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My Last Oyster at the End of the World

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My Last Oyster at the End of the World

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Acknowledgments

To my film advisor, Sky Hopinka: Thank you for letting me make what I wanted to make, and thank you for believing in me the whole time! Your work and mentorship have informed the way this project was made more than anyone else.

To my Jewish Studies advisor, Cecile Kuznitz, thank you for encouraging me to do more. You really pushed me to try to explain things that are difficult to explain.

For my mom, who invents the right words when there aren't any, who taught me poetry.

To my dad, who read me Miss Rumphius

For Jonah, Imogen, Holden, Gideon, and Livna

Jonah—who taught me everything I know

Imogen—the light of my life

Holden—who really sees things

Gideon—a dreamer who knows what it's like to be misunderstood in New Jersey

Livna—whose name means light, who has infinite wisdom

Nikki:

“We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea, whether it is to sail or to watch - we are going back from whence we came.”

John F. Kennedy

Lily:

“Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.”

Helen Keller

Sarah:

You are my best friend in the entire world. This one's for you.

“Life is God's novel.”

Isaac Bashevis Singer

And for Rufus Butterscotch, my love

The rabbinic saying “hiddur mitzvah” or “enhancing a commandment” (derived from Exodus 15:2) necessitates that, when possible, all religious objects be aesthetically beautiful¹. In Exodus 15: 2 the following is written: “I will prepare Him a habitation; my father’s God and I will exalt him..”

I am not a religious Jew, but I recognize, in this passage, that there is something Jewish about wanting to make things beautiful. I wanted my movie to be shiny and beautiful.

I started my senior project with a title: “My Last Oyster at the End of the World.” The title stuck in my head when I didn’t have a clear notion of what my project would actually be about. I knew I wanted my project to reflect the Jewish material culture that I grew up with and from which most of my own aesthetic preoccupations stem. When I chose the image of the Oyster as a sort of guiding image (although it’s worth it to mention that there are no actual oysters in my movie, only clam shells and the scallop shell from “The Birth of Venus”) I was thinking of the supernatural power of the pearl—the way it just appears in the darkness out of a grain of sand. In my initial search for inspiration, I looked to the synagogue I went to as a kid, which I remember as being decorated like the inside of a shell. The Torah Ark was painted beige with washes of pink and a muddy light blue, and it shined like silk. It was in between carved oak paneling, a dark and earthy background for the pearl. There’s a Rabbinic parable “If I had not taken off the shell [lit. “the potsherd”], thou wouldest not have found the pearl.”² Pearls represent knowledge, shells and texts are explored and studied.

¹ *Hiddur Mitzvah the principle of enhancing a mitzvah through aesthetics*. Sefaria.
<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/202052?lang=bi>

² The Jewish encyclopedia : a descriptive record of the history, religion, literature, and customs of the Jewish people from the earliest times to the present day

The way answers are searched for in my movie starts with the computer. Here is the opening shot:



The computer I chose is the most beautiful one I could think of—the iMac G3, and I adorned it.



The ark in my childhood synagogue, The Jewish Center of Princeton, New Jersey

When I look at the above picture, I see something so structural and permanent, the ark looks as if it was carved into a wall, out of a building. The first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet—numbers 1-10 in Hebrew numerals are carved into the wall, representing the ten commandments. Lee Shai Weissbach calls the synagogue a “*mivneh simli*, a symbolic structure

fraught with meaning.”³ Later in the article, Weissbach quotes an interpretation of a synagogue designed by Frank Lloyd Wright: “[The architecture] seems to obliterate the distinction between heaven and earth.” It is no coincidence that the doors to the Torah are magical, ethereal, and pearlescent and that the surrounding walls are not only carved from wood but are also emphatically wooden—the wood is carved with swirling lines that remind us of the tree they were cut from, every line is organic and there are imperfections in the material. I can imagine being called up and staring up at the ark and feeling immersed in this material as if I was inside of a tree. After public Torah readings, a line from Proverbs is often recited: “She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her” (Prov. 3:18). The tree of life is a point of connection between the divine and the earthly. The “She” in this line from Proverbs refers to the Torah which is here imagined as a portal to God and to the divine.

I mention this because I think it is representative of a Jewish way of constructing identity and meaning from experience. In the case of the synagogue, the way one worships and the way one experiences Judaism have already been materially constructed. My childhood synagogue has some very distilled Jewish aesthetics—aesthetics that are rooted in concrete, foundational Jewish texts. Highly elemental aesthetics: wood and water and rocks which evoke the stuff of creation. I do not mention the synagogue because I really believe it to be a viable center for Jewish life, nor was it the center of my Jewish life. The truth about the Jewish Center of Princeton is that my family left it when I was very young, I’m not exactly sure why. We went back there years later when we joined a rogue Hebrew school with a rabbi and two other families who met in the building’s library. The Jews are a diasporic people, there have always been synagogues, but they have always been destroyed. Jews have been pushed out of places for essentially as long as they

³ WEISSBACH, LEE SHAI. “Buildings Fraught with Meaning: An Introduction to a Special Issue on Synagogue Architecture in Context.” *Jewish History*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–11. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41478215>.

have existed. I recently heard from a friend that her temple had a Judaica store attached to it, and that this is true of many temples. One can leave a synagogue holding stuff they can use to create their own Jewish spaces. These shops concede that the synagogue cannot hold Jewish life—there is always the need to be able to construct Jewishness elsewhere.

In the opening shot of my movie, the computer is positioned where the Torah is in the above image of the synagogue. It is adorned with and surrounded by Tchotchkes: a plastic lemon, sea shells, a marble apple, a souvenir penny collection book, the anatomical, dissectible plastic hand my grandpa kept in his doctor's office, a coin jar, a GameBoy color, a lego castle, and "The Seven Habits of a Highly Effective Teen". These objects invoke my family history—the hand and the penny collection were passed down by my grandfather. They also recreate the cluttered space that I grew up in. The seashells reference the Oyster in my title, and more generally the theme of hidden knowledge and the material barriers/interfaces between our world and the other. The apple points out the connection between the iMac and the apple of knowledge. The Gameboy, the Legos, and the book are just the objects I was surrounded by in 2012, where my movie begins.

When I was a kid, I had many questions that could not be answered to my satisfaction by my parents. My father, the scientist, answered questions scientifically:

"Where did we come from?"

"The universe started with heat and pressure"

"Where will we go when we die?"

"Nobody knows. Our bodies will decompose."

Judaism focuses more on life than on afterlife. The question of the Jewish afterlife is asked often but most Jews I know have difficulty answering it. My father certainly did but he also doesn't

believe in God which, for me, led to a lot of worrying about death. When I was a kid, I can remember imagining common deaths like disease or car accidents, but I think I considered large-scale abstract endings more, like the end of the world. The first time I was old enough to anticipate a widely known threat of apocalypse was leading up to 2012—the year that many believed to be the end of the Mayan calendar. I knew it was a myth but I remember feeling like I couldn't be sure. I googled “Will the world end” over and over again and read all kinds of responses—a lot of them said yes. I couldn't picture the end of the world, no one in my family had ever talked about the apocalypse, and they didn't talk about it when I went to synagogue either. My movie is preoccupied with imagining the end of the world. I was inspired by these crunchy, highly digital images of apocalypse that I remember seeing in 2012, and I wanted my movie to look the same way. I wanted the computer to bleed into the world of the movie, the way its information and its answers bled into my world as a kid. I see the computer as one of the Gods of this movie—the God is in the machine, as they say. The governing text, the Torah, of this movie is the internet.



My Judaism did not include answers to questions of the afterlife, and it did not necessarily include God, but it included ritual— I always sipped something from my grandparents’ kiddush cup. My ancestors knew destruction, they saw explosions in the sky, they saw their homes destroyed, and I still know how to celebrate Shabbat—rituals were still passed down, and they will continue to be passed down. In the above Shabbat scene, I am attempting, first of all, to document my family’s particular ritual (my father is the one singing the prayers, my sister is the one drinking from the cup, and the cup is the same one that has been in my family for at least two generations) and also to reflect on the way that this ritual has continued throughout my life—through all the religious and the secular turmoil, and that even when I thought the world might end, I knew I would have dinner every Friday.

In the Shabbat scene—the girl is, first of all, wearing casual clothing (religious Jews wear special garments on the sabbath) and is sort of spiritually distanced from the prayers—although she is physically present, she is “considering all that might burn.” She is thinking about the end of the world. The last character in my movie, Anokh the figure skater, was written to carry this tension between the secular present and the much more religious past. There is a moment when she is on the phone:



In the movie, I do not include the other side of the phone call. It was written that Anokh was talking to her father who was telling her to look outside, that the Messiah had returned and the way the sky looked would prove it. Anokh is busy with her life, she has to practice figure skating so she dismisses her father's requests (she thinks he's sort of crazy) and goes to practice. Later, she runs outside and looks at the sky. Anokh is horrified because she realizes her father was right.

With this character, I was thinking about a few things. First of all, her name being Anokh is important. I based her very loosely on Enoch from the book of Enoch in the dead sea scrolls. Enoch is sometimes called Hanokh in Hebrew. I cut off the H because she didn't look like a Hanokh or an Enoch. I chose the book of Enoch because it is made up of images—of visions Enoch has during his ascension to heaven. I am also interested in the book of Enoch because it is an apocryphal text: it's not part of the Hebrew biblical canon. It's this beautiful poetry that exists outside of the institution—this feels serendipitous to me. Enoch sees these great columns of fire in the sky, and he also sees mountains of crystal—of pearl, alabaster, and silver. He sees beautiful rivers, and the throne of God, he sees seven stars all lined up.⁴ I wanted my Anokh to be the first one in my movie to actually look up at the sky. I wanted her to see something beautiful and transcendent and I wanted it to terrify her. The ending image of my movie is all of the mountains stacked on top of one another, which is something that Enoch actually sees. I chose this image because it stuck in my head.

I'm not sure what the point of Anokh listening to her father in the end is. I like the idea that even when different generations or different people believe different things, that you can't

⁴ The Book of Enoch: The Second Parable: Chapter LII. (n.d.).
<https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/boe/boe055.htm>

control what is in the sky. Maybe Anokh believes her father in the end, but maybe he was wrong. I'm not sure whether the world actually ends in "My Last Oyster at the End of the World".

And now, a few notes on some "artistic liberties"

1. I thought about sound a lot—I wrote the opening song and wanted the whole thing to be noisy. Each of my three main characters wear headphones—I wanted to create a media that itself immerses and I wanted to create a world that characters experience with/through digital media.
2. I shot on many different cameras—including DSLRs, mini DV camcorders, a tiny digital point and shoot, and my iPhone. I did this because some shoots were formal and required a still camera and extensive lighting and a lot of what I shot was shot spontaneously. Smaller cameras are easier to carry around and often look better than super HD larger video cameras. My movie is also supposed to be set in 2012, and has a lot to do with a digital world. The camera work looks this way.
3. I mostly did what felt right in the moment. I filmed all the time and I didn't worry about making anything with a traditional structure.

The end!