

EXEGESIS

PART 1:
Comparative Study

Introduction

My thesis is creative practice as research, comprising a creative artifact (a screenplay) accompanied by a critical component (an exegesis). This conforms to AUT University's guidelines for a 'Format Three' thesis, as described in the Postgraduate Handbook 2021, which states 'practice does not serve to illustrate theory but is more appropriately understood as the site of research; the exegesis relates directly to the practice-oriented work and as such does not have a research topic or question of its own; the purpose of the exegesis is to elucidate and clarify the relationship between the central concept, key contexts, relevant critical context' (pp. 109-113).

Accordingly, in my exegesis, I provide a discussion that overviews the creative work, which will include:

- A synopsis of the creative component and an explanation of my intentions
- A review of key texts relevant to the development of the creative work, in the form of a comparative analysis
- A detailed description of the process and methodology used, and a reflection on the outcomes of this creative practice as research
- Discussion of theoretical, historical, and critical context where relevant

The Core Story

The television series thesis *BRATS* is a story about taking emotional shortcuts. It's about an addiction to immediate gratification even when you have the tools and support to work towards your most authentic self. The series is set in the mid-eighties, a time in New Zealand, and, at large, when the pendulum had swung hard into the Reagan era / Rogernomics Christian fundamentalism and the demonization of the queer 'lifestyle'. Our protagonist, Brian, a closeted figure skater in Ohakune is confronted by our antagonist, an

openly gay Russian opponent, and an opportunity to reign supreme in the skating arena, if he agrees to stay in the closet and work for the Russian enemy. While the predominant theme is the selling out of one's true self, it also ties in some other themes and ideas, such as self-sabotage, self-delusion, weaponizing homophobia, and side-stepping the trope of 'gay trauma'. By the end of the first episode, Brian is coerced into an alliance with a Russian terrorist recruiting young gay skaters as potential spies.

Initially, the idea came to me while living in Toronto, Canada. A Winter Olympics news segment introduced a veteran of Canadian figure skating, Brian Orser, and chronicled the historic 1988 Olympics showdown, in which Orser was pitted against American darling Brian Boitano. Both skaters are now openly queer, but at the time remained closeted. Some short Googling uncovered a rather large number of skaters who were also queer and closeted. I pondered, if these athletes were so adept at hiding their queerness in men's figure skating in sequined bodysuits, what else could they keep secret? That set the stage for a darkly comic realization, in a post-cold-war era, who would be the easiest for the Russians to bend? Is there an alternate reality where the majority of KGB task forces are gay figure skaters? Coming home to New Zealand seemed like the potential to skew the premise even further. New Zealand is not exactly number one on the scoreboards when it comes to figure skaters, marking more potential for comedy. But more interestingly, in the 1980s New Zealand was world-famous for its pivotal anti-nuclear stance. In juxtaposing these ideas, the threads started to merge, what would happen if an antagonistic force attempted to weaponize 'being in the closet'? What kind of character would be willing to go down such a dark path? This is where the theme of moral bankruptcy started to emerge.

The Core Theme

Externally Brian is distracted by the conflict of whether or not his choice to be 'out' will affect his performance in the competition and how he will be seen by others. Internally, Brian is struggling with whether or not his choices will destroy his moral compass as he struggles with whether to sacrifice his authenticity for his ego. The core theme is man versus self. The antagonist, Vik, pounces on Brian's willingness to 'pass' amongst his peers, highlighting it as a skill to Brian. Though this story is set in a tumultuous decade, the story shows that 'passing' as straight is still normalized today. Queer people still sacrifice their authenticity to be on equal footing, even though it is 'heterosexual men who are in crisis and

struggling to hold onto traditional masculine habits' (Haywood, C. , 2017). In the 1980s, even in a rapidly evolving sport, figure skating was still forcing its players into the closet. What has been typically perceived as being a queer-fronted sport, it wasn't until 2017 when players like Johnny Weir and Adam Rippon started to come out. 'Even when you can see the light at the end of the tunnel, it seems you can still never fully trust it' (Raymond, 2011).

In *BRATS*, for our heroes, that love and light can be right in front of you, but your ego won't let you trust it. Each character is living with a lie, that if unburdened from it, they would be free. Brian refuses to admit that he might not be as good as he thinks he is, Aleks, refuses to forgive himself for the sins of his past. Vik refuses to admit she is a pawn of the Soviet powers and MK refuses to admit she's at fault for her own unhappiness. Ultimately, however, this is about the crossroads queer kids are presented with when they realize the truth can set them free. It's a very specific moment: be truthful, or keep driving in darkness. This is a story about diving headfirst into the darkness. This all culminates in the third act of the first episode. Finally choosing to skate openly and with authenticity, Brian overhears the judge's critiques, that he's not believable as a queer skater. Rather than accept that he's still learning about himself, Brian opts for the band-aid solution: rig the competition and continue to skate as he pleases.

Comparative works: To Die For

The dramatic thrust of the story at its core is whether Brian will push himself beyond redemption. In his pursuit of being seen as a star skater, a competent hero, a good son, and being divorced from his sexuality, Brian sacrifices his true self and his self-worth. In *To Die For* (Van-Sant, 1995), aspiring news reporter Suzanne Stone, is presented as unwavering in her pursuit of fame. She is calculated and hard-working, but not necessarily talented. In contrast to Brian, Suzanne lacks empathy in her quest to win and is unrepentant in her actions. At the end of the film, she shows her cards to the viewer, revealing her true self.

As you can imagine... I was shocked beyond comprehension. I mean, to think that these disadvantaged youngsters who I had taken under my wing and spent my time with... and who would only stand to ultimately benefit from my media-savvy... to think they might be responsible for this heinous crime! It simply boggles one with disbelief. Of course, I realized, and I hope this doesn't sound callous... that the upside

to all this, assuming justice prevailed, is that I would have in my documentary an extremely marketable commodity. Something that even PBS would take an interest in... which would mean a smaller audience but a much larger prestige factor. (pg 112)

As a satire on fame-driven dominance in the news media of the 90s, it's fitting that Suzanne's arc doesn't change. As she states at the beginning of the film: 'There are some people who never who they are or who they want to be until it's too late. ... I always knew who I was and who I wanted to be. Always.' (page 1). In *BRATS*, though Brian is willing to perform a role, and lie to his loved ones, he is constantly aware of the toll it bears down on him. Though there is cynicism applied to the story of Brian's undoing, this is a series, and it is important that there is a perception that Brian can be redeemed. Unlike films like *To Die For* and *The King of Comedy* (1975), it's necessary to show that Brian, at any moment, could change, but chooses not to. David Rimanelli of Artforum writes:

'[T]he very extremity of Kidman's character obliquely calls attention to fissures in Van Sant's conception. Suzanne has no psychology in the ordinary sense of the word. She's pure drive, blind ambition incarnate.

Though Brian is unflappable in his ambition, he shows reluctance at the extent to which the antagonists are pushing him to 'pass', what starts as a broad gag joke on gay 'beards', the onslaught of Karens into Brian's agreement gives him pause. In episode two we start to see the repercussions of hiring multiple beards, and the lies he tells, harkening back to the central theme of man versus self. Aleks's character provides a constant, ever available 'eject button' from the walls Brian is building around him. An opportunity to confide in someone like-minded. At one point in *To Die For*, Suzanne is presented with the reality of her actions through Lydia, rather than soften, Suzanne destroys Lydia. Therefore, in order to keep audiences invested in Brian's antics, we need to believe that at any point, he really could push that eject button.

Comparative works: Glow

At the beginning of *BRATS*, we meet Aleks as a potential antagonist, but as the episode unfolds we learn he may be at odds with his villainous sister. The story explores whether Aleks is to be trusted, or whether he's using New Zealand as a fresh start from his

old life in Russia. Likewise, Brian is initially presented as the hero of the story, and he is, but he may not be as trustworthy as he seems. We see this a lot in modern series, such as *Damages*, *Weeds*, and *Nurse Jackie*. In *BRATS*, I wanted to explore testing the limits of Brian's likeability, and whether or not Aleks is truly the obstacle to Brian's happiness. In the series *Glow* (Mensch, 2017), protagonist Ruth is stubborn to a fault in her drive to become an actress. Throughout the arc of the show, Ruth leverages her broken relationship with her ex-best friend Debbie to bolster the acting sequences in the ring fights. Her destruction of the relationship continues as she continually impedes opportunities to mend it by focusing on her own personal successes. In episode seven of season two, the conflict comes to a head when Debbie accidentally breaks Ruth's leg. Ruth continues to take responsibility for her own unhappiness, prompting Debbie to lay down reality.

‘Poor Ruth, she doesn't have anything. So, Deb, be careful. Just downplay all your accomplishments. Just pretend all the things you worked so fucking hard for don't matter to you at all, because she's gonna feel sad and insecure about her life and suck all the joy out of every moment that you have. Poor, poor Ruth.’ (pg 13)

Similarly, in *BRATS*, while being consumed by the competition, Brian is continually presented with opportunities to connect with Aleks, and gain, if not insight, at least commonalities with the prejudices they both face, but instead selfishly chooses to focus on himself. There are even comparisons with our perceived antagonist, Debbie, who for the most part, is jaded by the business and resentful for the time she's put in. Similarly, Aleks is presented as a seasoned skater, tired of the cross-country competition. It could be argued their comparative apathy towards these goals that further drive the protagonists to not become like them. That said, in *BRATS*, I wanted the overall setting of figure skating to put further pressure on Aleks and Brian to bond. Much like in *Glow*, the setting of the story puts flamboyance in the forefront, as its own antagonist. In *Glow*, Bash's story of self-acceptance is pushed to its limits in Vegas.

‘Vegas was such a repressed, conservative, flamboyant, permissive place all at once. It's such a contradictory place overall. In going to Vegas, it really supported this story that we knew we wanted to tell. Even in his costuming, Bash's outfits go even further this season because he's in Vegas and he can. He's a Vegas producer in 1986. Just that

layer of artifice and performance, on top of being married to Rhonda, that was so interesting to us.’ - (Bucksbaum, S. Entertainment Weekly, 2019)

Placing not only the setting as an obstacle but also the main characters against each other was important for maximum drama and conflict. Likewise, the peripheral characters around Brian and Aleks are designed to stoke their insecurities and continually lock them into their sitcom cycles. Vik is a reminder of Aleks own life and his submission to her. MK is a truth-teller and mirror of Brian's empty lust for ‘the finer things in life’. These auxiliary characters' place pressure on the main characters and their moral ebb and flow as the story dictates. To make them unlikeable when they need to be and root for them the rest of the time.

Comparative works: Search Party

On the surface, Brian is a fairly unlikeable character. He’s driven by a need to be ‘seen’ by anyone, including his family. He’s an outsider in a small town with obviously queer taste. That said, throughout the first two episodes it was important we see Brian’s desperation and what the cause and effect of that are by the end. In *Search Party* (Violet Bliss, Rogers, 2016), the protagonist, Dory, is complemented and juxtaposed with supporting characters similarly driven by empty motivations, and shallow goals at the expense of their true happiness.

‘These characters are initially variably insufferable and you’ll probably know before the end of the pilot if you’re feeling any affection at all for people who essentially view an amateur murder investigation as an activity on par with brunch, but not a cause for urgency. Even if what they’re doing is a good thing, they’re doing it for a lot of the wrong reasons and engaging in some bad stuff along the way.’ (Feinberg, 2016)

Though Dory is unlikeable in that she cannot see beyond her narcissism, it’s where her narcissism leads her that earns sympathy from the audience. When Dory attempts to pursue her dream as a Mentor for women, the interviewer plainly states to Dory, and the audience, the delusion of her ineptitude.

‘Your personal statement paints a portrait of someone who is immobile. I read all four pages and you’ve accomplished nothing. I could barely glean a single thing that you

even like in life. Sweetheart, do you have a passion? One passion? [...] I mean, not to sound crass but you're not equipped to teach Connect Four.' (pg 17-18)

Similarly, Brian is driven by his mediocrity. When faced with the realization that he may not be at the same caliber as Aleks, he refuses to concede that his talent and connection with his true self are lacking. We see through this delusion that Brian is unable to change, so like Dory, he resorts to ulterior motives. In *Search Party*, driven by her desperate need to be important, Dory relentlessly pursues the case of the missing girl, Chantal, ultimately to her own destruction. Brian, allows himself to be influenced by Vik, with the promise of grandeur and self-importance. Again, playing with this self-destruction is what compels the most about Brian and Dory alike. Placing a harsh lens on what happens if a queer person rejects self-acceptance and pursues self-destruction.

Comparative works: One of Them

The general catalogue of New Zealand queer cinema is, rather bleak. Often focusing on trauma and angst, contributing in turn to the wider global oeuvre of 'Gay Trauma' in queer art. In *A Death in the Family* (Mains, 1987) and *One of them* (Mains, 1997), our queer protagonists are defined by their trauma, be it abuse or death, respectively. More specifically though, in *One of them*, the fear of simply being 'one of them', of being queer is trauma enough, let alone the act of coming out, as suicidal protagonist Lemmy says "I cut my wrists... I'm one of them". Their arc completes once the two main characters confront their sexuality. To take a more modernized approach to the decade, In *BRATS*, our heroes begin their story having already accepted their sexuality, but rather than take the next step of coming out, decide to pivot their own story into something different. Brian is seduced by the idea of monetizing his ability to 'pass', and Aleks, to better understand his new home, starts a journey of what it means to be 'one of them' in New Zealand society. In *One of them*, Lemmy and Jaime are completely themselves with one another, save for actually admitting to their true sexuality. Conversely, Brian and Aleks present false versions of themselves to each other, despite both acknowledging their queerness. Considering their hostile surroundings, both would benefit from, at the very least, an alliance, but their flawed character 'wants' drive them apart. Despite their commonalities, like their disdain for the small-town mentality of Ohakune, the two claim a stake in the ground and defend their small piece of territory, much

to the detriment of their emotional growth. In *One of Them*, Lemmy and Jaime bond over the same concept of ‘small town’ blues that Aleks and Brian suffer from.

‘Lemmy says: Jaime, everything in New Zealand is so crummy, once you realize that, everything becomes a joke.’

The one ray of light in Lemmy and Jaime’s world is the queer window and lens with which to examine small-town New Zealand as camp. However, despite that, throughout *One of Them*, Lemmy and Jaime repeatedly taunt each other and the world with hostility towards queerness. Though Aleks and Brian do the same, they do so for the advancement of their own surface needs: Brian to win in the competition, and Aleks to out Brian: they both accept their sexuality, now, they want to weaponize it.

Comparative works: The Other Two

The weaponization of homophobia and Moral bankruptcy are major themes in *BRATS*. Brian seeks to go further into the closet, as he believes, to secure sponsorships and top placements in competitions, despite being told that the true path to winning is being authentically queer. Aleks, having lived a life free of blatant and named prejudice in Russia, learns that he too must also go back into the closet for his own safety. Brian is often presented with opportunities to confide in others, put in the work, or turn to introspection, but his short temper and desperate need to be ‘seen’ prevent him from looking inward, and distract him from what truly matters: connections with those he loves and in turn, love him. In *The Other Two* (Kelly, Schneider 2016), protagonist Cary, an aspiring actor, realizes he can gain traction in his career when his younger brother becomes a teen pop star. Rather than put in the work as an actor, Cary sidles up with a group of ‘Instagram gays’ who only recognize him through his brother's fame. Through the course of the series, Cary leans more and more into the stereotype he once mocked in order to garner social traction.

Okay That’s the problem with you [instagay] guys, you don’t do anything! I actually do something, I act. [...] I’m trying to [...] but the way this business works is you have to do stupid shit like this to even get to that level, so I’m gonna go over here and I’m gonna pose like a little pouty cow and you’re gonna take a picture and fucking tag me!

Carey loses the respect of his faux ‘instagay’ friends and hits rock bottom. In *BRATS*, Brian follows the same trajectory. The core story question asks, just how low is Brian willing to go?

In Conclusion, the compared texts highlight a doomed character in Brian. On the surface his determination at shutting down his naysayers, ala Suzanne in *To Die For*, signals inevitable destruction in common with Cary in *The Other Two*, and Dory in *Search Party*. However, it’s possible through his narcissism and over-confidence he showcases vulnerability similar to Ruth in *Glow*. Unlike New Zealand's own ‘One of Them’. *BRATS* is a story where we root for our characters to one day make the ultimate turn and embrace their truth. But by stacking the odds against him from an inner character struggle, the engine will still run for many episodes to come.

PART 2:
The Script

The synopsis

The synopsis of *BRATS* is the story of Brian Tamati, a closeted young figure skater, and pathological liar, who gets pulled into Russian espionage when he aligns himself with a cheating brother-sister duo. But what is a synopsis? Screen Australia (Brindley, 2009) describes a synopsis as:

The generally accepted idea of a synopsis... deals in WHO, WHAT and HOW, but also establishes the other major characters and their lines of conflict, what is at stake for these characters, the setting in time and space, and the major turning points of the story. The last is crucial; the key element of any synopsis is a clear indication of the story’s structure. That is, how the story begins, develops and ends.

When the skating association changes the rules to include points for ‘artistry’, Brian is forced to confront his sexuality and femininity when an out-and-proud Russian player comes onto the scene. When Brian is unable to be honest with himself and come out in time, he chooses to rig the competition in order to continue skating and learn his queerness on his own terms and timeline. Things get complicated when the person who rigs the games for him, blackmails him into espionage missions for a Russian faction infiltrating New Zealand. The theme of the story is ‘man versus self’, in that one cannot get what one wants without satisfying what one needs. What the story is really about is the toll lies can take on ourselves, and how far we’re willing to go to maintain that lie.

The world of the story

What is the world of our story? *No Film School* (Hellerman, 2019) describes the world of the story as a conduit for the audience to more easily digest your narrative :

Worldbuilding is the multi-layered process of using your imagination to create a world or entire universe. In fiction, cinema, and television, this process helps the audience get lost within the story and focus only on the narrative at hand.

BRATS takes place in 1983, in small-town Ohakune. A town known for its winter sports - but not at all for its figure skating. However, Auckland is the place to be for advancement in Brian’s field, creating resentment toward the limits of what Ohakune has to offer. Worse, the populist event in the town is the local hockey team's playoffs: a toxic, masculine mirror image of the protagonist's more feminine perceived sport. The town’s main rink is shared by both the figure skaters and hockey players, including the locker room, causing heightened tension. Hockey players and Brian's peers readily throw around words like ‘fag’ with ease.

That being said, glamour and pageantry were making a comeback in the 1980s, with Aucklander Lorainne Downes winning Miss Universe and the visit of Prince William and Princess Diana in July of that same year. More importantly, though, figure skating had begun to change its judging rules to include ‘artistry’, judging skaters on pageantry and costume, welcoming in a new age of ‘campness’ to the sport.

The political and cultural climate.

Politically speaking, 1983 was defined by its anti-nuclear stance. Visits from US Nuclear warships had begun an anti-nuclear sentiment growing in NZ, as well as the beginning of the end of the Cold War. Our Russian antagonists Vik and Aleks are trying to figure out where they belong, with Aleks wanting to disassociate from communist Russia, and Vik trying to undermine it. Since 1966 France had been testing nuclear weapons in French Polynesia, which ultimately led to the Treaty of Rarotonga, declaring the region a nuclear-free zone. Our story takes place two years before this and the bombing of the Rainbow Warrior in 1985, and fictionalizes french agent Christine Cabon's infiltration of Greenpeace, using Uschi and Vik as proxies.

In terms of New Zealand, politically In 1983, the third consecutive National Party was in power under the socially conservative Robert Muldoon - the same Muldoon who attempted to out Labour MP Colin Moyle, known as 'the Moyle affair' (*The Real Muldoon*, 1978). The 1980s was the beginning of a return to 'family values' as the pendulum swung back to conservatism from the freedom of the 1970s. Homosexual law reform wouldn't come until 1986. Despite this, one of the most popular shows of the eighties was 'Hudson and Halls', consistently ranking in the weekly top five programs. The show came to an end however in 1986 despite high ratings. It's rumored because of a change in management in TVNZ, and shifting attitudes. The pair were unmistakably queer but unabashedly closeted. They graced the cover of magazines showing off their shared home, but never outright stated they were together. This is important for our story because it's a mirror image of what was happening in figure skating - clearly, queer-coded performances and skaters were pressured by society to maintain a heterosexual front, even though audiences in some way accepted and even celebrated the queerness of the sport. Even in Brian's own home, Hudson and Halls are celebrated for what they do - but not who they are.

Theme

The story's theme is generally considered to simply be - what is the story about? What is the meaning behind the story and our characters? Ted Hope defines theme as the one key takeaway your audience should have from your story:

How do you find the theme? What do you want the big takeaway from the movie to be remembered for the audience? What do you want them to remember intellectually, and what do you want them to feel emotionally? (Hope, *Hope for Film*, 38)

As mentioned in part one, *BRATS* has many themes including self-sabotage, delusion, and weaponizing homophobia.

The theme of ‘Man Versus Self’

While there are many themes throughout the story the predominant theme is ‘man versus self’. More specifically, one cannot get what they want without satisfying what they need. Brian's main obstacle is himself. What Brian wants is to be successful in his field, but in order to do so, he needs to embrace his true self and be comfortable in his own skin to be able to skate expressively and convincingly.

Why this story?

As prefaced in part one, my intention in telling this story was to highlight the hypocrisy that pervaded men's figure skating in the 1980s and onward. They were asked to perform expressively in a more feminine-coded sport but were pressured by society and their industry to remain in the closet. It seemed impossible to imagine that in what for a time was considered ‘the gayest’ of men's sports - the sportsmen themselves were not allowed to be gay. It wasn't until 2018, thirty-four years after our story is set that an openly gay figure skater competed in the Olympics. Before then, everyone else had remained in the closet until their career ended. This was an astounding fact to learn when the general zeitgeist might have you think this was not the case. To imagine that there may have been multiple gay and queer men skating alongside each other but never mentioning it seems rife for drama and comedy. In terms of the antagonists, it seemed rife for cliché to include a Russian affront. Much like many competing countries, Russia was known to involve itself in the rigging of competitions for national glory. I wanted to pose the question - what would that look like if it took place in anti-nuclear 1983 New Zealand. And in terms of modern commentary, the prevalence of Russia's anti-gay propaganda and the insistence by the pro-Kremlin spokesman, Alvi

Karimov that gay people in Chechnya simply ‘don’t exist’ (Kramer, 2017), were important to include as part of our antagonist's journey.

Genre

Allows for scathing critiques of cultural norms through farce, and comedy. The genre allows for a ‘one-two punch’ style of critique by luring an audience into a false sense of safety, before revealing the ‘truth’ as a surprise. Brian retains one of the often-used tropes of the genre - delusion. Brian is blissfully unaware of the innate queerness in the character of Zorro, fiercely believing the character to be a beacon of machismo. Similarly, MK falsely believes her life will improve if she were richer. The script however does not strictly adhere to the sitcom genre or a straight comedy. It does oscillate between drama and comedy - often within the same scene. Political messages and queer themes are presented part and parcel with comedy to soften the blow. The violent use of the word ‘fag’, though indicative of the time, is sandwiched between pivotal character moments, further softened by comedic beats.

The protagonist

Our key protagonist here is Brian, though often our sympathies might fall on Aleks, the driver of conflict is Brian. But what is a protagonist? Aronson (2010) writes that:

The film is the protagonist’s story, the protagonist is who the ‘film is about’... The protagonist drives the action that makes the decisions. The protagonist is not passive and reactive... The protagonist is the person whose head we are inside, whose shoes we are in, and with whom we identify... The protagonist is central to the film’s dramatic high points.

What is the protagonist's motivation?

Brian wants to compete on the world stage of figure skating in an increasingly queer-coded sport without having to reveal his true sexual identity. In the first episode, his goal is to win the local competitions while still managing to remain in the closet. Throughout the episode, he continually attempts to separate his queer self from his skating life. First, he agrees to use a ‘beard’ - a fake girlfriend to present to the media. Second, he attempts to discredit his competition by outing them. And thirdly, when all else has failed, he agrees to the rigging of

the competition in order to move on to the next round, without having to fully commit to the new ‘camp’ rules of skating. In episode two he flouts his perceived progress in his plan to remain in the closet, hosting a parade starring closeted TV stars Hudson and Halls. His fantasy bubble is popped when Hudson and Halls are officially canceled on New Zealand Television, shattering his belief that in the 1980’s you can be closeted and successful in popular culture.

What are the stakes?

For Brian, living comfortably in the closet worked for him, but when confronted by changes in the scoring and a competitor that was extremely comfortable with their sexuality, Brian is forced to choose to either embrace his sexuality and improve his skating or continue to lie and potentially lose placement. Already an adept liar stemming from parental abuse, Brian is given multiple opportunities by antagonistic forces, Vik and Linda, to continue to hide his sexuality and win in the games through cheating. Furthermore, as he begins to see Aleks being embraced for his talents and open sexuality, he’s tempted more and more into facing the truth of who he is and potentially finally being honest with himself and others for the first time.

What is the protagonist's arc?

As is typical with television, Brian does not change as a character, though he will still follow a series arc and episodic arcs. Brian's ‘wants’ change but his ‘needs’ remain the same. He wants to leave Ohakune for Auckland but needs to be honest with who he is and how he competes. In the first episode his want to leave changes to a want to stay, not only for the attention of his peers but for the attention of his Antagonist and potential love interest Aleks. Brian’s overall series arc will be learning to embrace his sexuality truthfully and with integrity. His episodic needs however will challenge him with this overarching need. In episode one he wants to win but needs to fully embrace that he may not have been playing fairly or wholeheartedly embracing his sexuality in order to expand on the ice. In episode two he wants to maintain the lie that he is straight in order to garner popular opinion, what he needs is to realize that upholding that lie is detrimental to the relationships around him and is unsustainable.

The antagonist

The central antagonist in the story is Aleks, Brian's main competitor, and love interest. Aronson (2010) suggests that:

There has to be one antagonist in the relationship line and at least one antagonist in the action line.

In the case of our story, Aleks is both. Aleks is everything Brian is not: he's calm, cool, and collected, open about his sexuality, and could give or take competitive skating, despite being a natural-born winner. Alongside Aleks, are multiple antagonistic forces. The town itself exhibits homophobic attitudes, in the form of the hockey team, evangelistic busy-body Linda, and notably Brian's mother. The more obvious initial antagonist comes in the form of Vik: Aleks's older sister, who grooms Brian into becoming a spy.

Though the chief antagonist, Aleks does not on the surface present as antagonistic, only in the reflection of Brian's goals. Plot-wise, while Brian is initially thrilled by the idea of being a spy, Aleks is steadfast in trying to divert Brian from going down that path. Emotionally, Aleks pushes Brian to be his true self and embrace the path of living truthfully - both as a gay man and as a competitor. In episode one, Aleks spends much of his time unpacking homophobia - something new to him - in order to better understand Brian. Though the further Aleks continues in his pursuit of enlightenment and understanding, the further he pressures Brian to look inward and unpack his own issues with homophobia.

Aleks's sister Vik is both an antagonist to Brian and Aleks. Vik's goal is to recruit Brian as one of her many spies in order to undermine Russia. Her series-long goal is to create anti-Russian sentiment in New Zealand using violent force. Though initially we are led to believe she is acting in the interests of Russia. For Brian, she actively stokes the lie that by compartmentalizing and being able to 'play roles', Brian will be much happier living a life where he seemingly gets to have his cis-het cake and eat it too. She identifies queer men as the perfect spy: able to switch and perform different roles at the drop of a hat. For Aleks, she keeps her brother in the dark about what's going on, using him as a lure for Brian. Though

unconsciously she is fuelling Aleks to take a more active role in his own journey of self-discovery as a ‘soon to be over’ cold-war era Russian spy.

Though not explored in depth in the first two episodes, it is heavily implied that Brian’s mother Ngaire, is the main source of trauma and fear that fuels Brian’s internalized homophobia.

Creating dramatic tension.

In terms of dramatic tension, both episodes present two different methods to create dramatic tension. Episode one uses character to create tension through relationship lines, mainly so that the story can lay out who exactly Brian is and what he wants. But more importantly, follows Brian’s inner conflict. Dunne (2016) describes how suspense is generated by building up to a ‘crisis’ that the character faces:

The heart and soul of a dramatic story is the crisis that the main character faces near the end of the journey. This is usually when the character must make the most of the difficult decision of the story and it is the ultimate test of his or her commitment to the quest... [But] it is not a choice between good and evil. Such a choice would be easy... Rather, a crisis decision forces the character to choose between two evils that cannot both be eliminated (by choosing when you enable the other) or between two goods that cannot coexist (by choosing one, you lose the other). The task of the story is to bring the character to this point with compelling reasons to choose either way, so that the decision will be neither simple nor predictable.

Dunne, W. (2016). *The Architecture of story*. United States: the University of Chicago Press. (p197)

The biggest question throughout the story is whether Brian will ultimately tell the truth to himself and others about his sexuality. In order to win the skating competition, Brian must embrace a side of himself he’s hidden for so long. In the first episode, he is in a race against the clock to master his femininity in order to be on the same footing as Aleks. His internal struggles directly affect his external goals. Throughout this struggle, Brian is also confronted

with his habit of pathological lying. His desperation to impress everyone around him further obfuscates his path to living truthfully, open, and honestly.

Brian versus Brian

Throughout episode one, as Brian gets to know Aleks, he sees that his fears of homophobia aren't unfounded, but they're also not as bad as he'd imagined, and if he took a page out of Aleks's book - he might be able to live a happy life. There are multiple moments in the story where he is presented with this realization. The very first is at the party in act one, where he outs Aleks to the group. Though Aleks is met with hostility - he doesn't care and even seems to partly win over the crowd. The second is in act two, where He attempts to out Aleks further on local television. Regardless of the homophobia, this brings Aleks a small number of gay fans within the town. The final turning point is in act three when Aleks reminds him of why it is that he likes skating in the first place: because it's a refuge for his expression.

It's at this point that Brian has changed and regressed. Brian decides to perform with 'artistry', coded as open queerness, but because he didn't embrace it earlier with enough practice and confidence - he ultimately loses the winning spot. This is the point of no return for Brian - where he realizes he should have been performing like that his whole life. He realizes that if he cheats, he'll be able to continue performing as extravagant as he likes without negative critiques of his talent or skill. This is what ultimately propels the central conflict forward for the rest of the series. Brian has made a decision that goes against his potential to live an honest and true life. Not only that, he's locked himself into a situation where he will be lying for a living. And attached to the hip with Aleks: a constant reminder of the poor decision he's made. Brian has transformed, though not for the better.

A new reality

From episode two onwards, the question becomes 'how long can Brian continue the lie, and what will this lie cost him? Rather than focusing on Brian's inner conflict, this episode focuses on a plot question to create dramatic tension. Field (1979) places the question of whether the protagonist will get what they want/need at the center of the story:

First, define the needs of your character. What does your character want? What is his need? What drives them to the resolution of your story?... All drama is conflict. If you know the need of your character, you can create obstacles to fulfill that need... Without conflict, there is no drama. Without need, there is no character. Field, S. (1979). Screenplay. United States: Dell Publishing (p28)

Episode two begins with Brian reaping the benefits of his newfound false world. He's presented with two challenges - in his eyes - opportunities. First is meeting his idols, Hudson and Halls, who appear to be living the same closeted and happy life that he is. The second is his first mission from Vik: to retrieve a judge's damning scorecard. The latter shows Brian enjoying the thrill of dipping his toe into espionage. However the former does not go as smoothly, and Brian learns firsthand that being closeted and on television is not as cracked up as it is supposed to be. In act three of episode two, Brian sees the fallout from Hudson and Hall's television show cancellation: they've been fired because of the shift in societal pressures to present more conservative values. Worse still, his mother learns of their true orientation, and in turn, suspects him. Seeing her reaction reminds Brian of his fear of homophobia. This is a reveal for the audience and Brian, that the path he's chosen is a dangerous one. At the end of episode two, Brian attempts to renege on his agreement with Vik, but she reveals that his identity has been compromised by Greenpeace and that there's no backing out. Thusly, Brian's choice at the beginning of the episode, and the end of episode one to align himself with Vik has backfired.

Because this is a series, the protagonist's dramatic tension has not been resolved. Brian must continue to choose whether to be truthful and save his integrity or continue down the path with Vik, into potential illegal activity. For episodes one and two, the dramatic conclusion is needed to show that Brian is beyond the point of no return.

Re-drafting

As a first draft, all the ingredients are there to push toward a compelling and marketable script. However, issues remain around the pacing of the second episode and the character motivations for the antagonist, Vik. Ultimately, Vik's goal is to get revenge on her Russian oppressors - which is deliberately withheld in the first two episodes. But perhaps could be remedied by planting context clues in episode one that suggests she's gone awol, or at least

not following orders. Perhaps even a moment 'behind the curtain' with Vik to reveal more of her humanity. The second major issue is the pacing for episode two. The core plot driver of the episode is the retrieval of the missing scorecard. Perhaps this could be drawn out to conclude towards the end of the episode, and weave in the Hudson and Halls plot at the beginning and the end of the episode, to make it clear that they are simply there to support the theme.

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