BLIGHT

THE MAKING OF A SHORT FILM

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"Filmmaking is the art of turning problems into golden opportunities. Problems pave the way for fresh ideas, and more often than not, those ideas outshine the originals."

— Markus Hoeckner

FOREWORD

In 2019, I found myself at a workshop led by Mike Plante, the director of shorts programming at the Sundance Institute. Among a crowd of passionate young filmmakers, his words resonated: "Start with what's in your own backyard," he urged, cautioning against leaping at grand themes like world hunger for our first short film venture. As alluring as the idea of crafting the next Jurassic Park was, I took this counsel to heart. With funding support from the Minnesota State Arts Board (and a lot of favors), I completed my debut short film *Daughter* in the tumultuous year of 2020 – a year that's hard to forget, even if you've been living under a rock.

Through what seemed like a whirlwind of three months, a profound realization dawned on me: the honor of shaping narratives through the lens of cinema outweighs even the most daunting of obstacles. With the calendar turning to 2021, the itch to create my next film—this time on a grander scale—took hold. My objective was finding a way to balance scale, relevance, and the intimacy of relatability.

During my upbringing, my father's passion for film music and history introduced me to timeless works, though my true appreciation for them blossomed over time. During those years, I had a much greater interest in blockbuster adventures like *Jurassic Park, Gladiator, Star Wars,* and *The Dark Knight*. Despite the deep personal meaning and mature drama inherent in *Daughter*, I recognized its narrower appeal to a broader audience. Yet, this realization only fueled my determination to delve into my fondness for spectacle—an inclination best realized through the accessible canvas of short films.

Coincidentally, I was introduced to Barkhad Abdirahman, a talented Somali actor known for his role alongside Tom

Above: Actor & co-writer Barkhad Abdirahman and director Markus Hoeckner on set for Blight's fundraising campaign video.

Hanks in the Academy Award nominated 2013 thriller *Captain Phillips* and the Academy Award-winning short *Watu Wote*. Raised within a multicultural and multilingual setting as the son of German immigrants, I've long harbored a fascination for cross-cultural storytelling and this joint effort offered a distinctive opportunity to plunge deeper into the vibrant fabric of one of the Twin Cities' most prolific communities.

With Barkhad excited to collaborate, a flurry of brainstorming sessions ensued. As the idea took root, we carried a keen awareness of the cinematic history casting Somali actors as pirates or terrorists, a stereotype we aimed to challenge. Eventually, we landed on the idea for *Blight*: a narrative revolving around two brothers residing in a not-so-distant future, where the planet faces escalating heat waves and scarcity of food, making it increasingly inhospitable. As the United Nations begins evacuating survivors to off-world orbital outposts, the two brothers must confront their differences as they contemplate leaving their home behind forever.

Above: Barkhad Abdirahman and Mahamed Salad waiting for the lighting to be finalized.

Throughout my life, the challenge of grappling with change has been a constant presence, particularly when confronting matters beyond my grasp, such as the formidable force of climate change. *Blight* emerged as a channel to articulate this very struggle. The undeniable impact of human-induced climate shifts touches each and every one of us, but my intent was to veer from the trodden path of conventional disaster narratives. Instead of echoing the patterns of mainstream films, which often spotlight the trials of white American families, Barkhad and I aspired to breathe new life into the discourse.

These mainstream portrayals frequently overlook the socio-cultural dynamics faced by others, like the Somali community, who have weathered the storms of political upheaval and conflict in Somalia, leading to profound upheavals in their lives. Through close-knit collaborations with Barkhad, Mahamed, and other local members, I gained priceless insights into the nuanced experiences of the Somali people. This deep understanding formed the bedrock, an absolute necessity, in crafting a film that resonates authentically, capturing the essence of the community's lived realities.

Blight not only introduces fresh perspectives and languages into this subject matter, but it also personifies the two opposing sides of change through its characters. Abdi embodies the fear of the unknown, adamantly resisting any notion of uprooting his life any further. Conversely, Jamal symbolizes a willingness to embrace change as an inherent part of life. These contrasting viewpoints, set against the backdrop of a global crisis, enrich a straightforward central conflict with more depth.

In my view, filmmaking stands as one of humanity's greatest inventions, holding profound importance in culture as a potent means of artistic expression and storytelling. Its influence extends far and wide, shaping and mirroring cultural values, norms, and identities, both at the local and global levels. Most importantly, it offers a captivating escape from the trials of daily life, providing entertainment and a gateway to new ideas. Yet, the filmmaking process is shrouded in mystery. There is no one way of doing things and it's all about solving problems in service of the creative.

The goal of this book is to peel back the curtain and provide a detailed and comprehensive glimpse into the intricate process of bringing this ambitious short film to life. Through behind-the-scenes photos, anecdotes, and descriptions of the various stages, it is my hope that you will gain a deeper appreciation for the filmmaking process and the artistry that lies behind every frame, ultimately enriching your connection with the captivating world of cinema.

I. FUNDRAISING & DEVELOPMENT

Diving into this endeavor, I was acutely aware that sustaining any form of stable income would be an unattainable feat, given the monumental fundraising efforts it demanded. Initially, I enlisted the aid of a well-known local producer to outline the script's budget, only to uncover a projection surpassing $150,000 (at least if I did it by the book). To put this in context, the typical budget for most short films spans from the equivalent of a pizza box and some favors, to a maximum of around $15,000. Moreover, short films seldom yield profits, and their pursuit of funding is notoriously difficult, with artist grants, crowdsourcing, and support from well-to-do acquaintances being the sole glimmers of hope.

I also knew that if I didn't do this, I would forgo the opportunity to showcase my passion for crafting a film like *Blight*, irrespective of its reception on the film festival circuit. Luckily, I qualified for Minnesota's robust social programs, securing Medicaid and food assistance to supplement an inconsistent income stemming from sporadic freelance editing gigs—safeguarding my financial baseline. It's noteworthy that my partner, bearing a steady full-time job, generously offered to shoulder most of our financial responsibilities during this uncertain period—I couldn't have done it without her.

After my initial experiment with a few crowdsourcing platforms, I decided to shift gears and opt for a fiscal sponsorship through From The Heart Productions run by Carole Dean. Besides being the author of "The Art of Film Funding, Alternative Concepts," Carole's organization, based in Southern California, stands as one of the first nonprofits providing fiscal sponsorship, resources, and funding assistance to filmmakers. I quickly learned that I would need a team to help me raise such a significant amount of money, so I joined forces with Mahamed Salad, a driven Somali artist with a passion for acting who was referred to me by Barkhad. He would later become a co-producer and the lead in the film.

Together, we met three to four times a week for several months at the coffee shop down the road from my apartment and began drafting email campaigns to our family and friends, scheduled meetings with contacts in our professional network, engaged prominent Somali community leaders, and approached corporate foundations. I even reached out to one of my childhood idols in the film industry and through some miracle, received a generous donation from them a few weeks later. Nevertheless, this process was far from easy and we received many more rejections than we anticipated.

Mahamed and I came to the realization that a different approach was necessary beyond merely seeking monetary donations. Armed with the production budget top sheet, we began reaching out to local restaurants, businesses, and rental facilities, seeking equipment donations, a day of catering coverage, and volunteers to fulfill on-set production roles, all in alignment with the film's mission. Seven months later, we were in a spot to move forward with pre-production.

The fundraising journey taught me invaluable lessons, with the most significant being the importance of passion, patience, and tenacity. Succeeding in film fundraising shares similarities with getting a start-up business off the ground or gathering funds for a consumer product's development. The principles of business development and marketing apply here, and required me to assume the role of a film-trepreneur.

II. PRE-PRODUCTION

As the saying goes, 'fix it in pre" is probably the most important precurser for a smooth production. For those unfamiliar with the pre-production stage, here's a list of of some things that are included:

- Script Development: Refining the screenplay, creating drafts, and finalizing the script.
- Storyboarding: Visualizing scenes and shots through illustrated sequences.
- Casting: Auditioning and selecting actors for various roles.
- Location Scouting: Identifying and securing suitable filming locations.
- Scheduling: Planning the shooting days and setting up the shooting schedule.
- Rehearsals: Practicing scenes with actors to refine performances and iron out issues.

- Costume and Makeup Design: Creating looks for characters and planning wardrobe.
- Set Design: Designing and constructing sets as needed.
- Props and Equipment Acquisition: Obtaining necessary props and equipment for filming.
- Permits and Legalities: Securing permits and addressing legal requirements for shooting.
- Special Effects Planning: If needed, organizing special effects sequences.
- Safety Preparations: Implementing safety measures for the cast and crew.

While I won't cover every topic, I will share some of my favorite aspects of what I consider to be the most important stage of production.

SCRIPT REVISIONS

Blight went through many script revisions and it didn't really begin to take shape until I enlisted the help of an experienced local writer/director who agreed to mentor me. He was able to help me hone in on the "why" of the story and taught me things, such as the "give me 3 strong reasons for this scene to exist, or cut it" rule. Moreover, due to budget constraints, I constantly sought ways to reduce the production costs within the script.

This involved "killing my darlings," or removing moments that would demand significant set-building, visual effects, or extras. Ironically, it is the process of finding solutions within a defined set of parameters and constraints that often results in the most creative outcomes. It's akin to a pianist exploring all possible permutations within a single scale and key.

Yet, my perspective shifted when I came across Steven Spielberg's script for Saving Private Ryan. It differed significantly from the actual film, particularly the opening battle scene at Omaha Beach. Spielberg and his team took an unconventional approach, spending weeks improvising shots without relying on storyboards.

This allowed them to capture a genuine, almost documentary-style portrayal of the battle, aiming for utmost realism. This revelation prompted a change in my mindset, making me realize the value of relinquishing strict control during the filmmaking process. Instead, it taught me to embrace experimentation on set and leave room for creative spontaneity.

Ultimately, a script is just a roadmap. What you see on the page before production is almost never exactly what you see in the final edit.

Blight – The making of a short film

INT. INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX - LIVING QUARTERS - LATER

Close on a pot of canned soup being stirred by Ab[di] propane cooker.

                    ABDI
          Don't talk to me about it. I told
          you a hundred times, I'm not
          leaving.

Close on Jamal, faced away, pouring water into a covered mug--a basic filtration system. He watche[s] percolate. *Faced away, leaning on the*

                    ABDI (CONT'D)
          Everything I know is here. Up
          there, you're just cattle. ~~Cattle~~ *Cattle cu[t]*
          ~~crammed into tiny metal stalls with~~ *th[..]*
          ~~no where to go.~~ At least here,
          we're in our own home.

Jamal turns to Abdi.

                 exactly
                    JAMAL
          That's ~~what~~ mother and father used
          to tell us. Look ~~how they ended up.~~
                                   at them now.

Abdi snaps. He paces over to Jamal and grabs his

Slams pot of
hands on table.
                    ABDI
          Mother and father sacrificed
          everything to bring us here, to
          give us a better chance at
          surviving, a better life.

He lets go of the shirt. A moment of utter sile[nce]

                    JAMAL
          What kind of life is this? *option[...]*

He walks off. We stay on Abdi taking this in.
                      Let that moment bre[athe]

5   EXT. INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX - ROOFTOP - EVENING

include su[...]   A prayer rug and some laundry hung on a rope fl[...]
Jamal [...] wind. *Maybe two separate B-roll shots[...]*
the eye open[...]
                    Jamal empties the water catch made of tarp int[o]
A tear   shakes the tarp, the frustration still in his
rolles down   the tarp back over the rope. Then, he looks ou[t]
his face.   setting sun, taking in the spectacular gold ho[...]

         whole montage could happen o[...]
   *48 hours. Light/time of d[...]*

LOCATIONS

Securing locations stands as a pivotal cornerstone in the pre-production phase, yet the task of sourcing and ensuring these venues is not easy or budget-friendly. The process involves acquiring permits, securing liability insurance, negotiating rental fees, and navigating logistical complexities. After weeks of exhaustive research and scouting, amidst a backdrop of rejections, I stumbled upon the historic Theodore Hamm Brewing Company in St. Paul.

The complex, predominantly under city ownership and deemed unsafe for entry, held a silver lining. A section of the structure belonged to the privately-owned "St. Paul Brewing Company," whose owner, a patron of the arts, allowed us to use the space in exchange for a short promotional business video.
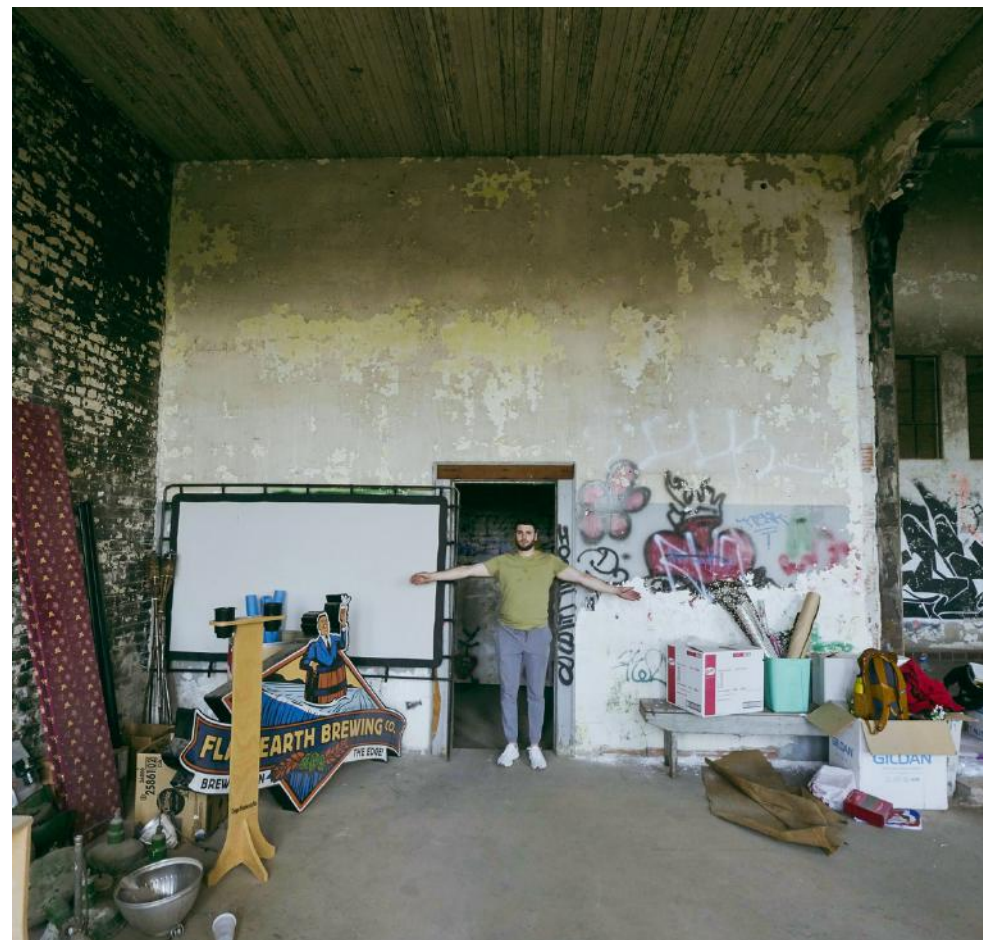
Our primary goal was to limit company moves—tedious and costly transfers of crew and equipment across various locations. To address this, our director of photography, Aaron Huber, devised framing techniques that leveraged the Hamm's complex to depict three distinct settings in our script. This ingenious approach resulted in considerable savings, approximately $5,000, effectively trimming our location expenses. I will discuss how we secured our second location later.

Below: images of the second floor of the historic Hamms Brewery in St. Paul before production design.
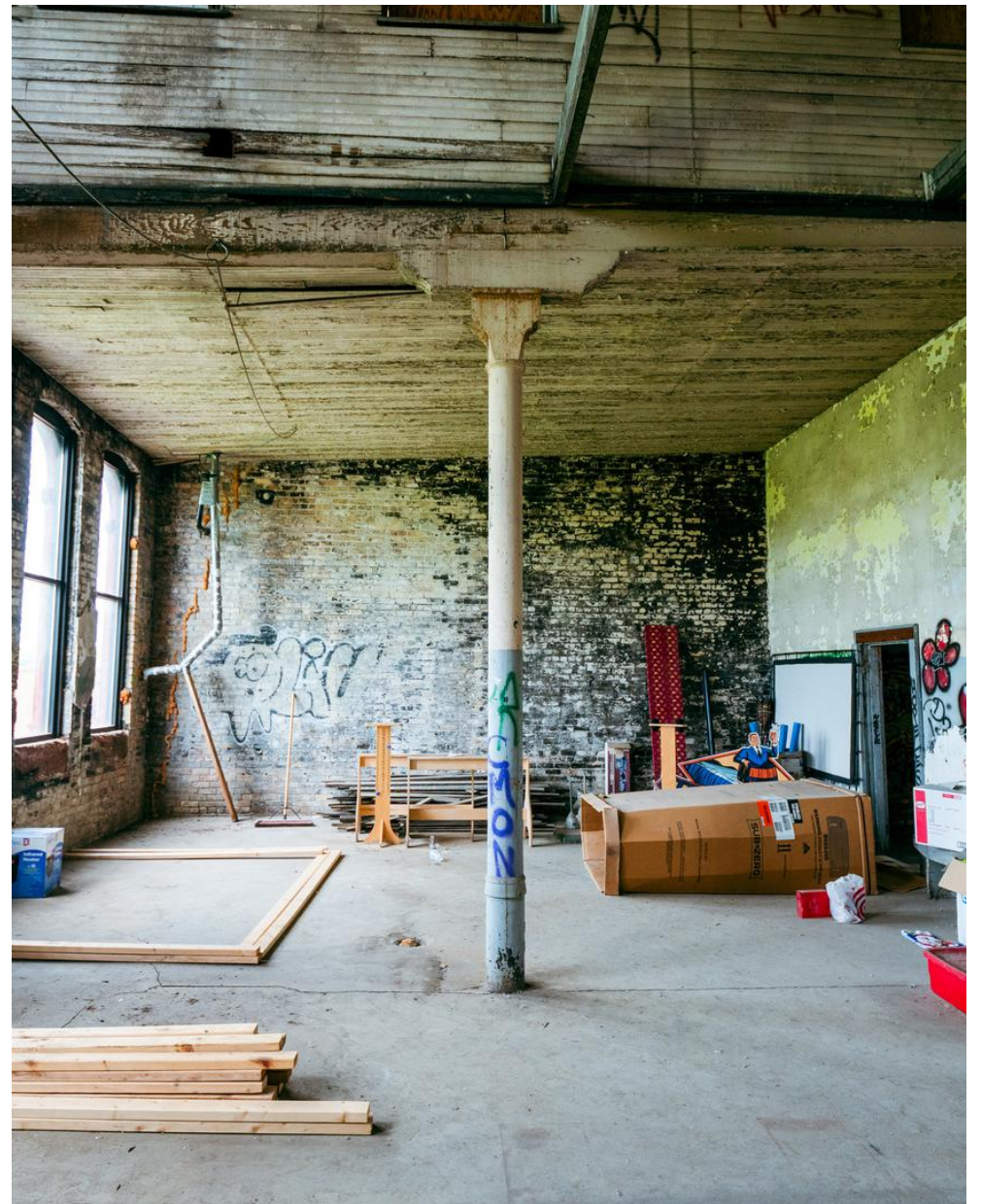
Above: the rooftop exterior – Historic Hamms Brewery.

Above: view of downtown St. Paul from the rooftop.

Left: Using a phone app called Sun Seeker. Director of Photography Aaron Huber was able to visualize where the sun's position would be at any given time, allowing us to plan our days based on available, natural light.

STORYBOARDING

Storyboarding in film is a crucial pre-production process that involves visualizing the entire narrative through a series of illustrated frames. It serves as a blueprint for the director, cinematographer, and the entire production team, helping them envision the sequence of shots, camera angles, and compositions. This form of planning not only aids in organizing the shooting schedule but also facilitates effective communication among the team, ensuring everyone is on the same page. While my first film, *Daughter*, had just a written shot list, it was clear from the beginning that *Blight* would need to be storyboarded. Working with a larger crew, more advanced technical equipment, and scenes with a lot of moving parts meant that shots needed to be meticulously planned out. Since we didn't have a budget for a storyboard illustrator, my long-time creative partner and director of photography, Aaron Huber, used a 3D software meant for studio photography called "set.a.light 3d." While it had its limitations, Aaron was able to push the boundaries of the software, using a combination of Adobe Photoshop and Blender to fill in the gaps.

Below: Director of Photography Aaron Huber lays out the master shot list and storyboard document.

INT. INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX - LIVING QUARTERS - DAY

INT. INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX - LIVING QUARTERS - CONTINUOUS   3

We push in on a barricaded door--someone behind it banging hard on it. Abdi begins pushing the blockade aside. He unlocks the door to...

...Jamal, tumbling through. He drops to the floor wheezing.

                    JAMAL
          Close it!

Abdi pokes his head out of the door, then closes it and moves the barricade back into place.

(All dialogue in Somali).

Jamal drops his bag at Abdi's feet and turns this over. Canned food rolls out.

Abdi picks one up and holds it in Jamal's face.

                    ABDI
          Didn't I tell you this will get you
          killed!?

He slaps him over the head and picks up some of the cans and places them on a table by the wall.

                    ABDI (CONT'D)
          Did you find any medicine?

Jamal shuffles through the rest of the bag.

                    JAMAL
          No, but this. The military must
          have dropped these from a plane.
          They're everywhere.

He pulls out a paper flyer and unfolds it. He holds it up in front of Abdi, who takes it from him.

ANGLE ON the flyer--there's a simple image of a map. Next to it in big letters reads: FINAL EVACUATION NOTICE followed by a paragraph in three different languages

                    JAMAL (CONT'D)
          It's our last chance, Abdi!

Without a word, Abdi hands the flyer back to Jamal. He collects the rest of the canned food and brings it to the table.

Jamal's excitement fades, reality setting back in, slumps back down on the floor.

DAY 1 2 of 4

3

Shot 1: MED - HandHeld - M -Truck forward. (ABDI Coverage)
Slow push in on the door. ABDI enters frame from the left and removes the Barracade. Jamal Burst through, Camera slighlty pans as Jamal enters the room but then pans back to ABDI. We stay with Abdi and follow him through the scene.

Shot 2: MED - Handheld - Low angle - Track right.
In front of Jamal's landing point looking back towards the door. Jamal enters the room and lands on his knees just in front of camera "Wheezing". Rack focus from JAMAL to ABDI as he closes the barricade in the bkg. Jamal turns around and situates himself towards ABDI. Camera slightly moves to the Right. ABDI approaches Jamal, Jamal empties his bag (Camera tilts down to see the contents at Abdis feet) Abdi's hand grabs a cans. Camera tilts up to Abdi's face. ABDI hits Jamal then walks to the shelf to put the can down. Scene continues.... (full scene)

Shot 3: MCU - Handheld -(JAMAL Coverage)
Camera on Jamal as he turns to say " Close the door" We stick with Jamal for this take. We hold on Jamal at the end as ABDI denies his suggestion to leave.

Shot 4: Med Wide - Two Shot - Both Characters
We see the interaction between the characters through the scene.

Shot 5: MCU - Hand Held - Bag > ABDI
JAMAL is shuffling through the bag, He pulls out the flyer. We hold on this for a moment then the camera tilts up as he shows and hands it to ABDI.

Shot 6: CU - OTS
OTS of flyer in ABDI's Hands. Hold on this for a moment, he hands it back to JAMAL.

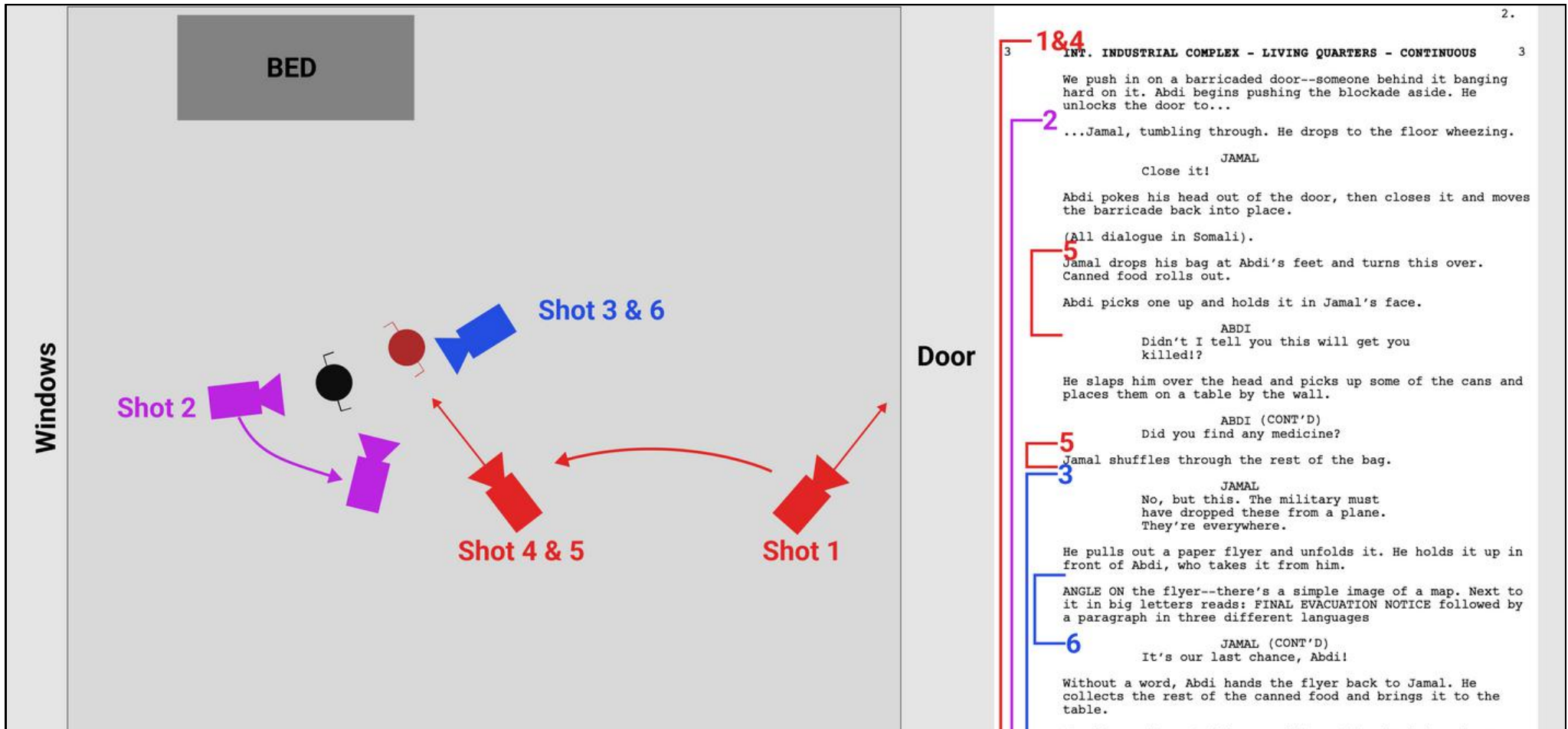*Above: The master shot list comprises the script (left), the shot list and shot descriptions (middle), and the storyboards (right). This system provides a very clear overview of each scene so the crew is able to understand clearly what we are filming in relation to the script.*

Above: Director of photography Aaron Huber and assistant director Dave Wilson discussing shot maps. Below: A visual of the shot maps. Each color represents a turn-around (when the camera changes angles for coverage requiring all the lights to be re-positioned).

2.

1&4

3   INT. INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX - LIVING QUARTERS - CONTINUOUS   3

We push in on a barricaded door--someone behind it banging
hard on it. Abdi begins pushing the blockade aside. He
unlocks the door to...

2 ...Jamal, tumbling through. He drops to the floor wheezing.

                    JAMAL
                Close it!

Abdi pokes his head out of the door, then closes it and moves
the barricade back into place.

(All dialogue in Somali).

5
Jamal drops his bag at Abdi's feet and turns this over.
Canned food rolls out.

Abdi picks one up and holds it in Jamal's face.

                    ABDI
                Didn't I tell you this will get you
                killed!?

He slaps him over the head and picks up some of the cans and
places them on a table by the wall.

                    ABDI (CONT'D)
                Did you find any medicine?

5
Jamal shuffles through the rest of the bag.

3
                    JAMAL
                No, but this. The military must
                have dropped these from a plane.
                They're everywhere.

He pulls out a paper flyer and unfolds it. He holds it up in
front of Abdi, who takes it from him.

ANGLE ON the flyer--there's a simple image of a map. Next to
it in big letters reads: FINAL EVACUATION NOTICE followed by
a paragraph in three different languages

6
                    JAMAL (CONT'D)
                It's our last chance, Abdi!

Without a word, Abdi hands the flyer back to Jamal. He
collects the rest of the canned food and brings it to the
table.

Above: On the left is the 3D model of the set. The camera is placed to create a frame (right). Below is the actual shot we captured.

Another example: the left is the 3D model of the set. The camera is placed to create a frame (right). Below is the actual shot we captured.

After finalizing our selected locations, our focus shifted to capturing high-resolution images. These images served a dual purpose: aiding in storyboarding and facilitating the production design phase. Allowing our design team sufficient time to gather the necessary props and set items was of utmost importance to us. To facilitate this, Aaron utilized these location images as a foundation, meticulously constructing optimal set layouts within a 3D environment.

Once a consensus was reached on our set mockups, we entrusted our production design team with the task of fabricating set pieces and procuring props. This collaborative effort was pivotal in seamlessly transitioning our chosen locations into vibrant, real-life sets.

Top Right: A birds-eye-view of the rooftop set using the Set-A-Light software. Below: A layout of the urban battle scene using available assets.

PRODUCTION DESIGN

Production design plays a pivotal role in the filmmaking process, serving as the visual and conceptual foundation upon which a cinematic world is built. It encompasses the arrangement of sets, props, costumes, and overall aesthetics, working in harmony to transport audiences into the story's universe.

After several meetings with our production designers, Vanessa Miles and Jeff Sherman, it became evident that creating a believable dystopian world would be crucial. These sessions involved examining alternate films with analogous subject matter, analyzing their color schemes, and delving into the subtle nuances that might elude audiences' immediate perception, yet contribute to the narrative's overall unity. Our discussions included water collection and filtration systems, where power and electricity comes from, and how the natural world has reacted to a changing climate. All of these conversations then translated into set designs, props, wardrobe, and visual effects mockups that adhered to a color palette, giving the film a cohesive "look."

Above: Director Markus Hoeckner and production designer Vanessa Miles review set plans. Left: art director Jeff Sherman rigs a practical light.

PRODUCTION DESIGN: PICTURE VEHICLES

Picture vehicles (vehicles you see in a film versus those used behind the scenes) serve as essential visual elements that contribute to the authenticity and realism of a production. I was determined to capture as much in-camera as I could, even though our budget was tight. By pure coincidence, while running an errand in South Minneapolis, I came across a parking lot filled with classic Land Rover Defenders. These vehicles are often used by the United Nations in developing countries, which was exactly what we needed. Seizing the opportunity, I made a U-turn and approached the door of what would later be revealed as Bishop + Rook, a company specializing in custom Land Rover restoration. It turned out that the owner, who used to work in marketing, had lent his car out to other independent film crews and was happy to donate a few of his cars for the shoot. This was a huge win for us.

However, the greatest hurdle proved to be sourcing military vehicles. Despite exploring numerous routes and seeking guidance from a local picture vehicle expert, every avenue I pursued presented logistical obstacles and big price tags. It was only in the eleventh hour, just weeks before filming commenced, that I discovered a hidden gem an hour south of the Twin Cities called "Drive A Tank." This place allows individuals to drive tanks through wooded terrain and obliterate scrapyard vehicles.

A phone call connected me with the owner, and within a day, I managed to secure a portion of his land for filming, along with an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC), an infantry truck, and a humvee, all at an incredibly reasonable cost. This single conversation not only resolved the issue of acquiring military vehicles, but also neatly circumvented the need for pricey permits by offering us a private setting.

Above: An armored personnel carrier. Below: a military hummer. Both vehicles provided courtesy of Drive A Tank.

PRODUCTION DESIGN: MILITARY PERSONNEL

For our production, we required both military personnel and suitable attire, as well as the separatist factions. Embracing the ethos of "using what's in your backyard," I tapped into the local airsoft community, a realm I am well-acquainted with. Airsofting, a long-standing hobby of mine, entails donning military attire and protective gear while engaging in simulated combat using airsoft guns (also known as BB guns) in various game formats like capture the flag or defend the fort.

I put out a casting notice within the Twin Cities Airsoft Facebook group and the response was truly overwhelming. Among the passionate individuals who came forward, a military veteran named Rich Cuddihy emerged as a key figure, playing a pivotal role in orchestrating a dedicated team. Rich also assumed the role of military advisor and armorer, ensuring that scenes were depicted realistically and safely in accordance with SAG-AFTRA guidelines.

III. PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY

PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Principal photography took place over the course of four, 12-hour days during the last week of August 2022. This is where all of our meticulous preparation, and planning comes into play. In this section, we break down filming with behind-the-scenes images and captions.

Below: Scene index cards with shot descriptions and details.
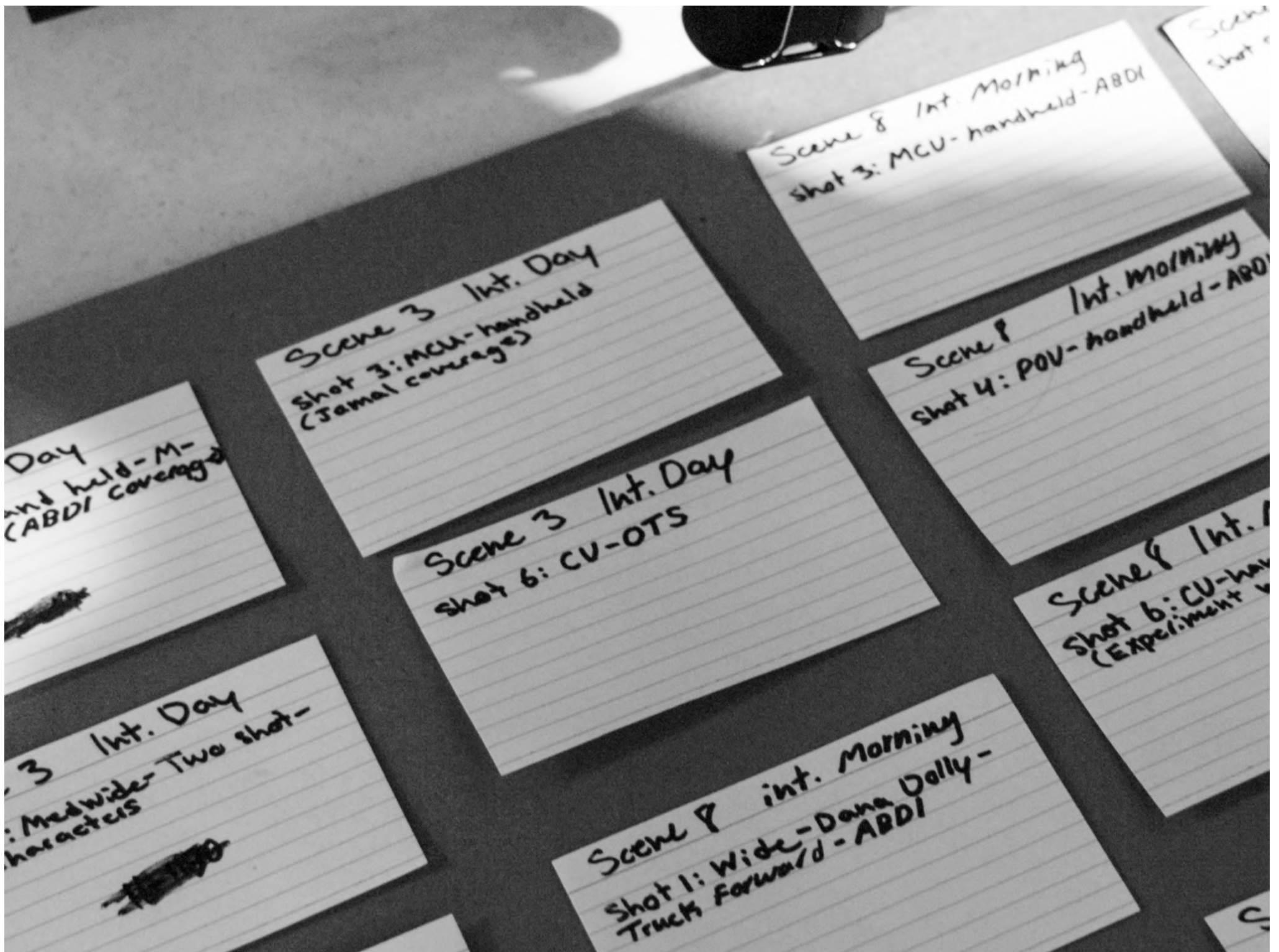
Above: Director Markus Hoeckner rehearses blocking with actors Mahamed Salad and Barkhad Abdirahman. Left: Assistant director, Dave Wilson and Markus discuss the shot order of a scene. Below: Director of photography Aaron Huber and Markus frame a dolly shot.

Above: Our gaffer sets up the lighting for an early morning scene in our main interior set. Below is the resulting shot we captured.

Above: Producer Mario Howard prepares a call sheet in the production office. Below: Mario reviews safety procedures for an action scene.

Above: Director of Photography Aaron Huber discusses the composition of a shot with director Markus Hoeckner and the first assistant director, Dave Wilson. Left: Aaron Huber reviews camera settings before rolling.

Above: The team waits for the signal from our first assistant director for the take to begin.

Above: Actors Mahamed Salad and Vienna Howard fist-bump after a great take. Left: The first assistant camera pulls focus using a wireless device that controls the focus ring on the lens of the camera.

Shot Type:
Medium tracking shot

Shot Type:
Reverse close up shot

Shot Type:
Wide POV shot

Above: Director of Photography Aaron Huber and gaffer Colton Fossen set up for a shot using a Dana dolly system.

Left: Our lighting and grip team sets up for a shot using lights shining through diffusion to soften the light hitting the subjects in the shot. Film crews use artificial lighting outdoors alongside natural light to ensure consistent, controlled illumination. While natural light is beautiful and cost-effective, it's unpredictable due to weather and time changes. Artificial lighting tools help maintain lighting consistency, create desired artistic effects, control shadows, and maintain visual cohesiveness, even in dynamic outdoor settings. This flexibility also allows shooting at night or in challenging weather, enhancing creative options and meeting production schedules.

Above: Second camera assistant David Gamligo prepares the clapperboard for a shot. Below: Script supervisor Amanda Yates (left) logs shot details and camera-take notes.

Above: Hair and make-up artist, Rachel Moen adds practical blood to actor Vienna Howard's wound using a squirt gun.

Above: Mahamed Salad shows off his gun shot wound. Trauma makeup entails creating a bruise, wound or other type of injury on the skin. The skills needed for trauma makeup range from careful application of color, for example in creating a bruise, to using gelatin or liquid latex to make protrusions or prosthetics.

Left: One of our hair-and-makeup artists Summer Rose, preparing bloody shirts.

Above: Markus Hoeckner runs through the blocking with the military personnel for a complex battle scene. Right: Production assistant Tyler Bantley (left) helps plan out a shot requiring multiple takes.

IV. POST PRODUCTION

POST PRODUCTION

Post-production encompasses a multitude of tasks, such as assembling footage, editing, composing music, adding visual effects, fine-tuning color and grade, crafting sound design, mixing audio, and achieving the final master. Despite its demanding nature, post-production holds a special place in my heart as my favorite aspect of the filmmaking process. It's during this phase that you witness the fusion of all the creative ideas and elements, culminating in the realization of your cinematic vision.

We were fortunate to have experienced partners that provided top-tier post-production services, including our visual effects & color team at Splice, our sound design & mixing team at Underscore Audio, and our music composer, Daniel Dehaan.

Together, we were able to accomplish a level of production value rarely seen in short films. Outlined below are the key steps comprising the post-production pipeline:

- Project assembly of footage
- Editing
- Picture lock
- Music Composition
- Visual effects,
- Color
- Sound mixing.
- Mastering and preparation for film festival submissions.

VISUAL EFFECTS

CGI (computer-generated imagery) serves as a valuable tool for expanding a set and incorporating elements that might prove challenging to film directly. Nonetheless, I strongly believe that visual effects should be used sparingly to enhance shots or existing components, especially given our increasingly adept ability to discern between what's real and what was added.

The project's most time-intensive stage involved perfecting the visual effects, a process that extended over 8 months. With a year between film festival cycles, our visual effects team integrated *Blight* into their workflow alongside other client projects. This approach afforded them the necessary time to craft effects that seamlessly blended into each shot.

Above: The shot before visual effects. Below: The shot after visual effects.

Above: Jets, smoke plumes, and a break in the bridge was added. Below: a muzzle flash, the chamber slide opening, and bullet casings ejecting are added using visual effects.

COLOR CORRECTION & GRADING

Color grading in film is the process of enhancing, adjusting, and harmonizing the colors and tones to achieve a desired visual atmosphere and narrative effect. Through the manipulation of hues, contrast, saturation, and brightness, color grading can transform a raw, flat image into a captivating and emotionally resonant visual composition. This process serves a pivotal role in storytelling, as it enables filmmakers to convey emotions, set moods, establish time periods, and guide the audience's perception. For color, we partnered with Splice (who also did our visual effects). Over the course of two weeks, we experimented with several looks.

After settling on a final look, we began the primary color pass and finalized images with shaping techniques, such as vignettes, to draw the viewer towards certain elements of a frame. The visual style of Alfonso Cuarón's dystopian masterpiece "Children of Men" from 2006 greatly inspired me. Aaron and I collaborated with our colorist to explore a comparable aesthetic for our project. Reflecting the story's world, we found it essential to reduce the vibrancy of greens in foliage and grass, while embracing the natural earthy tones of browns and beiges that defined the production design. The outcome captures the essence of a scorching, fading landscape, intensifying our protagonist's yearning to depart from Earth.

ORIGINAL MUSIC

From the very start of the script-writing process, I recognized the importance of a powerful score for *Blight*. It needed to elevate action sequences, evoke the passage of time in montages, and enhance the emotional impact of the narrative.

To achieve this, I collaborated with Daniel Dehaan, a music composer and educator. Daniel's expertise extends to teaching music composition at Columbia College's renowned MFA film scoring program, which holds the #1 spot among the top 20 music schools for film and TV composition.

In our initial discussions, we aimed to create a score that would feel off-worldly and instill a palpable sense of impending doom. This required us to venture into uncharted sonic territory, avoiding conventional or easily recognizable instrumentation.

Daniel's boundless creativity and innovative ideas ultimately gave birth to a score that was equal parts heart-pounding and heart-wrenching. It played a pivotal role in shaping the narrative of *Blight*.

SOUND DESIGN

For our sound design, we worked with Connor McLevish at underscore audio. A film's sound design encompasses a meticulously crafted auditory landscape that includes elements like dialogue, ambient noise, music, and special effects. It involves the careful selection, placement, and manipulation of these components to enhance storytelling, mood, and immersion. Connor worked to ensure clear and effective dialogue delivery, realistic atmospheres, and balanced the music with the various audio tracks. Additionally, he incorporated sound effects to bring life to the on-screen actions and events, ultimately shaping the sensory experience and contributing significantly to the overall impact of the film.

Right: Markus and Mahamed capturing ADR of breaths, grunts, and coughs. Below: Sound designer and mixer Connor McLevish sits in a session with Aaron and Markus.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I hope that these images, descriptions, and anecdotes have demonstrated the multifaceted and, albeit often painstaking, creative and gratifying journey of filmmaking. One of the aspects I cherish most about this art form is its ability to encompass a vast array of disciplines, including design, photography, music, sound, history, construction, logistics, business, and more.

Nonetheless, what truly fuels my passion for filmmaking is the unending opportunity it provides to delve into fresh subject matters, diligently research them, and weave tales through relatable and deeply moving characters.

The privilege of narrating stories using the language of cinema remains a privilege and I am committed to pushing the boundaries of what can be achieved.

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Written by Markus Hoeckner
and Aaron Huber

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