BTEC Level 3 Creative Media Production

unit 4 evaluation

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Shadows is a 3-minute-long supernatural horror short film following a teenage boy walking home at late at night who is tormented and chased by a hooded and masked figure lurking in the depths of the darkness.

I worked alone for this project, writing, directing, filming, and editing it. I feel that I worked efficiently and at a competent level, and was able to effectively overcome unforeseen obstacles and challenges that came in my way.

Pre-production

To begin with, I conducted audience research, including a questionnaire, multiple interviews, and a focus group to allow me to better understand my target viewers. Through this, I was able to understand who the audience is (demographics) and what they enjoy (psychographics).
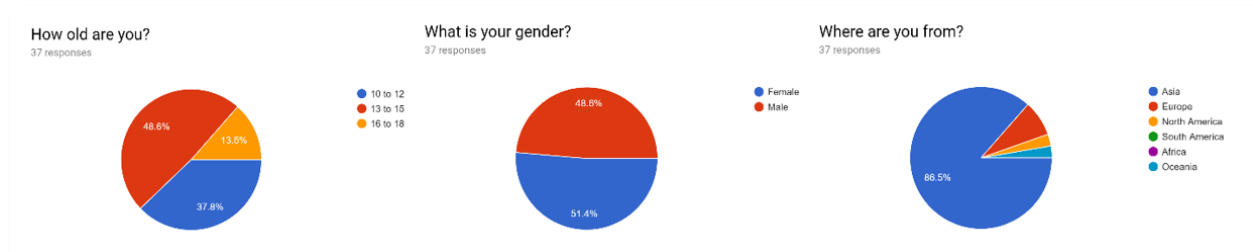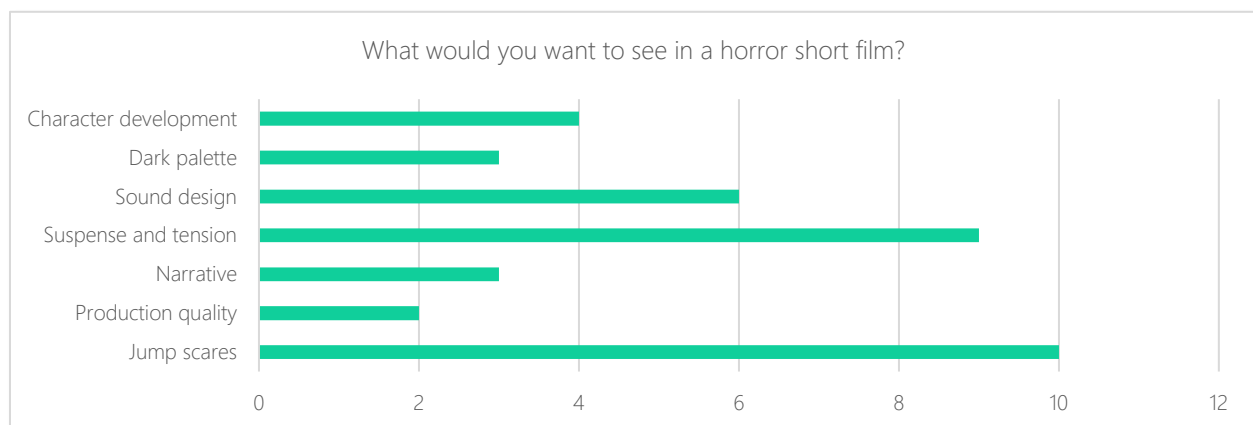

Figure 1: Questionnaire responses

Figure 2: A questionnaire response

1) What did you think of the treatment? Why?
2) How could I improve?
3) Do you like horror short films? Why?
4) What conventions do you think are intrinsic to the horror genre?
5) If you were to watch a horror film, would you sympathize with the protagonist? Why?
6) If you were to watch a horror film, would it be for entertainment or for another purpose?
7) What genres of film do you like? Why?
8) How would you describe yourself? Psychographics?
9) Do you think horror films do well financially? Why?

Figure 3: Interview questions

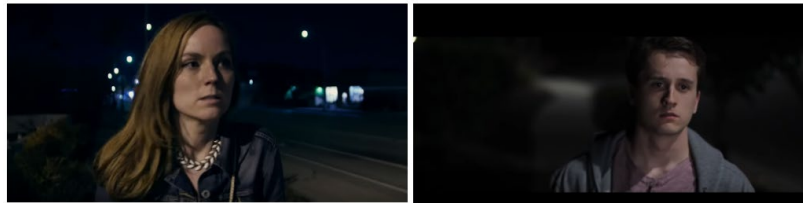*Left: The Moonlight Man / Right: 2AM: The Smiling Man*

Figure 4: Shot analyses and comparison

Left: Larry / Right: Annie

Figure 5: Shot analyses and comparison

From all these research methods, I was able to understand the following.

Audiences desire horror films that make use of the relevant genre conventions over a largely coherent narrative, but still look for logic and sense in the actions of characters. A proper buildup of tension is necessary, along with jump scares.

Additionally, the majority of viewers prefer cliffhangers over anticlimactic endings. The addition of a score and high-quality, relevant Foley sounds boost the overall production value, as well as good colour choices, a dark palette, and competent camera angles and moves. My treatment needs to be developed to become more original, as well as end on a cliffhanger.

The better part of my audience are mainstreamers looking for diversion in a horror short film. They are Asian males and females of age 13 to 15.

Figure 6: Research summary

This research was useful as it shaped the narrative and my style of production, with an aim to please a specific audience and an understanding of narratives and conventions they like. The influence this research had on my final work is visible in a multitude of ways; for example, the questionnaire and interviews showed that viewers look most for jump scares in a horror short film. To satisfy this desire, I included two appropriate jump scares in my film – one when the antagonist appears, and the other when he suddenly begins to chase the protagonist.

Figure 7: Glitch cuts and a jump scare when the antagonist appears   Figure 8: A canted angle and jump scare when the chase begins

I also learnt that the audience expects a long build-up of suspense before jump scares, so I built up tension through the audio and false alarms in the narrative throughout the first 1 minute and 20 seconds.

Figure 9 and 10: False alarms in the narrative, as well as lots of layering in sound to build tension

I feel that I was able to skilfully carry out research methods and employ what I had learnt in my film well, and that this boosted the overall production value of the film. My research was precise, accurate and unbiased, but was also varied and revealing.

Additionally, I learnt that audiences are not as concerned about the coherency in the narrative or the flow of the story than they are about the conformation to the genre conventions. As such, I chose to focus on ensuring that my horror film looked like one through the use of a cool and dark palette, handheld movements, convincing acting (through effective rehearsals), low and high angle choices, appropriate colour correction, sound design, etcetera. However, this choice hindered coherency of the storyline, so next time I will utilize my audience feedback better by making more substantial changes.

To further develop my pre-production, I conducted desk research to identify filmmaking techniques and conventions employed by and conformed to by professional storytellers. I watched about 25 horror short films, most of them supernatural, and took notes on location, characters and appearance, tools, camera movements and angles, and colours. I also analysed the narratives, noting down the enigma, binary opposition, and equilibrium/disequilibrium/new equilibrium progressions. This helped me in understanding the conventions of horror short films – such as short equilibriums and new equilibriums, and long disequilibrium scenes – and identifying key filmmaking techniques – such as the use of shallow depth of focus and handheld shots.

Name: Salt
Horror subgenre: supernatural
Length: 2:00

Location	Appearance/characters	Tools	Miscellaneous
Creepy house A small, cluttered two-storied (as shown) house – gives the sense that characters are confined and possibly not well off. The bed is small and cheap-looking, and there is not much light (although this also conforms to the conventions of the horror genre).	**Woman and (girl) child** Wearing plain, simple clothes. The girl is wearing a mask for (assumed) oxygen/medicine delivery, as she is sick. Both characters are female, and this is used to highlight their submissiveness and helplessness in the face of the male demon that chases them.	**Oxygen mask, medicine pills** Shows the girl is sick and heavily reliant on medicine to live. **Crucifixes** Mythological significance intrinsic to the style of many horror films. **Old car, messy house** Creates a sense of hurriedness (house) and economic status (poor).	• Warm colours → cool palette • Canted angles • Quick and deliberate motion from camera • Very immersive, non-diegetic sound • Supernatural foley

Enigma	Binary opposition	Narrative
What is the monster? What happens when mother and daughter are cornered in the car?	Mostly between the monster and the mother. The girl is a passenger.	**Equilibrium:** Girl is safe, but unwell **Disequilibrium:** Salt is the only thing that keeps them safe from a monster A ghostlike character starts chasing the mother **New equilibrium:** Mother runs away, tries to get away from monster with child. Sense of an ending, because the rain washes away the protective salt

Figure 11: Extract of my notes on one of the films I watched and analysed

After this, I was able to brainstorm possible ideas for my film.

Figure 12: My brainstorm

This note-taking was incredibly helpful as it helped me notice recurring and popular themes that are intrinsic to the horror genre, specifically in short films; a lot of what I learnt can be seen reflected in my brainstorm. I feel I did well in this aspect of preliminary pre-production as my notes were detailed, clear and concise. However, I could have improved by maintaining consistency in note-taking quality, as some films were analysed less than others.

Name: Larry
Horror subgenre: supernatural
Length: 5:20

Notes
• Night-time, well-lit inside guard's post • One person (man, victim) • ND + D sound • Simple, layered score • High angles • Supernatural Foley • Smooth movements • Match cuts

Enigma	Binary opposition	Narrative
Who is the monster? What happens to the man?	Between guard (man) and a strange monster	1. Night-time guard on duty 2. Finds an iPad, reads a story describing a monster, then the monster shows up everywhere + makes lights flicker 3. Monster comes out from iPad.

Figure 13: Notes for one film that were less detailed

To begin my pre-production for the film itself, the first thing I did was write up a production schedule. This was designed to ensure each task was allocated a sufficient amount of time and that deadlines would be met to ensure work was handed in on time.

Figure 14: My production schedule

Despite the fact that I planned all of my worked appropriately, I ended up only sticking to the production schedule until my second film date. This is because, despite the fact that my actors had promised to turn up an agreed maximum of three weekends consecutively, one suddenly refused to come for the second shoot due to personal commitments. This forced me to move my film date down 6 days, which prevented me from starting editing work as I did not have any footage to work with. In the meantime, as such, I utilized my time to learn about VFX techniques, shooting at night, and finding score and Foley audio.

My actor refused to show up the third shoot date as well, so I was forced to make the decision to change my actors. Because of the short notice, I had to work with a teenage boy instead of girl (this was a last resort) and alter the screenplay to accommodate this change. I feel that I adapted well to the situation, and because of the ambitious final due date on my production schedule, I still had time to film and edit even after a second date change.

Figure 15: I had to do a cast change from a girl to a boy

Each shot began to take longer than anticipated during the shoot itself, and since I had two actors in my film, I decided to film all the scenes of the actor who could not do another shoot. I was not able to get all the shots I wanted for the other character, so I had to schedule another shoot date for this. This was a fault on my part, as I should have anticipated how long the shoot would have taken. In hindsight, I should have either reduced the number of planned shots, or planned for two shoots and not one. Nevertheless, this decision prevented further delays as I now only needed one actor to finish the shoot.

I also conducted location scouting and risk assessment to find ideal filming locations and ensure the safety of everyone on set.

Figure 16: An excerpt of my location scouting notes

Figure 17: An excerpt of my risk management plan

Location scouting notes were detailed and relevant, which helped me to pick my filming locations taking into account what could be seen and heard, and how the locations affected or fit the narrative. I was looking for safe, quiet, dark, and isolated places.

My risk management plan was thorough, with a thought-out plan for each possible instance of risk. I also investigated the terms of the Violation of Air Navigation (Flight Prohibition) Order from the Civil Aviation Department (Govt. Of HKSAR) to ensure I would not be breaking any laws if I were to fly a drone on set, and found that I would. So I did not fly the drone and this prevented any legal issues. However, I included a few irrelevant or vague risks that could have been more focused to my shoot, which meant that the real high-risk events did not seem as concerning.

I additionally wrote a treatment, then 8 versions of a screenplay. I got regular feedback people both from and not from my target audience, which helped me improve the pace of the narrative and coherency of characters' actions. However, I do not think I altered the screenplay sufficiently, and so the narrative of my final film is somewhat confusing and disjointed.
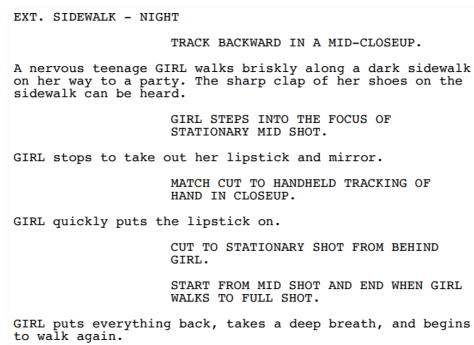
Figure 18: An excerpt of my treatment

Figure 19: An excerpt of my screenplay

In hindsight, I should have shortened the treatment substantially and focused on the details to produce a more logical narrative. The screenplay, however, was well-written with typed annotations for each shot above each action. This allowed for a far faster shoot as less reference to the storyboard or shotlist was required.

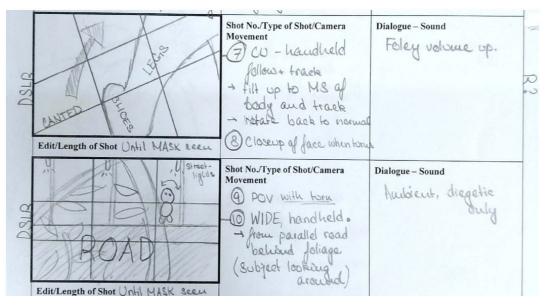To plan each shot, I used a storyboard and shotlist.

Figure 20: An excerpt of my storyboard

Figure 21: An excerpt of my shotlist

My shotlist was more helpful than my storyboard, as I had already visualised every shot and simply needed to be reminded to shoot each one. However, both my shotlist and storyboard were detailed enough for me to work with; however, I could have planned the sound better by preparing the score in advance of storyboarding. This would have allowed me to cut to the score instead of cutting the score itself.

Because I had chosen to use a mask prop in my film, I ordered it beforehand from Amazon.com in India and asked a travelling family member to bring it over to Hong Kong in time for the shoot.

As this was a technically demanding shoot, I had conducted some production research beforehand, and used most of these findings to shoot my film.
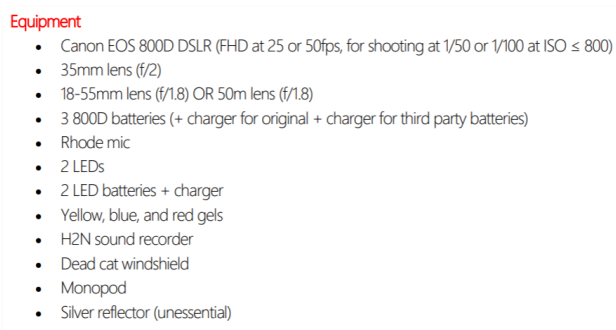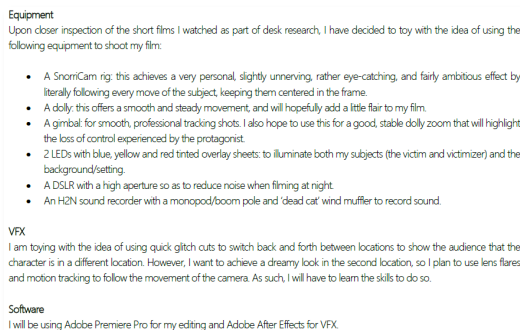
Figures 22 and 23: I used a lot of the equipment I researched about to shoot my film, and also used the stated software and VFX skills

This was immensely helpful in ensuring I got the aesthetic look I was going for, and the transitions and cuts appropriate for my film.

Overall, my preproduction was exhaustive and incredibly helpful when it came to filming and editing; virtually all of it was useful in this transition. Despite the fact that I did not stick completely to my production schedule, for example, I did continue to use the same allocation of time for each task in the same order. The risk assessment prevented a potential legal mishap, and the shotlist and screenplay were essential for getting all the shots. Production research helped in getting appropriate equipment, allowing for the desired shallow depth of field and exposure, for example. I could have been more detailed in my note-taking and risk assessment, which would have allowed for deeper understanding of genre conventions or potential hazards, but this did not directly affect the final outcome.

Production

Working alone, I took on all the roles of production.

DIRECTOR
As a director, my main role was to rehearse the actors and tell them what to do. I did this competently as they were rehearsed well before filming and knew where the story was going. However, I may have been too demanding as, in total, I spend over 16 hours on set shooting. Next time, I may record less takes and simply move on to finish the shoot in the time I have.

CAMERAMAN AND SOUND RECORDIST
It was challenging to do both tasks simultaneously, so I ended up recording essential audio and adding Foley in post so I could focus on the camera.

However, I ended up using almost no recorded audio as there was too much ambience, and instead booked the recording studio in school to record Foley such as jacket zipper sounds, breathing, and gasping.

Figure 24: I recorded the jacket zipping Foley separately and added it in post

As the cameraman, I was in charge of repeatedly changing lenses to achieve desired depth of field, aperture, and zoom. I also had to focus the subject each time before saying "action", and had to adhere to movements and angles on the shotlist. I executed this well as each shot is almost always identical to what had been planned beforehand; I did not change anything on set to make life easier.
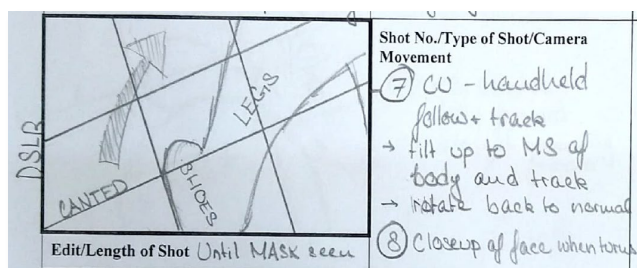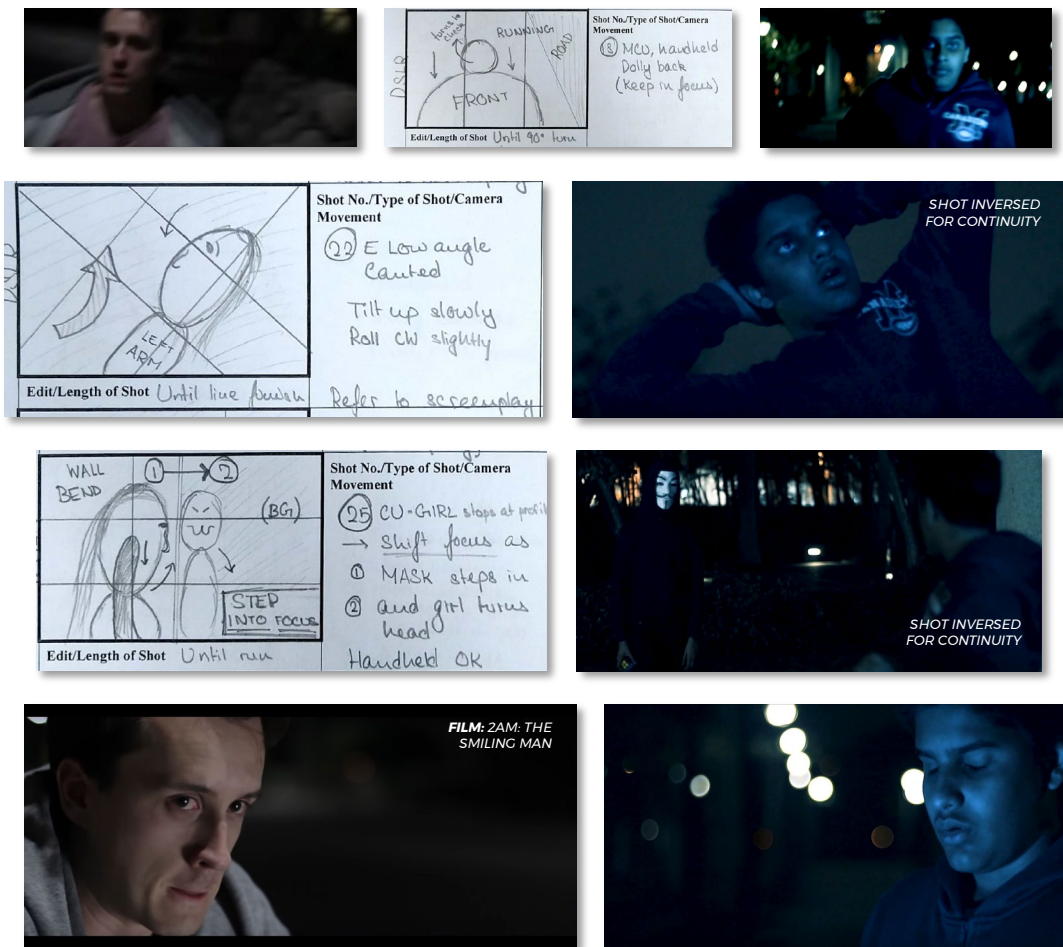
Figure 25 to 35: I used my storyboard to get the shots I wanted. Inspiration came from many professional short films, including 2AM

Using the camera in the dark was also technically challenging. I paid close attention to the frame rate (25 FPS), shutter speed (1/50 seconds), aperture (f/1.8), and ISO (600-800) to ensure that my footage did not become too grainy. However, it did come out noisy after colour correction, so next time I may film in more light to reduce the ISO even more. I am satisfied with my work as I feel the shots are aesthetically pleasing, cinematographically well-composed, and well-lit with the subject always in focus.

Figure 36: Low ISO meant low noise. 50 mm lens meant visible bokeh.

Next time, I should allocate myself one job only and ask someone else to do the sound recording, to ensure that it is of high quality.

Overall, I executed my roles as a director, cameraman, sound recordist, lighting director, costume designer, and cinematographer skilfully and efficiently. My planning meant that I knew exactly which shots I wanted and knew how they should look; this meant that I got all the shots I wanted. However, I could have improved by asking for help to reduce stress on me, as so many jobs were very demanding.

Post-production

Working alone, I took on all the roles of post-production.

EDITOR AND SOUND DESIGNER

My first step was to sort the media clips. I was able to do this efficiently as I had numbered every shot while filming, and so was able to note down the correct takes on my screenplay.
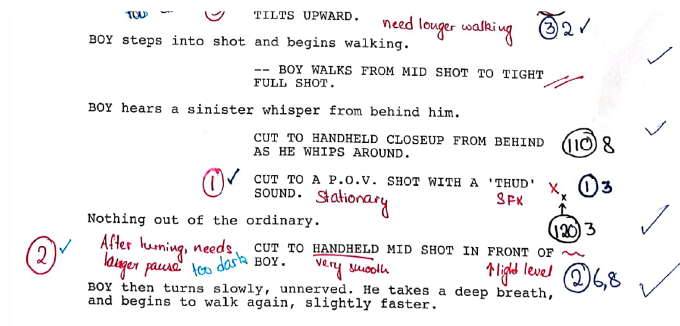

Figure 37: I annotated my entire screenplay with the final shot numbers and takes

After putting together the assembly cut, I had to do some preliminary colour correction by boosting lighting levels while maintaining exposure and colour. This was difficult as every shot needed adjustment, but I am satisfied with the look of the final outcome. However, correction increased the amount of noise in the shot, so next time I will plan for this colour correction and film in more light.

I also did additional colour correction and grading in the end to add a blue hue to cool the palette, while increasing contrast and adjusting curves to offer a more professional look. I am extremely pleased with the outcome, as I feel every shot looks far more professional and finished than it would have.
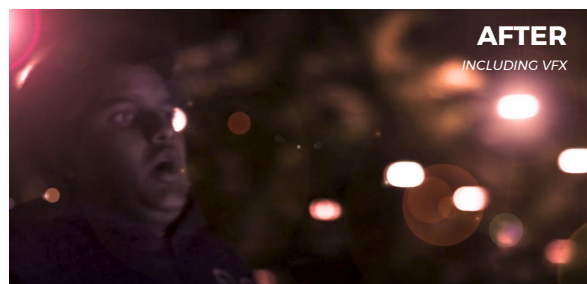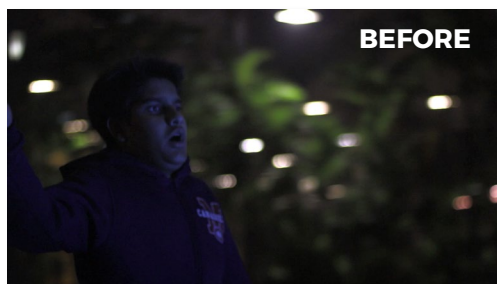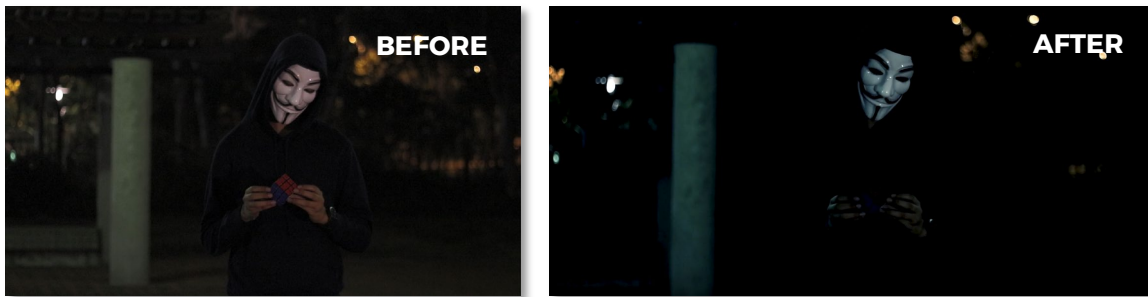
Figure 38 to 43: My shots before and after colour correction and grading

While and after editing, I added scores, Foley, diegetic, and nondiegetic sound. I feel this was done well as there is a lot of layering which adds to the tension of every scene. I also panned the sound for some shots to make them more immersive, and levelled the audio to -12dB for a sound listening experience.
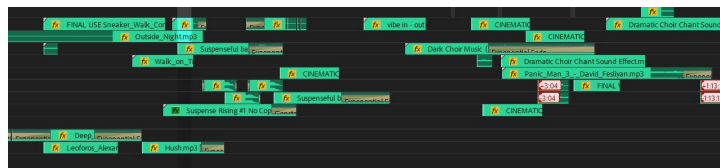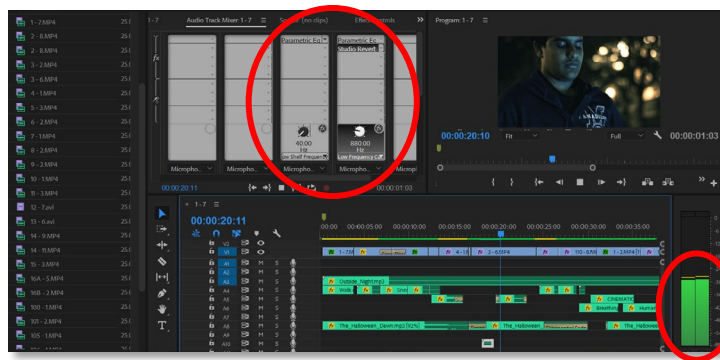

Figure 44: A few of the audio tracks

Figure 45: The audio workspace in which I levelled sound and added effects

I worked in the audio workspace to level sound and add equalization effects to make audio recorded in the studio fit into the scene. I feel this step was a success as all my viewers said they could not tell that Foley was recorded separately.

I feel my editing was competent and continuous. It was creative in the use of formalist editing and kept the film concise. I also utilized motion tracking and masking to remove text from clothing, and worked in Adobe After Effects to add lens flares.
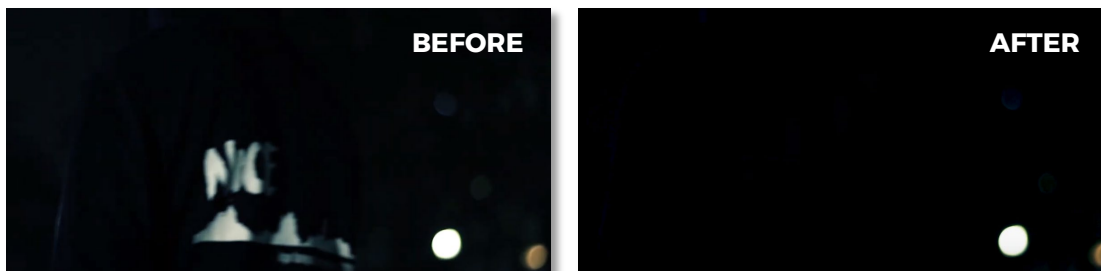

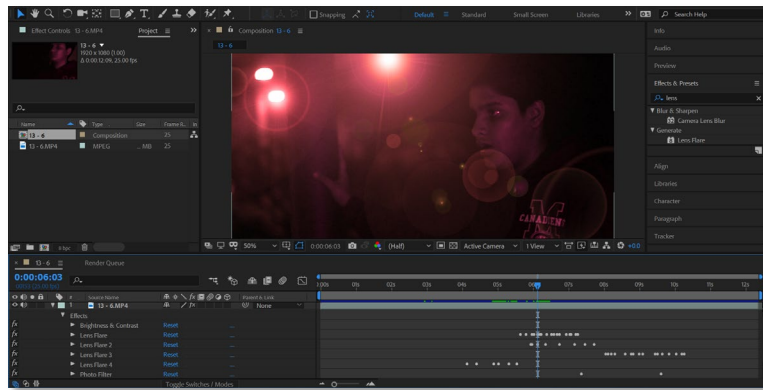*Figure 46 and 47: Before and after motion tracking and masking*

Figure 48: Adding 5 lens flares in one shot. This was done for multiple shots.

Next time, I should aim to make my editing more ambitious by adjusting the pace of editing so better suit the tone of the scene.
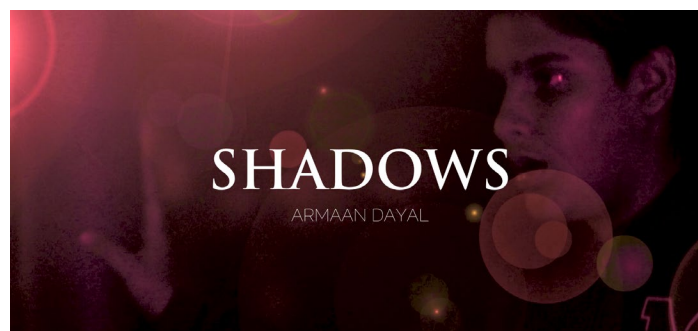
Overall, my post-production work was comprehensive and had many aspects to it; editing, sound design, Foley recording, and VFX addition. I am happy with the look and feel of my final production, but think the editing could have been more ambitious to instil better coherency in the film.

Overall

I think my film has a professional aesthetic to it and has followed horror genre conventions. It showcases a multitude of skills including effective colour correction, VFX, and sound design. Viewers from the target audience found it engaging and ambitious, applauding the number of "twists and turns" and "special effects". Occasionally, older viewers found the antagonist "unthreatening", so the narrative was not as effective.

The first jump scare was the most efficacious, as this is where most people gave a start. This was linked to the sense of false security and effective sound design.

I feel my preparation was exhaustive, making competitive, and post-production effective. In the future, I will aim to be more ambitious in my filmmaking technique, and also focus on the narrative of the film to ensure it is logical and detailed, but still entertaining and captivating.

Find **Shadows** here: http://bit.do/shadows-short-film