

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

School of Arts & Sciences Theses

Hunter College

---

Spring 5-19-2020

### The Life of Dan

Jeremy S. Levine  
*CUNY Hunter College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc\\_sas\\_etds/624](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/624)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

The Life of Dan

by

Jeremy S. Levine

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Integrated Media Arts, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2020

May 19, 2020

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Kelly Anderson

\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Sponsor

May 19, 2020

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Andrew Lund

\_\_\_\_\_  
Second Reader

## **Dedication**

*The Life of Dan* is dedicated to my brother Daniel James Levine. We've been on this journey together from the beginning.

## **Abstract**

*The Life of Dan* is a 30-minute film about the complications of brotherly love and working through the horrors of the past. The film explores past traumas between brothers Dan and Jeremy Levine through their shared love of horror films. As they work through unsettled moments from their childhoods, building towards Dan's temporary hospitalization, the documentary transforms into a horror film about mental illness and traumatic memory.

## **Project Description**

We begin in an empty room. The camera swings to the opposite end, still empty, but shifting from orange to blue. We emerge into a dark hallway with light streaming from the ceiling. Then a young man wearing a backpack adorned with pins walks through an empty void. Voices fade in as we cut back to reveal this man, Dan Levine, on a pier overlooking the East River in New York City. Walking down the pier, Dan looks directly into the camera and asks, "You have anxiety and depression too, right?" A voice from behind the camera, that of his older brother Jeremy, responds hesitantly. "Yeah, I

do.” After a pause, Dan smirks at the camera. “Not to be a dick, but I think I have worse anxiety and depression than you do.” The sky, now in the throes of sunset, bleeds red over the dark water. “What kind of a movie are we making?” Jeremy asks. After a beat, Dan responds, “It would be kind of cool if the second half of the movie was kind of like, hmmm, *Jeepers Creepers*, but I don’t know if that’s going to happen.” Dan laughs. “But the first half, um, I think it’s going to be a first.” A couple dances tango behind Dan, lost in their own world. “I don’t know what to say,” Dan whispers, exasperated. “You can say whatever you want,” Jeremy responds. After another pause, Dan looks up and stares into the lens. “This is the life of Dan.”

So begins our journey into *The Life of Dan*, a short film that seeks to exorcise the demons of the past by transforming trauma into horror. Through a blending of personal documentary and horror tropes, the brothers grapple with some of the most challenging moments of their childhood, building towards Dan’s temporary institutionalization in the youth ward of a psychiatric hospital.

An attic door creaks open and the brothers slowly ascend the rickety stairs. To begin their examinations of the past, Dan and Jeremy look through dusty boxes and crates. The wind howls as Dan discovers a box full of old tapes from their childhood. From behind the camera, Jeremy asks, “Why do you want to do this movie?” Dan, holding a tape in his hand, pauses and thinks. “I want people to understand.”

The tapes flicker to life illuminating moments from Dan’s childhood—his first days in the hospital, birthday parties, and concerts—landing on a shot of Dan looking straight

into the camera, the background bathed in cool cyan. He takes a deep breath. "So I've been wondering this for a long, long time, actually, so this would be the best place to ask," Dan says. "Do you ever feel ashamed or embarrassed to have a brother who has special needs, anxiety, depression, bi-polar, etcetera?" The camera spins to Jeremy, looking straight into the lens, bathed in orange light. "I don't feel ashamed," he says. "You are able to do so much. You have your own apartment, you have your own job."

We cut to Dan entering a large event room, with rounded decorations swaying gently from the ceiling. Dan sets up a series of tables that unlatch from the back wall as he talks about his desire to be "free" from mental illness. "I think I'd be just like this really happy person, living in a world without anything to worry about." He extends a table with a loud slam. "I can't even imagine what that would be like though."

Dan eats a salad at a long table in the staff break room. He sits alone as a flurry of teachers argue about hygiene in the foreground. It is as if they occupy different worlds. Dan looks towards the camera, subtly acknowledging the divide. The teachers filter out and Dan continues finishing his salad in a now-empty room. After a pause, he asks Jeremy from behind the camera how this is going to transform into a horror film. Jeremy flips the question, asking Dan how the horror could build from something in his daily life. "That's the problem, I can't think of something that would relate to that, you know?" Dan responds.

Dan rides home in the back seat of an otherwise empty state-run van. He walks down the bare white walls to his apartment. It's night now. The camera pans through

Dan's room, covered with stacks of horror film DVDs and bathed in red and purple light. Dan and Jeremy sit down to watch the latest *Halloween* remake. They are horrified watching a scene in a psychiatric hospital featuring patients in chains howling at the moon like animals. "When I was in the hospital it was nothing like this," Dan says quietly. Jeremy asks him what it was like but Dan remains silent. "Maybe this is what our movie is about," Jeremy says, his shadow hovering over Dan who is still glued to the screen. "What if we made a horror film about your time in the hospital?" The patients on screen scream as we cut to the sun setting behind barren winter trees.

Jeremy walks through Dan's room and sits in a chair across from his brother. A camera sits between them. Jeremy takes a deep breath. "Ready? We've never really talked about this." Jeremy asks Dan to recount the first time he was sent to the hospital. Dan spins the camera to him and talks about how a child psychiatrist sent him to the hospital in an ambulance. The lights go out. Sitting in darkness, the wheels of a hospital gurney clank against ceramic tile. A metal door slams in the distance. Jeremy asks Dan to recount what he was thinking on his first day at the hospital. A brief flash of light erupts with a bang, illuminating a frame of footage from Dan's home videos as he recounts his rapid thoughts. "What did I get myself into?" Another flash. "How long am I going to be in here for?" Flash. "What's going to happen here?" The light fades back up, creating a halo around Dan's face.

The camera spins to Jeremy. "Were you afraid you would never get better?" Jeremy asks. Dan flips the camera back to him. "That definitely crossed my mind." They

discuss how Dan felt trapped at the hospital, spinning the camera back and forth. “I felt like I couldn’t escape,” Dan says, describing how he wasn’t even allowed outside at first. The camera spins to Jeremy’s seat, but Dan is now sitting there. “I felt like I was stuck in this small little room forever and I was never going to get out of it.” The camera spins back, again to Dan in his original position, now bathed in orange light. “It was horrible.” The camera continues to spin back and forth. Jeremy has disappeared, replaced by Dan who is now interviewing himself. Each time the camera spins, Dan grows bigger in the frame until, finally, he stares at the camera in a silent close-up, his eyes remembering.

As the camera spins again, we crash into darkness. Dan walks like a ghost across the darkened apartment hallway. Flashes of light interrupt the sequence as we gradually descend down a dark catacomb with a man shaking violently in the darkness. The images and sound loop, evoking a feeling of claustrophobia. The image transforms into flashes of bright colors illuminating monsters and men in hospital uniforms—the stuff nightmares are made of—interspersed with frames of distorted home video. Then, in a final spin through strobing lights, we arrive at a still shot of Dan sleeping in bed in his apartment, with morning light streaming through the windows.

A phone alarm rings and Dan slumps out of bed, turning it off. As he searches through his drawers for clothes, a voice from behind the camera pleads, “Dan, I know you are going to kill me, but can we do it one more time?” Jeremy races into the shot to reset the alarm. Dan hops back into bed, protesting that he needs to go to the

bathroom. Just as the scene is about to start again, the alarm goes off, far too soon. Jeremy rushes into the scene laughing before resetting the scene.

Dan recalls how listening to music got him through his time in the hospital. His apartment is now transformed into surreal purples. He walks to his desk where a red light casts a vibrant glow as feedback fills the room.

We crash into a hardcore show. Men on stage scream aggressively into their mics as colored lights illuminate an audience of men flailing their arms wildly. “Music’s a very powerful thing,” Dan states, as the lights on his face shift from red to dark purple. “Cause it’s so heavy and so screamy that it, like, subtracts the anxiousness, you know? It almost like defeats it.”

We cut to thrashing music as burly men crash into each other. Dan enters the mosh pit. The intensity builds until we smash cut to Dan, back at school, vacuuming a large room. He talks about the stigma he faces when others learn that he was in the hospital. “You’re not a bad person if you go to the hospital,” he states while circling the room with the vacuum. “Eventually,” Dan recalls, “it got better, and that’s how I got discharged.” Dan unplugs the vacuum. “Good?” he asks the empty room. After a pause, an older man with a French accent walks into frame and looks around. “Looks good,” he says.

Dan talks about how he still has nightmares about his time at the hospital as the camera swings back to his interview, his face bathed in cyan. With a loud bang and a flash of white, the lighting shifts to a bright orange. “I have nightmares that I screw up



again.” Flash. We land back in the blue interview. “Going back and back and back to the hospital.” The image continues to shift between these color spaces as the disjointed sound design grows louder. We move down a dark hallway and then the camera spins, throwing us back into the scene with Dan lying in bed.

The alarm sounds. Dan gets up. We cut to activities from his daily life as a monotonous beat fills the soundtrack. Dan walks down the white hallway. He unstacks chairs at work. He rides in the van. His routine is heavily curated, his life still haunted by the memories of the hospital. But he’s also persevered. He survived and carved out a life for himself. The camera spins by a mirror, splitting Dan in two before catching a reflection of Jeremy.

The shot continues to spin to Dan seated in the interview space, pulling the camera back towards him. “What can you relate to my mental illnesses or anything like that?” Dan asks. Jeremy spins the camera and talks about how he’s experienced anxiety and depression, but not to the same degree. Dan spins the camera back to him. “Well it’s not good that you have things that you deal with,” Dan responds, “but it is good that we can relate on those.” Dan asks Jeremy if he thought his depression would get so bad that he would end up in the hospital. The camera swings to Jeremy, now in the spotlight and visibly flustered. “I don’t know, that’s a good question,” he responds. After a pause Jeremy continues, “I was terrified that maybe it would get really, really bad and maybe that’s what happens cause I saw that happen to you.” The camera swings to Dan. “Well, hopefully we both stay out,” he says, bathed again in a strange orange light.

“Hopefully it won’t get that bad.” The camera swings to Jeremy’s chair, but the frame is empty. Jeremy has vanished. The camera swings back to Dan’s position, but he is missing too. We cut to a wide angle revealing a now empty room. As if possessed, the camera spins on its own between the two positions. We cut back to the primary camera, still spinning. While the camera is in Dan’s position, we hear his voice, despite the fact that his body is missing. “Do you ever feel ashamed or embarrassed to have a brother who has special needs, anxiety, depression, bi-polar, etcetera?” The camera spins to Jeremy’s interview with an empty frame. Jeremy talks about how he wishes he could just snap his fingers and make all of Dan’s issues disappear.

The camera spins wildly. Screeching music ramps up as we see flashes from the home video footage of Dan as a child. We are slammed crashing back to the sunset on the pier. Dan looks over the railing at the water, bathed in reds and purples. In voiceover, Dan responds, “but then I wouldn’t be me.” It’s quiet now, just a soft breeze and water gently lapping against the shore.

Dan, in an extreme close-up against the sky, tells Jeremy, “It’s a beautiful night.” Jeremy asks him what comes next in the movie. Dan looks around, thinking. “Whatever happens in the life of Dan, I guess.” We cut to black.

### **Topic Summary**

Myths abound about mental illness. Despite popular fears about the mentally ill as violent and dangerous, those suffering from mental illness are far more likely to be

victims of assault than perpetrators. In fact, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, people with a mental health condition are four times more likely to be the victim of violence (Powell). Interestingly, we, as a society, are no strangers to mental illness. Approximately one in five American adults are affected by mental illness each year (Powell). Given its pervasiveness, why do damaging myths about mental health persist? One only has to look at popular media to see the ways in which our culture fetishizes and simplifies the complexity of the issue, creating the conditions for the writing and rewriting of dangerous stereotypes. Within the history of media, one genre plays an outsized role in this myth creation, a genre that focuses single-handedly on the creation of fear, on the darkness inside us and the demons with which we must grapple.

Horror films have existed from the early days of cinema and the genre has survived with enduring popularity. Yet, from the beginning, with films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the genre has had a troubled relationship with mental illness (Goodwin 201). Over the last century, horror films have depicted people with mental illness as violent, dangerous, animalistic—in a word, as monsters. What's more, treatments that can have real positive impacts on people living with mental illness—namely therapy, medication, and in-care treatment—are represented as menacing. Therapists are hiding evil ulterior motives, medication is used as mind-control or to make psychotic episodes worse, and psychiatric hospitals are dilapidated, violent, abusive, and likely haunted. Horror protagonists, if they wish to survive, must escape from treatment. Just as often, antagonists in horror films escape from mental institutions before going on killing

sprees, reinforcing the myth of the mentally ill as violent and inhuman.

Through reclaiming and transforming what a horror film can be, we seek to reframe the conversation around mental health and showcase the true horrors as mental illness and society's horrific stigmatization of the disease.

### **Artistic Approach**

*The Life of Dan* is a cinematic hybrid film at the intersection of personal documentary, horror, and cinema vérité. Spanning multiple styles and modes of production, the film creates a disorienting effect, evoking the confusion of traumatic memories, mental illness, and the loss of control experienced by patients in an institution. As viewers begin to understand the language of the film, the rules shift, keeping audiences alert and off-balance.

Dan's curated routines at home and work are filmed in wide shots, emphasizing the institutional settings, the monotony of routine, and his frequent isolation. Many of these images are reworked in the horror sequences of the film, where the shadow of Dan walks endlessly through a barren hallway, representing the repetition of traumatic nightmares. Flashes of light depict lurid images of people in hospital uniforms.

Some vérité scenes evoke found-footage horror film tropes. In an early sequence, we walk up the stairs into a dark attic in the first-person perspective. The stairs creak and the wind howls through the rafters as ominous music plays in the background. These moments draw stylistic and thematic parallels between vérité and

found-footage horror and suggest the horrors imbued in the unspoken traumas of daily life. In these scenes, the camera, and by extension, the audience, are searching unfamiliar spaces, placed in a space of vulnerability. Jeremy, as the camera operator, is not an omniscient observer, but a character doing his best to make his way through the scene. Throughout the film, Dan often breaks the fourth wall by looking straight at the camera and addressing his brother behind the lens, continuously foregrounding the artifice of the process.

Bold colors and vivid lighting design bring the complexities of memory, trauma, and emotions to life. During hyperreal sequences in which Dan finds solace in horror films and hardcore music, the colors shift between deep purples, cyans, reds, and oranges. By contrast, the scenes of Dan's daily routine are shown in desaturated grays and blues. Jarring flashes of light interrupt the film and move us between color palettes, representing rapid shifts in mood and the intrusion of difficult memories in everyday life.

At the heart of the film is a non-traditional interview between the brothers. They sit in Dan's apartment on opposite chairs with a camera on a tripod set up between them. They spin the camera back and forth and speak directly into the lens, creating both eye contact and intimacy with the audience while simultaneously producing a distancing effect between the brothers who can only see each other through a monitor mounted on the camera. Dan, framed against a window, is lit primarily in a dramatic cyan with an edge of orange. Jeremy, framed against the opposite wall, is bathed in orange light with a hint of cyan. They occupy separate frames within the same physical

space, serving as almost mirror images of each other. While Jeremy is often behind the camera, for this crucial segment, they both appear on screen equidistant from the lens. They ask and answer questions of each other, beginning to balance the power dynamics inherent in both film production and sibling relationships. There is an element of closeness in the interview as the brothers connect over unspoken moments from their shared history. There is also distance—the separation of their current lives and the probing questions to try to come back together. The spinning of the camera is kept in the film, creating a disorienting effect.

As the brothers delve deeper into the traumatic history of institutionalization, the rules of the interview begin to break down. The color palette of Dan's interview shifts rapidly from blue to orange and back again. As the camera spins, we plunge into darkness. Flashes of light and loud, jarring sounds interrupt the dialogue. The flashes simultaneously evoke an interrogation room, the intrusive camera flashes of the paparazzi, and sudden bursts of memory—further established by frames of home archival spliced between. As Dan talks about being trapped in the hospital, the camera spins back and forth, with Dan occupying both frames of the interview. There is no escape from these memories. Finally, in the climactic moment, Jeremy and Dan disappear from the scene as the camera continues to swing back and forth. Jeremy discusses how he would like to make all of Dan's mental illnesses disappear, but comes to realize that it's impossible without Dan vanishing too. They can find versions of peace and catharsis from this process, but ultimately, so much remains out of their control.

## Theoretical & Historical Roots

The *Life of Dan* is rooted in the varied histories of reflexive filmmaking, horror films, and personal documentaries. While this aptly suggests a hybrid approach, these seemingly disparate genres in fact share many commonalities in production techniques, tropes, and themes.

For Jay Ruby, a reflexive film is structured “in such a way that the audience assumes that the producer, process, and product are a coherent whole” (“Exposing Yourself” 156). The revelation of the process is not an accident but is central to the philosophy and experience of the film. In *The Life of Dan*, the characters continuously break the fourth wall and expose the production process. In the middle of a quiet *verité* scene where Dan gets out of bed, presumably alone, Jeremy interrupts the action, resetting the alarm and thus foregrounding the artifice of the filmmaking process. The brothers openly detail the trajectory of the film from personal documentary to horror in the opening scene, and question on camera how this transformation will work. In another moment, Jeremy gives Dan stage directions before the scene begins. The reflexivity mimics the disorienting effect of the shifting language of the film, abruptly interrupting scenes while simultaneously grounding viewers in the artifice of each mode of production. According to Ruby, reflexive filmmaking can “cause audiences to question or at least become confused about their assumptions concerning fiction and documentary and ultimately, I suppose, their assumptions about reality” (“The Image Mirrored” 69). This evokes the confusion caused by mental illness and

institutionalization.

*The Life of Dan* is concerned with the challenges of representing mental illness and traumatic memory, and as such, requires the foregrounding of the process. Bill Nichols writes that in reflexive documentaries, “we see not an image of imaginary unchanging coherence, magically represented on a screen, but the evidence of an historically rooted act of making things meaningful” (27). Jeremy and Dan, as characters playing versions of themselves, are attempting to not only work through the traumatic memories of their childhood, but to find ways to represent their intangible experiences on screen. The process is messy. Things get complicated. Is Dan defined by his mental illnesses? What is the “core” self underneath? Or is the dichotomy between “self” and “mental illness” itself flawed? The reflexive mode of filmmaking explores the artificiality of not only filmmaking, but of identity itself. By drawing attention to the ways in which films create meaning, we “may also heighten our conscious sense of self as something also produced by codes that exist beyond ourselves” (Nichols 27). Dan feels his identity is partially determined by how others view former psychiatric patients. He seeks to redefine the destructive narratives circulating in our culture. “You’re not a bad person if you go to a hospital,” he states. “It’s just people trying to get better, trying to get their lives straightened out.”

We see the construction of identity at play within the canon of reflexive films. In *Moi, un Noir*, Jean Rouch proposed not only a collaboration with his Ivory Coast participants, but a fictionalized film. During the opening narration, Rouch states that the



participants “would play their own roles with no restrictions on what they wanted to do or say.” They would create their own characters and play themselves, drawing attention to the artifice of both filmmaking and the creation of identity. Rouch hands the narration over to Oumarou Ganda, the lead protagonist who names his own character Edward G. Robinson. Ganda welcomes his audience with a theatrical flourish: “Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you TREICHVILLE.” Dan, in the introductory scene of *The Life of Dan*, offers his own grand entrance. “This is the life of Dan” he states, leading to the opening title.

Like many of his films, *Moi, un Noir* is a collaboration between Rouch, a white French filmmaker, and people of various African nations. There is a long and troubled history of ethnographic filmmaking by white directors attempting to represent the “Other.” Rouch developed a strategy of collaboration and reflexivity in attempt to balance the uneven power dynamics inherent in his position as a white European filmmaker. As Justin Izzo writes, “through narrative techniques like the ones at stake in *Moi, un Noir*, traditional ethnographic objects become subjects of an investigation in their own right and, in so doing, they determine what kinds of knowledge a European ethnographer may produce about them” (217). While the situation in *The Life of Dan* is vastly different, I felt it was important to foreground the process for analogous reasons. The depiction of mental illness in cinema is also fraught with damaging stereotypes. We decided to make our process of grappling with the difficulties of representation visible.

While Dan and I are family, that doesn’t erase the complications of documentary

storytelling. As Calvin Pryluck states: “Cultures other than our own are not the only ones that pose problems for filmmakers and their subjects. Even renditions of cultures and lifestyles we think we know something about are filled with pitfalls for the people involved” (23). I’d go a step further. Even amongst family we are still, to a degree, outsiders in one another’s lives. As such, I felt it was important to involve Dan as a collaborator in the film about his life. We have different perspectives about his identity, our relationship, and our shared memories.

D. Soyini Madison writes that the goal of reflexivity is “to bring self and Other together so they may question, debate, and challenge one another” (9). This was an important goal for the film. The joint interview, in which Dan and I face each other with a camera between us, forms the spine of the film. We question each other about our lives, our experiences with mental illness, and our traumatic memories, swinging the camera back and forth as we attempt to reach a resolution of shared understanding.

Many horror films, interestingly, mimic the language of reflexive filmmaking. *Scream* popularized the self-referential trope by outlining the rules of the horror genre within the film and transparently foreshadowing what was about to occur on screen. Found-footage horror films take the reflexivity a step further by including the process of making the (fictional) film within the script. For example, in *The Blair Witch Project*, the film posits that we are watching the raw footage shot by a crew of student filmmakers. The fictional “filmmaker” in *Paranormal Activity* is a man who recently bought a camcorder and can’t stop recording scenes with his partner at home. As such

*Paranormal Activity* functions like a mock home video or personal documentary.

Horror films share tropes with personal documentaries. For example, characters in both genres are often found looking through old boxes in dusty attics or basements. We play with this trope in *The Life of Dan*. The stairs leading to our parent's attic creaks and groans. We scrounge for old tapes as the wind howls violently around us.

Many personal documentaries and horror films narrativize the buried traumas that haunt protagonists and showcase their attempts to gain control over these issues. In the personal documentary *A Healthy Baby Girl*, director Judith Helfand confronts her mother about the carcinogenic drug DES that her mother was prescribed while pregnant. In *Shirkers*, filmmaker Sandi Tan attempts to unravel the mystery of the older man who stole footage from the movie they made together when she was a teenager. In *Minding the Gap*, Bing Liu confronts his mother about his abusive stepfather.

Horror films also feature characters confronting past traumas. For example, in *The Babadook*, the protagonist is haunted by the death of her husband. The monster in the film is, in many ways, a manifestation of her grief and depression. In horror, general anxieties take physical form and thus can be confronted, or at least actively fled.

Trauma is a lingering demon. "A traumatic experience remains in some special form of memory storage until it is mastered," M.J. Horowitz writes. "Before mastery, vivid sensory images of the experience intrude into consciousness and may evoke unpleasant emotions" (Ballon and Leszcz 215). In horror films, these "vivid sensory images" are often evoked as fast-paced flashes representing difficult memories of the

past. Throughout the course of the story, protagonists attempt to master their traumas and vanquish their demons. In this way, “the horror film can be seen as a cultural tale that provides a mechanism for attempting mastery over anxieties involving issues of separation, loss, autonomy, and identity” (Ballon and Leszcz 211).

In found-footage horror, the camera operator is often attempting mastery through the apparatus of the camera. As Adam Charles Hart writes, “the task of the cameraperson both within the film and as the spectator’s avatar is to...vainly attempt to achieve the sort of mastery over filmic space typical...of the camera in classical Hollywood cinema” (76). He contrasts this with the first-person gaze of the killer, another common trope in horror films, in which the act of looking comes from a place of power. “Whereas killer POV indicates something approaching invulnerability and omniscience for the wielder of the look, and helplessness for the object of that look, the diegetic camera signifies utter vulnerability” (Hart 76). The killer POV is often filmed with a Steadicam, showcasing the villain’s power and mastery of the space in contrast to the found-footage camera operator’s often shaky and out-of-focus footage, signifying their vulnerability (Hart 83).

The found-footage horror film emulates the look of *verité*. We typically view the camera in *verité* filmmaking as a source of power. Hart’s analysis inverts these power dynamics. “Contrary to film theory’s understanding of the filmic gaze in much of narrative cinema, the searching camera is fundamentally an expression of a lack of mastery, of inadequacy” (Hart 83). The operator is no longer wielding power over the

subjects in the film. In fact, the operator is very much in the same position as the on-screen participants. They are all terrorized by the same threats lurking off-screen. For everyone unlucky enough to find themselves in a found-footage horror film, “the act of looking is both their only hope for survival and, at some level, what makes them vulnerable” (Hart 77).

I sought to incorporate this concept of “vulnerable looking” into *The Life of Dan*. In many ways, the journey of examining past trauma with my brother was a powerfully vulnerable experience. We were searching together, not knowing what dangers might be unleashed by the act of our looking or if we would be fully equipped to deal with the demons that might be unleashed.

### **Background**

Dan Levine, my 32-year-old younger brother, is the protagonist of *The Life of Dan*. He loves hardcore music and horror films and has an absurdly large collection of CDs and DVDs. Dan lives in our hometown on the North Shore of Boston in an apartment about a mile from my parents. He lives with depression, anxiety, bipolar disease, and a host of learning disabilities. Despite that, he has a wicked sense of humor and a kind heart. Dan works part-time as a janitor at a local Jewish school and regularly attends local hardcore shows. It’s always been his dream to work on a horror film of his own.

I’m a 36-year-old filmmaker. In high school, I played in a hardcore band, but I

soon stopped listening to this genre of music and never looked back. I ran away from my old life in many ways. I wanted to get out of town and reinvent myself, something my brother has not wanted or been able to do. This film was my attempt to find my way back to my past.

### **Themes**

*The Life of Dan* is first about brotherly love and all of its joys and complications: the intimate familiarity, the competitiveness, the unconditional support, and the shared, if unspoken past. The film centers on our relationship and our attempt to come to terms with past traumas. *The Life of Dan* is also about mental illness, our shared struggles with anxiety and depression, and the toxicity of unspoken past traumas. Through the vehicle of the film, we show the process of confronting difficult topics that haunt both of us, with all of its messiness and potential for catharsis. Finally, the film explores the degrading and harmful depictions of mental illness in horror films and asks how we can do better.

### **Audience & Distribution Plan**

*The Life of Dan* is being developed for film festivals, community screenings, and streaming. My previous films have been featured on Netflix, Amazon Prime, Sundance Now, Starz, PBS, and Hulu.

We believe the film will speak to a wide and diverse audience. We will target

people who are interested in issues of mental health as well as fans of horror films and hardcore music. Additionally, *The Life of Dan* will interest those passionate about documentary and hybrid film.

Given the varied audiences, we plan to apply to a diverse set of film festivals. We will apply to top tier festivals including Sundance, Tribeca, SXSW, Berlin, and Telluride, as well as high-profile documentary festivals including IDFA, Hot Docs, Sheffield, and AFI Docs, many of which have played my work in the past. We'll also pursue festivals focusing on mental health and disability, including ReelAbilities, Mental Health Arts and Film Festival, and Mindscape Festival. Given the film's hybrid nature, we also believe that boundary-pushing festivals like True/False and Camden will be a good fit. Additionally, we'll apply to popular niche horror festivals, including Screamfest, Atlanta Horror Film Festival, and NYC Horror Film Festival, where we hope to have critically engaging conversations about the representations of mental illness in horror films.

Crucially, we want this film to elevate the work of mental health care advocates and to spark conversations amongst horror film fans. We'll create an outreach plan to bring the film into communities and host discussions about the depictions of mental illness and the cathartic potential of using creative projects to delve into unspoken past traumas. We will submit to national conferences on mental health including those sponsored by NAMI and the Anxiety and Depression Association of America. We will create a discussion guide for schools and communities that examines the depictions of mental health in the media, separates fact from fiction, and creates exercises to

transform difficult moments into art.

We aim to create honest and open discussions about mental illness drawing from our own experiences, our love of horror films, and the difficulty and catharsis of making this film. We hope that through sharing our own stories, others will see a version of their own lives on screen. As Dan told me, “I want people to see the movie so they can understand that they’re not the only ones that are dealing with these issues and they’re not alone.”



## Bibliography

*The Babadook*. Directed by Jennifer Kent, Entertainment One, 2014.

Ballon, Bruce, and Molynd Leszcz. "Horror films: Tales to Master Terror or Shapers of Trauma?." *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2007, pp. 211-230.

Benham, Megan. "Horror Movies and the Exploitation of Mental Illness." *The Boar*, [www.theboar.org/2018/04/horror-movies-and-the-exploitation-of-mental-illness](http://www.theboar.org/2018/04/horror-movies-and-the-exploitation-of-mental-illness). Accessed 10 May 2020.

*The Blair Witch Project*. Directed by Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, Artisan Entertainment, 1999.

*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Directed by Robert Wiene, Decla-Bioscop, 1920.

Gonnet, Sarah. "I'm all for Halloween horror. But don't make people with mental illness into monsters." *The Guardian*, 31 October 2018, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/31/halloween-horror-film-mental-illness-scary-cliches?CMP=tw\\_t\\_guWeb](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/31/halloween-horror-film-mental-illness-scary-cliches?CMP=tw_t_guWeb). Accessed 16 April 2019.

Goodwin, John. "The Horror of Stigma: Psychosis and Mental Health Care Environments in Twenty-First-Century Horror Film (Part I)." *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, vol. 50, 2014, pp. 201-209.

Groothuis, Eleven. "'Hereditary,' Mad Horror, And Representation Of Mental Illness." *The Establishment*, 12 June 2018, [www.theestablishment.co/hereditary-mad-horror-and-the-post-cronenbergian-body-b9e2dd13848/index.html](http://www.theestablishment.co/hereditary-mad-horror-and-the-post-cronenbergian-body-b9e2dd13848/index.html). Accessed 3 October 2018.

Hart, Adam Charles. "The searching camera: First-person shooters, found-footage horror films, and the documentary tradition." *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2019, pp. 73-91.

*A Healthy Baby Girl*. Directed by Judith Helfand, Women Make Movies, 1996.

"How cinema stigmatizes mental illness." *BBC Culture*, 28 August 2018, [www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180828-how-cinema-stigmatises-mental-illness](http://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180828-how-cinema-stigmatises-mental-illness). Accessed 16 April 2019.

*Jeepers Creepers*. Directed by Victor Salva, United Artists, 2001.

Madison, D. Soyini. *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance*. Sage Publications, 2011.

*Man with a Movie Camera*. Directed by Dziga Vertov, VUFKU, 1929.

*Minding the Gap*. Directed by Bing Liu, Hulu, 2018.

*Moi, un Noir*. Directed by Jean Rouch, Films de la Pléiade, 1958.

Nichols, Bill. "The Voice of Documentary." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1983, pp. 17-30.

*Paranormal Activity*. Directed by Oren Peli, Paramount Pictures, 2009.

Powell, Sarah. "Dispelling Myths On Mental Illness." *National Alliance on Mental Illness*, [www.nami.org/blogs/nami-blog/july-2015/dispelling-myths-on-mental-illness](http://www.nami.org/blogs/nami-blog/july-2015/dispelling-myths-on-mental-illness). Accessed 7 May 2019.

Pryluck, Calvin. "Ultimately We Are All Outsiders: The Ethics of Documentary Filming." *Journal of the University Film Association*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1976, pp. 21-29.

Ruby, Jay. "Exposing yourself: Reflexivity, anthropology, and film." *Semiotica*, vol. 30, no. 1-2, 1980, pp. 153-180.

*Scream*. Directed by Wes Craven, Dimension Films, 1996.

*Shirkers*. Directed by Sandi Tan, Netflix, 2018.

Williams, Linda. "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 3, 1993, pp. 9-21.

Winston, Brian. *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited*. Indiana University Press, 1995.