Duke UNIVERSITY | GRADUATE LIBERAL STUDIES

“Anti-?” Creative Documentary Photography and “Green” Short Film Production Introductory

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Abstract

These two projects began as a documentary exploration of the aromantic spectrum, driven by a desire to understand and amplify aromantic perspectives and to refine the filmmaker's approach to scriptwriting. Through conversations with individuals who identify along the aromantic spectrum, the filmmaker gathered personal narratives and transformed them into a series of creative photographs. Inspired by real experiences, these images offer visual representations of the complexities surrounding romantic attraction, relationships, and identity. This process not only deepened the filmmaker's understanding of aromantic lives but also fostered meaningful connections, underscoring the role of documentary work in revealing personal and often unspoken truths.

Building on these insights, the project evolved into a short narrative film that blends personal reflection with fictional storytelling. Inspired by the filmmaker's experiences and the accounts gathered during the documentary phase, the film follows two queers navigating friendship and connection. The production involved extensive script development, pre-production planning, and a collaborative filming process with a cast and crew. Post-production presented new challenges in translating the screenplay's nuances into visual storytelling, requiring creative editing solutions. Ultimately, the film serves as a personal tribute and a broader exploration of self-discovery, representation, and the emotional complexities of human relationships.

Content

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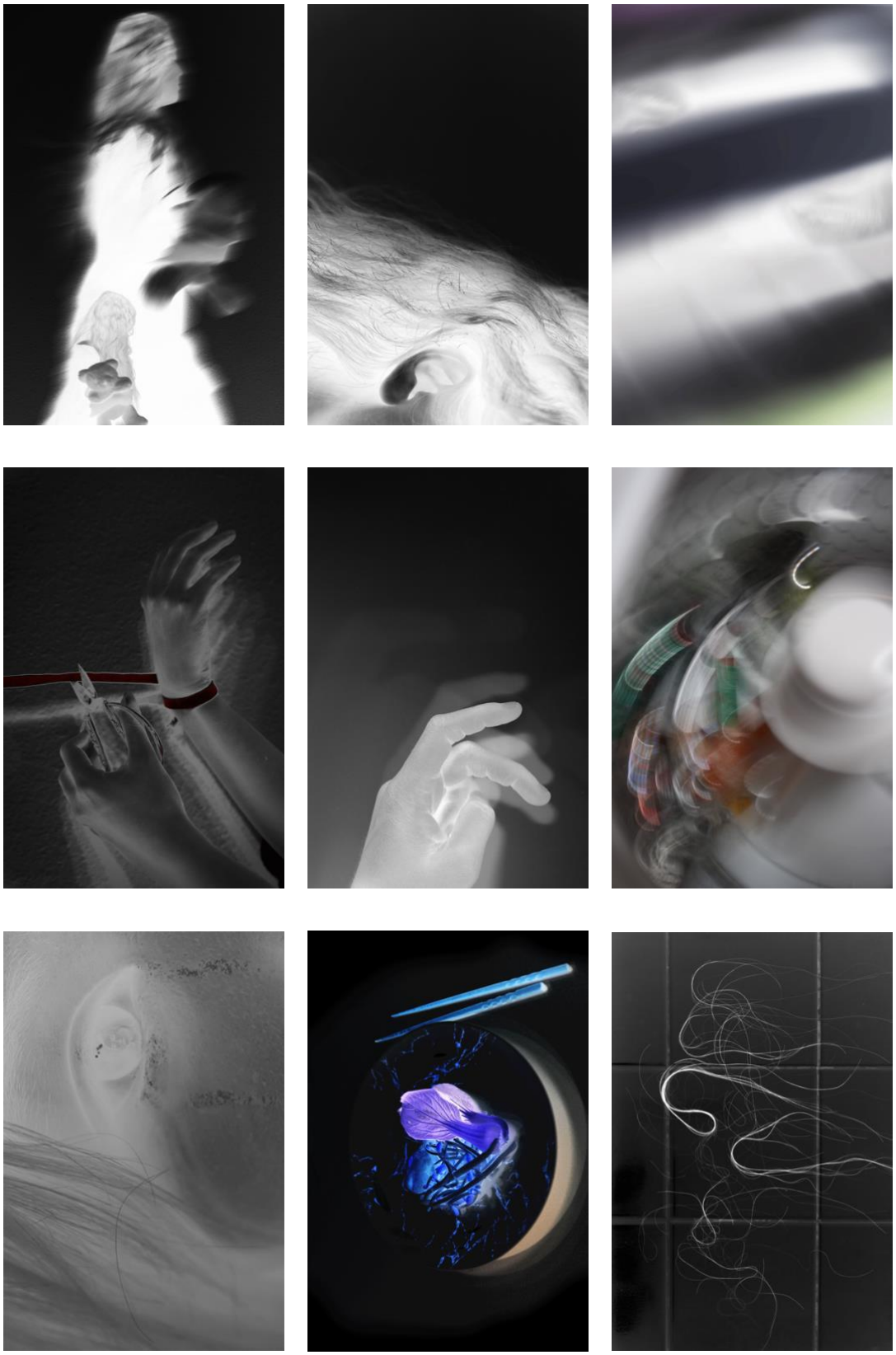
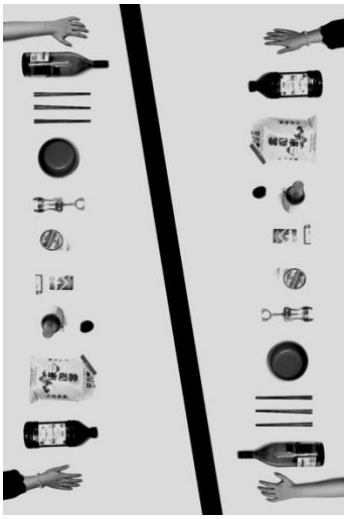
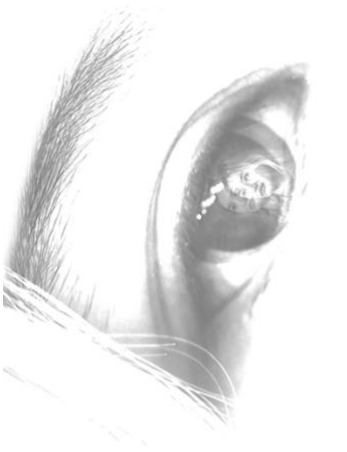
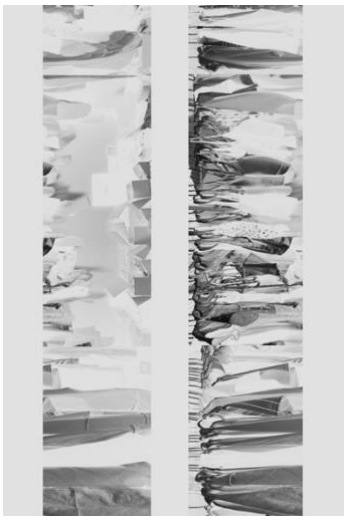
Project 1: “Anti-?” Creative Documentary Photography

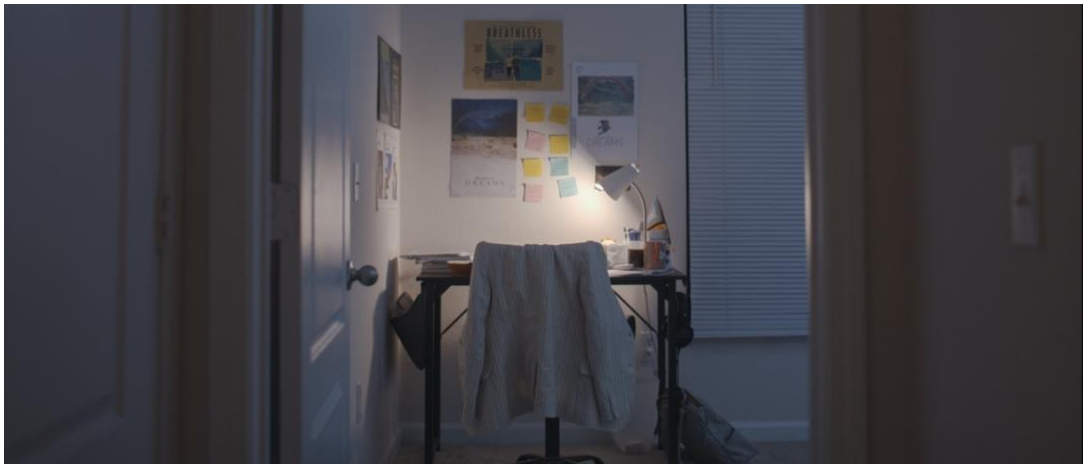


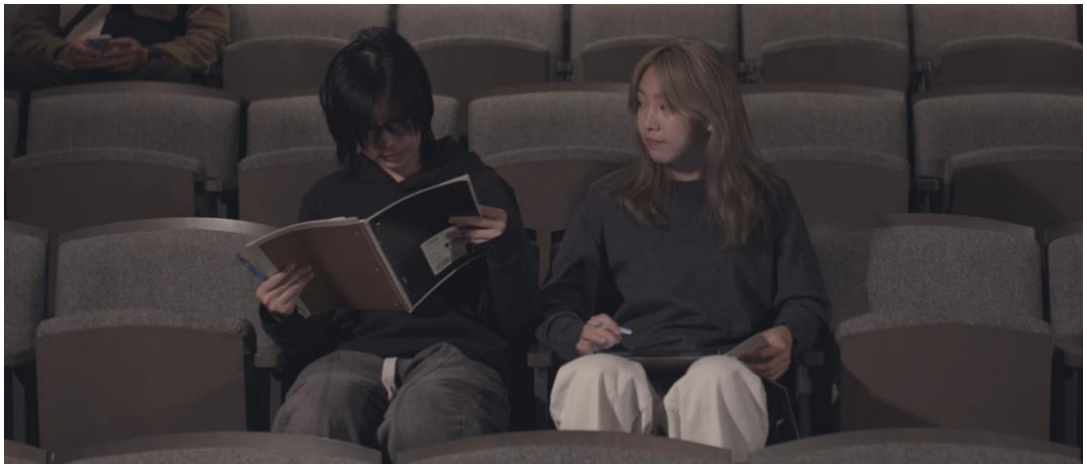


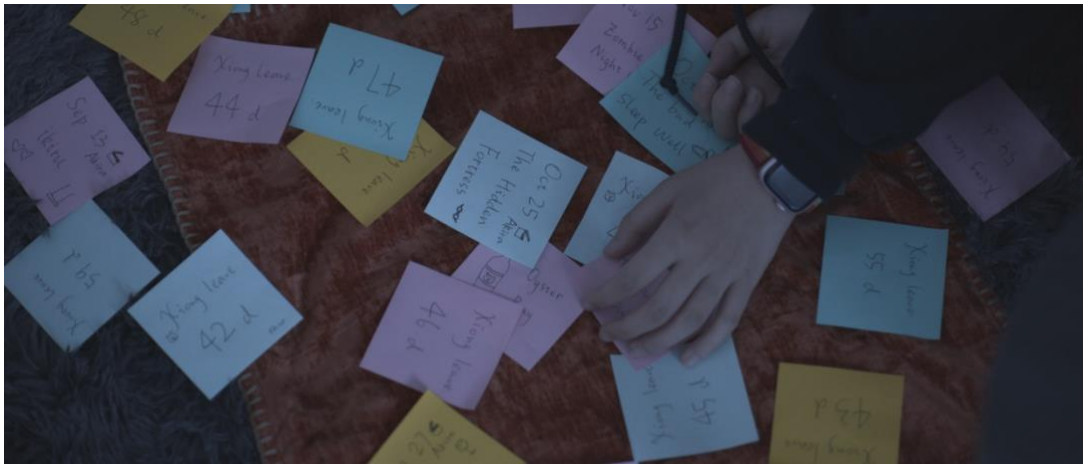




Project 2: “Green” Short Film Production



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Chapter 1: Meeting the Word “Aromantic”

I came across the word “aromantic (aro)” a year and a half ago through my friend S (they/them), who identified as aromantic asexual. At the end of my first semester, after working as a crew member on S’s film, I realized that I wanted to make my own narrative short film one day, just like S. S is shining for me when directing the short film, it feels like S is the different possibility of myself in the world. I think I admire S and am happy to be S's normal friend at that time.

However, after S left the U.S., I suddenly feel empty and sad because I realize that I can’t see S next semester and make films with S again. I started to wish I could be S’s close friend, be a part of their life. I was shocked that I missed S deeply and wondering if I had a crush on them. During winter break, even as I traveled, I couldn’t stop thinking about S. On the flight back to my apartment, the plane hit heavy turbulence. As I tried to stay calm, I began writing a posthumous letter in my notebook: “Before I die, I have three wishes. First, I want to make an excellent film. Second, I want to take my mom to travel the world. Third, I want to be close with S.”

For the first and second wishes, I knew they were achievable if I worked hard enough, but the third wish was unbelievable difficult for me since I always have issues handling all kinds of relationship. I’ve always struggled with relationships of all kinds, especially with expressing myself. Despite spending a lot of time learning how to smile and communicate, I still find it difficult. I couldn’t fully understand or describe what I was feeling toward S. Only later did I realize I might be on the aromantic spectrum. The closet term to describe my feeling may be “Alterous

attraction," which means the attraction of emotional closeness which exists in-between romantic and platonic feelings. But at the time, I misunderstand my feeling as romantic attraction and tried too hard to be close with S in a wrong way.

Unfortunately, my struggles with communication eventually led to the breakdown of our friendship, unintentionally hurting both S and me. From this experience, I realized that even well-intentioned romantic gestures can be painful for someone who is under the aromantic spectrum. I was confused and wanted to understand aromanticism more deeply—not only to help myself, but also to share more perspectives and voices with the world. If more people understood aromanticism, perhaps fewer people would be unintentionally hurt, and more friendships could be saved. I wonder what I can do, even if it is just a small step.

As I continued exploring, I noticed that "aromantic" often appears alongside "asexual." Though they share a similar structure, they describe different types of orientation. Asexuality is a sexual orientation, referring to someone who does not or barely experiences sexual attraction. Aromanticism, on the other hand, is a romantic orientation, referring to someone who does not or only rarely experiences romantic attraction. It's no surprise that they are often confused, but they are not the same.

I also learned that both "aromantic" and "asexual" exist on spectrums. However, asexuality tends to be easier for people to grasp, since the concept of sexual attraction is more widely understood. Romantic attraction, by contrast, is harder to define. The boundary between romantic and other types of emotional closeness is often blurry. Even people on the aromantic spectrum sometimes struggle to explain it

clearly. This makes aromanticism more prone to misunderstanding. For that reason, I feel called to explore the aromantic community and tell more aromantic stories.

Chapter 2: “Anti-?” Creative Documentary Photography

I first start a creative documentary photography project to understand better “aromanticism.” I want to explain that I named this project “Anti-?” because we live in a world shaped by compulsory romance, where creative works overwhelmingly revolve around romantic attraction and love. When two people share a close bond, others often assume a romantic connection, reinforcing the expectation that everyone must find a partner. Like many participants in this project, I sometimes feel powerless against these ingrained ideas. At times, we want to push back, to say no, but even we may struggle to define precisely what we resist or what alternative perspectives we hold. “Anti-?” represents this uncertainty, questioning societal norms and our collective search for clarity in a world that often leaves little room for anything outside romantic conventions.

I planned to converse with individuals on the aromantic spectrum, get to know their stories, and then create photographs inspired by their perspectives. First, I needed to find participants under the aromantic spectrum willing to speak with me. Finding participants was challenging since aromantic individuals are relatively rare and not always openly visible. I designed a poster to expand my reach and shared it through social media, online chat groups, and around campus. To my surprise, more people responded than I expected.

My first conversation began with H, who is at least demi-romantic and asexual. One of her stories made its way into my script. She shared how she once entered a romantic relationship without fully understanding it. She simply thought she

should at least give it a try. One night, while watching a movie with her boyfriend, he asked if he could hold H's hand. H felt confused, questioning why couples were expected to hold hands while watching a film. She didn't understand romantic behaviors and didn't know how to respond. This story inspired a scene in my short film: a quiet movie night where a character begins to question her feelings. Although nervous during my first conversation, I felt privileged and grateful to be trusted with such personal stories. Many stories I heard throughout this project were ones people wouldn't share with close friends.

The second participant is my classmate L, but now my friend who is aromantic asexual. L and I had only met once before she reached out, expressing interest in participating. I was surprised but thrilled to talk with her. During our conversation, she shared so much about her upbringing and thoughts on the world. I start to feel much stronger about the magic of documentary work: it allows you to glimpse into the deeper, often hidden, layers of a person. L and I grew closer through this process.

L told me that she barely felt any romantic connection between her parents; to her, her parents lived in the same house rather than genuinely being together. This shaped her skepticism and disbelief in marriage and romantic love. Additionally, sometimes living with her grandparents in a small village, she was exposed to gossip that painted romantic relationships in a negative light: stories of cheating and unfaithfulness. As a result, she preferred close friendships with women over any romantic relationship. She enjoyed physical touch with female friends, which made me reflect on my own experience and realize that desiring physical touch with friends

is regular and does not need to be labeled as “crush” or “romantic attraction.” L also said she’d suppose everyone is “aromantic” until people suddenly kiss each other with their tongues, which makes her feel disgusted. The conversation with L made me realize how deeply personal experiences shape our perspectives on love and relationships.

After L, I was contacted by N, who identified as aromantic asexual but had not yet come out. Despite sharing the same identity as L, her views on romance were quite different. N had no desire to be in a romantic relationship, but she genuinely enjoyed seeing others express love. She liked watching couples express affection and didn’t mind handholding or kissing. If her friends ask her for advice on a romantic relationship, she is also willing to give her suggestions. I began to understand that being aromantic doesn’t mean being indifferent or averse to all romantic expression. At the same time, N preferred physical distance. She was open and caring toward friends and family but felt uncomfortable with physical touch, even with her mother. Her emotional world was generous, but her body held its boundaries. This encounter deepened my understanding that aromantic experiences are diverse: the same identity can manifest in vastly different ways, shaped by personal comfort, history, and boundaries.

M, the fourth participant, had a different perspective. She could develop crushes on people, but if her feelings were reciprocated, she would immediately feel uncomfortable, even disgusted. Despite this, she had entered several romantic relationships, performing the expected emotions rather than feeling them. She

explained that she had learned to imitate romantic behavior by closely observing friends, couples on social media, characters in television shows, and so on. She studied how people acted when they were happy, affectionate, or even heartbroken. For instance, during one breakup, she believed the appropriate response was to cry uncontrollably and plead for reconciliation, just like she had seen others do. So, she cried and wrote long, emotional letters asking her partner to come back, even though she felt nothing inside. Her story struck a chord with me, as I had experienced something similar. I had also gone through periods where I performed the role of someone in love and breakup, mimicking the outward expressions of romantic attraction without truly feeling it.

As my project continued, I had two more conversations. Each one deepened my understanding of aromanticism and affirmed that it is a spectrum. All of the participants and their stories made me realize that there is no rigid requirement to be qualified as "aromantic." I started to understand that it's okay to exist in the gray areas and not always have a clear definition of your feelings or relationships. Through this journey, I have gained knowledge about aromanticism and discovered a part of myself. I felt ready to embrace my confusion around friendship and romance and write a script that explored these emotions honestly and carefully.

Chapter 3: “Green” Short Narrative Film Production

I wrote this short film script to discuss the boundaries between friendship and romantic relationships based on my conversations with different individuals under the aromantic spectrum. I felt gratitude for the creative documentary photography project for helping me to build compelling and authentic characters. I wanted to use this short film to amplify aromantic voices, bringing more awareness and highlighting that "aromantic" is a spectrum, and everyone shares a different story and perspective.

From the beginning, I titled this short film "Green," drawing inspiration from the colors of the aromantic and Asexual flags. The Aromantic Asexual flag includes orange, yellow, white, blue, and dark blue; when orange and blue are mixed, they create green. Likewise, the Aromantic flag features green, light green, white, gray, and black. Green, present in both flags, became a symbolic bridge between identities and a visual representation of the film's themes.

The film revolves around two main characters, Bai and Xiong. Their name together, Bai Xiong (白熊), means "white bear" in Chinese, a reference to the "White Bear Phenomenon." This phenomenon means that when you try not to think about something, it becomes the only thing on your mind. I wonder if sometimes, when people keep thinking about other people, it's not because of romantic attraction but psychological reasons.

I wrote Xiong (21, biological female, They/Them) based on conversations I had with aromantic individuals. Xiong is a junior media student who spent one semester as an exchange student at the University of Bai (23, biological female,

They/She). In Xiong's home university, they had a close friend named Ye (21, biological female, She/Her). When Ye confessed romantic feelings for Xiong, Xiong panicked and chose to escape, exchanging to Bai's university for the next semester. By the time they meet Bai, Xiong has begun to understand their aromantic identity but is still struggling with how to navigate relationships. Xiong regrets losing Ye not because Ye's feelings changed but because Xiong realizes that the changing of love should not have meant the end of their friendship. If the same situation were to happen again, Xiong wonders if they would face it differently instead of running away.

Bai's character is partially based on my personal experiences and conversations with her actress, Maggie. Like Maggie, Bai is a business student who loves film but questions whether it can ever become more than a hobby. Overwhelmed by the pressures of business school, such as group projects, career fairs, and talks about financial success, Bai turns to film for comfort. Bai takes a leap of faith and enrolls in a film production course, where she meets Xiong and is impressed by their work.

Over time, through film courses and movie nights hosted by Bai, Bai and Xiong grow closer and become good friends. Bai does not realize her feelings have changed until one night when Xiong rests their head on Bai's shoulder. At that moment, Bai freezes, unsure of what to do. She has known about Xiong being aromantic since a class discussion where Xiong openly answered a question on the topic. Bai has trouble figuring out whether her feelings towards Xiong are romantic or

friendship. Bai fears that expressing them might hurt Xiong or jeopardize their bond. Unable to sort through her confusion, Bai begins skipping class and takes time to reflect on her feelings and how to respond.

Since we were working with non-professional actors, I encouraged them to bring their real selves to the roles. Interestingly, both actors Wenxin (Ze/Zir) and Maggie (She/Her) are under the aromantic asexual spectrum. Wenxin, who plays Xiong, is also a media student with an exchange, making ze an ideal fit for the character. To help Maggie connect more deeply with Bai, I incorporated parts of her personal story into the role. We held several table reads before filming, allowing Wenxin and Maggie to understand their characters' emotional landscape better and build rapport. Their performances were deeply thoughtful and exceeded my expectations.

The production process was not easy, but I was fortunate to have the support of many friends. Clara and Sean helped refine the script and storyboard, while Hongyi, as producer, played a key role in casting and logistics. After two months of intensive pre-production, filming began. It was my first time directing a narrative short film and the largest production I had ever led. On the first day alone, we had ten actors and a crew of twelve. I am especially thankful to Professor Milligan for his guidance throughout the process. Though we faced numerous challenges, every part of the experience was meaningful. After four days of shooting and reshoots, I gained valuable insight into directing and film production.

Post-production demanded even more time and effort. Many details planned in the script didn't come across clearly in the footage, which required me to diverge from the original storyboard during editing. For instance, I tried to show the passage of time through the actress's changing outfits, but it wasn't evident to viewers, making the timeline feel compressed. With support from friends and much trial and error, I finally completed a polished version of the film, which was screened at the GLS Showcase and received warm, enthusiastic feedback. I hope this short film sparks questions and offers perspectives that invite people to rethink the boundaries between friendship, relationships, and the romance-compulsory world we live in.

Through this project, I not only deepened my understanding of aromantic spectrum but also discovered the power of film to hold space for complexity, ambiguity, and care. Creating “Green” allowed me to explore questions that have long occupied my mind, and to offer a quiet, tender narrative that invites others to do the same.

Conclusion

My thesis centers on “aromantic” studies through photography and short film production, which has been a deeply meaningful journey of self-exploration and engagement with diverse perspectives. By documenting real stories and translating them into creative expression, I have not only gained valuable knowledge but also discovered what truly resonates with me as a filmmaker and researcher. This process has challenged my understanding of relationships, identity, and storytelling, pushing me to think more critically about the narratives we take for granted.

The theory courses and film production courses I took evolved into a transformative experience that has shaped both my creative practice and personal perspective. As I approach graduation, I am immensely grateful for the people who shared their stories, the mentors who guided me, and the challenges that pushed me to grow. These projects are not just a culmination of my studies; they are the foundation for future explorations. The journey does not end here, and I am committed to continuing this conversation, questioning norms, analyzing more research papers, and amplifying underrepresented voices through my work.