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### Level Best: An original screenplay

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Level Best: An Original Screenplay

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Arts and Letters  
James Madison University

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by Katherine Marie Repholz

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Accepted by the faculty of the School of Media Arts & Design, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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HONORS COLLEGE APPROVAL:

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

### **Acknowledgements**

It is with great enthusiasm that I thank my advisor Joe Loyacano, and my readers, Dennis Lo and Nefin Dinç, for all the time and work that they devoted to this project. Without them, I am certain my script would not be where it is.

Joe Loyacano took the time to sit with me and listen to my misgivings and stress freak outs related to the project, always offering advice and edits. He was patient and encouraging, even when I wanted to throw the script out. Dennis Lo's thoughtful comments on the script allowed me to grow my characters past what they ever could have been. The character of Kayla, no doubt, benefitted immensely from his work on this project. Nefin Dinç provided a unique and integral perspective to my script, prompting me to think about the potential for a production aspect. She reminded me that there can be a more concrete goal past the paper. I cannot express enough how much their agreement to be a part of this project means to me. Thank you, thank you so much.

I'd also like to thank Hannah Patterson, Elli Imel, and Woody Ray for reading this script in every iteration, offering feedback and critiques. Sharing work with friends can be daunting, but they always made me want to send them the next 30 pages.

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Thank you to my parents for everything. For being there for me always, for sending me to college, for encouraging my writing. There is no doubt in mind that I would not have written this

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script if they had not let me barge into their room at 6 a.m. every morning when I was little to read aloud my newest chapter of the ongoing saga of *Flower Flower*.

Thank you all for being a part of this project. It means the world to me. I would give each and every one of you a crisp high five if the circumstances were different.

**Level Best**

The original screenplay, Level Best, is attached as a separate file. To read the script, please open the accompanying file.

### **Abstract**

For my Capstone, I wrote *Level Best*, an original screenplay. *Level Best* is about Tony, who finds out that his ex-girlfriend, Kayla, has cloned him, and that clone, dubbed 2.0, is an extremely famous musician. Tony, a failed musician, struggles to adjust to his new reality as Kayla realizes that 2.0 is perhaps not all she dreamed up. As Tony, Kayla, and 2.0 yearn for authenticity and meaning, they are forced to confront their personal demons that causes the three of them to ponder, “what makes you *you*?”

### Statement of Purpose

The 230-year-old Quaker Meeting House pews were uncomfortable. The wooden backs were harshly angled, the cushions were filled with coarse horsehair that poked through the fabric and into your legs, and if you dared move, even slightly, a creak roared through the building inviting hundreds of judgmental high school eyes to stare through you. Each week, along with the student body that widely voiced their dislike for the silent hour, I walked from the main high school building to the small Meeting House that sat atop campus. The purpose of Meeting for Worship was to reflect and allow yourself to be moved by the Spirit, however I used the time for a different purpose. On Wednesdays, from 10-11, I sat quietly and disappeared into a world of stories of my own creation. And now, years later, I finally wrote one down.

Once I knew I wanted to write a screenplay for my Honors Capstone, it was important to hone in on themes that the story would explore. In order to better understand and relate certain themes to my own story, my advisor and I designed a curriculum of notable scripts to study. The films I read and then watched reflected ideas of isolation, identity, duality, and authenticity. While I would not say these scripts influenced the conception of my screenplay, they underscored a larger narrative running through cinema that focuses on otherness.

Films like *The Graduate*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Moon* allowed me to delve into the theme of isolation. Cinema's long history of depicting lonely characters moving through their bare, everyday lives highlighted the subtleties of solitude. I wanted Tony to share a solitary aura with *The Graduate*'s Ben, as he is being moved by the horizontal escalator, *Lost in Translation*'s Charlotte as she explores Tokyo alone, *Moon*'s Sam as he does his daily duties in space, his only companion being a robot. When writing my main character Tony, I wanted his character's



loneliness to be obvious, but not overstated. From his mess of an apartment, to the way he interacts with people on the street, I built Tony as a lonesome individual.

Just about every film reveals identity in its own way, but I wanted to focus on those that felt real and honest. *Lady Bird*, *Cleo From 5 to 7*, and *Synecdoche, New York* offered important insights into the creative's mind and sense of self. While I did not find Tony a particularly challenging character to write, Tony's ex-girlfriends and the creator of Tony's clone (2.0), Kayla, was a bit more complex. On the surface she is unlikeable. At first she reads as a cliché crazy ex-girlfriend, but I wanted to give her more dimension than a simple trope. She is perhaps the heightened version of all the bad qualities I see in the world around me and in myself. She is the result of taking all of one's intrusive thoughts to fruition. I wanted her to have a strong façade of the condescending, controlling genius, but under the mask, she is vulnerable and alone. The struggle was to make Kayla a character that made some mistakes, but who is not altogether irredeemable. By studying the films listed above and focusing on the characters with strong personalities that we still embrace, I was better equipped to construct Kayla's character in a realistic way.

The theme of duality could not be more integral to my study of films because the plot of my script relies heavily on the fact that Kayla has cloned Tony and the clone, 2.0, is a famous musician. *Blade Runner*, *Vertigo*, *Never Let Me Go*, *Gattaca*, *Moon*, *The Prestige*, and *Persona* all examined the theme in different ways, each offering important takeaways. While *Persona* makes the audience question whether the two characters are actually one, and *The Prestige* offers a unique take on one character actually being two. Each film made me consider how my script, *Level Best*, could play with the duality of Tony and 2.0. Their relationships with the world, Kayla, themselves, and each other were informed by the way these films have creatively

employed the theme of duality. Establishing the rules of the clone posed a considerable challenge; it was important that 2.0 knew Tony's life, but never felt a part of it. Kayla's lessons, her making 2.0 watch her reconstruction of memories that Tony told her during their relationship, were a muddled and complex solution, one that fit Kayla's pompousness. Having Kayla force 2.0 to watch a retelling of Tony's life further adds to the gap between who Tony is and who 2.0 is.

Multitudes of films have explored the idea of a double or a clone which also introduces important ambiguity in knowing oneself. I wanted to contemplate the constant doubt of authenticity, another important theme for my script to examine. In *Blade Runner*, Deckard hunts down replicants who appear identical to humans. He is also forced to consider the fact that he might be a replicant. This struggle for authenticity is reflected in *Vertigo*, too. Scottie is driven to temporary madness trying to control Judy/Madeline in an attempt to make the inauthentic real. Likewise, in *Level Best*, I'm employing the similar theme of authenticity, by doubling Tony and forcing Kayla to realize the updates she made on her cloned ex changed him too much, and she prefers the original. Perhaps the strongest tie to the theme of authenticity in the script is the imposter syndrome that both Tony and 2.0 always feel. I wanted to build a hellish triangle for the main three characters: Tony feels like he can never live up to his famous and successful clone; the clone feels compared constantly to Tony by Kayla; and Kayla realizes that the clone is just that, a clone, and she can never truly love the clone when it is Tony that she loves. And while all three characters live a lie, there are still shimmers of authenticity between them. I identified these themes as being most pertinent to my script and by studying films that successfully employed them expanded my knowledge of the process and the art of writing.

Every screenplay looks a little different. Each writer has their own habits and voice. Over the course of writing this script, I realized I am more minimalist in my description of action and more heavily focused on dialogue. I hate it when a film talks down to me. It is important to trust an audience to some extent and not spoon-feed them every single thing the script is saying. I wanted my script to realistically mirror the way people talk, especially those who are familiar with each other. When I wanted to communicate a big piece of information that would be made clear by acting, I placed the direction in the action. For example, when Tony says something to Kayla that really makes her reflect and regret her choice to clone him, I placed it in the description instead of having Kayla verbalize the emotions she was feeling. I believe in doing so, I lent more realism to the characters, and further developed their personalities with the things they are willing to say, and the things they keep to themselves.

This story has been with me for years. When I first started forming it, it was underdeveloped, riddled with missing pieces. The themes that kept recurring in the films I watched prompted me to dive deeper into my own story. They forced me to evaluate what I was trying to say and helped me know how to say it. Watching films has formed me, inspired me, and encouraged me to be the writer that I am today.

### **Bibliography**

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*Never Let Me Go*. Dir. Mark Romanek. Searchlight Pictures, 2010. Film.

*Persona*. Dir. Ingmar Bergman. AB Svensk Filmindustri, 1966. Film.

*Synecdoche, New York*. Dir. Charlie Kaufman. Sony Pictures Classics, 2008. Film.

*The Graduate*. Dir. Mike Nichols. Embassy Pictures, 1967. Film.

*The Prestige*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Warner Bros., 2006. Film.

*Vertigo*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Paramount Pictures, 1958. Film.