

Process Book

“VHS” - short film

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Table of contents

Concept.....	4
The plot.....	5
Objective.....	6
Planning.....	7
Script writing.....	7
The crew.....	8
Equipment.....	8
Props.....	9
Filming location.....	10
Production.....	11
Setting the scene.....	11
Connecting with the actors.....	12
Timing.....	12
Teamwork.....	13

Post-production.....	15
File management.....	15
Software.....	17
Matching the files.....	17
Video trimming.....	18
Effects.....	19
VHS overlay.....	19
Color grading.....	20
Conclusion.....	21
Declaration of originality.....	22

Concept

Ever since I began planning out my project, I was aware of the fact that I wanted it to capture the themes of lost heritage and footage fragility. The idea came to me during one of the classes where burned film tapes, as well as lost film rolls have been mentioned. That's when I knew I wanted to create a short film which encapsulated the emotional dependency and sentimental value that we as humans attach to old videos and photos. I wanted to showcase that footage, much like memories, can appear as a warped version of its former state due to the passage of time and a lack of nurture. The aspect of cultural heritage was also vital in this case, since films often delve into themes such as alienation, linguistic estrangement, as well as a lack of ethnic identity.

The plot

The plot of the film revolves around a girl who discovers a VHS tape in an untouched box. The tape reads: “1991: play me.” She is intrigued and so she takes the tape and puts it into the VHS player. She’s soon caught off guard when she realizes that the man on the screen is wearing the same necklace as her, and also, seems oddly familiar. Throughout the course of the footage, the video interrupts and glitches with fragments of various films, which suggests that it’s been overtaped. This deprives the protagonist from a chance at restoring her childhood memories and understanding what message the man is trying to get across. When the video cuts abruptly, there's an enigmatic but firm knock at the front door, which leaves the character and the viewer in a state of precipitous uncertainty.

Objective

The main purpose of my project was to explore the connection between the past and the present through dividing the story into two separate parts - contemporary footage (the footage filmed as a representative of current events and relying on the gaze of the female protagonist) and past footage (the footage found on the VHS tape, indicative of past events and dependent on the male protagonist's standpoint). In connection to the main goal, there were other, less impactful ones and they included:

- Assessing the relationship between the father and the daughter through the screen by indirect interaction
- Creating a narrative environment in which the main protagonist is just as unaware of the upcoming events as the observer
- Placing the viewer in a state of disarray in order to generate a space for multifaceted reflection

Planning

Script writing

The first stage of planning in the context of my project was writing a script. I intended for it to be short, but also clear and specific. I started off with stage directions, since I needed to come up with the set-up that I needed for each scene. Then, I moved onto the dialogues; for my main protagonist there were almost none, since I wanted to focus on the non-verbal sphere of her character (face expressions, gestures, etc.), while for the male character, I wrote elaborate lines, because his monologue served as one of the most important elements of the short film.

VHS

The scene starts off in a grey room. We see a wide shot of a girl (known as „B”) lifting some boxes and placing them onto a pile. One of the boxes falls.

B (angrily):
Ughhh...

She crouches down to pick up the box, but all of a sudden, something catches her eye. The camera zooms onto a cassette tape titled: „1991: play me”. She’s intrigued, and so she goes through the other boxes and quickly finds a cassette player. She sits down at her desk. She plugs it in and inserts the tape. We see her face light up to imitate the first frame of the film appearing on the TV screen.

The man nods his head and stares into the void.

The man:
And if you find this...

He stops for a moment, addressing the person watching the tape.

The man:
You need to listen. My baby WILL live. Even if it means she doesn’t know where she’s from. *“Insert common Slavic words that demonstrate concern”.*

The man covers his face in defeat. B’s face frowns at the sound of words she doesn’t seem to recognize.

The man:
But I have to do this. I have got to destroy THEM. I-I hate-

The tape skips a part again, this time revealing the part of the movie: „A Short Film About Killing” by Krzysztof Kieślowski where a man is blindfolded and kidnapped. B doesn’t say anything, just stares at the screen paralyzed. The frame cuts again and it shows the man closer to the camera.

The man:
...one thing. They won’t take me alive.

The crew

After I'd written the script, the next step was to find a reliable crew who'd be willing to help me on the particular date that I had picked out. After asking for volunteers, this was the final result:

- Elvina Mullakhmetova - the main protagonist of the film, actress
- Timur Valeev - the main male character, actor
- Alyana Liepach - DOP, assistant director
- Reem Atia - DOP
- Hassan Olanrewaju Tihamiyu Adebisi - clapper loader
- Rafael Hennig - sound
- Egor Maslov - sound

Equipment

The other step in the planning process included renting the equipment. Since I came up with the concept for the film, I decided to use two separate cameras from the university arsenal in order to create space for various takes and recycle them during the editing process. I also rented two sets of lights, a RODE microphone and a light reflector amongst other things.

Props

The additional aspect of planning involved finding a VHS tape device. Unfortunately, due to a lack of preparations, I had to purchase a MP3 tape player instead of an actual VCR and that music cassette, along with the walkman I bought, were ultimately used while filming. Even though a person who isn't well-oriented about film probably wouldn't have noticed the difference, it was still an unprofessional choice and poor decision making on my side.



Filming location

The last and final step of the process was deciding on a filming location. Due to certain scheduling difficulties, I had to settle for a green screen studio and photography studios at the university premises. We filmed in the green screen room during the first filming day and later filmed in two separate photography studios throughout the second day. This decision turned out to be a problematic one, however, since the footage we filmed didn't turn out the way I wanted it to and it included a lot of inconsistencies in the context of lighting and sound.

Production

Setting the scene

One of the first steps of the production process was setting up the basis for each scene and planning out the layout from the point of view of both cameras. This part was quite difficult, since I didn't have a designated group of set designers, but rather the entirety of my film crew as my helpers. Still, we managed to work through the most jarring elements of the scene (like the huge green screen during the first day of filming or shelves and tables that didn't necessarily fit my vision) and eliminate the distractions to create as much of a neutral environment as possible.

Connecting with the actors

Another extremely important aspect was building a safe space for the actors to express themselves and forming a bond with them, which remains one of my favourite memories from this project. I guided both actors in the direction I needed, but I simultaneously tried to prioritize their outlooks and listened to their ideas, some of which sometimes turned out to work better than what was written in the initial script. It's also fair to mention that since my female actress barely had any lines and my male actor's character was monologue-based, I established a different relationship with the both of them. In Elvina's case, I mostly focused on giving her tips about body language and her expressionism, while in regards to Timur, I focused on explaining intonation, tone and idiolect that I thought would fit the most in the context of his character.

Timing

While considering what would be important during the process of filming, I might've underestimated one of the most dominant elements - timing. Due to a short amount of time during which I was allowed to use each of the rooms, the time limit immediately turned out to be tricky. By the time we were two hours into filming throughout the first day, we'd only managed to record three scenes. The timing issue improved significantly once the second day of filming arrived, mostly due to the fact that the crew was smaller and therefore significantly easier to manage.

Teamwork

Another important aspect of this project was the fact that we all had to work together and communicate with one another not only from a technical standpoint, but also in relation to acting, scheduling, cleaning, etc. I personally never enjoyed group settings that much, which is partially why I wrote the script and became the sole director for this short film, however I realized that when the crew understands basic cues and consists of not only flexible, but also honest and hard-working individuals, it's a great opportunity to engage in mutual effort.

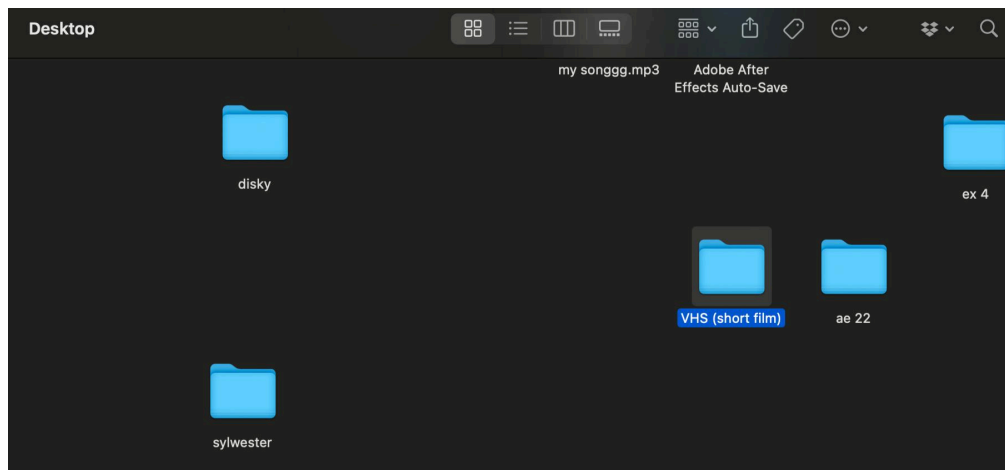


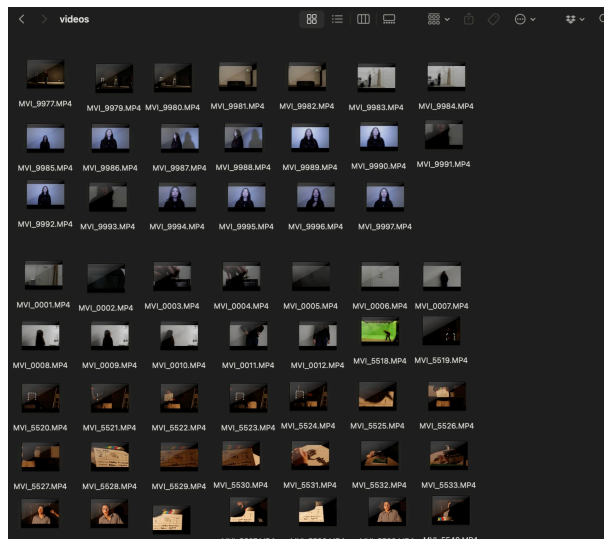
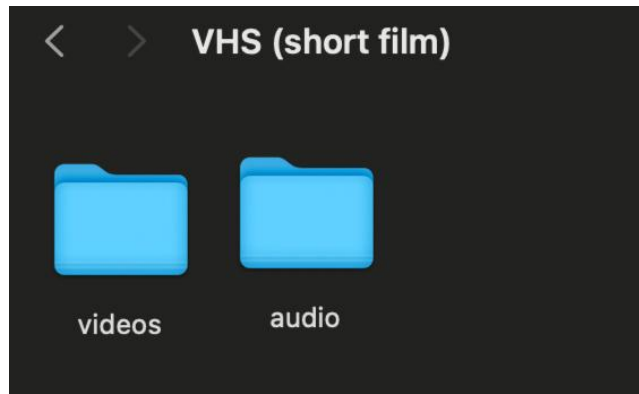


Post-production

File management

As we were done with the filming process, I began transferring all of the files onto my laptop. Since both of the SD cards were given to be, it wasn't an issue to create a folder named: "VHS: short film" and relocate them. After careful consideration, I split the files into two folders: "videos" and "audio". I haven't renamed them individually since it would've taken a long time, however they were all assigned a number and I was able to navigate through them while editing.





Software

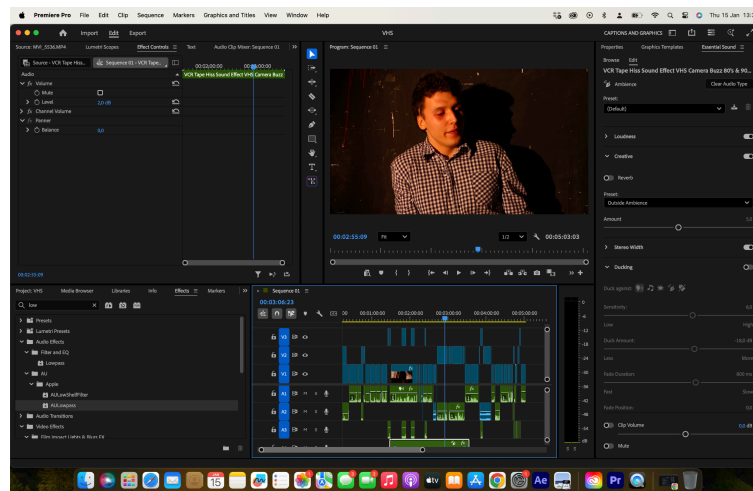
Ever since the start, I knew I would be using Premiere Pro 2025 for my project. I'd previously considered using After Effects, but due to its flaws such as memory shortage, crashes and laggy playback, the final decision was quite easy.

Matching the files

One of the main challenges during the editing process was exporting the files and trying to match the footage with the correct audio track. Since I decided not to rename them due to a timing limitation, I had to sort through every audio file separately until I found the one whose sound waves aligned perfectly with the video layer. I believe it would've been easier if I had planned it out prior and named each track, but I was eventually able to match them without any major setbacks.

Video trimming

The footage gathered during the filming process required a lot of trimming and cutting. I strived for my film to be around five minutes long, which caused me to shorten each scene significantly. This process not only made the entire workflow smoother, since I had less running time on the timeline, but it also allowed me to cut out unnecessarily long, monotone clips and direct my attention towards the most important shots.



Effects

Effects played a major part in my final result. Since Premiere Pro doesn't offer that many varieties in relation to effects (unless you invest in plug-ins which I wasn't able to do), I had to use the tools available, which included mostly: LowPass, Pitch Shifter and DeNoise (audio), as well as Brightness and Contrast, Lumetri Color and Lens Distortion.

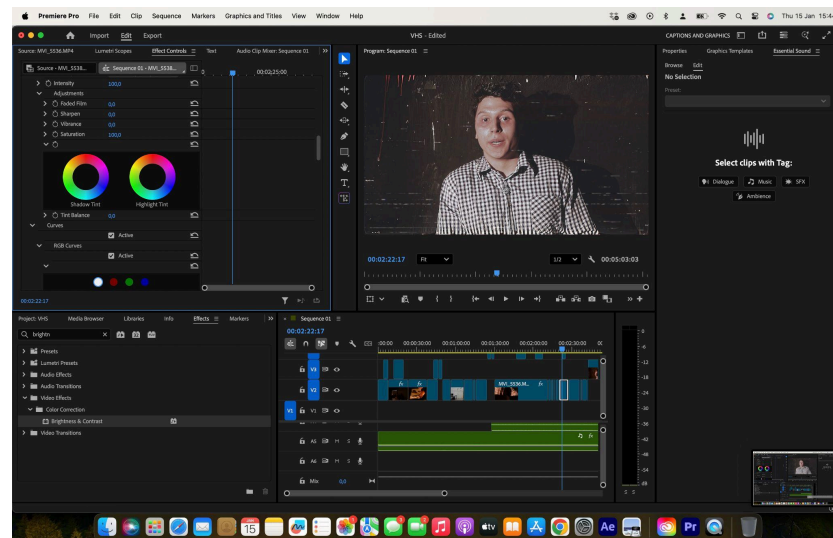
VHS overlay

For some time, I wondered how I could achieve the look of an old video tape that has also been tampered with throughout the years. Since I had limited resources and time, I opted for the most accessible option - a VHS overlay. I spent a long time searching for the one that wasn't too scratchy or rough and matched up with the length of the clips. It took a while, but I eventually found a free one on youtube and implemented it into my timeline by changing the blending mode to "Screen" and opacity to 35%.



Color grading

The final step of completing my project was to colorgrade it, especially the part where the VHS tape is playing. For the clips with my female protagonist, I used significantly warmer, yellowish tones, while for the sequence with the male character, I lowered the saturation and adjusted the contrast in a way that created more of a ragged, vintage look.



Conclusion

If I were to summarize the experience of directing a short film for the very first time, I'd say that I could've achieved something better if I had only spent more time planning, listening and organizing everything. It was a project where I noticed a pattern of challenges rather than rewards, most of which were due to my lack of motivation and bad decision making. It truly was wonderful getting to put my vision into good use, but at the same time, I feel like I'm capable of a greater effort. Still, this experience taught me how to work alongside people. It shaped a path for my future projects and tested my patience in the best way. Though I'm not the happiest with the result I currently have, there's nothing stopping me from reshaping it in a way that would allow me to be proud of it.

Declaration of originality

I hereby confirm that I produced the work assigned to me independently and that I have not ever submitted it in any other course.

Signature: _____

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Np', is centered within a light gray rectangular box.

Date: _____ 08/02/2026 _____