

Jessica Krcmarik
18 April 2012
Thesis

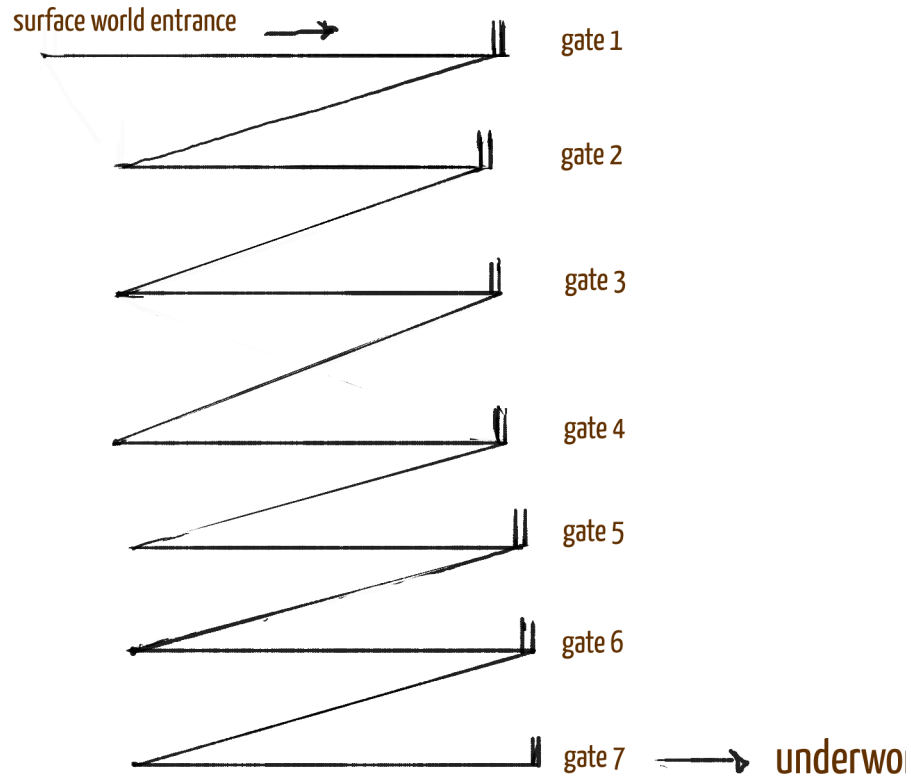
I created a printed book of digital illustrations about a modern version of the Fertile Crescent myth of Ishtar's Descent into the Underworld. Since I was very young, I have pursued mythology and cultural anthropology as a hobby, and I am interested in the way archetypal themes found in myths and folktales can tie into modern culture. *Ishtar's Descent into the Underworld* is a commonly referenced story, especially in an academic context, but not often adapted, despite thematic similarities with stories like Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and the Greek myth of Persephone.

I made *Descent* more accessible to the casual observer by placing the basic story and themes into a city setting, expressing the "otherness" of the Seven Gates of the Underworld by using an expressionistic style and skewed environmental perspective, referencing the Weimar-era films made in Germany after the First World War (such as *Büchse der Pandora* or *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari*). The main character Ishtar, an aerialist, will have to make her way out of the carnival that has taken over part of the city she lives in (the fair here representing the Underworld) owned by her "sister". The book is set sometime in the 1920s, as an homage to the style references used.

Understanding and retelling the original myth of Ishtar's Descent Into The Underworld was complicated by frequent mistranslations or misinterpretations. Initially when doing research I found that most people referenced a translation from 1918 that is incorrect, or they had let their own opinions influence the translation to the effect that it was no longer accurate. For example, Ishtar is either depicted as far more altruistic than other findings would suggest, or completely ruthless. I did not intend to strive for complete fidelity to my source material when adapting the original story, but I felt a full understanding was, nonetheless, necessary.

Below is an image showing the basic structure of the Underworld.

POSSIBLE MYTH STRUCTURE



The current synopsis, according to most recent translations and findings, is that Ishtar (or Inanna, depending on the language of the original myth) goes down to the underworld, which Babylonian sources refer to as “Irkalla”. She is said to be attempting to steal possession of it from her sister, but her actual motivations are unclear, as this is never elaborated on further. On the way down, she is told to abandon one of her material belongings at each gate until she is naked after passing through the 7th, as is the custom in the world of the dead. Ishtar is generally disrespectful to everyone she meets, and attempts to sit on her sister Ereshkigal’s throne, immediately turning into a corpse. Her servant attempts to procure help, but only Ea (one of the original creation gods) will help. Ishtar is then resurrected, but must find someone to replace her soul, as she has left an empty space in Irkalla. She wanders looking for a soul to steal, but feels too much sympathy for everyone she meets to do so, and eventually comes home and finds Tammuz, her lover, sitting on her throne, and appearing not to be mourning. The particular details of this interaction are unclear and somewhat convoluted, but Ishtar flies into a rage and sends demons after him. She takes pity on him, and instead of forcing Tammuz to stay in the underworld forever, he is then consigned to underworld for half the year, and his sister (who evidently tried to help him hide from her) is there for the other half.

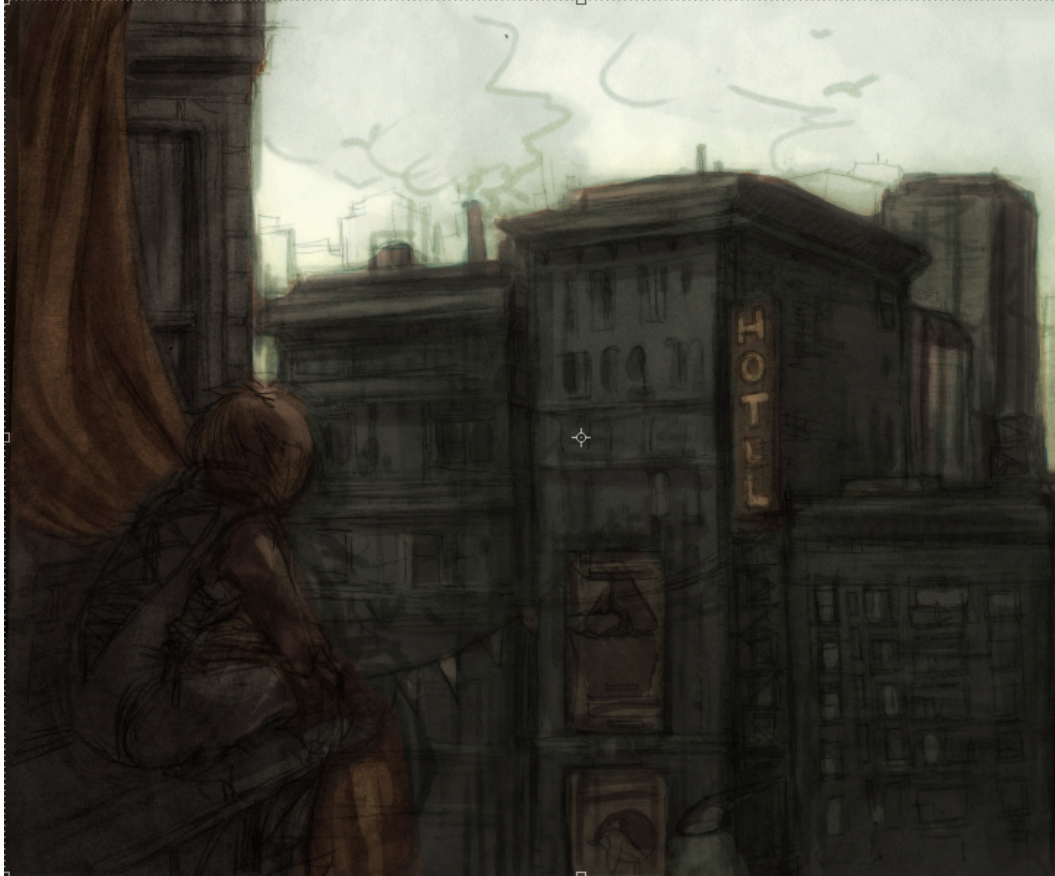
My version of the story has a slightly modified plot, and is set towards the end of the myth. This time, Ishtar is simultaneously looking for a replacement soul and progressing through levels of the underworld, searching for her belongings and defending herself from the “dead”. This is done simultaneously to focus on parts I find most intriguing, and to add some much-needed clarity. When Ishtar discovers Tammuz after she returns, there are essentially two alternate endings. Either he offers to take her place, or she grabs him with the silks she uses as defense, and kills him.

Duality is a theme throughout much of the Mesopotamian mythos, and I wanted to reflect this throughout my character and environment designs. Not only do many gods in this pantheon share aspects and responsibilities, but they often are “two sides” of the same idea. Or, perhaps, there are two people with contrasting personalities and appearances undertaking a long journey, such as in the Epic of Gilgamesh, or a single god/goddess may have conflicting aspects. For example, Ishtar and Ereshkigal, stated in *Descent* to be sisters, were intended by the people of the Fertile Crescent to be two manifestations of the sacred feminine. Ishtar is the light side and Ereshkigal is the dark side; while Ishtar is associated with the sun, Ereshkigal is generally represented by pestilence and death. Even within a single entity, this is true; Ishtar is simultaneously the goddess of fertility and a goddess of war. So I have intentionally designed Ishtar and Ereshkigal to have similar faces and physiques, but different ways of presenting themselves. While Ereshkigal’s costume is more elaborate and graceful, Ishtar wears form-fitting, utilitarian clothing. She also uses silks, an acrobatic tool generally used to symbolize air and flight, as a generally non lethal weapon, showing a reluctance to kill, but willingness to defend herself and engage in combat. This also represents her association with the sun and sky—the orange silk rigging is often the most vibrant thing in a scene.

The entrance to Irkalla was described as a rocky, desolate place, so I decided to translate this location into an unpleasant section of the city that is in extreme disrepair. It is dilapidated and crowded, visually reminiscent of a cross between a 1900s historic district and the old island of Kowloon, plastered with carnival posters and a extreme amount of neon signage. Overhanging clotheslines, power lines, flagpoles, and other assorted objects provide an easy means for Ishtar to swing from place to place when necessary, avoiding the ground in favor of safer terrain. The Underworld itself manifests as a sort of street fair, overwhelming the rest of the city like a sort of cancer. It is bright and garish, and its youngest inhabitants are diseased and blank-eyed. The further Ishtar progresses into it, the less human they appear.

In terms of basic process, I designed the characters and environments simultaneously, and sketched all ideas as silhouettes and rough forms first; mainly in mechanical pencil or art marker in my sketchbook. Then, after each design is finalized, I redrew it from several angles for clarity, and compiled the images into colored pages in the final layout for the book. In the case of the environments, I chose to use several colored two-page spreads showing the characters interacting with their surroundings. I did not limit myself to thinking of one idea at a time, or seeing one drawing from sketch

to completion during the initial sketching process, but instead chose to progress naturally from one idea to another. I initially attempted a more rigid version of scheduling at the beginning of my process, but this was unsuccessful- it was much more effective for me to rapidly brainstorm ideas, and then later pick the ones that were most successful, rather than attempt to go character by character.



A final image of one of the environments.

For the exhibition, I compiled my work into a bound, printed book. In my opinion, it is easier and more attractive to the viewer to see digital pieces in print than on a screen, and I want to show initial sketches as well as final renderings of my ideas—so it is more logical and allows me more freedom, in a sense, to create a book that documents my process. I also felt that books were a more informal and engaging way to present such a large volume of work than presenting the designs as wall-mounted prints. When placed on a stand for visitors to peruse as they walk around the gallery, it is more visceral and relaxing. I intended it to look like a stylized version of a sketchbook or pitchbook (as used to present initial concepts for animation work), and displayed a bit above waist level, so it is visible and easy for visitors to look through as they pass through the space.

The book divides the work loosely into several sections, mirroring the process of creating the work. The main setting and atmosphere of the world are introduced to the reader by interspersing the final designs for each character with more narrative illustrations and sketches of events during the story.

In the final installation, the book was placed on top of a black and white vertically striped podium that was slightly taller than waist height. The podium itself was heavily distressed and scratched and covered with ripped up replicas of the carnival posters advertising the main characters from the book, and was designed to match the tone of the book as well as look like an item that would fit into that world. As most of the other podiums and walls surrounding it were white, it looked appropriately jarring.



The whole display is meant to echo a promotional campaign for a carnival, albeit one that does not exist.



The cover of the book was faux-aged and covered with hand-drawn patterns referencing the cuneiform tablets the myth was originally written on, with orange text to match the color of Ishtar's silks.

Works Cited

Hare, John Bruno. "Descent of the Goddess Ishtar into the Lower World." Internet Sacred Text Archive.. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Oct 2011. <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/ishtar.htm>>.

Büchse der Pandora . Dir. G.W. Pabst. Perf. Brooks, Louise. Süd-Film, 1929. Film.

Kracauer, Siegfried. From Caligari to Hitler. 61-87. Print.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. No Exit. 3rd ed. Samuel French, Inc, 2010. Print.