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**WE EAT**

by

Maliheh Rahrovan

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for

the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Film and Animation

School of Film and Animation

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

December 2020

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## **Abstract**

*We Eat* is an animated short film showing the struggles of a survivor living in an apocalyptic world within a cruise ship that holds the last of humanity, most of whom are wealthy, opulent, greedy people. We follow the protagonist on her journey through the ship as she attempts to save a single baby calf. The inhabitants on the ship are obese, obsessed with consumption, and all are wearing animal masks that cover their eyes. Justine, the protagonist, frightened as she slips from a room, closes an unseen item in her luggage case, and begins to flee the hungry passenger from whom she has just stolen.

The monstrous pursuer follows her everywhere she goes. She manages to lose the follower for brief periods, but still, the anxiety and pressure of being in that sick world makes her weak. With her power of will, she stays strong. It is not easy to ignore people around her and their lifestyles.

The elevator that takes Justine to her safe place is located in the most densely populated area on board the ship: the restaurant. She believes in her goal and she's working toward the only good change she can find. Her room on top of the ship has a small window that lets the fresh air in, and it's a hopeful room, full of life, like she is. She lets the cow in her luggage out and releases it through the window while hoping for a better future for the world. Unfortunately, as the viewer is shown, the outside of the ship appears grim and hope for life seems dismal. The sun appears to be burning the earth on the horizon and the world itself seems beyond recovery.



Figure 1. Early visual development art, Watercolor painting

## **Introduction**

To convey the message of the film, which regards the excessive consumption and the abuse of animals and the environment by man, I chose a dramatic thriller genre to create tension for the audience. In addition to this, my goal was to build strong visuals and imagery to send a message through the visual action and composition. For example, the story is a metaphor for the real world and humanity, shown as a man-made ship that is sinking into a vast sea of muck. The protagonist is the personification of nature in the world, struggling to survive in a world that humans are greedily and thoughtlessly consuming. The calf carried in the suitcase represents one last will of hope in these desperate times. The warning of the film is to stop abusing and over-consuming animals and nature in order to avoid the frightening, dark future that is portrayed in the film. In the story, humanity has arrived at such a state that the people surviving on the ship can't even notice that their world is sinking. These people do nothing but consume. They wear masks depicting harmless and cute faces, and the signs and advertisements are charming and attractive, drawing people in this society to the magical restaurant at the center of the ship and its addictive food. The restaurant encourages them to consume more and more, fosters greed and personal gain, and acts as an expression of materialism and consumerism, and these are the main themes explored in the film. Much like today's society, the people of the film go beyond the point of no return, and the remainder of their opulent world, the over-indulgent society that they built, is solely concerned with consuming, hoarding, and having more, beyond need and even to the point of self-destruction.

Saturated colors are used to help express the intensity of the scenes, framing and camera movement are used to develop strong storytelling shots in the visual presentation. These visual tools helped to enhance the experience and convey the message of the film.

*We Eat* shows the world after the apocalypse and extreme climate change. Icebergs have melted and all lands have sunk in water. The humans who survived live on a cruise ship. Nowadays, climate change has already begun and is certainly worrisome, but if we act today, it is still not too late to save the earth and humanity. The smallest individual action could have a great cascading effect on the future, good or bad. We still have a chance to start the change for a better future, “but if we don't act with haste, the collapse could be well underway by the end of this century” ([Welch](#)) *We Eat*, specifically focuses on the overconsumption of meat. For example, I chose cows and steer to portray how cruelly they are raised and slaughtered to fill humanity’s purposes. “In total, more than 300 million cows were slaughtered for food in 2016 according to United Nations data” ([Sanders](#)). This has been shown by data to be an excessive amount, as the USDA shows that even with generous standards, Americans tend to eat nearly 150% of the amount of meat recommended ([USDA](#)). On top of this, it’s crucial to know how much land we are sacrificing for the use of the meat industry and our desire to excessively consume meat. “Of all agricultural land in the United States, 87 percent is used to raise animals for food. That’s 45 percent of the total landmass in the U.S. about 260 million acres of U.S. forest have been cleared to make the land available to produce feed for animals raised for food. The meat industry is directly responsible for 85 percent of all soil erosion in the U.S.” ([How does eating meat harm the environment](#)). More importantly, the emissions that are produced in the process of meat farming is astonishing, dwarfing the emissions produced by vehicles ([National Geographic](#)). As Denis and Carol Hayes, writers of the book *Cowed: The Hidden Impact of 92 Million Cows on America’s Health, Economy, Politics, Culture and Environment*, tell Simon Worrall of National Geographic, “the amount of carbon dioxide that is given off per pound of beef is, in fact, greater [than burning a gallon of gasoline]”.



On top of this, researchers at Oxford have shown in numerous studies that cattle farming in the dairy industry is culpable of environmental harm: of all the milk industries, dairy milk is by far the greatest consumer of resources. As the researchers show, one glass of dairy milk takes vastly more water and land and produces more emissions than nearly all the plant-based (rice, soy, oat, and almond) milk's emissions combined ([Briggs & Guibourg](#)). Likewise, as reported by Vox, researchers including Emily Cassidy at the University of Minnesota's Institute on the Environment show that nearly 40% of all the food crops grown around the world are actually used for animal feed (only around half of what is grown is eaten by humans) and this is even more extreme in the US where only about 27% is eaten directly, and over two thirds of the crops grown are used exclusively for animal feed ([Plumer](#)). Also, researchers at Cornell University say that the US could feed 800 million people with the crops and grain that is used for livestock ([Cornell Chronicles](#)).

Respected Carnegie scientists Long Cao and Ken Caldeira found that, globally, the reduced evapotranspiration was responsible for 16 percent of the land warming; the rest was due to CO<sub>2</sub>'s heat-trapping effects. In North America and Asia, more than 25 percent of the warming was due to the impact of increased CO<sub>2</sub> on vegetation. "There is no longer any doubt that carbon dioxide decreases evaporative cooling by plants and that this decreased cooling adds to global warming," said Cao. "This effect would cause significant warming even if carbon dioxide were not a greenhouse gas." ([Cho](#)). Moreover, a 2019 article published by The Guardian, written by a team of journalists and researchers from around the world, discusses the sad reality that 'the rampant deforestation of the Amazon rainforest is driven by a global greed for meat' ([Phillips](#)). As data shows, over 70 percent of the deforested land is attributed to cattle ranching alone, and this meat is then exported across the globe. One of the greatest sanctuaries for diversity of life and endangered species, and of the greatest areas to reduce and convert carbon emissions to oxygen,

the Amazon rainforest, has been dwindling at an alarming rate in the past decade all to feed us, not only our desire for meat, but our desire for convenience.

One thing that an individual can do for the environment, something that is even more effective than recycling, biking to work, and picking up litter, is to simply stop eating meat, or even just reduce meat and dairy in your diet. As a result, if we eat less meat and dairy, less forest land would be destroyed, fewer cows would be raised and slaughtered, and instead forests that were already cut and cultivated can be used to produce our daily food needs in the form of crops. If we can cut back on the meat industry, nature can grow back and thrive, and perhaps save us from the catastrophe that is climate change. It's not too late, and every little bit, no matter how small, will help to give future generations, and the future of this world, a hopeful chance.

## **Overall Concept and Message**

The story occurs in an ambiguous, post-civilization future inhabited by many inhuman, exaggerated beings. One of my main goals for this film was quality: to design and animate these unique characters and backgrounds according to the style and quality of my concepts was an important aspect that I hoped to achieve. Equally important, however, were my goals for the story, cautionary message of the film.

It is true that a frightening future similar to the exaggerated scene depicted in the film has a strong basis in the reality outlined in the research provided above. Such a future all depends on how we consume and protect our natural resources today. Many clues were placed to elucidate the film message, some of which were hidden throughout the environment. For example, the emoji face opening and closing its mouth repeatedly on a neon sign to hypnotically entice the passengers

to eat more, and also the television screens with looping music throughout the scenes, all represent the culture of consumption that permeates our world. Other symbols were more direct, such as the design of the humans in the shape of monstrous creatures with big mouths, or the restaurant as the heartbeat of the ship and the destination for all the passengers.

The protagonist's resolve to save the calf was the core of the story: Justine stole a calf from a monstrous woman (the follower) and tried to save its life. The calf serves as a metaphor for the hope that still exists for change, no matter how desperate or dire the situation is. For the ending scene, I was looking for something powerful, but hopeful. The cow is safely outside; the goal was achieved. But how about the state of the rest of the world? Is the calf truly safe now or is it too late? How will my film be perceived by the audience, what will their interpretation be, and how I could shape their interpretation toward the film's vision and message?

As I mentioned before, my goal was to make a film that portrays the impacts of climate change and abuse of the environment in the future. As the protagonist struggles to save a single calf, my intent was to show that even the smallest actions have meaning and impact. In the result of this, the viewer might better understand small changes they can make in their own lives that will benefit the world. Even small things like choosing more environmentally sustainable foods would have a great impact for good on the earth. As the National Cleantech Conference and Exhibition of Australia explains on their website, "Today, food accounts for about 25% of the greenhouse emissions released into the atmosphere. The food you eat also has an impact on land and water systems." They work with researchers and industry professionals from around Australia and the world, and with their aggregate knowledge they know better than anyone how small actions can make a difference "It is important to note that sustainable eating creates ripple effects in crop production and processing... As people shift from foods grown using unsustainable strategies, the

entire production line is forced to adopt to sustainable operations.” (NCCE). The small actions in our lives have gradual, but compounding effects that do indeed make a difference. My film was intended more or less as an alarm to wake and alert the audience to the danger, but also reassure them that small pieces’ count. We may feel powerless at times, as individuals. Change is possible, if we ask for it. I believe these kinds of grand, overarching messages are easier to express as a metaphor rather than being explained verbally, especially through visual and narrative means.

Having always been drawn to unique storytelling, I wished for my story to make the audience engage with the events and raise questions at every stage, while slowly absorbing the answers much like if they were solving a puzzle or riddle. In this regard, I think my aspirations for the complexity of the story were aimed higher than what I was able to achieve in practice. In essence, my thesis film was the beginning of my journey in filmmaking, and it was a learning and developmental experience with defined goals that were met with every effort of my ability. Despite my high expectations and my recognition that I yet have much growth to realize, I believe the film was a success with many achievements of which I am very proud.

## **Review of Research**

As often said by award winning animator and creator of the short film *Tutli-Putli*, Macieck Szczerbowski, animation is an illusionist’s device; it’s ideal to tell a magical story. The world of *We Eat* is a world that we live in but from a different perspective; a gruesome, frightening perspective: A cruise ship during the apocalypse containing monstrous humans. I started to look for films and movies that have similar elements or themes to my film. I was looking for a way to invoke emotions, rather than simply describing an event. Developing a color palette, structuring

the environment, choosing the music genre and creative sound effects that could support my vision were the focus when I was studying movies.

Music was also a great inspiration for *We Eat*. As I was developing the storyline and working on the early phases, I listened to albums and soundtracks that gave me the same vibe as my story, and they proved to be helpful in visualizing my ideas.

One of my first and greatest influences was ‘Madame *Tutli-Putli*’, the 2007 stop-motion film by Clyde Henry Productions. The mood was so close to what I had in mind. Macieck Szczerbowski in his interview with Vice said: “When working non-narratively you’re not working with story structure, but rather creating a suspended emotion.” Probably that’s what makes madame *Tutli-Putli* so special in expressing sensorial scenes. In my opinion this short film is a masterpiece and that is why I spent hours studying it. I analyzed the acting, expressions, and how to visualize an engaging plot without any dialogue. So far Madame *Tutli-Putli* is one of my favorite shorts and I learned a lot studying it. For example, Madame *Tutli-Putli*’s viewers learn about the side characters from the main character’s point of view. Their action and behavior are limited to a few things that are absorbed by the main character. In other words, throughout the film, we are learning what the protagonist is thinking, what she’s feeling and that’s how we get greatly involved with her inner feelings more than the story plot. I was aiming to manage that in my film as well.



**Figure 2.** *Madame Tutli-Putli*, 2007. Animated Film.

As mentioned, I was looking to express the sensation more than a plot, and the mood and music of Lars von Trier's 'Melancholia's was a great influence in how I visualized my film, and developed its color palette. Later on, its soundtrack became one of the references I used in creating *We Eat's* auditory atmosphere.

I also found *Melancholia's* impact on its viewers very strong. The sense of anxiety and depression slowly grows during the film, and awakens deep emotions in the audience. The music is very powerful. I was so interested to understand the intelligence of those filmmakers. Those who could engage you so deeply with the story and characters. I am glad that my thesis film was an excuse to study many aspects of film making as well.

On top of that, I studied disturbing paintings including Goya's "Black Paintings" and "Saturn Devouring His son", Henry Fuseli's "The Nightmare" and Edward Munch's "The Scream". The grotesque and deeply humane world of Francis Bacon's paintings was also another thematic influence.

The terrifying aspect of man's nature in these paintings was what I found so close to my ideas.



**Figure 3.** Goya, Francisco., Saturn Devouring His Son, 1819–1823

## **Pre-production; Ideas grow like tree branches**

The story that I presented in my proposal went through many changes and evolved into a different animation. During the pre-production phase, the story began to move and grow towards a different direction. The initial goals were a simple and clear story that evokes emotions and feelings, expressing the main concept that was mentioned earlier, and achieving a level of visuals that I had in mind. While I was developing the story I looked for references, watched movies, studied illustrations, paintings, images, and listened to music and soundtracks that grew the idea into an animated film, a seed to a fruitful tree.

## **Thumbnails and Storyboards**

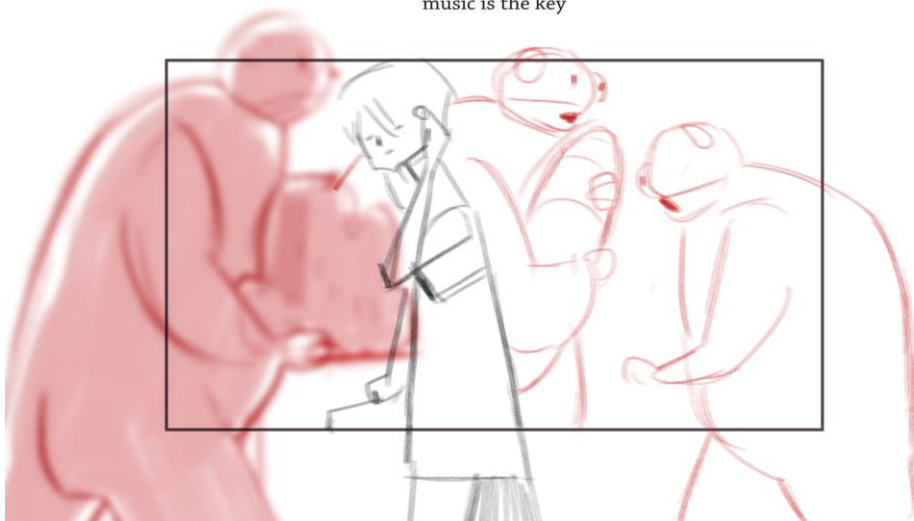
Everything started with storyboarding. Setting up the scene, designing the location, finding the right camera angle, visualizing the story on paper. The right camera angle and shots in animation improves storytelling and draws the audience's attention to learn about characters and characters' experiences along with the film.

There are some bizarre actions and events throughout the film. How to portray those scenes while following the main storyline was crucial. I represented these events as stationary, short side-stops that the protagonist passes through her journey to her final destination. Although she is sometimes passive, still, she observes each situation, and the viewers perceive the reason for the protagonist's mindset and goal; they see the reality of life on the ship through her experience, and their understanding of the protagonist's motivation grows deeper with each scene.





music is the key



**Figures 4,5.** Storyboards

### **Animatic night**

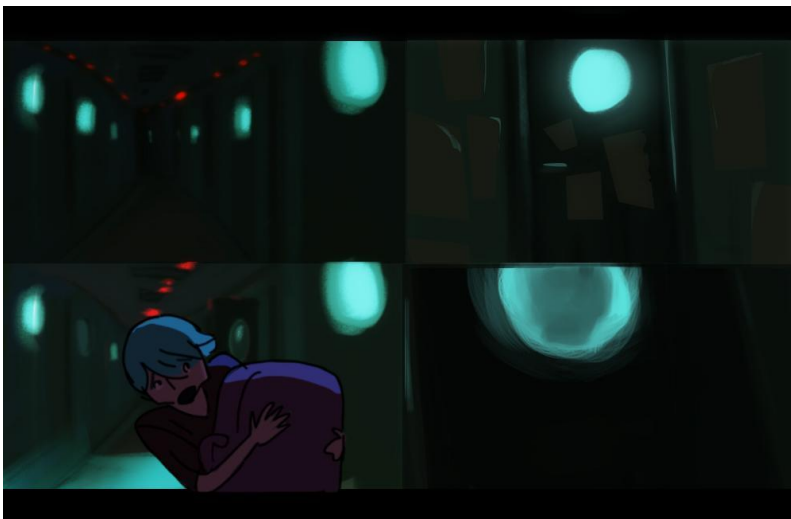
The first screening of the film was Animatic night. Animatic night is a great opportunity to find out what other people think about the story; are they excited, are they bored, do they follow the protagonist's journey, and can I answer their questions? Do I know the protagonist and the story well enough to answer any questions my viewers have in mind? I looked at my audience's

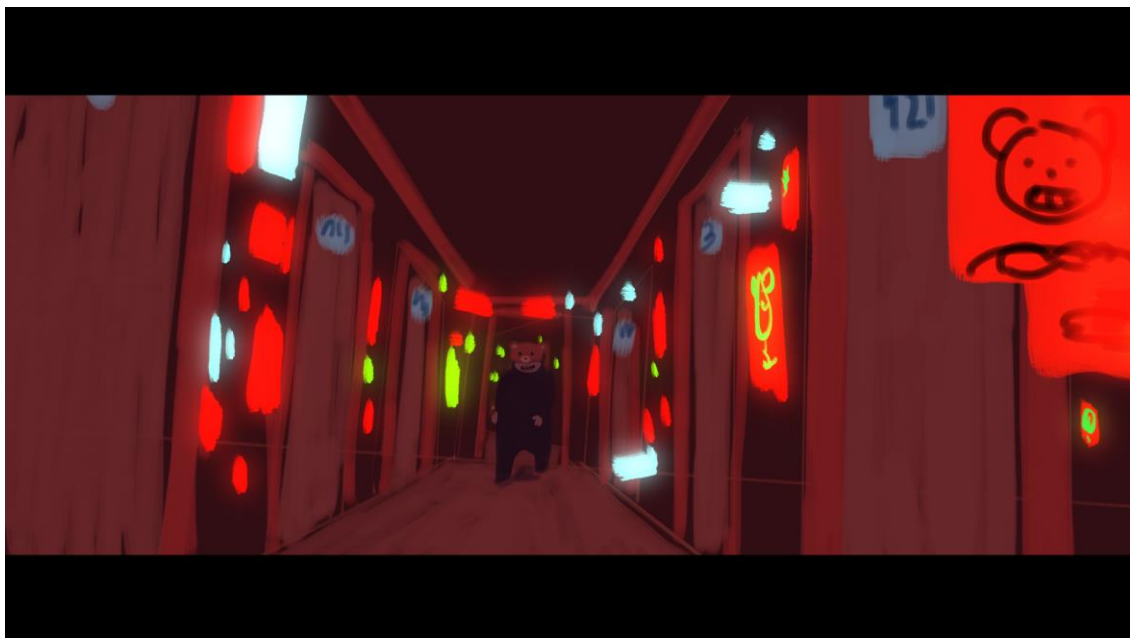
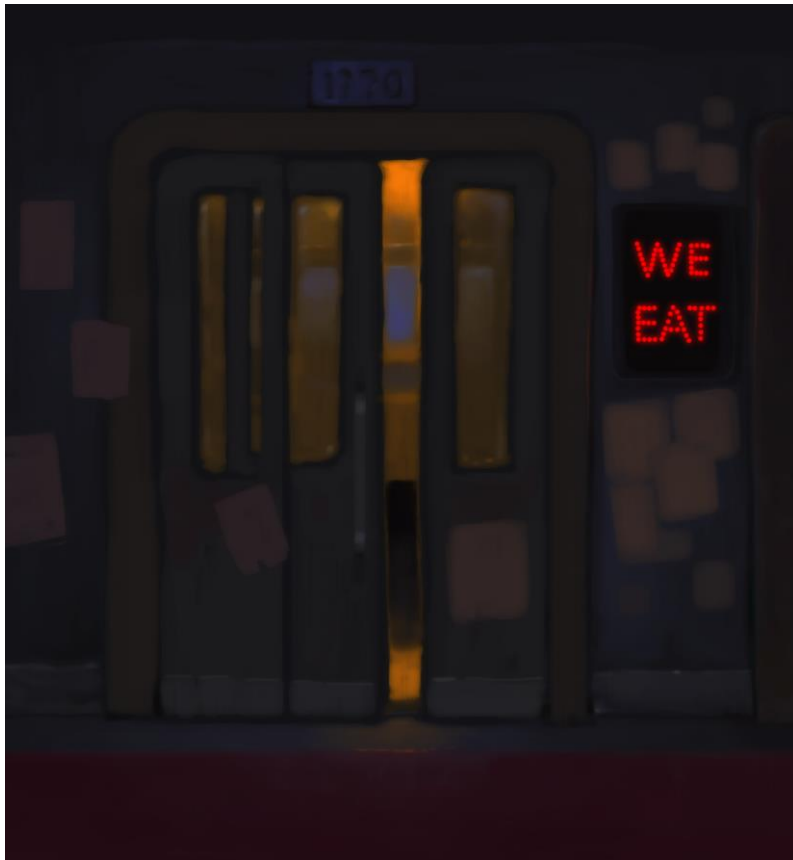
faces and tried to read their expressions while they were watching the film. They all looked interested but had many questions in their mind. I could read that in their eyes. They were interested in following Justine through her journey, or what's in the luggage that she is willing to go through to protect it. During the comment session, they told me that they read the main concept of the story but the ending wasn't clear to them. Besides the vague ending, the comments about timing were critical. There wasn't enough time to fully experience the scenes or the events. For example, the ending wasn't long enough, sure it revealed some hidden answers from the story, but the audience couldn't say what was happening or more importantly why it's happening. I was happy to find out all these flaws when I was still developing the story. Beside raising some key issues by the audience, my teachers and classmates suggested solutions and hinted to new ideas. For instance, the location of the last scene was unknown to them. The protagonist's final destination should've included a great contrast to the rest of the scenes. Therefore, based on the comments, the ending scene was developed to a place on top of the cruise that better represented Justine's room. Compared to the rest of the ship which looked brutal, cold and dark, the room felt cozier and warmer with a warmer tone and livelier palette. I added a bed and blanket to the room, to feel more like a home, so it's different from the rest of the cruise and indicates that she finally arrived in a safe place. On top of that, the pacing and timing in the last scenes are slower compared to the rest of the film. Also, she spent some time in peace with the calf before releasing her, and the audience can sense that her mission is almost completed.

## Visual Development

Fun and creativity are at their peak during pre-production. The world of *We Eat* is an industrial, punk, trashy world. The main colors of this universe are shades of gray contrasting saturated colorful lights. The saturated colors are part of the advertisement for the products, to trigger people's desire to buy more. The dominant color is grayish-green, to emphasize disgust. For the purpose of design, my sources of studies were photographs of China street and its alleys, along with cruise ships and trains' hallways to create and design the props and background.

Designing the characters and backgrounds were very challenging. There was a large number of characters and backgrounds to create with the best quality that I could reach. During the first stage of development, I did a variety of sketches for the characters and thumbnails for backgrounds. I explored various styles and techniques, including traditional watercolor painting. Also, by looking at the images that I provided in the paper, you can follow the transformations in the characters and backgrounds from the early stages to final development.





Figures 6, 7, 8, 9. Concept art exploration



**Figure 10.** Design exploration

## Character Design

Silhouette and shape design is a crucial aspect of designing characters. All the characters in *We Eat* have the same silhouettes except Justine, the protagonist. Justine is aware of her world, and her purpose in life is different than others. She knows that something is wrong with their world and tries to act for a change as much as she can. She is small but strong. The rest of the people who lived on the cruise are following one goal which is consuming. They all have a big mouth and their eyes can't be seen. They're selfish and they can't see the consequence of their actions. They have turned into monstrous, selfish creatures.

The first goal for designing the protagonist was to keep it simple; Also, I wanted to create a unique character with a futuristic costume design. Shown below is the process of her design from

the first sketches and thumbnails to the final design. The most noticeable element that improved her design is the shape, especially her costume.

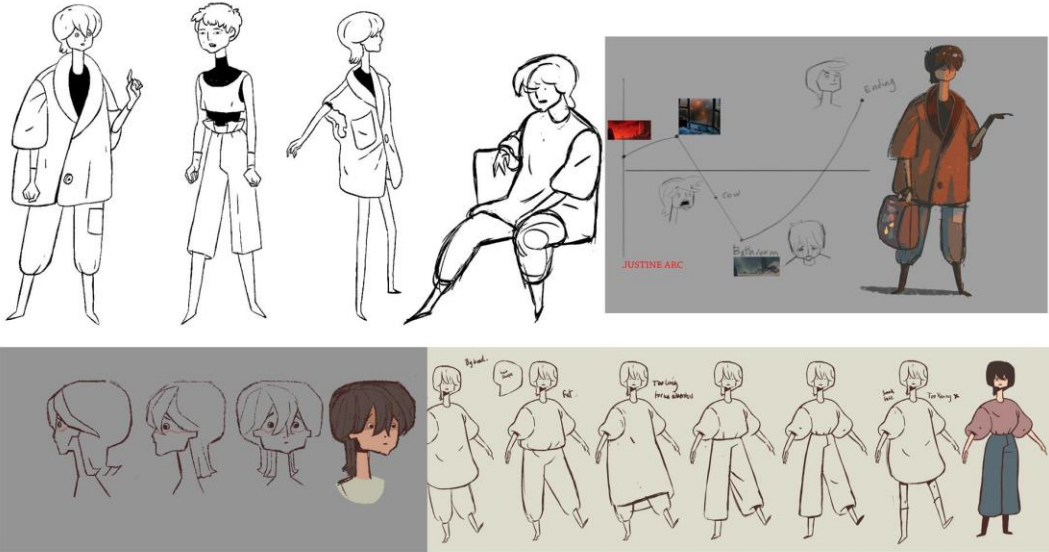
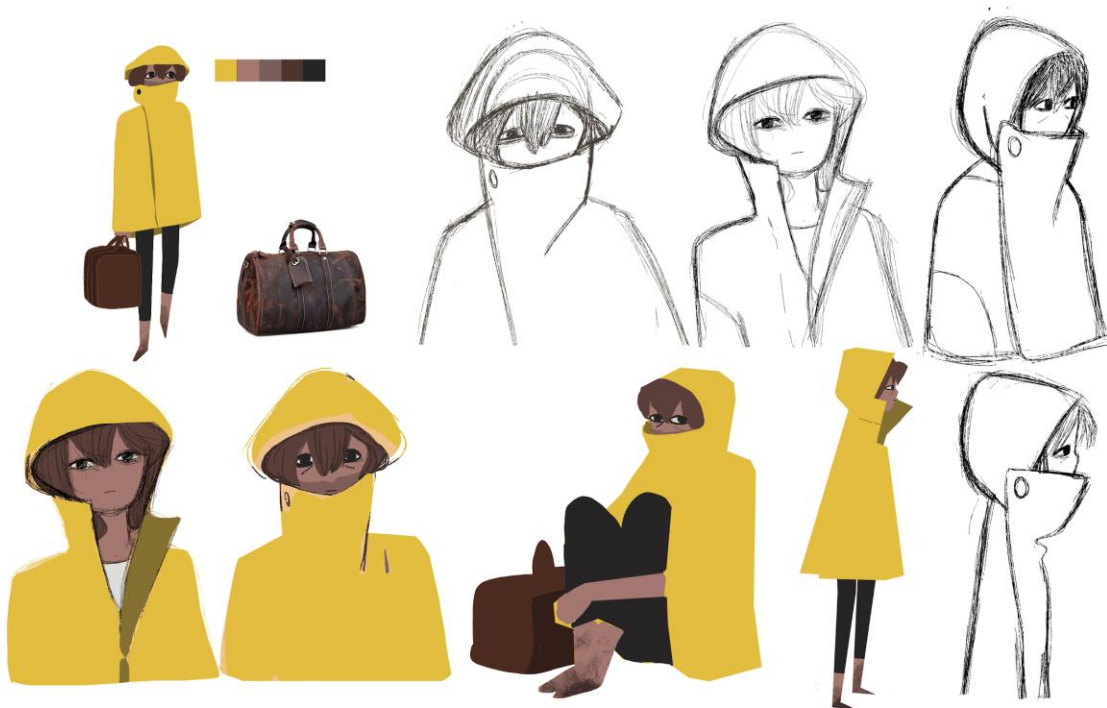


Figure 11. Character design exploration for Justine



Figure 12. Character Model sheet for Justine





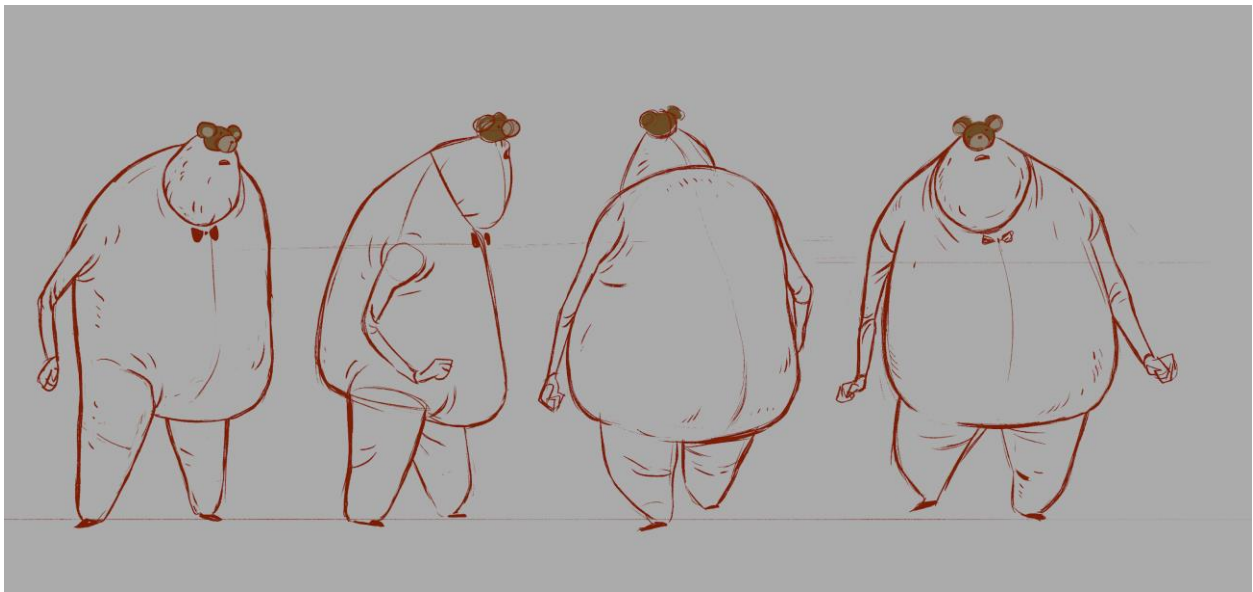
**Figure 13.** Justine final character design

The film had many side characters, few that the protagonist interacted with, and some filling the backgrounds. Surely, it was frightening to think about animating everything in less than four months. I preferred to look for the solution during the pre-production stage. I ended up designing all the side characters in the same silhouette but different in a few details. For example, they all had the same feature, look, and body shapes but their color palette and what they were wearing were different. Of course, this uniformity in shape and actions, reflected the monotonous, semi-human world of my animation, and was in stark contrast with Justine's character. Many other characters were part of backgrounds and not interacting with the protagonist, so limited animations were designated for them, just enough to bring them to life.





**Figure 14.** The Follower character design exploration



**Figure 15.** The Follower's character model sheet

## Background Design

With a total duration short of five minutes, *We Eat* happens at a fast pace. The protagonist passed by a variety of different locations and met many characters. Designing the place wasn't easy; it was hard to see and connect the locations—hallways to the bathroom to the restaurant to the elevator and her room. A useful technique was taking pictures of RIT Magic buildings hallways, stairways, and rooms then painting the designs on top of them. Other than creating the cruise, during pre-production, I spent a good chunk of time trying different styles and even mediums. For example, watercolor painting was one of the fun experiments I had for the backgrounds. My painting using watercolor is below.



**Figure 16.** Early background design painted with watercolor

I designed the painting's layout digitally, printed it out, and redrew it on watercolor paper, and then painted it. That was a long process. Therefore, for time-saving purposes, I did not continue working with watercolor.

Another exploration was using an unconventional color palette. Ten backgrounds were completed when I decided to move to another direction. The reason that using those colors failed was continuity. Lack of continuity in the scenes was the reason that the color palette changes to more realistic and believable colors. Today, I understand that planning for a solid style from the start could save plenty of precious time during thesis production.

In the first story draft and in my thesis proposal, the location was a train, and then it changed to a cruise ship. Replacing the train with the cruise solved many problems. It added a mysterious theme to the film and created a big twist at the end.

First of all, the location was entirely unknown to the audience. The lack of sunlight in the cruise made the backgrounds disturbing. Also, the train aisles could be too narrow for designing character movements, and the cruise gave me more space.

The backgrounds were designed to look unwelcoming and disgusting. The primary color in the palette was green. Other than design the green was used in the backgrounds to make an eerie atmosphere, filled in foreground with abhorring characters.



**Figures 17, 18.** Final background designs

## **Production: It's Time to Make It Happen**

Commitment and discipline are key during production. Scheduling for an achievable goal, and committing to that schedule is crucial. It is the most challenging stage in making an animated film, especially as an independent filmmaker. During the production stage, the initial excitement of making a dream project can be displaced by anxiety and harsh deadlines. During the pre-production timeline, the filmmaker is being trained like a soldier for the combat that is animation: learning and exploring the possibilities for design. The development and flourishing of ideas during the pre-production stage is exciting, but during production, the unadulterated hard work of the process is paramount. The soldier has to leave for the battlefield whether they are ready or not.

A feasible plan and an achievable goal help to get oneself successfully to the finish line. In the concluding weeks, when the shots and pieces of the puzzle come together and shine as an animated film, a year of hard work always pays off in the best way.

### **Production pipeline**

For personal reasons involving a new opportunity in my career, after the first semester of working on my thesis film *We Eat*, I took a hiatus which resumed the following semester. In the spring semester (typically the second and final semester of the thesis year) I began again with work on the film, from the starting line. The gap lasted for around eight months, during which many exciting opportunities came and I had the chance to make two more animated short films. I spent a few hours each month to continue sketching and exploring concepts for my thesis film, working

just enough to not completely disengage. There were some advantages as well as disadvantages to the eight-month hiatus between pre-production and production.

**The advantages:** Looking away from the animatic and going back to it with fresh eyes helped me to see what it was missing. The animatic had some issues in timing and clarity of the character acting. Due to the break, I had the chance to fix this and many things before moving to production. Secondly, I learned a lot during those eight months working on other projects. I was more confident about my animation skill by the time I started my thesis production. This confidence in my animating skill helped me to stay on schedule and spend less time on revisions.

**The disadvantages:** With the extra time I had during the eight-month break, I spent many hours in design exploration, and unfortunately, by the time I was to officially start production, I was lost and couldn't choose the direction I wanted for the design. At a certain point, I was wasting time overthinking the designs, and spending hours redrawing characters and backgrounds. Some backgrounds were repainted multiple times. While it was a period of stress and stalling, the final backgrounds were improved compared to previous designs in my opinion, and in the end I am very satisfied with the final visual concept of my film.

### **Time management**

One of the responsibilities of filmmaking I'm most proud of from production is my efforts in time management. Time management in production is vital to do any difficult job with success. An explicit schedule for the production reduced anxiety from the onset. This was possible thanks to a few strategies I employed. Instead of merely working toward a single, big, final goal (in this



case the completion of the animated film over months), I tried to manage weekly goals. This involves the process of breaking down the overarching goal into smaller, easier goals. This method also has the benefit of feeling more rewarding as you can consistently and frequently hit goals one by one. When the weekly goals were checked off, I felt positive about my progress instead of being anxious and frightened about the undertaking of trying to finish a five-minute animated film in only a few weeks. Aside from strategies with planning, I created a routine that helped dramatically with my ability to stay on track. Instead of working nonstop until I was exhausted, I worked during certain defined hours. I maintained a consistent work day starting at 8am and finishing at 8pm. I still spent most of my day working on the film, but because I was working by set hours, and also therefore enjoying my leisure and hobbies, like painting or going for a run, on set hours, allowed for peace of mind. Normally, I think I would spend every moment I wasn't working on my film full of stress and anxiety, which inevitably leads to burnout. I avoided this thanks to this sort of planning. It was especially helpful during the long weeks of harsh working hours.

The production timeline was scheduled in 4 phases, including animation roughs, adding in-betweens, inking, and then finally coloring. I finished each phase before starting the next. Once again, this was part of the break down, achieving smaller goals and getting rewarded the satisfaction of their completion. In addition to the animation, every week I had to paint three backgrounds. Committing to the schedule, working hard, and having weekly reviews to make sure I completed at least ninety percent of my goals every week was necessary. On top of that, any new ideas that would come along during the production stage were sacrificed by necessity. While it was often tempting, engaging with one of the new exciting ideas would likely end up as starting a completely new story, but not finishing anything I started. The main goal was to finish what I started with my original film on time. Therefore, rejection of smaller wishes was obligatory.

## Animating, Inking, and Coloring Process

When I started production, my animatic was quite solid. I knew I wasn't going to change camera angles or character actions. When I was drawing the key poses/animation I was cleaning my line work and adding details. It was pretty straight forward. With this, I could smoothly stay on track.

After I finished the rough animation, it was time to ink. However, I didn't anticipate how mentally overwhelming inking the film would be. Other than that mental stress, the few months that I spent on character animation was pretty stable and straight forward.



**Figure 19.** Characters inked and colored, Final look



## Techniques and Tricks that Brought Backgrounds to Life

Painting the backgrounds continued during production until the very day before the final deadline. My film had around fifty to sixty backgrounds total. Some of the backgrounds were complicated and quite challenging. For example, some of the extended backgrounds include the hallway down to the kitchen, the wide shot of the restaurant, and from the final shot, the wide shot of the cruise ship.



**Figure 20.** Background painting breakdown

As if painting wasn't difficult enough, the hallway background included several animated layers and character animations. I wanted the hallway to look like a throat that is swallowing the people inside of itself. For this purpose, the hallway was designed in many layers on top of each

other, and each layer moved individually toward the camera, while the characters moved in the opposite direction. The breakdown of this process is shown below.



**Figure 21.** Hallway to the kitchen, layers breakdown

The restaurant scene is the most complicated scene in the film. Aside from several character animations, it included many effects animations as well, like smoke. The character animations in

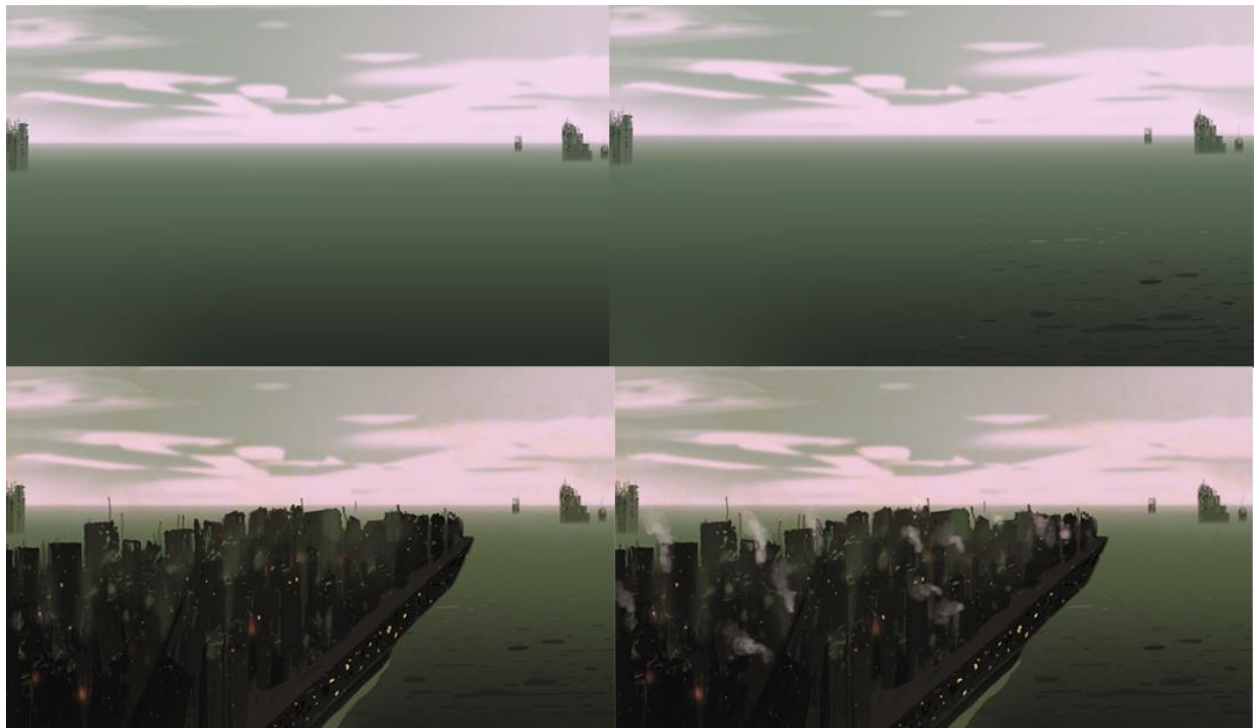
the scene are limited, but most of the characters in the scene are animated and needed to look alive. The layers were composited in post-production in After Effects. Between each layer, there are light effects and VFX to show the mood and depth of the scene.



**Figure 22.** Kitchen scene/restaurant breakdown

The last scene was created with the same technique. For building and bringing this scene to life, I mostly used After Effects animation. The sea included a few separate layers of waves, in the

background, middle and foreground, to show depth in the distance. This was done for the sky as well: two layers for clouds, with the sun and the sky all separated. This way, when I moved the camera, those layers moved variant timing in a few frames, creating a parallax so the sky did not look flat. Additionally, the smoke that rises from the ship was animated particles created in After Effects. After Effects played a great role in bringing the backgrounds to life. In the last week, while the production and postproduction overlapped After Effects was a blessing. The breakdown of the scene animated in After Effects can be seen below.



**Figure 23.** Final scene Breakdown

I am pleased with the results of the compositing and animation and what I accomplished in the last week. There were many difficulties, and lots of work, but I believe I overcame the challenges. Looking back, one detail I would have liked to change was the length of the final scene. It is an impactful scene and there is lots of information to clarify the story and the message throughout the last scene.

### **Post-production Miracle: Performing a two-week project in just two days**

Many layers of character animation and background layers came together in the last few days. I would say it was one of the most stressful two days of the process. The timeline shrank from both sides, as I was forced to start post-production late and also finish early. Luckily, what helped to make it possible to finish the totality of the work in only two days was that all the assets were organized and easy to compose in my programs.

I was unable to keep to the original post-production schedule for two reasons. Firstly, my progress on the production stage lagged somewhat: I was falling behind on small daily tasks that built up incrementally by the end of production. Likewise, as seems to be a common occurrence in filmmaking, the inking stage took far more time than expected, and I fell behind slightly again. The second reason for the time crunch of Post was due to coordination issues with my sound designer. I had not planned for it, but he wanted to have the finished film, locked and finalized, before working on the sound effects.

Due to this, I lost a day or two, and had to finish the post production earlier than expected. It was a challenge that required a lot of perseverance and hard work, but due to good organization skills and naming conventions, I was able to finish two weeks of work in a mere two days.

## **Sound design and music**

The animation didn't have any dialogue; therefore, sound effects could have brought the world and characters to life. Sound effects add depth and personality to characters and environment and make them feel more engaging. Creativity was an essential element in sound design. Most of the film was happening in an unknown dark hallway. Some of the scenes included unusual events and characters. However, with the sound, the uncanny, fantasy world became convincing. It expanded the imagination behind the visual. We create feelings of what may exist behind those walls and doors. That is what I love about sound effects. Crieghton K. Yanchar, Sound Designer for *We Eat*, created and mixed all the sound effects. As the director, I described to him the summary of the story, what was inside the walls, the temperature of the locations, and the texture materials of the environment (e.g. they are metallic or soft, etc.). In short, I imagined a complete world and shared all the things that were out of animation frames and were out of sight with Creighton.

Music could add a stronger mood and theme to the scene and story. Although I was mainly focused on the sound effects, I still felt the atmosphere could be enhanced with some music. Music was composed by a different artist, Vahid Ghaderi. Knowing Vahid's style, I preferred giving him freedom in his piece for the film with some directions, and what was important to me as the director. I had some references for the music as was mentioned before. For the first draft, I shared those with him. I also told him where are the beats of the story, where the music can dominate the

sounds effects and where it can't. Vahid then created a wonderful piece that set perfectly with the film.

### **Collaboration with MPS students**

That was a new experience both for me and the Motion Picture Science students. A class research for their team and also a new experience for me as the 2D filmmaker. Our goal was to project *We Eat* with an advanced laser projector for the first time at RIT. *We Eat* was the first 2D animation film that screened with this new advanced projector. The reason that *We Eat* got selected for this motion picture science experience was the saturated colors that I used in the backgrounds. The backgrounds were dark but there were many neon lights that could work perfectly with the projector. These projectors were made to show the colors with the highest quality. The brightness and quality via the projector was unbelievable. Definitely, that was one of the reasons that the backgrounds stood out the most. The MPS team helped me to learn about the projector and experience its result. They thought me how the colors project before I started painting the backgrounds. I had some knowledge of how I should move forward in choosing the color palette. Still, after the film was composite and ready for the screening the MPS team went over the entire film, and scene by scene, they adjusted the contrast and saturation. Of course, I was concerned about the result. The concerns were if the colors were too saturated to look at, or the contrast was too high, that the details in the darker spots completely disappeared. Fortunately, the screening was a success, and backgrounds, lighting, and colors were positively mentioned in the comments.



## **Risk and challenges**

There were many risks and challenges along the way. Year-long projects that require full-time attention usually coincide with many unpredictable events, mental break downs, and more obstacles. The biggest challenge is to have enough faith and strength to stand up against them and move forward. At the end of the first semester of the thesis capstone, I was fighting with many inner fears and doubts. In that period, like many other difficult times, having a supportive advisor helped a lot to manage and not fail my thesis project.

Working on a short animation all alone with a tight deadline is a big challenge. Understanding this fact and then planning for the story and a film that is doable for one artist to manage and complete could be very helpful. Working with students and friends during the last few weeks was more challenging than I imagined. I needed some help to complete this project on time but I couldn't afford to pay my assistants. I planned for this ahead of time but the friends whom I trusted were not committed to their assignments. Of course, that situation put me at risk to not be able to finish on time. Fortunately, I relied on the easiest part which was coloring to ask for assistance. But on the other hand, coloring was planned for the last few weeks and I was already overwhelmed with the deadline. In the last moments, I asked a few more students for help and gave each a small assignment to make sure they can make it, without the usual stresses of deadline time.

## Reception

It was an important day in my life. It was a day that I could show the fellow classmates, animators and professors who helped me through my education at RIT what I was capable of doing. Days of hard work, creating a film that I always dreamed about and carried thoughts about its animating, storytelling, and visuals were with me myself. *We Eat* was certainly far from perfect but I can definitely say it was the best I could do. The comments were all positive. The audience loved the visuals and backgrounds. I talked about my experiences and the challenges I had during the last few years and how much I appreciate teachers and the community of RIT and that includes Magic Spell Studios who supported me and my projects throughout the year.

## Final thoughts

It was a challenging time, tinged with many sleepless nights, wastebaskets full of torn and thrown out drawings, and personal sacrifices for making *We Eat* happen.

From the very first day when I was exploring the story, until compositing the assets, I was trying to outperform myself in whatever I've done before; that was the goal. Still if I was to start the project today, I would try to keep the film shorter than five minutes, keep the design really simple, just enough to work with the story. Creating, designing, and managing five minutes of animation is not an easy task to be done by one single animator. There were many nights that I felt frustrated and many mornings I woke up excited to get back to work. It was a great journey with ups and downs. The pressure taught me how to manage my time and helped me to grow to who I am today.

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# **WE EAT**

A 2D Animated Thesis Film

Maliheh Rahrovan

MFA Thesis Proposal School of Film and Animation  
Rochester Institute of Technology  
March 2016

Approved for submission by

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Mari Jaye Blanchard, Thesis Chair

## **Log line**

As a young woman starts her new independent adult life, boarding a train, she starts to understand the pain that exists in the world, ignored by indifferent and uncaring people, and eventually she is hurt and becomes an observer like the others.

## **Treatment**

A woman has just boarded a train with a small luggage case. She finds her cabin. With a smile on her lips she opens the cabin door. The cabin looks small and full of people; there are about 7 people already there. She finds a small place to sit, and sets her luggage on her knees. She looks around and smiles at other passengers, but she can't see their faces. Everyone has a big animal face mask. Two of them don't have mere masks but actual animal heads with human bodies. One of the passengers has a smile on his mask and offers her a big box. It's a big white box with a blue stripe. She thanks him but does not accept the box. She then puts her luggage on her seat to go out to explore the train. A large, corpulent lady with a big mask is walking in the middle of the train aisle. The aisle is rather thin. She pushes the young woman against the wall and rudely makes her way past. The young woman moves on. The deeper she goes inside the train, the more crowded it gets, and the more people there are with animal heads. She goes on until she can barely walk. The train gets warmer, and she can smell the sweat of everyone. She can hear a child from one of the cabins, looks left and see an old hyena holding a big head mask. He puts it on the little kid. The Hyena takes her teddy bear and smells it. Then he noticed the young woman. He closes the cabin door. The loud slam of the closing door scared the child. The woman can hear the kid crying. Her heart beats faster and faster, and it gets even more crowded and hard to walk. Farther down aisle, in a cabin, a group of people are trying to fit a regular, large cow inside their cabin but

it's too big. They push the cow until she can see the cow's skin tearing off, and the cow is wailing, but they won't stop. She wants to run but she cannot, because it's too crowded. It's hard for her to breathe. The aisle gets more chaotic and full with the crowd.

It seems she's somewhere close to the train restaurant as some people have giant dishes of food. As they try to find a way to move forward, they keep spilling food. She moves over and goes by a window and opens it. All she can see is water. The railway goes through a green sea, and nothing else can be seen. She tries to breathe after she opens the window. There is a small slit to let the air pass. Then, a stranger, a white fox-headed man, grabs her hand. The fox man looks very pretty. The fox smells her neck and kisses her face. She calms down. Suddenly, the fox bites her ear off and starts to eat it, while he pushes her toward the wall. She screams, but people don't even look as they are rushing to get to their cabins and protecting their dishes.

The fox grabs her hair and rips a chunk out. As she screams, he bites and eats her lips and leaves the protagonist on the floor. She tries to walk back to her cabin. She's bleeding and barely able to walk. She gets to her cabin. It's even more crowded than before. Someone is sitting on her spot. She picks up her bag from the floor. She feels hopeless and defeated and tears cover her face. No one even looks at her, except for the first person, the one who offered her the box at the beginning of her trip. His eyes can't be seen well because of the mask, yet it's clear his attention is in the young woman at the moment. Once more, he offers the box, looking at her. She opens the box. There is a big animal head mask inside. It's just like the masks that other people have. She puts it on her face. The person that offered her the box stand ups and gives her his seat. She has the new head on, and she sits down. She stares out and looks at the green sea. Still, behind her, more people trying to fit into the cabin.



## **Rational**

The whole story is a metaphor for adult life. One of the biggest parts of every one's life is social media. It's because of social media we are noticing and watching current events that are happening all around the world. In that moment, we become observers. My story is exaggerated to express the message more effectively. The film will include some disturbing moments and show people becoming indifferent observers, and in doing so they cover their humanity and eyes with the mask. The masks hide their humanity and feelings behind the blank non-human faces. Furthermore, the masks are similar to emoji we use in social media to express our feelings, although most of the time, it's not really the truth about how we feel.

The protagonist appears as a hopeful character to starting adult life, and at the end she becomes an observer and continues to live in the messed up zoo-train. She uses the mask to cover her feelings fears and pain and become a part of the crowd. There are some hints of hope and humanity that can be seen too in the characters; there are still some people left that care about others, such as the man who tries to help her and gives her his seat when he sees her exhausted and hurt. I'm also trying to show an interpretation of social anxiety and being part of the crowd as well as loneliness at the end. Despite being among many people, you can feel very lonely if you don't know them. Most of the protagonist's experience is anxiety, pressure, and discomfort.

Aside from the message, my goal is to build strong visuals, and to exaggerate and manipulate situations to send a message through a visual medium. For example, as she moves through the aisle of the train the pressure and anxiety get stronger. Specific, perhaps unusual color could express that feeling effectively. With this, the audience can imagine smells, be disgusted, and feel the humid warm sweat and sympathize with protagonist. More than color, I wish to explore

the cinematography to develop strong storytelling shots and develop a strong atmosphere in the visual aspect of the animation.

## **Vision**

This film is stylized 2D animation. It includes strong character personality and creativity. Some color scripts can be seen in images I provided as references. The train, which is the only location, has an old fashioned look. The animation is mostly subtle performances, and the scenes will escalate based on the characters' animation and acting.



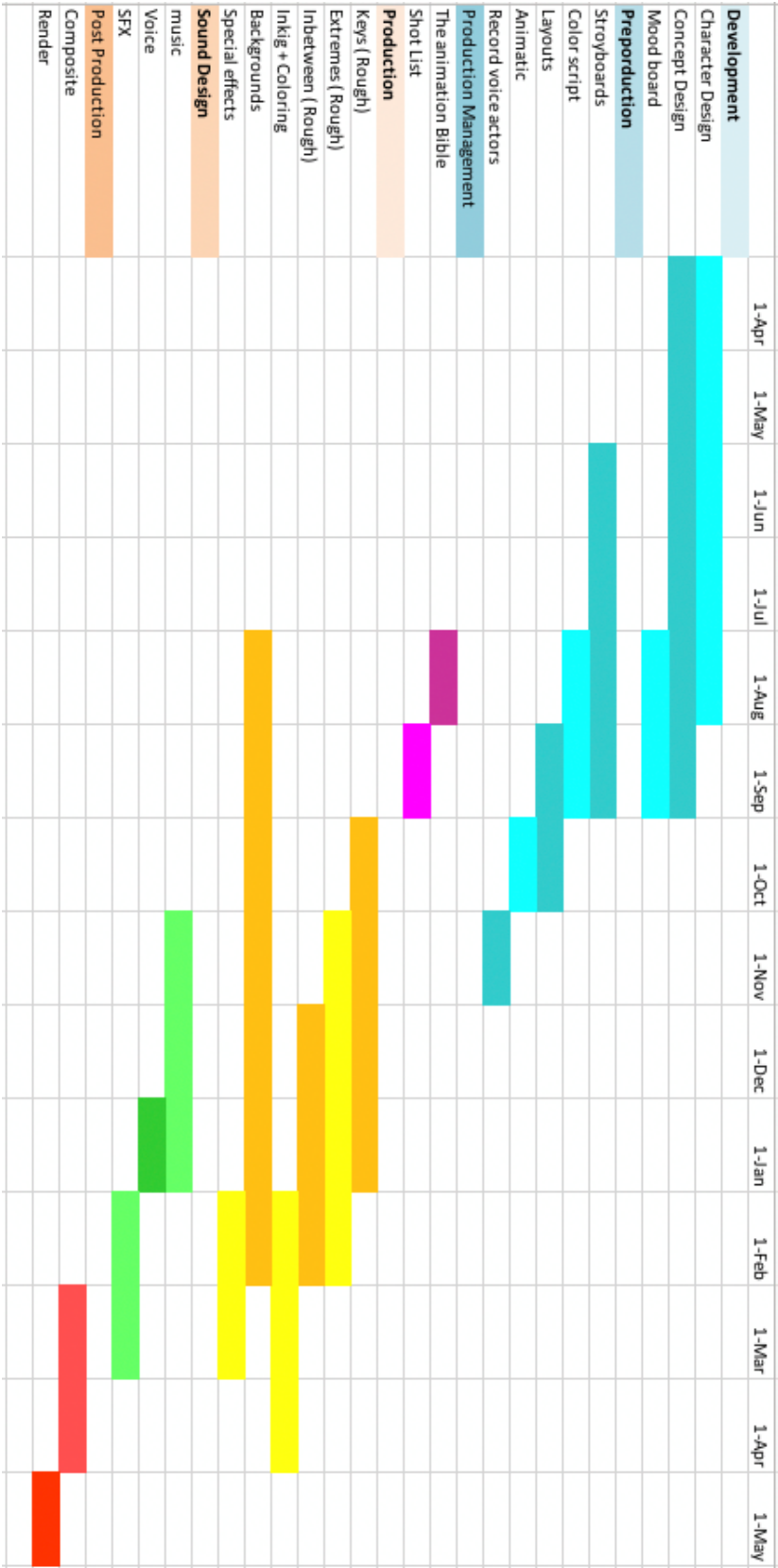




<b>Thesis Production Budget</b>			
<b>Categories and Items</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Fee</b>	<b>Subtotal</b>
<b>Software</b>			
<b>TVP Animation</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>200</b>	
<b>Photoshop</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>In Kind</b>	
<b>AfterEffects</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>In Kind</b>	
			<b>200</b>
<b>Sound and Music</b>			
<b>Sound effects</b>		<b>0</b>	
<b>Composer</b>		<b>200</b>	
<b>Voice Actors</b>		<b>200</b>	
			<b>400</b>
<b>Promotion</b>			
<b>Festival Fees</b>		<b>300</b>	
<b>Poster</b>		<b>35</b>	
<b>Post card</b>		<b>40</b>	
			<b>375</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>Total</b>	
			<b>975</b>



# TimeLine



**Production Stills, *WE EAT* (2019) - 1**

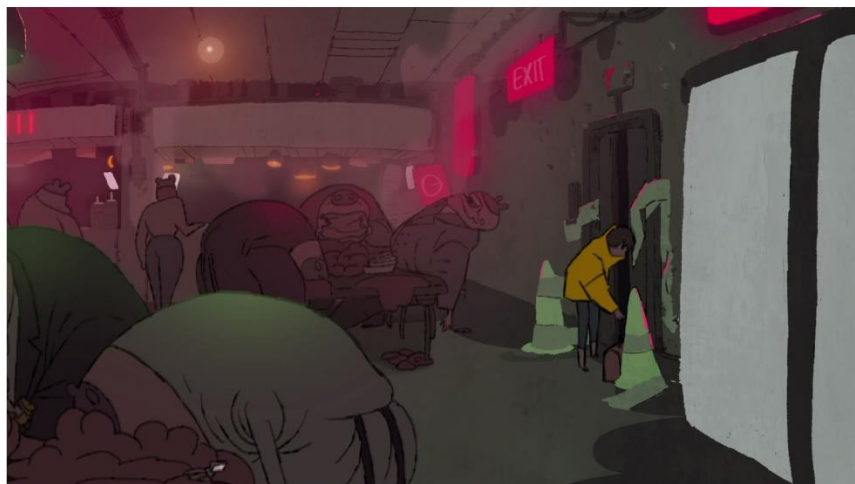




Production Stills, *WE EAT* (2019) – 2



Production Stills, *WE EAT* (2019) – 3



Production Stills, *WE EAT* (2019) – 4

