We're Not the Same:

Exploring Sisterhood, Identity, and the Emotional Cost of Comparison in a Contemporary Female Narrative

Honors Defense Paper

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I. Introduction: Storytelling as Inquiry

This thesis reflects on the creative and directorial process behind "We're Not the Same." This short narrative film explores identity, emotional abandonment, and the subtle entanglement of envy between women. The project examines how internalized comparison, rooted in family history and broader cultural pressures, can shape how women see themselves and each other. It offers a critical-creative reflection on the entire process: from the conceptual groundwork through production and into post.

As the film evolved, so did my understanding of what kind of story I was telling and how best to tell it. What began as a simple character-driven piece gradually became more layered and emotionally charged. Drawing from feminist theory and visual storytelling, I worked to reimagine familiar tropes — the "perfect girl," the "invisible one," the rival — through a more nuanced and empathetic lens.

This thesis explores the evolution of the work, including expected and unexpected challenges, aesthetic shifts, and collaborative discoveries. It also outlines how directing this film reshaped my creative ambitions and clarified my artistic values, particularly concerning character-driven filmmaking, visual storytelling, and the need to represent interior female subjectivity on screen.

II. Writing

Women have been objectified in film for years, a reality that became especially clear to me while watching *Vertigo* (1958) in FTVM 372. Sitting in Angell Hall Auditorium A, I felt frustrated that a film so highly revered by the film community for decades treated its female characters as mere objects, stripped of voice, agency, and autonomy. The women in the story existed solely under the control of the man's character, reinforcing a dynamic that felt deeply

unsettling. That frustration became the catalyst for “We’re Not the Same.” I wanted to create a film that captured a similar cinematic quality while critically examining the male gaze by exploring how women’s stories shift when told from a female perspective.

From the beginning, I collaborated closely with David Marek and Jim Burnstein, refining the script through multiple drafts. I knew I wanted the story to focus on sisters and the complex relationship between them. I grew up as the younger sister and was constantly compared to my sibling, Lauren. Teachers, coaches, and others often made unconscious comparisons that fostered an unspoken rivalry and insecurity between us. Being told I was “more competitive” seemed to suggest that Lauren lacked something, and although I was praised, I didn’t realize then how deep those comparisons cut. Those words wounded her while also imposing an impossible standard on me. It wasn’t until adulthood that we began to have open conversations about the harm of these constant comparisons. We learned to see each other as individuals rather than reflections of one another. Mia and Isabella’s journey mirrors that shift from competition to understanding. In many ways, this film is a love letter and a reflection of that growth.

I began outlining the script in April 2024 and spent the summer refining it, ultimately completing eight versions. Early on, I also began gathering visual and thematic inspiration for the film. From the earliest drafts, I imagined “We’re Not the Same” as a quiet psychological descent and a retaliation to *Vertigo*. I wanted the story to not only trace Mia’s emotional unraveling but also blur the line between reality and imagination. This wasn’t just a family drama; it was, at its core, a psychological thriller rooted in naturalism and emotional truth. Drawing from *Vertigo’s* exploration of stalking and the male gaze, I became fascinated by how the narrative would shift if the gaze were female, and how desire, obsession, and control would look through that lens.

At the same time, I found myself revisiting childhood influences that subtly shaped my understanding of comparison and identity. One of my favorite movies growing up was *The Parent Trap* (1998). While I loved it as a child, I was always struck by the emotional undercurrents, particularly the idea of discovering a sibling you never knew existed. I became fascinated by the emotional complexity that would come with such a revelation: the jealousy, curiosity, and disorientation of realizing someone else had lived a version of your life. I layered this with inspiration from the short film "The Neighbors' Window" (2019), which explores the longing for a different life and the quiet realization that the grass isn't always greener on the other side. These ideas, combined with the psychological tension of *Vertigo*, helped shape Mia's emotionally charged obsession with Isabella, giving her motivations a deeper sense of vulnerability and complexity.

IV. Pre-Production

Initial planning for pre-production began in the early summer of 2024, with a crucial priority being assembling the crew. An essential element was my intentional decision to build a predominantly female team. Inspired by Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," I wanted to challenge the traditional dynamics of cinematic gaze. Mulvey explains how the eroticization of women on screen is largely constructed through three male gazes: The camera's gaze (or pro-filmic event), which, though technically neutral, tends to be voyeuristic and shaped by the male perspective; the gaze of male characters within the narrative; and finally, the gaze of the male spectator, which aligns with the first two. She argues that because men have historically dominated filmmaking roles, cinema naturally reflects a male gaze. My goal was to subvert this dynamic, not to eliminate the male gaze, but to reframe and

challenge it through the presence and influence of a female gaze created by women behind the camera.

This choice was a direct response to a pattern I observed in Hollywood: films about women being made without meaningful female input in key creative roles. A recent example is *Damsel* (2024), which sought to promote female empowerment, yet was written, directed, and shot overwhelmingly by men. Despite increasing attention on gender equity, women remain vastly underrepresented in roles like director and cinematographer. With this film, I wanted to break that pattern and tell women's stories through women's voices and perspectives.

After assembling my team in the summer, we officially began pre-production in early August. One of the first steps was sitting down with my Director of Photography to start developing our shot list. Given the central theme of the male and female gaze in our film, we wanted to carefully consider how visual language could reflect and differentiate between the two perspectives. Before we could portray the female gaze effectively, I needed to deepen my understanding of it, what it truly means, and how it functions in visual storytelling. One particularly influential essay was "Gender in Cinematography: Female Gaze (Eye) Behind the Camera" by Zoe Dirse. In it, Dirse argues that when a woman holds the camera, it shifts the perception of women on screen, from voyeuristic objects to fully realized human beings. She emphasizes that "sexual difference at the point of production (not reception)" is key, suggesting that perception, how the camera sees, is where gendered representation takes shape (Dirse 16). This concept of perception became central to how we approached our cinematography.

During development, I worked through numerous drafts of the scripts to highlight subtle character shifts to better echo this gaze. Isabella, for example, started as highly passive, but through rewriting, she became stronger — someone with her own arc and agency. I did this to

ensure the story was more balanced and mutual in perspective. I also worked to define, intensify, and add nuance to the key theme: *Who would I be if things had been different?*

At the beginning of the film, Mia embodies the male gaze: Isabella is objectified, and her interiority remains inaccessible to the audience. In response, we sought to reconfigure this dynamic by introducing the female gaze through Isabella's point of view. Rather than presenting her solely as an object seen through Mia's eyes, we gradually align the audience with Isabella's subjectivity. As the narrative progresses, the camera moves away from its detached, objectifying perspective in favor of a more intimate and empathetic visual approach. This shift enables the viewer to more fully engage in Isabella's inner experience, ultimately recognizing her as a psychologically complex and emotionally resonant character.

It isn't until the scene in the clothing store, when Isabella catches Mia watching her, that the gaze begins to shift. I had always envisioned this moment as the narrative's turning point, the catalyst for reframing how Isabella is seen, and more importantly, how she begins to see herself. This scene was deliberately constructed to contrast with one of the most iconic moments in *Vertigo*, where Jimmy Stewart's character gazes at Kim Novak's character in a heightened act of objectification. In that scene, she is rendered passive, viewed solely through his desire.

I wanted to challenge that dynamic in "We're Not the Same." Rather than allowing Isabella to remain the object of Mia's gaze, this moment initiates her reclaiming of agency. From this point forward, she begins to assert her subjectivity and subtly engage a female gaze, one rooted in mutual recognition, complexity, and emotional autonomy. Rather than framing her as an object of desire, the narrative increasingly centers her perspective, allowing the audience to see her as a fully developed individual with depth, emotions, and inner conflict. She is no longer simply the subject of the male gaze, but someone whose experience is given weight and

complexity. The earlier objectification and obsessive attention she endures become sources of emotional harm, revealing how deeply damaging it is to be constantly reduced to an idealized image rather than being recognized as a real person.

Additionally, when crafting our shot design and determining the overall visual language of the film, we drew from a range of influences. One key inspiration was *Promising Young Woman* (2020), a film that masterfully blends the suspense and stylization of a thriller with the emotional depth of a grounded drama. Its ability to move fluidly between bold intensity and intimate vulnerability strongly resonated with the tone we sought to create. This influence was especially significant in guiding our approach to the depiction of the sexual assault scene. Given that approximately one in five women experience some form of sexual assault (according to the NSVRC), this is an all-too-common reality, one that I felt a responsibility to portray honestly and with care. As a woman, it was essential for me to present this moment from a female perspective, one that doesn't sensationalize or exploit trauma, but instead conveys the fear, violation, and emotional weight of such experiences. *Promising Young Woman* struck a careful balance: it didn't rely on graphic visuals to make its point, but still captured the terrifying and deeply unsettling nature of sexual violence. That sensitivity, that refusal to re-traumatize while still being truthful, was something we worked to emulate in our approach.

During pre-production, we also prioritized costume and hair/makeup design, recognizing how crucial these elements are, particularly for women in relation to identity, perception, and transformation. Clothing and makeup often carry heavy cultural weight, especially in how women are defined or judged by society, and we wanted to explore how these visual choices could reflect each character's internal journey.

With Isabella, we intentionally leaned into hyper-feminine clothing such as soft fabrics, pastel colors, and delicate makeup, not only to highlight how she is objectified through the male gaze but also to show how she, consciously or not, plays into these imposed stereotypes. Her appearance becomes both a shield and a symbol of how she is seen, rather than who she truly is. As the story progresses, Mia's transformation is also marked by changes in her appearance. As her obsession intensifies, she begins adopting more traditionally feminine looks, wearing pinks and softer tones as a way to mold herself into the idealized version of womanhood she has long yearned to embody. Yet in doing so, she loses a sense of her true self, conforming to a standard that ultimately consumes her.

The gradual loss of identity reaches its climax in a pivotal scene set in the Law Quad. Both women are dressed in white—a symbolic choice to suggest that they are starting over, or perhaps being erased. It's a moment of reckoning. Isabella, washed out and quiet, is beginning to reject the patriarchal ideals that once shaped her. It's as though she is peeling away the layers of what her world has told her to be.

In contrast, Mia has fully embraced those very standards, molding herself into the stereotype in pursuit of the life she's always desired, even if it means losing parts of herself. Stripped down by expectation, obsession, and conformity, they stand in stark visual similarity, underscoring just how much of themselves they've surrendered trying to inhabit roles never really theirs to begin with.

IV. Production

As production began, it came with its own set of challenges. One of the most significant setbacks occurred just two weeks before filming when we were informed that the University would no longer allow us to shoot in the dorms as originally planned. Losing our primary

location so close to production triggered a wave of stress, but instead of dwelling on the problem, I immediately shifted my focus to finding a solution. I reached out to Concordia University and, to my surprise, discovered they had an entire dormitory building available and were willing to let us film there. It was a pivotal reminder of the value of being resourceful and thinking creatively when faced with unexpected obstacles. That said, the last-minute location change also presented a new challenge for our production design team, who had to quickly reimagine the visual world of the film to fit a completely different space.

We leaned into the film's visual and thematic tension to support its feminist reimagining of the traditional male gaze. Where Hitchcock's male protagonist manipulates and reshapes a woman into his ideal, Mia's gaze is rooted in envy and longing rather than control. She isn't trying to possess or change Isabella — she wants to understand her, to unravel what made her "worthy" of their father's love and acceptance within a patriarchal framework that Mia feels excluded from.

This dynamic shaped not only the emotional arc of the film but also directly informed its visual language. Mirrors and windows became key tools in externalizing Mia's psychological journey—reflective surfaces were used to explore how the sisters see each other, and ultimately, themselves. Early on, we use mirrors to frame Mia's fixation, like when she observes Isabella in the boutique's mirror—a moment charged with both distance and desire. As the story unfolds, these same surfaces evolve to reflect recognition rather than projection. By the film's end, when Mia sees her reflection with clearer eyes, the use of mirrors underscores her shift from rivalry to empathy, from distorted perception to a more nuanced self-awareness. These choices were deliberate, allowing us to visually echo the film's core question: What happens when a woman sees herself not through the lens of judgment or comparison, but with understanding?

The production process was both creatively fulfilling and logistically challenging, with many moments of recalibration that reshaped the final product. As we began planning, the script relied more heavily on dialogue and exposition, but through rehearsals and early table reads, I realized the most emotionally truthful moments were the quietest ones. This led to a shift in my directorial focus: toward performance-based storytelling and subtle framing over explanation.

As we started shooting, my focus on the atmosphere and style became more defined. I worked with my team to identify real locations to ground the story in a relatable world, such as dorms, coffee shops, and suburban streets, all places loaded with emotional context. Color also became a critical storytelling tool. Inspired by *Her (2013)* and *Little Women (2019)*, I worked with my cinematography and costume teams to employ muted tones and naturalistic lighting to create emotional intimacy. Mia's world is lit in muted, desaturated tones, as is her attire, visually evoking emotional numbness. Isabella's world, bathed in softer, golden tones, symbolizes idealized femininity — a carefully curated illusion.

As Mia's obsession with Isabella intensifies, I leaned into more stylized lighting and heightened color palettes to reflect the unraveling of her mental state. The goal was not just to depict Mia's inner turmoil, but to make the audience feel it visually. We played with stark tonal contrasts—cool versus warm, reality versus imagination—to mirror Mia's fractured perception of the world around her. This contrast reaches a turning point in the pivotal scene where Mia confronts her father and witnesses Isabella crying alone in her dorm room. In that moment of vulnerability, the lighting intentionally softens for both characters, blurring the line between fantasy and reality. It marks a shift in Mia's gaze: she no longer sees her sister as a symbol of everything she lacks but as a complex person with her own emotional depth and pain—pain that, perhaps, mirrors her own.

As we filmed, I also became more conscious of the need to adopt a minimalistic visual style to reflect emotional realism. In the opening scenes, Mia's world is composed of static wide shots, with empty space around her creating an atmosphere of isolation and distance. My goal was for the camera to function as an observer, always at arm's length: a reflection of how Mia experiences life, on the outside, looking in. As her obsession with Isabella intensifies, the visual language shifts.

Drawing inspiration from *Promising Young Woman*, I incorporated visual and narrative cues from the psychological thriller genre to blur the lines between reality and Mia's imagination. I wanted Mia's unraveling to feel immersive and unsettling without relying on traditional horror tropes. To support this, I referenced Emerald Fennell's bold, stylized portrayal of internal trauma and emotional dissonance. For example, we staged one key scene, the party scene, with vibrant colors and heightened energy, deliberately contrasting it from the film's typically naturalistic style. This visual shift creates a subtle but unsettling effect that mirrors Mia's fractured psychological state.

I also worked with set design to consciously identify additional ways to use reflections in mirrors, windows, and screens as recurring visual motifs. These surfaces helped to serve as metaphors for Mia's self-image, projection, and the tension between how she sees herself and sees Isabella as the reflection of what she believes she wants to and should be.

V. Post-Production

When we first entered post-production, I brought on two male editors I had enjoyed working with on past projects. While I trusted their technical skills, I had initially hoped to collaborate with female editors, especially for a project so rooted in questions of gender, identity, and gaze. Unfortunately, the women I reached out to weren't available for something of this

scale. From early on, though, I sensed a disconnect. Despite their experience, the male editors didn't fully share the sensibility or perspective I envisioned for the film. That gap in vision became more tangible when one of the editors began relying solely on on-camera audio, neglecting to sync the externally recorded sound—a shortcut that would have seriously delayed post-production. Beyond the technical concerns, it underscored that this process needed a level of care and intention that I wasn't seeing.

That became a turning point. It was clear to me that if I wanted this story to reflect the vision I'd held from the start, I needed to take full control of the editing process myself. Editing is where the film truly takes shape, where its emotional truth is found, and because this was always intended to be a female-driven narrative, I felt a deep responsibility to personally shape every frame. Taking on the edit meant stepping back about three weeks as well as a significant increase in my personal time commitment. However, doing so allowed me to align the film more closely with my original vision. It was the right decision.

From then until mid-March, I worked through ten rough cuts. It was an intense, deeply immersive process that taught me more than I ever expected—not just about editing, but about storytelling. As I continued refining the edit, the concept of perspective, particularly the dynamic between the male and female gaze, became even more pronounced. While this theme had been embedded in the cinematography from the beginning, it was through editing that it started to truly resonate. It gave me space to sculpt the emotional rhythm of the film and to make deliberate choices about when to offer access to a character's inner world and when to withhold it.

That tension became especially clear with Isabella. In early cuts, I included more subjective moments from her point of view, particularly in scenes with her father, because I felt a need to fully communicate her interiority. But as I reworked the film, I began to understand that

subtlety often carried more emotional weight. What I once felt had to be clearly shown could instead be expressed through implication, silence, and restraint. Paradoxically, by pulling back, I was able to preserve her subjectivity rather than risk over-explaining or unintentionally objectifying her.

Pacing became another essential tool. With much of the film driven by silence instead of dialogue, I had to learn how to let moments breathe—how to shape emotion through rhythm, not just through words. One scene in particular stood out: a moment originally anchored in dialogue, where Mia watches Isabella talking to her father from a distance. In the final version, this scene was almost entirely restructured to rely on visual cues alone. By removing the spoken lines and allowing the camera to observe from afar, the emotional undercurrent became more potent. I learned that sometimes, what is left unsaid—and unseen—can evoke the deepest resonance. Restraint became not a limitation, but a language of its own.

As a director, the editing process meant navigating through extensive feedback—some incredibly helpful, some conflicting—and learning to trust my instincts about what served the story. I worked carefully to listen to and consider every perspective, knowing that each collaborator brought something valuable to the table. But I also had to learn when to push back and when to defend choices I believed in. This was unnerving at first, but it was essential to finding my voice as a filmmaker. What made it especially meaningful was seeing those decisions pay off, when something I insisted on keeping ended up being exactly what resonated. This was particularly important when my advisors, David and Jim, recognized these decisions, and in doing so validated my creative choices, giving me the confidence to trust my instincts and vision.

VI. Final Reflections

The process of making “We’re Not the Same” also helped me rethink how the genre can be used, not abandoned, but reconfigured. In this way, directing “We’re Not the Same” has helped clarify the kind of filmmaker I want to become. I’m interested in stories about perception, identity, and emotional inheritance — especially through the lens of female experience. I want to keep working in the space between realism and psychological drama — telling stories that are visually intentional, emotionally grounded, and profoundly aware of how characters (especially women) are framed.

The process of making this film greatly impacted my approach to directing. It taught me that directing must be grounded in listening: to collaborators, to instinct, to silence. It pushed me to think more critically about how emotion is communicated through frame, space, and absence. As both a filmmaker and a creative author, this project helped me realize that what matters most in the kind of storytelling I hope to pursue isn’t its scale. It’s how honestly and authentically my work speaks. Through Mia and Isabella, I hope viewers see a reflection of their own struggles — and perhaps a way to forgive themselves, or others. My goal is that my future work continues to create space for those feelings, and for the quiet, radical act of choosing empathy in the face of intense pain.

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