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Film in Practice: The Making of "The Aventrophe," A Short Monster Movie

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(Film in Practice: The Making of “The Aventhrope,” A Short Monster Movie)
(Robyn Wheelock)

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and Dr. Jennifer Henderson

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Film in Practice: The Making of “The Aventhrope,” A Short Monster Movie

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COMM-4399- Honors Thesis

Dr. Henderson and Dr. Delwiche

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Introduction

“The Aventhrope” is a short, fantasy/monster movie about a young monster hunter named Luna (Sasha Faust), and her girlfriend Stelle (Sarah Bastos). When Stelle loses her voice after being mysteriously attacked, Luna takes her obsession with hunting monsters to the next level in an attempt to find the monster she believes attacked her girlfriend. The purpose of this project was to create an engaging, well-crafted, and socially-conscious short film with a limited budget over the course of a single school year by applying the principles of screenwriting and filmmaking, and adapting the genre characteristics of monster movies. The project required multiple stages which include pre-writing, writing multiple drafts of the script and receiving feedback, conducting a literature review to contextualize my project in the realms of short film and monster movies, as well as to research best practices, and then applying my research to the creation of the film through pre-production, production, and post-production. This paper will contextualize “The Aventhrope” in existing literature, describe the creative process of producing the film, and will conclude with a post-mortem delving into the successes, failures, and knowledge gained through the project, as well as opportunities for further improvements to the film in the ongoing creative process.

Literature Review

A Brief History of Short Film

The world’s first commercial films were brief, one-shot spectacles that audiences could view at carnivals and music halls (Davies, 2010). Over time, films matured into multi-shot shorts, produced by the likes of the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès, and then to feature-length cinema. Shorts continued to be shown alongside newsreels and before

feature-length films for decades, but over time, they were replaced by advertisements (Davies, 2010). Still, short films were used for educational and propagandist purposes, and are still used today (Davies, 2010).

Though short films are not frequently produced by major studios, many beginning directors have found that “creating small features, such as short films, allows them to illustrate their vision on a smaller scale and budget than a full length feature film” (Combining Film and the Internet, n.d.). The increased availability of cameras (attached to smartphones, laptops, or otherwise), as well as reasonably priced editing software, has allowed for a drastic increase in the number of professional and amateur short videos being made. In conjunction with the rise of the internet, on which the public can view a constantly increasing number of short videos and films, (and conversely, has allowed for new filmmakers to improve their visibility) short film has experienced a renaissance of creative productivity and popularity (Combining Film and the Internet, n.d.; Davies, 2010). In fact, Amateur short films are more common and popular than ever with the coming of new technologies like the cellphone camera, and new platforms like Youtube, Vine, and Snapchat (Davies, 2010). Professional short films, though they will likely never surpass feature-length films in popularity, have developed a following around the world as cheaper and simpler technologies allowed for thousands of short film festivals to flourish (Davies, 2010).

The Monster Movie

As a monster movie, “The Aventhrope” straddles the line between fantasy and horror. Horror films are fairly easy to identify because they illicit such recognizable responses in their audiences; if made well, horror films unsettle, thrill, and strike fear into the viewer, resulting in a

cathartic experience (Dirks, n.d.). Monsters horrify us because they tap into our human phobia of powerful creatures with mysterious capabilities, with whom we cannot communicate, and which may wish to do us harm (Asma, 2009). By necessity then, monster movies usher us into worlds of fantasy, where everyday possibilities are challenged. Fantasy is a more difficult genre to define. In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word fantasy is defined as “something that is produced by the imagination: an idea about doing something that is far removed from normal reality” (Fantasy, n.d.). Films categorized as fantasy often operate in additional genres such as comedy, drama, horror, adventure, or romance. Critics such as James Walters (2011) note that prescribing a specific definition of the fantasy genre runs the risk of being either too broad, including all fictional works as forms of fantasy, or excluding films that contain non-traditional fantastical elements (Walters, 2011). Walters describes the experience of viewing fictional films as one that presents a set of possibilities that could occur within reality but also, assuredly, do not; he then argues that fantasy films show the viewer worlds, characters, and events that, according to logic and reason, could never exist in the real world (Walters, 2011, pp. 1-2). In contrast, Worley (2005) argues that “fantasy is inextricably defined by reality; how else can one define what doesn’t exist except by what does?” (2005, p.4) He goes on to challenge the notion of reality as objective, arguing that since different viewers bring different perspectives and beliefs to the theater, that is, belief or disbelief in ghosts, angels, demons, or other supernatural beings or occurrences, what one viewer considers fantasy and what another considers to be fictional but possible will not necessarily match, and therefore further complicating the definition of fantasy. (Worley 2005).

And what of monsters? What are they? The world is full of a multitude of cultures, each of which has their own set of myths and folklore featuring unnatural beasts like the chimera, bigfoot, and the krampus. Our fear of monsters can be explained through a Darwinian approach, with which, phobias of poisonous snakes and spiders, murky waters, and large, razor clawed beasts would be an evolutionary advantage (Asma, 2009 p. 3). In his book, *On Monsters*, Asma (2009) describes an experiment conducted by Charles Darwin, in which Darwin placed a taxidermied snake in a monkey house. The monkeys would not approach the snake but would approach dead fish and even live turtles. Darwin then placed a live snake, contained in a bag, on the floor of the dwelling. When the monkeys realized what the bag held, they dashed away, but each one “could not resist taking a momentary peep into the upright bag, at the dreadful object lying quietly on the bottom” (Asma, 2009, p. 3) Asma suggests that monkeys have an “emotional caricature” of snakes in their instinctual vocabulary, and that the monsters created by humans are just that, “originally built on legitimate threats but eventually spiralling into the autonomous elaborations that only big brains can produce” (Asma, 2009, p. 3) These grand yet terrifying beasts repulse us while watching monster movies, but they are the reason we return to the theater, or Netflix account, to watch them and be horrified again and again. Asma elaborates that, in addition to supernatural beasts, the word “monster” has been used to describe human beings who are mentally or physically different or disabled, or people who commit monstrous acts (Asma, 2009). In this way, the word monster has come to mean inhuman, and has become a derogatory epithet to describe people are perceived to have, in some way, lost their humanity (Asma, 2009). This results in an othering of humans labelled as monsters, displacing the blame of seemingly inhuman crimes from the palms of humanity.

Fantasy's respected scholars acknowledge a societal disregard of fantasy films as child's play or mere escapism, the argument being that films taking place in imaginary worlds or under supernatural circumstances must have little to yield about the ideologies, societies, and politics of the real world (Bellin, 2005; Butler, 2009; Jackson, 1981; Walters, 2011). But fantasy "like any other text [...] is produced within and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, [...] it cannot be understood in isolation from it" (Jackson, 1981 p. 3). Jackson (2008, p. 3) describes fantasy as the literature of desire, calling for critics to connect works to the conditions of their production, "to the specific constraints against which fantasy protests and from which it is generated." In this way, fantasy serves as a vehicle to observe and examine the boundaries, norms, and values of a society, as well as identify the fears and prejudices it might hold (Bellin, 2005; Butler, 2009; Jackson, 1981; Walters, 2011).

For example, Joshua Bellin (2005), argues that fantasy films, far from being pure or timeless, can serve to circulate and validate "pernicious cultural beliefs embedded within specific cultural settings," (p.2) Bellin, a self proclaimed fan of the 1933 King Kong film, argues that the film is an expression of the violent racism of Depression era- America; he also describes *Aliens* as a showdown between Ripley, a representation of WASP motherhood and family values, and the alien queen, a representation of the parasitic, black welfare mother as scapegoat. One of Bellin's most succinct arguments about the reflective nature of monsters in society is his analysis of *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*. By looking into a mirror which will show them anything they wish to see, the villagers, led by Gaston, behold a hideous beast. This implies that the townspeople wish to find external threats in the margins of their society, but the scene, through its use of a reflective surface as the mode of discovery, and the obvious bigotry and lynch-mob

mentality against the beast, makes it clear that the danger is rooted among them; Bellin (2005) ultimately concludes that the scene is a representation of how a community can “be led by images of their own devising to commit acts of violence against someone innocent and different” (p. 181).

“The Aventhrope” aims to horrify its viewers through its story and thematic content, use of suspense, and the image of the looming, long-taloned Aventhrope. The concept of monsters and how we respond to them is central to the story of “The Aventhrope,” and is explored throughout the film, both in terms of monsters as mythical beasts and as a person who commits monstrous acts. Within the world of “The Aventhrope,” humans live within city limits, monsters live outside of them, and monster hunters, such as Luna, work to keep the two worlds separate. This worldbuilding establishes a dichotomy between humans and monsters, good and bad, civilization and wilderness. When Stelle is attacked, Luna immediately assumes that a monster (that is, a mythical beast) must have attacked her. This assumption stems from Luna’s instinct, similar to that of the angry mob in *Beauty and the Beast*, to blame scapegoats that reside in the margins of society, in both cases, a monster in the woods, rather than confront internal problems.

The main fears dealt with in “The Aventhrope” are the fear of assault to one’s self or loved one, the fear of being unable to understand the pain of a loved one, and the fear of confronting violence in our own communities. After Stelle’s attack, Luna places her fears upon the external threat of the Aventhrope (Dillon Van Tran), and deals with them by acting in ways that allow her to feel in control, rather than supporting and communicating with Stelle. Luna’s failure to listen to Stelle is exemplified in the first scene, in which Luna repeatedly ignores Stelle, as well as by Stelle’s flute-speech in the second act of the film, which emphasizes the

ways in which victims of assault are often silenced or unable speak about what has happened to them. During the confrontation with the Aventhrope, Stelle, who has stoically grappled with her assault until this point, finally gives herself permission to scream. She does this in an attempt to scare away the Aventhrope, but it breaks her curse nonetheless. It is only when Luna finally listens to Stelle and hangs up her bow (for the time being at least), that she is able to be the person that Stelle needs, which is not an armed defender, but a person who pays attention to her needs and supports her.

Writing a Short Film

Writing a successful short film requires applying the principles of feature-length screenwriting and film theory to a story that is focused and specific enough to fit into a short narrative. Due their compact nature, short films are naturally limited in the scope of the story they can tell. Linda J. Cowgill (1997) emphasizes that the premise for a short film must be focused and specific. She notes that many short films suffer due to the fact that they try to cover too much material, and that their story would be better served in a feature-length film. The idea that eventually evolved into “The Aventhrope” was originally intended to be either a full-length film or mini-series, and included significantly more backstory, characters, and worldbuilding than “The Aventhrope” does in its current form. Once deciding to produce a short film with an intended length of approximately twenty minutes, it became necessary to significantly abbreviate the story. This was achieved by focusing the story’s plot on how Stelle’s attack and loss of voice affects Luna and the relationship between the two girls, rather than including the events after Stelle regains her voice, which would have included uncovering a political conspiracy within Midwest City and a showdown between the girls and the corrupt leaders of their town. This,

obviously, was much too much to try to include in a short film, and so the story was shortened to the current plot.

Cowgill provides three key distinctions to evaluate and develop a story. The first distinction is simplicity, meaning that the narrative of the film should be expressible in a single sentence and should center around a single conflict or incident. The second distinction is conflict, which should arise between the characters in the film, the protagonist and the antagonist, who are at odds because they have different ideas or goals. A good plot not only plants the seeds of conflict, but “exposes a situation where conflict already exists” (Cowgill, 1997, p.16). Cowgill’s final distinction is originality, and encourages aspiring writers to be creative and challenge clichés. McKee (1997) also discourages clichés, which result in stereotyping, and proposes the use of the “archetype” instead. He acknowledges that familiar struggles are essential to writing a relatable story, but without framing these struggles in original way, they become boring. McKee proposes that “[t]he archetypal story unearths a universally human experience, then wraps itself inside a unique, culture-specific expression,” he continues by arguing that the archetypal story creates original characters and unique worlds while illuminating “conflicts so true to humankind, it journeys from culture to culture,” (McKee, 1997, p.4).

Applying the theories of Cowgill and McKee to “The Aventhrope,” the narrative of the plot can be expressed in a single sentence: “In a world where monsters prowl at the edge of city limits, a young woman named Luna takes her obsession with hunting monsters to the next level after her girlfriend, Estelle, falls victim to a mysterious attack that robs her of her voice.” The conflict of the film arises between Luna and Stelle over Luna’s obsession with hunting monsters, which she prioritizes over her relationship with Stelle. This pre-existing conflict is established in

the first scene, when Luna fails to listen to what Stelle is saying because she is reading a monster hunting forum, but is fully exposed when Luna chooses to go hunt the Aventhrope instead of attending Stelle's senior recital. Finally, by featuring female characters with agency (both of whom make active decisions throughout the film), as well as by depicting a same-sex romantic relationship (but not making the social and cultural challenges of homosexuality the point of the film), I avoid stereotypical representations of women as well as same-sex relationships. In terms of archetype, "The Aventhrope" uses a recognizable failure-of-communication conflict, within an original fantasy world to tell an archetypal story in a creative way.

One of the most famous principles of screenwriting is the three act structure (Field 2005; Cowgill 2005). The first act contains the exposition, inciting incident, rising action, and first major plot point. The second act involves confronting the problem revealed in the first act and ends with the second plot point, which leads into the third act, including the climax and the resolution. However, it's not enough to build a plot around the three act structure. There is a general consensus that good stories contain characters who drive the plot forward by making active choices. (Cowgill, 1997; Menekse & Hood, 2016; McKee, 1997; Snyder, 2005; Field, 2005). Put most simply, "a story is about someone who wants something very badly and is having trouble getting it," (Menekse & Hood, 2016). This guideline, developed originally by Frank Daniels (Gulino, 2013) emphasizes the necessity of a clear protagonist (Whose story is it?) who wants something very badly (What do they want? Why do they want it so badly?) and begs the questions "What is standing in their way? What will they do to get what they want? What will happen if they fail? What will happen if they win?"

Both the three act structure and Daniels' guideline were fundamental to the development of the script of "The Aventhrope." Daniel's guideline ensured that I keep the story focused on Luna, prioritizing her perspective, choices, and growth as a character. The three act structure aided in the pacing of the film. In the first act (approximately the first five minutes of the film) Luna sees the Aventhrope for the first time. At home, we meet Stelle, Luna's flautist girlfriend, whom Luna loves dearly, though Luna often fails to listen well to her. Stelle and Luna argue about the likelihood of Luna seeing a monster within city limits, and then Luna sees the Aventhrope again, just before Stelle is attacked. Luna spends the second act (the middle ten minutes of the film) learning more about the Aventhrope. She attempts to convince Stelle, whose voice has been replaced with the sound of a flute to identify the monster that attacked her to the council, but Stelle refuses. On the evening of Stelle's recital, a local scholar (Dr. Benjamin Stevens) confirms Luna's suspicions that the Aventhrope exists, and she decides to go hunt it despite Stelle's whistled protests. In the forest, Luna places bait for the Aventhrope, though her stake out is quickly interrupted by Stelle, who followed her. Suddenly the Aventhrope arrives; Luna attempts to several times to shoot the Aventhrope, but is quickly cornered. Stelle attempts to scare the Aventhrope away by holding her flute over her head and screaming, but the flute catches the Aventhrope's eye. Stelle holds the flute out to the Aventhrope and it disappears, taking the flute with it. With her voice regained, Stelle tells Luna that she was attacked not by a monster, but by a human. In the third act (the final five minutes of the film), Stelle tells Luna that she wants to move on from the attack, and this time, Luna listens to her, at last deciding to prioritize Stelle over hunting the Aventhrope.

Suspense

There are many ways to build suspense in a scene. Visually, one can build suspense by lingering on shots for a few extra moments; the longer the audience has to wait to see the next shot, the more suspense is built (Davis, 2015). In “The Aventhrope,” this technique is employed to build suspense in the scene in which Luna is walking home with a pizza, lingering on the space behind Luna after she hears a sound and then utilizing a long take of Luna from behind as she walks away. Giving the audience information that the characters do not yet have is famous tool of Hitchcock’s (Bays, 2007), and one that was used before the showdown between the Aventhrope and the girls. After Luna and Stelle see the Aventhrope has taken the bait necklace, the camera cuts to a close-up on Luna’s face and shows the Aventhrope standing in the distance behind her (see Figure 1). This shot adds suspense to the scene because the audience can see that the Aventhrope is standing behind the girls, although the girls are currently ignorant of that fact.



Figure 1. In this shot, the viewer can see the Aventhrope lurking behind Luna and Stelle, unbeknownst to them. Giving this knowledge of danger to the audience but not the characters creates suspense.

Sound is another useful tool in building suspense. Hitchcock was known for directing silent death scenes in many of his films, such as *Torn Curtain* (1966), and *Strangers on a Train* (1951); as silence is essentially the auditory equivalent of darkness, purposefully quieting a film's soundtrack can leave the audience anticipating the next sound with piqued attention (Bays, 2011). Sound should be used as strategically as silence. An effective strategy that can be found in notable films like *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975), and the more recent *It Follows* (Mitchell, 2014), is the use of long lingering notes, which establish an underlying sense of unease, and which gradually accelerate and build up to louder and more dramatic music for attack scenes (Kelleghan, 1996). Sound and silence are used to build suspense in the scene where Luna is walking home with a pizza. Lingering, dissonant music builds throughout the scene, climaxing at the first true glimpse of the Aventhrope, and then fading to silence when the Aventhrope disappears, leaving Luna and the audience to wonder where the creature disappeared to, and if it was real.

Film Production

Pre-production is very important in maximizing one's efficiency on set. By planning out one's shoot beforehand, one can prevent discontinuity between shots and keep the shoot on schedule. There are several things a filmmaker can create during the pre-production that will help prepare them for production. Storyboards are "shot-by shot drawings of how the action and camerawork are supposed to play on screen" (Ascher & Pincus, 2012, p. 356). Storyboards let the filmmaker visualize the blocking and camerawork of their film before the fact, and are highly useful tools. Storyboards are often accompanied by shot lists, verbal descriptions of the action on

screen and camera movements. A script breakdown sheet is another important tool, which lists the people and resources needed for each scene in the film, including cast and crewmembers, costumes, props, makeup, vehicles, special effects, and music (Ascher & Pincus, 2012). While it is important to remain flexible when making a film, and remain open to unexpected possibilities, having a schedule helps everyone involved in the film keep on task, which can be very important considering that much of the equipment used in filmmaking runs on batteries, and if one is not careful, a shoot can become a race against the clock to film all of the necessary takes before the equipment dies. For a detailed description of the pre- production process of “The Aventhrope,” see the Creative Process section on page 18.)

Continuity Editing

Continuity editing is a technique in which shots filmed from different angles at different times are edited together so that the action on screen appears to flow continuously from one moment to the next (Ascher & Pincus, 2012; Dupaix, 2009). In major productions, a person called the “script supervisor” is in charge of noting which scenes have been filmed, and in what ways, if any, the action filmed varies from what is written in the script, the script advisor also works with assistants to create a continuity report and insure that continuity is maintained (Nulph, n.d.). Ascher & Pincus (2012) assert that continuity editing “is a grammar that audiences are familiar with from years of watching movies, and it is sometimes thought of as ‘invisible cutting’ since the technique is so common as to be at times unnoticeable” (p. 241).

There are many ways to suggest continuity in film. Some frequently used tools in continuity editing are the establishing shot, shot/reverse-shot, eye trace, match on action, and the 180° Rule or the Axis of Action (Ascher & Pincus, 2012; Dupaix, 2009; Nulph, n.d.). By using

these tools, a filmmaker creates a film that is visually logical and easy to understand. For the showdown scene in the forest, in which the Aventhrope teleports to different places in the trees surrounding the girls, these tools were especially important to maintain continuity. An establishing shot is usually a long, wide angled shot that displays the lay of a scene and all of the important things and characters within it (Ascher & Pincus, 2012; Dupaix, 2009; Nulph, n.d.). I use an establishing shot after Stelle's arrival to display the position of the girls in relation to the necklace in the tree and the surrounding scenery (see Figure 2.).



Figure 2. In this establishing shot from the forest scene, we see that the necklace is still hanging from the tree branch. Luna and Stelle stand in the distance, with a fallen tree on the right screen right and trees filling the background. Later in this scene, another shot from this angle will be implemented to note the disappearance of the necklace.

Shot/Reverse-Shot is simply the name for showing the same scene from different angles to focus on different characters or specific actions; one type of shot/reverse-shot is “eyeline tace;” eyeline trace operates under the understanding that the audience will want to see what the characters are looking at, so if you show a character looking at someone or something off screen in one shot, the next shot should reveal what that character is looking at (Ascher & Pincus, 2012; Dupaix, 2009; Nulph, n.d.). This “reveal” shot is often followed by a “reaction” shot that shows what the character thinks/ how they feel about what they saw (Ascher & Pincus, 2012; Dupaix, 2009; Nulph, n.d.). With eyeline match, it is also important to consider the angle of the character’s gaze in the first shot in relation to the angle the camera is pointed in the revelation shot; for example if one character is higher up than another, their gaze should point downward (Ascher & Pincus, 2012; Dupaix, 2009; Barrance, n.d.). For example, when Luna is scanning the forest looking for the Aventhrope , we see see a shot of Luna slowly turning from screen left to screen right as she scans the trees (Figure 3), this shot is followed by a POV shot of the trees moving across the screen from left to right , continuing with the motion of Luna’s gaze, which eventually lands on the figure of the Aventhrope (Figure 4). The scene then cuts back to Luna, who reacts to seeing the Aventhrope by shooting at it (Figure 5). This sequence is an example of shot/reverse-shot using eyeline match, and followed by a reaction shot.



Figure 3. In this shot, Luna slowly rotates from screen left to screen right as she looks for the Aventhrope.

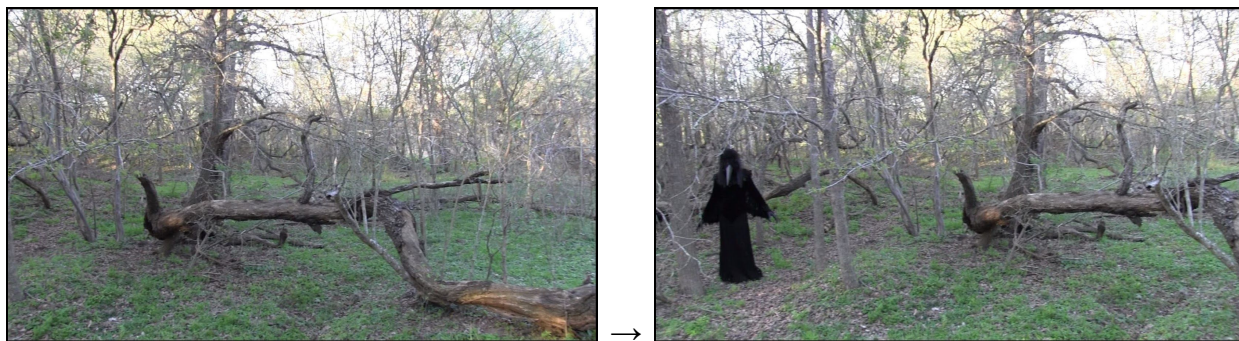


Figure 4. The following shot continues the left-to-right movement of Figure 3. and lands on the Aventhrope.



Figure 5. In this reaction shot, Luna has just seen the Aventhrope, and is about to release her arrow.

Finally, the 180° Rule, or the Axis of Action, describes the space within which the camera must remain while shooting, for example, in the 180° axis between the two characters having a conversation, to ensure that the characters do not switch direction on screen, confusing the audience (Ascher & Pincus, 2012; Dupaix, 2009; Barrance, n.d.) When planning out the

blocking for the showdown, I wanted to make sure to obey the 180° rule, so I mapped out the the scene shot by shot, labeling the placement of the camera, the placement of the actors, and the direction of any arrows that would be shot, ensuring that the action of the scene as well as the camera placement followed the 180° rule (See Appendix A).

However, despite the best efforts of everyone involved, some of the footage acquired was imperfect in terms of continuity, and it became necessary during the editing process to include footage that was flawed in some way. In his book, *In the Blink of an Eye*, Walter Murch (2001) provides six criteria for what makes a good cut or The Rule of Six. He argues that an ideal cut satisfies all six of the following criteria: 1) stays true to the emotion of the moment; 51%; 2) it advances the story; 23%; 3) it occurs at a moment that is rhythmically interesting or “correct;” 10%; 4) it acknowledges eye-trace—the placement and movement of the focus of interest on screen; 7%; 5) it respects two-dimensional planarity; 5%; 6) it respects three-dimensional continuity; 4% (p. 18). The percentages represent how important Murch considers each criteria when making a cut. Above all, he values emotion when telling a story, and considers it to be more important than the next five criteria combined. This does not mean to purposefully disregard continuity and eye trace if you can achieve them, it simply means that if one has to choose between prioritizing the emotion of a scene and prioritizing continuity, one should choose emotion.

The Rule of Six served as a fundamental guideline during the editing process of “The Aventhrope, for example, at the end of the showdown between the Aventhrope and the girls, Stelle hands over her flute to the Aventhrope, who takes it in its claws. In the next shot, Stelle is shown with her hands outstretched in the empty air, the flute and the Aventhrope both having

disappeared. She stands still for a moment before beginning to cough and falling to her knees. However, there is a discrepancy between the two shots, in the first, Stelle holds the flute for the Aventhrope at waist-level, in the second, after the flute has disappeared, her arms are outstretched in front of her face (Figure 6). This discrepancy was not caught until the editing process. Efforts were made to minimize the continuity error by cutting straight to the coughing fit, but this cut was discarded. The final choice to include the beat with Stelle's arms outstretched was made because it prioritizes the understanding of the story and the emotion of the scene. The beat was intended to contrast the previous shot with the Aventhrope's claws wrapped around the flute by allowing the audience to register the now empty space and Stelle's now empty hands, as well as give them a moment to digest the emotional intensity of Stelle saving Luna before Stelle starts speaking again.



Figure 6. In these two shots, one can note the discontinuity of Stelle's hand placement.

Creative Process

The original inspiration for the Aventhrope stemmed from a close encounter the creator had with a particularly aggressive grackle, which the author dubbed the “were-grackle.” This

idea gradually morphed into the Aventhrope, which is a somewhat more dignified name, and the story developed from there.

Script

The process of creating the story of “The Aventhrope” began with prewriting. Prewriting consisted mostly of longhand freewriting to explore possibilities for the story and characters (See Appendix B). After a few weeks of brainstorming the world, characters, and plot, a scene-by-scene outline of the plot was constructed (See Appendix C). This outline served as a guideline for the first draft of the script for “The Aventhrope” formatted using a program called Celtx. The script then underwent a period of review, where it received criticism and feedback from multiple sources, including Trinity Professors, classmates, and friends of the author, before being revised. This cycle of feedback and revision was repeated several times, until finally, the fourth draft of the script was chosen for production. However, during production, several lines were added, altered, or removed entirely for clarity or to avoid redundancy. For example, on page 16 of the final version of “The Aventhrope” script, Luna’s line “I have to do this,” was moved to the end of her third monologue, and the line “I’ll be back in time for your recital, I swear, but...” was removed entirely (See Appendix D).

Casting

Casting “The Aventhrope” was, for the most part, a process of reaching out to individuals I thought would do well in certain roles. For example, Dillon Van Tran, who played the Aventhrope, Taylor Mobley, who played the newscaster, and Dr. Ben Stevens, who played Dr. Wilson, were all sought out specifically and offered their roles without an audition. The roles of Luna, Stelle, Bea, and Jill however, were decided through an audition process. Several emails

were sent out to the Trinity University Players, members of PRIDE (Promoting Respect Inclusiveness Diversity and Equality), and a public announcement on Facebook, inviting members of the Trinity community to audition for “The Aventhrope.” Sarah Bastos, who is skilled in flute playing as well as whistling was chosen to play Stelle. Chloe Sonnier was chosen to play Jill because of her soft spoken demeanor. Alexis Jarrett and Sasha Faust were both considered for the role of Luna. Luna as a character was originally envisioned as having a shorter, sturdy build and a punk-rock aesthetic, and from this regard, Jarrett was more Luna’s “type” than Faust. However, during callbacks Faust displayed greater confidence in her line delivery, a greater vocal range, and more bold creative choices. In the end, it was determined that Faust would be able to perform more confidently under pressure and was cast as Luna, while Jarrett was cast as Bea.

Pre-Production

Storyboards were essential in the pre-production process for The Aventhrope, and served both as a method for brainstorming the visual composition of the film, as well as planning how to shoot individual scenes. The first storyboards of the project were detailed illustrations that appeared almost like comic books, however, producing such storyboards was a very labor intensive process, and so over time, the illustrations within the storyboards became simpler and more suggestive of the action onscreen (see Appendix E and Appendix F for comparison). This simplicity was supplemented by a detailed shot list, which corresponded with the illustrations and provided clear instructions about how to frame and block the shots within each scene.

Shot Lists were also essential to the creation of “The Aventhrope.” I began incorporating shot lists after filming the second scene of the film, to supplement the storyboards I had already

created. The shot lists contained detailed instructions for every shot in the film, including the intended camera angle, action, and dialogue to be captured. These explicit details were essential to the production of the film and served to significantly improve efficiency onset. After several shoots, checklists for props, costumes, and equipment were added to the shot lists, to ensure that all of the important supplies for each scene was remembered (see Appendix G).

Scheduling the shoots for *The Aventhrope* required collecting and synthesizing the availability of every actor involved in a scene, the availability of the necessary crew, as well as the availability of the filming location. The next step was to plan transportation for everyone involved in the shoot as well as the necessary equipment. If an actor or crew member could provide a functioning vehicle, this was very simple, however, if there was no car available, an Uber would have to be called. The evening before every shoot, an email was sent to the actors in the scene detailing which pages were to be shot, what props and costumes would be necessary to bring, any performance notes to remember during the shoot, as well as the location and scheduled start and end times.

Production

Lighting for “*The Aventhrope*” was a fairly simple process. Most of the scenes in “*The Aventhrope*” were filmed with natural light. This choice was made for the outdoor scenes to simplify production, but required that the scenes be filmed in the evening during the “golden hour” in order to ensure good light quality. However, this limited the times during which the film could be shot, and resulted in needing to schedule extra shoots because the light ran out. The rest of the scenes were filmed with available light, such as overhead fixtures in conjunction with strategically placed lamps.

Audio for “The Aventhrope” was, predominantly, recorded on set, simultaneously with the video. Most of the audio was recorded with a boom mic that was either placed next to the actors or held by a volunteer crew member. The audio for several scenes which contained no dialogue (the scenes of Luna alone in her room as well as the sequences of Luna walking) were recorded with a small shotgun mic that was mounted on the camera. The mini-shotgun mic was adequate for picking up ambient sound and sound from the actor’s movements, but in scenes with dialogue, it was important to use the full size boom, so as to have more flexibility in positioning the mic where it could pick up the actors’ voices. The library scene was the only one filmed with lavalier microphones, which were convenient to use because there were no crewmembers available to hold a boom, but which came with their own set of challenges, such as rustling with actor’s movements and a difference in sound quality.

Directing “The Aventhrope” was mostly a process of following the instructions I had set for myself with the script, shot lists, and storyboards, though efforts were also made to attend to the actors’ opinions about their own performances. I divided shoots by camera angle, and would position and focus the camera for one angle and then shoot every take from that angle in the scene. From there, I based the order in which shots were filmed by camera position, moving gradually from one side of the room to another, or from close to the actors to long shots. During the shoots, I would use the storyboards and shot lists as guidelines for how to position the camera and what to include in each take. For most shoots, I began by recording the whole of a scene from one angle, to serve as a warm up for the actors as well as to ensure I had at least one full audio and video recording of the scene, in case something went wrong. However, this full scene

recording was only taken when there was time to do it. If the shoot was particularly short on time, we would exclusively film the takes necessary to construct the scene.

Post- Production

The editing process began with creating charts based off the storyboards that served to map out the intended shot-by-shot construction of a scene (See Appendix H). The next step involved reviewing the footage and noting on the chart which clips (and sometimes which takes within each clip) were potential candidates for each shot of the film. Once the chart was filled out it served as a guide to edit the footage together in Adobe Premiere Pro.

Music is very important to the pacing and emotional energy of “The Aventhrope,” in fact it served as a guide for the pacing (how long to linger on a particular shot, when to cut) for several scenes, particularly forest scene when Luna is trying to hunt the Aventhrope. In other scenes, such as the meeting with Dr. Wilson, the pacing of the scene was based entirely on the dialogue and action on screen and the music was added later.

Stelle’s flute-speech was an exciting challenge to take on during the post-production process. During production, every shot that featured Stelle (Sarah Bastos) whistling was recorded with Sarah whistling as well as feigning whistling. This ensured that there would be flexibility when creating the flute-speech during post production. Before recording the sound of the flute, the scenes that featured the flute-speech were edited together using Sarah’s whistles as a placeholder, and as a prototype for the flute-speech to be recorded later. For the sound of the flute itself, Kylie Moden, a flautist in Trinity’s Wind Ensemble replicated the tone and rhythm of Sarah whistling. These MP3s were then laid over Sarah’s original whistles. Originally, the sound of Sarah’s whistles were removed from the flute-speech, but the flute alone lacked the expression

and fullness of the whistle, so the sounds were combined, and by balancing the audio gain, Stelle's flute-speech was created.

The sound of the Aventhrope was created using samples of birds flapping their wings and "mysterious woosh sounds" from the website Pond5.com. The two songs containing lyrics, "To Those Little Eyes" and "Back Again/Away" were written by and used with the permission of Joel Alexander. The instrumental music used throughout the film was composed on commission by Cullen Moore.

Post-Mortem

Challenges and Lessons

There were many unexpected challenges and lessons learned during the production of "The Aventhrope." The first major challenge was a last-minute decision to write a fourth draft of the script during winter break. At the time, the script contained several scenes that were not necessary to the plot, including flashbacks and a dream sequence featuring Luna's mother, and ended immediately after the showdown in the woods. The decision to write another draft was based on feedback from Dr. Patrick Keating, who suggested that the script currently lacked a third act, and would benefit from the removal of several scenes and characters and the addition of a third act after the showdown with the monster. This advice led to the final version of the script, which is more resolved and logical than previous drafts. Unfortunately, this rewrite took the entirety of winter break, which was originally allocated as time to perform pre-production. Because of this setback, pre-production and production were performed simultaneously. This is

not recommended. It is highly recommended to complete one's pre-production process before beginning production.

Scheduling was probably the biggest challenge of the entire production process. Considering that the actors and crew members were donating their time to the project in conjunction with school, work, and other obligations, there were a plethora of conflicts to work around when scheduling. The schedule was often adjusted or changed due to illness, unforeseen scheduling conflicts, or needing to schedule an extra shoot to finish a scene. This challenge was overcome through a constant flow of communication between the director and other participants in the film as well as flexibility and a healthy dose of patience.

One major challenge was a last-minute set change. Two days before the first shoot the residents of the flat that was originally to serve as Stelle and Luna's apartment informed me that the space was no longer available on the days needed for filming. This led to the decision to shoot in the large house seen in the film. Originally, this space was considered too echoey to film in, and too large to be believable as the house of two young college students. It was ultimately chosen because it was the only space available, and despite the echoes and expanse of the location, it provided a very interesting backdrop for the house scenes in the film.

There was only one scene that was necessary to re-shoot. While shooting the final sequence of the scene in which Luna is walking home with a pizza box, the sun went down. There was a streetlamp across the street which provided some light, but the footage was far too grainy to use. The next day, the scene was reshot. This footage turned out splendidly, although the shoot was relocated due to excessive traffic at the original location. External disturbances such as passing cars and noisy neighbors were frequent during filming. It was helpful to choose

locations that were quiet to begin with, such as the library, but besides this, all one could do was wait for the noise to pass.

Another challenge during the filming process came in the form of a poor microphone, which was used for the first several shoots, and which created a crackling static due faulty wiring, unless one held the cord in exactly the correct position. This microphone was replaced. The crackly sound captured by this mic was problematic in post-production, but was fixed with the use of Adobe Audition. Other challenges included becoming more confident in directing the actors and crewmembers on set, as well as gaining familiarity with the functions of the camera. These challenges improved with practice.

Successes and Highlights

One of the greatest successes during the production process was the forest shoot on February 25th, 2017. Several scenes in the film were shot on a private ranch on the south side of San Antonio. Because the film included shooting arrows, it would not have been safe (or legal) to film the scene in a public park. By networking through Facebook, a friend of an acquaintance agreed to permit “The Aventhrope” to be filmed on their property. During the first shoot on the ranch, we successfully filmed the archery range opening sequence and the montage of Luna walking into the forest to hunt the Aventhrope. The rest of the forest scene, which consisted of the four most cinematographically complicated and emotionally intense pages of the entire script were left to be filmed on February 25th. On the day of the shoot, the cast and crew drove thirty minutes out to the ranch. We began filming at 3:30 PM, and methodically filmed every shot on the shotlist. The cast and crew worked diligently and displayed immense focus. On February 25th 2017, the sun was to set completely at 6:54 PM. We completed our last take at 6:45.



Figure 7. An image taken during the successful shooting of the forest scene.

Another notable success of the project was the costume for the Aventrope itself. The inspiration for the Aventrope's look was a cross between slenderman and Howl in Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle*. It has been noted that the costume bares a resemblance to the abu ghraib torture pictures, though this was not intended. The costume was created with found materials such as cardboard, a pair of leather pants, a black leotard, a skirt, and black felt, as well as some materials bought specifically for the costume such as the wig, the talons, and a few hundred black feathers. Most of the design work on the costume was done during an evening workshop with Dillon Van Tran, the actor who played the Aventrope as well as constructing the costume. Dillon stood for approximately an hour while a strings of feathers were measured against and pinned to his sleeve. Then he took the costume to his studio and sewed the feathers in place. The mask was based off a wrestling mask and had velcro sewn to the bottom of the mask so that it

would stay attached to the bodice. During the first scene filmed featuring the Aventhrope costume (the walking home with a pizza scene), a family of cyclists passed by, the youngest of which cried out “What is that?”

During the same filming session, a woman named Joan, who was doing yard work nearby asked if she could stand off camera and watch the shoot. She was fascinated by the costume of the Aventhrope and wanted a closer look. While they were both off camera, Joan asked Dillon about the plot of the film, and he told her that it was about a lesbian couple who has to fight a monster. Joan lit up and exclaimed that she has been living with her girlfriend for thirty years, and asked if there was any way that she could see the movie when it was done.

One of the main points in creating “The Aventhrope” was to contribute in a meaningful way to the representation of queer women in film, and the fact that the story's existence means something to a member of the San Antonio LGBTQ community was a huge encouragement. Despite the increased appearance of queer characters in the last couple of decades, and the significant progress that has been made in the way of LGBTQ rights, such as the supreme court's decision to legalize same-sex marriage, representations of queer people in media are still few and far between. Mark Harris of the magazine *Film Comment* suggests that for some minorities, being included in film can “be a simple matter of race-blind casting, but creating gay characters is unique in that it always requires at least some writing as well. In other words, Sulu is evidently Asian in every frame of *Star Trek Beyond* in which he appears; he's only gay if a writer figures out a way to make it known” (Harris, 2016).

Joan will soon receive a personal invitation to attend a showing of “The Aventhrope” on April 30th, 2017. If the film is at the very least viewed and enjoyed by Joan, it will be a success.

The Ongoing Creative Process

Despite the conclusion of this honors thesis project, there are still multiple areas in which “The Aventhrope” could be improved. For example, the script would have been served by a few more rounds of continued revisions. The quality of the film overall would benefit from more time to experiment with different lighting and sound possibilities, as well as time for practice shoots, to gain more experience operating the camera and other equipment. “The Aventhrope” would also benefit from additional color correction, to ensure consistency of tone for each scene as well as to exercise more artistic choice over the colors present in each shot. Although “The Aventhrope” is completed, in the sense that it has been handed in as my honors thesis project, the creative process is far from over. The intention of this writer is to continue improving the sound and color balance of the film, possibly re-record the audio of the library scene with Bea and Jill, and possibly re-shoot pages 1-5 of the script. These changes would significantly improve the quality of the film.

Additionally, the film will serve as the basis for a study in COMM 3303, Media Audiences (a core course in the department of communication) The film will be shown to two sections of Dr. Huesca’s Media Audiences class and after which, the students will respond to a brief survey that will inquire as to the meaning of the film. These responses will then be analyzed in terms of Stuart Hall’s theory of the encoding and decoding of media, which suggests that there are two determinate moments at play in any “meaningful discourse” surrounding a text. There is the moment of “encoding” during which the creators of a text employ a code based on both denotative and connotative meanings to construct a message, and then there is a moment of

“decoding” during which the recipient of a message interprets the text based on their understandings of the connotations and denotations of the code in use (Hall, 2001). By comparing the students’ decoded understandings of “The Aventrophe” to the film’s encoded messages, I will gain insight as to how effectively the messages of the film were conveyed, the main discrepancies between the encoded and decoded messages, and the different understandings of the film as decoded by different students.

In the coming months, the film will be submitted to multiple film festivals such as SouthXSouthwest in Austin, Texas, and Another Hole in the Head film festival in San Francisco, California. Though both of these festivals permit the showing of films that are available online, about one third of major film festivals will not screen films that have already been made available online. For this reason, “The Aventrophe” will be restricted to campus-only viewing until after it has been shown at festivals (on the condition that it is selected by any). After attempting to make some festival showings, the film will be resubmitted to Vireo with public access, in addition to being made available on platforms such as Youtube and Vimeo, and will be licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

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Appendix A

Map of Forest Scene Blocking and Camera Placement

This map served as a guide during the filming of the forest scene and signifies the placement of the necklace, the “hiding tree” where Luna loads her first arrow before Stelle arrives, the blocking of the actors, the direction of each arrow shot in the scene, and the placement of the camera for different shots. Map is included in supplemental materials.

Appendix B

Pre-Writing: Example of Longhand Freewriting

Included in supplemental materials.

Appendix C

Prewriting: Outline of “The Aventhrope”

The following text includes the outline for “The Aventhrope as it was written in preparation for the first draft of the script.

1. Open on Luna standing in an archery range. She loads her bow and points at a target. Her Mother comes behind her and corrects her form. “Keep your shoulders back, Luna... Luna... Luna.”
2. “Luna, are you even listening to me?”
 - a. Stelle is anxious about her audition for first chair flute. This will determine the solos for the rest of the year, which are important for gaining experience so that she can become a concert flautist.
 - b. Luna is anxious because there is a proposal to terminate the Annual MidWest County Monster Hunt (The Hunt for short.) Her mother was killed by a monster while hunting when Luna was young, and the Hunt is an important ritual for Luna to deal with her grief. Officially, The Hunt serves to protect MidWest City by keeping the monster population in the surrounding woods below a certain level. If monster populations are low, then the monsters will have plenty of resources within the woods and will be less likely to encroach on city limits and endanger citizens. The Hunt was established shortly after the founding of the city in the late

19th century, and has been largely effective in preventing monster attacks within city limits.

- c. While Stelle explains to Luna her fears regarding her upcoming audition, Luna zones back into her daydream. She is on the range with her mother, pointing at the target. “Is this better, Mom? ... Mom?” (Her mother has disappeared)
 - d. Stelle again notices Luna’s distance. Luna apologizes and explains that she is concerned about the possible end of The Hunt. Stelle listens but doesn’t think that it’s likely that the Hunt will end. This makes Luna feel that Stelle is disregarding her feelings and Luna asks if Stelle understand why the Hunt is so important to her and if Stelle can understand why she might be concerned.
 - e. Stelle interrupts, asking, “Is something burning?”
3. The girls enter the kitchen and find their pizza burnt in the oven.
- a. Stelle offers to go out to Big Brutus’ and get a fresh one, but Luna insists that since she burnt the pizza, she should be the one to go out, and that Luna should stay home and practice for her audition.
- 4.
- a. We see Luna walking home with a box of Pizza. We see Stelle sitting on the porch playing her flute. It is sunset.
 - b. Luna hears something that sounds like breathing, the wind, and rustling leaves. She stops and looks around, but sees nothing. She hears the noise again, stops, and again sees nothing.
 - c. We see a long shot of Luna playing her flute, accompanied by low breathing.

- d. Luna is almost home, she can hear Stelle playing in the distance. Luna hears the noise a third time, and pulls out her pocket knife, and continues down the sidewalk alongside a wall. The sound crescendos as she approaches the corner. She takes a deep breath and turns, the sound stops and there is nothing there. She puts away her knife and turns back toward home when she sees a figure (The Aventhrope) in the distance. It stares at her, saying and doing nothing. Luna looks around her, there is no one else around, and when she looks back at the Aventhrope, it has disappeared. There is silence. Suddenly, a scream. “Stelle!” Luna cries, dropping the pizza and running to her house.
5. News Sequence
- a. Earlier this month, Midwest City was shaken by the brutal attack of a young woman just outside of her own home. The victim was bruised, with lacerations on the the chest and throat, but was not killed. Little is known about the young woman’s attacker. The MCPD insists that the attacker was human, although some argue that the violence of the attack implies the work of a monster. The Midwest City Bureau of Monster Control insists that monster populations are at an all-time low and that there have been no confirmed monster attacks within city limits for nearly 100 years. Activists for the Protection of Monstrous Life insist that the claim of a monster attack is founded on fear not fact, and that this attack should not be used to justify the increased hunting of Monsters. Nonetheless, the city council has, for the time being, dismissed the proposal to outlaw The Annual Hunt, much to the satisfaction of local Hunters.

6. We think we know what attacked Stelle.
7. The Weregrackle
8. Stelle speaks in flute now. She and Luna have a conversation with Luna speaking flute, and texting when she needs to be specific.
9. The nightmare.
 - a. Luna is in the woods. She sees Stelle playing her flute and tries to approach her, but she disappears. She hears her mother calling her name but cannot see her. She sees the Aventhrope in the distance. Just before she wakes, the Aventhrope screams, "Listen."
10. Luna visits Professor Wilson who is a professor of American History, and a family friend of Luna's.
 - a. She asks if the professor knows anything about Bird-humanoid creatures, or a were-grackle. Wilson responds that there have been reports of sightings, but no one has ever reported any injuries due to one, or successfully killed or captured one, so it isn't in the monster registry.
 - b. Wilson inquires after Stelle, and asks Luna if she's doing alright. "I know this must be very hard on you, especially because of your mother. You know that she would want you to keep yourself safe."
11. Luna gathers her bow and arrows. She ignores several phone calls. When she is about to leave Stelle arrives at her door. She sees Luna's bow and whistles inquisitively, holding her palms to Luna to make her wait and explain. Luna tells her that enough is enough. "I'm going to find the thing that attacked you. I need to keep us safe."

12. Luna approaches the woods. She hears a noise behind her. She turns a corner and waits for the footsteps to get close, then turns around. It's Stelle. She attempts to convince Luna to come home, but Luna will not be swayed. In this case, Stelle accompanies her.
13. The girls find themselves in the woods. Stelle whistles. Luna says, "I know where we are if that's what you're worried about. Stelle whistles again. Luna responds "You really don't need to be here. I can handle this thing. I want you to be safe. What was that?" The girls look around. The forest is quiet. Stelle whistles.
 - a. Suddenly they hear wings and The Aventhrope appears before them.
 - b. Luna loads her bow. The Aventhrope says "listen." She releases the arrow, but the Aventhrope has disappeared and the arrow is lost. Luna bolts crying "Where are you?" and "Show yourself." She loads her bow, looking around.
 - c. The Aventhrope suddenly appears, repeating "Listen" she shoots, and again, the creature has gone. It is suddenly behind her, shouting, "Listen!" She drops her bow and lunges toward the creature, which is suddenly much farther away. Stelle leaps between Luna and The Bird, throwing them both to the ground. Luna tries to reach her bow, but Stelle pulls her away from it. Stelle is whistling loudly, and Luna shakes her off. She picks up her bow, looking for the Aventhrope, and Stelle's whistles grow louder, more akin to flute-like screams. As Luna finally sees the Aventhrope she loads her bow. The Aventhrope is closer with every moment and again it screams "Listen." Luna lets her arrow go, and again the Aventhrope disappears in time to miss it. It appears behind her and screams "Listen," but when Luna turns around, it is Stelle, screaming with the

Aventhrope's voice. Luna drops her bow and falls to the ground as Stelle screams listen in a chorus of flutes with her voice intertwined with the Aventhrope.

- d. There is a moment of pause. Luna, sprawled on the ground, Staring at Stelle, who stands, infuriated, before her.
- e. Stelle can speak again and shouts "God damn it! You had to make this about you didn't you? God, Luna! I know you're still dealing with what happened to your mom and all, but you don't get to scapegoat the creatures that live out here. You don't get to make me the cause for your vendetta especially since you won't even listen when I try to tell you that the monsters in this forest are the least of our worries. So stop going after them. You don't get to fight for me if you won't even fucking listen.
- f. Another silence. Stelle asks. "Did you get all that?" And Luna says yes. She stands up, and she and Stelle hold each other for a few moments. Luna says that she's sorry. Stelle nods. She looks at Luna and says, "It's cold out. Let's go home.
- g. With their arms around each other, they leave the forest.

Appendix D

Fourth Draft of Aventhrope Script With Notes

Included in supplemental materials.

Appendix E

Early Storyboard- Detailed

Included in supplemental materials.

Appendix F

Later Storyboard- Less Detailed

Included in supplemental materials.

Appendix G

Forest Scene Shotlist

Included in supplemental materials.

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Appendix H

Editing Chart for Dr. Wilson Scene

Included in supplemental materials.