

Thesis: *Lacuna*

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Inception

For my senior Integrative Project I chose to center my attention on the creation of an animated short. The seed of this idea was planted about fifteen years ago when I first saw Carolyn Leaf's award winning animated short film The Street. The ten-minute animation, which is based on Mordecai Richler's short story of the same name, depicts a Jewish family waiting for an aged grandmother to die. I had never seen an animated piece quite like it. Action is not the focus. In the film Leaf "concentrates on intimate details that reveal the hidden dimensions of the characters she is depicting. Always vulnerable, these characters are compelled to live out their fate in a silent and unforgiving world." (Glassman, "The Unbearable Sadness of Being"). The events of the story are small and somehow delicate as the family contends with emotions that proceed from patience to impatience and from guilt to grief. The film's poignancy and its sense of sympathy and connection stay with me to this day. Two items of significance came from that experience. I realized that the plasticity of animation could be used to express anything, any kind of story, and I saw that short story could be an important resource for animation. I am a great admirer of the short story form, because it requires the writer to be concise in language and clear in meaning, so I was intrigued by this discovery.

Since that time I have carried with me ideas about the creation of an animation based on a short story. This endeavor became just that.



Still image from *The Street* by Carolyn Leaf.

I began the project working from a Raymond Carver story entitled A Small Good Thing. I chose this story because I thought it would make a challenging project and because I found it to be so moving. As I researched I discovered there was an earlier, darker, yet equally as moving iteration of the story entitled The Bath, and this became my starting place. Both versions revolve around the tragic accident of a child and his parents' subsequent exhausting wait for him in the hospital, but in the case of The Bath you never know how the wait is resolved. The story's combination of uncertainty, unease, menace and anxiety resonates with me and I appreciate that by not giving a clear cut ending, Carver invites the reader to use their imagination. "[The] ending. . . is very much up in the air, and the reader leaves the story with a feeling of uneasiness and fear" (Meyer 241).

This is my condensed adaptation of the story:

The action begins with a mother's (Ann) visit to a bakery to order a birthday cake for a party. The baker is an older man who is quite rude. On his birthday the birthday boy, Scotty, is hit by a car and is soon in the hospital in a coma. As Ann copes with the fear and uncertainty in the hospital, waiting for Scotty to wake up, she receives phone calls from an unknown person who says "It's ready" "There's a problem", or who just hangs up. Later a doctor encourages Ann to go home and rest, take a bath. She goes home and the story ends with one more phone call, when Ann answers the caller says, "It's about Scotty, the problem, have you forgotten about Scotty?" and hangs up.

Central to understanding the story and my intention with the project is the theme of waiting. Because it is a universal and existential experience, it is interesting to me, and with this project I explore the feelings within that experience. The type of waiting in The Bath, which I think of as purgatory, particularly compels me. My explanation of purgatory is an occasion when you are in a situation of great uncertainty, and you do not know when it will end, or how it will end, and you begin to doubt that it will end. Time stretches and seemingly stops, and what is left a gap, a time outside average existence that is filled by more waiting. To be subjected to this can be crushing, yet you can also arrive at a state where the waiting becomes freedom. Living in the gap, you have no decisions to make. The word lacuna describes a gap or missing part and so I chose it to be the title of the piece.

Context is added by the primary story setting, which is a hospital. I think a hospital backdrop emphasizes the idea of purgatory while contributing additional meaning. Hospitals and the events that happen there are an ever more significant topic in our society. Hospitals (and modern medicine) are creepy, isolating and dehumanizing. When contending with them we often have no control, most importantly, not even over our own bodies. I am both fascinated and repelled by these things. I found inspiration for this in the Kingdom Hospital television series by director Lars von Trier. While the series falls into the horror genre, it operates from an understanding of the hospital environment as essentially sinister, and works on our fears of it. My intention is to do that as well.

Creation

The formal approach to the work draws heavily on the work of John Korty, who was active in animation in the 70's and 80's. He has since moved on to live action work. In particular I refer to his feature length animation, Twice Upon a Time (1983). This movie had a very short exhibition life, two weeks to be exact, and a limited run on Showtime. It is now out of print. When I saw it I was immediately captivated by its rich, luminous appearance and its subtly textured colors. It was as if it had been made from stained glass, but laid on a stippled substrate. When I researched its creation I found that Korty had developed a unique animation method, which he called Lumage. He began with the creation of characters and sets made from cutout pieces of water colored Pellon (a sewing interfacing). The cut outs were animated on top of a light box, under camera, in

a process similar to stop motion. The combination of rear lighting and water colored fabric resulted in the vibrant aspect I found so appealing.



Still image from *Twice Upon a Time* by John Kory.

I have adapted Kory's method, and have extended it, employing a combination of analog and digital tools. This combination is a result of much experimentation and is a new synthesis of process for me, one that allows me to create in 2D, 3D (modeling) and 4D (time). I begin the same way he did by creating swatches of water colored Pellon. I then scan the hand painted material into the computer. The scanner serves as both camera and light table, capturing an image while backlighting the swatches to result in glowing colors as such as Kory used. I then develop assets (characters, sets, props) and perform staging using 3D software. This helps me to work out camera angles, poses and possible lightings scenarios. Once I am satisfied with the setup I output a few still images for use in Photoshop, where I work over them with the color swatches to create digital 2D cutout elements. These are then imported into another software package, After Effects, where pieces are assembled, arranged and animated. Effects if

needed, are applied. The result is both evocative and believable, which I believe underscores the nature of the story.



Still image from *Lacuna* by Michelle Folkman.

One additional component was needed to encourage believability, and it was audio. Since I had no experience with audio it was necessary for me take a class in it. I then field recorded most of the sounds. I also spent hours in hospitals recording ambient noise. One result of this was that I absorbed much of the atmosphere there, which enhanced my understanding of the setting. In the end I chose to use sound minimally, as backdrop rather than character.

Understanding

A combination of personal experience, long standing interests and research led me to create this work. The path to conclusion was circuitous and I did not always perceive or trust it but I sensed the goal: to employ animation to express a story of uncertainty. The irony of an uncertain path to tell a story of uncertainty is not lost on me. I found unexpected reward through this odyssey. I have come to understand how much I enjoy

the short form, whether in story, sound, or visual. I have searched for meaning and context in one such story. I have pushed against problems of form and process and found solutions, not always to my complete satisfaction, but I moved forward. I have become more discerning of the important differences and connections between the investigation of a project and the creation of said project. I have gained insight into the inexorable unraveling of a piece. It has been quite a journey. I look forward to the next step.

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