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Molly

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the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

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School of Film and Animation

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The Conception and Creation of "Molly"
a Stop-motion Animated Short Film
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I could not have made this film without the help of these individuals. They helped me to focus on what was most important and coached me through when I was attempting something that was both new and strange to me, something for which I felt unprepared on multiple fronts. I am extremely grateful to all of them. Their efforts made this film possible.

Abstract:

"Molly" is a stop-motion animated graduate thesis short film completed at Rochester Institute of Technology's School of Film and Animation and screened in May of 2019.

The film tells a fictional story about a young boy named Elliott whose life has changed both very drastically and very quickly. In what seems like an instant, he loses both his mother and his childhood home and finds himself standing, overwhelmed, in the street in front of his new residence as his life is seemingly being unpacked from the back of a moving truck. He is shell-shocked and feels profoundly alone but soon he, quite literally, stumbles upon the strangest girl and unwillingly becomes a guest at her rather unusual social engagement. Events take a slightly devastating turn but, in the end, both children gain a companionship that they both so desperately needed.

In making this film, I sought to tell a story about acceptance, loneliness, and finding companionship in times of need. I also aimed to make a film that was visually compelling, exemplifying the breadth of my skill in prop, set, and puppet fabrication.

These assets were all made by hand. The film was shot utilizing only in-camera stop motion techniques with a Canon EOS Rebel T3i Digital Single Lens Reflex (DSLR) camera and Dragonframe software and was assembled in Adobe After Effects CC 2018. The film was screened before an audience of professors and peers.

This thesis paper covers the conceptualization and production of the film as well as the film's receival upon screening and my final thoughts on the film and process.

I. Part One:

i. Introduction:

A life-long artist who dabbled in miniature sculpture as a child, I was captivated by the aesthetic of stop motion films at an early age and wanted so desperately to be among the fabricators helping to bring such art to the screen.

I have always been a visual artist but never considered myself a storyteller until I arrived at animation school and was given the proverbial microphone. When it came time to make my thesis film, I had to ask myself what kind of story I might believe in so strongly as to spend a year carefully developing it from concept to fully-realized, polished short film. I chose a story and style of storytelling by keeping in mind my strengths and weaknesses within the realm of stop motion animation and reflecting on the style of storytelling employed in some of my favorite films and television shows.

My goal for thesis was simply to create the strongest film I possibly could; a film that was visually appealing, with a clean, well-made, vivid aesthetic, backed by a unique story with meaning featuring relatable characters and a bit of humor. Ultimately, I would craft a story that starts in tragedy then takes an unexpected turn into the silly, quirky, nearly absurd, and finally ends on a tender note.

Animation proved to be the ideal medium to create such an experience for my audience because it allowed me to have complete control over the aesthetic of the film. Keeping a bright, vivid look kept the tragic event of the story from coming off too dark. I could also design the look of the characters down to the last detail, to emphasize the contrast between their personalities. Animation allows for exaggeration in character performance, which can aid

emotional moments in impacting the viewers. Further, I feel that animation makes a story feel accessible to the widest of audiences. I do not think that this film would have the same whimsical, playful feeling if it were filmed in live action. Choosing to animate the story in stop motion would be one of the most critical choices I made in the production of my thesis film.

This paper will detail how I employed a practical approach to creating this film and, despite feeling very unprepared and having much to still learn, I worked to apply the skills, wisdom, and experience I had to its construction.

ii. A Reflection on Storytelling: More than Just Communication

It is common knowledge that the act of storytelling traces back to pre-historic times. Stories were originally disseminated by word of mouth, before the advent of artwork or written language, however it is only those physical artifacts which have survived that can be dated by modern scientists. Big Fish Presentation's online piece entitled "A Very Brief History of Storytelling" mentions the earliest known artifacts of this practice, a series of cave paintings, which were discovered in France in 1940. These paintings have been dated by scientists as originating from around 15,000 BCE. Most of these very early cave paintings tell a simple story, likely aiming to teach fellow cavemen rituals and hunting practices.

Even the stone sculpture known as the "Woman of Willendorf," one of the earliest known pieces of man-made artwork, could be considered to tell a story. Modern archeologists deduce that it could have been a symbol for fertility and communicated norms or ideals of female anatomy.

Certainly, as language developed amongst early humans, so, too, did the telling of stories. No matter the time or culture, stories had a key part in the teaching of a new generation, the transmission of ideas, practices, moral and religious beliefs and, of course, in entertainment for all ages.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is the earliest recorded story that has been discovered. The tale speaks of King Gilgamesh who ruled modern day Iraq in 2700 BCE. The earliest written version of the story that has been found is from 2000 BCE. The standard, more complete version is dated to 1300-1000 BCE. Influence from this epic can be found in such texts as Homer's epics and the bible. Themes from The Epic of Gilgamesh have carried through even into modern texts (University of Idaho, "The Epic of Gilgamesh").

Stories can also help to embolden people in times of distress and unite them for or against a common cause. The first wave of popularity for superheroes was in the mid 1900's, during times of war and scarce resources. Resurgences in popularity for superhero stories can often be tied to times of war or sociopolitical unrest. In a 2011 interview, co-creator of the Captain America series Joe Simon said, "Captain America was designed to be the perfect foil for the Fűhrer" (Sacks). Captain America was a symbol for patriotism, hope and bravery in gruesome times.

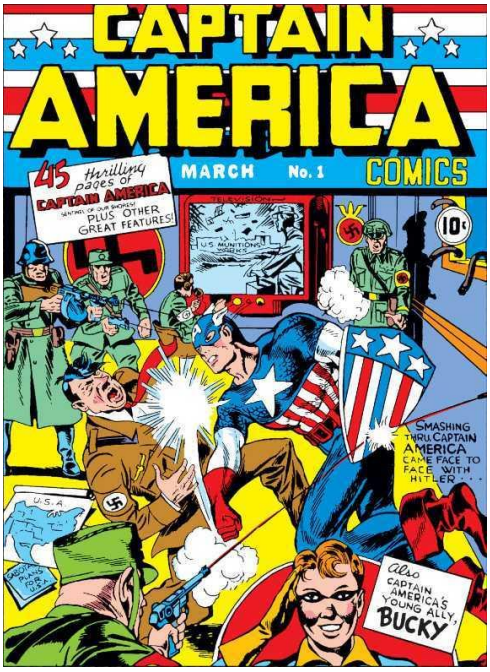


Fig. 1: Captain America #1 (1941), Marvel.

Storytelling is vital to the human experience. Through stories we can escape our own lives and seemingly travel the world without ever leaving home. The dominance of movies, games, music, and literature in popular culture is evidence of our need of this escape.

But we also learn about ourselves, each other, and the world through stories. They expose us to people, cultures, and experiences we might never have encountered otherwise and thus give us not only a sense of perspective on our own character and life experience but foster within us a greater sense of empathy for the shared struggles of the human race. Ultimately, storytelling is about learning and sharing the human experience.

iii. First Steps of Conceptualization

Given my limited background and experience in storytelling, I felt that being asked to spontaneously produce a quality work of short fiction was as if being asked to speak in a

language with which I had only a rudimentary understanding. I had also never really considered if I even had a story to tell. As a visual artist, I had conveyed ideas and expressed emotions. But effective storytelling is so much more complex. I needed to say something with this film. This project would consume a year (and ultimately more) of my life and would serve as the capstone to my master's career. It would be a testament to all that I had learned and a promise of my potential.

In terms of art of any kind, one might say, "It has all been said and done before." I am sure it probably has all been said, perhaps even more eloquently than I ever could, but that is never a reason to give up creating. If nothing else, I had to make this film to graduate, the act of creating serves a purpose for me, and though I am saying what has perhaps already been said, only I can say it from my perspective, in my voice. Time spent creating art, an act that is perhaps the most human thing a person can do, is never time wasted.

Pushing past my initial insecurities, I took a highly practical approach and laid out parameters for the story I would develop. It was not simply a matter of telling what story happened to come to mind. I wanted to be sure I made the strongest film I could possibly make at the time. Being acutely aware of my strengths and weaknesses, counting on this film to put me in the running for a fabrication career…it was these sorts of considerations that led me to form a plan for ensuring this film would be the best I could manage. I simply laid out a few standards and endeavored to come up with a story that met those requirements.

Unique Story:

I needed to focus on a story that could keep my attention over the course of production, a story I believed in. It had to be unique, it had to say something while being entertaining and I had to connect to it on an emotional level. I didn't want to tell the same old, tired narrative I had heard a million times before. I knew that I would lose interest in working on the film if it felt formulaic or derivative.

Greater Concepts and Meanings:

I wanted to tell a story that dealt with larger concepts like isolation, loss, and being an outsider. My drive to complete the film would have faded over time if the story was simply centered around a gag. Films that center around slap-stick style humor are legitimate works of art but I favor work that readily offers deeper meaning. For one thing, stories with meanings surrounding subjects like bullying, for example, can empower victims and inspire others to bring about real social change. It's worth fighting to put stories like those out into the world.

Relatable Characters:

I also strongly favor stories that offer characters and content with which you can connect on an emotional level. The most compelling characters are ones in which you can see yourself, ones with which you truly, deeply empathize. When you feel a character embodies you,

it can be powerful to watch them triumph on screen. With the story I eventually chose, I was able to feel some release of my own recent emotional experience through my characters.

Humor:

I sought to incorporate some amount of humor into my story as it can temper an emotionally heavy story. It is a welcome bit of release for an audience. Quirky little bits of dialogue or plot points also come fairly easily to me, when writing.

Clarity:

Having seen a significant amount of the films produced by my fellow classmates over the years, I began to identify things I wanted to avoid in my thesis film. Primarily, I learned the importance of telling an intelligible story. It seems that some animation programs, RIT's included, encourage students to make films without dialogue. Dialogue increases the amount of work to be done in such a short time, requires a certain degree of sound production knowledge as well as voice actors and access to specialized software, it might require lip sync and perhaps makes a film less universal by limiting the audience who can understand it. Dialogue is yet another gear in a complex machine that might bind up and halt the entire operation for a student who is still mastering the process of filmmaking. But I have found that a lack of dialogue in some student films can contribute to an unclear or confusing narrative. I have seen too many student films whose stories I could not follow.

It simply seems a shame to spend so much time making a film that is not understood. When the story is unclear, the film is reduced to being just a visual spectacle. Granted the visual aesthetic of a film is of monumental importance but if the goal was to tell a story, one could say the film was unsuccessful.

So, I primarily wanted to be sure that my film was easily understood. I decided to embrace dialogue if that is what my story needed (I even considered that dialogue might help to make the plot easily understood) and resolved to avoid complex action, metaphors, or plot points. I was a beginning storyteller, after all.

Heavy on Fabrication, Light on Animation:

My final requirement for my thesis film was that it exhibit my strongest suit, fabrication, as thoroughly as possible while de-emphasizing my weakest skill, animation. I am hoping to be hired in the field for fabrication and so I wanted my film to show off what I can do in terms of object-making. I kept in mind that my story should require a detailed set and well-engineered, cleanly made puppets and props. I was also quite aware that my weakest asset was animation, so I sought to write a story that involved minimal amounts of grandiose puppet movement. There was to be no dancing, jumping or anything of the sort; anything that would give away my lack of experience in actually applying principles like eases, tracking, etc. Even aside from using my film to seek a career in stop motion fabrication, the film itself and the viewer's experience of it would suffer if my rudimentary animation was too obvious, similar to how poor acting can negatively color a viewer's perception of an otherwise good live action film.

And so, I aimed to make a film that kept my attention throughout the production process because of a unique and emotionally compelling narrative; a film with deeper meaning that was simple enough to be easily understood, one that was not necessarily void of dialogue, and preferably contained a bit of humor; and most importantly, a film that exhibited my skill in fabrication while drawing attention away from my lack of skill in animation.

iv. Influences

With a list of parameters in place, I began to think about the types of stories I enjoy. Over the years I've found that I engage most readily with stories that make strong use of a narrator who overly-explains character details, events, and morals of the story. This narrator often introduces each character, listing hyper-specific and amusing quirks and making abundantly clear the characters' thoughts and intentions. Many of the details given have no real effect on the story. They don't come up again in the storyline. Traditional standards might deem them a poor narrator, but I find the approach refreshing. I find that such a peculiar style paints a vivid picture of the world in which the story is set.

Hand in hand with this approach is often the use of atypical characters and a focus on their peculiarities. In general, whereas I grow tired of stories that seem to have the same general plot, I never grow tired of character studies, particularly of characters that don't fit inside the usual boxes. And so, I love a quirky narrator coupled with an equally quirky character. Where one author might introduce a character simply as "a 12-year old girl from suburban Michigan. She was artistic but messy," I prefer an introduction more along the lines of, "Susie was 12

summers' old. She liked to photograph oil slicks and hated washing her hair." The latter draws me in, gives me a better picture of the character and an idea of the feel of the story, and brings me to empathize with the character. I thought that a style of story-telling similar to this would match the type of story I would like to tell. *Lemony Snicket's Series of Unfortunate Events*, particularly the television adaptation, is somewhat of an example of this exposition technique. So are the feature films Amelie and Mary and Max.

Amelie, a French live action film released in 2001, tells the story of Amelie Poulain, a woman who takes great pleasure in helping others and eventually finds herself in love. The film received critical acclaim and has gathered a cult following since its release. The script features strong use of a male narrator who introduces Amelie's father:

> *Raphaël Poulain doesn't like peeing next to somebody else. He doesn't like noticing people laughing at his sandals, coming out of the water with his swimming suit sticking to his body. Raphaël Poulain likes to tear big pieces of wallpaper off the walls, to line up his shoes and polish them with great care, to empty his toolbox, clean it thoroughly, and, finally, put everything away carefully* (Jeunet).

This information is not referenced later in the story. In fact, Amelie's father is not even a main character. And yet, these seemingly unnecessary details not only add a distinct character to the set-up of the story, but give the viewers background on Amelie's character.

This description fleshes out the character in a way that a simple straight forward summation might not. And in this case, in the course of three sentences, I find the father endearing and empathize with him because I can relate to some of his particularities. I cannot say

I would feel the same or be compelled to continue with the story if the character was described more generically.

Narrative styles like this make the story somehow even more of an adventure. I am given information and insights that I did not expect to encounter. The characters seem more nuanced, more like real people when introduced in such a way. Ever fascinated by human psychology, with storytelling like this, I feel as though I am not just consuming a story for entertainment but perhaps also learning a bit about the human experience. I find myself liking the characters partly *because* of their faults and peculiarities, which makes me feel a little more likeable for mine.

Another excellent example of this narrative style is Mary and Max, a feature length stop motion animated film by Australian filmmaker Adam Elliott. His work, animated in clay and shot in black and white, again features heavy use of quirky narration, though his work features dark tones which .poke out from beneath the humor. The film begins in a manner similar to Amelie:

Mary Dinkle's eyes were the color of muddy puddles. Her birthmark, the color of poo…

Her favorite tea bag was Earl Grey. She loved saying "Earl Grey" and would like one day to marry someone called Earl Grey. They would live in a castle in Scotland, have 9 babies, 2 ducks, and a dog called Kevin...

[Her father's] hobby was to sit in his shed and drink Bailey's lrish Cream and stuff birds he'd found on the side of the freeway. Mary wished he'd spend more time with her and less with his dead friends… (Elliott) .

Similar to the introduction to Amelie, very little of the information given in the introduction to Mary and Max is referenced later in the film but the supplemental information gives the viewer a vivid, three-dimensional picture of the nature of each character.

Like the rest of Adam Elliott's work, Mary and Max has humor and heart. But there is also a great deal of darkness. I am particularly drawn to Adam Elliott's work because of the undertones of melancholy and even moments of tragedy. Mary has no human friends. She is told by her mother that she was a mistake. Her mother is an active alcoholic, her father a recluse. Both parents die prematurely, her mother after mistaking a bottle of embalming fluid for a bottle of alcohol. Mary marries her childhood crush, but he eventually leaves her for a male pen pal. Unaware she is pregnant, Mary begins to attempt suicide. But the one thing that has carried her through since her childhood is her pen pal relationship with Max, a man dealing with severe Asperger Syndrome in New York City. Their relationship has its ups and downs, but he admits she is his one, true friend. At the end of the film, Mary leaves Australia to go visit Max in New York City. When she arrives, she finds he has prematurely passed away on his couch, staring at the apartment ceiling, which is covered in all of the letters she had sent him over the years. The film ends on this bittersweet note.

Themes of loneliness, untimely death, abandonment, mental illness, alcoholism, and the like are prominent across Adam Elliott's body of work. The darkness is what sets aside the filmmaker and really makes his work memorable for me. I appreciate a storyteller who is brave enough to take his audience to dark places, dealing with themes that might be uncomfortable for viewers. I also feel that incorporating darker themes lends depth and sophistication to the film. A story that is a lovably peculiar, nearly whimsical jaunt completely lacking in the kind of dramatic upheaval necessary to truly challenge its characters could appear to lack depth. Strong,

captivating stories that resonate with viewers possess a yin and yang; a degree of light as well as dark. Adam Elliott's stories are unique in that their darks are more extreme and play a greater, more constant role in the narrative.

His films resonate with me because I recognize the dichotomy of a quirky, light-hearted tone punctuated by tragedy and intense emotional pain. I recognize it because it is part of my lived experience. I have struggled with Major Depressive Disorder since the age of eleven. The reasons I am drawn to dark subject matter are complex but ultimately, vicariously experiencing tragedy, even fictional, can prove cathartic for me. When I can connect to the pain the character is experiencing, I am able to feel with them and ultimately release some of my own pain.

Adam Elliott's work, Mary and Max in particular, had the strongest influence on the film I would come to make. His success in weaving tragedy into an otherwise hopeful, touching story emboldened me to express some of the darkness I have spent much of my life accustomed to purging into my artwork. Indeed, the final edit of my film opens with a gut punch of tragedy. The first spoken line states that Elliott's mother died suddenly, unexpectedly, seemingly without reason. The second line indicates an equally sudden change for Elliott, a move of residence as a result of Elliott's father's own inability to deal with her death. And so, our introduction to Elliott is by way of his tragedy. We find Elliott standing alone, shell shocked and broken, in the middle of the street.

I would later realize that not only are Molly and Elliott foils for one another, the literal light and dark of the story, they unintentionally became manifestations of the two major sides of me. Molly is the vivacious, creative, unapologetically odd fiery spirit that I believe I am at my core whereas Elliott represents the great specter of my depression (depression is, in my opinion, very similar to grief), cohabitating my mind, dampening and obscuring the fiery spirit. As Molly

does for Elliott, the fiery one endeavors to shed light into the shadowy corner where the depressed one cowers.

v. Conceptualization

For me, so much of art-making is the purging of emotions. So much so that the actions involved in the process has become a reflex. I do not think I could create without drawing upon my emotions. Depression is a part of me, a part of the human experience that I deeply understand, so between living with it and considering Adam Elliott's work, it is of no surprise to me that I began with a character plunged suddenly into grief.

I chose grief over depression because I feel that an audience reacts to a traumatic event more strongly than just being told that a character has depression. A mental illness diagnosis for a fictional character is abstract whereas the sudden loss of a parent is narratively powerful and elicits more empathy.

This led me to begin with a male character who is grieving. His mother dies suddenly, during a seemingly harmless nap. The death happens too fast, out of nowhere, and doesn't make sense, especially to a young boy. He is, at once, slapped in the face by that depersonalization, that loss of meaning, the uncertainty about what is supposed to happen next. And Elliott's father can't cope. He sees his wife in every part of the house. So, the father decides they must move. And so, the boy, who was already shy and isolated, needs something, anything to grab onto. Everything he knows has crumbled beneath him.

I didn't want this to be another story simply about grief or depression, or even about getting over grief or depression. I wanted the story to be about hope and companionship in the face of them.

The young boy needed someone, whether he knew it or not, just to be there. But his nature was too shy, too reserved to reach out to someone on his own. He had to be thrust into a situation where he met someone, ultimately someone that forcibly befriended him. He had to literally trip on someone. And so, he did.

Molly is a slightly exaggerated version of myself. I was and in some ways still am that weird, tomboy girl who learned to play by herself, indeed, to raise herself, out of necessity. She had already been deemed "the weird girl" at school, already been ignored by her parents, shunned by her siblings, and yet because she is on her own, she is able to be exactly who she is. And sans human friends, she is the girl having tea with a dead bird, pet earthworm, and peanut.

My intent was that she remain unaware for the entirety of the story that Elliott is mourning his mother. She assumes he grieves for the dead earthworm. She doesn't even understand his initial shyness and so she might not be the answer to his problems but his are problems that cannot be easily fixed. He needs a break from the pain, someone to simply be there, and a connection to his new neighborhood. And there she is.

vi. The Early Script

Early iterations of the script for my film differed significantly from the final of 27 total edits. The original had a much longer introduction by the narrator, giving more insight into each character. This included the explanation for why Elliott wore a parka, scarf, and mittens whereas

Molly was dressed for spring. The winter dress reminded Elliott of his mother. She used to carefully dress him before he went outside in the winter and with the coat tight around his chest, he could imagine she was still hugging him. I was asked about this detail at screenings.

In first forming the story, I shied away from inserting major conflict or, really, a climax at all, though I knew that without conflict, there is no real arc, no narrative structure. My advisor suggested that Elliott choke on something at the tea party. At first I feared having to animate that, given my lack of skill, but when I realized the object could be an earthworm, resulting in Elliott being at a funeral for the second time in a short while, I saw the dramatic potential. I knew the audience would not be saddened by the loss of an earthworm. They would find it and the subsequent funeral funny more than tragic so the decision to make an earthworm the victim was not a risk. The event also invited Molly to empathize with him. But as pre-production went on, it became less of a narrative priority to over-emphasize the point that he was yet again at a funeral. I received feedback at various stages in the process that my script had either too much or too little dialogue, so I was constantly in adjustment. I also had to be conscious of how much lip sync work I was setting before myself. I had not perfected lip sync at the time and knew that it would greatly lengthen the animation process. In the earlier versions, Elliott had perhaps only about three words of total dialogue but as I received feedback from multiple sources that his character needed more development, I endeavored to add more dialogue as well as play up his reactions.

As I wrote and re-wrote the script, I began to assemble the rest of what would be my thesis proposal; a document laying out the details of the story as well as a project budget, timeline, aesthetic, and more to be presented before a committee for review.

vii. The Thesis Proposal

The thesis proposal and approval process were of immense aid in helping me to formalize my plans, have a sense of what to expect, and to go into production as prepared as possible. As someone more inclined to scribble a short list then jump headfirst into the work, it was important that I be forced to fully flesh out my intentions and have them approved before a committee.

Being required to put down as many details as I could muster forced me to thoroughly consider my options and make definitive decisions. I also needed that deadline, a cut-off date by which to nail down the details of my story. Without a clear-cut deadline, one could go on over-thinking and re-writing the same story infinitely. I was well aware that the original plan would change as production progressed but that initial commitment to paper was still incredibly important.

The proposal and review process allowed for feedback from several different professors. Critique from others is an vital element in the artmaking process. The artist will never be able to see his work through the eyes of another person, so the second-best thing is to hear the viewer speak about their experience of the piece. It was by a stroke of good luck that the one professor at the School of Film and Animation who is dedicated to the practice of scriptwriting, Frank Deese, was in my review committee and said that I "might have something here." I do not consider myself a writer so hearing that my story had merit from a professional scriptwriting instructor allowed me to move forward feeling that the basis of my film was strong enough to pursue. With feedback from all in attendance, the proposal was approved.

I. Part Two: Pre-Production

The pre-production process was long, and I was intimidated by what I had set forth for myself. At times I wished I had chosen a simpler story with a simpler set but this film was to be an exemplar of my current skill and my future potential. Doing what was easy would have only served me in the short term.

As I was easily overwhelmed, considering the scope of the whole project and the long list of logistics I had yet to figure out and that nearly every step of the process still felt new and strange to me, it was immensely important to focus on small steps rather than the big picture. In this case, elective tunnel vision proved a worthy survival tactic.

It was also important to stay inspired, to not lose sight of the love and passion that drove me to animation school in the first place. Clinical depression, stress, attending school for art-making, many factors can extract nearly all of the joy from the process of making. It is vital to reconnect to the fire inside in order to keep creating. I re-energized by re-watching stop motion films I enjoy and taking breaks from tasks that were new, intimidating, and frustrating, to return to my roots, making props and set pieces, disciplines that felt familiar and natural to me. I felt confident in those abilities and that confidence and calm was a relief from the constant uncertainty, over-thinking, and harsh self-judgement I experienced in other parts of the filmmaking process.

Ultimately, it is important to push through pre-production as it lays vital groundwork for the production process. Pre-production is the stage with the most uncertainty but can also be the one with the most freedom to explore new aesthetics, techniques, influences, and modes of storytelling. Pre-production is where one not only builds a plan for moving forward with an idea

but lays a foundation for that idea to blossom into a fully realized, strong work of art that can speak to others.

i. The Animatic

Approaching my first semester working on the film, my most immediate task was to hammer down the details of the story and put together an animatic. An animatic is a storyboard in video form. Scenes are sketched out in drawings, the timing of events and changes in shots is fine-tuned, and temporary place holder sound is inserted. As one moves through production, they can simply replace scene for scene of sketches with completed animation.

Like most Americans, I had spent a good deal of my life viewing television and films but to watch well-executed films is not necessarily to fully understand what makes them great. In making my first animatic, I realized that I had learned the basic types of camera angle shots like wide shots, close-ups, and extreme close-ups and could readily identify them when I saw them, even admire their use in a film or in sequential art, but when it came time for me to arrange them on my own to tell a story, I felt at a loss. I cannot, without careful consideration, explain how filmmakers choose the camera angles that they choose at each moment. I simply know that the order makes sense. The viewer is only ever frustrated by what they can't see at a certain moment if the filmmakers had that specific intention.

Having a background in fine arts, I had a strong eye for composition but lacked the instinctive sense of which angles to use for which moment in the narrative. I had learned how to draw the viewer's eye to certain things in a certain order, but I had never been given the control of exactly what the viewer sees at a given moment. Additionally, I felt as though I had no idea

how long to hold a particular shot. One must utilize cuts to keep visual interest but not employ them so often as to appear frenetic. Finally, I was unfamiliar with working cuts around and within lines of dialogue, a prominent element in my film.

I also knew that as I would be working with a physical camera, there were logistics for which I could not account ahead of time. For example, I might not have the clearance to fit the camera in a certain position and thus might have to use an entirely different camera angle than planned for a given shot.

The first iteration of my animatic consisted mostly of extreme close-ups, where the character's face filled most of the screen. But these angles are intended to be used only sparingly, for moments of high drama in a script.

It proved crucial to have my advisor for this stage of work. His experience in filmmaking, cooler head, and outsider perspective allowed him to see clearly what would work best. Over the course of several weeks, he tirelessly worked with me to find the shots that would place emphasis where it was needed at a specific time. He helped me to see cuts as a tool for better storytelling.

The other element that proved helpful in choosing shots was creating a rudimentary plasticine clay model of my characters and their locations in relation to one another. This way, I could test potential angles by viewing the scene through my camera in real space. It also provided a reference that informed my drawings. This is a great opportunity to assess whether the lens one plans to use will serve their purposes, such as providing the desired level of depth of field, or to test lighting and other elements ahead of even beginning fabrication.

As I learned from my advisor, I did weekly overhauls of my animatic, partly in anticipation of the upcoming Animatic Night.

ii. Animatic Night

Animatic Night is an event at the School of Film and Animation which occurs yearly and is aimed at providing multiple, diverse voices of feedback on an undergraduate student's capstone film animatic. The event is attended by undergraduate and graduate students as well as professors and is a marathon of the animatics created that semester by undergraduate students who are in their fourth and final or "capstone" year. Feedback on the animatic before animation begins is essential. For example, early feedback can encourage a student to adjust the timing of a scene for clarity or flow or even eliminate scenes that are narratively unnecessary, before the student spends great amounts of time completing polished animation for them. The feedback at this stage is comprised mainly of critique on story, pace, content and shot choice.

Graduate students are not required to participate but I knew that it would be a tremendous wasted opportunity to not gather fresh, outsider takes on my story and how effectively my animatic presented it. My advisors had presented excellent feedback, but they knew all the details of the story as well as my motivations and goals in choosing it. Those viewing my animatic on Animatic Night would be coming to it without any prior knowledge or prejudice.

A fellow grad student noted that he enjoyed the character of Molly but wished her eccentricity was pushed further. He suggested she physically interact with the dead bird, peanut, and earthworms, holding them and having conversations with them. One professor said that I was staying on the same shot too long and indeed I was, at that time, struggling with how long to spend on each shot. Finally, the head of the animation program said that if the film was going to be driven by dialogue, it should be heavier in dialogue than it was at the time. With this critique

as well as the continued feedback of my primary advisor, I continued to hone my story and animatic.

I did not intend to spend the entire semester fine-tuning my script and animatic but I knew that the story behind a film is the last thing on which to cut corners in the interest of time. By the end of that semester, my advisor said that I had made noticeable progress in my animatic in shot choices and staging. That is one of the pieces of positive feedback from the production of my film that I still cherish.

iii. Fabrication

Between honing the details of the story, going through the majority of an ultimate 26 edits of the animatic and my work as a graduate assistant in the office of the School of Film and Animation, I had little time left for fabrication. Further, I was invested in the story I was telling but as a life-long visual artist, my primary concern was the look of my film. And so, I felt an overwhelming pressure, though largely self-imposed, to produce professional-quality hand-made puppets, props, and sets. Compounding these nearly unattainable standards was the lengthy list of all that had to be fabricated for the film. I had certainly met my goal of planning a fabrication-heavy film. But as this was both my specialty and what I wanted to showcase in the film, I resolved to take no help from anyone else in constructing all assets.

And so, I had much to do in the realm of fabrication yet lacked great deals of time and energy left for it. I additionally had a significant amount of engineering to do, primarily for the functioning of the puppets, and many of the most crucial choices required more research into the

solutions of other independent animators. Being incredibly overwhelmed and intimidated slowed my progress to small steps and perfectionism resulted in backtracking on some of those steps.

By the end of the semester, I presented my committee a finalized script, animatic with scratch sound, and 2-dimensional concept art. I had completed two to-scale maquettes of each character as well as a set of twelve head sculptures of different styles for each character, all hand-sculpted in Monster Clay. I presented three partially completed build-up puppets, which had turned out to be too small for facial animation but were worthy exercises nonetheless. I had examples of experiments in setting spherical ceramic beads as eyes into a sort of skull, around which I could construct the heads and faces of the puppets, perhaps in latex. Having had no instruction on how to do this, the experiments proved to be informative but were overall unsuccessful. The mechanics of the puppets' heads, despite ample research on other animators' solutions, remained my largest and most daunting logistical challenge at that point. The puppet heads would need eyes that could blink via replacement or manipulation and some sort of system for replacement mouths or jaws, to function for lip sync. I additionally presented detailed plans for set design and leads on voice actors for the narration and dialogue for the film.

I knew at that point that rushing the remainder of fabrication in order to begin shooting in January could be done but the film would greatly suffer for it. That was not something I was willing to accept. So, I requested to register for Continuation of Thesis for the upcoming spring semester and complete my Research and Thesis II term in the fall.

I spent my second semester at work bringing an Elliott puppet to completion but again, it proved too small for lip sync. I did end up using it in the film but decided to make one more Elliott. I used what I had learned in the construction of the smaller puppet, applying that practice and wisdom to making a final one which, at nearly twelve inches tall, was significantly larger

than usual size for a stop motion puppet. This size gave me a puppet head that was roughly size of a plum, allowing for intricate manipulation of the paper mouths and clay eyebrows I would ultimately use to animate his face. (See vi. Final Puppets for details on puppet construction)

I also completed considerable work on props for the film, again doing much trial and error with various materials and techniques but finding, in the end, workable solutions for what I needed. It was also in this semester that I recorded the voice work for my film.

iv. Voice Recording

Back in the planning stages, the choice to have dialogue in my film was scary for a number of reasons. It would mean adding lip sync, another layer of complexity, to animation that was already going to challenge and frustrate me. It would mean I would have to find, direct, and record voice actors; children, most likely. That would be a whole series of uncomfortable interactions. I would also have to ask someone for help with the recording process. Those audio clips would probably need extra mixing by someone else. I am not one to ask for help. And finally, I would be handing a large portion of the performance to my voice actors. I have seen student films with unconvincing actors or voice actors. I find it a huge distraction and am unable to suspend my disbelief.

To make matters worse, I would be employing children as my voice actors. The chances were higher that they would not understand the story and might not give the intonation and energy I had imagined for the characters. For example, the character of Molly was considerably sassy. I needed a voice actress that could give genuine-sounding attitude. Lines like “Watch it, dorkwad!” had to have punch to them.

I feel that even if puppets are animated beautifully, a lack-luster voice track can render the performance mediocre. The voice is such a huge part of the performance and it can feel scary to hand over part of the performance to someone else. But I forged ahead.

In my first semester, I had begun searching for a female voice actress to play the part of Molly. It might have been possible to record someone of my own age and alter the pitch of the recording to make it sound like a child's voice, but even if done well, it might not have been convincing. I figured that there was really no replacement for the voice and intonation of an actual child. The student-run film organization at the School of Film and Animation offered me a few headshots of young girls but it was ultimately another student who referred me to a young girl named Maya Jaouen. The student spoke highly of Maya's father, Patrick, who was invaluable in directing Maya, and gave me their contact information. Luckily, Maya had a brother Ethan of about the same age. So, I had both of my voice actors and could record them both in the same session.

I had taken the Basic Sound class but did not have the confidence to execute a recording session on my own. Fellow student and sound engineer Matt Ansini was happy to assist. Yet even with help on the technical end, recording voice actors, particularly children, was a daunting task. I worried that they wouldn't understand what I was going for, not give the intonation I needed, be miserable, be difficult to work with, any number of concerns. This is where Patrick, Maya and Ethan's father, saved the day. I had not met the children prior to the session and had no rapport with them, no semblance of a relationship to build upon in asking them for what I needed. I had communicated with them only via emails with their father. But Patrick was by each child's side as they read through the of lines. Patrick understood the tone of the film instantly and

barely ever needed to ask my intention with a specific line. He encouraged each child to do several takes of each line and limit fidgeting that could be picked up by the microphone.

Most of the jokes in the script went above the heads of the children. They were puzzled by how weird the two characters were and why I would want to have weird characters. One or two of the words in the script were difficult for the children. If you listen for it, you can hear in the line where Molly mentions her "artisan" tea that the voice actress was unfamiliar with that word. It was more difficult to get a performance out of Ethan. I ended up with less material to work with from him but Elliott, his character, had a small share of dialogue anyway. Maya nailed Molly's attitude in a few of the lines and that not only delighted me but inspired me to do my best to make this film stellar, in order to do justice to her outstanding performance. I was initially unsure about using the line, "Watch it, dorkwad!" but hearing Maya nail the inflection convinced me that I had to get it in the film.

With voice recording out of the way, I cut up and organized the voice clips, amassed all of the sound effect and ambient noise clips I would need for the film, mostly from Sound Snap's website, and assembled them into a rough scratch track for the most current edit of my animatic. It was a relief to have a handle on the sound portion of my film, an element of the film that was intimidating in that I did not feel qualified to do the bulk of the work (though I ultimately did) and had little sense of how long and how much research and self-teaching each portion of work would take.

v. Fall 2018- Set and Setbacks

At the end of the summer, I was told that the space that was going to be set aside for me was no longer available, the result of some miscommunication. The new building for Film and Animation was still under construction. I considered renting a garage at my apartment complex, but that space would not have enough power, if any at all, for all of the shooting equipment. John Vincent, one of my committee members, offered to lend a space in his studio to me. Luckily, I was ultimately saved by the management at the new animation and gaming building, who gladly offered one of the brand-new stop motion studios to me.

The only problem with that space was that there was nothing in it. No computer, camera, lights or even a table. So, I purchased my own tables, camera, camera connections, power source, and lens, and used my own Dragonframe keypad. The only thing left was the lights. I was under the assumption that I would be able to rent them from the existing pool owned by the School of Film and Animation.

That turned out to not be true. In the end of August, a set of ARRI 150 lights and a softbox light were ordered for me. It was days before the start of the semester, but I figured I should have them soon. That was not the case.

Meanwhile, the sets came together quite organically and quickly. I was very proud of how they turned out and the facilities and management employees in the new film, animation, and game design building enjoyed being able to show off my sets and shooting space to visitors, offering outsiders a peek into how the brand new spaces were being utilized by students as well as the kind of work the students were doing. During building open house events, I was asked to present my space and work to visitors, explaining the stop motion filmmaking process and how I

was approaching it. The positive feedback I received on my set, puppets, and animation fueled me to keep pushing myself to make the best film possible.

Each of two large sets spanned eight by five feet. I believed that it would be most efficient in terms of time and workload as well as most clean and professional in aesthetic to use dollhouse kits for the houses that would line the side of the suburban street on which Molly was hosting her tea party. As I only needed the façade of the houses, dollhouses were a perfect solution.

Each kit came with loose pieces of wood that I sanded, primed, painted, and assembled. Each roof tile on each house had to be stained and individually attached to the roof. I then applied dry brushing to each assembled house for a weathered effect and dressed them with moss, dirt, and other foliage. The first of the eventual four dollhouse kits I purchased took a month to construct and unfortunately ended up being far too large to be used. The title card for the film features a close-up shot of it.

I constructed thirty trees from sticks to which I attached old bed pillow polyester filling. I spray painted the polyester batting with various shades of green and applied loose foliage fibers of many varieties purchased from a model train hobby store. As planned, I was able to reuse the same trees in both the first set, the funeral located by a wooded area, and the second, the suburban street with houses.

The plan was to shoot, complete, and screen my film in the fall of 2018. But I still had no lights with which to shoot. I was assured every time that I asked that the lights ordered for me would be arriving soon. I learned that it may take weeks for RIT to approve the purchase and additional weeks for the lights to arrive, then still more time to be processed by the school and signed out to me. I asked about renting lights from the School of Film and Animation as I waited

for the new ones to come in but was turned away twice, told that there would be a noticeable difference in my final film as I switched from the set of rented lights to the ordered lights.

By the end, I received my lights in week seven of a fourteen-week semester. This made it almost impossible to set up, do tests, animate, switch sets, animate more, then complete post-production all in the remaining weeks. Given this situation, I accepted an "Incomplete" for the semester, planning to re-take Research and Thesis II in the spring.. I did not care that it affected my graduation date or that I would have to pay for another semester. I cared about the quality of this film. I saw this film as my potential ticket to a career that had a strong chance of being more fulfilling than my other options. This film was a chance to prove that upending my life to move to another state and attend graduate school was not a mistake. Taking another semester would mean going further into student loan debt but I accepted that consequence, as well. I regretted dragging my committee through yet another semester when they had originally signed up for the standard two, but I tried not to focus on that guilt. Perhaps a better film on my part would reflect more positively on them, in the long run. Although I knew that I would pay in more ways than just monetarily for this decision, I wagered that it was worth it.

vi. The Final Puppets

My research has shown that build up puppets constructed over a wire armature are generally suitable for a short film. It seems only in the production of feature length films or films requiring extensive amounts of intricate movement where one might benefit from a ball and socket armature and/or silicone cast puppet body. Indeed, the wire armature puppets worked out well for me. I had no breakage whatsoever.

The puppets I used for all but one shot of my film stood about twelve inches tall, with heads roughly the size of plums. This is larger than most stop motion puppets but suited my needs as I was going to be doing a good deal of lip sync and facial animation. Elliott's puppet eventually grew even taller than twelve inches. He spends much of the film seated with his knees up to his chest and I was not pleased with where his knees fell when in that position when he had legs that were proportionate to his body, so I extended his legs. Fortunately, his costume is a coat that falls about halfway down to his shin, which allowed me to conceal half of that leg length inside the coat, which made him look proportional when standing.

Both puppets were constructed using a build-up technique. I layered thin polyurethane foam on top of the wood, wire, and epoxy putty armatures and hand sewed the costumes directly onto their bodies. I had no patterns for the costumes or experience in making costumes. I simply worked piece by piece, figuring it out as I went with trial and error. I tried to consider where seamlines fall on human clothes as well as where I could place seams to be out of view of the camera. I figured that having seams on either side of a puppet's arm could add bulk where I wanted a slim look. So, I endeavored to have a single seam in the arms that ran down the back of the arm, over the elbow. For certain shots, I was able to rotate the cuffs of the sleeves to nudge a seam out of view of the camera.

Both sets of feet had tie-downs accessible from both the top and bottom of the toe and the remaining portion of the feet were coated in latex which I had colored with acrylic paint. This allowed the feet to be flexible in the way that human feet are, especially at the half-way point between the toe and heel. Both puppets' hands had wire and epoxy putty armatures which were dipped in thick mold-making latex colored with acrylic paint. Of all the silicone puppet hands cast from a mold that I had seen, it was only the professionally produced ones that looked clean.

Those made by independent artists and students appeared, to me, chunky with inconsistent coloration and unsightly seamlines left by the mold-making process. I happened to come across some thick latex and experimentation with dipping wire hands into it proved successful in producing smooth, seamless hands. I could vary the thickness of the hands and fingers by the number of dips. I made over 18 individual hands for Molly. Earlier versions of the puppets allowed for the replacement of hands, but a single set for each puppet lasted for the entirety of the film.

Both puppet heads began with cherry-sized balls of epoxy putty on reinforced wire. I then built layers of aluminum foil over that epoxy putty ball to build up mass without the excessive weight a solid polymer clay head would have had, weight that would stress the neck, back, and legs of the puppet. I applied Super Sculpey polymer clay on top of the aluminum foil, shaped it, and baked the heads. I used acrylic paint to paint the heads, finding that a dabbing motion with a make-up sponge, at least for the base coats, produced a complexion-like texture as opposed to the brushstrokes that might have resulted from using thick bodied paint and a paint brush. I was conscious of minute facial details like texture as I anticipated many close-up shots in high definition resolution.

My original solution for eye animation was using tape as stickers, overlaying layers on top of layers to close and open the eyelids but that technique was frustrating and overly time-consuming. Removing sticky closed eyelids often also removed the half-closed eyelids and the pupils underneath.

Instead, I acquired rare earth magnets that were about 2mm in diameter. I dug cavities into the eye sockets of both puppets and inlaid the magnets with epoxy glue. I painted over these inlaid magnets to seal and conceal them. To create the eyes that would attach to the face, I placed

plastic wrap over the eye socket and dropped a magnet, allowing it to line up as it pleased with the magnet already inlaid in the eye socket. I then took a carefully proportioned bit of Sculpey clay and pressed it on top of that magnet, carefully smoothing the clay ball out to the diameter and shape that filled the eye cavity as I saw fit. I then grabbed the plastic wrap and pulled up to remove the clay eye with its magnet in place. Once baked, I had an eye that, when placed near the eye socket, magnetically matched up exactly where it needed to be aligned. I coated the eyes in white nail polish for a glossy effect then painted eyelids and eyelashes as desired. Each puppet had four pairs of eyes- one set wide open in surprise, one set with eyelids in a relaxed position, one half-closed, and one fully closed. For pupils, I acquired a set of paper hole punches (hand cutting resulted in imperfect circles) and punched out rice paper circles, applying them to the eye and moving them around with Vaseline.

It is helpful for a puppet that will sustain a great deal of facial manipulation to have hard hair. The fluffier the hair, the more it will move during animation and cause the sort of "boiling" effect seen in Wes Anderson's The Fantastic Mr. Fox. Elliott's hair is the same Super Sculpey polymer clay as the rest of his head. I placed the clay on a hard surface and brushed it with a wire brush then applied that textured piece to his head before baking. Molly's hair is synthetic doll hair that I applied then styled and coated with an acrylic gloss medium, to hold it in place and render it hard. I experimented with combing silicone into the hair, as was done in several Laika films but the gloss medium proved superior, in my case, to both silicone and white glue (which left a visible residue).

After surveying several examples of artist and studio work for puppet lip sync, techniques such as 2-dimensional mouths drawn in during post-production, replaceable jaws, replaceable mouths (similar to Aardman's approach), frame-by-frame sculpting of a clay mouth, and the use

of replaceable paper mouths, I decided that the paper mouth technique looked the most clean. It seemed that unless replaceable jaws and replaceable mouths were being implemented by a professional studio, there was a considerable amount of chatter, which I usually find distracting. Though I made my puppet mouths as minimalistic as possible, eliminating lips and limiting the amount of teeth and bright red tongue, the aesthetic of the mouths themselves did not quite match up with the aesthetic of my puppets but that was a small matter.

For the lip sync technique itself, I took the advice of a YouTube stop motion artist and tried using repositionable glue sticks to adhere the mouths to the puppets' faces. This technique did not work well for me. The mouths were difficult to move once placed, the technique was messy and there was a residue of discolored glue that built up and got stuck to the face of the puppet and to the mouths themselves. I was worried that if I should use Vaseline instead, any remaining on the face of the puppet would catch the light, looking wet, but it didn't seem to be an issue. But I also frequently dusted the faces of the puppets with translucent white make-up powder to keep them matte and perhaps lend a skin-like texture.

I found that inkjet printer paper and thicker drawing paper, though perhaps more durable, did not hold to the curvature of Elliott's face. The corners of the mouths would curl up off of the surface of the face. One might think that if a mouth is there for only one frame, it might not matter but those curling edges create shadows, which distort the shape of the mouth. I found it apparent in the footage. It was unfortunate that I could not use inkjet paper, as it would have been easy to produce more mouths. I could simply make several color photo-copies of my original. I ended up using mouths I had individually hand-painted onto thin rice paper.

In my studies, I encountered warning after warning about the fragility of puppets. Tutorials suggested engineering the puppets so that they were able to be easily repaired. These

tutorials, books, and articles promised that puppets would break in the course of filming, parts like hands first. So, I began by engineering my puppets to have replaceable hands and limbs that could be opened and repaired internally. But by the end of my film, my puppets, even though their armatures were simple wire frames and not ball and socket structures, had not broken whatsoever. Both had their original set of hands. Molly's were dirty from handling dirt but the fingers had not come loose (I specifically formed the wire inside to keep the fingers interconnected and less likely to come loose or snap off). The latex had stood up to abuse. The only difference in either puppet that I noticed was that Molly's neck had started to loosen up. This was not surprising because while I had made the internal structure of the neck strong, Molly's head ended up heavier than I had intended and she was the main character, requiring the most animation, including the most head movements. I was proud of how well my puppets stood up to the filmmaking process though an argument could be made that the animation required of them was relatively low impact.

Overall, I was most intimidated by the task of making puppets for my film. More than any other element, they affect the final look of the film and I had little experience in making sculptures that had to be so functional- bending repeatedly but also needing to hold position and support their own body weight between movements. The puppets were also the first sculptures I had made that needed to be designed to allow for repair. But I learned an immense amount through research and simple trial and error experimentation. It is astounding to consider how cluelessly I began the effort and yet how confidently I can speak about puppet-making now. The aesthetic, quality, and durability of my puppets was one of the clear successes of my thesis filmmaking experience.

III. Production

Fairly early into my schooling at RIT, I found that I did not enjoy the process of animating as much as fabricating sculptures. Sculpting was a more creative endeavor and it was familiar. With sculpture, I could draw upon my knowledge of materials and techniques, there was room and need for experimentation, and it simply kept me engaged in a way that the laborious task of animation did not. Further, I was naturally good at fabrication and the positive reinforcement of being pleased with my creations motivated me to continue making. Animation, however, held my attention for only so long before I grew fatigued. The ratio of time spent working to output of length of footage was disheartening. Indeed, especially for a student still honing the craft and even at fifteen frames per second rather than the twenty-four frames that is standard for professional films, a four to five-hour session might yield only few seconds worth of footage. I was aware that this would be the case when I elected to pursue stop motion animation, but it was nevertheless deflating to experience firsthand.

Most frustrating to me was the fact that intelligence and a general understanding of both the basics of physics and the principles of good animation constituted only a part of what seemed required to be good at animating in stop motion form. Smooth, believable animation seemed to be largely the result of experience and an instinct that I felt that I lacked. Even with careful study of books, tutorials, and the work of other artists, my animation appeared unnatural, almost robotic. And when I fail to excel at a task, I have the tendency to begin over-thinking it and getting frustrated, which often compounds the problem.

Realizing that I disliked animating was uncomfortable, to say the least, while attending school for animation, but I eventually came to terms with it, telling myself that as with other

forms of animation in the industry, there is specialization. Unless the studio is very small, the same individual is not expected to make the assets as well as animate them. It was valuable, however, to have the experience of animating in stop motion because that knowledge informs my object making. Understanding the mechanics of the animation process would help me to engineer my assets in a way that makes the work of the animators easier and more efficient. Experiencing the task of animating also strengthened my identity as a fabricator.

Given my experience thus far, I dreaded, somewhat, having to actually begin shooting the film because I foresaw the amount of work, frustration, and potential disappointment that was ahead of me. But I had to finally make this film happen.

Shooting the film was a rushed and overwhelmingly stressful endeavor. I had the option to enlist help from peers in completing the work but was stubborn in wanting to complete it by myself. I was fixated on doing as much of the work of my thesis film on my own as possible because I thought that it would prove me more valuable to a potential employer. This is one of the things I regret most, in hindsight, as the film surely suffered for it.

Going into shooting, my initial shot list consisted of 64 shots, a number which was pared down over time to simplify and expedite the shooting process. I designed custom exposure sheets, which I would fill in prior to beginning to shoot a scene. My clips of dialogue were pre-cut, as were over a hundred hand-painted replaceable mouths. I used the slate on my animatic video to identify and mark down on my shot list the exact frame length of each shot and planned to animate that length as well as a "handle" of extra frames with a small amount of action on either end, to allow wiggle room in editing. As prepared as I felt I could be, I dove into filming.

i. The Process of Shooting

The process and workflow of shooting was still relatively new to me. For one thing, I had never extensively used an exposure sheet to assist myself in animation. An exposure sheet is a detailed chart planning key steps in animation, aimed to streamline the process and encourage the animator to focus on specific elements. The nature of animating in stop motion can necessitate using tools like this. To over-simplify a bit, if a 2-dimensional or 3-dimensional animator wants to make a ball complete an arc motion in the span of five frames, they can utilize "key frames," drawing or placing the ball at frames one, three, and five ahead of time. Frame one would be the ball at the start position, three would be the ball at the peak of its arc, and five would be the ending position. The animators then simply go back and fill in the frames in between, using, for example, frame one and frame three as a reference for where to draw the ball in frame two. Stop motion animators do not have the luxury of being able to attack animation this way. They must animate "straight ahead," without skipping frames or going back to previous ones. This makes it especially important to do as much planning as possible before starting. Exposure or "dope" sheets are the most tried and true method of planning ahead in stop motion animation.

Particularly for animating lip sync, it can be helpful to note at which frame certain key consonants or vowels hit, to better match up replacement mouths. In the past, I made brief notes in the digital dope sheet included within the Dragonframe Animation interface but especially considering the lip sync I needed to do, formalizing preparation for animation was key. And so, I began animating with diligent use of exposure sheets I generated for myself, customized to my needs. With dialogue, I always broke down the major points in each word within the

Dragonframe interface. Without Dragonframe's ability to break down audio frame by frame, this would not have been possible.

I originally intended to shoot the film at twenty-four frames per second, a rate standard within the industry that yields smoother motion, but considering the limited time in which I had to work and taking note that other students before me had shot at fifteen frames per second, I resolved to shoot at that frame rate. A lower frame rate such as this means that there are fewer images being flashed in front of the eye per second. This results in choppier-looking motion but I feel that within the first thirty seconds or so of a film, the eye seems to acclimate to it and it ceases to be a distraction. I also took note from YouTube videos by other animators that animating mouths and eyes on one's and head movements on two's seemed to work well so I employed this method. Indeed, making head movements on one's looked unnaturally frenetic in playback.

ii. Lip Sync

Lip syncing is the act of animating a puppet's mouth to match up with a recorded line of dialogue, making it appear that the puppet is talking. A common method is using replacement animation which means literally removing and replacing mouths of different shapes to match up with the syllables of the words being said. Puppets may have interchangeable jaws which snap into place, each with a mouth of a different shape or individual mouths which are placed directly onto the surface of the puppet's face; mouths often made of clay like in the Wallace and Gromit series by Aardman Animation, or paper mouths, as I chose to do.

As with animation itself, there is only so far one can go through research alone. Lip sync animation in the stop motion method is one of those ventures that simply requires experience to master. What seems at first overwhelming and confounding slowly begins to make sense and then becomes instinctual.

I believe that most people starting out in lip sync make the same mistake as when starting out in stop motion animation itself. There is a tendency to over-animate. In my first attempts with replacement paper mouths, I used a new mouth for nearly every frame and the result, when played back, was an unintelligible flurry of scribbles. I found that oftentimes a single mouth is held for more frames than seems logical. This is, in part, due to the fact that in normal speech, we do not over-annunciate every syllable. Consonants and vowels flow together, as do our mouth positionings. Only the most percussive consonant beats really stick out, causing a tell-tale drastic change in mouth positioning. So, much of planning to lip sync a line of dialogue is identifying at which frame those major consonant sounds hit and then filling in smooth transitions in between. It is important to identify where sounds like “F”, “M,” and “P” land as they accompany particularly characteristic mouth positionings. Nailing the timing of those mouths makes the lip sync instantly more believable.

I hand-painted over a hundred different mouths for my puppets but, in the end, ended up re-using the same 15 or fewer mouths, which differed only subtly from each other. In general, I wanted to keep the mouths for my puppets minimalistic rather than large, bright, and reminiscent of cartoons. So, aside from consonants that required a bit of teeth or tongue to show, I erred on the side of using simple solid black mouths. A helpful feature available within the Dragonframe Animation window interface is onion skin, the ability to see the last image captured superimposed over the current camera’s view. This is immensely helpful in keeping each mouth

in line with the previous. As I got the hang of certain parts of the shooting process, I found ways to be more efficient.

iii. Strategies for Efficient Shooting

I developed several strategies for streamlining my shooting both ahead of time and in the moment, as my remaining time began to dwindle.

I made changes to reduce the number of shots I had planned and even combine certain shots. Small portions of lines of dialogue played when the character was off screen, to save on lip sync work. I grouped my shooting schedule by camera angle, intending to shoot all of the shots of a given character from a specific view in a specific position at one time before moving the camera to shoot scenes at a different angle. As I completed shooting a scene, I dropped the video file or image into the final assembled file in After Effects, to help me gauge the flow of the narrative and identify areas that shortcuts could be made.

For many reasons, it might seem like a good strategy to save shooting the hardest, most complicated scenes for last but this approach can backfire as it allows a perfectionist like me to spend too long fixated on minor details in the small scenes they shoot first, scenes that are relatively inconsequential in the scope of the larger story. Then, as time begins to run out, the animator is rushed in filming those larger, more complex and narratively pivotal scenes, which require more time and intensive work anyway. This way, the scenes that need to be the strongest, fall flat. I believe that part of being efficient in any stage of the filmmaking process is recognizing which elements deserve careful, intensive work and which can pass with only broad strokes of development. For example, one could save time in adding high levels of detail to set

pieces that the camera lens's depth of field would render in soft focus anyway. Instead, that precious time could be spent in perfecting the animation, honing edits or mixing the final soundtrack for the film, elements of the film that stick out if left unpolished.

I had to make more shortcuts than I was comfortable with, but it seems like most students have to do so in the rush to complete the project. To the outsider, a year seems like more than enough time to make a three to four-minute short film. But, to the filmmaker, it seems not nearly enough when the film is animated and definitely not enough when the film carries the weight of being a thesis project. Given the pressure of this film being the thesis project, I think many students find, in hindsight, that they were over-ambitiousness in the planning stages. Between setting out an unrealistic amount of work for oneself and all the things that inevitably go wrong, the thesis experience often feels like a fight against time. But you certainly learn an incredible amount about the craft and even about yourself through such a tumultuos process.

iv. Camera, Software, Lighting and Equipment

I shot the film with a Canon EOS Rebel T3i DSLR or Digital Single Lens Reflex camera. Digital cameras contain a sensor which records image data in digital file format, as opposed to traditional film cameras which allow a photographic film to be exposed to light and thus capture information. Photographic film requires manual chemical processing after exposure to reveal the image that was captured. Early stop motion films were shot with film cameras, the greatest caveat being that the cinematographer had little idea of how the image would appear until after the motion picture was shot and the film was removed and developed through that chemical

process. With modern digital cameras, the filmmaker can see their images in real time as well as make drastic manipulations of the images on a computer.

A camera lens's focal length, ranging from 35mm to 400mm, determines the properties of the lens. Lenses of higher focal length can capture an image of an object in high focus from a great distance, while lenses on the lower end of the focal length spectrum are considered "wide" lenses and are ideal for accommodating more into the shot. For the purposes of a student stop motion film, a 35mm or 50mm lens is sufficient for even the entirety of the shoot.

Not planning on any special lens effects, I shot with a single Nikon 35mm lens, which I was able to acquire for $200. John Vincent, one of my stop motion instructors, had spoken about the advantages of using a Nikon lens with a Canon camera. The pairing required only a relatively inexpensive adapter ring. Nikon lenses were preferable for stop motion because Canon lenses have an iris mechanism that is at least partially automatic. This means that the iris can close in slightly different increments for each image the camera captures, exposing the sensor to a different amount of light. This results in a slightly different exposure, or brightness (more or less), in each image. It is a variation that is not problematic when one is taking still images that are intended to stand alone. But when multiple images are captured and played in succession, this small change in exposure from image to image can produce a flickering effect that is undesirable. Nikon lenses have a manual iris mechanism and therefore do not produce a flickering effect when an image sequence is played back. Their F-stop setting, however, must be adjusted manually, on the lens itself, rather than within the Dragonframe program.

After further research into camera exposure settings, I chose and remained at the same settings consistently throughout filming, as I did not want there to be detectable differences in exposure and other image qualities between shots in the film. The closest metaphor I can find for

explaining a digital camera's ISO, aperture, and shutter speed settings is the human eye and eyelid. Consider the camera's sensor (or what was physical photographic film in traditional exposure cameras) the retina, or image receiving and processing center at the back of the human eyeball. The aperture is like the eyelids, a set of blinds that can open narrowly or wide, letting varying amounts of light into the eye. A digital camera's F-stop setting determines the width of this aperture, thus restricting or increasing the flow of light into the sensor. I maintained a 5.6 F-stop setting for the entirety of the film.

Shutter speed is how long the camera's aperture, or eyelids, remains open, again determining the amount of light that is allowed to reach the sensor. I varied between a shutter speed of 1/13 and 1/15 of a second's exposure throughout the film, adjusting only if the scene required it in order to match exposure to previous scenes that I had shot.

ISO, another camera setting, stands for the International Organization of Standardization, a group that regulates standards of camera sensor sensitivity (Carver). So, the ISO setting of a digital camera determines the sensitivity of the sensor itself. A standard setting for ISO is 100. For conditions of extremely low light, one might increase the ISO setting by a few hundred points, however, this can cause the resulting image to degrade, to appear grainy. My own experiences in digital photography told me to avoid adjusting the ISO setting unless totally necessary and further research corroborated that view.

Simply put, depth of field is a measure of how much of a scene is in focus. I was pleasantly surprised by the ample depth of field the 35mm lens provided in my shots. I was able to focus the camera in high detail on Molly's face, as seen from over Elliott's shoulder, which was in soft focus. Though it might seem undesirable to have any part of a scene out of focus, it is, in fact, aesthetically pleasing and encourages the viewers to focus on a point of particular

interest in the scene. In this case, the fabric of Elliott's shoulder is in the foreground of the shot, thus begging attention but the viewer's eye needs to be drawn, instead, to Molly's facial expressions so a soft focus on the fabric material and sharp, clear focus on Molly's face is ideal.

With this lens, I only encountered a few instances where the movement of the puppet or object along the Z-axis, which is to say directly toward or away from the face of the lens, caused the object to come out of focus. I had no solution for this but to adjust the focus incrementally with each frame, which is somewhat detectable in the final footage. Molly's face came out of focus slightly in one or more clips focused on her where, seated, she lunges toward the camera. Those shots were a show of her character acting and included lip sync so the last thing I wanted was a loss of focus on her face. Perhaps, had I shot these scenes again, a change of lens or adjustment of the positioning of the camera itself could have alleviated the issue.

I had never worked with a manual lens on a digital camera before. So I was not aware of Dragonframe's difficulty in accommodating for them. I was surprised to find that the so-called "video assist" image offered within the Dragonframe interface was of extremely low-quality resolution. The video assist image is a live view, essentially a live video feed, of what the camera is currently seeing. It is never of the high quality that a captured JPEG image will be but offers enough quality to make adjustments to elements like lighting and focus.

The image was nearly pitch black until I made adjustments to over-expose it and contained an extreme amount of "noise". Therefore, I could not see if my subject was in focus or get a preliminary read on my lighting. I had to, instead, take hundreds of test shots, making small adjustments after one image before capturing the next in order to adjust my lighting and focus the camera. This was workable but slowed my set-up significantly

In terms of software, the only program I had ever used indicated specifically for stop motion was Dragonframe. There are numerous free and low-cost alternatives but Dragonframe is the gold standard and is used in the industry unless a particular studio has developed their own proprietary software. It, by far, offers the most capabilities and assistive features. I purchased my own license and used the wired keypad which came with it to shoot more efficiently. If I were to repurchase the package, I would invest the extra bit of money in the Bluetooth keypad as I found the wired version somewhat limiting. I had something of a short leash on which to operate despite having to shoot in various different positions around the set, sometimes a distance from the computer itself. For previous films, I had imported image sequences into Adobe After Effects to be edited together but given the greater size and complexity of this film, I chose to export video files from Dragonframe in addition to the image sequences and import the video clips into After Effects for editing. For light cutting of audio clips, I utilized Adobe Audition and for the voice recording session, Pro Tools 12. I considered shooting Camera RAW image files for the still shots on which I would be doing compositing work but having grown frustrated with After Effects drastically slowing down to accommodate the size of RAW images before, I opted for the highest quality JPEGs. The final film was to be compressed to some extent, anyway.

For equipment, I used a set of three ARRI 150 lights and one ARRI soft box light, which is a light attached to the ceiling that is encased in a white plastic film box and offers a softened, all over sunlight-like effect. It has a wattage around 650. The aim was originally to mimic natural sunlight during the tea party and late afternoon/dusk light for the funeral scene however I caught myself spending too long experimenting with lighting, even though, in my experience, lighting can make a huge difference to the overall aesthetic of a film. I tried different amounts and grades of scrims for the 150-watt lights, tested their flood versus spot settings, experimented with

multiple layers of film and even polyester batting over the soft box light, angled the smaller lights down low to mimic a setting sun as seen through the trees, and placed white foam core just out of frame to bounce light to the underside of the puppet's faces, especially since shadows around their chins could obscure the lip sync I was so carefully executing. Ultimately, I stopped trying to mimic a specific time of day and focused instead on simply making sure the scene was well and evenly lit.

VI. Post-Production

I worked to minimize the amount of post-production work I had to do as fabrication and animation consumed most of the time I had. I am also not well versed in in-depth color correction as it is not typically taught to stop motion students at our school. I know only the basics such as exposure, brightness, contrast, hue, and temperature. However, I had been very conscientious about my lighting during shooting and felt that my final shots were well lit and certainly passable in terms of color, if a bit cooler in tone than I ideally would have preferred. A warming of the skin tones certainly would have been nice but was not necessary and the film's colors and exposure would manifest differently when projected onto a screen than when being displayed on a monitor, anyway. I did not have access to the new color correction suite in the building in which I was shooting. Accurate and professional level color correction requires the use of a specialized suite with calibrated monitors such as that one.

During shooting, I continually referenced images from previous scenes when setting up new ones, comparing the JPEGs of the completed shot to test shots of the current one, assuring consistency in exposure, partly as I was running out of time to match those adjustments in post-

production following the shoot. Even in the early stages of pre-production, I made a mental note to do as much work in-camera as possible. I preferred to spend more time adjusting lighting and camera settings before shooting as opposed to relying on post-production fixing of inconsistencies because unless I was working with a Camera RAW image in its specialized editor, every adjustment to a digital image has the potential to degrade the quality of that image. I far preferred to maintain consistency in my shots during the shooting process in the first place rather than having to correct deviations after the fact.

I had already completed the compositing work I needed to do and made corrections to minor continuity issues like occasional shadow flickers in between sessions of shooting scenes. I had also assembled my credits sequence ahead of time so that simply needed to be dropped into the master file with the rest of the project.

I had assistance in the final mixing of my soundtrack from a student at RIT who had advertised his sound mixing services. I had the lines of dialogue cut and placed along with all the necessary sound effects and ambient noise into the timeline. Arthur Tisseront simply did some final fine-tuning and adjusting of levels. The audio and video for the film were all assembled in Adobe After Effects.

Despite having to cut some animation, it was very important to me that I caption my film. I feel strongly that every film that screens at the School of Film and Animation should be captioned. RIT and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf are one and there's a large deaf and hard of hearing population in Rochester. Moreover, we have students in our program that need captions to enjoy a film. And even if we didn't, it is not okay to exclude an entire demographic of people from enjoying a film. I had to teach myself how to caption a film in After

Effects and experienced some unexplained difficulty but completed the task and submitted the final film for screenings.

VII. Evaluation and Feedback

The film screened in the new state-of-the-art theater on campus on the last day of the screenings schedule in May of 2019, before an audience comprised of the majority of the professors of the School of Film and Animation as well as many of the undergraduate and graduate students. This first screening was the more formal of the two screenings and where I would receive feedback from my professors and peers. My film screened a second time, at a later date, for the parents of graduating students. This second screening was more informal, a courtesy screening for the parents who came to campus for graduation yet missed the initial screenings of thesis films.

One or two lines of dialogue received a subtle audible reaction from the audience as the film played at the formal screening, so I felt assured that some of the humor of my story was resonating. The audience at the informal screening was much more audibly reactive and really seemed to enjoy the character of Molly. One or two audience members from the informal screening found me afterward to tell me of how much they enjoyed her character. It is possible that that audience seemed to enjoy the story more because they were not viewing it with the critical eye that my professors and peers were in the initial, formal screening. The audience at the informal screening was not tasked with providing constructive feedback for the film so they were

not assessing the film's performance and looking for areas of improvement. They were simply there to enjoy it.

It was rather surreal to see my film on such a large screen, the audio playing back through such a sound system. I even had a moment of pride, admiring the look of the film.

For the formal screening, I was required to give an artist's statement. As it was to be a summation of my intentions in making the film and my feelings regarding the process and resulting piece, I had been writing portions of it since the earliest stages of development of my film. But they were somewhat disjointed fragments and I was conflicted as to what I should focus on. I wanted to be professional but also to be honest. A massive part of my experience in making the film was my continued struggle with mental illness, which was debilitating and continues, even now, to color my view of the film I ultimately created.

I am unsure if I will ever be able to view the piece with clear eyes. I was then and am still inclined, when viewing it, to see only the areas where I feel that I failed. In terms of conveying the story I set out to tell, the film is complete. The entirety of the content of the script is there. The film simply has two shortcuts where characters are off-screen during a line of dialogue because I ran out of time to animate the character lip syncing that line. So, the film is narratively complete. There is no missing plot information, however, I personally considered the film an unfinished project simply in that I planned to go back and do that bit of color correction, adjust the alignment of the captions, animate those two lines, and maybe make a few other adjustments.

In that sense, I was presenting a piece of work with which I was not finished. It had not been completed significantly ahead of time and polished before being submitted for screening. I, perhaps erroneously, conflated this to a failure. And a failure on an immensely important project.

Further, I had struggled to meet deadlines, and, in my view, had asked too much and been too great a burden on my advisor and committee.

So, I went into that screening defeated and, quite frankly, consumed by disappointment in myself. But I was fighting to convince myself that there was reason to be proud of myself and proud of parts of the film. I tried to focus on all that I had learned in the process, how bravely I had ventured into unknown territory again and again, all of the research and hard work that I did, and the great many things I had taught myself to do. But my artist's statement came out somewhat jumbled and distorted my message, making it sound like my film was actually unfinished in that it was missing content and that I learned so little in the stop motion classes I took that I had to teach myself practically everything.

In terms of critique at that formal screening, the film received limited commentary, perhaps because the miscommunication on my behalf in my artist's statement had a chilling effect or simply because it was the last day of screenings so attendance was low and people were fatigued of viewing so much content in so short a period of time.

I believe a professor complimented my characters and the look of the film. Another professor asked about my reasoning for including captions and was pleased with my justification of wanting to be as inclusive as possible. Of course, I wish there was more feedback and that it was more thorough, but I accept the input that I did receive. I agreed with and learned from the critiques I received on both Animatic Night and at thesis screenings.

Over the course of the entire filmmaking process, I received the most praise and most consistently positive and encouraging feedback from visitors to my studio. They were impressed by the scale, detail, and realism of my sets and fascinated by the workings of my puppets. Most at least smiled when hearing my summation of the story and seemed to enjoy the bits of

animation I had to show. These were people from outside of the animation world, but their approval was still encouraging. I still carry with me the input from a scriptwriting professor that I "may have something here" with my story. This makes me feel like I might be a good originator and judge of story, even if I am still learning how best to tell them. I value that my advisor said I made progress with my animatic. This makes me feel that even if I am new to something, I can learn quickly and well. Critique throughout the process of creating any form of art is essential to the final strength and success of the piece. Artists simply can not see their work from the perspective of other people and so even the most seasoned of creators must remember to seek out feedback wherever and whenever possible.

VIII. Conclusion: My Reflections

Having the benefit of time between me and those emotionally excruciating final weeks of production and screening as well as the perspective of somewhat fresh eyes on the film itself, there is more clarity in my view of my thesis film now. I can more readily see and appreciate the strengths of my film and can put in perspective the areas in which I could have done better.

The measure of a successful student film could be a matter of interpretation. At the most base level, I wanted to make a film that was not only understandable to an audience, but enjoyable as well. For my own sake, I needed to feel that I was putting out into the world a story that was unique, unexpected, and had meaning. As a visual artist, I always made work that had meaning to me but had no say in whether the viewers found their own meaning in the piece. With film, I cannot just hope the audience finds meaning. I have to strive to make it happen. With an artwork

in a gallery, the viewer can just move on to the next piece if the first doesn't speak to them. With film, the audience is investing time in my work and so I felt the need to give them something deeper and more meaningful, a story about grief and needing connection. A story that starts in tragedy but takes an unexpected turn into the whimsical and finally concludes in a moment of connection for two souls needing it most.

I wanted to use the medium of animation to best create this experience for my viewers. I think the bright aesthetic of my film tempered the dark subject matter the film begins upon and gave an upbeat, energetic feeling to the entire story. With the ability to decide on every single element of my character's designs, I could draw contrast between the two characters. Molly's attire was for spring, with soft lavenders and pink tulle, purple hair. Elliott's clothing was for the deep of winter, of mourning, with a long overcoat obscuring most of his body and a hood and scarf wrapping his head. With stop motion animation, I could exaggerate the character performance of my puppets to create a stronger emotional punch for the audience. Even if animated two-dimensionally, much less filmed in live action, my film would not have the same feel. I believe that it is most successful in animated form, stop motion particularly.

I wanted to make the most visually appealing film that I could. And of all parts of my film, I am most pleased with the final look. Some of my sets are downright beautiful. The dollhouses lent a level of professionalism and my puppets were cleanly constructed and engaging. Molly's puppet, for one thing, makes people smile. They already like her character, just seeing her puppet.

I am also proud of the story I constructed. Every time I summarized my story for someone who inquired, I received a positive response. They found it an unexpected and yet endearing and novel tale to tell. The clever bits of dialogue came rather effortlessly to mind for

me and I still smile at Molly's best moments of sass. I so enjoyed Molly that I made an additional video compilation of her best moments, which I have posted online alongside the film itself. Audience members have come up to me after screenings to share how much they enjoyed her character. I wrote the story and the characters on my own, with only slight direction given to me by my influencing works. And though influenced by Adam Elliott's work, I think my story ended up its own, not too derivative of his style.

The obvious area of improvement for my film is the quality of the animation. While I feel that I got a good handle on lip sync over time, the bodily movement of the puppets is, at times, robotic. I can attribute the robotic movement partially to the film being shot at fifteen frames per second but indeed, I have a journey ahead of me in relation to animation skills.

I wanted to tell a story that resonated with me, one that spoke from my experience (as those are, I find, the strongest stories) and helped me to release some of the weight I had been carrying. And I hoped to make a film that stays with the viewer even after it is over. I wanted to make a film that spoke to the outcasts and those that feel alone and unwanted by others. I wanted the audience to laugh and fall in love with my characters. I hoped that they would appreciate the charm and potential of stop motion animation and look to support the production of future stop motion films on student and major production levels. It is the fans that truly keep this art alive. Without support, stop motion would become a lost art.

Ultimately, the project is a success. I made a short film, from conception of the original idea to production and finally, screening the film before an audience. I had positive reactions and feedback from audience members, peers, and advisors throughout the process. I am very proud of parts of it and recognize that other parts could have been stronger. I used the medium of stop

motion animation to effectively communicate complex concepts like loss and need in an aesthetically pleasing and entertaining way.

I will never fully know what did or didn't resonate for its audience but as a capstone to three years of graduate school in a field I had never before explored, it is something. It says that I have come far from knowing only object-making, and it proves my potential in this new landscape.

Overall, I've learned many lessons in terms of working with various materials and animating but most of all, I've learned through perhaps somewhat self-inflicted adversity how to handle a life-consuming daunting project whilst struggling, psychologically. This task seemed insurmountable at every point in its production, even as it was finally coming together. But I've learned how to work around my shortcomings and finally emerge with a completed film.

Beyond screenings at RIT, I may submit the film to various film festivals. Ultimately, my main goal is to get my work out there, to hopefully be in consideration for a career position in the field. As that is my real, final goal, we have yet to see if and where this completed project takes me.

This experience yielded an enjoyable short film that entertained audiences and inspired other artists. It has made me stronger, taught me how to work around adversity, shown me how far I've come but also how far I still need to go and fueled me in knowing that I have potential in storytelling and fabrication. It was the largest undertaking of my life and will be a springboard toward new heights in my future.

IX. Appendix

Molly & Elliott

(working title)
A stop-motion animation

Allison Zelle

Thesis Proposal
For MFA in Film and Animation
School of Film and Animation
Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York
April, 2017

Approved for Submission by:

Peter Murphey, Thesis Chair
4/5/17

Allison Zelle
Advisor: Peter Murphey

LOGLINE:

A quirky, fiercely independent young girl comes to accept a peculiar boy as her first real friend.

TREATMENT:

A male, British narrator introduces a young female character, Molly, by describing her peculiarities. She has a unique birthmark and muddy grey eyes. She has no friends except for her pet earthworm. Molly's mother said that they could not have a dog or a cat because Molly is allergic. But Molly is not allergic. Her mother is too busy to pay much attention to her so Molly has become independent out of necessity. She is nine years old and accustomed to being the strange one at school.

The narrator then introduces a young boy of the same age as Molly. His name is Elliott, he is very quiet and he just recently lost his mother. He tries to cling to any last memory of her. His father couldn't live in that house without her so he and Elliott moved to Molly's street.

It is spring and Elliott is dressed for winter. Distraught over the recent loss of his mother and caught up in the business of moving, Elliott quite literally stumbles upon Molly. The narration ends at this point but the action continues. Elliott is too shy and too overwhelmed to have ever met her on purpose. But watching his life being pulled from the back of a moving truck, paraded across the lawn, and dropped into a small, worn house that would never truly be home, he found himself stepping backward until he almost tripped on something. Startled out of his daze, Elliott looked down and saw a girl having a tea party with a live earthworm, a dead bird, and a peanut. Molly looked up and saw a young eskimo boy standing on her pet earthworm's salad fork.

Both children stare at each other for a moment. Then Molly throws out her right hand for a handshake saying, "Molly." Elliott stares at her hand and fidgets with his mittens. Elliott's eyes dart to his new house across the street; he yearned to just run away from this strange meeting with this strange girl.

Molly sees this but only grows more determined. Most kids wouldn't even go near her and now here was a boy of her age, standing on her picnic blanket. She pats the picnic blanket beside her, indicating that Elliott was to sit. His eyes dart back to the house across the street. He takes a long time considering his options. Finally he just sits down. Molly is a little surprised that he didn't run.

"What's your name?" Molly asks. Elliott avoids eye contact. "Where are you from?" Elliott is frozen in place holding his teacup, still too scared to speak.

Molly introduces the other tea party guests. She gestures to the earthworm, who is wearing a tiny bowtie. “This is Clarence. His wife Ethel is around here somewhere. They’re in love. The wedding was quite lovely.” A flashback shows the dead crow and the peanut seated in front of two earthworms. Molly is in the position of the minister and says, “I now pronounce you worm and wife.” The worms wiggle around in response. Molly throws a handful of dry rice in the air and the worms try to eat it. Flashback ends.

Elliott is still silent and frozen. Molly continues, “This is Kyle. He’s just a peanut. But he’s always happy to be wherever he is.” Cut to shot of peanut on a plate in Molly’s kitchen. A radio is on in the background playing music.

Elliot is still staring straight ahead, expressionless. Molly exhales and points to the dead crow, “And this is Steve; he’s…had a rough week.” A short flashback shows Steve being chased by a cat then flying into a glass window of Molly’s house. Molly places him in a shoe box and hand feeds him until one morning, she wakes to find him dead. Flashback ends and we return to the present. “Has anything big happened in your life recently?”

Elliott makes eye contact for a second then looks down. His eyes start to fill with tears but he holds them back. Molly notices the reaction but doesn’t push for information. She takes the teacup from in front of the dead bird and puts it in Elliott’s hand, “Here, have some tea.” Looking back at the dead bird she says, “I don’t think Steve is going to drink it. “

Elliott is still not moving. “It’s only polite that you drink it,” Molly says. Elliott wipes his nose as Molly lifts her cup. Elliott lifts his as well and they both drink. Immediately, a sound comes from Elliott. His eyes are wide as he chokes on something. Molly is confused and alarmed.

At first she doesn’t know what to do but finally she jumps into action, landing a hard slap to Elliott’s back. The end of a worm peeks out of his mouth. “Ethel?!” Molly cries. Now, angry that maybe Elliot has swallowed her worm she whacks him on the back one more time. The worm comes flying out of his mouth as a woman’s locket necklace falls out of his pocket. Elliott now becomes active and aggressively pushes Molly away to grab the necklace. He clutches it close to his body. Molly and Elliot stare at each other. Elliot puts the necklace back in his pocket Molly sighs as she looks at the limp worm. Ethel is dead.

There is a silence and Elliott’s eyes started to well up again. Sad for the loss of his mother and now guilty for the loss of Molly’s worm, Elliott with tears in his eyes, says “I’m sorry about your worm.” He pulls out the locket and opens it up to show Molly a picture of a young woman, “Me mum.”

Molly nods with understanding that Elliott’s mother has passed. Thinking back to the worm, she smiles faintly and whispers that Ethel was actually Ethel “the Third” and had lived a good life. “What was your mum’s name?”

Cut to Elliot, Molly, Steve, Clarence and the peanut around a small rock as they hold a short service for the departed worm. Elliott holds his mother's necklace in his palm as Molly says some words about life and loss that rings doubly true for Elliott. After burying Ethel, the two children sit quietly on the lawn, thinking to themselves. Elliot turns to Molly dramatically, "Elliott," he said. "My name is Elliott." There was silence but Molly smiled, glad that Elliott was finally starting to open up. "Do you want to go digging to find Ethel the fourthth? Clarence gets terribly lonely." she said. Elliott smiled faintly and said, "…yeah, okay."

The story ends with the narrator saying, "Molly was most certainly very strange. And Elliott was downright peculiar, but that suited them both just fine."

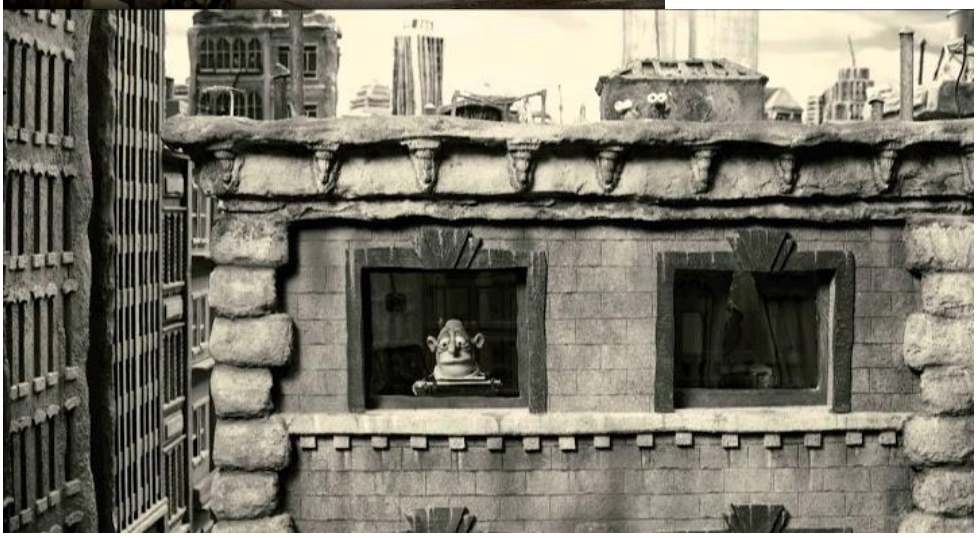
RATIONALE:

I have always enjoyed stories that are narrated in a quirky way- films like Amelie and Mary and Max. I often find narratives formulaic and predictable so this unexpected, slightly different take on story-telling intrigues me. I'm certainly fascinated by the peculiarities of those around me; these tiny details that make us who we are. We're all a little strange and that can actually be a unifying thing. I'm ultimately trying to say both that our quirks can be beautiful and that there is immense value in finding someone who really understands you. Ultimately, I want the characters to finally find in each other someone who is like them, someone who changes their opinion of "other" people and perhaps therefore, life.

VISION:

This will be a stop motion short film with silicone and/or foam latex molded puppets of 9 inches approximate height, child-like in proportion. Their armatures will be wire and heads may be an epoxy plastic or Super Sculpey with moldable plasticine features. Alternately, the heads could be 3D modeled and printed with interchangeable jaws. I am not anticipating much, if any, lip syncing. The primary set is a chunk of the suburban street that the children's houses sit on, across from each other. I will use air dry earth clay and foam-core to build the exterior of both houses, giving them a rustic, stone-built appearance. I will use fabric flocking on the lawns of both houses so as to not have any chatter. Built, this set may be as big as six by six feet and around three or four feet tall. I have already discussed plans to use the studio space connected to the Prop Shop. I will share that space with the undergrad Tara Gordon. So that allows me to have a fairly large, permanent set.
Style references for set. Puppets will not look like this.


Mary
and
Max



TIMELINE:

I intend to start work on fabrication over the summer and get as much shot in the fall semester as possible. I also end up with better animation when I re-shoot each shot at least once so I'm planning for that.

	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Au	Se	Oc	No	De	Ja	Fe	Mr	Ap	May
Treatment	■														
Script	■	■	■												
Char. Design							■	■	■						
Storyboard							■	■	■						
Animatic							■	■	■						
Fabrication							■	■	■	■	■				
Test Shots							■	■	■						
Filming							■	■	■	■	■				
Re-shoots											■	■	■		

Compositing														
Editing														
Titles														
Sound														
Screen														

BUDGET:

PURCHASED SUPPLIES:	Quantity	Cost	Subtotal	Acct. Total
Canon EOS T2i	1	$269.94	$269	$269
DragonFrame 3 (Software)	1	$280.01	$280	$549
Canon AC Adapter	1	$12	$12	$561
USB cable	1	$5	$5	$566
Nikon 35mm Lens	1	$190	$190	$756
Nikon to Canon lens Adapter	1	$14	$14	$770
“C” Clamp	2	$11	$22	$792
Silicone Caulk	1	$6	$6	$798
Naptha	1	$8	$8	$806
Nuts, screws, wing nuts	3	$5	$5	$811
Dragon Skin Silicone	1	$30	$30	$841
Foam Latex	1	$50	$50	$891
Ultracal	1	$9	$9	$900
Plasticine	2	$8	$16	$916

PROJECTED SUPPLIES:				
Silicone	1-3	$90	$90	$90
OR Foam Latex	1-2	$70	$70	$70
Monster Clay	1	$30	$30	$120
Air Dry clay	1-2	$60	$60	$180
Ultracal	3	$27	$27	$207
Wire, foam, fabric	1k			
Lumber		$40	$40	$247
Sound		$300	$300	$547
Festivals		$400	$400	$947

Total Budget: $3,000


MOLLY
But it was all happening too fast.


Did you RSVP?


Uh...


I'm Elliott.


This is an ancient, artisan recipe.
Very earthy.


This my pet earthworm, Clarence.
They're in looooove.


He's had a rough week.


Ethel, you were a good worm wife,
I think you were a heartworm


‘cause you were a worm that lived in our hearts.
It’s okay.

STORY, FABRICATION, ANIMATION
ALLISON ZELLE

VOICE TALENT

MAYA
JAOUEN

PATRICK.JAOUEN@GMAIL.COM

ETHAN
JAOUEN

NARRATOR: MATTHEW ANSINI

SOUND ASSISTANCE

ARTHUR TISSERONT
ARTHURTAUDIO.COM

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE
OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS
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