

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

Theses

7-25-2015

Mer Depré

Margaret Orr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Orr, Margaret, "Mer Depré" (2015). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact repository@rit.edu.

Mer Depré

A Thesis Film by Margaret Orr

Master of Fine Arts, Animation

School of Film and Animation

College of Imaging Arts and Sciences

Rochester Institute of Technology

July 25th, 2015

Committee:

Professor Stephanie Maxwell, Chair

Professor Peter Murphey

Professor Brian Larson

Abstract

Mer Depré is an experiment to see if the essence of the experience of depression can be captured through film. Inspired by personal experiences, it invites the viewer to enter a world of darkness and anxiety.

The creation of Mer Depré began with sound. A rough soundtrack was used to create the bones of the film before visuals were laid on top. Most of the animation was done using stop motion techniques. When animating, the process was as important as the end result, and many different materials were used to create various effects. The compositing process compiled all of the animation into shots, creating layered and deeply textured visuals.

The final film is a deeply uncomfortable journey into the mind of a depressed individual, that challenges its viewers to feel empathy and creates understanding of a misunderstood disease.

Appendix

Abstract.....	pg 02
Summary of paper	
Introduction.....	pg 04
Why was it important to me to make a film about depression?	
Why did I choose to use abstraction?	
Research and Preparation.....	pg 05
What methods did I use to learn about depression?	
How did I prepare for this film?	
Sound.....	pg 07
What steps did I need to take to create the sound for the film?	
How was the sound recorded, how was it edited, and how was it mixed?	
Animation and Experimentation.....	pg 10
How did I approach the animation in this film?	
What sorts of experiments did I do?	
What methods did I use?	
Compositing.....	pg 12
Use of After Effects to create the final visuals in the film	
The process of discovering the final look	
Conclusion.....	pg 17
Final thoughts on the film	
Audience reception at RIT premiere screening	
Works Cited.....	pg 19
Appendix A.....	pg 20
Research documentation	
Appendix B.....	pg 21
A transcript of a conversation I had with my friend Wil about her depression	
Appendix C.....	pg 29
My artist statement (read at the film's screening)	
Appendix D.....	pg 31
My thesis proposal	

Introduction

Depression is a disease that, like many mental illnesses, is often triggered by an event or change in a person's life. My depression was no different. In my case, the bullying I was subjected to when I was in middle school triggered the depression. For two years I lived in a world dominated by negativity, and I thought about killing myself regularly. Thankfully, I never attempted suicide, but I came close.

Depression runs on my father's side of the family, so it's not surprising that I also suffered from it. However, I didn't know that at the time. I felt alone and embarrassed of my feelings, and I didn't realize that I was sick. I thought that I was broken, not ill. It wasn't until I got better that I came to understand how unhealthy my mindset had been. My illness had a name: depression.

I've been healthy now for 12 years. Those 12 years have been a continual process of coming to understand what happened to me and why. As an artist, it became important to me to express this experience, particularly because there is such a stigma in our culture around mental illness and talking about it. It's almost impossible for someone who hasn't experienced depression to understand it, which is a significant contributing factor to this stigma. I wanted to make a film that would allow a healthy individual a glimpse into the mind of a depressed person, and hopefully help them to understand the disease a little better.

When I decided that I wanted to make a film about the experience of depression, I quickly realized that it would be impossible to express how it feels to be depressed through a narrative work. Abstraction has the advantage of being more universal, allowing for many stories to be "told", instead of only one. Abstraction can also allow people to see their own experiences, because abstraction has the potential to become a story for each individual, depending on the unique circumstances of each person's life. As Wells says in his book *Understanding Animation*, "...subjective work has... necessitated that audiences respond differently. Instead of being located within the familiarity of formal narrative strategies... the audience [is] required to intemperately work on their own terms, or terms predetermined by the artist" (44). It was for these reasons that I decided that abstraction would be the most effective means to convey the experience of depression.

I was lucky enough to have the type of depression you get better from. That isn't the case for many people, which is why conveying my experience, and consequently, the story of so many others, was important to me.

Research and Preparation

One of my most important steps towards the creation of this film happened years before I began to prepare for it. In 2010 I took a class at DePaul University about the history of experimental film. This was one of the first times that I was exposed to experimental film. From Maya Derin's (a woman who has been called the mother of the American Avant Garde, despite being born in Kiev, Ukraine) "Meshes of the Afternoon" to Stan Brackage's "Dog Star Man", I was introduced to many of the most influential and important experimental film and artists.

Seeing a wide variety of experimental work was invaluable. It provided me with a history of experimental film, as well as a plethora of ideas and inspiration. Brackage's "Dog Star Man", for instance, was a great inspiration during the compositing stage of the film, as I layered many different images together to create a new meaning. Although Brackage used live action to create his films, the process of choosing different images, motions, and textures to combine to create meaning is surprisingly similar.

Once I realized that I wanted to make a film about depression, I started to actively do research in the spring of 2014. My own experiences with depression were at the heart of the film, but I wanted this film to be more universal than my own unique perspective. I began by reading articles and watching TED talks on depression. Andrew Solomon's TED talk "Depression, the Secret We Share" was particularly inspiring because of how clearly he described his own personal experiences.

I also sought out advice from Rochester Institute of Technology's psychiatric department. I contacted the head of the department and asked which members of the department would be experts on depression. I was given two names, Dr. Joseph Baschnagel and Dr. Lindsay Schnekkel. I met with each of them individually and asked them a barrage of questions about depression specifically, and about mental illness in general. They helped me to gain a clinical viewpoint on the disease.

My third and by far the most valuable source of research were my friends and family. As I started to explain to people what my project was about, many people started to come forward and offer to tell me their own personal stories. The first person to do so was my cousin Erin. It was through her that I learned that almost everyone on my father's side of the family has suffered from depression, but that no one would talk about it. My cousin Stephanie also offered to talk to me about her post-partum depression. Several friends also came forward to tell me that they had been depressed or suffered from other mental illness. My friend Wil in particular had a long conversation with me that was particularly helpful because it was in writing, which meant that I could constantly refer back to it while I was making the film.

Everything I learned throughout the process of doing research was helpful, but these personal stories from people I loved were what convinced me that I was doing the right thing by making this film. They showed me how needed films like mine are. As soon as people felt like they had a safe place to talk, they were dying to tell their stories. It's my hope that Mer Depré will help to spark many more conversations on personal experiences of depression between people in the future.

In addition to my research, there were steps I took to prepare myself for the process of spending a year thinking deeply about depression. My first step in this process was to tell my parents about my experiences. It is very difficult to talk about depression, particularly when talking about it might cause another person pain. I knew that my parents would be distressed to learn that I had once wanted to end my life, even if that was a long time ago. Since I got better, I've instinctively tried to hide my depression from my parents, but I knew that I couldn't create a film about my experiences and show that film to the world without first sharing my experience with my family. In the end, telling them everything felt liberating. My depression was no longer a secret I had to hide. Being open about this experience with them was the first step towards being open about it with the world.

The second step I took was to talk to one of the mental health counselors here at RIT. I have never seen a therapist about my depression, and it was important to me that I speak to a professional before starting this journey. I needed to make sure that I was approaching this film in a healthy and productive way. Talking to a professional was very helpful. I was able to work out a plan of exactly what I would need to do to ensure that I stayed healthy throughout the process. We were also able to talk through current stresses related to the project.

Staying healthy throughout the process of making this film has been a priority. Although the chances of a project like this triggering an episode of depression are slim, spending a prolonged period of time trying to get back into the mindset of a depressed person can have consequences. It was important to be very open about my feelings, especially whenever I was having negative ones. I also had to make sure that I occasionally took time away from the film. I tried to have one day a week where I didn't think about the film. Spending all of your time trying to access your darkest emotions is tiring, and not always good for you. Getting away from it, even for a short period of time, allowed me to recharge my batteries and ensured that I was more productive and focused when I was working on the film again.

Sound

Beginning this film was a challenge for me. I spent the summer of 2014 trying to start. I attempted several animated visuals, but I wasn't remotely satisfied with any of them. It was an extremely frustrating process. It wasn't until a week into the fall semester that I had the idea to begin with sound. I reasoned that it would be much easier to come up with visuals if I wasn't starting with a blank page.

At first, I thought that music would be the main sound in the film, but I realized that using sound effects to create the sound gave me some advantages that music did not. I am not a musician, and being able to create my own sound gave me more control. It made the sound unique and the lack of familiar instruments created tension in the sound.

I spent five weeks recording my sound. I found an old video camera that was small enough to take with me wherever I went and had a better sound quality than my phone. I carried it around with me everywhere and whenever I heard something that made me feel anything that resonated with the experience I wanted to convey, I recoded it. I also spent a lot of time going on long walks around my neighborhood or campus looking for sounds.

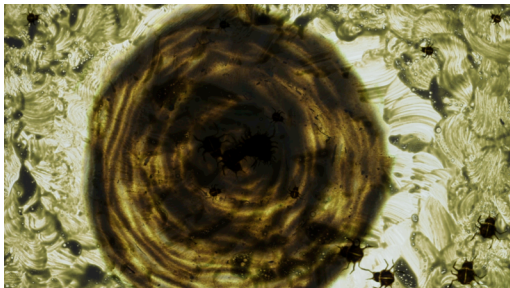


Figure 1: frame 3521, bugs swarming

There were some great surprises in this sound search process. The sound of stirring macaroni and cheese became the background for the bugs swarming in the film; sizzling peppers created a tense beginning for the film; and a spinning, rainbow lawn decoration created the squeaking noise that accompanies the tension-inducing white and orange bars that appear several times in the film.

In addition to recording the sounds I heard in my daily life, I also had two long Foley sessions where I tried to create sounds. I spent several hours walking around my neighborhood collecting leaves, acorns, rocks, twigs, and anything else I thought might sound interesting. Then I took those items into the Foley room in the School of Film and Animation and stomped on them, threw them, soaked them in water, and anything else I could think of. I also used many of the Foley materials provided in SOFA's Foley room, such as bricks, plastic, and other materials.

Some of my best results came



Figure 2: frame 6570, the climax of Mer Depré

from this experimentation. I discovered that if I rubbed a pinecone against plastic it created a grating, nails-on-chalkboard sound. Featured in the climax of *Mer Depré*, it is perhaps the most memorable sound in the entire film.

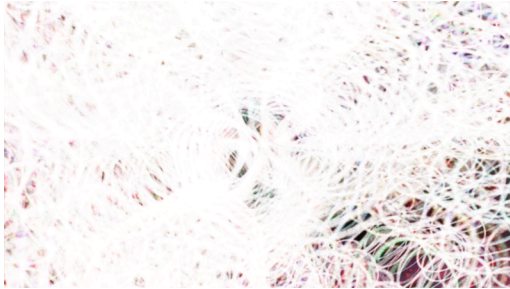


Figure 3: frame 6246, white circles

I also did a few very specific experiments. I filled glass jars with different materials, from hair conditioner to marbles to crayons, and I broke the jars. I got mixed results from this experiment, but one of the sounds did end up making it into the film and accompanies the circles that flood the screen twice in the film. I also spent a good amount of time in a tunnel near my

home, experimenting with the echoes there. However, none of those sounds made it in to the final film.

Once I had finished recording the sound, I started to try different ways of putting the sounds together. I thought a lot about music while I was doing this, and the structure of a song. I wanted the film to have an emotional peak at its climax. I also decided pretty early on that I liked the idea of giving the sound an “overture” in the beginning. I wanted to ease the audience into the film, particularly because it is such an uncomfortable film, and give them a taste of what was to come. Ultimately, I hoped that after the overture the audience would feel as though they had just sat through something so uncomfortable that it could not become worse, only to have the film build in to something similar but ultimately more intense in the end.

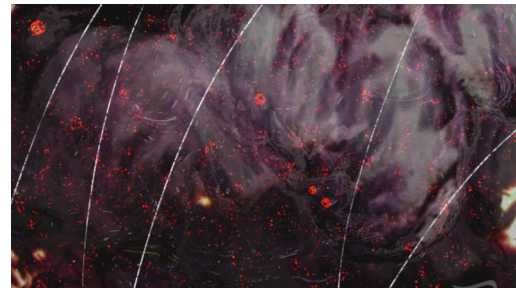


Figure 4: frame 6246, the overture

Once I had two sound drafts I liked, I had several people listen to them to get opinions and thoughts. I then went back and made several changes to one of the drafts, which became a rough soundtrack for the film, though not the final sound track. Throughout the process of creating the visuals of the film, I changed the soundtrack many times. I would realize that parts needed to be longer or shorter, or that I needed to add additional scenes, or that a transition wasn't working as well as I thought it was, or any number of other things. The soundtrack evolved with the film, and was a constant process of experimentation and soundtrack edits.

By the end of week 9 of the first semester, I had a good rough sound edit that provided me with lots of inspiration to work on the visuals. It was very much a jumping off point, and was a great way for me to get started with the film. Starting with sound also allowed me to integrate it with the visuals more closely

than dubbing sound over finished visuals would have allowed. The sound is an integral part of this film, and is hugely important in creating the emotions I wanted to inspire.

Animation and Experimentation

I used a large variety of techniques to create the visuals in this film. I was constantly experimenting and trying new ideas. The majority of the visuals were created with stop motion animation, but I also used hand drawn animation. Some of these experiments turned out great and others did not. Only a fraction of the animation I created (about 1/5) throughout the process ended up in the finished film.

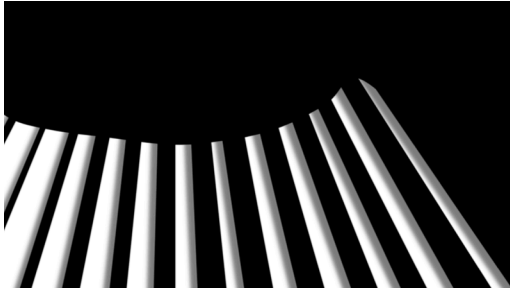


Figure 5: frame 886, fan blades

The very first visual I created for the film came about almost by accident. While recording sound for the film with my video camera I also recorded the images of a large fan in a cooling system near my apartment. I noticed while looking at the video that the light shining off the fan was creating interesting patterns. I went back to the fan footage a

few days later and rotoscoped the light on the fan blades, even though I hadn't planned to do any rotoscoping for this film. This was a hugely successful experiment, and the animation of the fan appears three times in the film. It was also the only rotoscoping I did for the film.

I did a lot of experiments with paint on glass animation while working on *Mer Depré*. My first several experiments were more about trying to learn how to use the medium than anything else, but I was quickly captivated by the texture I was able to create with the paint. This was especially true when I tried mixing the paint with dish soap. The dish soap created hundreds of small bubbles in the paint, which when backlit made a pocketed and varied surface. I also tried mixing the paint with milk, water, and other substances. These experiments were hugely successful, and many of them are in the film in one form or another.

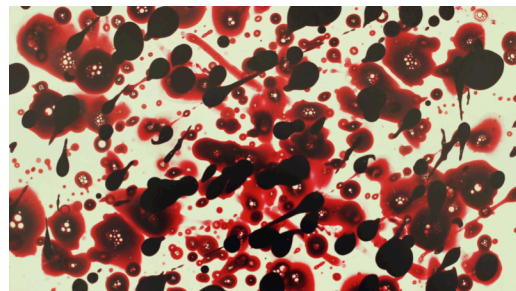


Figure 6: frame 5010, paint on glass animation

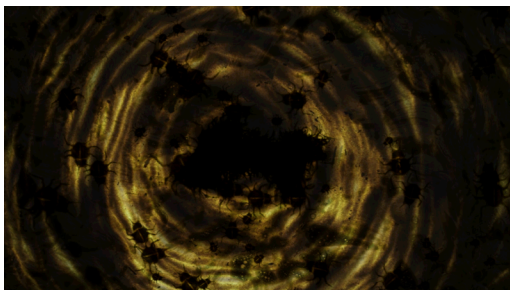


Figure 7: frame 3890, sand tunnel

I also did several experiments with sand. I spent a long time experimenting with how to best manipulate the sand and use its grainy texture. My bugs are made from sand, as is the circular "tunnel" that envelops them as they swarm. I was very interested in the texture of sand because during my research of depression several people described depression as grainy or

rough.

In addition to the stop motion techniques I experimented with in depth, I also did lots of smaller experiments with various materials. I animated with marbles, poly-fill, clothing, yarn, and even Christmas ornaments. Each of these materials created its own unique texture and feeling within the film.

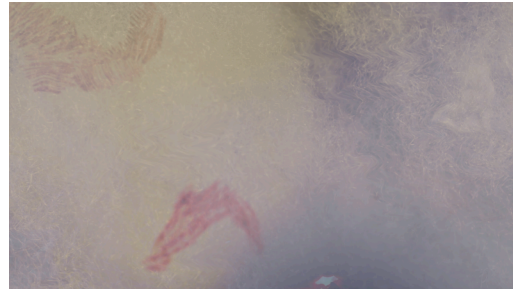


Figure 8: frame 5450, polyfill animation

When approaching the hand drawn animation in the film I was usually

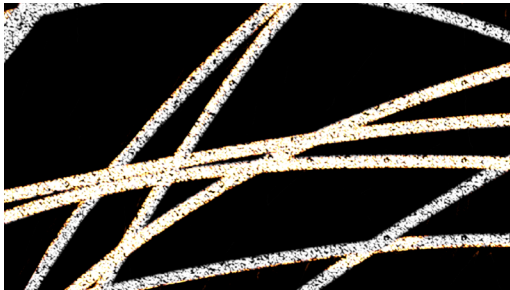


Figure 9: frame 6933, scribble animation

more specific, and used it to fill specific needs. When I needed a sound to match the intensity of my screeching animation during the climax of the film, I animated a scribble that could go with it. I experimented a lot with various ways to add texture to the hand drawn animation and to make the drawings feel as though they were coming at the viewer.

The other main piece of hand drawn animation I created was a hand reaching out to the viewer. I wanted to create the sense that even when people reach out to help one who is experiencing depression, it is so distorted by the depression itself that a depressed individual cannot even tell what it is. Originally the hand that I animated was quite realistic looking, but I realized that this was not getting the idea of the distorted perception of offered help across properly. So I went back and made the hand scribbly and shaky, and then I warped the hand until it was barely recognizable. The result was that the feeling of being reached out to was still there in the movement, but the viewer cannot tell that it is a hand reaching out in the animation.

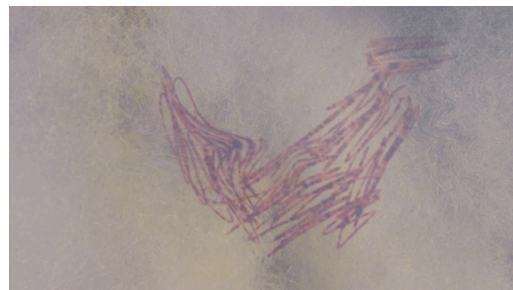


Figure 10: frame 5313, a reaching hand

Compositing

None of the animation I did stood on its own in this film. Everything was composited to create the final visuals. In fact, before I began compositing I had no idea what any part of the film would look like. The compositing process was just as much of an experiment as was every part of this film.

I used the program After Effects for all of my compositing. Before creating this film, I had used After Effects for simple projects, but with this film I greatly expanded my knowledge of the program and tested the limits of what I could create with it.

The first scene I began to composite was my bug scene. This was also the scene that I had the clearest vision for very early on in the creation of the visuals. I was inspired by the sound for this particular scene, as well as my own, personal anxiety surrounding bugs of all kinds. Anxiety is an important component of the film, and for this scene I wanted quiet, skin crawling, slowly intensifying imagery

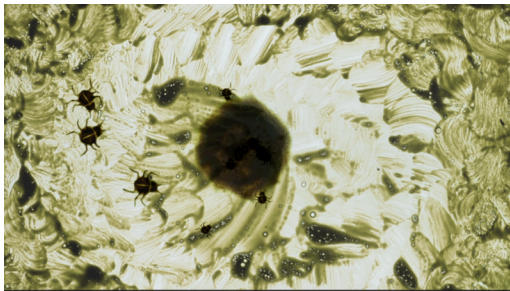


Figure 11: frame 3429, the bugs begin to swarm

that would leave the audience squirming in their seats. This was also the scene that caused me the most technical problems throughout the film process, as it was an incredibly heavy file. The scene is made up of three pieces of animation. The background is paint and dish soap backlit through glass, over that are my sand bugs, and over them is the sand “tunnel”. I chose to use paint as my background because it provided such a rich texture. I wanted something that was light enough that the bugs could stand out and be silhouetted against it, but complex and textured. An early paint test, one I hadn’t originally thought would be used at all, fit the bill. The bugs and sand tunnel were animated specifically for the scene. They were my first foray into sand animation. I wanted the grainy texture of sand, as well as the soft edges that sand does so well. The final scene is, perhaps, the one I receive the most comments on. Although the bugs are the only piece of recognizably figurative imagery in the film, their movement (particularly their little wriggling legs) has abstracted by the end of the shot, as they swarm together into a horrible mound of anxious activity.



Figure 12: frame 5422, fog scene

Directly after the bug scene is the fog scene. This scene was probably the one that evolved the most over the course of working on the film. My friend Wil, who described her depression as living in a fog, was a huge inspiration when creating this scene. I also wanted

to show how depression clouds a person's experience, making it so that even when someone is reaching out to help them that help can feel threatening. The fog in the scene was created with an animation of polyfil, the background was two different paint animations, and on top of those I placed an animation of hands, to imply that even when people reached out to help that help would be difficult to see through the fog of depression.

Once I had a rough draft of several other scenes completed I realized that the fog and hand scene was the weakest scene in the film. I spent a lot of time trying to strengthen it, and eventually succeeded. My first change was to warp the hand animation to make the hands feel more abstract and less literal. When that only partially succeeded, I changed the hand animation so that rather than an outline of a hand the animation was a scribbly shadow. Additionally, I took out some parts of the foggy background, giving the scene more depth and contrast. Finally, I gave the hands some color, which helped them to stand out a little more against the new background. The final scene created the emotion more effectively and without being so literal.

The red scene, which happens after the fog, was one of the hardest for me to come up with ideas for, and it took a long time for me to figure out something I was happy with. The final composite is surprisingly simple. I

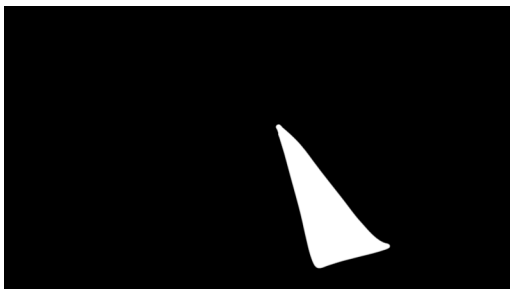


Figure 13: frame 805, the beginning of the film

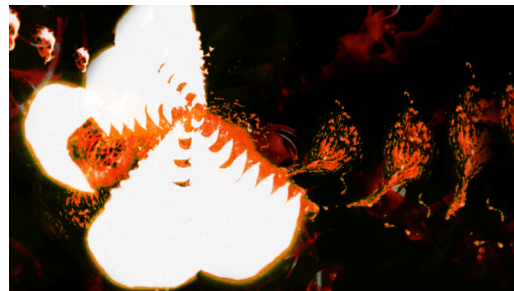


Figure 12: frame 5658, the red scene

wanted a very natural transition from the hands to what happened next, so I kept most of the red background. However I placed the various layers in 3D space and moved the camera through them, to create a sense of depth. Over this, I placed a piece of inverted paint animation. The bright paint was an intense contrast to the dark background, and by vibrating the paint it created a sense of tension and anxiety. The contrast became very important in this scene. In a dark room on a large screen, the white, vibrating paint becomes difficult to look at, yet draws the viewer's attention to it. This anxiety and discomfort of this scene are essential to the experience.

The very beginning of the film required the least compositing. I had two pieces of animation, the beginning flickers with the white bars. It was simply a matter of transitioning them from one to the other in an interesting manner.

Putting together the first section of screeching and the climax of the film was very similar. I wanted them to feel the same, except the climax would be

more intense. So once I had put together the screeching, I went back in and worked on making every aspect of it bigger in some way.

The first screeching scene is made up of several components. The background is made up of a scarf being twisted, some paint animation, and the bugs' legs moving. The red sparkles were made with a hideous, cheap Christmas ornament, with the colors blown out and only the sparkly bits of the animation visible. On top of all this I placed my scribble animation. The final effect is lots of frantic movement, creating a sense of anxiety and pain. Paired with my screeching sound, it is designed to be difficult to sit through.

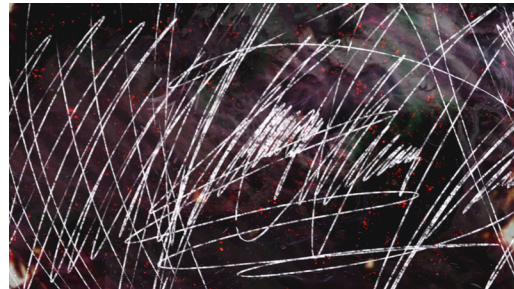


Figure 14: frame 1664, the first screeching scene



Figure 15: frame 6900, the climax

When creating the climax, I sped up the bugs, the scarf, and the paint, and created a larger jitter in the paint. I also saturated several of the colors more, making them more intense. The scribbles were already such an uncomfortable moment. In order to heighten their power I thickened them and gave them a colored shadow. This made them pop out from the

background even more than they had, and made them a larger point of interest. I also made them come towards the viewer in several places, making the viewer feel overwhelmed by the scribbles and the noise that accompanied them. In addition, I brought the white and orange bars back in near the end of the climax and added strobing orange flashes. The final effect is an intense overload of movement, sound, colors, and textures.

These two scenes were designed to work together. The first part of the film is designed to make you feel as though you can't experience anything worse, only to build up into something more intense and uncomfortable at the end of the film.

Very late in the process of creating the film, about week 7 of the second semester, I realized that I needed another scene. The film was missing a sense of pressure and tiredness. So I created my blue scene. I knew immediately that I wanted to use deep rumbling sounds for the scene, to

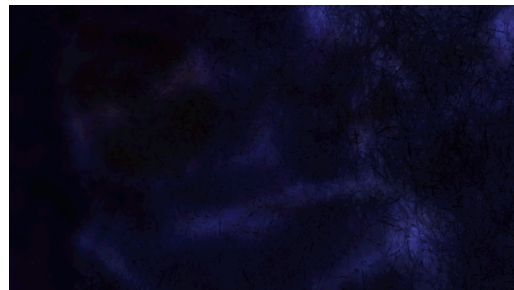


Figure 16: frame 2105, the blue scene

contrast with all the high pitched, squeaky parts of the film. The visuals needed to be similarly dark. I used my polyfill animation to give the scene plenty of texture, and combined that with two paint animations. I also added a pulse to one of the paint layers. This became one of my personal favorite parts of the film. It provides great contrast to a lot of the anxiety in the film, and shows another facet of depression.

As well as creating the scenes themselves, creating the transitions between the scenes were an equally important and often just as challenging a part of the compositing process. Although each scene is very different from the others, I did not want the film to feel segmented. The transitions helped the film to feel as though it was one, cohesive piece.



Figure 17: frame 1269, the first marble transition

Sometimes a transition was as simple as creating a piece of transition animation that could be placed between two scenes. This is exactly what I did with my first transition in the film. I used marbles to create an animation of hundreds of falling rings. I was able to use this transition twice, to transition to the most intense parts of the film. The second time it was used I intensified the

transition by making it brighter and adding more rings.

Another method I used to transition between scenes was to find a way to blend them together. I used this when transitioning between my blue and bugs scenes. By warping one of the scenes and using a variety of effects and blending modes, I was able to create what boils down to a complex dissolve. I used a similar technique to transfer between my fog and red scenes. I designed the scenes to have the same background layer. Then I was able to dissolve the fog to create my transition.

The transition from my bugs scene to my fog scene ended up being the most complex transition in the film and took the most time to figure out. I wanted to literally chew up my bugs scene to reveal the fog. However I realized before too long that this was being a bit too literal and it wasn't having the effect I wanted it to have. So I went back to the drawing board, and after lots of experimentation, I created a transition that uses intense color changes, bright flashes, and the fog scene expanding out from the center of the bugs' swarm.

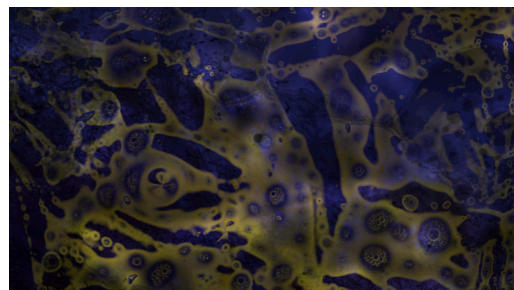


Figure 18: frame 3213, transitioning between the blue scene and the bugs



Figure 19: frame 4837, transitioning between the bugs and the fog scene

I learned a ton while doing the compositing for this film. I explored many of After Effect's most powerful tools. I also experimented with many ways to composite a shot, to create emotion, and to put many pieces of animation together to create something new. The compositing phase of making this film was where it all started to come together.

Conclusion

Creating a film about clinical depression was challenging both mentally and creatively. Over the course of one year I performed countless experiments looking for the perfect combination of visuals and sounds to create the emotions I was looking for. The final product is a visceral and difficult look into a disease that leaves its victims silent, lost, and all too often dead at their own hands. The importance of starting a conversation about depression, and mental illness in general, cannot be overstated, and this was an important goal of the film.

It was always important to me that *Mer Depré* be broad enough that people be able to discover their own experiences within it. I didn't want to tell people what I wanted them to see. I always wanted my viewers to be able to discover something completely different from what I was picturing. I felt that if people could see their own lives in the film it would create a more personal and powerful viewing experience.

It was also important to me to capture the experience of depression in a way that would be relatable to those who are struggling with it. I wanted a depressed person to be able to point at my film and say, "this is how I feel." Depression is a silent disease; one that is almost impossible to describe with words. Through sound, movement, texture, and color I hope to create a window into the experience of depression. In order to achieve this goal, I chose several ways that depression can present and explored them in depth. From the tired, heavy hopelessness of my blue scene, to the skin crawling anxiety of swarming bugs, to the pain of piercing nails-on-a-chalkboard sound, the many facets of this complex disease became my pallet for expressing it.

However this film is not only aimed towards those who have suffered from depression. I wanted to allow those individuals who have never experienced depression to do so. By immersing themselves in the world of depression, even if it's only for a short time, people can get a tiny bit closer to understanding the disease. I hope that this film will foster understanding and empathy among healthy people. My use of abstraction was an important part of this goal. "The value of a line, of a form consists for us in the value of the life that it holds for us. It holds its beauty only through our own vital feeling, which, in some mysterious manner, we project onto it" (Worringer). An audience being able to project their own feelings onto an image creates empathy. Abstraction is the perfect way to create empathy, because the audience creates every emotion themselves. The stigma against those who suffer from mental illness is very real, and I believe that it is largely born from a lack of understanding. I hope that this film will help to start a conversation and bring us closer to comprehending the reality of depression, rather than the stereotype.

Mer Depré premiered on May 17th 2015 at the Rochester Institute of Technology. It was received well and was later selected as an honorable mention

in RIT's honors show. It has since been selected to screen at multiple international film festivals.

Works Cited

Wells, Paul. *Understanding Animation*. London: Routledge, 1998. Print.

Worringer, Wilhelm. *Abstraction and Empathy; a Contribution to the Psychology of Style*. New York: International Universities, 1953. Kindle. AZW file.

Appendix A

This is a small sampling of the articles I read, the videos I watched, and other materials I studied in preparation for making this film.

- Depression Comix
 - <http://depressioncomix.com>
 - A web comic about depression.
- Andrew Solomon's The Secret We Share
 - http://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_solomon_depression_the_secret_we_share
 - A Ted talk by Andrew Solomon, a sufferer of depression, about his experience with mental illness and suicide.
- JD Schramm: Break the Silence for Suicide Attempt Survivors
 - http://www.ted.com/talks/jd_schramm
 - JD Schramm's Ted talk about why it's important to speak about suicide and provide resources to those who have attempted.
- How A Ted Talk From A Fellow Suicide Survivor Helped Me Rebuild My Self Respect
 - <http://blog.ted.com/2014/02/04/how-a-ted-talk-from-a-fellow-suicide-survivor-helped-me-rebuild-my-self-respect/>
 - An article by Cara Anna, a suicide survivor, about why speaking out about suicide is important.
- Hi, I'm Sorry To Burden You, But I'm Thinking About Killing Myself
 - <http://kieranmoolchan.com/2014/01/28/hi-sorry-to-burden-you-but-im-thinking-about-killing-myself/>
 - An article by Kieran about why suicidal people don't speak up.
- Live Through This
 - <http://livethroughthis.org>
 - A collection of portraits and stories of suicide survivors.
- No Where To Go: Mentally Ill Youth In Crisis
 - <http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/nowhere-to-go-mentally-ill-youth-in-crisis/>
 - A 60 Minutes report on the state of the mental health services in the USA.
- Understanding Animation
 - A book written by Paul Wells
 - First published in 1998, Wells explores the origin of animation, and its specific characteristics.
- Abstraction and Empathy; a Contribution to the Psychology of Style
 - A book written by Wilhelm Warringer
 - First published in 1908, Warringer's doctoral thesis compares realistic and abstract art and argues that (among other things) the urge to create fixed, abstract, and geometric forms is a response to the modern experience of industrialization.

Appendix B

In the Spring of 2014, I was just beginning the process of making this film. A good friend of mine from college, Wil, learned about my project and asked if I would like to ask her some questions about depression, as it was something she had experienced personally for many years. As we were far away from each other at the time, we had this conversation over Facebook. At the time she was battling cancer (Igor was the nick-name for her tumor), and though throughout this conversation both of us were optimistic of her chances, she died only a few months later. Her words were a constant inspiration to me, and inspired many of the visuals within this film.

I have not edited this interview at all. I've included the emoji used as we spoke, grammatical errors, and the bits of conversation about other topics (mostly knitting, a hobby we shared).

This interview has been included in this paper with the permission of Wil's family.

Maggie:

Hey Wil! Thank you for offering to help me with this! Before I ask any other questions, how are you? I hope that Igor is being beaten up well and good. For the record, I really miss having a knitting friend. I keep trying to teach people here, but so far no one's stuck with it.

Could you give me a basic outline of what you've experienced before I ask any specific questions? When did you experience depression, was it treated, ect.

I so appreciate your willingness to share this with me! I know it can be very difficult to talk about. I'm not sure if I ever told you about my own experiences with depression. It was a very long time ago (10 years), but I was suicidal for about 2 years as a young girl. That's what's inspired me to make this film. The more information I can gather about other people's experiences the more accurately I can portray this, so your offer is really wonderful.

Wil:

Awww, that's too bad no one's sticking with knitting where you are ☹ Thanks to cancer, I have plenty of time to spend at home with my knitting - I have two shawls and a blanket actively on the needles, and I want to get into pattern design soon. I have a few shawls in mind... :D

I'm sorry to hear that you've been on the depression boat, too ☹ Depression is an ongoing thing in my life. It has been since I was ten, which is when I realized I wanted to die and was swept up into countless therapy sessions (oh goodness, I've been through more therapists than I can count) and youth groups I didn't fit

well into because my depression always felt trivial in the face of kids being abused. My official diagnosis is dysthymia, which is a long-term, low grade depression that feels like a personality flaw more than anything else. I'm on Lexapro, which helps on some days, doesn't help as much on other days, and makes its lack of presence known if I try to stop taking it and see what happens. (I hate being dependent on medication, it makes me feel like a junkie.)

I haven't thought about my depression very much since I've been diagnosed with cancer. My depression's had a strange effect on my relationship with my cancer - I'm not at all worried about the cancer and I know that things will turn out right in the end. It's really strange for me to see so many people banding together to help me through my cancer, especially since I think my depression is worlds worse and I never had solid support for that. I lied about my insurance coverage through most of college because my father's federal insurance raised a big stink about continued mental health coverage and my father, sick of dealing with them, refused to pay for counseling. Unfortunately for me, I don't have the kind of depression that goes away - I've had to use sheer willpower and an incredibly effective autopilot system to get this far, and I don't even know how I have the will to keep going in the first place. Chalk it up to human survival instinct?

I think the process of "beating" cancer will have a pretty good effect on my mental health and I'm going to use that to dig myself out of the ditch I've been in for years. Plus, it helps that there's tons of scholarships and rewards for cancer survivors - hooray for being rewarded for having a body that can sustain Western medicine's nastiest poisons! :V

Feel free to ask any questions you might have, I'm an open book. ☺

Maggie:

Designing patterns is so much fun! Do you plan to publish any?

I was very fortunate that my depression went away, and I am eternally thankful. I can only imagine how difficult it must be to have a more chronic form of the disease.

Some of these questions might be a little weird, so I hope you'll bear with me. I'm not only trying to figure out what happened and how it might have made you feel, but also how to put visuals to that. Answer as best you can and if you don't know the answer don't worry about it.

What color would you say your depression is? Is that a different color from the rest of your life, or does your depression color everything? What texture does your depression have? What smell? What taste?

You said you've been to therapy. Has that helped? How? What color is your therapist (if you've been to more than one, are they different colors)? How has your depression changed before and after therapy?

Have there been any external factors (interactions with family and friends, deaths of people close to you, bullying, etc) that have cause your depression to worsen? Any that have made it easier or better? How did those things make you feel? What color were they? Did they have a texture?

I find it really interesting that you mentioned that people rallied around you when you were diagnosed with cancer but not with depression. That's precisely what sort of issue I'd like to start a discussion about with this film. There is so little support for people with depression, and so little understanding about the disease. So often people don't know what to say when they find out you're depressed, so they say nothing. And there are so few official resources for people who are struggling with mental health issues. I hope that this film will be a part of a national dialogue that may start a process to change that, though of course that is ambitious.

Wil:

I don't know if my depression has a color as much as it feels like a haze over everything. When it's at its worst, I feel like I'm in an impenetrable fog. The fog goes both ways - I feel like I'm separated from everyone and everything else, and I also feel invisible to others. People don't acknowledge I exist, and life moves on as it would if I wasn't there. One of the most painful feelings in the world, I think, is being in the same room as other people who don't realize you're there, especially if the other people happen to be your friends! This has happened to me a lot, I can't quite explain it... if you're going to illustrate this fog, make it thick, grey, and hazy.

Oh goodness, therapy is much of a mess as people are. I've been to so many therapists that it's hard to keep track of them all. The worst therapists have been too wrapped up in their own concerns and theories that they refuse to acknowledge my problems - one of my therapists was convinced that my father had abused me (he wasn't the best father, but he didn't abuse me), and another preferred to hurl accusations at me instead of listening to what I had to say. I ran from both of those therapists quicksnap. I've been to a handful of ineffective therapists who, while they were perfectly nice people, used methods that didn't mesh well with what I was going through. I've been to countless therapists-in-training with very little experience (they're the only ones I could afford without insurance), and school therapists are very hit or miss. I like who I'm seeing now, but she took a lot of research to find and I don't think I'm using her abilities as well as I could be! It's hard for me to trust therapy because I've been burned so hard by it, but despite that I keep crawling back... I don't know if therapy's helped my depression at all, but I'm a pretty good armchair psychologist because of it!

I don't talk about my depression with my family because they're all pretty much in the same boat. Besides, like the cancer, it's like dumping a bag of fiery shit on their doorstep - what the hell are they supposed to do about it? I'm fairly certain my father is depressed, he self-medicates with an awful lot of weed and an awful lot of booze. It kept him out of my hair for the most part, and when I did make the mistake of talking to him about how I was feeling, he'd freak out and beg me to tell him how he could make it go away. Depression doesn't work like that. I doubt his joint custody with my mother helped - all of my childhood interactions with my mother turned to shit because I'd inevitably do something she didn't like and she'd rage at me over it. It doesn't help that she's bipolar and wasn't medicated for it until recently. I still don't talk to my mother and I don't plan on talking to her anytime soon.

My friends growing up weren't much help, either. I learned pretty quickly to not trust my friends when the person I thought I was my closest friend, after I've given her realistic, practical advice about her problems time and time again to the point where that's the only reason she would call me (she stopped even asking how I was), told me to talk to Jesus about my depression instead of, you know, talking me through it like I've talked her through so many breakups and so many decisions... yeah, not friends with her anymore.

I was picked on as a kid. Ruthlessly. I still feel like I kind of asked for it, even though I couldn't have chosen my upbringing - I was the weird kid with no socialization since my father was a shut-in who worked weekends, so I had to learn everything the hard way. And oh, how I did! I had to make up my own coping mechanisms - I shut up and kept my head down through middle and high school, so no one noticed me. I pretty much went to school and went home, that's it. I stopped doing my homework in third or fourth grade and didn't pick it up again until high school, where I used it as an excuse to not waste my time on major projects. (The C I got in English for doing everything but the bullshit major paper is still the grade I'm proudest of - I'm usually a straight A student! A's don't make me feel anything.) I admitted my suicidal intentions in fifth grade, and I've been some degree of suicidal from then through college. I'm not now - I've been considerably happier since being out of school!

We haven't even gone into the queer bit! I knew for sure that I was queer in high school, but didn't come out until college because I had too much to worry about during high school to even think about my own queerness. I'm glad I didn't come out back then, because coming out in college was soooooo much more manageable. I think most people knew I was queer before I admitted it - I know for sure my father did (he told me he knew since I was ten), and I didn't come out to him until I started dating Lenya.

Oh goodness, look at this wall of text! I'm sorry I didn't have answers to too many of the color/feeling questions, I don't tend to remember things that way... everything was grey and dull and awful and I'm glad I'm done with it. It's only

recently that I'm starting to feel more okay about this life thing, and because of that I'm feeling more okay about talking about what I've been through. Feel free to ask more questions if you're curious ☺

Maggie:

Thank you for being so honest! This helps me a lot!

The reason I asked about texture and color is because my own depression has always felt like it had a rough, grainy texture to it, like sand paper slowly rubbing me out of existence. Like you, it has always felt gray to me, but I was curious as to whether it might have felt like a different color to you. The fog is a very different image from what I see my experience as, and definitely something that would be worth exploring in my film.

I am so glad to hear that you have been happier recently. Can you tell me anything about what that process has been like? As an example, when I was depressed I was so young that I didn't realize what it was until I stopped feeling that way. It felt like some sort of horrible knot in my chest had finally come undone. Have you had any similar experience as you've become happier? Has the fog lifted or lessened?

I also experienced bullying when I was young. It is so hard to let go of the feelings of guilt that it causes, as though what those people said was true or somehow your fault. I still struggle with that as well. And I think I also developed some of the same coping mechanisms that you talk about: shutting the world out, doing poorly in school, etc. How do you think those coping mechanisms have effected your life today? Do they continue to help you cope, or do they hurt more than they help? Have they changed over the years and if so how?

You mentioned that you're glad you didn't come out when you were younger because coming out in college was much easier. Do you think that being in the closet when you were younger was a contributing factor to your depression?

Do you think that your friend's lack of sensitivity was due to her age, ignorance, or just a bad personality? The attitude you described it one I found very prevalent when I was younger, but not quite so much as I got older. But I'm not sure if that's because I got better at picking my friends, people have become more educated, or if people just understand mental illness better, or at least are more sensitive to it, as they get older.

It seems as though you haven't had a very positive experience with therapists. I didn't go to therapy when I felt this way, although I have always wished that I'd had the courage to admit I needed it.

Your insights into this have been so incredibly helpful! Don't worry about not being able to answer some of the questions! They are weird questions. Ha ha.

Maggie:

Gosh darn it.

Maggie:

The last paragraph was supposed to read:

It seems as though you haven't had a very positive experience with therapists. I didn't go to therapy when I felt this way, although I have always wished that I'd had the courage to admit I needed it. What do you think could have been done, if anything, to ensure that the therapists you were seeing were more competent?

Your insights into this have been so incredibly helpful! Don't worry about not being able to answer some of the questions! They are weird questions. Ha ha.

Maggie:

That posted when I was in the middle of writing the last paragraph. Ha ha ha,

Wil:

Since everyone's different, I feel like there isn't a universal experience of depression, which might be why it's so hard to describe the experience to others. Have you run into depression comix? It's definitely worth a look - some of the best depictions of issues related to depression that I've seen, and a variety of issues are covered.

I was very aware of my own depression, still am. I knew normal people didn't think this way, but I couldn't comprehend how they couldn't think this way, if that makes sense? The fog's still there on some days, especially if I don't take my meds, but it's not nearly as bad as it was in college.

I've had to unlearn a lot of my old coping mechanisms, especially in college - I learned quickly that the whole not doing homework thing doesn't work quite as well, for instance. :V I didn't have space to start unlearning my coping mechanisms until college - it helped a lot to be away from home and to actually be interacting with people who were on the same level as me (JMAC). Lenya's helped a lot with my further socialization, and working at Hoosier Mama helped too (that's a big reason why I signed on in the first place!). I am definitely much better with people than I was, which helps me feel better about my place in the world. I still have trouble sometimes since people don't come naturally to me, but I feel like people are more accepting now than they used to be.

I wouldn't say being closeted in high school contributed to my depression as much as other factors did. Sure, not being to be able to express myself didn't help, but surviving high school in the face of what I thought was the utter pointlessness of human existence took up enough of my mental reserves. Honestly, I thought I was asexual through most of high school because I didn't

feel physically attracted to anyone I knew. I had an inkling that I was definitely not straight, but again, awkward around people/didn't like people/no one my age in Oak Park was interesting enough to me/who knows.

I think it was due to her bold, fiery personality and her Christian Baptist upbringing. This particular friend ended up being strange in ways I didn't feel like dealing with - at the end of our friendship, she only called me when she needed my advice and I never told her how I was feeling because I knew she wouldn't understand. She always thought I'd turn to the good lord someday. Diiiiidn't like how she talked about her token lesbian friend in high school, either - she liked the person, but hated the "sin". I don't think she could have ever accepted me being queer. That aside, I think things have changed for the better as I've gotten older, and my judgment in people has improved as well (though maybe a little too much? I only talk to a handful of my old college friends anymore).

Good therapy definitely favors people who have the means - I know from personal experience that it's tough to find a good therapist if you don't have the money or are uninsured. Sliding scale therapists are almost always psychology students or interns who didn't have the experience necessary to help me with my deep-seated, long term depression. I did the best I could with the resources I had and I was always able to get myself out of a bad therapy situation (being pretty damn familiar with psychological terms and methods really helped there), but I wouldn't agree with some therapy being better than no therapy at all - you really have to do your research. Bad therapy is EXTREMELY damaging.

I've found that the most crucial factor in choosing a good therapist is whether your personality meshes well with the therapist's personality and whether their psychological method matches what you're looking for - people looking for therapists should definitely do research on common therapeutic methods. People looking for therapists should do research, period.

Answering your previous question about pattern writing, I do intend to publish patterns. Would you be up for testing/editing patterns I write, if you have the time? ☺

Maggie:

I'd love to edit or test some of your patterns! I would be a little worried about time. I don't have a ton of time to knit now-a-days, although I do it when I can. Basically, if I test knit one of your patterns it'll probably take me a while to finish. If you want people more prompt you might check out the Free Pattern Testers group on Ravelry. They tested almost all of my patterns and are really good.

You're absolutely right that nothing is universal, which is one of the things that makes this project so challenging. A lot of what you're saying is very familiar (having to unlearn your coping mechanisms, dealing with friends that were less than understanding) and mirror my own experiences. Other things you're talking

about are very different from what I experienced (how aware you were/are of what you were feeling, your experiences with therapy). Right now I'm just trying to gather different perspectives and different people's stories. I haven't read that comic before but I just looked it up and it's really good. I'll read more of it over the next few days.

Thanks for answering all of my questions so thoughtfully. I know how hard it can be to talk about this sort of thing, and I know I asked some really strange questions. It'll be about a year and a half before I finish this film (it's my thesis) but when I do I'll be sure to send you a link.

Wil:

It was my pleasure! If you have any other questions, please do let me know - I wish you the best of luck in working on the film!

Maggie:

Thank you! I will absolutely take you up on that!

Appendix C

The following was read at Mer Depré's screening at the Rochester Institute of Technology.

I've been thinking about this film since I was in high school, but if you'd told me as little as 2 years ago that it was going to be abstract I probably would have laughed at you. Before this I'd never made an abstract film, and didn't have a ton of interest in doing so. So why did I decide to make an abstract film?

I can tell you that it wasn't because I wanted to take the easy way out. There's this totally incomprehensible feeling among some film makers that abstract work is easier, and when I decided to make this film a SoFA student (I won't name names) asked me if I'd chosen to work in abstraction because it would make my thesis so much simpler. So let me set the record straight. This film was intense, and I learned a lot making it. Not just about composition, and timing, and texture, and sound, but about myself. This film was an intimate look into the darkest and hardest moments of my life. It forced me to come out of the mental illness closet, and face the disease that nearly killed me head on.

If you haven't figured it out yet, the film you just watched was about clinical depression.

Depression is something that runs in my father's family. It's something that I and most other members of my family have experienced, not to mention 1 out of every 10 Americans. Way back in high school when I first started thinking about this, I wanted to tell my personal story. And this film still is very much about my own experiences. But through abstraction, I hope that anyone can see their experiences within it. The beautiful thing about abstraction is that it's universal, in a way that narrative film can never be.

Finally, I would like to thank a few of the people who helped me along the way.

First and foremost, my thesis advisor, Stephanie Maxwell, who's advice shaped this film more than any person aside from myself, and who's persistent optimism and cheerful attitude was always a welcome break from thinking about depression all day.

Second, my friend Wil. Wil lost her battle with cancer this summer, but before she did she gave me a detailed account of her own battle with depression. She was a constant source of inspiration and I miss her more than I can say.

Professors Lindsay Schnekel and Joseph Baschnagel in the psychology department, for letting me spend 2 hours apiece in their offices picking their brains for anything and everything they knew about depression.

Peter Murphey, for giving me the suggestion that I should begin the film with sound. Without him I think I would still just be trying to start this project.

And finally, my friends, my family, and all the people who supported me throughout this process. There's far too many of you to thank individually, so I will do my best to do so in person.

UP

(Working Title)

Animated Thesis Production
By Margaret Orr

March 2014

Approved for submission by:

Faculty Advisor, Stephanie Maxwell
Committee:
Brian Larson, SOFA
Lindsay Schenkel, Psychology

DIRECTOR	Margaret Orr
ADVISOR	Stephanie Maxwell
START DATE	May 2014
END DATE	May 2015
RUNNING TIME	4 minutes
GENRE	Experimental Animation

IDEA

Up is an abstract, experimental animated film that creates a journey through the experience of depression from the point of view of someone who suffers from it. This journey evokes impressions through abstract form and visual metaphor to immerse one in the multi faceted states of crisis that a depressed person endures. Depression can take many different forms, and *Up* explores some of the most common forms, such as shame, loneliness, isolation, a lack of energy, and suicide. Depression runs in my family and I myself have suffered from it. It is a disease that is difficult to understand, even for those who experience it. But through abstraction it will be possible to create the 'environment' in a depressed person's head and experience their world.

TECHNIQUES

This film will be created largely in 2D, however it will also combine other media, such as photography and stop motion animation. The primary animation software used will be TV Paint. Additional software such as Toon Boom, Premiere, After Effects, and Photoshop will also be used.

SOUND

The soundtrack will consist of an original musical composition intercut with sound effects.

BUDGET

TOTAL	\$950
Art Materials	\$200
Office Supplies	\$50
Production and Distribution Media	\$100
Distribution Festival Fees	\$400
Project Web Maintenance	\$100
Music and Sound Production	\$100

TIMELINE

[illegible]