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Mom's Money: A Dark Comedy

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THE MAKING OF *MOM'S MONEY*

By

BUDDY ALEXANDER KETELLE, Bachelor of Fine Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree Of

Masters of Fine Arts

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will recount the making of the feature film Mom's Money which I produced, edited, wrote and directed. My influences on the story and visual style of the film will be discussed as well as my prior work and the way those combined forces drew me to make this film. Breaking this into the three stages of filmmaking- Production, Pre-Production and Post Production- I will explore the film from its conception to its completion. The collaborative nature of filmmaking and the way the particular collaborators I had on this film gave me an advantage (while still providing an occasional challenge) over past features in the cinematography program. The two parallel threads of the themes I explore in this film and the collaborative process of making the film will provide the narrative spine of this thesis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must first thank William Arscott, my professor and filmmaking mentor for giving me the opportunity to make this film and giving me guidance as a filmmaker over the years. It is because he founded the cinematography program at Stephen F. Austin that countless other filmmakers and I have been able to learn the craft of filmmaking and make our first films. Without his contributions and oversight, this would have been impossible.

I must acknowledge my cast of actors- Logan Ward, Madison Laird, Tim Hogle, J.R. Brown, Jody Ryan, Kevin Kinkade, Patrick Lesarbeau, Charles Viney Jr., Bill Small, and Jonathan Clos. Thank you all for giving me your time and putting in such hard work to make even the smallest roles memorable. You are the glue that keeps this movie together.

I must also recognize the contributions of the cinematography students- both graduate and undergraduate- as crew members for the five long weeks of filming and the long months of post-production. I could not have asked for a more enthusiastic crew and the end product is the result of all our hard work. I also have to thank Peyton Paulette for his work as a director of photography as well as teaching the summer feature class and being a sort of co-conductor to this whole orchestra.

Lastly, I must thank two undergraduate students whose contributions to this production are so significant that they are credited as co-producers: Lauren Griffith, my assistant director, and Katherine Daniel, my script supervisor and co-editor. You both went far above the requirements of your on-set jobs, putting in hundreds of extra man-hours and stepping up to perform jobs not required of you. You simply did what had to be done. It is impossible to imagine the final product without your help from beginning to end. I am forever in your debt.

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PRE-PRODUCTION

What is *Mom's Money*?

Mom's Money is a dark comedy about two estranged siblings, Chuck and Lily Lancaster, who are brought closer as adults when they decide to plot the murder of their antagonistic mother. The humor is derived from how out of their depth the two siblings are in this situation and the unforeseen domino effect of their actions that manifests in a sequence of madcap violence and a large body count.

The death of Chuck and Lily's father John Lancaster and their subsequent childhood under the supervision of their emotionally tyrannical mother Pearl sent the two on starkly different paths. Pearl pressured Lily to go to college and succeed whereas Chuck was neglected and stumbled his way to adulthood. All the while, Pearl took the considerable money left from their father's death and put it into a trust that the children could not get until her own death and refused to give the children any financial help after they reach adulthood. In the present day, the siblings are estranged from one another and miserable in very different ways.

Chuck has no legal employment, works as a drug dealer, and owes a large gambling debt that he has no hopes of repaying. He is utterly depressed and finds himself frequently antagonized by Dwayne, his bookie's henchman.

Lily, on the other hand, seemingly has everything she could want. She has a wealthy husband, Austin, who adores her, and she is free to focus on her passion for painting. However, she finds her husband's affection overbearing and feels trapped because of a prenuptial agreement that makes it financially impossible for her to leave the marriage.

Pearl in her old age is now weak and feeble but still incredibly spiteful to her children. They each visit her asking for financial help and she pointedly rejects them. Indeed, any spare affection she has seems to be taken up by Hank, her boyfriend and caretaker, and her taxidermied cat, Dennis, who sits on her bedside.

The siblings' financial woes dovetail, leading them to plot their mother's murder in hopes of gaining their inheritance. They succeed by hiring a hitman who kills their mother. Quickly we see that this does not solve their problems. Lily cannot bring herself to confront Austin to break off the marriage. When she finally does confront him the resulting argument ends in Austin's accidental death. Chuck pays off his gambling debt but almost immediately bets even more money on a risky fight, losing all of his inheritance. Meanwhile, Pearl's boyfriend Hank becomes suspicious of the circumstances behind her death, even going to the police with his concerns. This worries Lily who hires a hitman to kill Hank. All of this leads to a collision of every significant character in Chuck's apartment which ends in the bloodshed entire cast. In the end, only Chuck and Lily are left alive with an uncertain future in front of them and only each other to count on.

Writing *Mom's Money*

I grew up in a very sheltered conservative home where I was raised by my grandparents. As a result, I had limited exposure to a lot of pop culture from the mid to late 1990s and I didn't have much access to a lot of the films considered classic from the 80s and earlier. Two key events in the year 2003 opened the world to me. On my thirteenth birthday, my parents bought me a bicycle and then that summer they bought me a television for my bedroom. Add to this my discovery that the staff at the library within riding distance of my house did not care if a thirteen-year-old kid checked out R-rated movies; this was the beginning of my love for cinema. On a weekly basis, I would check out as many VHS tapes or DVDs as I could and smuggle them into my bedroom to watch. It was then that I discovered my love for the films of Joel and Ethan Coen. The Coen Brothers have made and continue to make films that explore the dark side of human nature through the lens of comedy. The most quintessential film in their filmography and one of the biggest influence on my film might be their 1996 masterpiece *Fargo* (Fig. 1).

Fargo tells the story of a normal, seemingly harmless man who pays to have his wife kidnapped in order to ransom her for money from his wealthy father-in-law. Naturally, the man finds himself over his head as his plan goes awry and he finds himself sucked into a world with violent criminals that he can't control.

Unsurprisingly, a pile of bodies is left in the wake of his scheme but what is surprising is how funny the whole film is. The Coens love laughing at the idiocy of

their characters and seeing their well-laid plans go up in smoke. There is a direct line from this type of story to *Mom's Money*.

Throughout my career as an undergraduate film student and into my works as a graduate student, I made short films finding the dark humor in grim matters such as death, marital discord, and even postpartum depression. I always wanted to make something that involved normal people committing crimes but found it to be too much for the runtime of a short film. Often times these sort of films thrive on large, colorful ensembles and the colorful characters therein colliding with each other after a long build-up. In a short film, simple concepts executed well is the name of the game and that mission statement is greatly at odds with a large cast. When I entered the graduate cinematography program at Stephen F. Austin State University and was faced with the requirement to make a feature film I knew I finally had a big enough canvas to tell my spin on this sort of story.

There are a few things that led me from the nugget of wanting to tell a story about seemingly normal characters crossing moral boundaries for financial gain to specifically writing *Mom's Money*. I knew that my take on this sort of story had to be grounded in things I know and understand. Right off the bat, I knew it would behoove me to have characters in my age range. Try as I might, it is very difficult for somebody my age to tackle the struggles of a character in say their forties. So I set the rule for myself that my lead or leads had to be around their late twenties or early thirties like me.

For me, the films that have the most impact tend to have a relationship or a dichotomy of some sort at its center. Whether that is a protagonist and antagonist such as *Fargo* or *Silence of the Lambs* or the relationship between a father and son in *The Godfather* or a romantic relationship as in *When Harry Met Sally* (Fig. 2-4). These films each center around two characters that the movie holds up to each other as mirror images and every other character serves to complicate or unveil truths about that central relationship. Even though I grew up as an only child, I instinctively wanted to tell a story about a brother and sister. Having a male lead and a female lead appealed to me as a way to further contrast the characters. As such, the idea of a sibling relationship sang to me. It felt much more interesting to explore and more challenging to present as the central relationship in a film to me. I also made the decision to have the antagonistic parent be a mother rather than a father because it felt a little less played out to me.

There is a direct line from the everyman-turned-criminal characters in The Coens' films to the character of Lily. Jerry Lundegaard in *Fargo* and Linda Litzke in *Burn After Reading* are two great examples of characters in the Coens' oeuvre with nice exteriors who feel entitled to more than they have and cause significant collateral damage because of that entitlement (Fig. 5-6). Lily is cut from the same cloth and in many ways is the film's true antagonist. What I wanted though was a lack of self-awareness in the character. Her whole worldview is built around wanting to be left alone to work on her art but she fails to see the selfishness in

that. The simple truth revealed over the course of the movie is that very little separates Lily from her mother. Both women lack empathy and have worked their way into positions where a loving, oblivious man waits on them hand and foot. Lily's great flaws that cause so much destruction are that she doesn't know what to do with somebody if she can't use them to her own ends and that she has great difficulty solving her problems directly. This arises repeatedly and her attempts to get other people to solve her problems always end with other people dying. She completely lacks compassion towards their mother's boyfriend Hank after the siblings receive their inheritance and Hank is simply left their mother's taxidermied cat, Dennis. This drives Hank to become suspicious of the siblings and Lily's resultant decision to have him killed lays the groundwork for the deaths of four other people who would have otherwise not died. Indeed, Lily only has one real redeeming quality: her love and affection for her brother Chuck.

Chuck, as a foil to Lily, is on the surface a shady criminal who surprisingly has a conscience. Chuck is far from being a saint but it is Lily, not him, that floats the idea of a murder plot and it is only after Pearl subjects him to verbal and physical abuse that he agrees to the plan. Chuck sits on the edge of the criminal world by being a drug dealer, but it is not until Lily re-enters his life with this plan that he uses those connections to directly bring harm to another human. Whereas Lily manipulates and climbs her way through life Chuck is directionless and just lets things happen to him. When Chuck does act his decisions tend to be poorly thought out and dig him further into the hole that he is in. Not taking

responsibility or making an effort to course correct, Chuck wallows in his misery. In the way that the story sort of happens to Chuck and his world is turned upside down, Chuck slowly overtakes the everyman status from Lily as he becomes more relatable to the audience (Fig. 7).

In the end, the characters' arcs conclude in ways that offer them a tiny shred of redemption for their character flaws. Confronted with the possibility of Hank killing him Chuck stops feeling sorry for himself, saying that he deserves to die for his part in things. This prompts Lily to kill Hank in defense of her brother, finally confronting a problem directly and caring for another person.

To construct the story that houses these character arcs my biggest influence was actually a television show, not a film. Vince Gilligan's television series, *Breaking Bad* maps the transformation of Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher, into a meth kingpin- again touching on this idea of a normal person becoming a criminal. What I latched onto from *Breaking Bad* though isn't that central character but the way that Gilligan tells his story. Every decision his protagonist makes has a clear ripple effect and seemingly minor decisions come back to haunt him in surprising and violent ways. Gilligan says in a 2017 *Huffington Post* interview: "I like that feeling... [that] every action has a consequence. I think I respond to that. I think that feels right to me — that every bad thing Walt does comes back on him, that it has a consequence ... Maybe on some level what I'm intending is to explore a world where actions do have consequences. They do in our real life, we know that."

Perhaps this is never portrayed more bluntly than in the second season when Walter's actions indirectly lead to the midair collision between two passenger planes. (Fig. 8) On first viewing this turn of events feels like a break from reality but as the series continues this event feels more and more like a mission statement for the series as a whole: every action has a consequence even if it might not be obvious at the time. To reflect this storytelling method my film features disparate supporting characters that seem loosely connected to the action that are sucked into the climax through the ripple effect of Chuck and Lily's actions.

Planning the Movie

After completing the script, the collaborative part of the process really began. My next goal was to find the money to make this movie. Luckily, as a graduate student doing my film through Stephen F. Austin's Cinematography program, my biggest collaborator, I was already saving a bundle. Three of the most significant expenditures for film production are crew, equipment rental, and food. All three of these were covered by the school. The crew was provided in the form of undergraduate and graduate students working on the film as a class for college credit. The school provided equipment and paid for the catering that was the crew's lunch every day. Furthermore, in a small town like Nacogdoches most businesses will let film productions use their location for free, whereas in a major city it can cost thousands of dollars to shoot even just one

day at a business. This saved me thousands upon thousands of dollars. As such, I could put my focus on raising money for two other key areas that I would argue are two of the most important: art direction (props, set decoration, make-up, costuming) and casting. These are the two biggest elements that are on the screen at all times and really go a long way towards giving verisimilitude to the final product.

After a lot of research, I decided to raise money by running a Kickstarter campaign. (Fig. 9) Kickstarter allows creators to present their concepts to a wide audience and offer them rewards in exchange for donating money to their project. After looking at the Kickstarter campaigns of other filmmakers I made the decision to make my funding goal five thousand dollars. There was not a more stressful time in pre-production. I had to essentially contact everyone I know - some people that I hadn't spoken to in years! - and ask for money. Around this time I also began working with my assistant director, Lauren Griffith, to schedule the production and find locations. As a Nacogdoches local, Lauren had ideas for every shooting location and knew a lot of local people that were excited to help out with the film. Through her family connections, she was able to raise over three thousand dollars beyond the five thousand raised by the Kickstarter campaign. I was also lucky to have my friend Katherine Daniel, an undergraduate film student, offer to help me with running the Kickstarter campaign and promoting it on social media. (Fig. 10) At the end of fundraising, *Mom's Money*

had around eighty-five hundred dollars at its disposal and I could not have achieved that alone.

I knew right away that the most significant portion of our budget would go towards casting the key roles in the film. The believability of the performances often makes or breaks a feature and I knew I needed actors that were dedicated to their craft to pull off this film. Two movies with exceptional casts that I've always been drawn to are *Inglourious Basterds* and *True Romance*. (Fig. 11) Both these films are populated with great performances even in the smallest roles. Across these two films we see legendary actors like Christopher Walken, Dennis Hopper, Gary Oldman, Michael Fassbender, Diane Kruger and others play small roles, sometimes only for a scene or two. On paper, this looks like a curious mistake however I think it is an excellent strategy. These characters may be only in two or three scenes but the actors cast in these roles lend a sense of gravitas and life these characters live outside of the story. As such, audiences are left wanting to see more of these supporting characters and they remember them.

Obviously, I don't have access to the top actors in Hollywood but I could adapt this approach to my film, small though its budget may be. There is a very small pool of talented actors here in Nacogdoches, that would only take me so far, so I posted casting calls reaching out to actors in Houston, San Antonio, and Austin. Much to my surprise, within a day I had hundreds of email requests to audition show up in my inbox. While I did use Nacogdoches area talent for some

major roles (Chuck, Hank, and Pearl are all played by local actors) my budget afforded me the opportunity to hire the rest of the cast from out of town (Fig. 12). As such, Lily and the supporting characters in my film were played by trained actors who brought gravitas to their parts no matter how big or small.

With the cast taken care of, the rest of my budget went towards art direction. I had a department of five students who were designated to work in my film's art direction department. This was a terrific resource but the simple truth is that this was my project and undergraduate students - most of whom lived in dorms - could only put so much time into pre-production, especially when all of them had to return to their families during the month between the spring semester and the beginning of production. As such, I had to handle a lot of the gathering of costumes and props on my own. This included a whole day where a friend and I sat down and painted the majority of the paintings that appear in Lily's art studio ourselves and several days of running around purchasing props and costumes. Luckily my art direction department was mostly able to arrive during the week prior to production and organize their materials. With the cast, schedule and art direction in place, it was time for production to begin.

PRODUCTION

Going to the Store

Making a movie is not unlike a trip to the grocery store. Pre-production is looking at your money and making your ideal grocery list. Post-production is taking what you have and making a meal. Production? That's the hard part. Production is going to the store and getting what you need. Except you're going to the grocery store with five kids and trusting them to grab the right ingredients.

During production in the summer of 2018, I had over thirty crew members and around thirty cast members of varying importance that I was collaborating with during four weeks of production. I had been a part of crews of this size and larger on other major productions but this was my first time directing a crew this large. Prior to this, I had only directed short films with crews of fewer than ten people that took, at most, three days to film. With a production that small the director is able to, and to a certain extent has to, be heavily involved in all areas. With a production as massive as a feature film, the director is mostly concerned with the actors and their performances. There are so many moving parts that it is impossible to micromanage. On top of all that, about half of my crew had never worked on a feature production before, so I had no idea what to expect from them. A further challenge was that the majority of the cast was actors I had never worked with before. I was trusting my movie with individuals of whose abilities I was completely unsure. (Fig. 13)

Relinquishing Control

During production, my most important collaborator was Peyton Paulette, my director of photography. Having Peyton in this position gave me a considerable advantage compared to some of the past SFA feature films. In the summers of 2014-2017, the director of photography had been an industry professional from outside the cinematography department. This meant that the directors of those features were often trusting the visual element of their film to somebody they had not met and could not meet with frequently during pre-production. I'm fortunate because Peyton is somebody I already knew in his capacity as an adjunct professor, and I had already worked with him on multiple short films. This meant I was working with somebody who I knew I worked well with and who, as a Nacogdoches local, was available to discuss the visual elements of the film well before production. Having worked together before, it was easy for us to get on the same page about what was important to get across in the visuals of the film: the relationship between the two main characters.

To keep this in focus we took inspiration from the romantic comedy *When Harry Met Sally*. My film isn't a romantic comedy but there is an arc that the central relationship goes through over the course of the film. In *When Harry Met Sally* the love story between the two leads is often told through how close they are in the frame to each other, and during periods of strife there are often objects or people in between them. Similarly, the first time we see the siblings in *Mom's Money* their closeness is shown through Lily resting her head on Chuck's

shoulder. Over the course of the film, they come closer together or grow apart because of various events and each time this is shown through their placement in the frame (Fig. 14a and 14b). In the final shot, after everyone else is dead, Lily again rests her head on Chuck's shoulder. Having made the decision to visually portray the central story in this way I knew Peyton understood the material and that it was in good hands.

The other great benefit of having Peyton Paulette involved is that in his capacity as a professor he had already encountered every undergraduate student working on the crew. As such, Peyton was able to help me with leading the crew and back me up in key situations. It is because of this collaboration that I was able to relinquish some of my control over the film's visual style and focus more on the performances of my actors.

Bringing Characters to Life

For an independent film, *Mom's Money* has a large cast of nearly thirty speaking roles. Of those thirty, around ten belonged to actors who were on set for multiple days. That meant ten very different personalities that I had to contend with on a regular basis during production. Largely, I could not have asked for a more cooperative cast. Everybody brought their best effort to the table and approached their characters in an intelligent way. That doesn't mean it was all smooth sailing.

I faced my greatest directing challenge in the form of my lead actress, Madison Laird who played Lily. We both wanted the film to be good but our

personalities and approaches often clashed. I am a director that does not like to do a lot of takes of each scene. I try to make sure the actors know what they're doing in rehearsal and then usually only make slight suggestions after each take. Some actors enjoy this approach but Madison is an actor who likes a lot of direction. She is used to directors that do many takes of the same scenes and micromanage her performance. Madison was also far more concerned with the likability of her character than I was. For me, it was enough for the character to just be interesting and likability was a secondary concern. This caused some tension between us but I think that tension caused us to push each other and generated a really strong performance. Looking at the final product, I can see that Madison knew what she was doing and that she was absolutely making the right choices for her performance. This was an invaluable experience for me as a director and taught me lessons about collaborating with personalities different than my own.

POST-PRODUCTION

Finding the Film

Upon the completion of shooting it was time to move into the editing process. Many people think that the script is an accurate indicator for what the final film will look like: this is not always true. While the script provides a framework for the movie to follow there are so many things that can go wrong on the way to the final product and many times that is not seen until the editing stage. The editing process is my favorite but it is the most time consuming and the most tedious. The majority of past summer features only had one editor for most of the process, I was very fortunate that Tyra Greer and Katherine Daniel, two undergraduate students, were both interested in helping me edit *Mom's Money*.

Together, we were able to edit the film very quickly. Shooting wrapped on July 3rd and we began the editing process on July 5th. I decided that I would split the film into sections from and assign those sections between the three of us. By July 12th we had the first cut of the film which clocked in at one hundred and ten minutes. If I had been doing this by myself without collaborators it would have taken me weeks to reach this point. I knew from the outset that I want the film to be about ninety minutes long, an ideal length for a comedy in my mind. This meant we had about twenty minutes that we could trim. (Fig. 15) A big hazard of again on other features where the director was the sole editor. In those cases, the editing process can stretch on six months or more. With two other editors at

my disposal, I was able to avoid this. After the initial cut of the film, Tyra stepped away for three weeks while Katherine and I went through the film removing scenes that weren't working or re-editing scenes. During this period about ten more minutes were trimmed off the film. We ultimately screened this cut of the film for a test audience of locals to get a sense of what was and wasn't working. To my surprise, the audience laughed in all the right places and offered good constructive criticism. Katherine and I then handed the film over to Tyra who had fresh ideas since she'd stepped away from the film.

Over the following weeks, Tyra worked through the movie and we arrived at a cut of the film that was about ninety-five minutes long. In this cut, Tyra fully utilized her creativity, sometimes re-editing whole scenes and helping me find exciting new ways to tell the story. I screened this cut for William Arscott, my film professor, and the other graduate students. I listened to their feedback and spent another few days refining the film. On October 1st, I had a cut of the film that was ninety-one minutes with credits. This would be the final edit of the film before the addition of music, sound effects, and visual effects. Less than three months is a remarkably quick timetable for this and I'm very proud that we were able to achieve this. It would have been absolutely impossible if I was the sole editor of the film.

I had about six months after the final cut of the film to put it in the capable hands of other collaborators. During that time I have collaborated with composers from the music department who created original music for the film and with

students from Peyton Paulette's motion graphics class to devise special effects where necessary. I've been astonished at the talent of these individuals and the way their work has helped me bring about my vision for this film.

I am very proud of the final product. It is by no means a perfect film, but the story I set out to tell when I wrote this script comes across in it. I feel proud of the work that I put into it myself but I am also proud to have worked with so many great collaborators without whom this would have been impossible. Though the film is complete, the journey is not over. It is my goal to send this film to film festivals and to have it available to watch on Amazon Prime by the fall of 2020. I can not wait to send this film out into the world where people can see what Stephen F. Austin's film students are capable of.

IMAGES

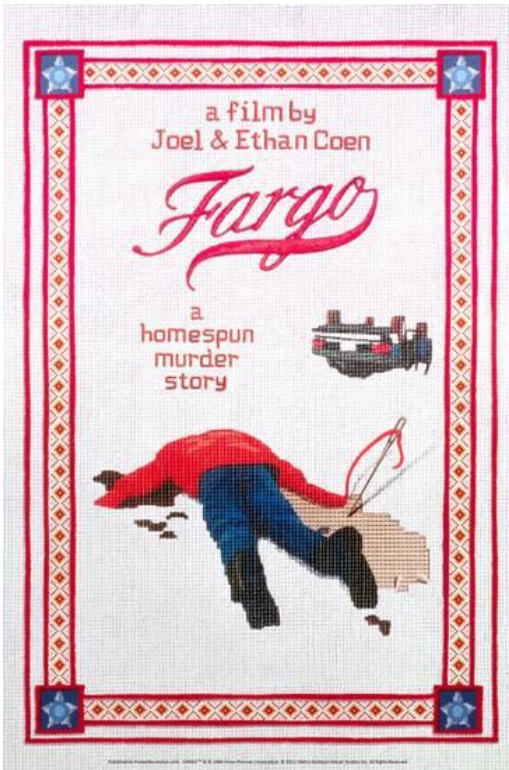


Figure 1. The poster for *Fargo* (1996), a dark comedy directed by Joel and Ethan Coen that was very influential on *Mom's Money*.



Figure 2. *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) focuses on the relationship between a hero (Clarice Starling) and a villain (Hannibal Lecter).

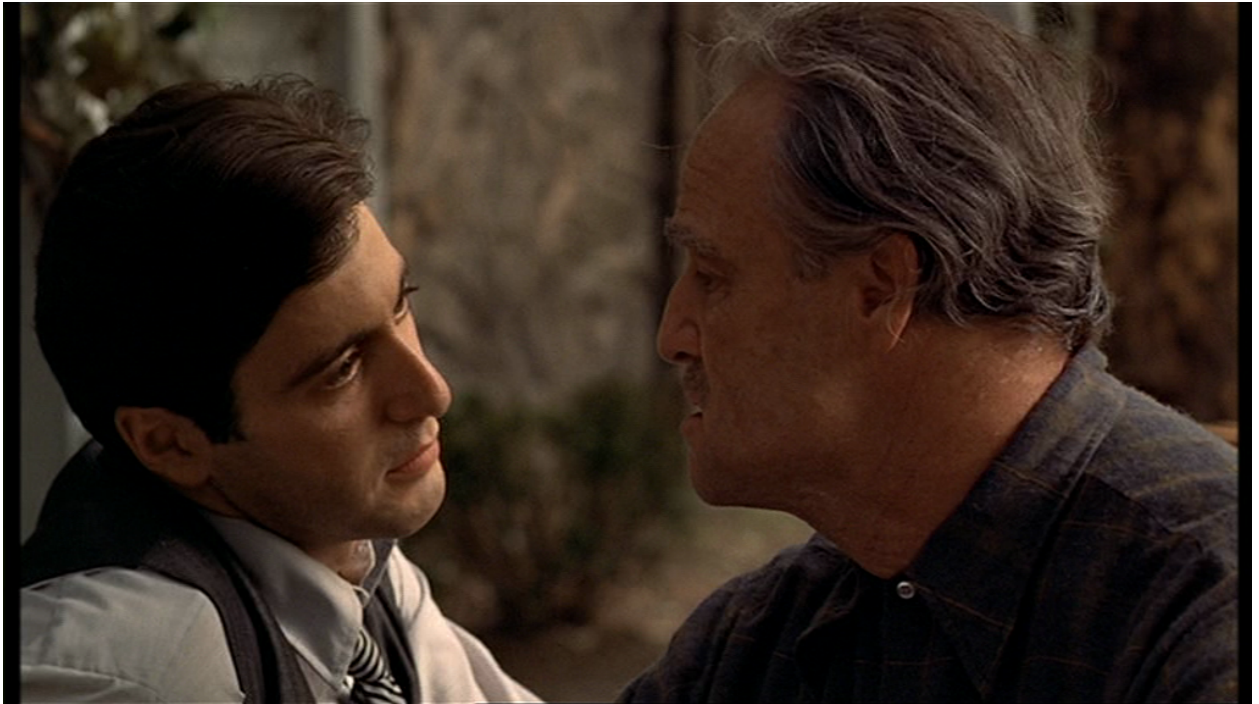


Figure 3. *The Godfather* (1972) focuses on the relationship between Michael Corleone and his father Vito.



Figure 4. *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) focuses on the burgeoning romantic relationship between the two title characters.



Figure 5. Jerry Lundegaard in *Fargo* (1996). A key inspiration for the character of Lily Lancaster in *Mom's Money*.



Figure 6. Linda Litzke in *Burn After Reading* (2008) a key inspiration for the character of Lily Lancaster in *Mom's Money*.



Figure 7. Chuck and Lily, the two protagonists of *Mom's Money*, who over the course of the film are revealed to be very different from the first impression the audience has of them.



Figure 8. Walter White, the protagonist of the TV series *Breaking Bad* (2008 - 2013), witnesses a mid-air collision that is indirectly the result of his actions. This style of storytelling where characters' actions have far-reaching, unforeseen consequences is a major influence on the script for *Mom's Money*.

Mom's Money- A Feature Length Dark Comedy



A dark comedy about two estranged siblings that reconnect over a plan to kill their mom and claim their inheritance. Hilarity ensues.

Created by
Buddy Ketelle

74 backers pledged \$5,231 to help bring this project to life.

Figure 9. The successful Kickstarter campaign to raise money to provide the casting and art direction budget for *Mom's Money*.



Figure 10. An example of the social media posts created to promote the Kickstarter campaign for *Mom's Money*.



Figure 11. The posters for *True Romance* (1993) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). These films both have large colorful casts of characters much like *Mom's Money*.



Figure 12. The poster for *Mom's Money* showcasing the cast made up of both local and professional actors.



Figure 13. Some of the cast and crew of *Mom's Money*.



Figure 14a. Examples of how *When Harry Met Sally* portrays the relationship between its main characters visually through their placement in the frame.

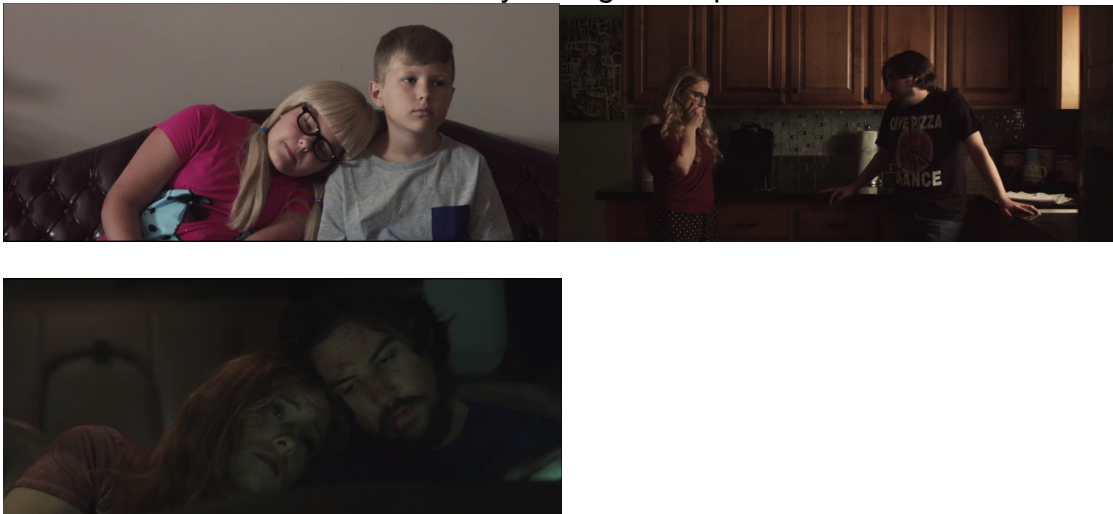


Figure 14b. Examples of how *Mom's Money* uses a similar visual approach to *When Harry Met Sally*.

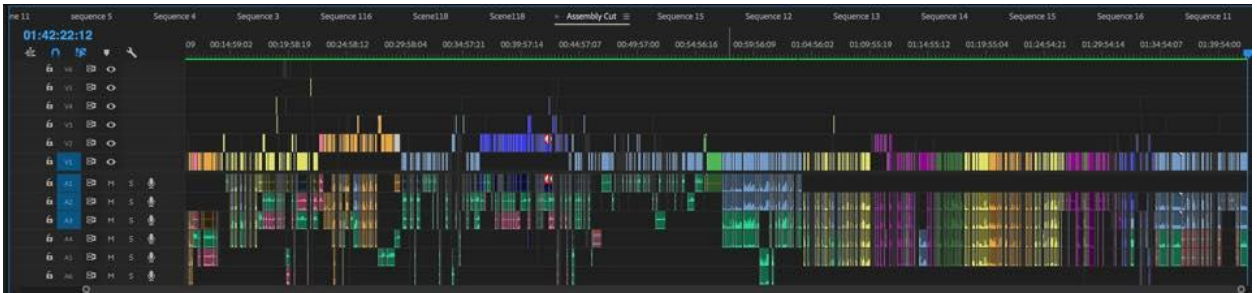


Figure 15. The editing timeline for the original assembly cut of *Mom's Money* (without credits).

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