Anna Vanderberg
IP Thesis
24 April 2019

<p style="text-align:center">The Touchable Intangible: A Deep Dive into Sleep Paralysis Hallucinations</p>

Over the past four years, it has become a normal occurrence for me to find myself suddenly locked in paralysis in the middle of the night, mired in fear and hallucinating nightmarish apparitions. The hallucinations affect my senses of sight, hearing, and often even touch. This experience is distinct from a nightmare in that without fail, I am always convinced that I'm fully awake. I accurately sense my positioning, and the appearance of my surroundings, but imagine beings or situations that aren't real. The mix of real and not real heightens my fear and confusion, and during these experiences I often find myself incapable of even stringing together a coherent thought.

For a long time, I kept all of this to myself. It all just seemed too crazy to admit. This past year, however, I felt encouraged by my classmates sharing their struggles with mental health and other invisible illnesses, and I started to do some light research. I found out that my experiences have a medical name - sleep paralysis - but also that it's nearly impossible to pin down the exact causes and treatments. Next, I spoke to my friends about it. They were all genuinely interested and concerned, but I quickly found that there was a sort of language barrier. How could I even begin to explain my visceral nightly experiences using only words?

This language barrier is what kicked everything off. It all started off with the simple question of how to explain this, and eventually evolved. The logical next step for me was animation. On a simple level, I want my career to revolve around animation so it's always my go-to. Beyond that, however, I saw animation as the ideal medium to break through this language barrier. Animation has a way of bypassing the fact that some experiences are hard to explain and

<p style="text-align:right">Vanderberg 1</p>

shrugs its shoulders at the fact that the real world has rules that it has to abide by. Animation portrays the subjective in a clearer way than I've ever seen before, and I knew it was up to this task.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

By the time I was ready to settle on this topic, my goal was to figure out how I could use animation to depict the abstract, multisensory experience of sleep paralysis is and in doing so, interrogate what I think about how the intangible world of dreams and the reality of fear can affect the physical world. Furthermore, I wanted to figure out how my perspective on sleep paralysis could potentially enrich both my understanding and viewers' understanding of the condition.

CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

Considering that initially it was a revelation to me that my hallucinations had a medical name, the scientific side felt like the right place to begin my research in earnest. I was hoping to learn more about why these things happen and how I might take proactive steps to prevent them, but I quickly found that my questions were destined to be left unanswered. Almost any article on the topic can tell you that sleep paralysis occurs when one experiences disruptions to REM sleep; essentially, one's mind "wakes up" before their body does. This was a good starting point, but to my dismay that was about as much as I learned; my neuroscience roommates who have studied sleep in the past couldn't tell me anymore, and even after participating in a sleep study at a sleep clinic, all I learned is that I don't have narcolepsy or obstructive sleep apnea.

That dry explanation didn't satisfy my curiosity. The intellectual understanding of what sleep paralysis is fell short of explaining I found it difficult to accept that my experiences were a purely medical occurrence.

So I decided to look into what other cultures have to say about sleep paralysis. As it turns out, most cultures around the world besides ours have some sort of a historical mythology that is now understood to likely have originated in sleep paralysis situations.

Across cultures, the symptoms of sleep paralysis remain consistent though the explanations and attitudes towards the experience vary. In her book *Sleep Paralysis: Nightmares, Nocebos, and the Mind-Body Connection*, Shelley Adler explains several sleep paralysis mythologies from around the world. For instance, among Inuit communities in Canada, sleep paralysis has a well-fleshed out backstory and set of terms. Briefly, the state of sleep paralysis is usually referred to as *uqumangirniq*. Historically, the Inuit have believed that in *siniktuq,* or sleep, a person's spirit, or *tarniq*, is less connected to the body, and more vulnerable. *Uqumangirniq* can occur due to attack from a shaman or a malevolent spirit attacking the *tarniq*, and this attack can be fatal; sometimes people simply don't wake up from *uqumangirniq*. In past understandings of *uqumangirniq,* the visions people recorded only made sense strictly in their cultural context, but as Christianity spreads through Inuit communities in Canada, visions have come to include ideas such as demons and devils (18-20).

In Japan, sleep paralysis is more commonly known as the monstrous *kanashibari.* There are a few interesting things about *kanashibari* that sets it apart. For one, Adler claims that ⅓ of the population has encountered *kanashibari*, and knowledge of it is widespread. When interviewing schoolchildren and college students, almost all of them were familiar with depictions of *kanashibari* in popular media or had experienced it themselves. Even more interesting, though *kanashibari* is known to be just as terrifying as any other iteration of sleep paralysis, sufferers in Japan tend to be less afraid. In fact, many school children intentionally

sleep in ways that they think will lure the *kanashibari* to their bed as they crave the fear, like watching a scary movie (20-22).

There were more examples besides these; in Turkey, sleep paralysis is associated with the *karabasan*; in Cambodia, the *khmaoch sangkat*; in the Czech Republic, the *muera*; in the Netherlands, the *nachtmerrie*; in Poland, the *zmora* (14-16). And the list goes on.

As I was doing this research, I grew convicted of two things: one, the possibility of a spiritual/mental connection with the physical affliction was worth examining. In many of these cultural stories, there were documented cases of people dying from sleep paralysis, which I found to be a strong case for the intangible dream world affecting reality. Two: I was growing slightly envious of these other cultures. With a cultural background assigned to the experience, sleep paralysis is shown to be less daunting; it's still frightening, but it's less of an unknown. It's understood, and not something to be hidden from others. In the US, the closest thing we have to a culture-wide sleep paralysis story is alien abductions, and those are only just recently being looked at more critically. Realizing this renewed my conviction that telling my story would be valuable in contributing to a larger understanding of the experience; if I could make even one or two people feel comforted that they're not crazy when they see things at night, I'd be satisfied.

But how would I accomplish this, and what did I want to say? I hit a bit of a wall this point in my script writing and storyboarding because I truly didn't understand where I stood. My breakthrough ended up coming from an unexpected source: a podcast called "I Fear That." In this episode the guest was Jenny Slate, there to talk about her fear of ghosts. Despite having never contacted one, Jenny fully believes in ghosts. She talks to them, assuming they're present and listening, and makes her home welcoming for them. Obviously, this is a bit odd, and the interviewer was interested in pressing the topic of whether or not ghosts are real. Her response:

"we can debate their existence all we want, but that won't change how we feel about the reality."

This one remark in a podcast that I wasn't intentionally using for research made the rest of my

script, and the question of what I wanted to say, snap into focus. I had been spending all my time

trying futilely to understand the nature of the reality of sleep paralysis, with the intangibility of

the experience thwarting me at every turn, when all along the part that I knew to be most real

was the fear. From there on, I knew that what I wanted to focus on was my fear.

From there, my research took more of a slant towards craft. I first searched for other

videos and animations that feature sleep paralysis or even situations involving fear so that I could

understand ways that other filmmakers have successfully conveyed frightening situations. I

didn't find any animations addressing sleep paralysis, but one really helpful piece was the

documentary *The Nightmare*. It featured a blend of live-action and computer animation to bring

the described hallucinations of interviewees to

life. I was struck by the genuine fear I felt

while watching this documentary. I found that

the realism of the animations actually had very

little to do with the successful transmission of
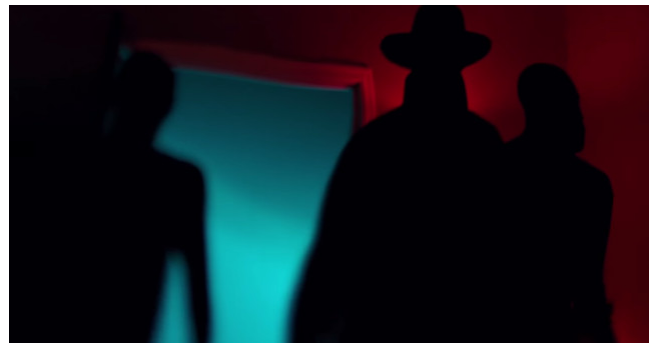
fear; rather, the combination of fast pacing,

Figure 1 Screenshot from Rodney Ascher's "The Nightmare." His use of framing, timing, lighting, build fear and tension in the viewer while a narrator speaks about their experience.

extreme camera angles, dramatic lighting, and tense sound design built and environment that

puts the viewer on edge before the characters are even in any peril on-screen (Fig. 1). This

helped me to make a plan for how to alter my typical style of long shots and comfortable pacing

in order to convey the fear that I wanted to.

METHODOLOGY

Once I got into the actual work of ideation, this project went through many phases. At first, the decisions were fairly easy; for instance, I couldn't imagine this piece being made with anything other than puppets, as their visual straddling of the worlds of animation and live action produces just the discomfiture I was looking for. Also, I knew that I wanted to have a more conventional narrative, as I wanted there to be no confusion in my audience made up of some who are and some who aren't familiar with sleep paralysis.

Beyond that, things were muddled. At the start, I didn't have a clear focus since that comes with research, and it showed. There was a lot that I wanted to accomplish which would have been difficult enough, but I also soon found as I began drafting my storyboard that I lack experience in planning animations (Fig. 2). In the past, I've taken on projects in a loose, improvisational style. I wanted to produce my animation in a way that would give me practice for being a freelancer, but this proved to be easier said than done.

Over the course of the fall semester, I went through quite a few iterations. My initial plot was an autobiographical musing on my experiences with sleep paralysis and the way that hallucinating demons interacts with my long-held religious beliefs. This was to be supplemented by abstracted scenes of a deer caught in the headlights of a speeding car, the intention of which was to illustrate how trapped I feel by sleep paralysis. By the time I reached review at the end of the semester it was clear that something needed to change. I had strayed far from my goal of being concise and clear, and to include all of the themes I was interested in, the animation would have needed to be at least five minutes long.

As a result, almost everything about my animation changed between the first and second semester. I completely rewrote my script, remade my animatic, and didn't spend much time agonizing over that before digging into researching ways to make my puppets more lightweight and mobile. My finalized script kept the musing, autobiographical style of the previous script and stuck to portraying hallucination events like before but eliminated the unnecessary side scenes and the extra theme of religion. Along with being trimmed down, my finalized script focused more on portraying my fear and pondering what it means to be afraid of something that's not real.
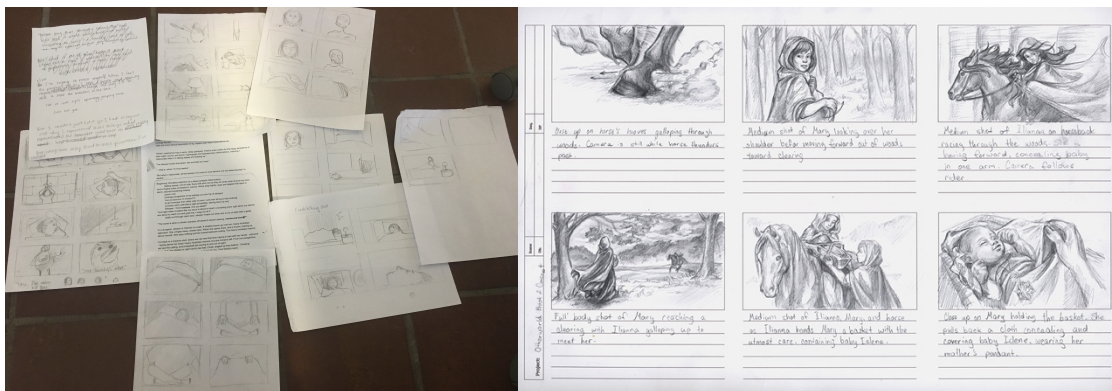

Figure 2 Left to right: My storyboards, which were put together in a scattered fashion, as compared to the storyboards of Lindsay Archer, which more resemble what storyboards are supposed to look like.

With my renewed attention to clarity and simplicity, scriptwriting and storyboarding came much more naturally. My process was as messy as ever, but I was able to finish the planning phase in a third of the time it had taken me the first time around.

From there, my attention turned to my puppets, set, and props. My main concerns were practicality and the tension of what looked real and not real. I needed to design a set and props that could fit in my studio space in the

Figure 3 The first iteration of my puppet, though correct in appearance, was not practical for stop motion as its movements were impeded by its heavy clay head/hair and its weak spine.

Duderstadt Center (Fig. 4), and I needed to figure out how to make my puppets as functional as possible while preserving my vision for their appearances. Props and set presented a regular making process, but the puppets were a special challenge. My first iteration, made in the first semester, had failed me, so in the second semester I focused the most on puppet production (Fig. 3).

I found that my previous understanding of puppet construction wasn't enough to make the puppets I wanted to with the personalities they were supposed to have, so I taught myself some new techniques. Some of the techniques, like cotton and latex buildup, are tried-and-true techniques that have been around for decades. I discovered others, like needle felting, on blogs and social media accounts as the method is relatively new.

Figure 4 To maximize space, I experimented with modular set pieces that could double as different props depending on what shot they appear in. In this case, I made a desk with a removable front that can be replaced by a front piece that turns it into a functional dresser.

CREATIVE WORK

"Intangible" is a four-minute stop motion animation. It is in a musing, autobiographical style; I narrated it myself. The plot of "Intangible" follows my journey of understanding and coming to terms with my nightly hallucinations. The main tension lies in the nature of sleep paralysis as a physical experience rather than just mental. The animation begins with a representation of me that doesn't want to acknowledge that nightmares are anything to be afraid of. It quickly becomes apparent when nightmarish puppets invade the space that she lives in that

she's not simply having nightmares. It takes some time, and several episodes of lying frozen while the nightmares cavort about, to acknowledge that something must be done. This leads into a representation of my investigation into sleep paralysis. It boils down to me wanting an easy answer and there not being one. The final push of "Intangible" acknowledges that though there aren't easy, satisfying answers to my questions about sleep paralysis, the fear I feel is real and valid. There isn't a very wrapped up conclusion since this chapter of my life is still open, but "Intangible" ends with the honest hope that if I don't give up, one day I'll be rid of these experiences for good.

The key things to notice about this animation are the puppets, the lighting, and the sound.

For my puppets, I ended up producing each puppet out of a different mix of materials to produce the necessary effect (Fig. 5). First, there's the main character puppet; a normal human girl dressed in pajamas with wide, staring eyes, she's intended to be unintimidating and have a somewhat shocked look to her. Most of the puppet is constructed of felted wool to produce a smooth, undifferentiated surface, save for the eyes which are made of clay and sit loosely in their sockets to allow for eye movement. You'll see that the other three puppets are made with even more varied media to enhance their unsettling qualities. For instance, though

Figure 5 Front: Main character puppet. Back from left to right: Chicken puppet, flying demon puppet, tentacle monster puppet.

the chicken is made of smooth felted wool, it also has blank, shiny black eyes, rough legs, and distorted proportions. This allows the chicken to be both cartoon-like and menacing. For the

other two puppets, it is difficult to say which is the more disturbing. The obvious answer would be the vaguely demonic flying monster (constructed with liquid latex and cotton) which lacks a face and has rough, cratered skin. On the other hand, the tentacle creature (constructed with fabric, wire, clay, liquid latex, cotton, and wool) presents tropes of several types of horror monsters: she has too many legs, her coloration makes her appear as though she is missing skin, her eyes are wide and unblinking, and yet she appears to have human hair and wear a smile. Using a variety of tools and puppet-making materials was essential to creating four puppets that are distinct in appearance, function/abilities, and personality.

Though I certainly put a lot of time into the puppets and set of this animation, the lighting and sound are also worth noting as they bring the whole piece together. Both of these elements serve to ground the animation in setting and in tone. I often used lighting to differentiate between the hallucination world and reality, as well as to make each monster's scene distinct (Fig. 6). In concert with sound effects and music designed by the wonderful Corey Dundee, lighting shifts at key points in the animation cue the viewer that something is
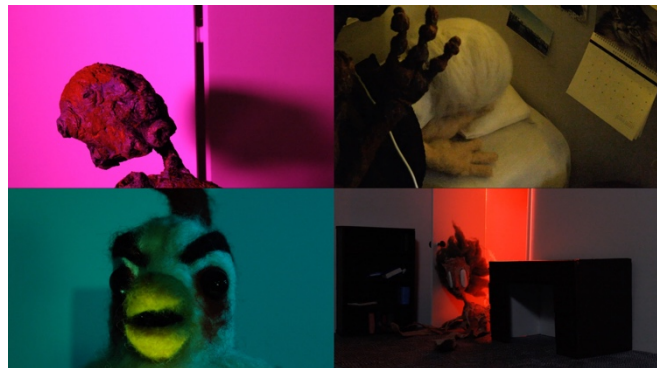

Figure 6 Examples of various lighting scenarios present within "Intangible."

about to happen. For instance, from 1:05-1:06, we are zoomed in to the main character's sleeping face. She remains sleeping and her face fills the screen, but the lighting changes from a typical nighttime light to an exaggerated greenish glow, while the soundscape changes from relative silence to the ominous, echoing sounds of a completely new environment. This allows for some surprise in exactly what the environment is while maintaining somewhat of a smooth transition.

CONCLUSION

The production of *Intangible* has been quite the learning experience. It was not without its difficulties; I've never worked so hard on a project or had to overcome so many difficulties, from the regular rigor of creative problem solving to the more urgent problem of being months behind schedule. Despite my struggles, I really enjoyed myself and I know that I'm going to want to make a project like this again in the future. For the immediate future, I will probably just work on my stop motion craft but eventually, I want to continue with the theme of interrogating ways to portray that which is difficult to conceptualize.

Most importantly, I learned about my own workflow. Ultimately, I want to be able to be an independent animator, and for that to work I need to know how long a piece will take me to animate and edit. Granted, each project presents its own unique challenges that can be difficult to anticipate, but this project has at least given me a baseline for what a more complicated piece takes. Finishing this piece, it has become apparent that I have a way to go before I'm ready to take my animations into the professional world. I'm not discouraged, though; working on a project of this scope has revealed what skills I need to work on (storyboarding and making animatics, mostly) in order to take my work to the next level.

Works Referenced

Adler, Shelley R., 1963-. *Sleep Paralysis : Night-Mares, Nocebos, and the Mind-Body Connection / Shelley R. Adler.* Rutgers University Press, 2011.

Archer, Lindsay. "01Storyboard_Otherworld." *Archer Productions*, lindsayarcher.com/wp/information/storyboards-concept-design/.

Black Maria Film Festival (October 23, 2018).

Brierton, Tom. *Stop-Motion Puppet Sculpting: A Manual of Foam Injection, Build-up, and Finishing Techniques*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004.

The Nightmare. Directed by Rodney Ascher, 2015. www.netflix.com/watch/80031391?trackId=13752289&tctx=0%2C0%2Cf30c82fbf308f9 8bff68d91b632c0f6c1f9443ea%3A21ae6a8cc42bdb51e9ccf967153af55347f3b982%2C% 2C.

Priebe, Ken A. "'The Advanced Art of Stop-Motion Animation': Building Puppets: Part 1." *Awn.com*, Animation World Network, 24 Feb. 2011, www.awn.com/animationworld/advanced-art-stop-motion-animation-building-puppets-part-1.

Sartori, Mariela. Inside Puppet's Construction. *Instagram,* 29 Oct. 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BphxNd3BUXV/.

Svensson, Richard. "Stop Motion Puppet Build-up Method." *Stopmotionworks*, 2005, www.stopmotionworks.com/articles/richsvensn.html.