DIRECTING *EL ABUELO*: CREATING BELIEVABLE AND MEMORABLE PERFORMANCES

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by

Stephen Roy Crutchfield
DEDICATION

Melanie, you are my muse, my friend, and my love.

Your unconditional love and unending support has made this possible.

Thank you for believing in me. You made me believe in myself.

This is dedicated to you.
ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT

Directing El Abuelo: Creating Believable and Memorable Performances
by
Stephen Roy Crutchfield
Master of Arts in Television, Film, and New Media Production
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The narrative short film El Abuelo follows Nick, an autistic twelve-year old boy who seems to have lost the ability to speak. Nick becomes fascinated with an old Mexican man who sells flowers and oranges on the side of the road. Nick’s fascination leads him on a journey to a remote canyon where he finds the old man in a makeshift migrant camp. Over the course of a day and night, a bond is formed between Nick and Abuelo, one that eventually gives Nick something to talk about. A DVD of the film is available for viewing at the Media Center of Love Library.

My foremost goal was to create and capture believable and memorable performances. This paper explains how I set out to accomplish that goal. It presents research on childhood autism and north San Diego County immigrant life. It explains how I drew from neorealist filmmaking practices—a style of filmmaking that is generally used to depict the marginalized of society, and to capture seemingly insignificant moments of a character’s life. In addition, this paper reviews how I shot my film to accommodate the “voyeur’s eye,” and how I created a specific mise-en-scène to support the realism of the story.

Building on my research, I attempted to bring the characters of El Abuelo to life, and fortify the overall verisimilitude of the story.
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CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

The offer to direct *El Abuelo* came to me by surprise. I had just finished a film in my directing class, a screen adaptation of a scene from the play *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*. I was also taking a class on writing for the stage and screen from an adjunct professor who was both a seasoned playwright and a Hollywood veteran screenwriter. Having received valuable feedback from him on a previous film, and knowing that he was familiar with *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea*, I asked for feedback on my film. He offered valuable feedback, and at the end of his response he said, “I am writing a short film that a producer friend of mine wants to make. We should talk about you directing it.” At that point, I had no clue what his film was about, but the opportunity to work with a professional screenwriter and receive financing from a local producer was enough for me to say, “When can we meet?”

I initially chose to do *El Abuelo* because I wanted to work with my adjunct professor. I had learned a lot from him in his writing class, and knew I would learn more if I worked with him on a film. I also wanted to work with the producer, who was creating Drama House Productions, a start-up independent film company based in La Jolla, CA. *El Abuelo* was to be the first of a series of short films designed to help him get his feet wet in the world of film. His plan was to use *El Abuelo* as a calling card with hopes of raising money to produce an award-winning feature screenplay that he co-wrote. He was looking for someone to partner with on *El Abuelo* to show him the ropes of indie filmmaking. I welcomed the opportunity. I
also saw an opportunity for an ongoing partnership—perhaps *El Abuelo* would lead to work on subsequent Drama House Production films.

Most thesis projects are chosen because of a student’s connection to a story, character, or style of filmmaking. I chose *El Abuelo* for the opportunity to collaborate with a professional screenwriter and a start-up producer who was willing to fund the film. Because of the nature of these relationships, I assumed that making *El Abuelo* would be closer to a real world Hollywood experience than what I was used to on my past student films; thus the film would draw me closer to what may soon be the reality of my professional life. I saw *El Abuelo* as an advancement of sorts; a graduation from a student film to a semi-professional film; an “almost” paid gig; a chance to say I worked with a well-known writer and was funded by an indie production company.

One would think that directing a film written by a Hollywood veteran and not having to spend a dime would be nothing but positive. But the truth is, as a director, I had to compromise on certain creative and artistic freedoms; and the film ran the risk of having too many cooks in the creative kitchen. Ah, but isn't that filmmaking? Learning how to negotiate and compromise without sacrificing your creative vision, learning how to assert your ideas without being pushed over (or pushing over others and getting fired!), and learning how to communicate effectively with people who have very different personalities.

While aspects of interpersonal communication between the producer, the writer, and myself were critical to the project, and to my growth as a filmmaker, the film would have benefited no one unless I did my homework as the director. The majority of this paper focuses on that homework. At times throughout the paper, I include relevant information on how my relationships with the producer and the writer influenced my approach to the film.
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The short narrative film *El Abuelo* follows Nick, a high functioning autistic boy, who seems to refuse to talk. He is fascinated with the immigrant workers who gather at the gas station near his home waiting for work. He is especially taken with the old man who sells flowers and oranges on the street corner. On his own, Nick bicycles out to the canyon where many of the immigrant workers live in a squatter’s camp. It is there that he meets the old man, the Abuelo, the grandfather. Over the course of the ensuing day and night, Nick listens, watches, and learns about lives very different from his own. He comes under the quiet spell of the Abuelo, and at the end of his adventure, he finally finds his voice. A DVD of the film is available for viewing at the Media Center of Love Library.

Directing *El Abuelo* required me, as director, to delve deeply into the skin of an autistic boy and a Mexican migrant worker whose realities were far from my own, and bring their stories to life. The problems associated with this task were multiple: I was challenged to portray a child on the autism spectrum without making him a caricature of the disorder. I was also challenged to depict the lives of immigrant workers without politicizing their existence by making them more heroic or villainous than they are. Due to my lack of experience in both the autistic community and the migrant worker culture, I took extra efforts to be as true as possible to their respective realities. Neglecting this directorial responsibility would diminish what I considered a beautiful story, casting it in stereotypic assumptions and inaccuracies.

Extensive research was done to gain a good working knowledge of what a high functioning, yet speechless autistic boy was like. Autism is a disorder with an extremely wide array of symptoms, and it would have been easy to present the most stereotypical manifestation of the disorder. However, because the goal was to create a believable
performance, such an approach would have been detrimental to the success of the project.
Therefore, written and documentary materials were researched, local professionals in the autism community were consulted, and autistic children with characteristics similar to Nick were observed. The information gleaned from these resources was invaluable in the formation of the Nick, as well as in my directing of the actor.

I did extensive research on the lives of the Mexican migrant workers in California. Due to the “hot button” political status of illegal immigration, and the many presuppositions, both for and against migrant laborers, these characters could have easily fallen prey to cheap, one-dimensional representation. My research aided greatly in dispelling clichés and misunderstandings about characters such as Abuelo and the other migrant workers.

In addition to character and topic research, the filmic techniques used in *El Abuelo* would be equally important in creating believable characters and establishing verisimilitude. I drew from techniques used by neorealist filmmakers, who often presented poor and marginalized protagonists in everyday, non-spectacular life, and believed that such stories were told best through natural lighting, on-location settings, and specific camera and directing techniques. I also implemented Jon Boorstin’s theories on the voyeur’s eye. Boorstin describes the voyeur’s eye as “the mind’s eye, not the heart’s, the dispassionate observer, watching out of a kind of generic human curiosity” (13). Boorstin holds that through the specific manipulation of establishing shots, deep focus, and wide angles, as well as close up shots intended to pique curiosity, a filmmaker can beckon the viewer to look closer and ask more questions. And, finally, I attempted to carefully orchestrate a mise-en-scène that weaved all of these elements together to encourage the perception that the viewer was witnessing real events unfold.
STATEMENT OF THE SUBPROBLEMS

Both English and Spanish were used throughout the film. The choice of when to use each language was difficult. I wanted to have enough Spanish dialog to represent a realistic picture of when the migrant workers would use their native language and when they would use the language of their surroundings. Too much Spanish (with English subtitles) could have proved tiring or disorienting to the viewer; but too little would smack of artificiality.

Adding to the language difficulty was the fact that I am not, by any means, fluent in Spanish. Somehow, I needed to ensure that the actors were speaking in a natural way, and that their accents were consistent with the demographic of Mexicans I was representing.

Another crucial element in delivering a realistic film was casting, specifically for the roles of Nick and Abuelo. It was imperative that the actor playing Nick did not over- or under-act. Because Nick was speechless for the majority of the film, the actor also needed to have a great deal of physical, and especially, facial, control in order to convincingly reflect autism purely through his facial expressions and body language. Abuelo needed to speak fluent Spanish and speak English with a convincing and natural Spanish accent. He also needed to be a good storyteller and have a warm, inviting presence on screen.

One major challenge of the film was to create a way for the audience to connect with Nick. I was struck by the quiet nature of the script and its lack of conflict. Conflict aids in turning the audience for or against a character, provoking sympathy, empathy, or disdain. Assuming I could capture believable and memorable performances, I expected viewers from the autistic community to connect with Nick, but I was concerned that viewers from the non-autistic community would neither understand nor relate to Nick. The source of this concern was that there was seemingly no logic behind Nick’s objective. Nick wanted to be with the
migrant workers, specifically, Abuelo. Why? What led him to Abuelo? I believe it does not matter. Nick is autistic, and as such, Nick’s thought processes differ from people who do not have autism. Yet this fundamental difference could make it difficult for the non-autistic related viewers to empathize with Nick. I was concerned that if I pushed the audience to be empathetic with a character they did not understand, their suspension of disbelief would be more easily broken. So while empathy is essential in establishing the audience’s connection to a character, I had to carefully examine the limits of that empathy in Nick’s case. My choice was not to forgo empathy altogether, rather, to strike a believable level of empathy with a character so different from the average viewer.

In regard to the mise-en-scène of the film, the migrant camp and the workers’ appearances presented a great challenge. The migrant camp needed to be completely functional, and all the pieces of the ramshackle structures appropriately “stressed.” Some pieces needed to look as if they had been rained on for many nights or were collected from an old construction site, while others could have been picked up relatively new from a second-hand store. Appropriate set dressing would be critical in creating a convincing world for the viewer to enter into. Additionally, the exterior locations needed to be handpicked from a huge section of San Diego County. Finding the right combinations of locations to construct the world of El Abuelo was very challenging indeed.

**GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

Aristotle said the purpose of art is “to teach and to delight.” That was my goal for El Abuelo. I aimed to teach the audience about the lives and communities of two very different people, not by tackling controversial issues regarding autism and illegal immigrants, but by
staying true to the quiet, subtle nature of the script, and allowing character relationships to be the instructors. Above all, I wanted to teach the audience about the importance and sometimes-unexpected nature of human connectedness as portrayed in Nick and Abuelo’s relationship.

I attempted to “delight” the audience by portraying Nick as a character who should be rooted for. I wanted the audience to be curious observers of Nick (much in the way Nick is curious of Abuelo), asking questions such as: who is this boy? Why is he silently looking out the window? Who is the man next to him in the car? Why is the boy fixated on the old Mexican man? Such questions should establish connections between Nick and the audience. I rarely expected the audience to share in or fully understand Nick’s feelings. Instead, through observing Nick and his interactions with other characters, I hoped that the audience would root for Nick to connect with his family and new friends.

I believed that I could accomplish these goals through the use of cinematic techniques such as the orchestration of near-point-of-view shots, establishing shots, long takes, medium shots, carefully planned compositions, and a convincing mise-en-scène.

**DEFINITION OF TERMS**

**Autism:** A complex neurobehavioral disorder that includes impairments in social interaction, developmental language and communication deficits, and rigid, repetitive behaviors. It ranges in severity from a handicap that limits an otherwise normal life, to a devastating disability that may require institutional care (“Learn the Basics of Autism”).
**Character-Driven:** In reference to film, an approach to storytelling that foregrounds the characters’ internal or psychological realities that are reflected in their choices and actions.

**Figure Behavior:** An element of mise-en-scène that refers to an actor’s control and expression of their body language, as well as their placement in or through a scene.

**Migrant Worker:** A worker who moves from place to place, based on the seasonal availability of work (typically in the farming industry). For the purposes of this project, migrant workers are specifically Mexican individuals who have come to California for work.

**Mise-En-Scène:** When applied to the cinema, mise-en-scène refers to everything that appears before the camera and its arrangement—composition, sets, props, actors, costumes, and lighting (Bordwell and Thompson 495).

**Near Point of View:** A camera angle that puts the viewer near the eyeline of the character, as if s/he were standing next to the character. This subtle difference from a “point of view” angle (which sees through the eyes of a character from the literal perspective of that character) aims to make the audience feel as if they are standing next to a character as an observer, rather than seeing through the eyes of the character.

**Neorealism:** An Italian film movement in the 1940s and 50s that emphasized documentary aspects of film art, stressing loose episodic plots, non-spectacular events and characters, natural lighting, on-location filming, and the use of nonprofessional actors. Neorealist themes focused on poverty and social problems, and emphasized humanistic and democratic ideals. The protagonists often represented the poor and the marginalized. The term “neorealism” has been used to describe films that reflect the techniques and themes used by Italian neorealists (Giannetti 538).
DELIMITATIONS

While there have been many films made about characters with autism including \textit{Rainman}, \textit{Snow Cake}, \textit{Big City Dick}, \textit{Mozart and the Whale}, \textit{The Black Balloon}, and most recently, the award winners \textit{Temple Grandin} and \textit{My Name is Khan}, I limited my film research to two documentary films that have children with autism in leading roles.

This project does not discuss the many causes of autism nor speculate on the varied treatments for autism, although it briefly touches on causes of autism.

I limited my research on illegal immigrants to the demographic I represented in the film—North County San Diego migrant workers and day laborers. This project does not present a commentary on undocumented workers or immigration policies. While there is a clear message on the value of human life and the beauty in each person, this is not an attempt to translate these values into any kind of political policy for or against undocumented immigrants.

I did not intend to teach the audience the ABCs of autism, provide in-depth detail on the socio-political struggles of homeless immigrant workers, or take sides on debates over illegal immigration. While some of my research touched on these topics, and provided a backdrop for the lives of the characters in the film, I did not intend overtly to include them in the film.

This project does not focus on the entire history of neorealism nor does it evaluate every film that is considered to be neorealist. Rather, it focuses on writings and specific films of the neorealist movement that relate directly and specifically to the project.
While all aspects of mise-en-scène were considered, this paper focuses on key characteristics of mise-en-scène that most relate to the film: setting and props, costumes, actor movement, and camera strategy.

**Significance of Project**

This project intends to demonstrate the power of the human connection over class and culture. Nick and Abuelo, in their own ways, are aliens to their surrounding cultures. They come from radically different social backgrounds, yet they find common ground in each other. This short vignette of the human spirit is particularly significant in 2011 in California. Autism has been steadily on the rise in the United States, and those affected are often misunderstood, sometimes even (understandably) by their own families. At the same time, undocumented workers have come under tremendous criticism in recent years and these members of our society are often feared and demonized. There are times when our starkly different backgrounds fade, and our commonalities in the struggle of life come to the fore. With *El Abuelo*, I hoped to capture a small moment of camaraderie amongst strangers. Willingness to be open to such unexpected alliances is key to creating stronger communities and a better future. By thoughtfully portraying these two central characters and giving their relationship time to illustrate this idea, I sought to perpetuate the same spirit of openness and generosity that Abuelo extends to Nick.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE, FILMS, AND GENRES

LITERATURE ON PROJECT TOPIC

*Abuelo* dealt with two very specific and relatively unknown groups: children with autism and migrant workers. To be confident that the images and performances I captured would be believable and feel authentic, I referred to several resources.

**Autism**

Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder that begins in very early childhood and is often marked by abnormal communication, social interaction and movements (Brasic, Windle, and Pataki). Social interaction is most commonly affected and can be noted even in the toddler age. In general, children with autism make less eye contact and have difficulty understanding tone of voice, facial expressions or other body language (Siegel). These differences commonly emerge between the ages of eighteen months and three years.

The term “autism spectrum disorder” (ASD) is now frequently used due to the wide range of symptoms and their severity that have been discovered over the years. The five diagnoses within the autism spectrum are: autistic disorder (including high-functioning autism), Asperger’s Syndrome (AS), Rett’s disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS; Ozonoff, Dawson,
and McPartland 24). In general, Asperger’s Syndrome and high-functioning autism are very similar and often mixed up diagnoses. For Nick’s character, I limited my research primarily to these two categories of autism spectrum disorders as Nick’s characteristics described in the script were more aligned with them.

In the book *A Parent’s Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism*, Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland describe several individuals, all with high-functioning autism, who present very different challenges. Joseph taught himself to read before he was three and could name anywhere in the world from a description of its geographical location by the time he was five (3). Nine-year-old Seth stepped over his injured mother while she gasped for breath after a fall, without noticing her injury (3). Seventeen-year-old Lauren does exceedingly well in school, but still fervently collects Barbie dolls and has trouble responding to and socializing with her peers (4). This paradoxical condition—average or higher than average intelligence but an inability to communicate effectively or connect with others—was exactly the scenario that faced our main character, Nick.

**Causes of Autism**

“Given that no ‘specific’ anomaly has been demonstrated to be inseparable from the spectrum known as autism, autistic disorder is still no more than a hypothetical clinical entity” (Boileau 37).

The cause of the disorder is unknown and can be a topic of heated discussion. In the 1950s, doctors believed, and many mothers were told, that autism was caused by emotional neglect by the primary caregiver, typically the mother. In fact, the term “refrigerator mothers” was used in reference to mothers of autistic children (Brasic, Windle, and Pataki). Thankfully
for many parents, that theory was later abandoned. In 1998, Dr. Andrew Wakefield published a research study in *The Lancet* that sparked a great debate that continues still today. Wakefield reported that the parents of twelve children noted regression in social skills and a development of bowel disorders shortly after they received the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine. While the article has since been retracted (Wakefield et al.) and Dr. Wakefield widely discredited, his article launched widespread fear of vaccines and suspicion of their influence in the development of autism spectrum disorders.

While numerous epidemiological studies have been conducted disproving the link between autism and vaccines (including the MMR vaccine), some researchers do believe that a preexisting genetic vulnerability can be exasperated by environmental elements, essentially tipping the scale toward the likeliness of a child developing the disorder. A 2010 study by Volk et al. concludes that children born to mothers who lived within 1,000 feet of a freeway or an area of high traffic (high pollutant areas) have twice as much of a risk of developing autism than the general population. While Volk et al. state that the study does not say that exposure to air pollution or traffic causes autism, they express that these could be some of the factors that are contributing to an increase in autism among children.

Even after Dr. Wakefield’s support in the medical community has dwindled, many parents and professionals still believe that vaccines and other environmental toxins play a key role in the development of autism, and that by avoiding these elements one may be able to protect their child against the disorder. As a parent myself, the picture of a parent dogged by lingering fear, doubt, and guilt stayed in my mind as I thought about Nick’s parents, and how much more protective they might be of their son.
HOW AUTISM AFFECTS NICK

There were four main characteristics that were most crucial in representing Nick’s autism: his lack of speech, his motion, his response to pain, and his manner of connecting with others. These four elements were evident in the script, and it was imperative that they be accurate and plausible if I was to represent a child with ASD well.

I met with Dr. Joshua Feder, a local practicing child and adolescent psychiatrist specializing in the treatment of developmental and learning disorders, to discuss the script and its authenticity. In addition to the consultation of Dr. Feder, I found *Children without Language* by Laurent Boileau, *A Parent’s Guide* by Ozonoff, Dawson, and McParland, and *Embracing Autism* edited by Robert Parish to be valuable resources. Through these sources I carefully studied each aspect of Nick’s autism both as a guide for my directing and to be able to inform the child actor.

LACK OF SPEECH

Autistic children without language can vary widely in their ability to communicate in any way, shape, or form. Some children, while unable to produce an audible vocabulary, can point or gesture in a meaningful way to communicate their desires, feelings, and goals. Conversely, some children can produce words, but cannot use them to communicate their thoughts, nor can they use gestures for the same goal. An example of this is a child with echolalia. Echolalia is “the often pathological repetition of what is said by other people as if echoing them” (“Echolalia”). While repeating phrases or sounds is a natural part of development, an autistic child engages in echolalia during phases of development when it is
unnatural to do so. In these scenarios, words are spoken, but at an inappropriate time and without apparent relevance to the current situation the child is in.

In *El Abuelo*, Nick’s character’s speechlessness had another cause: choice. He had acquired the skill of speaking with a proficient vocabulary, but chose to cease communicating in that way. His ability to communicate remained viable through nods and gestures, clearly showing that he was engaged on some level, but unable or unwilling to engage verbally.

Dr. Feder confirmed that some autistic children did indeed stop speaking for periods of time. He also agreed that, in some cases, children would speak again if a topic arose that was of great enough interest or importance to them. Thus, it was imperative for me to communicate Nick’s interest in Abuelo and the migrant workers in the film. It was this interest that ultimately inspired Nick to speak again.

**Motion**

Among the activities required for an ASD diagnosis are restricted or repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities. In many cases, these repetitive behaviors manifest as stereotypy. According to Merriam-Webster.com, stereotypy is the “frequent almost mechanical repetition of the same posture, movement, or form of speech” (“Stereotypy”). Examples of stereotypy are flapping hands, flicking fingers, and spinning or rocking. In the autistic community, stereotypy is also referred to as “stimming,” short for “self-stimulating.”

It is thought that this self-stimulation is sought for many purposes: for the satisfactory feeling it generates for the child; for stress reduction; for sensory stimulation; and for improving an undesirable situation (Lewis and Bodfish 83). In the film, Nick stims by rocking back and forth at various times, such as when he falls and injures his ankle, which
would have been a likely scenario to create stress. It is exactly in these types of instances that children with autism and stereotypy would either begin to stim, or increase the rate or frequency of their stimming activities.

**RESPONSE TO PAIN**

A prevailing misconception about children with autism spectrum disorders is that they either do not feel pain or have a much higher tolerance to pain than the average child. Recent research is proving this to be untrue (Nader et al.). Instead, it is posited that the communication of the pain, not the experience of it, is what is abnormal in a child with ASD. Given the aforementioned details about the unusually difficult time children with ASD have communicating, it stands to reason that the same children would have difficulty expressing feelings of pain with clarity.

The fact that children with ASD experience pain the same way the general population does, does not diminish the challenge presented when trying to identify the existence and origination of an autistic child’s pain. In a chapter in *Embracing Autism*, Stagliano recalls a time when her daughter fell and broke her arm, but Stagliano was unaware of the injury until she happened to run her hand over the swollen breaks. Her daughter was crying, but was unable to make her mother aware that she had a very specific reason to be upset. The mystery surrounding pain in a child with ASD seems to revolve around her ability to “self-report” the injury.

In “Pain Expression in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): A Foundation for Instrument Development,” Melissa Dodd Inglese marks the difference between a normal child’s pain communication and that of a child with ASD (36). A normal
child, after a mildly painful fall, will look up seeking the attention of an observer. If that observer looks afraid, the child may cry more. If the observer smiles and offers comfort, the child may cry less. What we perceive as the most accurate barometer of pain for children—crying—is highly influenced by the non-verbal communication that takes place between the child and the observer. If a child does not engage in such non-verbal communication, then the barometer becomes wildly inaccurate.

Clearly, the presence of crying is not the best, or only way to observe the pain of a child with ASD. Many children with ASD do not cry, moan, or seek comfort (Inglese 42). But if a child does not cry, verbally self-report, or non-verbally communicate discomfort, how can we know that he is in pain? The Pain Indicator for Communicatively Impaired Children (PICIC) suggests looking for a “screwed-up or distressed-looking face, screaming, tense body, difficulty in consoling, and flinching” to determine if a communicatively impaired child (such as a child with ASD) is in pain (Stallard et al. 147).

In Nick’s case, no one was around when he injured his ankle. Therefore, difficulty in consoling and flinching would not have been applicable to his situation. However, he may have communicated his discomfort through a distressed-looking face and tense body. As mentioned previously, children with ASD commonly stim to relieve stress, so this was also a likely way that Nick would have reacted to an incidence of injury. Initially, the script had described Nick’s reaction to his injury as being one of indifference, as if he was looking at a flat tire, and eventually flapping (moving his hand up and down—another form of stimming). However, through my research, we (the actor and I) came to believe it would be more accurate if we showed his pain manifested through a combination of indifference, a tense body, and rocking.
CONNECTEDNESS

The behaviors of autistic children can be mystifying and frustrating, even to their own parents. As mentioned previously, social skills are most commonly affected and the effects can be seen from a very early age. *A Parent’s Guide* describes the autistic child’s behavior in this way:

The child with AS-HFA [Asperger Syndrome/High-Functioning Autism] may not seem to listen and may not follow directions because of social deficits and language processing problems. He does not understand the centrality and importance of the human voice and does not orient to it naturally. . . . He may be reluctant to do certain school assignments or have trouble staying seated, but not because these are inherently difficult tasks; they simply hold no interest for him. Praise from teachers or parents and high grades may not be incentives for the child with AS-HFA, who has a vastly different motivation and reinforcement system than that of the typical child. (Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland 40-41)

*A Parent’s Guide* also notes that autistic children frequently struggle with the development of age-appropriate peer relationships (Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland 27). In the context of Nick’s story, his development of a relationship with Abuelo is good, but the fact that Abuelo is much older than him shows that, while it is progress, it is still outside the realm of typical child interaction. When Nick’s parents discover his interest in Abuelo and the migrant workers, his mother is at first pleased, then concerned. One can imagine that they would be much more comfortable if Nick had approached a child of his own age.

While the most dramatic element of the end of the film is Nick choosing to speak again, his demonstration of social and emotional reciprocity might well have been an equally astounding improvement. Many autistic children fail to be aware of others, their circumstances, and how they might be feeling. After his time spent with Abuelo in the migrant worker camp, Nick speaks with clarity about the workers’ plight, and shows strong
feelings that they should be helped. This would be a great accomplishment for many children with ASD.

**Migrant Workers**

In addition to research on autism to create an accurate world for Nick, I researched what the daily lives and conditions might have been for Abuelo and the other migrant workers. I found *Shadowed Lives* by Leo R. Chavez to be extremely helpful, along with the information I gleaned from several articles and documentaries. Again, I identified several key elements evident in the script to define and research in my quest to create an authentic world for *El Abuelo*. These elements were: living conditions in migrant worker camps; relationships between migrant workers and legal San Diego communities; relationships of migrant workers to their families abroad; and faith traditions in migrant worker camps.

**LIVING CONDITIONS**

The types of camps that migrant workers create are composed of ramshackle sleeping shelters made from whatever materials are available. The materials typically include plastic, cardboard, tarpaper, and discarded wood (Chavez 67). At times, some northern San Diego County canyons have sheltered 300-500 men. The shacks are tucked into bushes and brush as much as possible, making them difficult to see from outside the canyon. Walking down into the canyon, however, an entirely different world is revealed. As Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) raids increased in frequency in the early 1990s, workers began to make their sleeping places smaller and more hidden, and “spiderholes” dug in to the ground and covered with brush rose in popularity (Chavez 71).
Available resources (discarded metal lids, old plastic buckets for pesticides) are also used for storing and cooking food and water. Without running water or sewage services, the migrant workers carry in water from nearby spigots and hoses on farm properties and relieve themselves in the immediate area of their camps. Obviously these conditions lend themselves to contracting illnesses, and camp residents complain of frequent headaches, stomachaches and diarrhea (Chavez 73).

Landowners who discover migrant camps on their property often bulldoze the area, forcing the workers to find another place to camp. They do this out of fear for liability for the workers’ living conditions, and to avoid being charged with harboring illegal aliens (Chavez 79). Not only are these workers itinerant, moving from Mexico to California and back frequently, following work wherever they can find it, their lives are made even more impermanent by the impersonal dynamic between them and their employers.

In the mid-1980s, Chavez began to discover women with children living in the canyons as well. He describes the living conditions of two women and their infants. They both lived in tiny shacks, one metal and one wooden. There was no running water or electricity and their small beds and tables rested on the dirt floor. While the conditions were obviously unfit to house the small families, the women were at least fortunate enough to avoid one of the bulldozing events because one of the women worked as a housecleaner for some nearby residents who were sympathetic to their living conditions (Chavez 81).

**RELATIONSHIPS WITH SAN DIEGO COMMUNITIES**

In a 2006 article in the *San Diego Union Tribune*, Leslie Berestein reviews the plight of homeless migrant farm workers and touches on their relationships with the surrounding
communities. She says, “Tensions have flared as homeowners, some fueled by the national furor over illegal immigration, lobby local officials to clear out the homeless. In recent weeks, anti-illegal-immigration activists have targeted McGonigle Canyon in hopes of rooting them out, hiking through encampments and crashing nearby day-labor pickup sites” (Berestein).

Southern Poverty Law Center’s *Intelligence Report*, Issue 126, from 2007, details the tensions that had arisen between the migrant farm workers and nearby neighbors, which were exacerbated by a local group, the San Diego Minutemen (SDMM). In the report, Casey Sanchez describes how the SDMM intimidates suspected migrant workers, following them with cameras while they are out in public. The report also details an incident in January of 2007, when a group of men and women hiked into the camp and cut up clothing, tarpaulin shelters, and other belongings with knives. What little the migrant workers had was destroyed. Members of SDMM allegedly committed this crime (Sanchez).

Even without such outright hostility, migrant worker relationships with their surrounding communities are often strained at best. Many migrant workers rarely leave their camps other than to go to work and an occasional walk to the convenience store. Even making the short walk to a store will lead them through neighborhoods, which can arouse suspicion and fear in the local residents. Having heard of various deportations, abuses, and attacks, migrant workers tend to avoid venturing out into local societies (Chavez 74).

Still, there are many groups who find the needs of the migrant workers more compelling than their immigration status and these groups give them aid in various ways. Groups such as the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, the Southern Poverty Law
Center and some local churches are able to provide support to improve the extremely impoverished conditions these men and women live in—immigration issues aside.

**RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES ABROAD**

While some immigrants come to the United States with the intention to stay, many come for a short time (days, months, or perhaps years), with the goal of earning money, then returning to their homeland. However, for some migrants, the passage of time, raising a family, and hard work slowly erodes their dreams of returning home (Chavez 79). We might imagine, then, that Abuelo came to California with the hopes of making some money then returning home to his family, but the months became years and he now finds himself longing for family, but wondering if he will ever return to see them again. The characters Fernando and Diego, however, might be newly arrived and optimistic about their ability to earn riches, and then return to their homeland. Thus they find themselves in the same physical location and financial situation, but entirely different positions of heart. Imagining these different back-stories allowed me to fill in more details about how each character would react to Nick.

**FAITH TRADITIONS**

One of the most fascinating discoveries I had during my research was that of the faith life that continued in the migrant worker camps. In an article on SignOnSanDiego.com in 2006, Elena Gaona describes yet another eviction attempt from McGonigle Canyon. In the article, she mentions that the camp includes a small outdoor chapel with an altar, pews, and a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe (the Virgin Mary). She says that that outdoor chapel had served the migrant workers for nearly fifteen years. In addition to this article, I also watched the documentary *The Invisible Chapel*. The film shows in greater detail, this group of people
with little to their names, without the frills or comforts of modern life, who choose to give their effort and materials toward the creation of a place of worship. I was struck by the dedication this group of people had to their faith, and how a place to honor that faith seemed to have the same priority as a place to sleep or food to eat. In the early stages of writing, I forwarded the aforementioned articles to the writer and he worked the chapel into the script. During preproduction, the art department and I referenced the McGonigle Canyon chapel exclusively to develop the look of our chapel. It seemed fitting, as the location where we shot the altar scene was only miles from McGonigle Canyon.

Patrick Scott, the producer for *El Abuelo*, was struck by the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe so much that we added dialog to the chapel scene at the last minute to include the story in the film. As the story goes, a peasant witnessed the apparition of the Virgin Mary, who asked for a church to be built in her honor. The peasant’s bishop, not seeing her himself, asked the peasant for proof. After another visit to the Virgin Mary, the peasant returned to the bishop with his poncho full of flowers as directed by the Virgin. When he released the flowers from his poncho, the image of the Virgin was miraculously imprinted on the fabric. Upon reading the story, a connection came to mind: the Virgin of Guadalupe was faithful to the young peasant so long ago, and Abuelo, the modern-day peasant, looks to her still to be faithful. There is something powerful in the grace, mercy, and compassion that are portrayed in so many religions, and I saw this as an opportunity to allow that basic need for, and faith in kindness to be shared between Nick and Abuelo.
LITERATURE ON PROJECT STYLE

The overall stylistic approach I took with *El Abuelo* involved cinematic techniques that focused on the audience as observers. My goal was to make the audience feel like “flies on the wall,” watching Nick’s every move, observing the world around him, seeking something with which to connect, just as Nick was observing the world around him, seeking something with which to connect. The audience would connect with Nick, not because they shared his pain or curiosity, but because they shared with Nick the experience of being observers. To support these techniques I drew from Italian neorealism and contemporary neorealism practices, theories on the voyeur’s eye presented by Jon Boorstin in his book *Making Movies Work*, and aspects of mise-en-scène.

Drawing from Neorealism

For the sake of this paper, it is appropriate first to review Italian neorealism and how it relates to *Abuelo* before discussing the integration of the practices of its new incarnation, contemporary neorealism.

Italian neorealism emerged in the 1940s as Italian filmmakers turned their lenses toward the poverty that was pervasive in post-World War II Italy. New film techniques evolved, abandoning the careful and calculated studio films of the time, both out of necessity due to the poor postwar studio conditions, and lack of funding. This stylistic shift was also attributable to a desire to create films that were more reflective of the lives Italians were then living. From 1945 to 1949, Italian filmmakers in the neorealist movement took their productions to the streets, hired nonprofessional actors, and began to tell the stories of their nation’s people. These efforts earned international acclaim for the new movement, which was
labeled “neorealist.” It exploited natural lighting, and camera movements and compositions that attempted to put the viewer in the place of an observer, as if s/he were witnessing real events unfold (Wagstaff 410-13).

*El Abuelo* certainly shares many characteristics with the neorealist films, but it does not contain all the elements that have since been academically ascribed to neorealism. For example, Cesare Zavattini theorized that neorealist films needed no story and should follow the tiniest detail of the lives of real people (Wagstaff 412). While these criteria contributed to *El Abuelo*, I did not find them to be critical elements whose absence would diminish the story that was afforded me by the neorealist elements I chose to employ. Classic neorealist films themselves did not always adhere to all of the theoretical requirements of a neorealist film. *Roma città aperta*, for example, was shot mostly in a studio (Wagstaff 35).

Casting nonprofessionals was common for Italian Neorealist filmmakers, although not as common as one would expect. Of all the actors in *Ladri di Biciclette*, only three leading roles in a very large cast were nonprofessionals. The practice of nonprofessionals in neorealism cannot be called innovative, as nonprofessionals had been used in Soviet cinema in the 1920s, in dramatized documentaries in the United States and United Kingdom in the 1930s, and in Italian cinema from the 1930s on; but from 1945 to 1949, neorealists used more actors “from the streets” than any other filmmakers at the time (Wagstaff 31).

It is interesting to note that the prominent Italian film critic and theorist Umberto Barbaro translated and promoted the writings of Soviet filmmaker Vsevolod Podovkin. Podovkin spoke of choosing actors based on physical characteristics and personal qualities over professionalism. He believed that the director should choose the right person, not the
right actor; and that the director should make the most of the free self-expression of that person, while maintaining tight directorial control (Wagstaff 31).

With *El Abuelo*, I sought out both professional and non-professional actors. For the role of Nick, I hoped to audition autistic children, as they possessed some of the same personal qualities of the character. I also sought out Hispanic non-actors who possessed the physical characteristics that would be akin to Abuelo, Diego, and Fernando. In this way, I followed in the footsteps of Pudovkin and the Italian neorealists to find the right person for the role.

The common practice of using child characters as a mirror to reflect our shortcomings and moral challenges is also a neorealist practice. Vittorio de Sica incorporated this practice in many of his films including *Ladri di biciclette*, *I bambini di guardano*, and *Sciusciá*. This practice proved useful in directing *El Abuelo*. Nick is the central character in the story. It is through his perspective that we understand Abuelo, who confronts the challenges of adult life (in his case, immigration, economic scarcity, prejudice, etc.) from a decidedly philosophical and spiritual perspective. Through his encounter with Abuelo, Nick perceives a fundamental human connection that underlies the layers of complexity we accumulate through age. Thematically, the film suggests that this fundamental connection, along with childhood hopes and dreams, becomes harder to access with age.

A. O. Scott coined the phrase “Neo neo realism” in his 2009 article in the *New York Times* as he reviewed several contemporary films that he claimed employed the techniques of Italian neorealism. While the term “Neo neo realism” indicates a modern revision of neorealism, I find the term clumsy, and prefer instead the term “contemporary neorealism.”
Scott’s article caused quite a debate about how influential Italian neorealism really is in the films he references, and that debate is not without merit. While the term may not fit the films precisely, I do believe that the influences of Italian neorealism have spread far and wide in many great films, and its influences are, in fact, clearly seen in the films he reviewed (Man Push Cart, Wendy and Lucy, and Goodbye Solo). Christopher Wagstaff in Italian Neorealist Cinema summarizes many elements of Italian neorealism that I believe are echoed in contemporary neorealism. The characteristics that he lists that are relevant to El Abuelo are as follows: “Contemporary social, historical and political subject matter; Protagonists: the ‘people,’ the poor, marginalized groups; Cheaply made films with low production values; A ‘realist’ treatment of authentic and substantial subject matter; Everyday, non-spectacular life” (411).

*El Abuelo* deals with two very significant topics of 2011: autism and migrant laborers. Migrant laborers are at the fore of current political debate. Autism is also a rising concern as more and more families are dealing with the realities of raising children with different needs. Indeed, both groups represent very specific struggles in the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Both groups, for different reasons, are also marginalized and/or poor. The migrant laborers in El Abuelo are essentially homeless and separated from society. Children with autism are frequently separated from their peers by the very nature of ASD.

In terms of the production value and cost of El Abuelo, most student films are cheaply made out of necessity. I was fortunate to have a small budget with Drama House Productions, but we were still faced with a significant lack of resources. I was challenged to maximize every dollar available, just as were the Italian neorealist filmmakers.
Wagstaff encapsulates the way the last two aforementioned characteristics were manifested in *El Abuelo* as he describes the realist theory shared by many Italian neorealists: “The smaller the ‘facts,’ the more ‘everyday’ they are, the humbler the protagonists, the fewer the events and the more they are preserved in their ‘fullest duration,’ the simpler the apparatus used for recording them, the quicker they are reproduced . . . the closer you are to ‘reality’” (411)

I attempted to tell this simple story, with humble protagonists, captured with long takes, shot on a Canon 7D, in the spirit of neorealism. While neorealism has a reputation for having a rough look, I employed a more polished look more akin to that of *Wendy and Lucy*, *Goodbye Solo*, and the proto-neorealist film *The Children Are Watching Us*.

**Voyeur’s Eye**

In *Making Movies Work*, Jon Boorstin details the three ways in which movies are experienced. Boorstin refers to each way as an “eye,” the first of the three being the voyeur’s eye. Boorstin uses the word “voyeur,” not as one spying on others to gain sexual gratification, but rather as one whose pleasure is “the simple joy of seeing the new and the wonderful” (12). Through this eye, the audience is encouraged to ask questions such as, “where are we?” and “what is happening?” By using long shots, along with establishing shots and close ups intended to pique the viewer’s curiosity, the filmmaker establishes place and begins to tell a story; and the viewer watches, taking it all in. The voyeur’s eye seeks believability and logic, in a sense, realism. *El Abuelo* used the voyeur’s eye not by conveying “the thrills of a lifetime but something simpler: watching events steadily unfold in rational, explainable sequence,” creating “an engrossing story that never violates our sense of logic” (Boorstin 13).
According to Boorstin, this sense of logic comes from two elements: creating a credible flow of time and space, and establishing a believable story that is defined by its own rules. If these two elements are compromised, the film will fall prey to the ultimate criticism of the voyeur’s eye—“That couldn’t happen.” For example, if an actor crosses a large room in one step, violating time and space; or if a police officer has a six-shooter and fires off twenty bullets, breaking the rules of the world on screen, then the viewer ceases to suspend disbelief. If the filmmaker succeeds in creating time, space, and story, then the viewer believes s/he is watching reality on screen (Boorstin 13). This was the goal with *El Abuelo*. With over thirty scenes in twenty pages covering twenty locations over a twenty-four-hour period, *El Abuelo* had the potential to be confusing in terms of its construction of time and space. There were also many “coincidences” that occurred in the story that prompt the incredulity of the viewer.

According to Boorstin, filmic techniques that engage the voyeur’s eye include establishing shots, long shots, deep focus, and wide angles. These moments of spectacle, often involving a cast of thousands and sets extending half a mile, sometimes only last ten seconds. Producers refer to these shots as “money shots” because they are so expensive to shoot, but the payoff is that for the rest of the film, the viewer is convinced that “the world is out there beyond the frame” (Boorstin 15). *El Abuelo* did not have the budget for “money shots,” but I incorporated these techniques the best way possible to introduce the viewer to the larger worlds of Nick and Abuelo. For example, the steadicam shot of Nick’s arrival at the camp opens on Nick, Diego, and Fernando walking through bushes toward the camera, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. The camera turns to reveal a migrant shack and a worker taking off his shoes. Then we follow behind the three as they walk into the camp. Throughout
the shot, six different migrant shacks are visible and nine actors are present. In one continuous shot using deep focus and a wide angle, the migrant camp is established.

In some films, such as *Blade Runner* and *The Last Emperor*, the world itself is a reason to see the film. The voyeur’s eye enjoys experiencing a new world it has never seen before. Boorstin believes that in creating a new world, it is more important for the world to feel authentic than for it to be absolutely real. It is up to the art director (in our case, the production designer and art director collaborating with the director) to determine how real the world will be, drawing from broad research and experience to make it as authentic as possible (Boorstin 16). In the end, the authenticity of a world comes down to the filmmakers’ good choices, and not so much his/her originality. While *El Abuelo* does not have the grandeur of *The Last Emperor* or the futuristic expanse of *Blade Runner*, it attempts to present a unique take on the rarely seen worlds of autism and migrant life by means of engaging the voyeur’s eye.

**Mise-en-Scène**

In their book, *Film Art: An Introduction*, Michael Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define mise-en-scène as, “all the elements placed in front of the camera to be photographed. The settings and props, lighting, costumes and makeup, and figure behavior” (495). Originating in theatre and referring to all of the elements on stage, the concept of mise-en-scène has been expanded in film to include nearly anything that appears in the frame and the director’s control of it. For example, in *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*, Michael Rabiger states that mise-en-scène is concerned with how the elements of a scene are arranged and photographed under the leadership of the director. This includes blocking (movements of
the actors, and camera strategy), lens choice, and composition (336). Critical to creating the mise-en-scène of *El Abuelo* was the creation of Nick’s world, and the creation of Abuelo’s world. Special attention was given to settings and props, costumes, point of view (subjective or objective), and blocking of these worlds, in order to capture believable and memorable performances.

It has been widely understood by film critics and audiences alike that setting plays an active role in cinema. In *Understanding Movies*, author Louis Giannetti explains, “settings are not merely back-drops for the action, but symbolic extensions of the theme and characterization” (311). British designer Robert Mallet-Stevens noted,

> A film set, in order to be good, must act. Whether realistic or expressionistic, modern or ancient, it must play its part. The set must present the character before he has even appeared. It must indicate his social position, his tastes, his habits, his lifestyle, his personality. The sets must be intimately linked with the action. (Giannetti 322)

Giannetti developed the following list of characteristics a director should consider when choosing a setting: exterior or interior, style, studio or location, period, class, size, decoration, and symbolic function (324). These considerations lead to several questions: Is the set an exterior or interior? If it is an exterior, how can nature be used to convey the film’s mood or theme? What is the style of the setting? Is it realistic or formalistic? Are the structures in a particular architectural style? Will the setting be in a studio or on location? In either case, what does the location say about the characters? What era, or period, does the film represent? What is the class or apparent income level of the owners or inhabitants? How large is the set? Giannetti notes, “rich people tend to take up more space than the poor, who are usually crowded in their living area” (324). This denotation was relevant to the class differences portrayed in *El Abuelo*. What props are used to furnish the set? Are there any
oddities of taste or status symbols? Is the set sparsely furnished or crowded? And finally, what symbolic image does the overall set and its props project? These questions were asked for every scene of *El Abuelo*. We sought out locations and props that were linked to the action of the story and the characters.

Costumes, much like settings and props, are extended aspects of character and theme. Giannetti argues that costumes “represent another language system in movies, a symbolic form of communication that can be as complex and revealing as the other language systems filmmakers use” (327). The styles of costumes can reveal class, psychological state, or self-image. The cut, bulk, and texture of a costume can suggest a range of characteristics such as delicacy, dignity, and agitation. These characteristics can also be symbolized through the color of the costumes. For *El Abuelo*, we took a contemporary realistic approach favoring off the rack clothing over individually designed costumes. Research photos of migrant workers and autistic children informed styles and colors of clothing.

For each scene, it is important to ask whose point of view should be favored. The answer depends on whom or what the scene is about. Once a point of view has been determined, blocking (actor and camera strategy) can be explored to heighten and support the chosen point of view (Rabiger 340). A point of view can be subjective or objective. A subjective point of view brings the viewer closer to the action through the use of close ups and angles that are nearer to the characters’ eye lines. An objective point of view puts the audience at a distance, incorporating wider shots and angles that are farther from the characters’ eye lines. A director may change point of view throughout the film (Rabiger 341). While I used both points of view in *El Abuelo*, I favored an objective point of view, as it aligned with my approach of making the audience observers.
Depending on the nature of the film, blocking can be covered through a long take or a series of short takes. A long take generally requires a mobile camera in order to break up the composition and avoid a flat appearance. It also requires expert control from both the crew and the actors, as the smallest of errors will require another take. With a longer take, there is a risk that the editor will not be able to rebalance the rhythm of a scene should it become unbalanced. Short takes are useful to create juxtaposition and tension. Short takes provide more options in post-production, allowing space for the editor to finesse the emotion of a scene, but they run the risk of making the material look more manipulated because they often require more cuts (Rabiger 347). *El Abuelo* used several long takes ranging from thirty seconds to a minute and a half. Some of these shots took upwards of eleven takes. Shorter takes were less frequent, but were useful for the montage-like scenes of Nick riding in the car with Greg and Nick riding his bike.

**Films and Genres That Relate Thematically**

With the goal in mind of creating believable and memorable performances, I sought films that related to the project thematically—namely, documentary films about the lives of migrant workers and autistic children. Watching the real lives of these two groups on screen provided insight on how to direct the actors. It also helped confirm story elements of *El Abuelo* that were specific to each group, and gave me an idea of what the mise-en-scène (costumes, sets, makeup) would look like. I was fortunate to find two films that focused on migrant life in northern San Diego County: *The Invisible Chapel*, and *The Invisible Mexicans of Deer Canyon*; and two films that followed autistic children: *Autism: The Musical*, and *The Horse Boy*. 
The Invisible Chapel

The Invisible Chapel chronicles the controversy surrounding a makeshift chapel that existed for over twenty years near a wealthy neighborhood off the Highway 56 corridor in northern San Diego County. The chapel was built by parish volunteers to provide humanitarian assistance for the hundreds of migrant workers living in the nearby canyons. Every Sunday, volunteers would lead a religious service, distribute food, and provide health care for the migrant workers. The chapel started with no physical structure, just a cross and a tile icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in an area surrounded by trees and shrubs with enough room for a few dozen people to meet. Over time, the chapel grew in both physical structure and in number of parishioners. The altar became a main fixture of the chapel, while the sky and the surrounding trees formed the roof and walls of the chapel. The altar was an eight-foot wide, five-foot tall structure made of cinder blocks, having a waist high area for flowers, candles, pictures, and other significant religious items. Migrant workers would place items such as personal photos and figures of saints that were blessed by the priest on the altar.

Local neighbors, a local radio host, and the San Diego Minutemen clashed with the church and the mostly undocumented migrant workers. Pressured by those opposed to the chapel, the landowner, who had given permission for the parish to meet on his land, asked the parish to leave. Block by block, the parish and the congregants took the altar apart. The congregants have wandered from location to location in the area surrounding Highway 56 ever since.

The Invisible Chapel inspired the chapel that we created for El Abuelo. I was drawn to the images of the chapel in its early stages. I liked the simplicity of the icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the cross. I also liked the idea of having a small altar for the placement of
personal and religious items. Coming from a religious studies background, I knew the significance of the items on the altar and had an idea on what we needed to include on our altar to remain authentic. The back-story we developed for El Abuelo’s altar was that it was an intimate place for one or two worshippers, not a big group of people. It was a satellite altar of a bigger altar that existed closer to civilization. Abuelo and other believers visited the small altar alone and on a daily basis, and went to the big altar with many people once a week. Additionally, I made sure the chapel was surrounded by nature. The documentary also inspired the look of the costumes and the migrant camp.

*The Invisible Mexicans of Deer Canyon*

*The Invisible Mexicans of Deer Canyon* documents the lives of migrant workers living in makeshift camps in northern San Diego County. The filmmaker, John Carlos Frey, lived among the migrant workers off and on over the course of a year. He was able to befriend the migrants and was given full access to a world rarely seen by those on the outside. The most valuable information I gleaned from the documentary was how the migrant workers lived their lives and what the migrant camps looked like.

The documentary reveals the third world conditions the migrant workers lived in. They had no running water or electricity. Their dwelling places varied from walled shacks built with pallets and blankets, to mattresses placed out in the open. They washed their clothes and dishes in a nearby stream. According to the filmmaker, over 300 migrant workers lived in these conditions in the canyons surrounding Highway 56. Most of the migrants worked jobs in local agriculture, construction, or landscaping. Many would wait at local gas
stations or designated meeting areas for work. All of these living conditions are seen in *El Abuelo*. The documentary provided a basic visual conception for *El Abuelo*.

The camp in the documentary was organized in many ways. One person was responsible for a weekly trash pick up. One person had a truck and was responsible for transporting workers from one location to another. The women who lived in the camp often stayed home to cook and clean and take care of the children. Certain places were set aside as bathrooms and were occasionally relocated. Weekly religious services were held in a nearby chapel (the chapel featured in *The Invisible Chapel*). Fires were lit nearly every night to provide light, warmth, and sources for cooking food.

Many of these aspects informed the world of *El Abuelo*. In one scene in *El Abuelo*, a truck drops off migrant workers on the roadside. I imagined the driver of this truck to be the person who was responsible for transporting workers. We cast men and women (although more men than women) in roles as migrants in the camp. We looked into acquiring fire permits, but the Poway Fire Marshall was disinclined to help as fires ravaged the area twice in the last ten years. In fact, one fire burnt twenty-two homes in the neighborhood to the ground. The home on the property where we filmed was one of the only houses left standing.

Most of the migrant workers in the documentary were undocumented and came from villages in Mexico. Some of the members of the community knew each other from these villages. A couple of people would cross the U.S./Mexico border to California, and once they found work and safe shelter, they would send word to their village. Then, more people from their village would cross the border to join them. Some of the migrants had been there for over twenty years. They all spoke Spanish, some of them spoke English, and a rare few spoke neither Spanish nor English, but a dialect that was not understood by many. Many of the
migrants sent money home to their families. This information contributed to the back-stories of Abuelo, Diego, Fernando, and the other migrant workers in Abuelo’s camp. How well did everyone at the camp know each other? How long had they been there? It was clear from the script that Abuelo is fluent in English. Were Diego and Fernando fluent in English? Was there a regional accent to their Spanish? It was also clear that Abuelo and his fellow workers send money home to their families.

**Autism: The Musical**

I watched *Autism: The Musical* to get a firsthand look at how autistic children interact, communicate, use their body language, and behave. The film follows five autistic children (Lexi, Wyatt, Neal, Henry, and Adam) as they take part in The Miracle Project, a theatrical workshop for children with autism led by Elanie Hall. I expected to see a consistent picture of what autism looked like. But to my surprise, each child was at different place on the spectrum. The film showed me that no two children with autism are the same.

When we are first introduced to Lexi, she is singing beautifully and confidently, with a commanding screen presence. Once she stops singing, she speaks in broken repetitive phrases, hunches her back, and refrains from making eye contact with those around her. I was shocked. It was like seeing a completely different person.

I remember being just as shocked when I first saw Wyatt. The film introduces Wyatt as he and his mother having a conversation about school. Wyatt is voicing his frustration about being in special education classes and being bullied by other students. The scene carries on for over a minute. I was shocked because I couldn’t believe Wyatt had autism. This
scene showed a socially adept, coherent, and aware child who was making eye contact with his mother and using non-verbal communication that was consistent with his language.

Neal represented what I expected to see in a child with autism. Not having known a child with autism in real life, and not having researched autism until after watching the film, the only pictures I had of autism were from *Rainman* and other popular culture references. The film shows footage of Neal as a child having tantrums, thrashing about, destroying household items, and screaming like a wild banshee. After trying every kind of therapy, Neal’s mother (Elanie Hall) brought in artists and musicians to connect with Neal. This led Elaine to form The Miracle Project as a form of therapy for autistic children. Neal has apraxia, which is the inability to form speech or language. His body language is “closed-in”—having a lack of eye contact and appearing unaware of his surroundings. Over the course of the film, Neal is introduced to a typing machine that he uses to communicate phrases and words. It was amazing to hear Neal “speak.” It revealed that Neal was more aware of his surroundings and more connected to others than I had assumed. I hope that the end of *El Abuelo* incites the same reaction in the viewers—that people are amazed to hear Nick speak and surprised by how much he understands.

Henry, another child in the film, has Asperger’s Syndrome. Kids with Asperger’s tend to be highly gifted in certain areas, and in Henry’s case, he has a photographic memory. Throughout the film he constantly talks about dinosaurs and reptiles. He often retreats from other children his age, but as he becomes more involved in The Miracle Project, he opens up and learns about caring for and sharing with other kids his age, and becomes more empathetic.
The final child highlighted in the film is Adam. Adam is a competent cellist. He is much like Wyatt in that it is sometimes hard to believe he has autism. He just seems like a hyperactive child. At times he makes eye contact with others, and is attentive and considerate, while other times he bursts out, interrupts conversations, or goes off-track from the task at hand.

The film gave a wonderfully varied picture of how children with autism communicate. One of my goals in watching the film was to find a child to model Nick after. While I didn’t find a child who was exactly like Nick, I did learn that I couldn’t make sweeping generalizations about how autistic children interact, communicate, and process the world around them. It gave me confidence in the script, and allowed me to feel comfortable taking certain liberties with Nick’s character. I didn’t feel that I had to mold Nick into a character with autism that we are used to seeing on screen (i.e., *Rainman*, *Temple Grandin*, *Mary and Max*). The script took on new meaning for me. I talked about the children I saw in *Autism: The Musical* and Nick’s character with the writer of *Abuelo*, and we collaborated on how Nick’s autism would be portrayed. The writer also had some personal insight to give on how he saw Nick, as his son is autistic.

**The Horse Boy**

*The Horse Boy* is about Rupert Issacson’s journey to heal his son, Rowan, of autism. Rowan was diagnosed with autism at age two. Around that time, Rupert and his wife, Kristen, noticed changes in Rowan. Rowan stopped using words and was regularly flapping his arms (stimming), avoiding eye contact, and screaming inconsolably. Rowan and Kristen immediately sought out therapies and treatments for Rowan. One morning, Rupert noticed
something peculiar; his quarter-horse mare named Betsy displayed submissive body language whenever Rowan was near. Rupert placed Rowan on the back of Betsy, and immediately, Rowan stopped stimming, calmed down, and spoke. It was an amazing and mysterious connection between a boy and a horse.

That same year, Rupert (a human rights activist and journalist) invited several San Bushman hunter-gatherers from South Africa to America to talk about their loss of land due to diamond hunting. Kristen and Rowan joined Rupert on part of that journey, as did healers, elders, and shamans from around the world. Some of the shamans prayed over Rowan, and Rowan’s autistic symptoms began to dramatically reverse. Amazed by the Shaman’s prayers and Rowan’s connection to Betsy, Rupert planned a trip to Mongolia—the only place on earth he knew of that combined horseback riding and shamanic healing. The bulk of the film, *The Horse Boy*, follows Rupert, Kristen, and Rowan as they journey from shaman to shaman on horseback in Mongolia over the summer of 2007.

I watched *The Horse Boy* for the same reason I watched *Autism: The Musical*—to see how a child with autism communicates and acts. While Rowan was much younger than Nick (Rowan was five and Nick is twelve), I was still able to gain valuable insight. Rowan’s autism was clearly manifested at times (stimming, babbling, and screaming), while at other times his autism was not so visible (he held eye contact with others, showed empathy, and cared for the horses he rode).

I was drawn to the movie because of its focus on connection and spirituality, as these ideas are present in *El Abuelo*. I hoped the film would educate me on why autistic children connect with certain people, animals, or objects. Unfortunately, the filmmaker did not take an educational approach; instead the filmmaker took an observational approach, showing
connections and spiritual moments happening without trying to explain in detail why or how they happened. Thus, I was still able to see the ideas of connection and spirituality play out without knowing why or how. Interestingly, after my first few reads of El Abuelo, I struggled with the question of why Nick was connecting with Abuelo. I wondered if the audience would need to know Nick’s motive in order to connect with Nick. Does Nick even have a motive? What goes on in the mind of an autistic child? After watching The Horse Boy, I was confident that the audience did not need to know why Nick connected with Abuelo, they only needed to see that Nick was connecting with Abuelo. As Nick and Abuelo spend time together, my hope is that the audience will see Abuelo’s shamanic, healing, and hospitable nature and speculate that perhaps Nick has a sixth sense about this that might account for his attraction to Abuelo.

**Films and Genres That Relate Stylistically**

Films that share stylistic similarities with El Abuelo include Vittorio de Sica’s proto-neorealist film, The Children Are Watching Us, and two films that A. O. Scott referred to as neo-neo-realist, Wendy and Lucy and Goodbye Solo.

**The Children Are Watching Us**

Vittorio De Sica’s The Children are Watching Us is a good baseline comparison for contemporary neorealist films as Vittorio De Sica was one of the directors who formed the backbone of the neorealist movement of the 1940s. Further, this was his first collaboration with Cesare Zavattini, an equally iconic writer in the movement who would pen the neorealist
manifesto.\footnote{“Some Ideas on the Cinema” by Cesare Zavattini appeared in the October-December 1953 issue of \textit{Sight and Sound}. Film historians refer to the article as the neorealist manifesto. The article was edited from an earlier interview published in \textit{La revista del cinema italiano}, vol. 2, published in December 1952.} The film, released in 1944, shows the theories of neorealism as they begin to solidify, though it still has many pre-neorealist aspects as well (much of the film was shot on a set, and professional actors were used). De Sica describes the film as “a compromise between the old formula and the new” (Snyder and Curle 24).

The story follows the every-day happenings of Nina, an Italian mother and wife, as the consequences of her infidelities ripple through her family, as seen through the eyes of her son, Pricò. Although this was De Sica’s fifth film as a director, he would later call it “the most important stage in the evolution of my career as a filmmaker, and even as a human being. Through the character of the child, we felt for the first time a human being, whereas all my previous characters had felt like puppets” (Brunette). Indeed, Pricó is the centerpiece of the film, and most of the film is presented as being filtered through this child protagonist’s consciousness. Some critics argue that this weakens the film, pointing to the fact that at times Pricó does not understand what is going on around him. Other critics disagree, stating that while Pricó may not understand everything he sees, the adult viewer surely does, and this strengthens the film (Brunette). I agree with the latter and see a comparison to \textit{El Abuelo}. I aimed to strengthen the connection of the audience to \textit{El Abuelo}, not by making the viewer aware of Nick’s understanding of his environment, but by making the viewer an observer, watching Nick on his sometimes-perilous journey. Admittedly, Nick’s situations are not as dramatic as Pricó’s, but I believe Nick’s situations are compelling enough to engage the audience.
While my approach was not entirely from the consciousness of my protagonist, I still learned from De Sica’s film. De Sica often used close ups of Pricó to engage the audience. He also used point of view shots and lower angles to put the viewer in Pricó’s shoes. But, as this film was a combination of the old and new formulas, De Sica also used longer, steady shots on wider angles in various scenes—a technique that would become representative of neorealism. For *El Abuelo*, I included close-ups of Nick to engage the audience, near point of view shots, and lower angles, but I leaned more toward longer, steady takes on wider angles. In doing so, I ran the risk of losing the popular audience, as film and television today tends to favor quick cuts and close ups. *The Children Are Watching Us* caused me to wrestle with the idea of including close ups more frequently throughout the film in order to keep the audience continually engaged and connected to Nick.

The plot of De Sica’s film mostly remains true to neorealism, refraining from a three-act structure in favor of a meandering story, trailing behind the characters as they move through life. The first draft of *El Abuelo* gave me this same impression. Over the course of pre-production, I pitched various ideas to the writer with the goal of adding more dramatic moments to the “quiet” script and creating a stronger three-act structure. In the end, we stuck to the original script, as it felt more true to the characters to simply follow Nick on his adventure. Additionally, the short film form does not usually lend itself to a strong three-act structure, even at a length of twenty-three minutes.

Neorealist theory suggests that montage is used far less than mise-en-scène, and such is true in *The Children Are Watching Us*, although De Sica does use montage in one scene to show a dream that Pricó is experiencing. I used montage sparingly in *El Abuelo*, specifically during the car riding scenes, but even so, my use of montage was not as stylistic as De Sica’s
dream scene. I relied heavily on mise-en-scène, leaning toward longer takes that captured the actors in their environment.

**Wendy and Lucy**

*Wendy and Lucy*, released in 2008, follows Wendy, a twenty-something traveler as she heads out on the road toward Alaska hoping for work. The majority of the movie she is trapped in one town after her car breaks down and her dog, Lucy, gets lost. The opening scene of the film is one long take of Wendy and Lucy playing catch in a wooded area as dusk settles in. Long shots such as these give the viewers time to orient themselves, take in the beauty of the location and be silent observers of the deep relationship Wendy has with her dog.

Throughout the film the lighting feels very natural, even in a midnight scene in which the lack of lighting makes it difficult to see anything at all. While many filmmakers would fear that the subject would be lost and the result would be distracting to the viewer, the lack of detail benefitted the scene, underscoring the fear and insecurity Wendy experiences from a stranger suddenly being so close to her in the pitch-black night. In *El Abuelo* there is a night scene in a canyon. We shot the scene using minimal light similar to the scene in *Wendy and Lucy*, but instead of using minimal light to underscore fear and security, we used minimal light to bring a touch of warmth and comfort in the vast darkness.

Other techniques that *Wendy and Lucy* shares with *El Abuelo* include: extensive use of medium shots; exclusion of characters from the shot, even when they have lines; heavy use of steady or static shots; near point-of-view shots; and the use of establishing shots in between scenes.
One scene in *Wendy and Lucy* that incorporates many of these techniques occurs when Wendy is trying to start her car and discovers that it is inoperable. The scene starts with a medium shot of Wendy from the passenger’s seat. When the local security guard comes to tell her to move her vehicle, the viewer only sees him partially, even though the two carry on a conversation for some time in one long take. When she gets out of the car to look under the hood, we first see her in a medium shot looking down into the engine that is off screen. Then there is a cut to the engine, taken from a near point-of-view position, as if we are standing next to Wendy. These choices invite the audience to observe Wendy and the world around her.

Another scene that I used as inspiration for *El Abuelo* occurs when Wendy walks all over town searching for Lucy. This scene employs a series of static long shots with Wendy walking through the frame as she calls out for Lucy. This technique not only gives a strong sense of place using existing locations, but also leads the viewer to search the image for Lucy. For the scene in which Nick rides his bike and makes his descent into the canyon, I tried to show a series of establishing shots that give a similar sense of place.

*Wendy and Lucy* takes a slow, quiet pace as it chronicles its lonely heroine being crushed by disappointment after disappointment. The documentary-like camera style, subtle story and performances, and natural lighting all contribute to the film being categorized as a neo-neo realist film (Scott).

**Goodbye Solo**

*Goodbye Solo* is similarly categorized in the same article by Scott and shares some of the same characteristics as *Wendy and Lucy*. *Goodbye Solo*, however, has an inherently
different feel because the central relationship that is explored is between two men: Solo, a bubbly Senegalese cabdriver, and William, a lonely elderly man contemplating suicide. In the beginning of the film we find William making an arrangement with Solo to drive him out to a remote mountain point so he can end his life. As the story comes to an end, Solo does, in fact, drive William out to his desired destination. As a palatable heaviness hangs in the cab, the film allows the cab to wander in and out of the frame as the passengers weave through the stunning countryside that has become shrouded in fog. These long shots in *Goodbye Solo* allow the viewer to absorb the seriousness of the moment and feel the same uneasiness that Solo feels.

The net result of the techniques used in *Goodbye Solo* is precisely one that I aimed to replicate: the viewers are asking questions. As Solo drives William out to the mountain point, one can’t help but think, “No, he’s not really helping him kill himself. He must have another plan.” While the tone of *Goodbye Solo* is more serious than *El Abuelo* and therefore more dramatic, I still attempted to use the same filmic techniques (establishing shots, close ups, etc.) in *El Abuelo* to convey subtle moments in the story.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This chapter details the methods and procedures I used to create believable and
memorable characters based on my studies and research. I have included sections on the
following: preparations leading up to preproduction; casting (addressing the sub-problems of
finding the right characters and directing scenes with Spanish language); time, space, and
story (emphasizing the voyeur’s eye); cinematography (explaining approaches inspired by
neorealist practices and the voyuer’s eye, and addressing the sub-problem of the audience’s
connection with Nick through the use of camera angles, movement, and blocking); and mise-
en-scène (addressing the sub-problem of creating the worlds of Nick and Abuelo).

PREPARATIONS LEADING UP TO PREPRODUCTION

Entering my final year of graduate school, I directed two projects (The Soldier and the
Doll and Saint Valentine) during the Fall 2010 semester, in preparation for El Abuelo, which
was shot during the Spring 2011 semester. The first two films prepared me in two important
ways: First, I was able to establish a crew with whom I could communicate effectively and
with whom I might work in the future; second, these films allowed me to develop and
practice my directing skills.

I used the same crewmembers with the assumption that by the time we got to El
Abuelo, we would be “a well-oiled machine.” I wanted to know my crewmembers and trust
them to do their jobs, thus avoiding the biggest pitfall of student directors—the director who
wears too many hats. While it was a challenge for me to “let go” and give control over to my teammates, personal improvement came when I reminded myself that talented, hard working people who believed in the projects surrounded me. Key members who were involved in each film were Josh Krohn (1st Assistant Director), Jason Gnerre (Producer/Editor), Christina Cervantes (Director of Photography), Sonia Elizabeth Lerner (Costume Designer), Christopher Ward (Production Designer), and Chris Truitt (Composer). Key members who were involved in *El Abuelo* but not the first two projects were Jonathan Tsang (Line Producer), Patrick Scott (Producer), and Stephen Metcalfe (Writer). The most valuable person to me who was involved in all three productions was my wife, Melanie Crutchfield (Producer, Writer, Assistant to Director).

I specifically chose to direct *The Soldier and the Doll* because of the opportunity to direct children. I did not want *El Abuelo* to be the first time I directed a child. I specifically chose to direct *Saint Valentine* because of the opportunity to explore character and dialog, two very important aspects of *El Abuelo*. Two other projects I directed in Fall 2010 (two episodes for the web series, *Hollywood Hell*) taught me to be more efficient with my shot lists. With repeated practice, directing was becoming more second nature to me. This was exactly where I wanted to be once I started preproduction for *El Abuelo*.

**CASTING**

For casting, I aspired to stay local and feature San Diego talent, but *El Abuelo* required specific actors that proved difficult to find. We posted a casting call on lacasting.com, nowcasting.com, and craigslist San Diego. We also distributed the call to local casting directors and employees at the Media Arts Center (organizers of the San Diego Latino
Film Festival). Weekend one of auditions was held in Los Angeles and San Diego. We saw a lot of talented actors in Los Angeles. In San Diego, the talent was somewhat lacking, but hiring a complete cast from Los Angeles would put us over budget. We needed to find more actors from San Diego.

For round two of our auditions, we followed Pudovkin and the neorealist’s belief of looking for the right person for the part, not the right actor. We notified Actors for Autism, Aces, and ARTS (A Reason to Survive) in search of an autistic child who loved to act; we posted a call on Craigslist for a non-actor to play Abuelo; and we posted another general call for actors. Due to budget constraints, we decided that the rest of our auditions would take place in San Diego and focused on finding San Diego actors.

We had one autistic child respond to our search for the “right” person. His audition immediately brought a realness to Nick that none of the other actors had been able to express. His body movements, head movements, facial expressions, eye contact, and stimming made me feel like I was watching a documentary. When I showed the video to my wife, she was overwhelmed and began to cry because of the rawness and realness of the child’s performance.

While all of these qualities were positive, there were many challenges. As a director, I felt hopeless during the audition. I realized I needed to communicate to him in a different way in order for him to process what I was saying, but I didn’t know how to communicate. Thankfully, the child’s mother, his mother’s fiancé, and a life coach were all there to help. His mother gave me tips on how to communicate, but I still felt like I got nowhere. To top it off, I left the audition with questions of ethics in my head. Did the boy comprehend what was
happening? Did he know what he was getting into? Would I be taking advantage of him if I cast him in the film?

Because of my wife’s strong reaction to the audition tapes, and the supportive community that surrounded the child, I called him back two more times. In all, I spent over two hours with him doing improv and running lines. I thought, “If I could break through and discover a way to communicate with him, then together we could create an amazing performance.” But I still had concerns: what about the scene where Nick falls—could he fake that? Could we cheat it? Would we have to rewrite the script? What about something as simple as the scene in which Nick looks out the car window? How long would it take to shoot that? (We rehearsed this scene in the auditions and I had difficulty getting him to look at a specific location on cue.) What about life on set? How would he respond to people, lights, and the camera? I was already expecting our production days to be stressful. If he was cast, I suspected that shots would take at least twice as long, adding to the stress. I was torn. I had to choose between an autistic child who naturally looked the part, but whom I would have difficulty directing, and a non-autistic child whom I would have to direct to look the part. In either case, it could be possible that I wouldn’t get a believable performance. In the end, I decided to go with a non-autistic actor.

While we had hundreds of submissions for the roles of Greg, Sara, and Nick, we only had tens of submissions for the role of Abuelo. Out of those tens of submissions, we only auditioned four. Fortunately, Louis Olivos, Jr. auditioned. He had a great look and a warm presence. I had worked with Louie on a previous film. Because I was familiar with his work, I felt confident that with enough rehearsal time, he could deliver an outstanding performance.
Mr. Olivos was the only actor to be cast from outside the San Diego area. I was fortunate enough to cast well-known San Diego theater actors in four of roles (Nick, Greg, Sara, and Fernando). A San Diego State University student was cast in the role of Diego.

To address the language barrier, I made sure that fluent Spanish-speaking actors were cast in the Spanish speaking roles. I gave the actors liberty to translate the lines in a way that they thought would be consistent with migrant life. I spoke and understood a little Spanish. During rehearsals, I could tell they added a causal tone to the dialog and made it their own, but I had difficulty knowing if they had delivered the lines correctly in terms of grammar. I planned on finding an on-set Spanish language consultant, but I could not find one. As far as how often Spanish is used in the film, I decided to stick to the original script, with Abuelo speaking primarily in English to Nick, and primarily in Spanish to other characters.

**TIME, SPACE, AND STORY**

In order to please the voyuer’s eye; time, space, and story are of major importance. The sense of time in *El Abuelo* had to be portrayed accurately; otherwise the audience would not suspend their disbelief. Key moments of the film take place from the early afternoon until the late evening. To create a convincing sense of time, I conferred with the director of photography on the quality of light we desired for each scene, and what time of day would best represent that light. We took several trips to the migrant camp location and watched the sunlight fade in order to determine how long we would have to get the quality of light we were looking for. We also scouted exterior locations in Nick’s world to observe and discuss natural light. We used this information to create a production schedule.
The sense of space was a challenge, especially given that the film covers seventeen locations and a lot of physical area. Most of these varied locations were in Nick’s world. Since we did not have a location scout or location manager, I collaborated with the production designer and the art department to identify locations that would fit our needs. We started with the script (the shooting script and revised scenes are in the Appendix). For Nick’s world, I wanted an upscale neighborhood, preferably with some homes in mid construction, located next to a canyon with sweeping vistas. There needed to be a sidewalk for Nick to ride his bike on or, at the very least, neighborhood roads where one might expect a child to ride a bike. I also wanted to create a sense that this upscale neighborhood was right on the edge of a larger community. If this place existed in real life, it would only take a few minutes to drive from Nick’s neighborhood to a grocery store or a big box construction store.

Where would these locations be found? Again, we started with the script. Scene headings included locations from Rancho Santa Fe to Solana Beach with specific mention of Lomas Santa Fe Drive and the 805 Freeway. We scouted Rancho Santa Fe where we found that most of the houses were on larger plots of land and were set back off winding roads. The landscape of Rancho Santa Fe reminded me of a wooded countryside. That was not the feeling I was looking for. It felt too distant from the city or any area of business where migrant workers would gather.

Rancho Santa Fe is significant as it is the twelfth wealthiest zip code in America according to Forbes magazine (Levy), further representing the divide between Nick and Abuelo’s worlds. But was it significant enough to establish as a location on screen? For this film, I believed portraying upper to upper-middle class wealth was more important than showing the actual location. Establishing Rancho Santa Fe would have required including a
shot of a car driving by a Rancho Santa Fe sign, adding a conversation about Rancho Santa Fe, or putting the title “Rancho Santa Fe, California” on the screen. Even then, what would it add to the story? We needed only to show an image of big houses to convey that Nick came from a background of wealth. If this were a feature film, I would have considered including details of Rancho Santa Fe. But this was a short, and because I was not happy with the look of Rancho Santa Fe, we decided to scout other locations that would fit the theme and space of the story.

This took us to the Highway 56 corridor, the same place that The Invisible Mexicans of Deer Canyon was filmed. The documentary showed rows of newly developed homes that marched right up to the edge of a canyon. My favorite image showed migrant workers waiting on a roadside turnout with two multi-million dollar homes perched on a canyon ridge behind them. These images gave a sense of separation, revealing that the migrants lived under the shadow of the wealthy. The images also made me wonder how long it would be before the housing was developed in the rest of the canyon, pushing the migrants out of their homes.

Nick’s neighborhood ended up being on Del Mar Mesa Road, the location where the two multi-million dollar homes were perched on the canyon ridge. Del Mar Mesa Road had everything we were looking for in a location—large homes, a place for Nick to ride his bike, and a larger community nearby. It also had what many other locations lacked—history. The location for the scene in which the migrant workers hop out of the truck led from Del Mar Mesa Road into McGonigle Canyon, the same canyon where the migrant workers featured in The Invisible Mexicans of Deer Canyon lived.

Questions about the believability of the story detract from the viewing experience. Shooting to please the voyeur’s eye requires the director to convince the audience that every
moment is likely to happen. Every moment must be real. I searched every nook and cranny of the script for potential holes in logic. For example, when Fernando and Diego first find Nick on the ground, staring at his ankle, it is not immediately apparent that he is hurt, only that he is sitting on the ground in a place where he should not be. Yet, I got the impression from the script that Fernando and Diego were aware of his injury. This seemed to go against all logic. In the end, I had the actors play the scene as if they were surprised to see Nick sitting in middle of nowhere. I had them keep their distance from Nick; thus, we never see them interacting with Nick to know he is hurt—instead, this occurs off screen.

Another part of the script cut from Nick drawing in his room, to Nick riding his bike down his driveway and into the street. This felt abrupt for me and I wondered if something else could be added to bridge the scenes. After all, this was Nick’s moment of decision to leave his house. Perhaps it was the intention of the writer to never show Nick’s moment of decision, but I wanted to see it and I wanted to see him leave the room, so I added a scene depicting that.

**CINEMATOGRAPHY**

By using filmic techniques associated with the voyeur’s eye (long shots, establishing shots, close ups to pique curiosity, deep focus), an objective point of view (wider shots and angles farther from eye lines), and techniques associated with neorealism (long takes, smooth shots, static shots), my intention was that the audience would not feel what Nick was feeling; rather, they would observe him. I wanted the audience to remain removed from Nick, just as one might be removed from any autistic child. Instead of stressing an empathetic connection
with the main character, I wanted the audience to observe Nick in a more reflective mode, just as the camera does.

The opening sequence of *El Abuelo* attracts the voyeur’s eye with close-ups on Nick’s empty stare through a car window, near point of view shots from Nick’s perspective, and establishing shots of the car driving through the wealthy community in which Nick and his family lives. The scene ends with Nick staring out of the car window at Abuelo. My intention was for the audience to ask: Who is this boy? Who is the man driving him? Where are they going? Why are they so quiet? Who are the men gathered on the side of the road? Why is the boy so interested in them? Why is he interested in the old Mexican man? The intention in this sequencing of opening images is to hook the audience by the time the title appears at the 01:30 minute point. They have been observing Nick, they have questions, and now they want answers. My goal is to have the audience become observers of Nick, just as Nick was an observer, and for this commonality to be the basis of the viewer’s connection with him.

The subsequent scenes answer the audience’s questions and introduce new ones. The scene following the opening sequence introduces the idea that Nick isn’t speaking. Why isn’t he speaking? We discover the answer in a subsequent scene after Nick has approached the day laborers: he is autistic. With this game of prompting questions, answering them, then prompting new questions, I intended to pull the audience into Nick’s world. I believed this technique was the best way for the audience to forge a connection with Nick, an autistic boy, with whom it may be difficult to relate.

In Nick’s world, I used camera angles and compositions to isolate Nick in his own environment, as if he were a stranger in his own world. For example, when Greg speaks with Nick’s doctor about Nick’s speechlessness, the scene opens with a push in on Nick, and the
conversation is heard off screen. The next shot shows Nick in the foreground, with the Doctor and Greg in the background continuing their discussion about Nick. Nick is excluded from the conversation, yet it takes place right in front of him. My hope is that the audience will wonder if Nick can hear or understand what’s being said about him. The same technique is used in the kitchen scene with Greg, Sara, and Nick; and again when Nick is drawing and Sara is on the phone on the patio. In using these techniques, I tried subtly to show Nick excluded from his community.

In contrast to these scenes, the scene in which Nick approaches the day laborers (which follows the doctor’s office scene and precedes the kitchen scene) has Nick lining up with the day laborers. With this composition I intended to imply inclusion—Nick was looking for a place to belong. Additionally, in the migrant camp I favored camera angles and compositions that included Nick in the community. For example, when Nick first sits down at Abuelo’s tent, the entire scene is captured in a four-shot of Nick, Abuelo, Diego, and Fernando; and when Abuelo talks to Nick about life and school in the following one minute and thirty second one-take scene, Nick and Abuelo are both present in the same frame as much as possible. In fact, the original shot stayed on a two-shot of Nick and Abuelo for the entire scene, but in postproduction, I felt that the scene wasn’t engaging enough. I wanted the scene to remain a one-take scene, but there needed to be more movement within the frame. To make the scene more interesting without losing a sense of inclusion, we added motion points to the clip, panning up to the photos, zooming in on Nick, zooming out to a two-shot, cropping the scene in tighter, etc., all within the one-take shot. This was possible partly because of the very high native resolution of the footage.
During preproduction, I was set on shooting the migrant camp scenes handheld. After I did some camera testing, I was concerned that handheld shots would be too shaky. The week before production, I decided that a steadicam would work better. Not only would a steadicam provide a dramatic first reveal of the camp, it would give a sense of movement to the scenes in the camp. A steadicam allowed us to make our longer takes more interesting, specifically when Nick first enters the camp, and when Abuelo and Nick return from their night in the canyon. These long, sweeping takes revealed the space of the camp and favored blocking that incorporated many actors into one frame. Three other scenes (when Abuelo gives Nick beans, when Fernando tells Abuelo to get Nick out of there, and when the camp gets raided at the end) incorporated long takes with the steadicam. While these scenes did not involve as much actor orchestration or camera movement, the use of the steadicam provided a way to smoothly and subtly change the framing to lead the viewer through the scene.

Close ups of Nick in the camp were reserved for two intimate scenes between Abuelo and Nick—the altar scene and the night canyon scene. These moments were intended to reveal more clearly Nick’s connection with Abuelo. I still wanted the audience to question whether or not Nick understood what was happening, so the close-ups were used sparingly. I realize this approach may work against me, as some viewers will want to see more close-ups of Nick in order to connect with Nick personally. But I wanted to keep the audience at a distance as much as possible. In a way, I was trying to incorporate the frustration that I felt when I tried to communicate with the autistic child that I auditioned. At times I felt like I was connecting with the child, and then something would happen to make me think he wasn’t aware the entire time. My hope is that when Nick speaks at the end of the film, the audience’s
curiosity will finally be satisfied. Yes, Nick was aware. He was more aware than he was given credit for.

**MISE-EN-SCÈNE**

Nick’s world was created entirely through existing locations. I used a beautiful home in northern San Diego County, a doctor’s office in Solana beach, and various outdoor locations along the Highway 56 corridor. Many of the items placed in frame originated from these locations. I used natural light for all exterior shots, and a mix of natural and artificial lights for interior shots to achieve a natural look. Not only did this serve to create an authentic mise-en-scène, it echoed the influence of neorealist techniques. Costumes and makeup were based on research photographs of autistic children and wealthy north San Diego County families.

The figure behavior of Nick was crucial to the mise-en-scène of the film. In addition to watching documentaries starring children with autism, the writer and I observed autistic children at Aces, a non-profit organization that focuses on helping autistic children through therapeutic methods such as Applied Behavior Analysis, and Behavior Modification. I saw many of the same behaviors I witnessed in *Autism: The Musical*. One child in particular moved his tongue around in his mouth quite a bit. Another child rocked back and forth. Some of the children seemed like they didn’t have autism at all, while others had difficulty using language. After visiting Aces, I collaborated with the actor, discussing the research I had done. He had also watched videos of autistic children on YouTube. Together, we came up with Nick’s characteristics and traits.
Abuelo’s world was more difficult to create, as we (myself, the production designer, and the art department) did not have access to an actual migrant camp. Instead, we looked for locations in San Diego County where we could create our own camp. It was important to us that the ingenuity, frugality, and commonness of the migrant worker camp were evident in every scene that took place there. Thankfully, I was able to view the documentary film *The Invisible Chapel* and speak with the film’s director, allowing me access to a wealth of detailed, accurate information to pass along to the production designer. The production designer and the art department did extensive research on migrant camps, presenting me with photos of real migrant camps and location photos every week.

We searched for locations near the Highway 56 corridor, not too far from the actual canyon that was featured in *The Invisible Mexicans of Deer Canyon*. The art department’s first great find was Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve. It had the look I desired. The line producer contacted San Diego County Parks and Recreation to check the possibility of shooting in the canyon, and unfortunately, even with a discount, the location was out of our budget. Even if it were within our budget, we would have to set up and tear down our locations daily and pay extra for location escorts.

I mentioned our need for a location to the casting director. He gave me a few leads, one of which was pure gold. The location was in Poway, very close to the Hwy 56 corridor. The property owner had seven acres of land, two of which were overgrown with young saplings and brush. He gave us free reign to cut down whatever trees we wanted to and said that we could keep the set up as long as we needed to. The property also had a lake for the dishwashing scene, and a rocky area for the night scene. To top it off, the property owners were incredible hosts and very supportive.
Abuelo’s world relied almost entirely on natural light with the exception of the night scene in the canyon. The costumes, makeup, and the figure behavior were inspired by the documentaries *The Invisible Mexicans of Deer Canyon* and *The Invisible Chapel* and other research photos and articles that we had found. I kept in mind that the migrants were a hardworking group, with limited access to resources such as clothes, water, and medical care. This was reflected in their clothing and makeup. Their bodies were, no doubt, stiff and sore as they went about their thankless work and came home to their makeshift beds.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

As the old saying goes: films are never finished; they are just abandoned. Nonetheless, I regard it as my job to make the best film I can with the time that I have. While my assessment of the film as the director is valuable in determining if I achieved my goal of creating believable and memorable performances, it is the audience who will ultimately be the judges. When I get the film in front of an audience, I can finally see if the things that have been bothering me are worth fretting about, or if there are other things I didn’t see that I should have been more concerned about. Therefore, my conclusion will not only include thoughts on how I think the film turned out, and what I believe I could have done to make the film better, but also thoughts on how I expect the audience to react to the film based on initial screenings of the film.

Overall, I am pleased with the performances of all the actors, even though at times the performances were difficult to capture. One actor in particular took several takes to deliver his lines. This happened in multiple scenes, affecting our production schedule, and as a result we had to cut or consolidate shots. It also diverted my attention from other actors, causing me not to focus as much as I would have liked to on their performances. Finally, it wore out the crew and slightly influenced the morale of other actors. It was aggravating at times, but I did my best to remain calm. It taught me how to be assertive, yet patient. Having worked with the actor in the past, I doubt that this could have been avoided with more rehearsals. I knew that
while it would take some time for him to deliver, in the end it would be a great performance. If we had more time in the casting phase, perhaps I would have found another actor for the part. But in the end, the actor “nailed it.”

The altar scene was the most difficult to capture. At the last minute, there was an addition to the scene. A long monologue about Our Lady of Guadalupe had been written that the actor did not receive until two hours prior to shooting. It was a tall order for the actor and for myself. Were two hours enough time for the actor to memorize the lines? Could I be effective as a director under this time constraint? It wasn’t enough time and we wasted two hours trying to film the scene. I should have rescheduled the scene from the beginning so the actor and I would have been more prepared. We ended up reshooting the scene a few days later. While the reshoot was much better, I still debated cutting the scene during the editing phase. I felt like it was Abuelo’s weakest performance and I questioned what it did to move the story along. To improve the performance and make the scene more about Nick’s reaction to Abuelo, we trimmed off twenty seconds of the story and re-cut the scene with more close-ups of Nick. I decided to keep the scene after screening it to some members of the autism community, which evinced a very positive response. The audience’s connection with Nick was almost palpable. I was stunned by their response, as I was never a fan of the scene.

I believe I made the right choice in casting the non-autistic actor over the autistic actor. Once on set, I fully realized how demanding the physical actions of Nick were. I was correct in assuming that casting the autistic actor would have made the shoot far more challenging, as the shoot was challenging enough.

The camera angles I chose to capture the performances in the final scene may not have been the best. Throughout the film, I strayed from stirring emotion in the viewer
through the manipulation of camera and editing strategies, and instead tried to keep the
viewer at a distance as an observer; but people go to the movies because they want to be
moved. Perhaps I could have presented a more emotional performance with the use of more
close-ups on Nick and other characters, and a faster paced edit. I intentionally avoided such
techniques because I thought they would be overly dramatic for the story I was trying to tell;
but in retrospect, more coverage would have afforded me more possibilities in
postproduction.

We did not rehearse on the set of the migrant camp prior to production because of
schedule conflicts. Additionally, the scenes in the migrant camp were not story boarded; I
only created a detailed shot list. I neglected to do storyboards for a few reasons. First of all, I
prefer to storyboard after I see actors rehearse on set. Going into rehearsals, I have an idea of
what shots I want in a scene, but I like to see what the actors bring to the table. I also like to
have the director of photography and first assistant director present so I can confer with them
on the best possible angle, the lighting, and the logistics of the shot. Because such a rehearsal
never happened, we had to rehearse on the day of shooting. This cut into our production time.
I believe holding onset rehearsals before production began, and then storyboarding, would
have saved us two hours every day we spent in the migrant camp, better preparing the crew
and allowing me more time to capture better performances.

Having learned my lesson from the first weekend of production, I storyboarded the
scenes that we shot two weeks later. While these scenes were less involved than some of the
migrant camp scenes, it was extremely helpful to present the shots visually to the crew. It
saved us time and allowed me to focus more on the performances.
There are a few lines I wish I could have worked on more with the actors. One in particular is Greg’s line telling the day laborers that his son is autistic. In retrospect, I needed more coverage of this moment, as I would have liked to be on Greg from a different angle when he delivers his line. Moreover, the delivery is too theatrical for me. But while I feel this way, the delivery may work for others—it could be seen as if Greg is talking in a slow and deliberate, almost loud way to the day laborers, much like one would speak to someone who doesn’t speak the same language or is near deaf. It may also work to the general benefit of the film, as the shot itself is a longer take and fits with the overall feel of the film.

A few shots are out of focus or soft. One bothers me in particular. It is the shot of Nick looking down at his ankle. This was the only coverage we had of this action. The shot was one long take following Nick from his fall, to him trying to walk, to him sitting down and staring at his ankle. There were multiple takes of the shot. Another shot had better focus, but the performance wasn’t as convincing and the camera work was distracting, so I stuck with the out of focus, better performance shot.

During preproduction I created a collaborative wiki because conflicting schedules made it difficult for key crewmembers to meet together in person. On the wiki, crewmembers could post photos, links, documents, etc. While the wiki was helpful, it was not used to its potential. People had difficulty creating pages and uploading photos and documents. I tried to assist by leading people to the wiki help pages and creating a seven-page tutorial, but it only resulted in minimal posts. I should have pushed people to use the wiki more and held a meeting to show them how to use it. It would have saved time, particularly in reviewing research and location photos. Location decisions were delayed because I was not able to review the photos immediately after they were taken.
I believe there is a general audience perception and expectation of what autism looks like. It is partially informed by characters from films such as *Rainman* and *Temple Grandin*; characters with dramatic swings or very specific peculiarities. *El Abuelo* presents an autistic child who may not fit those expectations. I chose to make Nick observant of the world around him. I chose to make Nick’s stimming manifest in a slow rocking movement. I chose to make Nick speak in a specific way. All of these decisions were informed by research and were intentional. While I do not regret the decisions I made, I am concerned that the audience will not believe that Nick is autistic due to the popular conception of how autistic people act. If they do not believe, then I have not met my goal.

I believe there is no formula for what an autistic child looks like; *Autism: The Musical* did a great job of showing this truth. But, does the audience have an expectation of what autism should look like, and will that expectation prevent them from believing the actor’s performance as Nick? Only time will tell. In all the screenings thus far, I have only received a few comments on the actor’s performance. This leads me to wonder how the performance is being accepted. We screened an early cut to people from the autistic community and they responded well. They even volunteered to help spread the film through autism organizations, networks, and conferences, as they believed the film accurately portrayed the life of an autistic child. What about the non-autistic community? Reception has been hit or miss. One person, who had very limited contact with an autistic child, didn’t believe Nick’s performance because Nick was not like the autistic child they briefly knew in real life. Others believed that the actor was autistic in real life.

Working on *El Abuelo* was a wonderful, yet stressful experience. It was wonderful to dive into these two worlds so foreign to me. It was a joy to see how the mise-en-scène,
cinematography, and acting coalesced to create worlds I had only read about in research. It was stressful because I was nearing “burnout” in the preproduction phase. In a way, this was a good thing. It forced me to focus all my energy on directing. It also forced me to trust the line producer and the producer to delegate the proper tasks to other crewmembers. The partnerships I established with the screenwriter and the producer were invaluable. Through these relationships, and my relationships with the rest of the crew, I learned how to better negotiate, collaborate, and lead as a director.

In discussing how people react to *Autism: The Musical*, the film’s director, Tricia Regan, said that “people who have had no association with autism at all come out really with not only an understanding of what it is but a curiosity and an acceptance and a desire to know a person with autism. It opens their hearts and allows them to look at their own lives in a new way” (“Interview with Tricia Regan”). It is my hope that *El Abuelo* will have the same effect on the audience in terms of how they might perceive both a person with autism and a migrant worker.
WORKS CITED


Feder, Joshua D. Personal interview. 9 Feb. 2011.


APPENDIX

THE SHOOTING SCRIPT AND REVISED SCENES
The Shooting Script and Revised Scenes

This appendix includes the shooting script and revised versions of scenes 24, 33, and 34. The script is in screenplay format with scene numbers in the right-hand margin. Page numbers have been deleted.

The Spanish translation is not accurate. Neither the writer nor I are fluent in Spanish. On two different occasions, we had someone translate applicable lines into Spanish. While these translations were helpful, in the end I relied on the actors to translate the script. I have decided to include this draft of the script (instead of one of the translated versions), as this was the working script for the production.

The reader will notice several differences between the shooting script and the finished film, some of which were discussed in this paper and some of which were not. The most notable differences are in scenes 8-9 (the location was changed from a gas station to a Mexican restaurant/car wash due to location availability), scene 13 (this scene was rewritten to stress Nick’s moment of decision—he leaves the room while Sara is outside on the phone), scenes 15-16 and 30 (these scenes were not shot for various reasons, one being the potential requirement of a stunt driver for scene 15), and scene 32 (THE WOMAN was changed to a man and a line was cut). Scenes 5, 7, 8, and 11 (establishing shots) were filmed, but in the end they were cut to shorten the film’s running time. Scenes 33 and 34 went through several changes. Two versions of scenes 33 and 34 are presented, both of which are different from what made the final cut.
EL ABUELO

By

Stephen Metcalfe

Based on a story by
Patrick Scott and Stephen Metcalfe

Registered WGAW
EXT. RANCHO SANTA FE, CA - DAY

Establishing. And now an upscale car passes.

INT./EXT. CAR - MOVING- DAY

A father, Greg Chase, and his son, Nick, 12, drive in not unpleasant silence. Nick stares quietly out the window. There is something oddly but intently reserved about him.

TO:
The car, moving.

TO:
Looking through the passenger window at Nick, the reflection of the passing landscape in front of him.

TO:
The car disappears down the road.

EXT. LOMAS SANTA FE DR. - DAY

West of Interstate 5, heading down to Pacific Coast Highway.

AT A GAS STATION INTERSECTION -

The car pulls to a stop at a red light.

TO:
Nick, staring.

TO:
Nick’s POV - There is a large group of shabbily dressed Mexican laborers in front of the gas station. They are there, hoping for work. Odd jobs. Construction. Anything.

TO:
Nick stares. Turns his head to look at -

TO:
In the middle of the intersection, an older Mexican man is selling bags of oranges and bunches of flowers. He sees Nick looking at him. He smiles and holds out his wares to see if Nick or his father is interested in buying.
Nick just stares, expressionless. But now, as his father pulls away, he turns to look back. He watches as -

The old man recedes in the distance.

Nick sits in a waiting room. The door to the inner office is ajar. Nick can hear his father and a doctor talking.

GREG (O.S.)
He’s not stupid.

THE DOCTOR (O.S.)
The testing shows that.

GREG (O.S.)
So why is he no longer talking?

THE DOCTOR (O.S.)
To communicate effectively, there’s got to be the desire to communicate and something to communicate about.

GREG (O.S.)
Meaning ...

THE DOCTOR (O.S.)
He doesn’t have anything he wants to say.

Turning off Pacific Coast Highway - moving east on Lomas Santa Fe Dr.

The car turns the gas station.

Greg puts the nozzle into the gas tank.
GREG
(hoping for a response)
Nick, something to drink?
(nothing; then)
I’ll get you a Gatorade.

He walks towards the station.

GREG (calling back)
Lock the doors!

Nick stares out the window; attentive again. The Mexican laborers are still by the roadside, sitting, waiting for work. And now Nick opens the car door, slips past the pumps and walks down to join them.

TO:
He approaches. He stops to stare.

TO:
One of the laborers glances up; sees him and nudges a friend. Then, to Nick:

LABORER 1 (FERNANDO)
Que pasa, amigo? You got work for us?

Nick is silent.

LABORER 2 (DIEGO)
(In Spanish; w/subtitles.)
Maybe he don’t speak English.

Nick just stares at them.

DIEGO
He’s making me nervous.

TO:
Greg approaches the car. No Nick. Oh, my god -- he spins, looking -- and sees:

TO:
Nick standing with the workers.
GREG
Hey! Hey - get away from him!

He starts forward-

TO:

Greg hurries up. Diego and Fernando rising to their feet. Fernando raises his hands in front of him.

FERNANDO
(we’ve done nothing)
No hemos hecho nada. He come to us.

Greg realizes that it is Nick who has approached the men:

GREG
...lo siento... I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to -- my son is autistic.
(To Nick)
Nick, you shouldn’t be bothering these men. Let’s go.

Greg leads Nick back to the car. Nick looks back.

DIEGO
Que es "au-ti-ta"?

FERNANDO
Loco.

EXT. CANYON ENTRANCE - DAY

Adjacent to a canyon. A pick-up stops and several Mexican laborers jump out.

TO:

And now Greg and Nick’s car approaches -

TO:

- and passes them.

IN THE CAR -

Nick turns to look back.
TO:

Nick’s POV - The pick-up driving away in the opposite direction. The men now turning towards the canyon.

TO:

Nick looks thoughtful.

EXT. NICK’S HOUSE - DAY

Establishing. An upscale house.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Nick sits, sketching. It is a rough portrait of the old man, surprisingly good. Greg and Nick’s mother, SARA, are making lunch.

        GREG
        Nick made some new friends today.

He glances at Nick, hoping for a reaction.

        SARA
        (this is good and surprising news)
        Really? Who?

        GREG
        Some migrant workers. You know how they gather at the gas station looking for jobs. Nick went over and said hi. So to speak.

        SARA
        I’m not sure I like that. Nick?

Nick looking at them as:

TO:

        GREG
        They’re harmless. Let’s face it, they can’t afford to get into trouble.

        SARA
        Where do they live?

        GREG
        Around here?
        (Gesturing; it’s not far away)
        Some in Clark Canyon. They build these squatter camps.
SARA
(with sympathy)
That sounds horrible.

GREG
They have to live somewhere.
(a beat)
Oh, I have to head into the office
this afternoon. Impacted wisdom
tooth.

NICK’S BACKYARD – AFTERNOON
Sara is working in the garden.

EXT. NICK’S HOUSE – DAY
ENTERING FRAME - Nick, on his bicycle, pedals down the
driveway, heading towards the road.

TO:
He comes out of the driveway and pedals away.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD ROAD – LATER
Nick on his bike. Oblivious. Riding down the middle of the
road. A car honks as it veers.

EXT. COUNTY ROAD – LATER
Nick on his bike. He stops, wipes his brow, looks around. He
continues on.

EXT. CANYON ENTRANCE – AFTERNOON
Nick rides up and stops at the shoulder of the road. He’s in
front of the canyon where he saw the laborers disappear. The
canyon is steep on both sides, is all rocks and dry brush.
In the distance, on the surrounding hills, Nick can see the
beginnings of large housing development. Nick gets off his
bike, pushes it off to the side and starts in.

EXT. CANYON TRAIL – AFTERNOON
Nick is walking. He stops, looks on:

TO:
The canyon narrows – the path looks treacherous.

TO:
Nick continues on.

EXT. CANYON TRAIL - LATER

Nick is unsteady on the rock strewn path. And then it happens -

TO:

- a rock gives way beneath his foot, the foot twists and -

TO:

Nick falls.

(Note: Some autism kids don’t react to pain the way other children do. This has to do with sensory integration. They seem more surprised and confused by the pain than anything else.)

Nick tries to rise - and can’t. He sits, staring at the twisted ankle, the way one would a flat tire.

LATER -

The sun is throwing late afternoon light on the hills.

TO:

Nick sits. He’s stimming - lightly flapping his hand in front of his face - a sign that he’s nervous. The sound of voices. Nick looks up. Two men are approaching. They stop in surprise. It’s the two men from the gas station - Fernando and Diego. A moment. I’m tired.

FERNANDO (what the fuck?)

Saluda?

DIEGO

I guess we should take him back.

FERNANDO

Estoy cansado.

EXT. IMMIGRANT CAMP - LATE AFTERNOON
Nick is carried into camp, piggy-back on Fernando’s back. Men stare. The camp is a small, sad enclave of tiny shacks and sheds made from scraps of wood; in some cases, plastic sheeting propped up by trees. There is litter on the ground.

**FERNANDO**
(The old one)
Donde esta’ el viejo?

**DIEGO** (Muttering)
Tal vez el sabra que hacer.

Maybe he’ll know what to do.

**EXT. ABUELO’S TENT - LATE AFTERNOON**

The old man - the flower seller - is in a plastic-tarp-shed, kneeling at a tiny camp stove. He rises as Diego and Fernando approach with Nick. Wiping his hands, he comes out-

**FERNANDO**
(we found him on the hill)
Lo encontramos en el cerro.

They put Nick down so he’s sitting on a wooden crate.

**FERNANDO**
(gesture at the ankle)
He’s hurt. They might blame us.

The old man kneels and touches Nick’s ankle. He looks up.

**ABUELO**
Cual es tu nombre?
(in accented English)
What’s your name?

**FERNANDO**
He doesn’t talk.

**DIEGO**
(pleased that he knows)
"Au-ti-ta".

**LATER** –

**ABUELO**
He looks hungry.

Nick hasn’t moved. He watches intently as the old man stirs a pot on the small camping grill.

**ABUELO**
We have beans ... beans .. and more beans. Frijoles.
Nick is silent. He looks around.

ABUELO
Not what you’re used to, eh? Hacemos nuestro mejor esfuerzo. We do our best. We build, they come, they tear down, nos movemos, we move and build again.

Nicks now sees -

TO:
- that there is a small, worn black and white photo of an extended family pinned to a piece of wood/post. The old man notices.

ABUELO
Mi familia. I send them money. We all do. The less we spend, the more we send.

He brings Nick a chipped plate of beans with tortillas. Nick hesitates; eats. The old man smiles. He turns away back to make his own meal.

ABUELO
Do you go to a special school?

A beat. Nick nods.

ABUELO
What do you like? Literatura? Ciencia? Arte?

Nick nods.

ABUELO
Que bueno. I would have liked to have learned things. Astronomia. The sky. Geología. The earth. Aprendizaje que nos hace hombres. Learning makes us men.

He sees that Nick is staring at him. He smiles.
ABUELO
Comer. Eat.

LATER -

Nick has finished his food. His plate is clean. He looks up. The old man is looking at him. Nick holds out the empty plate. Instead of taking it, the old man turns, bends, looks over his shoulder.

ABUELO
Subir en. Climb on.

EXT. THE CAMP - EARLY EVENING

Nick is on the old man’s back, holding the plate. The old man is walking to -

EXT. STREAM - EARLY EVENING

The old man is cleaning the plate in the tiny stream. Nick watches.

ABUELO
Our dishwasher. And Laundromat.

He tosses water into his face.

ABUELO
(smiling)
And shower.

EXT. CHAPEL - EVENING

The old man approaches with Nick on his back. He stops and puts Nick down.

REVERSE ON -

They are in front of a make-shift chapel. A bench. A cross. A small statue of the Virgin Mary.

ABUELO
Que es una comunidad sin una iglesia? Our church. Hablo a Dios todos los dias. I talk to God every day.

Nick watches as the old man moves forward, kneels, closes his and clasps his hands and murmurs his prayers.

EXT. HILLS ABOVE CAMP - EVENING
The sun is setting on the hills.

EXT. ABUELO’S TENT – CONTINUOUS

Nick sits. Watching:

TO:

A group of men sitting on the ground and on makeshift chairs and crates. Smoking, talking quietly - one of them drinking a beer - passing it to another.

TO:

By a decrepit shack, two tired looking women in front it, sewing - repairing worn clothes

EXT. FERNANDO’S TENT – CONTINUOUS

Outside another shack, Fernando and Diego are talking to the old man in hushed urgent voices.

ABUELO
The boy is hurt.

FERNANDO
Tell that to the police when they come looking for him. I don’t know about you but I can’t afford to be deported.

ABUELO
Will you carry him out in the dark?

FERNANDO
You like him so much, you do it.

DIEGO
I say we keep him.

They look at him, shocked.

DIEGO
Who even knows he’s here? We ask for money.

ABUELO
(kidnappers)
Now we are secuestradores?

DIEGO
No, what we are is poor.
ABUELO
I’m ashamed of you both.

The old man moves away. Fernando and Diego glance at one another. Diego shrugs.

DIEGO
All right, it was a stupid idea.

EXT. ABUELO’S TENT - MOMENTS LATER

The old man approaches. Nick looks up.

ABUELO
Tiempo para ti a la casa. Time for you to go home.

EXT. CANYON - NIGHT

The old man makes his way down the path with Nick on his back. It’s a hard walk at night and the old man is quickly tiring. He stumbles. And now he stops, panting slightly.

ABUELO
Rest for a moment? Bueno idea.

Nick drops off his back. The old man sits.

ABUELO
Tirar una piedra. Pull up a rock.

Nick sits down next to the old man.

ABUELO
(comfortable)
Cómodo?

Nick nods. The old man stretches his back, wincing.

ABUELO
Only yesterday I was as young as you. Now look. Un abuelo. A grandfather.
(Wincing slightly; touching his jaw)
With a toothache.
(Then:)
Sonrisa.

Nick smiles wide, showing the old man his teeth. The old man peers closely at them; grunts with satisfaction.

ABUELO
Perfecto. You can always tell a poor man by his teeth. He hasn’t
many. Such a country here. Que rico. Que pobre.
(Opening his hand)
Mana abierta.
(Closing it into a fist )
El puna cerrado.

With a sigh, the old man lies back, the canyon wall behind him.

ABUELO
A bit of rest, we’ll move on.

TO:
Nick and the old man. The old man is talking; drifting.

ABUELO
All I’ve ever known is work. En los campos. Construcción. I’ve washed cars but never owned one. I’m not complaining. This is life.

They are looking at -

TO:
- the night sky - stars overhead.

ABUELO (O.C.)
Dios bendice a los que son pobres.
par el Reina de los cielos les pertenece.

TO:
The old man and Nick.

ABUELO
God blesses those who are poor in spirit, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

The old man closes his eyes and with a tired sigh, is immediately asleep. Nick cuddles up on the ground next to him and closes his eyes.

EXT. BULLDOZED HILLS - EARLY MORNING

Establishing. The bulldozed hills; the housing developments in the distance.

EXT. CANYON ENTRANCE - EARLY MORNING

LONG SHOT - A police car is parked at the side of the road.
A uniformed officer lifts Nick’s bike up out of the weeds. Another is on the police car’s radio.

EXT. THE CAMP - MORNING

Diego and Fernando, drinking coffee, look up in surprise as the old man and Nick enter the camp. Nick is limping slightly. Diego quickly rises -

TO:

Diego, now followed by Fernando, approaches the old man and Nick.

DIEGO
What is he doing back here!?

ABUELO
We didn’t get far. We’ll eat something, we’ll try again.

He leads Nick past the two men. Diego calls after them.

DIEGO (deported)
You’re going to get us all deportados!

TO:

Nick and the old man walk towards the old man’s shack. They stop as a woman steps in front of them. She stares at Nick a moment. Then:

THE WOMAN
Para el niño.

She passes the old man two eggs. She turns away.

ABUELO
Gracias, señora!

The old man looks at Nick as if to say I told you so.
ABUELO

Fue ahorrando estors. She was saving these. Venga. We eat, we go home.

Suddenly:

SARA (O..C.)

Nickie!!!!

Nick turns to see Greg and Sara rushing across the camp towards him. There are police with them.

TO:
The immigrants are rising in fear and alarm. The herding them into a group -- Por aqui!! Todos ustedes! Mover! Mover!

TO:
Sara moves to Nick, kneels and sweeps him into her arms.

SARA
Oh, God, we were so worried.
(looking at him)
Are you hurt?

Greg kneels to hold them both.

GREG
It’s all right now. It’s all right.
We’re all together.

ABUELO

El ninó está bien.

Sara and Greg look up at the old man.

ABUELO

We took good care of him for you.

Greg rises, turning-

GREG
I want these people arrested.

TO:
The illegals murmur; alarm in their faces.

TO:
Greg turns back to the old man -
GREG
I want him arrested.

GREG
Sara, Nick, we’re all going home.

Sara rises. Nick doesn’t move.

GREG
Nick.

A moment.

SARA
Honey, are you all right?

NICK
... d -- don’t ...

Greg and Sara seem frozen to the spot. Greg quickly turns to the policemen.

GREG
Wait.

GREG
(Then: )
... Nick?

Nick’s voice is rough from lack of use.

NICK
... these ... are my friends ... 

All watching, listening -

TO:
Greg and Sara -

TO:
The old man -

TO:
- Fernando and Diego -
NICK
They’re ... nice. They have no houses. They send money ... to their families.

Nick moves to the old man and takes his hand. He turns back to his mother and father.

NICK
This ... is El Abuelo. He talks to me. His tooth hurts.

Greg and Sara look at the old man, really seeing him now. Greg looks back to Nick. Seeing him.

GREG
(kneeling)
Come here.

Nick moves forward into his father’s arms. Greg holds him - looks over Nick’s shoulder at the old man. The old man nods.

PULLING UP AND BACK -
To look down on the crowd of people, the police and immigrants, the cluttered canyon.

CROSSFADE TO:

EXT. THE IMMIGRANT CAMP - MONTAGE - DAY

It is empty now. The shacks and tarps and trash are gone. The vegetation has grown in. The voice is older but there is still somewhat slowed, less expressive speech.

TO:

OLDER NICK(V.O.)
It’s been years now since I visited the camp.

The complete housing development overlooks the canyon.

TO:

OLDER NICK(V.O.)
There are houses now, built by people who couldn’t afford houses.

The camp. A faded aluminum beer can on the ground. Wild flowers near it.
TO:

OLDER NICK(V.O.)
The old man continued to sell flowers on the street corner. And then one day he was gone.

An old piece of wood that supported some plastic sheeting where the old man’s shack was.

TO:

OLDER NICK(V.O.)
I never saw him again.

The stream.

TO:

OLDER NICK(V.O.)
But I haven’t stopped talking about him.

The remains of the church.

OLDER NICK(V.O.)
I never will. Aprendizaje que nos hace hombres.

EXT. GAS STATION INTERSECTION - DAY

IN SLO-MO - We are in a car, passing. The old man is selling flowers. He smiles at us - his teeth are now repaired -

OLDER NICK(V.O.)
Learning makes us men.

— and then he’s gone.

FADE TO BLACK.
Revised version of scene 24:

EXT CAMP - EVENING

The old man approaches with Nick on his back. He stops and puts Nick down.

REVERSE ON -

They are in front of a make-shift chapel. A bench. A cross. A small statue of the Virgin de Guadalupe.

ABUELO

Our church. I talk to God every day.

The old man sees that Nick is staring at -

CLOSE ON:

The small, worn statue.

ABUELO

La Virgin de Guadalupe.

(then:)

One day, Juan Diego was in the mountains and la Virgen de Guadalupe appeared to him. She told him - Juan Diego! Go back to your village, and tell the Bishop to build a church here. But the Bishop did not believe him. So Juan Diego went back to the mountains and la Virgen came to him again. Juan Diego! Give your bishop these! And she filled his tilma with red roses. So Juan Diego went down to the Bishop, rolled down his tilma, and the flowers fell to the ground. The Bishop was amazed because roses were out of season. But even more amazing, when the Bishop looked up, there on Juan Diego’s tilma was the perfect image of la Virgin de Guadalupe. The church was built. Un milagro. And that’s why we have our church here. We’re waiting for our miracle.

The old man smiles and turns away. Nick stares at the small statue.
Revised version of scenes 33/34:

EXT. THE IMMIGRANT CAMP - DAY

It is empty now. The shacks and tarps and trash are gone. There is still a somewhat slowed, less expressive quality to Nick’s speech.

TO:

A faded aluminum beer can on the ground beneath grown in vegetation.

NICK (V.O.)
They tore down the camp.
(a beat)
They took them away.

TO:

The completed housing development overlooks the canyon.

NICK (V.O.)
There are houses.
(a beat)
Who built them?

TO:

An old piece of wood that supported some plastic sheeting where the old man’s shack was.

NICK (V.O.)
I never saw El Abuelo again.

TO:

The stream.

NICK (V.O.)
I talk about him.

TO:

The remains of the church.

TO:

Something from the altar. Wild flowers near it.

NICK (V.O.)
I will. Always.
EXT. THE INTERSECTION - DAY

In SLO-MO - We are in a car, passing. The old man is selling flowers. He smiles at us - his teeth are now repaired -

NICK (V.O.)
Learning... makes... us men.

- and then he’s gone.

FADE TO BLACK.