



Frame by Frame

by: Jorge Garza



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MFA Exhibition + Written Component

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**COLA**



**Art+Art History  
Department**

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## Foreword

When I think of the work that Jorge has produced in his final year, it takes me back to my own collegiate career. Our stories are very different, but our paths are the same. I spent my film school career honing my creative voice, exploring different subjects until I found the ones that intrigued me. Jorge has done the same. He has explored several genres while studying at UTA, all the while keeping his focus on the interactions between people.

His final films, although they deal with people that find themselves in exaggerated situations, are at their core, character studies of the people Jorge grew up around. He puts characters in impossible situations, forces them to make life-altering decisions and in the end treats the audience to the pleasure of watching them evolve because of those decisions.

His work, although not flawless, is a seed for better work to come.

- Professor Ya'Ke Smith

## Artist Statement

If the benefits of an action outweigh the costs, people will continue to perform that action. When the costs outweigh the benefits, people tend to reconsider their actions. Depending on the circumstances, the tipping point on that scale will differ greatly from person to person.

I've always been fascinated with human behavior and the lengths that humans will go to for people, ideas and objects they care about.

When I create characters for my screenplays, my goal is to push the characters wits to the limits. "Only by going too far, can we realize how far we can actually go." It's in this moment that characters are truly changed and become different people...versions of themselves they didn't know they were capable of being.



MFA Exhibition Image



**Santino (2011)**  
HD Video, 1920 x 1080p

MFA Exhibition Image



**Truman (2011)**  
HD Video, 1920 x 1080p

MFA Exhibition Image



**India (2012)**  
HD Video, 1920 x 1080p



## Written Component

### INTRODUCTION

Upon applying to the University of Texas at Arlington, I wrote the following on my statement of purpose:

“During my time here [at UTA] I hope to accomplish what I think every filmmaker wishes: to help tell great stories. In a world that can be gray at times, I’d like to give something back, if I can. If I can tell you a story that makes you forget, even for a few moments about the bills, the laundry, the meetings or whatever weighs you down, I’ve succeeded.”

### THE AWAKENING

My first film ever was a western that I did with a group of friends while in junior high. We borrowed a camera from a friend’s mom, gathered wardrobe, made props and shot a reenactment from an old western gunfight for a school history fair competition. The film was raw, it was gritty... but we didn’t win. Viewers of the film were really entertained and the experience left a really positive mark on me. I’ll never forget how it felt to have created a few enjoyable moments for a group of people.

While pursuing a B.A. in Psychology at the University of Texas at San Antonio, I found myself behind a camera lens again. A friend and I collaborated on a few short films, sometimes spending 20+ hours shooting and editing. I felt that I had to continue making films so after graduating from UTSA, I decided to pursue my M. F.A. in Film & Video at the University of Texas at Arlington.

### ECONOMICS

In my films, I tend to rely on a principle of economics in order to determine what choices my characters will make. This principle drives my characters’ motives. The principle states that if the benefits of something outweigh the costs, characters (people) will continue to seek these benefits. When the scale is tipped and the costs



and the costs outweigh the benefits, characters (people) will cease to seek these benefits. When I ask myself if the costs outweigh the benefits (for a given character), I can usually trace the origin of my characters motives and predict future decisions (the ones most in line with his/her personality).

## PSYCHOLOGY

Obviously, a writer can shape the story and mold a character to whatever the writer wants. But shaping just to sharp, or writing just to write means nothing if it's not in line with the personality of the character's that have been created. I feel that when writers don't know what will happen next to their characters, it's typically because they don't know their characters to the depths that they should.

## MORALITY

In each screenplay every choice and every door opened leads to several more hallways with several more doors and endless possibilities. My characters are seldom ever wholly "good" or "bad" and the choices they make are in accordance with what's right to them, in their own eyes. If the benefits outweigh the costs, characters/people will exhibit certain behaviors.

In Santino, David wasn't trying to kill Sonny's dream. But the benefit of delaying Sonny's departure off to college definitely outweighed the lonesome feeling of an empty house. Also, in David's own way, he felt as though he had Sonny's best interests in mind.

On any given day Truman probably wouldn't send a surge of energy through someone's body in an attempt to hurt them. But in the final act of the film, this decision far outweighs the cost of risking his family's well-being. For India, the benefits of leaving the agency far outweighed the risks involved with such an idea.

## FILM TITLES

It never fails; I always end up spending a great deal of time trying to title each film. It's like naming your first-born. You want it to be great. At first, I wanted my films to have a bold, unforgettable name. But the attempts I made to give the films these 'unforgettable' names, never really sat quite right. It seemed forced or silly to me at times, so in the end I chose character names from within the films themselves. I realized that no matter what I titled the films, to me they would always be films centered on the characters' story and journey. This was the essence of the films. So

naturally, I felt compelled to title the films with character names: SANTINO, TRUMAN and INDIA.

## THE STORIES

### Santino, (2011)

Imagine that you're working 40 hours-a-week-and-then-some at a second job. Every paycheck earned is a paycheck already spent to stay afloat. Your spouse has recently passed away and now your son wants to skip out on the family business, move away and give college a shot. This scenario sets up my film Santino (2011) and gives you a brief glimpse into David's life. With this film I felt that I had created two characters who are bound to each other by love and family ties. Despite these close ties, the characters desired things that were miles apart. David is content with the life he has, or at least feels that it's a safe bet, and doesn't understand Sonny's desire to have "something more."

David's fear is a universal one: abandonment. His wife's death left a chasm in his life, as it would anyone's. When conflicts arise with Sonny, David retreats to the confines of his truck to "talk it out" with a picture of his wife on the truck dashboard. There was a brief time when I thought about pulling this part out of the script because at first glance it felt strange that he would talk to a picture of his deceased wife. But after giving it more thought, it seemed in line with moments of loved ones "talking it out," at graveyards and the several stages of coping with grief. I don't think anyone completely gets over the loss of a loved one. It's like cutting an emotion down by half. No matter how many times you slice it, you'll still have a fraction of it left.

For David, I settled on a level of grief that felt right for the character. The dialogues with his deceased wife were ones that we all have at some point, some expressed and some kept inside our own heads. For Sonny, his mother's memory would live on with the pursuit of a higher education. Despite a household where money was stretched thin, she had managed to create a savings of money for Sonny's college fund. Sonny would honor her memory by setting out on the path that they had started together. Only after finding out about the savings does David realize the importance his wife put on Sonny's education.

Sonny's desire to have something more speaks to a notion: "I've made it this far, I can make it further." Many of us have experienced this in our lives when challenging ourselves to the fullest extent. If you're a Type-A personality, then you're constantly raising the bar or pushing the limits. In this respect, I think Sonny would agree with T.S. Elliot when he wrote, "Only those who will risk going too far, can possibly find out how far one can go."



## Truman, (2011)

You gain wind of your employer's unethical tactics so you decide to get away and leave that life behind. Several years later he's tracked you and your family down. He "offers" you a job because of your unique abilities, but you decline. In case you change your mind, he leaves his contact info. Later, you're strangely waking up face down on your hallway floor and... your family is gone. This is Truman (2011).

For this next film, I wanted to explore a larger landscape than in the previous film. In Santino, the setting for most of the film is Sonny's house. I knew early on that I wanted to send Truman into the desert. I set the film on a ranch in South Texas and then the sand dunes of South Padre Island, TX. These dunes provided me with a backdrop for my desert scenes.

We all want to be special or unique at something. I've always been intrigued with people who possess unique abilities or are specialists in a particular field; world's fastest runner, world's sharpest shooter, world's best ping pong player, and the like. In this film I created a simple character with a supernatural ability to find rare minerals and metals hiding underneath the earth's surface. Truman could send out a shockwave of energy into the earth and hone in on an elements location similar to radar's echolocation technique.

With Truman, I wanted to bring a strong sense of family ties and the lengths one would go to for his/her family. It was important for me to have Truman's character be a simplistic one. The things Truman genuinely desires for his life are a family, a house and a dog (probably in that order). For this film, I didn't want to overcomplicate his character. When a character is overly complicated there are usually several variables in his/her life that, if left in the mix, could inexplicably align themselves to become "good" reasons for doing something "bad" to achieve a goal.

Truman's character is simple and thus his dramatic need in the film is simple as well: to get his family back. But it's because of the simplicity in Truman's character that he never abused his supernatural ability. Since Truman's main objective was to rescue his family, he possessed the ability to leave the diamonds in the desert.

A few weeks before shooting this movie, someone tried to convince me to change the ending so that Truman would take the diamonds. I tried to explain that Truman's journey wasn't about the diamonds and I left the ending as I had intended it since day one. The character that would take the diamonds is a very different character from the one I had written into the screenplay. Such a character would go to great lengths to justify this action. Truman's actions weren't ones that needed much justification since they were within the realm of "reasonable" actions that anyone would take if their family were in jeopardy.

## India, (2012)

After shooting several films heavy in drama, I wanted to explore the action genre. After the experience with a large landscape in Truman, I was excited to push further into another large landscape. With 100+ acres to utilize in Brownsville, TX, the location for this next project was tentatively set. This would be the biggest, most significant project I've undertaken to date.

In the fall of 2011, a colleague and I talked about similar interest in shooting large-scale, stunt-heavy movies. Rather than shoot two large-scale movies during the same semester, we decided to pool our resources (funds, crew & equipment) and shoot both movies back-to-back. We had no idea what was in store for us. We talked about our movies having similar storylines or characters that crossed over into one another's films. We did our research and watched films, but found nothing that really matched our idea. We wanted the stories to start off in the same place for the first act (main story's beginning).

Then the movies would venture out into their own places, having their own unique stories for act two (a sub-plot). Finally, the characters would come back together in the same location for act three (the end).

The idea was to create two movies that could stand-alone and be viewed independently of one another, but when screened together, would enrich the viewing experience of the other film. In the winter of 2011, scripts for the "double-features" of Cowboy and India were born. My colleague and I went into production for both films under the project name "Cowboy & India." In the pre-production and production phases the team moved as one whole army. Later on in post-production these films would separate into their respective pieces.

Writing and directing such a unique a project like this one came with it's own unique challenges. My colleague and I both needed a protagonist (good guy) and antagonist (bad guy). Early on, it became clear that in order to avoid seeing the same movie twice, we would need to change things up. So in my film, India is the hero. But in the other film, he's seen as the villain. In the other film, Cowboy is the good guy. But in my film, he's the villain.

This role switch would give a unique opportunity the cast members, as well. They would get to play both a good guy and bad guy within a single production. During the first phase of casting I had difficulty finding someone with the right "look" for my character. I wanted India to exhibit power, intelligence and allegiance.

When Al Dias came in to read for the part, the decision, which had eluded me, became instantly clearer. Not only did he look the part, Al Dias also brought his own unique qualities to my character that helped differentiate India from Cowboy.

There were several people that I considered for the role of Juliet and to choose between them all was a hard decision.



We called back a select few to read lines along with Al. Al and April Hartmann had worked together before so when they read together, they shared a chemistry onscreen that felt really natural. I had them read a scene where Al (India) finds out that April (Juliet) has betrayed them. In the screenplay they make love, they have a fight and have words after.

While they were reading the scene together I could feel the tension in my stomach. I was genuinely worried for Al, for April, for what would happen next. When Al left April sitting in that motel room, I felt all that emotion, like I was re-living a really bad break-up. It was tragic, it was sad... it was great. At that moment, I snapped back to reality and knew I had found the perfect pair for this film.

The two films would need to look and feel distinct from each other, so I decided to shoot mine with a newer, modern, "Jason Bourne," look and feel. I wanted hand-held camera movement to make the audience feel as though they were there. I wanted fast-paced cutting in the editing room to keep the rhythm of the film quick and fresh. The other film would have a classic "Clint Eastwood Western" look with grand vistas and drawn-out pacing.

A large crew was definitely called for and we had 25-30 people on hand. The producers made miracles happen and the rest of the production team followed suit. The producers would have to procure some odd locations. In the time it would take a team to shoot one movie, this production team would have to have to schedule and plan for two. The stunts that were written into the screenplay were a tremendous undertaking. It was planned to be a big production (to us anyway) so big stunts were part of the package. To name a few stunts: bronc riding, close-combat fight, firing live ammo, shattering a window with a chair, jumping out of 2nd story window and riding down a zip-line, a truck barreling through a wooden fence, horseback riding at full gallop, high speed stunt-driving, flipping a truck into a ditch, and explosions.

## INFLUENCES

I can't say that any one particular person or artist is solely responsible for influencing my work. Rather, it's been an accumulation of lessons, notes and thoughts that I've taken and inscribed in my mind.

In *Before Sunset*, I was amazed at how Richard Linklater was able to make a feature film with just two people who walk and talk for 90 minutes. This was so impressive to me as a mark of good storytelling that didn't need anything more than strong dialogue and characters.

I feel really connected to the screenplay that Ben Affleck and Matt Damon wrote for *Good Will Hunting*. Matt Damon's character seemed to reject emotional intimacy and, in the end, this is what ends up saving him. If I were hard-pressed to name a certain figure that's impressed me the most, I'd say Christopher Nolan. It's

simple; he's a great storyteller. In *Memento*, Nolan chopped up a story and told it to us in reverse while still moving forward somehow. With *Inception*, Nolan takes the simple concept of dreams and weaves an intricate story within several "layers" of these dreams.

## INTROSPECTION

Three years ago, if someone had asked me to describe the underlying theme of my work, I probably wouldn't know what to say. After each movie, my knowledge and skill set took a quantum leap forward. As I reflect on my work, I can now see that certain emotions and themes surfaced time and time again. I've always known that the idea of family was an important one to me but it's only by looking at my body of work that I realize how deep it goes (Santino & Truman). But I've also seen myself grow and take on other challenges and themes (India).



Screenplay excerpt from *Santino* (2011)

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Sonny paces back and forth in the living room.

On the coffee table there's an application for Financial Aid. The "parent signature" portion of the document is blank but has been highlighted.

David strolls in through the front door.

Sonny snatches up the application from the coffee table and walks to cut David off.

SONNY  
I need you to sign this.

DAVID  
Otra vez? (*Spanish translation:*  
*Again?*) I already told you, "no."

David turns and walks toward the kitchen. Sonny follows.

SONNY  
The deadline is tomorrow.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

David reaches for a cup from the cabinet.

DAVID  
I didn't go to college and I'm  
doing just fine.

Sonny stands in the middle of the kitchen with the application in hand.

SONNY  
(beat)  
I really need you to sign this.

David puts his cup down on the counter and turns to Sonny.

DAVID  
Look, you're not going OK!!!

Sonny looks at David for a moment then at his application. Sonny tosses the application onto the kitchen counter and storms out of the kitchen.

SONNY  
You can't keep me here forever!

David watches his son walk away.

Screenplay excerpt from *Truman* (2011)

INT. TRUMAN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Truman and Caroline sleep peacefully in their bed. A CRASH of glass is heard off in another room. Truman is startled awake. Caroline stirs.

TRUMAN  
(whispers)  
Stay here.

Truman reaches for a nearby shotgun, aims into the hall and exits the room.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

There's broken glass at the end of the hall.

MOLLY (O.S)  
(from other room)  
Daddy!?

TRUMAN  
You ok?

She doesn't respond. Truman lowers the shotgun and walks toward her room. As he approaches he sees someone holding Molly at her bedside. Truman picks up the shotgun to aim.

TRUMAN  
It's-

Molly sees something behind Truman.

MOLLY  
Daddy!

From behind, Truman is struck on the back of the head. The shotgun falls to the floor. Truman goes down.

*Screenplay excerpt from India (2012)*

INT. CARAVAN MOTEL - NIGHT

India packs a duffel bag. Juliet's bag is on now on the bed and several documents/photos are scattered on the bed.

Juliet's POV: A groggy Juliet wakes up to see India packing.

Juliet realizes that she's bound. She desperately tugs on her bindings. India notices that she's awoken. He grabs the photo of Whiskey and brings it near her.

PHOTO: A picture of the Cowboy and a close up of his tattoo (WHISKEY) that's styled similarly to India & Juliet's tattoo.

INDIA  
He's one of us.  
(beat)  
You KNEW about this!?

Juliet ignores him and tugs on her bindings again.

India draws his pistol, cocks the hammer, aims at her head.

INDIA  
(frustrated)  
Did you know about this!?

JULIET  
(a long pause)  
Yeah, so just do what you gotta do.

India contemplates pulling the trigger. After a long moment, he uncocks the pistol & backs off.

INDIA  
They'll just send someone else.  
(beat; leans closer to Juliet)  
Besides, I don't hunt my own.

He grabs duffel bag and walks toward the door.

JULIET  
Fuck you!!

India opens the door.

INDIA  
(exits through door)  
Yea, fuck you too.

India shuts the door on his way out. Juliet is left, bound.

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