask them to come again at a later date. So I was stalling. This unwillingness to take charge and put the quality of the film above my general sense of politeness was perhaps the symptom that I still had some space to grow in my "show-runner" shoes. Caroline could sense it, so she made the move and suggested what I didn't have the nerve to demand: let's take a rain-check. And she didn't do it because she felt bad for me, but because she didn't either want a below-par result. I wasn't the only one who had a vested interest in this film. She, too, really wanted

this to work out. Eventually, we managed to get our second day of shoot a few weeks later.

However, that whole “apartment part” of the Paris shoot was a piece of cake compared to the other part, which had to follow my character on the shoot of his next movie, with all the equipment and crew around him. This required finding a real movie set that would allow me, along with a DP, to be on-set for a few hours, walking around and filming what was going on. This was one of the things that I initially brushed off with a “All I have to do is find a film set” and turned into a “How the hell do I find a film set?” I had absolutely no connections to production companies and knew no one who was involved in any professional film shoot. What I did know is that productions don’t really go around announcing when they’re coming to town, and were I to find one, I couldn’t just waltz onto it uninvited.

So, as usual, I came up with a fairly reasonable plan: “Why don’t I get in touch with Belgian director Jaco Van Dormael and ask him to be on his next shoot?” The reason I thought of van Dormael was because I had long admired his film *Mr. Nobody*, a film that explores similar themes to those of *Psi*, telling the story of a boy who, forced to choose between his mother and his father when they divorce, remembers choosing both and living several alternate lives branching from that initial decision. If I could find a way to get in touch with Van Dormael, I thought, I could appeal to his artistic camaraderie and ask to come on his next shoot. After some online digging, I quickly found his agent who I wrote to, hoping he would transfer the message. In the e-mail, I added a second request: would Van Dormael also agree to do a cameo in my film. I honestly didn’t expect

much from this and was already thinking about alternative solutions when a few days later, I received an e-mail from Van Dormael himself, where he expressed interest in the film, said that unfortunately he had just finished his latest shoot, but that if I found a convenient film-set, he would gladly do the cameo. I couldn't believe it. Given that Van Dormael is Belgian, I wanted to find a shoot that would be geographically convenient for him, so I focused my search in Brussels. I e-mailed the Belgian film commission, explaining my situation, and they put me in touch with a bunch of different production companies that had upcoming shoots. Over a few weeks, I sent out e-mails left and right, explaining my situation and promising that shooting my scenes would not get in the way of their production and that as a bonus, Van Dormael would spend a couple hours with us on set. However, despite some initial positive responses, they all eventually turned me down. There was always someone – the director, the producer, the distributor – someone whose green-light was necessary, who refused for some reason or another.

Eventually, the Brussels plan dwindled and I came to accept the fact that I was probably going to lose track of Van Dormael and that I would have to have to create my own film-set in Paris. This was what I wanted to avoid from the start, because creating a film-set – one that really looks like a big-budget film, of course – means having equipment, trucks, a studio and people. In other words: money.

So where could I start? I remembered, from my film-school days, that the big player in film equipment and studios in France was a company called TSF. I e-mailed them, asking if there was any way I could rent some equipment on the cheap and then use one of their studios

(perhaps on an off-day) to grab the few shots I needed. Of course I added the obligatory arguments, such as I was a young director, making my first independent low-budget movie and that I had worked with them in the past as a student. I got no response. I e-mailed again, unsuccessfully. So eventually I called one of their reps. He explained that the first step would be for me to go and visit their studios in Epinay, a suburb of Paris, to see if they could work for my needs. So in July 2015, I met with the TSF studios groundskeeper who toured me around their massive 800m<sup>2</sup> and 1600m<sup>2</sup> soundstages. I was like a kid with exclusive access to the theme park, but there was one glaring problem: the studios were empty, there were currently no films being shot there. And without sets, these studios look just like giant empty warehouses. The problem just wouldn't go away: I didn't just need a studio, I needed a studio with a set, and so I was back at square one. I needed a movie set *inside* one of the studios.

While touring the TSF studios, I visited the workshops where a bunch of different craftsmen - carpenters, painters, welders - were building sets for upcoming productions. I struck up a conversation with a lady who turned out to be the set decorator for an upcoming shoot, a big-budget comedy called "Brice de Nice, 3." This was the sequel to an extremely popular 2005 French comedy, "Brice de Nice," based on a character created and played by Jean Dujardin, who later shot to worldwide fame when he won the Academy Award for his part in the throwback silent film "The Artist." This was my opportunity: I explained to her my situation and asked if she could put me in touch with the production team, to see if there was any way I could take advantage of their set for my own film. She gave me the

production manager's e-mail, a guy called Pascal. I knew it was a bit of a long-shot, but I sent him an e-mail. While I expected the same kind of response I got from the Belgian productions, Pascal replied with some positive news: the producer, Nicolas Altmayer, had agreed and they were waiting on the director, James Huth, to reply.

A week or so later, still no news. I was in my hometown with some friends. I'm no big drug-consumer, but there were mushrooms - it was the middle of summer, we wanted to cut loose - so we took a couple and headed to the beach. A few minutes or hours later, we found our way to a bar where we sat down, ordered some drinks and stared at them. And then my phone rang - I had a new e-mail. It was from James Huth himself. He wanted us to meet. My face melted.

At the end of August 2015, I met with James in a café in Paris. As I expected, the first thing he asked me was to explain exactly what I wanted to do on his film-set. My pitch was locked and loaded and I delivered it with a special effort to anticipate the few issues he could have: I was flexible on the date, I was happy to shoot right after the end of their daily schedule in order to simply take advantage of the sets before they dismantle them, and I would shoot in such a way that it would not be possible to recognize which film set this is. As I was delivering my speech, he seemed totally relaxed about the whole thing, casually thinking-out-loud that we'd figure something out, and then he started asking me about what I had done previously. He had obviously looked at my website and watched the few things I had shot in the past - my spec adverts from film school, my GoPro travel video from South America, the "Save The

Date” video I shot in Finland for Paul and Julie. He asked what tasks I had taken care of: did I come up with the ideas? Did I direct? Did I do the camera work? Did I do the editing? And while I answered yes to most these questions, I was starting to suspect there was a reason for his interest, and soon enough, he mentioned that he was looking for someone to shoot the making-of (or “behind-the-scenes” documentary) for his film “Brice 3” and asked if I’d be interested.

At first, I couldn’t quite believe it, but I rode my luck and said that of course, I would love to do it. He emphasized how hard it would be and warned me of the pitfalls that previous young directors he hired had fallen into. But this was a golden opportunity and I had to take it. Apparently, there was another experienced filmmaker already in contention for the job, so James told me he would have to think about it. In the following days, I wrote the preceding paragraphs and sent this book to him, indicating that if he were to hire me for this project, it would become part of the wider story of my own trajectory, a huge stepping stone to achieving the ambitions I had set out to pursue 18 months ago, and the title of the chapter dedicated to this experience would write itself: “A making-of in the making-of.”

A few days later, he called me to say I got the job, starting in two weeks. I cover this experience in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6

### A making-of in the making-of

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Even though it is made up of English words, a “making-of” is an expression used by the French to call what the English more commonly call a “behind-the-scenes” documentary. It’s what you often find on DVD extras, and it is this kind of video that I was hired to make for the film “Brice de Nice, 3”, which was shot between September 2015 and February 2016.

When James, the director, called to offer me the job, he still needed to send me to the producer’s office to get the final seal of approval. The movie was produced by Mandarin Films, led by two brothers, Eric and Nicolas Altmayer. Aside from Brice, they are also mostly known for producing the OSS 177 franchise, also starring Jean Dujardin. When I met with Nicolas Altmayer in his office, I could tell that he was a little skeptical about hiring me given my lack of experience. I was to produce a 30-minute “behind-the-scenes” video that would be on the DVD and used as promotional material for various outlets on the Internet and television. He informed me that the shoot was divided in two separate periods: there was a first 5-week shoot in France, followed by a 2-month break and then a second 5-week shoot in Thailand. Altmayer made it very clear to me that the first part of the shoot would be enough to make the behind-the-scenes, and so that I would not be going to Thailand.

On September 14, 2015, I flew to Nice, in the south of France, to join the cast and crew for the first day of the shoot. Pretty sure that day was in the top 5 most nerve-racking days of my life. I knew what I had to do for my job, I had binge watched a ton of behind-the-scenes features and read interviews by people who had directed them, so I knew what was expected of me, but on the first day, I just didn't know what to expect: I had never set foot on a real film set before, and aside from James, I knew absolutely no one. I quickly realized this made it particularly hard to perform the job I was there to do: the kind of footage I needed to get requires both good navigation of the film set (in order to know where to be and, more importantly, where not to be) and good relations with the crew (so that they behave naturally in front of my camera and don't feel weirded out by me creeping around them). During the first few days of shooting, I genuinely felt like an imposter, like I had somehow smuggled my way on set and that sooner or later people would notice and I'd get fired. To compensate, the first couple of weeks I kept a low profile and shot ridiculous amounts of footage (the first day, I had 7 hours of footage out of a 10-hour day). I was so worried of missing something that I tried to film everything. Not only was this exhausting to shoot, but it cost me hours after the end of the day to un-rush it all. In time, however, I learned to know what was worth filming and what was clearly not going to make the cut – and so, by the end of the shoot, I was averaging 2 hours of footage per day.

As I progressively grew more comfortable on set and familiar with the crew, my initial anxiety wore off and transformed itself into the excitement of shooting something

interesting. Two different voices started to battle inside my head for control of the camera: on one side was the “filmmaker-for-hire,” the one who was performing a professional service specifically to deliver a paint-by-numbers product, and on the other was the “filmmaker-by-passion,” the one who wanted to direct something original and fun. In the end, I tried to accommodate the two, in order to make a behind-the-scenes documentary that ticked all the expected boxes, but that would also try to be engaging. And so this led me to experiment with what I shot, capturing more than just “the crew at work,” but more intimate and off-the-cuff moments that would later prove to be essential.

After Nice, we shot near Bordeaux for 2 weeks and then returned to Paris to shoot in the TSF studios in Epinay, where my whole “Brice” journey began. While in the studios, I was able to get the shots I needed for my Paris life. James was so helpful with this: he cameoed as my in-film actor and tasked his DP, Stéphane Le Parc, with operating my camera for my scenes, and other crew members played along around me.

As the first 5-week part of the shoot ended, I wanted to prepare a video to show at the wrap party, in part as a “thank you and goodbye” to the crew, and also in part as a “here’s what I can do” to the producers so that they’d hopefully remember my name for the future. I had at my disposal so much footage that I loved and that would not make it into the official behind-the-scenes, so over the course of a week, I edited two 20-minute videos: one for the whole crew and one specifically for Dujardin (containing clips of his family

and friends who came to set). The first video was projected half-way through the wrap-party. I was worried that in such an environment, people would only endure a couple minutes of my video before resuming their conversations, but that was not the case. The video kept everyone's attention to the final second and the reception afterwards was beyond anything I could have hoped for. Jean and James thanked me for the gift and Altmayer, the producer, told me that in 20 years of experience, he'd never been moved by a behind-the-scenes crew video in such a way. That evening, James and Jean insisted with him that I be taken to Thailand for the second part of the shoot, and the following Monday, I got a call from the production office asking for my passport information.

At that moment, I must admit, I felt like I was being carried by some invisible tidal wave of good fortune. A few weeks earlier, I was clutching at tiny straws in my quest for a film set and now I was mingling with James Huth, Jean Dujardin and Nicolas Altmayer on my way to Thailand. The biggest achievement for me at that point was to have been able to show these people that I could do something worthwhile – something they were willing to pay me for. And what this told me is that in this industry, it is really your work that does the talking. Your work is your currency; the better the work, the higher your value. This is kind of a reassuring thought in a way, because it goes to show how void other strategies like ass-kissing can be; and it's a useful one to keep in mind too, to stir up self-belief and motivation when it can be lacking. Naturally, the higher people are in this industry, the more everyone around them is asking or offering them something. And so the only way to stand out in the crowd and get their

attention is if you have something on offer that they actually want to ask you for. And that is in your own hands.

On December 15, I flew to Thailand for the second half of the shoot. And while the couple months we spent there were fun and interesting for many reasons (Bangkok street food, full moon parties, etc.), I'll only focus on one here. Most of our shoot was on a beach resort specifically built for the film. It took months to build, particularly because the actual beach, which was originally virgin, had to be almost entirely covered by a huge platform resting on a steel structure, itself covered in sand to make the customer lounging area higher and bigger, with bars and a nightclub surrounding it. On a regular day, the set would have anywhere around 250 people working there, with crew, cast and extras everywhere.

Mid-way through the shoot, on a day-off I woke up at the crew hotel and as I walked across the grounds towards the breakfast restaurant, there was an eeriness in the air that day: the sky was dark with low heavy clouds, the palm-trees were swaying in the wind and the sea was abnormally high, encroaching on the land beyond the beach. Second later, I saw the set designer running panicked towards a mini-van; as she saw me, she yelled at me to grab my camera and come with her. An anxious 40-minute drive later, I was capturing what was by all definitions a disaster for the film but absolute gold for my behind-the-scenes documentary: that night, a storm had completely destroyed the set, sweeping most of it to sea and leaving the rest in ruin. The main platform had been shattered, exposing the steel structure beneath, bent and broken like an eviscerated shipwreck. The production manager was the only senior team member already on the

scenes, and the first thing he said was: “It’s over. We’re going back to Paris.” My initial thought was the same: how could we possibly finish the shoot?

But then a vision appeared from between the broken palm-trees: was it a bird? was it a plane? No, it was James, the director.

His reaction to seeing the destruction of his film was the greatest example of smooth crisis management and/or balls-to-the-wall-refusal-to-see-reality-in-the-face I have ever witnessed firsthand. He overlooked the destruction, let people console him about packing up, nodded with a smile and said: “We shoot tonight.” He sat down among the rubble, opened his laptop and started planning the rescue operation. So many parameters had to be taken into account: how many hours could we make the extras work, when did our supporting cast have to leave for other commitments, when was the yellow elephant available, planning issues with shooting days and nights, security issues relating to electricity and lights, what parts of the set could be quickly repaired and which had to be abandoned, etc. As other key members of the crew showed up (DP, ADs, grips, etc.), everyone contributed to solving the riddle and, sure enough, that night we were shooting in what was left of the set, while off-camera, welders, painters and every possible handy-man were working to fix what could be salvaged for the following days.

Of all the lessons I learned on set, this was surely the most inspiring – another example of how willpower can overcome some pretty daunting challenges. Because I’m sure that when James set foot on the rubble, he was just as aware as anyone

else that this signaled the end of the shoot, and that if he had had called off the production, no one would have bat an eyelid. But upon saying “We shoot tonight”, he was convincing himself as well as everyone else of something that was still genuinely uncertain, thus forcing one future to happen over another.

Returning back to France after the shoot to edit the behind-the-scenes, I had time to reflect on this experience. When I first met James and he offered me the job, he told me that shooting a behind-the-scenes was the best film-school you could find, and he was right: not only are you tasked with shooting a small-scale film yourself, but you have an in-depth access to all aspects of a full-scale film. I picked up the language, identified the different positions and how they usually operate, and learned to read the internal politics of a film crew (who has power in what instances, whose job is usually unpopular, who is it good to have on your side, etc.). I also saw the true scale of such a production. In the past, I was always surprised by the length of the credits at the end of feature films, often wondering why so many people had been involved. Now I get it – from pre-production, to the actual set crew, to post-production and all the people involved even for just half-a-day, a feature film is a mini-economy in itself.

More importantly, this experience confirmed to me that shooting films was what I wanted to do, and better, something I felt confident I *could* do. Before the shoot, I was curious how it would affect my ambition in pursuing this career: perhaps witnessing a professional film-set would either show me that it was not a place I wanted to be, or

worse, confirm that it *was* a place I wanted to be but confront me with a task I simply was not up to. Thankfully, this wasn't the case. First of all, I felt at home on a film set and was instantly envious of James' position. The regimented nature of the film set was also something I hugely admired: it was like an army, with the director as the general, and everyone duly did their job – their job that *they* were the best at doing. Everyone knows their responsibility, their strengths and weaknesses, people get yelled at but there are no hard feelings, they get on with it. It truly was a great example of human cooperation and task optimization, and I can only imagine the sense of empowerment and fulfillment that must come from being the captain of such an enterprise. The crew is like the extension of the director's brain, each augmenting his capabilities to make everything better than it otherwise could be.

I cannot thank James enough for his trust. From the first time we met, he has been incredibly generous with me. Outside of the shoot, James spent time with his family in their vacation home in a town called Le Croisic, which, coincidentally, is only a 20-minute drive from my hometown, Pornichet, on the west coast of France. And so after the shoot we met up there for lunch. His main concern was not whether I was making progress on the “making-of,” but rather whether I had been sufficiently learning on set. He was anxious to know if I was happy at the amount of exposure I was getting to the filmmaking process, and whether I felt like I was learning interesting lessons. He would often revisit moments in the shoot, explaining what was actually going on beyond what was apparent – things I couldn't see, hidden power struggles here and there, things

that he would not tell me if he didn't have a real desire to share some fundamental knowledge with me about his own work and process.

Finally, being part of the crew was incredibly enriching on a human level. Many crewmembers have become close friends and people I hope to work with again in the future. It was really inspiring to me how all these people with extremely diverse technical skill-sets conglomerated here to work on the basis of something someone had imagined— this wasn't an object being manufactured, a building being constructed, a machine being engineered – this was a story, a work of art, a piece of entertainment thought up in one mind and being realized by the sweat of many hands. As I got to know the crew members, I was struck by how diverse their backgrounds were. Roll back time 15-20 years, and where today you have an Oscar-winning actor, a bankable filmmaker and a powerful producer, you had a key-maker, a dentist and an art dealer; where today you have a production manager, a prop-master and a stunt double, you had a mountain guide, a bar-owner and a bomb-squad diver. The sense of wonder at seeing all these seemingly unrelated trajectories converge for such an intense period of time was only equal to the sadness at seeing them all diverge just as quickly afterwards to go onto other adventures.

All in all, shoot and edit combined, my involvement with *Brice de Nice 3* required my undivided attention for 8 months, during which time *Psi* was put on hold. Upon finishing the edit and delivering the behind-the-scenes, I knew that the Altmayer brothers would be the first producers I would talk to about *Psi* and my subsequent

projects. Had I found the door or had the door found me?  
Either way, I knew where to knock.

## Chapter 6 Pornichet

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Pornichet is the town where I grew up in France; it is a small resort on the Atlantic coast, about 4 and half hours' drive from Paris and a 40-minute drive from Nantes, just south of Brittany. I would come here with my parents every summer when we still lived in Darlington, in the north of England, and eventually, when I was about 10, we moved there for good. I lived there until I was 18 and finished high-school.

This is where I set the life of the “original” character, the one who, afraid of all choices, chose nothing. He is the framing device for the other 5 lives, as it is his psychologist who goes to meet the alternate versions, in the hope that this experiment will help him get out of his paralysis.

Again, I underestimated the difficulty of the shoot in Pornichet. One of the practical aspects of this shoot was that I would have to transform myself enough to be a convincing hermit. To look this way, I wanted to get long hair and a long beard. While I quickly abandoned the idea of putting on a fake beard, as the ones I tried on were just not believable, long hair was a necessity. But finding a wig was actually a rather frustrating challenge. I contacted several makeup artists, who all charged over 200 or 300 euros for their services, plus the cost of the wig. So I thought I'd bypass the makeup artist and fit a wig on myself, if I could find one. I first met with a professional wig designer in Paris, whose wigs were indeed very believable, but cost 200 euros rental

per day. As the dates approached to go and shoot in Pornichet, I just couldn't come to spend more for a wig than for DPs or actors. So, I just dug deeper in my research and found my way to the Goutte d'Or neighborhood of Paris, populated by a predominantly African (sub-Saharan) community; here, I found dozens of hair salons and shops selling wigs, extensions and all sorts of hair products. The second shop I went into had the perfect wig for me; I tried it on in front of some amused kids (and suspicious parents), and got what I needed for 35 euros.

I estimated the apartment shoot would take no more than two days, and so went to Pornichet over a weekend. The shoot was at my grandmother's apartment, by St Marguerite beach, facing the sea – the only apartment that had remained in my family over the years. I had been there as a baby and would still occasionally go there during vacations. I spent half a day transforming the apartment into a hermit's den, moving the furniture accordingly and generally making a mess with junk food and sodas.

The one particular item I absolutely needed for this shoot was a projector – my character watched movies all day long - and a local friend of mine, Romain, agreed to lend me his. After rearranging the apartment and positioning the projector correctly so that its picture covered the white screen I had set up, I relaxed for the night, thinking everything was in place for the shoot. The next morning, my mother Sophie and half-sister Héloïse showed up, ready to help operate the camera. I put on my wig, bathrobe, turned on the projector and explained the first shot. Everything was going smoothly until I turned the camera on. When pointing

the camera at the projected video, the feed was picking up vertical rolling lines and an annoying flickering effect. I instantly knew what the problem was: the projector emits its picture at a certain frame rate which is not the same frame rate as my camera. This messed with my mind and in the confusion, I tried changing the frame-rate on my camera, with no success, and then the shutter speed, but this only modified the intensity of the effects without canceling them. I got a little crazy at that point. My mind was racing for a solution. I thought about going to the local electronics store to buy another projector, but I wouldn't know what kind of projector to ask for. The pressure got to me for a couple hours and I was angry how something so stupid and contingent was threatening to ruin my week-end plan and force me to return. While my mother was trying to downplay the situation, I relentlessly looked for a solution, fiddling with the settings of both the projector and the camera, until finally I stumbled across a winning configuration: I changed my camera's frame-rate to 24fps and slowed down the shutter speed. Somehow, this matched the projector's shutter speed, and, while there were still some lines visible, they weren't moving anymore and there was no flicker. It wasn't perfect, but it was manageable.

During the summer, I returned to Pornichet to shoot the "memory" scenes on the beach. I had asked around for a kid, aged between 6 to 10, who could pass for a young version of me, and found the ideal kid in Iggy, the son of a friend of mine, Jaime. The way in which I came to meet Jaime some years earlier was the result one of those once-in-a-lifetime coincidences which make you wonder how often we unknowingly find ourselves crossing paths with people

who we are actually more closely connected to us than we know. When I was 21, I worked as a flight-attendant during the summers for Air France. On a flight from Paris to New York, I was managing my isle at the back of the plane, greeting passengers, when a cute blond girl came aboard, crying her eyes out. Seeing as she looked more or less my age, my colleagues immediately nudged me to go and assist her. She spoke American and wanted to be left alone. Half way through the flight, while everyone else was asleep, she was wide awake and crying again – so I made a second attempt and offered her something to drink. This time she came to the galley for a chat. She was sad because she spent holidays in France with her mother but lived the rest of the year in the US with her father and hated it. When I asked her where she was from in France, she replied: “You won’t know it, it’s a small place.” I insisted, and she replied: “Pornichet.” It turned out her mother lived on the same street as me. We had even been to the same party the week before. We exchanged numbers and a few months later I was introduced to her mother and her step father: Jaime. Thinking back on it, so many tiny contingent things led to this encounter: if she hadn’t been on that plane; if I hadn’t been in charge of that particular isle; if she hadn’t been crying; if she hadn’t been from the same town, let alone the same street. The list of tiny consequential circumstances adds up quickly and makes the whole thing insanely unlikely.

So back to the present: filming on the beach with Iggy, Jaime’s son, was a lot of fun – it was the only part of the film which I shot almost entirely on the Glidecam and with the wide 14mm lens. Furthermore, it was intriguing to notice how some elements of my childhood beach connected to other places I had filmed and which I hadn’t planned or

intentionally looked for: the stairs that leads down from the buildings, the wall that lines the beach, the pyramid-like structure that defines the rocks at one end of the beach, the starfish, the branches of the parasol, etc. As I began to see these patterns across the other footage I had shot in the other locations, I honed in on these leitmotifs and gave them some significance: the ingredients of our life are already there in our childhood, and they will later become expressed in different ways depending on where our life goes. But they are there, and always were.

As I write this current paragraph, weeks after the previous one, it is early September 2015, and I find myself in the midst of a sharp frustration: I have just seen the new extended trailer for Terrence Malick's upcoming film "Knight of Cups," and some of the shots in this film make it look like I am deliberately trying to rip him off, especially the shots on the beach, where a character draws lines in the sand and then makes a hand print that is washed up by the waves. I have just shot almost exactly the same shots with Iggy at the beach. Godammit.

In the autumn of 2015, I returned to Pornichet to shoot the final scenes of the film, where the "hermit" character leaves the apartment and goes to the beach. This turned out to be a very difficult sequence to shoot: first of all, the weather was tricky. I needed the sky to be grey, but dry. However, the Atlantic coast is rarely one without the other, and so I often had to contend with the drizzle. When it didn't rain, it was windy and so gusts would drift a mist from the breaking waves onto my lens, forcing me to wipe it every couple minutes and making it impossible to shoot

anything longer than 10 seconds. The other thing I had to deal with was the tide: at that period, the coefficients were high and so the difference between high-tide and low-tide was huge. In order to get enough available beach, I would have to shoot at the right moment, when the tide was half way going down. And finally, there were three shots of particular importance that took me several days to get just right. I had decided that the opening and closing shots would be reflections of each other, with the same frame but with important elements being different. They seemed simple enough in my mind, but the gloomy-day ones were a nightmare to shoot. I needed the beach to be pristine and no matter how early I went to the beach, there was some dog-walker or jogger already there. After a couple unsuccessful attempts at being the first person on the beach, I eventually asked two friends to come and block people either side of the beach for an hour, and got my shots. These early morning fails were times when I really hoped one day I'd get to shoot real films with a proper crew.

Added 26/11/2015: I have just returned from the movie theatre, where I went to see Malick's *Knight of Cups*, and I am stirred by two very different feelings. The first is a lingering irritation that spiked while still in the theatre and that I've tried to downplay for the past two hours. There are far too many similarities between *Knight of Cups* and *Psi*: similar beach shots with drawings and hand prints in the sand, many driving shots (with one which is even horizontally flipped), following the character as he walks through downtown Los Angeles and even on Skid Row, the voice-over talking about life choices, one of the girls telling him he can be who he wants to be ("*the palm trees tell us that anything is possible*"),

another voice-over saying that the present is the only time that counts... Several times I was in the theatre shaking my head, thinking: "That's it, you're gonna have to rethink your film and cut half the shots." But then as I travelled home, I began to pick myself up: why should I? I shot all my stuff independently, with no previous knowledge of Malick's latest film, and these shots are entirely justified in my film. So I have decided to keep them and get on with it.

PART 3  
THE INTERVIEWS

## Chapter 1

### Why interviews?

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I began this project with a fairly simple but broad question: are we free to lead the life we lead? Developing this question led me approach it from two different angles: a social one (i.e. are we free in terms of choosing our life path, why do we struggle to do so and to be happy with it, etc.) and a more fundamental one (i.e. the question of free will and determinism). But my interest and engagement with these two levels of questioning was at first only on a personal level.

My first impulse was in reaction to my own experience and those of my friends around me. I realized that most of them all shared the same concerns I did: what should they do with their life? had they chosen the right path? will they ever start enjoying their work? should they commit to their girlfriend/boyfriend? will they ever stop regretting some decision they made? And so on. All of these existential questions were consuming and evidently at the top of my generation's list of daily worries. This was particularly intriguing to me because at the same time we have been told our whole lives that we are lucky to be as free as we are and that we should take advantage of it. I'll give you the examples of 3 of my best friends (those who are involved in Psi) because despite the big differences in their respective chosen paths, the similarities in terms of existential questioning are striking.

Paul Marinucci (he's the guy in Helsinki), he's now 29: in high-school, his sole interest in life was music. His father was a boat engineer and his mother a chemist, but he was a classically trained pianist, he was a founding member of a band called Miss Take (with our other friend Thomas, who I'll talk about in a moment) and he idolized French multi-instrumentalist and *Amélie*-famed Yann Tiersen. He dreamed of becoming a professional pianist and writing music for movies. So, when graduating from high-school, Paul enrolled in med school and studied chemistry. He then went to get a Master's degree from a top business school in Paris then started working in the pharmaceutical industry. Over the years, every time I saw him, the main subject we talked about was: music. Throughout College, he still produced his own tracks, printed his own CD's and sold them to friends and relatives. And even though he was learning about chemotherapy-related lab research, his real dream was: being the next Yann Thiersen. Over the years, I've heard him a good 50 times say: "I swear, after I finish this year, I think I'm just gonna quit, build my own recording studio and seriously work on composing music." Paul today works as a product manager for a major pharmaceutical company, he's happily married and has just bought an apartment in Paris with his wife, Julie (who's also in the film). Verdict: he's happy, but he still spends a good deal of his extra time playing music and thinking about his forsaken life.

Marie Lefèvre (the blonde girl who's with me in Jerusalem), she's now 30. We met when we were 22 in University. She had already started working in the NGO/humanitarian scene, first in Paris and then on short missions abroad in South America and then in the Middle East. Every time she

returned to Paris after a fix-term contract, she became a ball of nerves: “What do I do next? What kind of work should I do? NGO, governmental, private sector? Where? Middle East or should I branch out to other continents? I also want to open a café in Paris!” On the one hand, she had built-up a lot of experience in the Middle East and established a good professional network, but on the other, she missed being in Paris, close to her friends and family. So what to do: career or relationships? After leaving Jerusalem, Marie got a job in Tunisia and said: “That’s it, this is the last one, after Tunis, I’m moving back to Paris.” Marie is now married to a Jordanian, mother to their first son and living in Amman. Verdict: she’s happy, but they still talk about moving to Paris someday.

Thom Terylson, who was in high-school with me and Paul, always loved music and theatre as a teenager. Aside from being the drummer in the band Miss Take alongside Paul, he was a regular cast member in the high-school plays. But what should he do afterwards? What to study? Where? Nantes? Paris? London? As a backup, he started with a 2-year business diploma in a local school, before moving to London to study music marketing. For several years, he managed bands and worked in pubs on the side. When I met up with him to shoot the scenes for Psi, he was 28 and told me he’d been thinking about acting a lot. He felt that acting was where his future laid. A few months later, he quit London and moved to Paris to start fresh. He enrolled in acting classes and, as of September 2017, he’s the lead in a play in central Paris. Verdict: he’s happy, pursuing his dream.

These stories are similar in many ways to most of my other friends – a lot of options, a lot of expectations, a lot of hesitation, mental torture, back-and-forth, stunted hopes and leaps of faith. The reason I find these experiences especially interesting is because I don't remember hearing the same stories from my parents when they told me about their youth. They had issues, don't get me wrong, but of a totally different kind. My dad grew up in the fifties and sixties in the North-East of England and his set destiny was working in the railroads, like his dad and granddad before him. He didn't want to do that, and society in the early sixties was starting to open up so he wasn't totally forced into that path, but his options were still pretty limited. He left school aged 15 and hustled his way into photography, becoming one of the youngest professional journalists in the UK at that time, an asset which opened backstage doors to the bands of the swinging sixties. My mom grew up in a French middle-class family and didn't really know what to do with her life. She eventually drifted her way into a job that appealed to her for its rather sweet balance of work-hours, fun and salary: airline hostess for Air France. In both cases, there wasn't much hesitating, or dilly-dallying, or existential crisis about what they were doing with their life. This just seemed to happen and they were pretty happy with it. So as I brewed my film project, there definitely seemed to be something unique about the situation the newer generations found themselves in, and this was the first side of the freedom-coin I wanted to get more expert insights on for the film.

The second side of the freedom-coin appeared originally as an outgrowth of the first one when I started studying philosophy in University. As my ethics teachers would

question us what makes us “us,” I was quickly drawn into the so-called “free will debate:” are we free to lead the lives we lead, or are there other factors at work that could render our freedom illusory? Perhaps, after all, the existential questions I was grappling with were in many ways moot, if at the end of the day everything is just part of the plan for the Universe?

As I wandered through the free will landscape, I was particularly drawn down two particular rabbit holes which I think are the most exciting frontiers of human enquiry today: physics (both quantum and astro) and neuroscience. On the one hand, an outward exploration into the infinitely tiny and infinitely immense, the infinitely close and infinitely far, in a bid to understand the origins, nature and functioning of objective reality. On the other hand, an inward exploration into our brain and minds to better understand the origins, nature and functioning of our subjective reality. Both promise earth-shattering and mind-blowing insights into everything that matters, the bedrock for all knowledge. With these two disciplines being so vast, naturally my interests funneled into several more particular fields of inquiry pertaining to human freedom: what does science tell us about the causal order of the world? to what degree do we control our lives and decide who we are and wish to become? Are we free in the truest sense (i.e. is there something special about us that makes us the originators of our own wills, the causes of our own ends) or are we entirely the product of factors over which we have no control? Does quantum physics change our place in reality? Could there really be parallel universes in which all other alternatives exist? These questions were so vast and complex that I felt that talking with experts would be necessary not only for my

own understanding, but for offering the audience the most trust-worthy source of information.

Furthermore, all these questions, on both sides of the freedom-coin are intertwined and play into each other to various degrees and, like almost everything in life, are all part of an overarching, directing quest: how to achieve greater well-being and happiness? We want to understand how the world and our minds really are and function in order to make sense of them and draw some conclusions for our individual and collective well-being. So, while Mill would argue that you don't derive an *ought* from an *is*, we still want to know what *is* in order to decide what we *ought* to do. And for this purpose, I thought that conducting interviews with experts would be interesting – because before being philosophers, astrophysicists, neuroscientists, psychologists or economists, they are first and foremost people, who have life experience worth sharing.

I'll here present the interviewees, how I came to meet them and some thoughts on how the conversation related to this project.

## Chapter 2

### Giorgio Coricelli

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My first interview was with Giorgio Coricelli, Associate Professor of Economics and Psychology at the University of Southern California. Part of his research is studying the effects on decision making of counterfactuals, which are thoughts about possible alternatives to life events that have already occurred, typically starting with a “what if.” His research had been identifying which parts of the brain were involved in the emotion of regret and mapping pathways of how it affected human reasoning. With the use of fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), researchers had been able to track the neural correlates of regret and found that there is a network of regions in the brain associated with its processing: the crucial part is the orbitofrontal cortex, which is more widely identified as being heavily involved in decision making, but also the rostral anterior cingulate cortex, a part of the brain strongly linked with cognition, the hippocampus, which is the hard drive for memory, and the amygdala, which is considered the seat of emotions. The interpretation is that regret is a cognitive process: if we don’t think of decisions and outcomes, we don’t feel it; and the information about the emotion of regret is then stored in memory to leave a biological trace of the experience, enabling people to adjust their behavior in the future whenever a similar situation arises so as to avoid repeating the behavior that elicited the feeling of regret in the first place.

Not being a brain specialist myself, after the interview I found myself looking up where these parts of the brain were situated and the first thing that struck me was how superficial my knowledge of the brain was. This single organ is, after all, responsible for almost everything that makes human life interesting, and yet I knew so little about it. It also appeared to me that in the grand scheme of things, neuroscientists didn't know much about it either. Their work was still very gross and approximated; most descriptions of regions of the brain are still coated in precautions such as "it seems like..." and "this part of the brain is heavily associated with..." or "so far, studies lead us to postulate that..." - often accompanied by a list of other parts of the brain that are thought to be involved. If anything, this hints at the incredible work still ahead and made me think that in another life, I would have loved to be a neuroscientist.

Talking about regret with Coricelli also allowed me to make a few distinctions which really honed in on what regret was, or wasn't, and he suggested an example to make it instantly clear. Suppose there are two wallets, one with 100\$, the other with nothing, and you and another person are in a game in which one of you (selected at random) will get to decide who gets which wallet, without of course knowing which is which. Suppose, first, that it is the other person who wins the draw and chooses which wallet to take and which one goes to you: if you get \$100, you'll surely feel *lucky*, and if you get 0, you'll naturally be *disappointed*. However, suppose that the initial draw is in your favor and *you* get to decide who gets which wallet: now, if you take the \$100, you'll feel a little *victorious*, but if you take the empty wallet, you'll quite surely feel some *regret*. In both cases, the stakes and the results if you win or lose are exactly the same, but the

feelings associated with these results are undeniably different, and somewhat more intense in the second case. What has changed is the sense of responsibility with regards to the outcome. This subjective difference indicates something very important: whatever the nature of the world, these emotions exist and the difference is consequential. We feel it because we have a sense that we caused the world to go one way or the other, regardless of the causal reality of the universe.

When our interview was over, Coricelli offered to walk me across the USC campus to the School of Cinematic Arts, where he was friends with one of the teachers. He was far from knowing that for me, this was a rather bittersweet proposal. Many years earlier, when I was maybe 14 or 15 (in the phase of my life where I was convinced everything was all planned out ahead of me to become a filmmaker), I had in fact already visited the USC School of Cinematic Arts while on holiday with my father. I had been inside the school, toured the facility, collected all the glossy leaflets and admission folders. I even sat down for a meeting with one of the administrators, who explained to me what life was like on campus and what the requirements were to be admitted. At the time, I had become convinced this would be my natural home: it was a film school funded by Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Robert Zemeckis - there was no way I was ever going anywhere else. That was, of course, the closest I ever got to USC. Now, here I was again, 12 years later, on my own terms, invited this time by a professor of economics to visit the same premises. I declined. I knew that by going over there, I would feel like I was treading on the grounds of a life I didn't lead, and I also didn't want to find memories of my former self, who annoyed me now for being so naïvely fascinated with this place.



### Chapter 3

#### Michael Gazzaniga

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Later that month, I had the pleasure of meeting with Michal Gazzaniga in his beautiful house overlooking the Pacific Ocean, just south of Santa Barbara where he directs the SAGE Center for the Study of the Mind. I knew that he was going to be one of the bigger names I would interview for my film (even Coricelli admitted that Gazzaniga was one of his heroes), so I was particularly eager to make the most of it.

Gazzaniga is famous for leading pioneering studies on split brained patients – these are people whose corpus callosum, the part of the brain that connects the two hemispheres, is to some degree severed (often as the result of surgery to treat epilepsy). Having studied how these individuals function on specific tasks compared to people who have intact brains, he discovered many of the specific attributes of the left and right hemispheres respectively. One of the most interesting findings, originally postulated by Gazzaniga and for which his colleague Roger Sperry was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medecine in 1981, is the presence of an “interpreter” module in the left hemisphere. In his early experiments, Gazzania observed what happened when the two hemispheres of such split-brained patients could not communicate with each-other: when patients were shown an image only to their right eye (which is processed in the left hemisphere), they were able to provide an explanation for what they were looking at; however, when they were shown an image only to their left eye (which is

processed in the right hemisphere), they were unable to account for what they were seeing. This is how Gazzaniga first postulated that the left brain had the unique ability to build an explanation for the information that was being fed to the brain, something which the right hemisphere was unable to do by itself.

This “interpreter module” was subsequently shown to apply to almost every aspect of life, leading Gazzaniga and his colleagues to define much more precisely how it works and what its use is. In the larger scope of things, the “interpreter” is essentially the little narrator of our lives, the editor that conjures up reasons and explanations for events and ties everything together so that the chain of experiences that constitutes one’s life not only seems singular but makes sense, reconciling the past and the present to provide consistency and continuity. Further research showed that the left hemisphere is far more inventive in interpreting past events than the right brain, which is much more literal and true to the facts. Gazzaniga admitted that our sense of free will was quite probably a direct product of the interpreter: when something happens, the interpreter looks for why it happened and often the easiest, most obvious explanation to give is that it was us. Projecting the past into the future, the interpreter builds us up as free agents in control of decisions and determining which path we proceed upon, shaping the world as we go along and having a consequential effect on our own destiny.

Another interesting aspect of Gazzaniga’s work is that, being a cognitive neuroscientist, he has sought to understand the relationship between “mind” (a word used to describe the high-order mental abilities coupled with the sense of Self) and “brain” (the crude, physical organ, made up of grey

matter, neurons and synapses). To him, the mind is an emergent property of the brain that operates at a “higher level” than its constituent parts, much like software running on the hardware of the brain. He postulates that our inability to explain “mind” from “brain” is just the result of its immense complexity. He uses the analogy of traffic: no amount of absolute knowledge and understanding of how a car works in its most intricate mechanical and technological details will allow us to understand or let alone predict traffic. Traffic is an emergent property that is not reducible to its constituent parts, cars. This concept of emergence appealed to me greatly. It was a scientifically viable framework to explain the more subjective aspects of consciousness without sounding kooky. Tegmark has a similar thought on this matter, claiming that “wetness” is an emergent property of H<sub>2</sub>O in its liquid form, without being reducible to the constituent molecule which, in other patterns, can be icy or gaseous. The big question, however, with this idea of emergence, is whether the emergent level has any downward causal influence on its constituent parts. Gazzaniga himself identified this as one of the major fields of inquiry becoming in neuroscience.

Towards the end of the interview, when I asked Gazzaniga about his own life and regrets, he looked up, racking his brain, and eventually replied as though the answer was obvious and the question silly: “I don’t do regrets!” I laughed and didn’t insist. “I don’t *do* regrets,” he said. Does that mean that he *chooses* not to have regrets? Can we choose to be regretful or not? Is he suggesting that it’s somewhat silly to have regrets? I should have asked him that. Facing his legitimately joyful satisfaction with his own life, I couldn’t help but think that perhaps he had no regrets

because he simply had no reason to have any. By all accounts, he had been successful in every aspect of his life: he had made breakthrough discoveries in his field of expertise, contributing in a meaningful way to human knowledge, he was recognized and respected by his peers as the father of cognitive neuroscience, he had raised a large family, was still happily married and had built the beautiful house we were sitting in. Who would be *unhappy*?

Truth be told, perhaps that kind of success in all walks of life, for someone else, would still not be enough. He had the wisdom to harbor this positive, satisfied mindset with the life he has led, completely unperturbed by what could have been if he had done things differently. He did concede, though, that his success had originally hinged on one rather fortuitous coincidence: it just so happened that one of his first jobs was in a facility where he came into contact with his first split-brain patient, thus leading him on the path of his famous research. Had that split-brain patient not been there in that facility at that time, perhaps Gazzaniga's career would have gone very differently.

## Chapter 4

### Robert Kane

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After meeting Coricelli and Gazzaniga in LA, I travelled across the US in January 2015 to meet with the other experts who had agreed to an interview. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, I flew to Austin to meet with Robert Kane, who is Distinguished Teaching Professor of Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin. Kane is considered to be the leading libertarian philosopher on the subject of free will, and is the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, widely used in university philosophy classes.

To understand where Kane stands in the free will debate, it will be useful here to explain briefly what the big difficulty surrounding free will really is and why it is still today, after centuries of philosophizing, a hot topic. This will also serve to situate the other philosophers I interviewed on the spectrum and bring out their relative positions and disagreements. As I mentioned, Kane is a libertarian; this means he considers that free will is not compatible with determinism. He concedes that we are undeniably determined by many things which are out of our control (our genes, our neurons, our environment, etc.), but that what really matters is that we be *ultimately responsible* for who we are, such that when we act freely, we are acting on a *will of our own free making*. What this means is that, some (if not most) of our decisions may indeed be entirely determined, but what matters is that at some points in our past, we were responsible for forming the will upon which we are now acting. To illustrate this, Kane cites Aristotle, whose quote I

find particularly enlightening in this respect: *“If a man is responsible for wicked acts that flow from his character, he must at some time in the past have been responsible for forming the wicked character from which these acts flow.”*

Many philosophers believe that this is impossible, because the causal nature of the universe, whatever it is, doesn't allow for it. This is often called the “Standard Argument” against free will, and it goes like this: first, the world must either be entirely deterministic or entirely indeterministic (random) - it cannot be simultaneously both, and so one or the other must be true. If determinism is true, then all events, including our thoughts and actions, are caused and predetermined; if, instead, indeterminism is true, then all events, including our thoughts and actions, are random. Either way, we lack control and cannot be held responsible and so, whatever the truth about the causal nature of the universe, libertarian free will is impossible.

Kane has spent over forty years fighting the Standard Argument, and I must say I admire the consistency with which he has built up his theoretical edifice, as well as the energy with which he defends it. First of all, here is how he gets the randomness in: quantum random events at a tiny scale in our brain (perhaps in the synapses) cause tiny micro-variations, the effects of which are amplified through chaotic processes in the brain, thus leading to potentially different outcomes down the road. According to him, there are particular moments in life where we face a decision of such importance, where the competing options are both supported by non-conclusive but equally strong reasons, that we are “in two minds” and torn about what to do. In these “soul-searching moments,” we must make an effort to resolve the tension and make a choice. Kane claims that the

effort made to “parallel process” the deliberation in favor of both (or all) competing options simultaneously creates noise in the brain, stirring up quantum indeterminacies at the neuronal level and thus screening off complete determination from the past. The thoughts that feed the deliberation will thus to some degree appear randomly (rather, the probability that any given thought among all the available thoughts stored in our brain will become conscious will be more or less high) and in the end, the decision we make, while fundamentally hinging on random brain-events, is nonetheless one we intentionally will for our own reasons, one for which we can therefore be said to be ultimately responsible for – and this holds *either way*, whatever choice we end up making, because in every case we had good reasons for doing so and we intentionally willed to do so. Kane calls these moments “self-forming actions,” because they serve to form who we become afterwards, and crucially, they are moments which are “will-setting” – meaning that up until the moment we made the choice, our will was not settled – it was truly undetermined. It is by virtue of making the choice that we set it: it becomes our will. And these self-forming actions are therefore those actions by which we become ultimately responsible for who we are.

Of course, Kane has faced many challenges to his model – mostly from determinists – and they require many books to be fully covered. It is no coincidence that Kane’s interview was the one that lasted the longest (he spoke with me for almost 3 hours). I was actually surprised how eagerly he had prepared for the interview and also how open he was to telling his own personal story, including the story of his eldest son who suffered from schizophrenia and died in his late twenties. After our conversation, Kane toured me

around Austin and took me out for a huge Texan barbecue, most of which returned to his wife in a doggy-bag. One amusing anecdote in our conversation was that one of my filmmaking heroes, Richard Linklater, a local Austinite, had studied in Kane's philosophy department and even shot some of his films there, with the participation of some of Kane's colleagues.

## Chapter 5

### Alfred Mele

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Following my interview with Kane, I flew to Tallahassee to meet with Alfred Mele, professor of philosophy at Florida State University and director from 2010 to 2013 of the multi-million dollar “Big Questions in Free Will” project.

Mele has developed both compatibilist and libertarian views, officially agnostic about which kind of free will should be argued for. However, he has been fairly vocal about rejecting most of the neuroscientific evidence purportedly claiming that we have no free will (in the libertarian sense). In particular, he has spent a great deal of effort trying to downplay the conclusions drawn from the famous “Libet experiments,” which kicked-off the contemporary resurgence in interest in the “free will vs determinism” debate and caught the attention of the media and public at large. In 1983, neuroscientist Benjamin Libet conducted a study to measure the moment in the process leading up to an act when a subject becomes consciously aware of the decision to act (here, to move a finger). Earlier studies had already shown a peak in brain activity before the decision to flex a muscle and had called it a readiness potential. Libet’s goal was to see *when* the conscious awareness of the intent appeared in relation to this readiness potential, with famous neurobiologist John Eccles postulating that it had to come before. In the experiment, Libet asked people to watch a small clock-like device with a dot moving around the frame and to remember where the

dot was when they first became aware of their decision to move their finger, with an electroencephalogram monitoring their brain activity throughout. The observations were rather surprising: while the device picked up the readiness potential in the brain about 550 milliseconds before the motion, the subjects reported an awareness of the intent to move only around 200 milliseconds before the muscle moved. In other words, the subjects were consciously aware of the decision to flex about 350 milliseconds *after* the unconscious activity of the brain.

This led to a flurry of interpretations that the brain is “making decisions” automatically and that our awareness kicks-in only after the fact. This inspired many magazine covers touting that scientists had disproved free will - despite Libet’s own opinion, which was that the subject still had the ability to interrupt a readiness potential and essentially *veto* an act before doing it (what some called *free won’t*). Yet, the damage had been done in popular science and Libet had supposedly paved the way to proving that free will is an illusion.

Mele has done a great deal to critically examine Libet’s experiments and seriously challenge it on all fronts: its experimental methodology (such as not recording brain activity long before the readiness potential to see if it is an isolated burst or not), the results they yielded (there are issues with the reliability of subjects self-reporting a time on a clock), the interpretation of the results (the early spike in activity may not necessarily correspond to anything causally linked with the motion) and the conclusions that were drawn from the results (which don’t necessarily disprove free will, given that moving a finger doesn’t involve much if any conscious reasoning and therefore is probably not the best

test for a free-willed decision). Listening to him essentially “debunk” the Libet experiment was terrifically refreshing, and showed me how even well established and cited studies/experiments can be grossly overblown in popular conversation.

## Chapter 6

### Bob Doyle

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My last stop on this cross-USA trip was Boston, where the cluster of great universities meant a concentration of experts in many different fields. I had arranged three meetings there: first with Bob Doyle, then with Daniel Dennett and finally with Max Tegmark.

The first on the agenda was Bob Doyle, who is in some respects the “outsider” of my cast of experts, as he is the only one not currently part of academia. It is hard to sum-up what he does in one line and a quick look at his CV reveals what an diverse life he has led: a PhD in Astrophysics from Harvard, he was once secretary of the NASA astronomy missions board and coordinator of the ground-based observation program for the Skylabs mission; an entrepreneur who holds several patents, he co-invented a synchronous sound recorder for Super 8 film cameras then became CEO of the Super8 Sound company, invented several single purposed computers and electronic games (such as the Merlin for Parker Brothers), and was one of the first certified developers for Apple who wrote the first ever desktop publishing program “MacPublisher”; he has also been involved in electronics publishing, content management and video editing; and amidst all this, he has spent several decades extensively (and I mean *extensively*) researching and writing about many problems in philosophy and physics, and is probably the world’s most prolific non-academic researcher and writer on the question of free-will, hosting in his living-room what is surely the largest private collection of

books on the matter. His personal quest to distribute information about free will is actually how I first came across him: he is the creator of [www.informationphilosopher.com](http://www.informationphilosopher.com), the most broad and exhaustive website dedicated to the cross-section of free-will and quantum physics, which provided me with numerous useful references and became my go-to website whenever I needed to get some information on an author or a particular concept.

Doyle is a bit like a philosophical engineer: he sees things like problems to be resolved and free will is no exception. Combining his knowledge of both quantum physics and philosophy, he has built up his own model to account for free will, which he calls the “Cogito model” of free will. Before explaining how it works, it is necessary to understand a fundamental concept in his line of thought, which is possibly what I find to be the clearest and most convincing way of making sense of both the apparent randomness of quantum physics and the apparent determinism of the every-day world. This concept is “adequate determinism” or sometimes called “statistical determinism.” The idea goes like this: quantum physics applying to all particles, there is no strict determinism at any level or scale in the physical universe. Therefore, what we routinely call “determinism” is in fact nothing more than a theoretical framework that applies to *our scale* of experience and allows us to use accurate mathematical models to predict things, such as the movements of planets or billiard balls. This is possible because for objects of a certain size, there are so many individual particles involved that the random probabilities of each and every one of them become “averaged over” to the point of near statistical certainty (law of large numbers). In other words, what we see as being

determinism in the human-scale world (Newtonian physics), while almost always reliable for all practical intents and purposes (like sending men to the Moon), is actually only an “adequate determinism” of many, many, many quantum events that, averaged out, approach the near statistical certainty of classical physics for big-enough objects (an atom, for instance, is already big enough). This concept of “adequate determinism” therefore serves as a convincing theoretical framework that can bridge the apparent contradiction between indeterminism and determinism, and thus pave the way for a rebuttal to the “Standard Argument” against free will that doesn’t need to reject outright one or the other, but can subtly accommodate and cleverly combine both.

With this in mind, Doyle’s “Cogito model” of free will explains it in two steps, in line with many other “two-staged models” from William James all the way to Martin Heisenberg (son of Werner Heisenberg). He argues that free will is best understood not as something that expresses itself in a single moment (the decision) but over a temporal sequence in the brain leading up to a decision. The first stage is what happens at the microscopic level (what Doyle calls the “Micro Mind”) where quantum random effects create noise in the neurons which in turn leads to the generation of random new thoughts. In the second stage, the higher-level conscious mind (what he calls the “Macro Mind”) makes a choice among the randomly generated alternate possibilities, a choice which is “adequately determined” by everything that constitutes us at this higher level and plays a *determining* role in any decision we make: our character, our ambitions, our desires, etc. In short, quantum physics works in the brain to open up several alternate paths into the future, from which

we make a choice which is adequately determined, thus preventing us from acting randomly like loose cannons, with no connection to who we are or what we want.

In the days following our interview, Bob and I spent a few other afternoons discussing his other endeavors, both in philosophy and entrepreneurship (he owns a studio which is like a mad inventor's cave, with computers, gadgets and video games everywhere) and I am glad to say that we have become rather good friends. Having a lifelong desire to help DIY film projects to get off the ground, and knowing that I was heading into the editing process on a tight budget, Doyle extended his own Adobe membership to me, and gave me an extra monitor and external hard drive.

## Chapter 7

### Daniel Dennett

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While in Boston, I also had the great pleasure of interviewing Daniel Dennett, professor of philosophy and co-director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. Dennett is probably the “biggest” name in my cast of experts, partly due to his status as one of the most influential philosophers of our time, and partly because of his regular media presence as an outspoken atheist and secularist.

The thing that struck me upon meeting him was how much of an imposing character he is. He waltzed into his office with heavy boots and a walking stick like a wizard who had just hiked down from a mountain, exchanged pleasantries with his assistant and welcomed me with a deep, warm voice and a mischievous tone that hinted at a combative spirit waiting to be tested. As part of this charming introductory act, when he remembered that I am French, he started humming a tune which eventually turned into him singing a classic French folk song by George Brassens: “*Les amoureux qui s’écotent sur les bancs publics, bancs publics, bancs publics, en s’disant des ‘je t’aime’ pathétiques, ont des p’tites gueules bien sympatiques!*” At that point, I felt a little silly bringing this great man back to the less gleeful subject of free will and determinism.

As I mentioned earlier, Dennett is a compatibilist on the issue of free will, meaning that he believes free will is possible in the context of determinism. Being a cognitive scientist, Dennett has spent much of his career studying the

broader subject of consciousness and so his view of free will should be understood in the context of his claim that consciousness itself is just a “box of tricks.” As such, he concedes to most determinists that there is, indeed, no “absolute free will,” in the sense of a soul or an *élan vital* that is calling the shots, exempt from the laws of nature. And regarding the libertarian kind of free will, he doesn’t think it’s possible - although actually, he doesn’t seem to shut the door on the possibility of a libertarian free will *per se* (he gladly grants the possibility of an amplified quantum event in the brain), he just claims it’s “not worth wanting,” because the brain’s ability to “pseudo-randomly generate” thoughts is a good-enough source of randomness.

The undesirability of the libertarian free will was something that left me rather puzzled though, and I still don’t quite understand why he’s so adamant that it’s pointless. He narrows what he defines as free will to “being morally competent”: the ability to collect reliable information from the environment, to reason and be rational, to have desires and ambitions which are not forced or coerced and to act freely upon them in a way which is consistent with the causal laws of nature and will have the predictable outcome. And so, to the question “Do we have free will?” he’ll reply with his usual aplomb: “Do we have the *magical* kind of free will many people want? No. But who cares? Do we have a free will *worth wanting*, yes we do. And that’s all that matters.” With Dennett, there is always a “matter of fact” tone to what he says that makes him equally convincing and infuriating.

On the one hand, his “magic” response is frustrating because I don’t think the libertarian kind of free will is magic. I for one don’t see it that way. My intuitive interest in libertarian free will certainly doesn’t mean that I hope there’s

real magic in the Universe – it just means I’m interested in whether such a conception of free will is scientifically possible. So he loses me a bit when he goes down that road, because I don’t think that the only alternative to compatibilism is magic. On the other hand, his response points to something in Dennett’s work with which I must say I feel much sympathy: his battle against wishful thinking and feel-good mysticism. He compares the task of explaining consciousness and free will to that of revealing the secrets of stage magic, in that it is a “thankless task” which is going to hurt the sensibilities of people who have bought into being “fooled, bamboozled and awe-struck.” As such, Dennett rightly bemoans that people like him often get branded as “spoilspoorts” and “party-poopers.”

Interestingly, there is another source of wonder to which the stage magic metaphor can apply, even more directly in fact: film. Indeed film is an elaborate trick and the fascinating thing is that it is a trick which hinges not on making people think that what they are watching is real, but that it is *believable*. This is what the French call “*la magie du cinema*,” the magic of cinema, in that it can make things which are clearly not real seem believable. Like with stage magic, in film we want to be fooled by the trick; this is why films strive to hide their artificiality by following rules such as not breaking the fourth wall, ensuring continuity and more generally keeping off-screen anything that reveals how it was made (boom mics popping into the shot, cameras reflecting in windows, crew members in the background, etc.). Of course, some films explicitly break these rules but the goal of film remains to draw the audience into a life which they can truly believe so they can experience it as their own. This is why usually, good films are those which didn’t feel contrived,

memorable characters are those in which we believed; inversely, bad movies are not just those that were unbelievable from the start, but that had the audience's commitment and then lost it. How many times have you been watching a film that had you hooked and invested up until something happens that is just so blatantly inconsistent with the plot or so utterly unbelievable (within the rules of the story) that from that point onwards you withdrew your stakes in the film and lost interest? In those instances, you rightfully feel a little cheated, as though the filmmaker, to whom you opened your emotional space and trusted to reward you with a fulfilling experience, abused you a cheap trick: something you weren't willing to buy.

This all points to a fundamental concept in filmmaking which is "suspension of disbelief": the audience is a cooperative, consenting passenger to start off with in that it will accept to believe the world that the filmmaker is offering them in order to buy into the story and enjoy the ride. However this suspension of disbelief is not infinitely elastic and filmmakers can't overstretch it, otherwise it will snap and the audience will be gone. How much "suspension of disbelief" can we have in real life, I wonder?

## Chapter 8

### Max Tegmark

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My last interview in Boston was with renowned cosmologist Max Tegmark, professor at MIT as well as scientific director of the Foundational Questions Institute and co-founder of the Future of Life Institute. Alongside Dennett, he is the most recognizable expert I interviewed, having appeared in several documentaries on the BBC and the Discovery Science channel, and currently very vocal about the dangers of artificial intelligence.

The main reason I wanted to interview Tegmark is that he is one of the most prominent and vocal scientists researching and championing the concept of parallel universe. Ever since I was a kid, watching TV shows like *Quantum Leap* and *Sliders*, I was fascinated by the idea that there could exist alternate realities where history was different in many interesting aspects. I often found myself wondering what it would be like to travel to them and see what was I was doing there. As I grew older, I took a more focused interest in why such theories existed and broadened my readings to learn about the origins of the universe, with popular science books such as those of Stephen Hawking or Brian Greene, trying to become familiar the rudimentary basics of physics and cosmology. And this how I came across Tegmark, in a documentary on parallel universes. As you can imagine, I was very excited when he originally agreed to meet with me.

However, I almost never got to meet him and the story of how I eventually secured the interview is one I often

remind myself of, because it embodies a mantra I have since tried to stick to more confidently than before: *He who dares, wins*. This saying originally comes from a British sitcom I watched over and over growing up, *Only Fools and Horses*, and it doesn't take much explaining: if you don't try, you don't succeed, and if you try, more often than not, you *will* succeed. When I landed in Boston, unlike Doyle and Dennett, Tegmark was yet to settle on a convenient time and place for the interview. To ensure maximum flexibility on my part, I had taken a chance with my flights and booked a whole week in town. I e-mailed Tegmark, called his office, but couldn't get a reply. I interviewed Doyle, then Dennett, and then three days before leaving, I started to feel like I was just going to have to give up. But I didn't want to: I had to have him in my film. I knew there was one last thing I could try: show up at his office and see if he was there. However, in the moment, two fairly trivial things were holding me back: first, my confidence was lacking. I felt that if he wasn't answering, it was because he was busy and I didn't want to be nagging. Second: the weather. That morning, there was four feet of snow in Boston, the record-breaking 2015 blizzard was still going strong, and I had no real motivation to take my equipment, face the elements, the slow-ass subway, find his office on the huge MIT campus and perhaps discover that he wasn't even there. Sitting in the hotel lobby, I was debating whether to go or not. It was warm inside, I had a ton of translation work to get done, and it felt like a lost cause. But deep down, I knew it, I was just being lazy. However much I tried to make it seem like going would probably not work out, my gut kept telling me not to chicken out. If I did go, there was the off-chance he would be there and say something like: "I have an hour, let's do it

now.” So, after some internal debating, I picked myself up off the couch and went. By the time I got into the MIT astrophysics building, my nose was running, my glasses were steamed-up, my shirt was soaked in sweat under layers of clothes, the bottom of my jeans had frozen and my shoes were leaking puddles anywhere I stood still – I was seething. But, I found his office on the top floor, and there he was; one of the only people in the whole department, actually. I caught him as he walked out of his office, we spoke for a couple minutes and eventually he checked his laptop and gave me an hour to meet with him a couple days later, on the Thursday, at 3pm, only a few hours before my flight back to Paris. When I left MIT, I couldn’t care about the weather or my clothes, and when I got back to my hotel, I imagined seeing my alternate self – the one who had stayed at the hotel instead of taking a chance and going to MIT – sitting on the comfortable couches in the lobby, on his computer, and just thinking to myself: “Sucker!”

When I eventually met with Tegmark, I was introduced to a character who, even more so than Dennett, was beaming with joy, smiling excitedly like a teenager on the first day of summer (I later attributed this to the presence of his wife, Meia, who was sitting in the corner, and who quite clearly made him a cheerful soul); while setting up the mic, Tegmark put his hand on his heart and belted out a rendition of “*La Marseillaise*,” the French national anthem. Again, I felt silly having to keep things serious and talk about quantum physics and parallel universes.

To generally introduce what we are talking about with parallel universes, I will quickly recap the different possible ones listed by Tegmark:

- “level one parallel universe” basically rests on the assumption that if our universe is infinite, then every possible configuration of particles happens several times in different places. This means that beyond our observable universe (i.e. beyond the furthest place from which time has had time to reach us), there is an infinitely vast continuation of our universe – and the power of that infinity is such that there must be other planets somewhere that formed almost exactly like ours, that may even have developed and had a history also almost exactly like ours up to a certain point, but where things then played out differently. If we went there, as Tegmark says, we would learn the same things in physics class (same universe, same rules) but different things in history class (almost same beginning, different outcome).
- “level two parallel universe” relies on inflationary cosmology and postulates that our universe is like a bubble among many other rapidly expanding bubbles (and all the bubbles are in a larger space that is itself inflating, such that the inflating bubbles are moving away from each other faster than they are themselves expanding, and therefore never connect), in which each universe may exhibit different laws of physics. If we were to travel there (which we can’t, because space is inflating faster than we can move inside it), not only would we learn different things in history class, but we would also learn different things in physics class (different universe, different rules).

- “level three parallel universe” is a prediction of Hugh Everett’s “many-worlds” interpretation of quantum physics (which I’ll come back to in a moment), whereby every random outcome of a quantum event actually happens in some other reality – however this is probably a misleading way to think about it, because it conveys this idea of an arrow of time that splits when a decision is made. Instead, all possible universes are already there, running parallel like lanes on a race track, and what looks like a split is just two lanes that are happening identically up to a point and then two different things happen. The crucial thing about this theory is that each lane is fully determined. It’s just that the difference between two lanes could be just one quantum random event. Observers, however, would always only observe their particular “level one universe,” unable to see or communicate with the other ones.
- “level four parallel universe” is Tegmark’s own “theory of everything” called the “mathematical universe hypothesis,” which basically states that our physical reality is a mathematical structure and that all possible mathematical structures exist.

Although *Psi* doesn’t specify what kind of reality it is set in, it is more or less navigating the “level three parallel universes,” the ones which most intuitively correspond to the kind of questions the film raises: what alternate lives could result from different decisions? Could all possible lives happen in parallel worlds?

In 1957, Hugh Everett, a theoretical physicist at Princeton, tried to resolve the quantum problem of the collapse of the wave-function, which was popularly illustrated by Erwin Schrödinger's cat experiment: a cat is put in a box along with a contraption that would be randomly triggered by a quantum event that may or may not happen, but, if it does, will kill the cat. As such, the exact time of death is unpredictable and random, and so as long as the box remains closed, there are chances of finding a dead or live cat. The experiment meant to suggest that quantum mechanics describes the simultaneous and contradictory existence of both: the two possible states of the cat are in fact real, in a state of "superposition," the probabilities of which are described by a "wave function." Both states remain like this until a scientist opens the box to see the result and in doing so, he commits one state to actuality. This event is called the "collapse of the wave-function," and is a good illustration of what is widely known as the "observer effect," i.e. that a conscious observer will affect the nature of reality.

Everett tried to explain the paradox by postulating that *both* outcomes actually happen, each in a different universe: while in our world the scientist observes a dead cat, there is another world which is identical to the first in every way up until that moment where the scientist observes a live cat, and crucially, each world is entirely deterministic. His theory, now known as the "many-worlds interpretation," ranks among one of the main interpretations of quantum physics.

As you can imagine, there were so many questions I wanted clarification for and so I tried to pick Tegmark's brain from different angles. And yet despite my attempt to limit the scope of our 1-hour conversation, there are still

parts of that conversation that have left me with more questions than answers. For instance, the many worlds interpretation left me doubting what I thought true about the very concept of determinism. Everett's goal was to provide an account of quantum physics which *restored* determinism to each individual world. So, if in world A I decide to marry my fiancée and in world B I decide to leave her, despite the appearance that at time  $T$  right before the decision I could have gone in two different directions, I was determined to do what I did in world A and determined to do what I did in world B. But how can two worlds, having up until  $T$  two identical histories and laws of nature, yield then two different outcomes and yet still be deterministically caused? Doesn't this completely contradict the whole concept of deterministic causality? I'm sure there's an answer to my question, perhaps even I'm just misunderstanding something, but I left Tegmark's office scratching my head.

This issue led me to a further concern about personal identity: if we are to believe then that there are an infinite number of parallel universes in which you are at all times deciding contradictory things (leaving/staying, fighting/fleeing, lying/telling the truth, etc.) and thus being many different conceivable beings (a painter, a policeman, a serial killer, a victim, etc.), then how can we even say that they are all alternative versions of "you"? Isn't there a point where the lump of matter that is "you" in this world is rearranged in such a way that it is no longer "you" in another? Does it even make sense to say that there are alternate versions of "you"?

This comes back to my earlier point about character arcs in storytelling: if after the same past, a character is split in two and each version makes a series of different decisions,

how can we say we were dealing with the same person to begin with; if all alternative possible options become reality in some world or another, then doesn't that in some way void the whole idea of identity? For instance, if in world A I follow my moral motives and decide to stay with my fiancée, but in world B I yield to temptation and decide to leave her, then what does that say of the person I was moments before making the decision? Was I strong or weak in the face of temptation? Was I a man of my word or not? What kind of person was I? You may be thinking: well, that isn't a question that was settled at that moment, it is precisely through your actions that you form yourself in one way or another and thus create and reveal yourself at the same time to be who you are. I agree with this, but then the "many worlds" interpretation voids this explanation completely, because if we do *all* possible things in some world or another, then we are essentially everyone at once, and thus no-one in particular. The definition of character comes from early Greek, *kharakter*, which means a stamping tool and carried the early sense of a distinctive mark. The definition of character is thus to be able to describe, to distinguish, to identify – if you could potentially do everything, then you have no character left to be reliably described by. Just like the value of something is proportional to its scarcity, so to with character: if you are the kind of person who could really do both things, then you are less of a particular kind of person, and thus have less value as an individual. Scary stuff.

## Chapter 9

### Galen Strawson

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After my stay in Boston, I returned to Paris and then arranged to meet in London with British philosopher Galen Strawson, who happens to be a colleague of Robert Kane at the University of Texas at Austin, only he wasn't there during my earlier visit.

On the free will debate, Strawson is often categorized as a “hard determinist,” which means that he is essentially a tenant of the Standard Argument against free will: whether the world is deterministic or indeterministic, ultimate responsibility for our acts is impossible, for we are either entirely caused or entirely subject to chance (and so, in the end, the libertarian kind of free will, which is the one he agrees we are really after, is not possible). At the same time, inheriting the ideas of his father, P. F. Strawson, also a prominent philosopher, he claims that the *feeling* of free will, perhaps akin to an emotion, and more importantly the first person experience of agency is not only unlikely to go away even if determinism were proven true, but practically useful for psychological well-being and social cohesion.

Aside from writing about free will and determinism, Strawson has also worked on another very interesting subject: *narrativity*. This is a theory in psychology that claims that most people are “narrative” beings, meaning that they construct a single story that covers their whole life and they feel like the protagonist of that story. Furthermore, narrativity makes the normative claim that people ought to be narrative in order to be happy and that not being narrative

is in some way detrimental to one's well-being. Strawson has spoken out against both premises, claiming that the empirical claim is overstated – not everyone is narrative and there is probably a much more nuanced spectrum of how people relate to their selves and their past – and that the normative one is plainly wrong: you can absolutely be happy without being narrative. To specify his point, Strawson distinguishes “diachronic” people whose sense of Self is greatly integrated into the broader story of their life and “episodic” people whose sense of Self is far more concentrated in the present with less connection to their past and future selves.

While preparing for the interview with Strawson, I realized why I was drawn to this aspect of his work, because it was clarifying a problem I had personally grappled with throughout my 20s: I'm an “episodic” person who wishes he was a “diachronic” person – in other words, I want my life to feel like a coherent whole, but it doesn't enough. At one point during the interview, Strawson offered a personal example to which I immediately related; he said: “I remember when I visited Petra in 1972. I remember the scenes, the visuals... But *I'm not there*. I'm just the camera.” This was eerily similar to how I feel about many different moments in my past. For instance, I perfectly remember the time I worked as a flight attendant in my early twenties: going to the staff quarters of the Charles-de-Gaulle airport in Paris, prepping for flights with the other crew-members, travelling around the world visiting wonderful places with colleagues and making friends along the way. But when I think of all this, *I wasn't there*. I have a good “objective” memory of these things - in the sense of factual, autobiographical - but I have little “subjective” memory of them. It is as though they have all become “void” snapshots;

in fact, the actual pictures which I took on these trips have become the first things that come to mind when I think of these memories. Perhaps most people feel the same, I'm not sure. All I know this is something that bothers me, whereas Strawson doesn't seem to mind. And I wanted to know why.

In June 2014, I was also fortunate enough to visit Petra and this is an experience to which I am still very connected, cognitively speaking. When I think of it, *I* was definitely there. It feels mine, still. And so the important question for me to sort out is whether the strength of my cognitive connection to past experiences is a function of time; in other words, is it just a matter of time before my trip to Petra feels, to *future me*, like an experience enjoyed by a different *past me*? Or is there something else which could account for the disconnection?

I believe I partly have an answer to this. First of all, time does play a role, for we naturally feel closer to experiences that just happened than to those long past. But I don't think time is a sufficient force to break the connection, it can only weaken it. If I look at my own past, I believe the main reason for the disconnection is the lack of actual coherence and continuity to my past life itself. I spoke earlier of Gazzaniga's "interpreter module" in the left brain, the function of which is to tie all experiences together and construct the story of our lives. In other words, the "interpreter module" is probably the "narrator" underlying narrativity. To do its job, maybe the interpreter requires a degree of "objective" consistency (i.e. a consistency in living situations, social surroundings, ambitions, projects, etc.) without which it struggles to provide a sufficiently good thread to create "subjective" consistency. And indeed, the subjective disconnection I feel to my past is mostly salient

regarding objectively disconnected periods of my life. And so far my life has been a patchwork of endeavors with little consistency and much diversity in surroundings, all lasting anywhere between 1 and 5 years, and all very self-contained: a different city, a different occupation, a different immediate goal, a different parental situation, a different girlfriend and different friends. Perhaps my interpreter module is simply struggling to explain it in any coherent sense, and consequently, the more “objectively” isolated or removed from the present a period of my life is, the harder it is to fit into any coherent “subjective” story linked with who I am today.

Going forward, I believe the key to keeping the connection with the past is twofold: first, relationships. The only source of cognitive connection I still have with the episodes of my life which I feel removed from is through family and friends, because they act as external anchors that lock you into your continuing self and provide a thread to connect the beads. And secondly, having more “objective” consistency to life, and this can only happen when you have found “your path,” in other words when what you are doing is coherent with your long-term ambition for becoming who you want to become. This supposes you know who you want to become, which can itself be a long, meandering stumble. Today, I believe I have now found the path which is right for me –I have the strong impression that my “current” life started when I decided to make my film, in January 2014, and I hope that if I succeed in this path, I will continue with this same narrative stream and be able to remain strongly connected, cognitively, with everything that has happened since it started. What I hope to do, in time, is to be at peace with my past lives and find a way to cognitively reclaim them

for my present self – and to do this, perhaps I need to accept that they are all necessary building blocks for who I am and will ultimately become.

## Chapter 10

### Barry Schwartz

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Initially, Galen Strawson was supposed to be my last interview. Shortly after meeting him, however, during one of my “falling-down-the-rabbit-hole-of-Internet-when-I-should-be-doing-something-else” moments, I came across a TED talk titled “The Paradox of Choice,” by American professor of psychology Barry Schwartz. When his 20-minute presentation ended, I just stared at the screen, totally in shock: how had I not heard of this guy earlier? With almost every sentence, he was making a point that perfectly captured a feeling I wanted to elicit in my film and that somehow I hadn’t actually honed in on. It was like I had set up all these nails on a board and he was hammering them one after the other. His arguments had evidently struck a chord with people at large, too, as his TED talk is one of the most viewed in the library, with over 9 million views; and every time I showed it to my friends, they all just sat back with a bewildered smile, as though he was talking about them personally, perfectly capturing how they felt and hadn’t been able to articulate so clearly before.

Immediately, I knew I just *had* to get in touch with him. I found his e-mail online, contacted him about the film and within a few hours he replied, agreeing to do the interview. And so, in July 2015, I flew to Philadelphia to meet with him at Swarthmore College, where he had taught psychology his whole career.

Most of the important points Schwartz insists upon are in the film, but the one thing I would like to notice here

is how relevant his insights are to the particular generation and demographic to which I belong. He makes a point of it, too, saying that the problems he is talking about belong to the “modern, affluent, industrialized, democratic societies.” They are basically “the problems of people who don’t have any problems.” And this is obviously and important caveat. But these problems remain crucial; the fact that others are worse off doesn’t mean that our problems don’t matter. Indeed, we should wish that everyone else has it better, but if affluent societies are the model for what is better in terms of potential material for well-being, our issues need to be corrected along the way.

As I listened to him talk, it struck me that a year earlier I had described almost word for word the issues he points out while recording my “fake interviews” for the Jerusalem life. There are parts of that interview (which I left out of the film) where I talk about choice and use the example of movies. When I was a kid, I grew up with VHS – I would wait months for a video to come out, and we would not regularly have many new VHSs laying around waiting to be watched. When we knew a tape was coming out, we’d get excited, buy it, watch it and actually really enjoy the whole experience. Today, we have internet streaming services with thousands of movies readily available, and the result is this: unless there’s a specific movie I want to see, I’ll regularly end up spending way more time trying to pick a movie than watching one. And when I do eventually pick one, if the film doesn’t capture my interest within 10 minutes, or if another film equally as enticing just happened to pass before my eyes during the selection process, then I’ll be constantly thinking about bailing and switching films. Sometimes, I never even get involved in any film, and finally, more out of exhaustion

than interest, I'll settle on one, make it to about half-way through and then fall asleep or stop and do something else. The bad thing about this is that whatever you watch, it feels botched, incomplete, unfulfilling, and so, what Schwartz told me echoed perfectly with life in general: pick a film and see it through to the end, that's how you'll enjoy it.

As I left, Schwartz handed me his "non-professional" business card, which bears a description given to him by comedian Aziz Ansari (who interviewed Schwartz for his book *Modern Romance*). The card read: "Barry Schwartz. The motherfucker knows choice." He sure does.

## Chapter 11

### Thoughts on free will

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My interest in free will was originally driven by my questioning of my own life: how free have I been to become who I am? It was later reinforced by a fear that anybody reading the news might legitimately worry about: is science really telling us that we don't have free will? Going into this project, I had some understanding of the matter – more than the regular Joe – enough at least to navigate it safely and know how to explore it further. But as I got into it, I discovered I had only started grappling with the outer weeds of the forest. And the process of making this project forced me to make some adjustments in my understanding which I will present here, because my own “un-weeding” of the question may be helpful to those who want to know more too.

To begin with, it took me a long time to come to really appreciate that the question “do we have free will or are we entirely determined?” is a misguided question, because it is implicitly opposing determinism and free will, which at first glance feels kind of natural, but depending on how you define free will, might not be at all justified. And it is essential to get this: most philosophers arguing about free will are often talking about different kinds of freedom. And while the distinction is often summarily presented at the beginning of classes or lectures, it often doesn't really register that we are talking about two *different* things, because we continue to use the expression “free will” indiscriminately.

So the first step in approaching this discussion is to clearly understand that there are two very different ways of defining free will.

One way is to say that free will means being morally competent, and moral competence relies on two things: (1) being able to reason correctly, to make rational decisions and to act freely (in the sense of not being constrained by outside forces or internal incapacities) to pursue our desires and ambitions (whatever they may be and however they may have been formed, excluding the involvement of external manipulators), and (2) the presence of a society with other people who hold each other responsible. If either one of these two conditions isn't met (a child, for instance, or a person alone with no one else around), then this kind of free will just isn't there or worth talking about. With this kind of free will, we are essentially saying: a person is free because he is morally responsible, he is morally responsible because he is morally competent, and he is morally competent because he is able to decide and act in accordance with his will. Now if we define free will in this way, then determinism is not an issue, because determinism says nothing of our ability to be morally competent. In fact, living in a determined world (i.e. one where causal laws allow us to act in a controlled way and predict the actions of other objects and persons) enhances our ability to be morally competent. So, in short, this kind of freedom is compatible with determinism; this is why it is called Compatibilism.

The other way is to say that free will means some form of true authorship over our wills themselves. In simple terms, it can be defined in a negative sense, in contrast to

determinism: you're free so long as you are not fully determined to be the way you are. So it's not enough that we be free to act in accordance with our will, we must have been responsible for forming the will from which we act. This is sometimes called "ultimate responsibility," in the sense that you were not just responsible for causing your act, but also for causing the will that motivated your act. So, in contrast to compatibilism, here you are responsible if and only if you are free, and being free requires that you were not fully determined to will what you will, which means in turn that at some point in your past, there must have been decisions which were both (1) undetermined and (b) caused by you in such a way that they weren't entirely random either. Answering these two conditions is where the meat of the work rests for those who hold this view of freedom, which, seeing as it is not compatible with determinism, is called Incompatibilism, or, more commonly, Libertarianism.

So you see, if you view freedom in the compatibilist sense, then determinism doesn't really matter; it's only if you think that freedom should be understood in a libertarian sense that the determinism question comes up. And this is important because the original question "Are we free or are we determined?" tells us something about our intuitions on free will: namely that we have this natural bias towards libertarian free will. We really do believe that we are in charge, that if we were to go back in time, we could have made a different choice – and that we *really* could have, not just in a "no one is forcing me to do this" way, but in a "I dictate the course of the universe with my decision" way.

Because of this natural inclination, I think the indiscriminate use of the expression “free will” leads to a quite a bit of confusion, because when a scientist or a philosopher says “we do” or “we don’t” have free will, it isn’t obvious to the untrained listener which kind of free will is being talked about. Usually, when we hear people say “free will is impossible,” they are referring to the libertarian kind of free will, and it makes absolute sense to say that if determinism is true, then it is hard to make sense of it; conversely when we hear philosophers being disgruntled at such claims that free will is impossible, arguing in return that free will *is* possible, they are usually not talking about libertarian free will – they are talking about the compatibilist kind of free will, which, again, most would say *is* possible in a determined world.

In fact, it’s enlightening to detect potential points of agreement among philosophers who, on the spectrum of the debate, are polar opposites. Let’s take the example of Dennett and Kane, who most clearly personify the compatibilist/libertarian divide. If you ask Kane and Dennett the following question: is free will possible? They will both say yes.

- Kane will say: yes, free will is possible because of and thanks to quantum randomness. He’s referring to free will in the Libertarian sense.
- Dennett will say: yes, free will is possible despite determinism. He’s referring to free will in the compatibilist sense.

They agree that we have free will, but they disagree both on what free will is and on the causal nature of the universe. But the fact they seem irreconcilable rests in large part because they argue mostly for their own version of free will while

dismissing the other – Dennett says that Libertarian free will is not worth wanting, while Kane says that the Compatibilist free will is not what we want. But if we were to neatly compartmentalize the conversation, they would both probably agree on most things. If you ask Dennett and Kane whether or not free will *in a libertarian sense* is possible *in a determined world*, they will surely agree: no, it is not, but this is of little interest to Dennett. Conversely, if you ask them both whether free will *in a compatibilist sense* is possible *in a determined world*, they will both agree: yes, it is, but this is of little interest to Kane.

And this is where a lot of people, myself included, get confused – because usually if you get interested in this subject, it's because you've read somewhere that science is proving that we don't have free will (and they mean it in the libertarian sense). So you get hooked, you read a few things then hear a philosopher who says “No not at all, don't listen to the naysayers, free will *is* possible” and then gives you the compatibilist argument, and then for a moment you get it, but then you don't, because something's off. And this is why: the compatibilists are essentially shifting the conversation, they are doing some form of conceptual slight of hand. When Object A (libertarian free will) seems to vanish into thin air, they make it appear again, saying “surprise, it hadn't actually disappeared,” but it is in fact Object B (compatibilist free will). And I don't mean this in a bad way, either. Compatibilist free will is its own thing, just as important a subject as libertarian free will, and compatibilists are understandably baffled by people's eagerness to discuss libertarian free will. But they feel this way because they themselves, personally, have lost interest in it, and are quite happy having their compatibilist kind of free will. But in

doing so they alienate many listeners because they don't address the issue they are concerned with when they dive into this subject.

The big question, then, is: which definition of free will should we favor? And there are basically two ways of looking at it:

- We have a question of scientific fact: how does the Universe work? Is it fully determined or is there some randomness?
- And we have a question of philosophical preference: what does free will mean? How should we define it? What is required for free will to exist?

And so there are two ways to approach this problem:

- Approach 1: you start by answering the first question of fact, and then you adjust your preferences in answering the second question.
- Approach 2: you start by answering the second, that is by setting your philosophical preference, and then probe the answer to the first one in the hope it can make it possible.

My initial impression was that generally, compatibilists and libertarians each had a different approach:

- I felt that compatibilists were the ones following approach 1, that they first looked at how the world works and then constructed a view of freedom that can operate within the bounds of that answer – thus compatibilism.

- In contrast, I initially suspected that the libertarians were prone to approach 2, that they started with their intuitive preference about what freedom should be, and then needed to look at science in the hope of finding some explanation to make it possible – thus their sometimes “hopeful” stance on the random interpretations of quantum mechanics and brain processes.

But as I looked closer, I felt that both camps might sometimes be approaching the question the other way:

- Compatibilists sometimes seem so attached to the compatibilist view of freedom that they refuse to really engage with the research in quantum physics, simply dismissing the influence it might have on our brains and arguing that it is irrelevant to the compatibilist kind of free will (which, in a sense, it is). But in doing so they are resisting new scientific evidence that might shift the answer to the first question, in order to not distract from a definition of freedom that functions well.
- Meanwhile, libertarians sometimes appeared to be the most in tune with modern science, starting with an assessment of how the world works –including indeterministic interpretations of quantum mechanics – and then constructing a view of free will accordingly.

And so, on the libertarian side of things, I genuinely think that Doyle follows approach 1, that he is first and foremost a quantum physicist, convinced of indeterminism, before being a libertarian philosopher of free will. Whereas Kane, I feel,

follows approach 2: he is first and foremost a philosopher who wants Libertarian free will to be possible and therefore must become scientifically knowledgeable enough to defend the indeterministic interpretations of quantum mechanics in support of his philosophical preference. While on the compatibilist side of things, I think that Gazzaniga is first and foremost a neurobiologist who, based on his own findings on the brain, has drawn conclusions about free will that happen to fit quite neatly in the compatibilist category. In contrast, Dennett seems to be first and foremost a philosopher who argued quite successfully in favor of a free will that is compatible with determinism at a time when science was claiming all over the place that free will (in a libertarian sense) is impossible, and is therefore uninterested in opening up his conversation to the desirability or possibility of libertarian free will.

The bottom line here, that really muddies the waters, is this: we really don't have a definitive answer to the first question. How does the world actually work? Is there some randomness? We don't know for sure, so the matter of fact is still open. Some think it's not open enough to leave room for any argument in favor of libertarianism, others do – and that is yet another level of possible debate. But still, most philosophers don't depart from what science is saying – at most they exploit some “open questions” in support of their view, but they hardly ever push the boundaries of what is scientifically possible beyond – otherwise they'd lose all credibility. So, despite everything we know and understand about the physical world, there's still a lot we don't, particularly on the causal order of the quantum world, and we know even less about the brain. So there's still a

reasonable “fog of uncertainty” there where libertarianism can live. The reason why most philosophers are compatibilists is because compatibilism is the “safe bet”: whether the universe is deterministic or not, we can have it. The libertarian kind is the one that is a bit tricky, because it cannot exist if everything is actually genuinely deterministic.

How you feel about this issue really depends on what you consider to be important for freedom, what do you think is worth wanting. If free will in the compatibilist sense is good enough, then you have nothing to worry about, because even if quantum randomness did have an effect in our brain, it wouldn't fundamentally change anything - it would essentially take the place of Dennett's “pseudo random generation” and be a “better” source of randomness – and in response to claims that this would make our actions random, we can just appeal to the libertarian arguments of “adequate determinism” and absorption of quantum randomness to restore reliability and coherence to our actions. In short, transitioning from compatibilism to libertarianism is fairly easy – it's the other way around that's painful.

Indeed, if free will in the libertarian sense is what matters to you, then you have to “take your chances” with science:

- Condition 1: You must endorse the view that quantum physics is indeed showing that there is randomness in the universe, and thereby rebut all those who claim that the apparent randomness is not actually what it seems.
- Condition 2: You must endorse the view that this randomness does affect our large-scale brain

processes in a non-negligible way and therefore rebut those who say that this quantum randomness, while possibly being true, just has no effect on our mind.

If either of these steps fail, then you cannot have the libertarian kind of free will. And even if these steps are satisfied, there are further complications: how does a random event make us any more responsible for our actions? why doesn't that make us random? isn't an undetermined decision irrational? and so on. So beyond the tricky question of whether it is possible lies the question of whether it is at all useful.

While grappling with these issues, I always felt a little frustrated by the "free will debate", because it opposed two camps I kind of agree with: on the one hand, I felt that the libertarians did really capture the kind of freedom we intuitively feel and that actually matters to us in a deep way, and that determinism was thus legitimately a big concern; however, libertarianism requires fulfilling a bunch of conditions that are scientifically challenging, and also, annoyingly, sometimes comes bundled up with mystic, religious or otherwise new-age conceptions of human agency. This is why, on the other hand, the pragmatism of compatibilists appealed to me: I shared their suspicion that many libertarians seemed to hold out for some metaphysical view of free will and agreed that compatibilist freedom was not only what really should matter to us in a more practical sense, but that it's possible; however, compatibilism always left me wanting more, as though just stopping there was sidestepping the issue that the libertarians were addressing.

And this bothered me too. So the debate didn't sit well with me: either you're a libertarian, either you're a compatibilist. One or the other.

As I worked on Psi, I slowly came to realize that doesn't have to be the case, for one simple, basic reason: compatibilists and libertarians are arguing about different things, two different definitions of freedom, and that means they didn't have to be mutually exclusive. They could co-exist. They operate in a different space, or rather, at a different "time" or "level" in human behavior, and so you can have one and the other. In other words, compatibilism and incompatibilism are not... well, incompatible. The way I see it now is that they are in a continuum, like in a "two-stage model of free wills", if you will:

- In the first stage, we can grant the possibility of libertarian free will, which itself can be best construed as a two-stage model:
  - o First: if (a) quantum physics is actually random and (b) such micro-indeterminacies are amplified in the brain (through chaos, for instance) to have a non-negligible effect on cognitive processes (both things which I don't think we can for sure say aren't true), then the randomness part is established.
  - o Second: the functioning and scale of the brain mean that the end result of such micro random neuronal activity would not be macro random actions. The size of the brain allows for such micro indeterminacies to be "averaged over" in such a way that

our behavior is “adequately determined,” even though at the source of things there is some real randomness. Moreover, libertarians grant that many of our actions may be fully determined anyway, when we would have no reasons for such actions to be undetermined.

- Then in the second stage, once we have established that a libertarian will could be possible and it wouldn't really undermine our control over our actions, then we can focus on a compatibilist kind of free will, which is then totally possible and useful too for discussing moral responsibility. And the potential presence of amplified quantum events in the brain takes nothing away from it.

So my two stage model basically would be:

- First stage: libertarian free will
- Second stage: compatibilist free will

I know, this sounds like some neat, simplistic view of a centuries-long debate which has probably been held by every 1<sup>st</sup> year philosophy student. But I haven't heard it before and it seems like a fairly workable model to me. The only knock-down argument would be: if complete determinism were shown to be true, then libertarianism would be impossible. But then, whatever - we'd still have compatibilism, which after all is still pretty good and would perhaps accelerate an already needed reevaluation of our intuitions about moral desert.

But then even if everything was determined, libertarian free will wouldn't be doomed the trash bin of

ideas, for two reasons. The first is that our intuitions about libertarian free will are still pretty deeply ingrained in our genetic hardware – and it’s one that is almost impossible to shake off, even willingly. So I think whatever we learn about the causal laws of the Universe, we’ll still live in some “simulation” of libertarian free will. But the second reason is that there’s even a way to get a “sort-of libertarian free will” even in a determined world: we just basically substitute the “real randomness” of quantum physics by the unpredictability of our behavior, given how chaotic our brains and social interactions are. In theory, sure, an all knowing machine could predict what you’re going to do – so the future is not *really* undetermined - but this machine just doesn’t exist. And so we would operate in a way that is for all intents and purposes “free-in-a-libertarian-sense” because our brains and our social interactions are so complex that they are just as unpredictable as quantum events.

This model, combining libertarianism and compatibilism as part of a continuum, or as working at two different layers in human behavior, is the one I tried to present in Act 3 of the film. My first edit was originally a more traditional presentation of the free will debate, where I basically started by saying “look, we’re pretty determined, but it doesn’t matter because we have compatibilist free will” and then went on with “but wait, is that enough? What about libertarian free will?” But then I started seeing both in the way presented above, and re-edited Act 3 to present libertarianism and compatibilism on a continuum, rather than as two different views that would have more or less merit. Obviously, I don’t know if that will come across to the

audience, which is why I wrote this entire chapter to explain.  
Thanks for indulging me. On to the next.

PART 4  
POST-PRODUCTION

## Chapter 1

### Editing

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Over the course of the first couple years of the project when I was shooting, I had been in touch with a couple editors who had shown interest in taking care of the post production. But as the editing phase approached, I realized that I would do the editing myself. It was just the nature of the film that made it difficult for me to hand over my rushes to an outside editor. I had shot plenty of things on the fly, knowing that I would build the film in the editing room. My film had no screenplay, no precise shot-list, no storyboard. I had hours and hours of disjointed rushes (not to mention the 13 hours of interviews) that if I handed everything over to 10 different editors, they would make 10 completely different films.

Editors are often considered the “third writer” of a film anyways, but the degree to which this is actually consequential really depends on how the film was shot. Typically, feature films still constrain the editors with the screenplay and the footage. The editor can only deviate so much from the material handed to him from those who came before. Here, these constraints were virtually non-existent. The film was entirely in my head and was going to be made in the cutting room. If I got an editor, I would essentially have to sit through the whole process with him and walk him through what I wanted. It was just not efficient. I had to do the edit myself. I couldn’t expect from anyone else the type of commitment and effort required to

edit this film, given the lack of pay. So, much like the decision to act in the film, the decision to edit was one I took initially out of necessity. And while my displeasure with acting more or less faded away as the production unfolded, editing didn't grow on me at all. It was a truly a long and painful process.

To paraphrase Douglas Adams, editing is easy, you just have to stare at your footage until your forehead bleeds. The reason it was so difficult was precisely because I didn't have a clear blueprint on which to lay the material. My first step was to un-rush all my footage from the different locations, list what sequences I had in each city, then deconstruct the interviews, categorize them by theme and select the best bits. I jumped right into the edit and wasted about 4 months thinking I could piece the film together right there. But because I had shot a lot of footage with only a general idea of what the final film would be like, I had set my own trap to fall into: there were so many things I wanted to show and say in the final film, it became this huge problem I had to solve. Imagine trying to build a puzzle where you are cutting out the pieces yourself *while* designing the final picture.

Because this was not a scripted film, I essentially had to write the film after having shot it. So eventually, I adopted a different strategy: I transcribed all the clips (from the fictional lives and from the interviews) into a gigantic spreadsheet and started editing in Word without even opening Premiere. This made it somewhat easier – or at least less time consuming - but still, I felt like I was trying to solve this massive Rubick's cube: from time to time, one face

would start looking pretty good, but then as I'd go to solve the next face, I'd mess the whole thing up again.

For several months, the editing process got me pretty depressed. Every morning I'd wake up with this terrible sense of dread that would make me just want to keep sleeping. After my first coffee, I had about 1 hour of good vibes, after which the cogs in the enigma would stiffen and grind me to a halt. So I procrastinated, cleaned my room, tried going to the gym... but nothing worked. I binge-watched TV shows. At one point, I was stuck on the same page of editing for almost 2 weeks. Then one afternoon, I watched the whole first season of Aziz Ansari's Netflix show "Master of None." In the last episode, "Finale," his character starts off by struggling to choose a taco restaurant, then goes on to struggle to choose which life he wants, only to learn that if he waits too long before making up his mind, options go away. Perhaps he had written this episode after consulting with Barry Schwartz when doing research for his book, *Modern Romance*. This episode set fire to my couch and got me back to working on my edit – so Aziz, if you come to read this, thanks! And thank you for introducing me to this great quote from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, which I want to reproduce in its entirety here:

“I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a

brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.”

— Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

The problem I faced at his stage of the editing process was, fittingly, a question of choice: which way to edit? Which combination of shots will yield the best movie? Should I just “go with one version” and be happy with it? Or should I continue testing different combinations? When do I reach the point where “enough is enough,” accepting the fact I’m giving up on potentially better versions? There are infinite ways to edit shots together and so many things you can tweak that will change the effect: the order of the shots, the length of the shots (sometimes just half a second more or less gives a different feel), the music (what kind of music?

should I edit to the beat or slightly off?). Given all the shots I had and all the music I could potentially use, I was constantly tortured by the teasing thought that there was one *absolute best* edit to make and that, if I wanted to find it, I had to keep doing tests and look for it. The trouble with this line of thinking is that finding it would require years of testing every possible combination, perfecting through trial and error, and having a system that allows you to not only remember how you evaluated every previous version but then to compare versions in some objective way.

And so I started to wonder: can you even ever find a “best” edit, no matter how long you search for it? What is the “best possible”? What does this even mean? “Best” is an evaluation, so it can only exist and mean anything within an evaluator. So the question really should be: “the best *to whom?*” Suppose I begin writing a film and at the end of the first act, the story can go in two directions; suppose I write both and then at the end of the second acts, each story line then branches out into another 2 stories, so that by the time we reach the end of the third act, my movie has 4 different stories and endings. That’s four possible movies to make. Which one is “the best”? Supposing all four have their strengths and weaknesses, what will determine “the best” is not entirely inherent to the story. There are of course some objective measures of good storytelling, but it’s conceivable to have more or less 4 equally well written stories. So what ultimately makes one of them the best rests in the appreciation of the viewer. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as they say. The audience will say which one was best – and different people will have different preferences. Who then decides which is best in an absolute way? Do we

take a vote? Barring alternate endings on DVDs, movies have one storyline, one beginning and one end. We enjoy it or we don't (oftentimes, we think up alternative endings which we claim would have made the film better) – and as an author, you have to make that determination based on what is closest to what you're trying to say, and stick with it. That's it. Own it. It will be the “best representation” of you. Perhaps I had to focus my quest not on some objective perfection but on my subjective experience: figure out what I am trying to say and then let the movie live in one version among the many million different versions it could take. If this one version followed from a good reason for selecting that one over the others, then I could legitimately stick by it, ignoring all other options. My purpose would dictate my course.

This, of course, is something that applies to life in general. Given that there is no “alternative ending” to life, what determines “the best” is not the viewer, but the person living it. Perhaps the key to a “good life” then is to be a “good audience” (in French, we could say “*il faut être bon public pour être bon vivant*”). This points back to Schwartz's imperative to have modest expectations in order to enjoy the result. Which films are usually the most disappointing? It's those that were hyped-up beforehand by critics and friends. But what happens when you stumble across a film you knew nothing about, or you see a film that you were told was just ok but turned out to be pretty damn good? These are the films you enjoy and remember.

Furthermore, it's not just a question of having modest expectations: it's a question of finding values by which to

lead your life. Just as the writer/director/editor is asking “what am I trying to say” as a way of focusing his work, people who have purpose can subject their choices to this purpose – thus confidently excluding what is not in line with it. Suppose you’re a student facing a common dilemma: “I have a massive math exam tomorrow, but there’s an amazing party tonight with some cool people I want to meet. What should I do?” Well, the answer can be easily determined if you have some greater purpose in life, and there’s no right answer to give from the onset. If this person’s purpose in life is to be a great physicist, he can safely stay in and work, despite the temptation to go and party, and he will not dwell too long on having missed the party because whatever loss will be justified; but if this person’s purpose in life is to explore the experiences of social life, then it would make sense for him to go to the party at the expense of his exam (again, whatever loss he would incur from not having studied would be “worth it”). And both decisions would be, subjectively speaking, well-lived, because they would be coherent with the person’s longer purpose. If the person had no particular purpose – say he’s studying math without any real conviction of why he’s doing it other than just getting a good degree – then he may legitimately be torn about what to do because there will be no stronger purpose giving more weight to one option or the other – and therefore whichever option he does take will yield considerable regret afterwards in light of the forsaken alternative. In other words, purpose is what gives you confidence to pursue one path at the expense of all others, and is the good reason keeping regret at bay.

So returning to the editing process, the only way to get ahead is to have a plan: what am I trying to achieve, what feel do I want to convey, what message am I trying to communicate? Once I have that settled, I can then use the pieces at my disposal as a means to an end. If you don't have these *finalities*, the *telos*, you are aimlessly trying combinations. If you know what you are trying to do, then you can put the different pieces of the puzzle in place in a meaningful way and move ahead on solid ground. Otherwise, you are progressing in murky waters and constantly looking back and sideways for fear of getting lost, instead of ahead at where you want to be going.

So, as I faced my massive Word spreadsheet, I focused my energy into answering the following question: what is this film about? I had to define the controlling idea and structure the film around it. This would bring into focus the important bits and allow me to confidently exclude all surplus.

This film was about freedom.

Ok. But then how to tell it? My main problem at this stage was the sheer amount of content I had. I didn't know how to get it all into one film. A breakthrough came when I established what became the broader structure of the Psi project. Originally, my project was only a film (which was itself at first supposed to be a short film) and the interviews I shot were only meant for the film. But as I was struggling to choose which parts to keep, and soon realized that I could exploit the rest of the interviews as an accompaniment to the feature film, to inform it and provide extra food for thought. And this is how the third piece of the project came to be: a

web-series more focused on the interviews. This really liberated me because I was then far less reluctant to cut pieces of the interviews from the feature, knowing they would find their place in the web-series. Together with this book, they would form a triptych.

I could then move on more purposefully with the film and focus on its structure. I think this may have to do with my law studies, where your natural desire to write in free-flow is constrained by a neurotic level of structuring. In French law school, your essays had to follow a strict rule: Introduction, 2 parts, 2 sub-parts, Conclusion. Each had to be clearly distinguished with titles, and you had to be able to understand the whole argument at a glance. So, a little unconsciously I was trying to do the same thing with my film: I had all these different elements to combine and in order to bring them all together, I needed to define a structure. This structure would allow me to keep track of the visual themes, the editing pace, the narrative balance and, as I would come to see, it would be extremely useful for composing the music.

So, over several months, the film found its structure: 4 acts, each act has 3 movements, and each movement is in 2 parts (a “presentation” part, which shows the fictional lives, and a “contemplation” part, which is where the narrator thinks out loud), with the whole thing book-ended by a prologue and an epilogue. Furthermore, the whole film is structured in a mirror-like fashion, with parts either side of the center in reflection of each-other: Act 2 and Act 3; Act 1 and Act 4; the Epilogue and the Prologue, the opening and closing shots; and finally the opening quote and credits.

Remember, all this structural work was being done in Word. And it took me roughly 6 months to get this skeleton in place. But once I did, adding the meat to the bones went much quicker: I just filled in the spreadsheet with the contents of the film and within a few weeks, I returned to Premiere Pro to start assembling the puzzle.

## Chapter 2

### Music

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I mentioned earlier that early in the process, I had asked my friend Paul to compose music for the film. Throughout most of 2014 and early 2015, he regularly sent me short pieces, testing different styles and melodies. I would give him feedback on which ones I preferred and how I would like him to develop them. However, as the project kept growing in scope and ambition, it became clear to me that listening to piano for 90 minutes was going to be annoying. So we would need to orchestrate the music – and for that, we needed some help.

Around April 2015, I spent a couple months inquiring left and right for musicians, but unfortunately those I got in touch with through friends were either busy or declined due to lack of funds. Turning to the Internet, there were so many potential composers out there that I just didn't know where to start. Also, I didn't really know how to approach them. Not only did I face the "payment" hurdle, but artistically what I was offering was a little tricky: I still wanted Paul to be involved and so it was probably a little weird contacting composers asking them to work partly with someone else's material. Additionally, if I did convince someone to help with the music, I didn't want to wait a few weeks for them to send me some tracks and feel pressured into liking them out of reluctance to extend a collaboration that might be costing me money.

For a time, I seriously considered licensing tracks that had already been composed. I found several very nice websites, such as The Music Bed, The Music Case, Marmoset Music and Premium Beats, that all offered some pretty obvious advantages: the production quality was good, I could download the tracks I liked and edit to them before even buying them and the price was relatively affordable. For online use and festivals, tracks cost about 200\$ each – I had estimated I may need between 10 and 20 tracks to cover the film, which meant a budget of \$2000 to \$4000. However if the film was shown anywhere else, or if it got any kind of distribution, then the licensing agreement had to be changed for all the tracks. And this just seemed to me like one giant legal and financial nightmare, as their status would keep changing and the costs would keep getting exponentially bigger. Besides, licensing tracks bugged me for another reason: the music would not have been composed for the film, and so it would have no particular identity or coherence in theme or melody.

And so finally, around March 2016, I got round to exploring the option I had postponed thus far: finding a composer who would be interested in the project and willing to work on a tight budget. And amazingly, the first page I looked at was the last. I found an article that introduced 5 young French composers who had recently won their first awards. I went to their websites, listened to their music and identified one whose musical style matched what I was looking for: Alexis Maingaud, 28 at the time. I sent him an e-mail, offering the amazing opportunity to compose the music for a feature film while working around someone else's existing piano melodies and all this with no budget. Alexis e-mailed

back with some interest, we met the following week in Paris and we clicked. When he asked me what musical influences I had in mind, I could see his eyes light up: Max Richter, Phillip Glass, Abel Korzienowski, Ludovico Einaudi, Johnny Greenwood, etc. My project offered him both an artistic opportunity and a professional challenge that he was relishing, and for my part, I was speaking to a composer who clearly understood what I wanted.

After our first couple of meetings, I noticed however that we had set off with a slight misunderstanding about the budget which turned out to be a useful test of the robustness of this project's motivations. He liked the whole DIY style of the project but for some reason, he thought the post production budget was a different thing. I told him that I planned on showing my film to several production companies, including Mandarin films (the production company that had produced *Brice*), and Alexis thought they were going to finance the music and post-production. He sent me an e-mail saying that with 70 000 euros we could probably do a great job. At that point I told him this wasn't going to happen, not because I couldn't go and ask around for money, but because I didn't want to. It wasn't the nature of this project. If I did go out and find financing, and if I did manage to convince a production company to invest say even 100 000 euros, then this would mean that post-production would have cost 6 times more than everything else. It made no sense. If we were going to ask for that kind of money, we might as well ask for 200 000 and start the whole shoot over, with better equipment and a crew. But then it would no longer be what I wanted it to be: a film that most people could do with their own normal savings.

When explaining this to Alexis, I was worried he'd back out of the project. But he didn't; instead, he got it and readjusted the game plan. He would compose 80% of the music in virtual instruments, and would figure out a way to record the main pieces with real musicians on a tight budget. And so around the summer of 2016, he started composing. At first, he jotted down ideas, trying to orchestrate around Paul's piano music – but there was no real coherence to it all. During this process, I was adamant the music as a whole should have a coherent structure. I had spent so much time structuring the film in a very precise way that I thought the music had to be similarly rigorous. Given that the film, at face value, is very confusing (many characters and locations, several levels of narration, complicated themes, etc.), the music couldn't be distracting; it had to be the cement holding it all together.

As we discussed the musical structure, I returned to my massive Word-breakdown of the film and used it as a map for the music: 4 acts, each with 3 movements, each in 2 parts, with the second part mirroring the first. Doing this was extremely beneficial for us both: for my part it allowed me to indicate to him specifically, beat by beat, what I wanted from the music; for him, it was a roadmap for him to then explore his creativity while staying on track with regards to the bigger picture. Our process was in place: he would compose a track for each movement of the first two acts, and we would then adapt them in the second part of the film for the corresponding sequences.

In terms of themes, we initially discussed the idea of having one for each character, but that seemed too confusing.

Instead we felt the need to have 3 musical “signatures” that would identify the three core subjects of the film: one for The Way of Necessity, one for The Way of Chance and one for The Way of Judgement. Each one would have a distinct musical theme and style (ordered, linear and predictable for Necessity; chaotic, playful and unpredictable for Chance; and a balanced, harmonious combination of both for Judgement). Therefore, the music would reflect which theme the film is exploring and mirror the evolution of the story by exploring Necessity and Chance separately first before putting them together in Judgement. This music system fulfilled both of my requirements: narrative relevance and structural coherence.

A few months into the composing though, we came to a stumbling block: Paul’s music. We had originally decided to keep 2 specific piano pieces at 2 crucial moments in the film and Alexis had tried to orchestrate around it. However, it was becoming an issue with regards to the broader coherence of the film’s music. Paul’s two tracks had two very different and distinct themes, neither of which fitted well into the general composition. After some test screenings with friends, we noticed that his two piano tracks, while beautiful individually, seemed out of place and had become distracting. And so an uncomfortable suspicion that was growing in my mind confirmed itself: I had to remove Paul’s music from the film. I knew this was the right decision because at that point, if I kept his two songs in, I would be doing so out of friendship alone, and not for the good of the film. Paul took it well and the silver lining was that his music would be redirected into the Web Series.

Like most difficult decisions in life, making this one was a relief: the next day, Alexis had full creative control over the composition of the original soundtrack and we moved on much quicker. We progressed Act by Act; he would send me a Movement, I'd edit into the rough-cut of the film, make adjustments, then write on-screen notes and send it back for him to make adjustments. By early 2017, Alexis has composed the three most important movements of the film, corresponding to the ends of Act 1, 2 and 3. These were the musical pieces that we wanted to record with real instruments. At first I was a little worried about how much this would cost. But Alexis had worked several times on past projects with an orchestra in Budapest and knew that a bulk recording session for other projects was coming up soon. This was our chance for a low-budget studio recording: Alexis made the right calls and managed to get our project on the last available slot in the studio's schedule.

On March 4, I turned 30. The next day, we flew to Budapest. The recording session was on the Monday morning. We had 45 musicians for 3 hours. Honestly, this was a surreal day. The musicians all started showing up in the hour leading up to the recording session, taking their seats, discovering the music sheets. First the flute, then the double bass, then the horn, then the violins... I was on the balcony watching them find their marks. Amidst the cacophony of instruments, here and there I could recognize bits of music: a few notes of the theme by the violin, a little tune on the flute. The chaos grew until 9:29 when the conductor got on stage: one wave of his wand and it was silence. A second wave and they all harmonized for 20 seconds. And then, a third wave and they started playing the music as though they'd been rehearsing it

for years. The whole thing came to life and I was blown away. I think this was really the first time I became aware that we were making a proper film; until now the whole project still felt like a bunch of friends making something for fun. Here it sort-of hit me that this was bigger than us.

The whole process of composing the music, from my first meeting with Alexis to the last export in July 2017, lasted about 14 months. Once music was all done, we could move ahead with the sound-editing and mixing.

To be continued...