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**April 2005**

**Reflections: Original Works in Video**



# **REFLECTIONS: ORIGINAL WORKS IN VIDEO**

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## **Sufficiency Course Sequence:**

<b>Course Number</b>	<b>Course Title</b>	<b>Term</b>
EN 1251	Introduction to Literature	A02
EN 2211	Elements of Writing	C03
EN 2222	Theatre Workshop	D03
MU 3613	Digital Sound Design	B03
COMM 101	Communications and Culture	Fall 2004 (Clark University)

Presented to: Professor Laura Jehn Menides  
Department of Humanities & Arts  
D Term, 2005  
LJM-HU78

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of  
The Humanities & Arts Sufficiency Program  
Worcester Polytechnic Institute  
Worcester, Massachusetts

## **ABSTRACT**

*Reflections: Original Works in Video* represents a culmination of five courses in the Humanities and Arts. The work is a return to the style of music-influenced videography I started with some six years ago. The first piece, on the immigration experience, is set to Russian Rap, while the second, on ballroom dance, features a jazzy foxtrot melody. *Reflections* is so named because it touches upon subjects close to my heart and being.

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# INTRODUCTION

I work in video because it represents a unique mix of disciplines. On the one hand film is artistic, visual, and inherently creative, on the other hand video is often technically challenging. The artistic expression combined with the technical necessities of the digital video landscape permits me to communicate in what I hope is a captivating and effective fashion.

Shooting visually-interesting video calls for visualizing the desired effect, proper composition, and appropriate and light and shadow. My background in web and graphic design often helps me here. I feel that my strength lies in identifying and capturing beauty, tasks well suited for working with a camera. I try to use my intuition to separate the interesting from the banal and compose a fitting sequence of events. This ability serves me not only during the shooting itself, but also in the post-production process where many important visual decisions are made.

In addition to the artistic requirements, digital video requires a relatively high degree of technical knowledge. As an individual with a technical degree and a love for all things tech, I enjoy the challenge of getting the most out of the possibilities DV offers. Desktop non-linear editing software has become very sophisticated in recent years and allows for incredible flexibility in postproduction. On recent occasions I have been able to delve into areas of chroma-keying, motion tracking and stabilization, compositing, deinterlacing techniques, and video compression, all technically challenging topics.

The goal of this WPI Humanities and Arts Sufficiency project was to return to my roots in video production, to the style of work that I started with six years ago. Back then I worked on short pieces which were nearly music-video like in their structure. I likewise wanted to create shorts that would be self-reflecting in nature and address significant aspects of my life. The near-music-video form is appropriate for such reflection as it has proven to be flexible and highly interpretive.

I have completed five humanities and arts courses in preparation for this sufficiency project. WPI does not offer a film program, so I have tried to choose my classes from a number of related disciplines that would most strongly complement my work. As a result, over the past four

years, I have completed classes in literature, theater, writing, digital sound design, and in communications and culture.

I began my humanities classes with "Introduction to Literature" taught by my present sufficiency advisor, Professor Laura Menides. This class introduced me to a broad overview of topics from various literary genres. The class went through a critical analysis of short stories, poetry, essays and drama. The dramas were most relevant with regard to my present sufficiency, as reading the works of playwrights such as Shakespeare helped me learn more about captivating audiences and telling stories in a limited amount of time.

In my sophomore year I was enrolled in Professor Code's "Elements of Writing" which gave me the freedom to create writing of various sorts. I worked on developing several short stories as well as poems and a Russian-English song-lyric translation. The class also provided me with feedback from my peers, which I valued and appreciated. In addition, I completed a "Theater Workshop" class in my sophomore year, which proved to be a highly relevant experience. Professor Dean O'Donnell lead the class through discussions concerning the various Sam Shepard plays the covered during the term. I also took a role in a WPI production of "Dining Out" by Ryan Petti, which was part of the New Voices festival in 2003. Acting in front of a live audience was a new and exciting experience and provided me with a little bit of an actor's perspective.

In my junior year I completed a digital sound design class with Professor Frederick Bianchi. Topics included the nature of sound as well as producing, capturing and playing back digital audio. The class also included hands-on labs in which we generated and utilized various sounds and effects to create a sound track for video sequences. Music and sound is very important in my productions, thus I found this class to be both applicable and interesting.

In the fall of my senior year I branched out to the Worcester College Consortium and enrolled in "Communication and Culture" at Clark University. This semester-long class covered a number of fascinating topics under the direction of film Professor Tim Shary. We discussed and looked at the creation and transmission of various communication messages, studied related media, and considered influences in the development of communication. Specific attention was paid to visual media and film, namely the role of film and television in society, the perspectives of the actor, the camera, and the audience, as well as other relevant topics.

I believe that the five classes described above gave me a strong foundation for the completion of my sufficiency project. Each class explored relevant and unique topics which helped build my base of knowledge and influenced my work. In addition to these classes, I also leaned heavily on my previous experiences in video production.

As I mentioned earlier I began shooting short videos some six years ago in my high school video production class. I took to the medium and worked with a close friend on an independent study in film in my senior year of high school. Together we shot and edited “The Most Dangerous Game,” a 35-minute short film based on a short story by Richard Connell. We screened the film to our friends, family and classmates. The Most Dangerous Game was a significant leap in the technical quality of my productions, and it was well received by our audience.

Over the course of my four years at WPI I worked on a second short film, titled “The Butcher,” based on an original script written by one of the actors. The Butcher was again very technically challenging as it relied on extensive use of blue-screening. I completed this 20-minute film just prior to the start of my Sufficiency project, and will be screening it alongside these two new shorts.

## **INFLUENCES: A HIGHER ORDER**

The immigration experience forever changes a person. It takes everything one knows and understands and flips it upside down. I was eight year old when my family left St. Petersburg, Russia for the eastern shore of the United States of America. Children adapt easier to a new life, but they too are strongly affected. At the age of eight I was an independently thinking, literate individual. Many of my personality traits had already made themselves known, and I had time to form a world view. Up until January 17th, 1991, this view did not include America.

Fourteen years have passed, and though my English is now stronger than my Russian ever was, I am still a child of the immigrant experience. I associate strongly with my roommate, Stefan, also an immigrant from St. Petersburg. We understand each other on a different level from my American friends. We live by unspoken common courtesies and relate on our evaluation of the world.

It was he who first introduced me to a music genre close to his heart. Surprisingly, this was Russian Rap and Hip-Hop. Stefan never appreciated it back in Russia, but listening to the lyrics here in the States makes us feel a little closer to our old home. Songs about drinking tea in the kitchen, knowing your neighborhood, and the importance of family, all ring true. One song in particular, KASTA's "Na Parayadok Vishe" (A Higher Order) has become one of our favorites. This song, whose lyrics are included on the next page, relates the Russian immigrant experience.

The song holds a conversation between two friends, one leaving for a life abroad, and one who tried it, but returned home. KASTA's message is about recognizing the relative levels of importance you place upon things in your life. Specifically, the group raps about remembering your roots and from whence you emerged. In many ways, this has become a focal point of my immigrant experience. Priorities vary, but remembering my roots takes on a certain "higher order."

## КАСТА - На Порядок Выше

Припев:

Не забывай свои корни, помни  
Есть вещи на порядок выше, слышишь  
Говорят отсюда надо сваливать по идее,  
Встать на ноги, завести семью, расти детей,  
И может это правильно,  
но прошлое не может быть оставлено и брошено,  
позже найдено.  
Не забывай свои корни, помни  
Есть вещи на порядок выше

Эй братка постой! Куда спешишь?  
Присядь со мной, расскажи как жизнь  
Ты чё такой худой стал? Курить будешь?  
Не куришь? Красавец! Какой раз уже бросаешь,  
Ты смотри, не узнал сразу, значит я богатым буду  
Сто лет тебя не видел, рассказывай откуда ты,  
Куда спешишь? Аж запыхался  
Скажи может с кем из наших старых виделся,  
Как там кто? Все живы, здоровы?  
Слава Богу! Да я-то что, не спрашивай, всего по  
немногу

Такая жизнь, в основном ..и пинаю, сам знаешь  
Слушай чё хотел спросить, пацаны твои сказали  
Уезжаешь за границу жить, это правда?  
Да ты чё, а когда? После завтра?  
Ну даешь старик, мог бы и позвонить  
А чё так надо ж проводить  
И стало быть навсегда едешь безвозвратно  
Ты хоть скажи куда, хоу, тогда понятно  
Да ну не зарекайся, ещё вернёшься обратно  
Я и сам до дыр затёр шкуру эмигранта  
Тебя ж я знаю как брата, а здесь несладко  
Без базара, твоя правда  
Что хочешь досыта есть? Хочешь крепко спать?  
Тогда ты думаешь давно надо было рвать  
Да только видел я те рожи, ты там засохнешь  
А заглянешь вовнутрь, от тоски сдохнешь  
Там пусто, а ты братан - русский  
Тебе это важно, а остальное ..й с ним  
Пойми здесь исповедь истова, искренность истинна  
Душа на рассвете как капля водки чистая  
А там ты будешь живым среди зомби  
Незнайкой в Солнечном городе  
Зато узнаешь цену золоту, улыбки русской девочки  
Сравнишь её с импортной овечкой, что как икру их  
мечет

Я эту кухню знаю, лайнер поднимет в воздух  
И ты поймешь что прогоняешь, да только поздно  
Вижу себя ты жалеешь, ну давай вперед смелее  
Только не жги мостов да возвращайся скорее  
Давай братан чиркани хоть пару строк оттуда  
Пойду кулю чё похавать, прощаться не будем

Припев (2 раза)

## KASTA – A Higher Order (translated by Boris Masis)

Chorus:

Don't forget your roots, remember  
There are things of a higher order, you hear  
They say you need to run from here,  
Stand on your own two feet, start a family, raise children,  
And maybe this is true,  
But the past cannot be left behind,  
To be found later.  
Don't forget your roots, remember  
There are things of a higher order

Hey brother, wait up! Where you hurrying?  
Come sit with me, tell me of your life  
Why are you so skinny? Want a smoke?  
Don't smoke? Saint! How many times have you quit now,  
I didn't recognize you at first, means I'll be a rich man  
Haven't seen you for 100 years, tell me where are you  
coming from,  
Where are you hurrying? You're winded  
Tell me, maybe you've seen someone from the old gang  
How is everyone? Alive and well?  
Thank God! And me, don't ask, little by little  
Such a life, mostly wasting time, you know it  
I wanted to ask, your boys told me  
You're leaving us for good, is that true?  
You're joking, when? Day after tomorrow?  
Wow old pal, you could have called  
We have to celebrate the going-away  
So you're leaving forever, without return  
So tell me where, oh, I understand  
Don't start with that, you'll yet return,  
I myself wore the immigrant's fur to its holes  
I know you like a brother, and here it's not easy  
Without fuss, it's your right  
So you want to eat your fill? Sleep tight at night?  
So why the doubt? You should have ran long ago  
It just that I've seen those grimace faces, you'll dry up  
there  
And when you look within, you'll die of loneliness  
Its empty there, and you brother – are a Russian  
That's what's important to you, to hell with everything else  
Understand that here is truth and sincerity  
The soul is free and clear like a drop of vodka  
And there you'll be alive amongst the zombies  
A "know-nothing in the sunny city"  
Although you'll learn the value of gold –  
a smile from a Russian girl  
Compare her with an import girl that runs around mad  
I know how it goes; a plane will raise you in the air  
And you'll understand that you're kicking yourself out, but  
too late  
I see you're sorry for yourself, well go bravely ahead,  
But don't burn your bridges, and return soon  
Alright brother, write a couple lines from there  
I'll go grab some food, we won't say goodbye

Chorus (2 times)

## **INFLUENCES: WPI BALLROOM**

My history with ballroom dance is an unexpected one. I was not pushed by my parents to dance from an early age, nor I was I exposed to it at family gatherings or in my immediate circle friends. Rather, I began to ballroom dance without much reason one evening with the then WPI Dance Club. This was an organization in its infancy, without much structure, or a regular lesson schedule.

We danced in our socks, sometimes above the auditorium, looking at our reflections in the windows, and sometimes in the racquetball courts. We became friends as much as we became ballroom dancers. Little by little our organization picked up speed and professionalism, we got jackets, a new instructor, and a new name; the WPI Ballroom Dance Team. I was elected vice president in my sophomore year and president in my junior and senior years. Things became more serious.

Looking back on my WPI career I thought about the team as a reflection of growth over time. I haven't done everything I would have liked, but a lot has changed before my eyes. The team was my baby. I looked upon our practices though a video camera as a parent tries to capture the youth of his child. I encapsulated a moment in time, April 2005 in the senior year of my WPI education, within the walls of my organization.

I know that the team will change when I leave, some for the better, some perhaps not. I am trying to start letting go. I can't go on feeling the team's pains and successes personally. We have new officers, new members and new priorities. I will no doubt feel something missing in the time to come, and will no doubt watch this ballroom video often, but I will also move on. The WPI Ballroom Dance Team has been an adventure of my own creation, and I am saying goodbye.

## **PRELIMINARY SCENE LISTS**

The following two pages are scene lists which were written prior to the commencement of filming. I did not write full-blown scripts primarily because these two works in video feature no dialogue. I also preferred the flexibility of having a pre-written scene list, but not a shot-by shot listing, as much of the expressive nature of the works came from on-the-spot impromptu interpretation of the environment. And in fact, these original scene lists do not perfectly match with the flow of the completed pieces. Some scenes were not filmed as they seemed unnecessary, where as others were included by intuition, and without prior planning.

A HIGHER ORDER		
No.	Location	Description
1	Unknown Location	
1.1		Turntable; hands put on a record. It spins, crackling
2	Founders Dormitory	Inside a room, following a male character
2.1		Flat-panel monitor; browsing the web, scrolling
2.2		Close up of face; eyes are glazed over, pushing monitor away
2.3		Opening the window, turning the handle
2.4		Looking out the window, bug screen
2.5		Walking down the stairs, stairwell
2.6		Pushing through the doors, focus on card key access, cold cement
2.7		Walking outside, flash to white
3	City, Worcester	Walking on the street (black and white)
3.1		Feet walking, shot from ahead (close, mid), rhythmical, in beat to music
3.2		Wind blows through hair, spring is setting in
3.3		Reflections in store windows
3.4		Reflections in puddles
3.5		Sitting on bench, people are passing
3.6		The city moves, the character is still
3.7		Shots of the city from above, buildings, clouds, birds
4	Founders Dormitory	Drinking tea with a second male character
4.1		Turning on the light
4.2		Watering the plant
4.3		Pouring water from the tea pot
4.4		Sitting in chairs
4.5		Laughing
4.6		Putting tea bag in cup
4.7		Putting sugar in cup
4.8		Cutting pieces of a pie
4.9		Sudden zoom out, fade to black, credits

<b>WPI BALLROOM</b>		
<b>No.</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	Alden Hall	Setup and Start
1.1	Opening heavy Alden doors; coming from the darkness into the light	
1.2	Before practice, getting organized, shuffling in	
1.3	Chatting, talking, putting on shoes	
1.4	Scrolling through the music system	
1.5	Conversations; "What are we working on today?"	
1.6	Norm (instructor) walks in, shaking hands, smiling	
1.7	Norm; turning pages of the dance syllabus	
2	Alden Hall	Practice – leaders and followers on separate sides
2.1	Two sides, guys and girls	
2.2	Norm demonstrates the moves, grabs a partner	
2.3	Group repeats, views down the line	
2.4	Feet moving in unison, shuffling	
2.5	Norm; "Try it with a partner"	
3	Alden Hall	Practice – with partner
3.1	The walk across to a partner – nervous, diverted eyes, the understanding, the smiles: couples join	
3.2	Couples are together, the stumbling, the apologies	
3.3	Couples are together, the success and the smiles	
4	Alden Hall	Social Dance
4.1	Dark, mysterious atmosphere	
4.2	Music and dancing, no structure, colored lights, tight space	
5	Ballroom Dance Competition	
5.1	Girls in costumes, putting on the numbers, pins, the Latin shirts	
5.2	Lots of people, nervous energy and excitement is high	
5.3	Team banners and jackets	
5.4	Practicing on the carpets	
5.5	Waiting in line, looking ahead, anxious	
5.6	Walking onto the floor, the music starts	
5.7	Judges with pads walk around, writing down numbers	
5.8	Cheering from the sidelines	
5.9	Seriousness on the competitors faces	
5.10	Music stops, the finish, smiles, relief, fade to black	
6	Alden Hall	
6.1	Heavy doors of Alden, from light to dark	
6.2	Music, tango, credits	

## **ANALYSIS: A HIGHER ORDER**

*A Higher Order* was largely filmed in accordance with the established scene list. The outdoor city shots were taped over a period of two days in Worcester, MA. The main character, played by Stefan Slonevskiy, my roommate and fellow immigrant from St. Petersburg Russia, wore headphones in most shots. Through these he listened to the lyrics of KASTA's song, in its original and remixed versions. I hoped that doing this would put him in the mood of the music, as well as influence his step pattern to reflect the beats. In the future I would also like to listen to music while filming, as camera work can certainly be rhythmical as well.

On the first day of filming we deviated from the scene list by including Stefan buying and eating a hotdog. It was spontaneous, but it worked, and added extra symbolism. He was consuming America. We likewise improvised on the ending tea scene. Originally I had planned to mount the camera on a tripod and film myself and Stefan enjoying the evening tea. However, Stefan had invited one of our mutual friends, Yuriy Lande, an immigrant from Moscow, over to our dorm room. Thus Yuriy entered the scene and became part of the video. Having two characters allowed me the freedom to be more creative and mobile with the camera.

*A Higher Order* was color processed to give it a dark, saturated, look. Browns and yellows were over-emphasized creating a vintage, but also a grimy feel. The following pages include captures from the video and explain some of the symbolism and thought that went into the scenes during the shooting and editing of the final piece.



“A Higher Order” opens with a shot of a spinning record. The record is symbolic of memories of a bygone era. Quite literally, records were the music distribution system of my childhood.



We jump to present day America. The character is shown browsing the internet. He stares at the monitor with glazed over eyes. The new technology is not important or captivating to the character. The experience is seemingly mindless. Finally, he’s had enough and rises to his feet.



The streets the character finds himself on are not picturesque. This is not the America paved with gold. For the majority of the early portion of the video the character appears deep in thought and generally keeps his gaze down.



The song lyrics ask “*So tell me where [are you immigrating to], oh, I understand*” at the moment the character passes a dollar bill to the hotdog vendor. The hotdog itself is also a symbol of America. By buying and eating it, the character is submitting himself to the culture of the new land.



The song preaches *"Its empty there, and you brother – are a Russian, That's what's important to you, to hell with everything else."* That moment becomes a reflection point for the character. He is shown paused in the middle of the city. Close up shots of his face are used between flashes of white. The character is thinking about what it means to remember his roots and origin.



The bird which flies across the sky symbolizes the breaking point in the video. This shot comes in the midst of the depressing Worcester landscape, immediately following several gloomy shots of homeless men. At this point the character realizes his need as well as desire to maintain his roots.



Shots of the character walking back to his apartment are decidedly more uplifting. The character is looking up and forward. The city does not appear as grimacing.



The character turns around, a symbol for remembering and returning to his roots. This shot is followed by the metaphysical return to his childhood, Russia, and spinning of the record.



Much of Russian socialization focuses around drinking of tea. The character invites a fellow Russian immigrant to join him for tea and deserts. Together they socialize in their native tongue, and are able to relax.



The second to last shot shows a pensive character. He is satisfied for the moment, in the company of his Russian friend; however he does not forget that he must make conscious efforts in order to maintain his roots.

## **ANALYSIS: WPI BALLROOM**

Mood-wise *WPI Ballroom* is a considerably different piece from *A Higher Order*. The latter tends to dark and depressing, while *WPI Ballroom* features smiling faces, jazzy music, and dancing. Yet in creative terms, the pieces are similar. Both were shot and edited with the intention of influencing the viewer's mood through footage and music. I consider the ability to influence mood and induce feelings as one of the biggest things a film-maker can achieve. If one can change how a viewer feels during, or perhaps even after a film, something real has been accomplished. The work will be memorable.

*WPI Ballroom* seemed to edit itself. Once I selected Frank Sinatra's "Mr. Success" as a fitting audio backdrop, shots flowed together in sequence with little effort. The foxtrot was upbeat and called for facial close-ups as well as smiling and laughing (see screen captures on the next page). I found that the music was a good choice for integrating the various dance sequences, as the piece features swing, bolero, cha cha, and foxtrot itself, filmed over three Dance Team practice sessions.

I hadn't fully intended for the video to be quite as radiant as it turned out. The scene list presented earlier called for additional drama in the way of selecting partners, as well as competing at a collegiate ballroom competition. I was unable to obtain footage of a competition, and thus left that section out. What remained was a very optimistic and lovable view of the organization. I did not mind that, after all, it is my baby. The final credits sequence features my legs walking across the floor of Alden Hall. I could not resist inserting a little bit of myself into a work reflecting the WPI Ballroom Dance Team.



The opening shot features the doors of Alden hall. The camera enters from the dark into the light of the dance floor; the music is grand and inviting. Welcome. In the next sequence we see impressive lighting fixtures, woodwork, red curtains, and dancing, the atmosphere is one of celebration and grandeur. You are brought into what is nearly another time period; accompanied by “Mr. Success,” recorded by Frank Sinatra in 1958.



Smiles and laughter are inserted generously, making them part of the flow and the dancing. I had not shot these sequences on purpose, but rather many of the close-ups happened to include smiling faces.



Normand, our instructor, played a central role in the piece. He controlled the action in a way; separating and combining lines of leaders and followers, and by stopping the class for demonstrations and suggestions.



There is certainly a certain amount of sex appeal involved in the dancing. Ballroom pairs the sexes, and expressive and seductive dancing is often the goal.

The short ends on a positive note with a laugh shared by Norm and the students. The final sequence shows my legs walking across the Alden floor to the sounds of Norm teaching a lesson.

## CONCLUSION

*Reflections* deals with two subjects that have been on my mind frequently over the past four years at WPI. It is a fitting culmination project for both the Humanities and Arts classes I have taken as an undergraduate, as well as for the growth I experienced as an individual over that time. I have enjoyed putting the pieces together, and am happy that I will have something additional to remember these years by.

The work has been satisfying from an artistic point of view. I had wanted to do more of the music-influenced expressive pieces from my high school days, and the opportunity presented itself. I am grateful for the help of my friends, Stefan, Yura, Lawrence, Norm, and everyone at the WPI Ballroom Dance Team. I am also grateful for the flexibility and design of the WPI Plan, and the advising of my sufficiency project by Professor Laura Menides.