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Gretchen Miller-Stephan

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Goodnight Irene
by
Gretchen Miller-Stephan

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**MFA IMAGING ARTS/COMPUTER ANIMATION
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
November, 1995**

**Erik Timmerman, Chairperson
Associate Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences**

**Marla Schweppe
Associate Professor
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences**

**Kathryn Vajda
Lecturer
College of Fine and Applied Art, R.I.T.**

Goodnight Irene

I, Gretchen Miller-Stephan prefer to be contacted each time a request for reproduction is made. I can be reached at the following address.

**P.O. Box 868
Lewistown, PA 17044
Phone (717) 899-7679**

**or
(717) 899-6327**

Date: 11/21/95

Like an artist would attempt to paint a portrait, I am trying to do the same in animated form. *Goodnight Irene* is a portrait of an older woman during the course of an evening. Nothing special happens. No climax is reached. It is simply my interpretation of what an evening in Irene's life would be like. This animation is simply a reaction to things that I have observed and tried to understand.

Character Development

Although the character of Irene was inspired by several women in my life, her character is an entity unto itself. There are aspects of my grandmother and other women I have known from her age group as well as aspects of my mother, my sister, and myself in the character of Irene. My grandmother, from whom the essence of Irene was mainly derived, is an older woman coming to terms with the effects that aging has played upon her appearance. Like many women from her generation, she based her self-worth on how attractive she was to men. Her life has been a constant battle with the aging process. Now that she is loosing her battle, all I can do is watch as she becomes the shell of the woman she once was. For my mother, my sister, and myself, it is our fear of her present day situation that contributes to the development of Irene. My hope is that *Goodnight Irene* will be successful in setting a mood, conveying a feeling, and creating an awareness about our society and the demands that it places on its women to be perfect and beautiful despite the inevitability of the aging process.

Irene is a complicated character. She is by no means likable, yet a strange sympathy, if not empathy, should be derived from her situation. Since she was formed out of women that I am quite familiar with, the character of Irene came to me quite naturally. I found myself becoming Irene. Putting myself in the situation that I had created for her forced me to take a good look at myself and my life. I lived that evening over and over again with her. I found myself becoming too close to the character. Who was Irene? Was it my grandmother, my mother, my sister, my friends, or was it

me? I had to come to terms with these questions and reached the conclusion that Irene is an entity unto herself. She is the culmination of some different personalities in my life. I hope everyone, male or female, can find some aspect of themselves in the character of Irene, or vice-versa.

After coming to terms with my character and separating myself from her I had to revise the original draft of my treatment. Originally I had an unnecessary character. In scene one I had introduced the memory of a little boy. This memory was triggered by an old tin toy fire truck Irene found while looking through a chest of memorabilia. This was his first and his last appearance. I eliminated his character because it was unnecessary and confusing. My portrait was not of a lonely old mother, but of a lonely old woman dealing with the loss of her beauty, not a child. I had to narrow my treatment so that the aspect of her that I chose to illustrate was clear and to the point.

Completion Dates

Next, I created an animating time-line. According to it, I was to have completed my Thesis by May of 1995. The animation was more tedious than I had anticipated in the beginning, and a job and additional classes made it difficult for me to devote all my time to my work. I realized that my original completion date was unrealistic for the amount of work that I had to do. I was advised by my committee to move my completion date for *Goodnight Irene* to November of 1995.

Proposal

Before I could begin animating I had to choose a committee, propose my Thesis to a review board, and have it passed. My Thesis Committee was comprised of Erik Timmerman(Chair), Marla Schweppe and Kathryn Vajda. Each came from a different background and perspective, and this aided me in creating a more comprehensive piece. On the day of my proposal I felt confident about my plans for *Goodnight Irene* and felt eager to get the ball

rolling. The proposal went well and the feedback I received from professors outside my committee was beneficial to further modifications that had to be made before engaging in the animation process.

Further Modifications

As a result of the feedback I received from the review board, I came to the realization that Irene had to interact with someone outside her apartment. This interaction would be useful in defining Irene through the eyes of other characters. I decided to do this through her memories. I completely revised scene one. After I had eliminated the boy I had room to add other characters that would enhance my portrait. I added two of them. From the beginning I had an anchor man on Irene's television. I changed his role. The anchor now speaks to Irene. He asks her where she is going. Irene in turn crushes out her cigarette and picks up her whiskey glass. This shot was to be morphed into a shot of Irene sitting on a stool at a bar. In the bar I introduce a new character. This character is just "some guy at a bar". Irene flirts with him and he laughs at her. Irene becomes angered, throws back the remains of her whiskey and slams the glass down on the table in the living room. This is her link back to reality. Upon her return, Irene hears a knock on the door. She opens the door and is confronted with another character. At first Irene sees a handsome man who hands her a dozen roses, but he changes into a salesman, and Irene closes the door in his face. The addition of these two characters helped define the character of Irene. By putting her in situations with other characters, I hoped to create a better understanding of who she really was.

Soundtrack Inspiration

In the beginning I had entitled the piece *Goodnight Irene* and, until Professor Erik Timmerman informed me, was totally unaware that there was a song by Huddie "Leadbelly" Ledbetter under the same name. Upon investigation of this, I found the Huddie Ledbetter song "Goodnight Irene" to

be a perfect compliment to my piece and decided to have this and variations of it as the soundtrack for my animation. My husband Jon agreed to do the soundtrack. Jon has done all the sound for my previous animation as well.

Software Packages

Goodnight Irene was animated using ElectroGIG/3D-GO, Macromedia Director 4.0, Painter 2.0, Dabbler 1.0, Adobe Photoshop 2.5.1, and Morph 2.0. I began with the backgrounds, most of which were originally done in GIG. I built the rooms then played with the camera angles to achieve the perspective that I had in mind for the individual shots. The whole process was reminiscent of my first doll house when I was a child, putting furniture in the rooms and creating environments for the dolls who would later inhabit them. Playing around with texture and other attributes in GIG was really fun. I got some beautiful results that I was very pleased with and was surprised that I could achieve such a painterly type quality in a 3D package. Later, I would bring these backgrounds into Painter and work into them.

Incorporation of Character into Backgrounds

The next challenge was to incorporate the character of Irene into these spaces naturally so that they would not seem too independent of one another. This was very important because even though I created the backgrounds in a 3D package I did not want the cold feeling that is usually associated with 3D work. These spaces had to be livable. I had to convince my audience that Irene actually inhabited them. As I mentioned before, I was pleasantly surprised at how painterly I could make the backgrounds look in the 3D package. This was further enhanced by painting into them myself in Painter 2.0. My Thesis advisor, Kathryn Vajda, was tremendously helpful in encouraging me to make concrete aesthetic decisions about how I approached the backgrounds, and later, how I planned to incorporate Irene into them.

I used a program called Dabbler 1.0 to do my rough sketches of Irene. With this program, I imported the backgrounds from Director 4.0, laid tracing

paper over them, and drew Irene into the spaces. I used a WACOM tablet for all the drawing in *Goodnight Irene*. Both Dabbler 1.0 and Painter 2.0 allow pressure sensitivity while using the tablet. This helped me tremendously while doing my initial sketches of Irene. It cut down on the opacity of the line so I could see the background more clearly underneath the tracing paper. This was difficult, but paid off in the long run. As a result, Irene looked at home in the 3 dimensional spaces. A good example of this is the living room scene in which Irene is sitting in her big green armchair. Notice that Irene does not appear to be pasted over the top of these backgrounds even though she is a separate cast member. My use of shadow played an important role in this illusion as well.

Motion and Timing Considerations

In my previous animation, the movement tended to be choppy and sometimes the absence of movement caused my animation to die in certain places. One of the goals I had in mind for *Goodnight Irene* was to eliminate these problems and keep the movement going throughout the piece. I also wanted to eliminate the choppy movement of prior pieces, and decided to transfer my frames to an optical disc from Director 4.0 as opposed to merely accelerating them in MM Accelerator 3.1. I approached my piece much like a traditional animator would approach his or her animation under a camera. My background in cel animation became invaluable at this point. I was not relying on the computer to do my animation for me. I used the computer to build scenes, to create the frames, and to test them in succession, however, the true movement did not reveal itself until these frames were transferred to optical disc.

I had to take the timing of my shots into consideration from the beginning. I came up with a rough estimate about how long each shot would be. I factored this time in with credits, etc. and came up with a rough idea as to the length of the entire piece. Once this was done I created an animatic

using my storyboard. I scanned each picture that represented an entire shot from the storyboard into the computer and placed them into Director 4.0.

Since I didn't have access to the optical disc player at all times, I had to improvise and figure out the frame to time ratios in my head and hope that they looked right in the long run. Since an optical disc runs at 30 FPS (frames per second), I decided to draw my animation on twos and later transfer them to the optical disc this way. This meant that for every second I had to draw 15 frames worth of animation. When I looked back on how long I estimated that the entire animation would be, this reality became somewhat depressing and I had to find a way to make shortcuts around it without compromising the quality of the animation. This was a challenge, but was necessary because I was faced with a deadline. I could have worked on a piece like *Goodnight Irene* for years and still not be finished. As it stands, *Goodnight Irene* ended up taking me a year to animate, and this was with the shortcuts and modifications that I had made to my original idea.

Animation Shortcuts/Morph 2.0

The Morph 2.0 program helped cut down my animation time. In addition to the morphing I did in Morph 2.0, I was also able to generate in-betweens. For example, say I wanted to show Irene's arm moving upward smoothly. What I would do is draw Irene with her arm down, then draw another with her arm up in the Painter 2.0 program. I would then import both these images (PICTS) into Morph 2.0. Next I would graph out the key points on the start image, then go to the end image and move them to the desired end position. Morph 2.0 then generated as many frames as I wanted between the start and end images and exported them wherever I wanted in my desired file format. In my case PICTS were exported to specified folders on the HD.

Most of the time the in-betweens that Morph 2.0 generated, and the morphs themselves, were very messy and if I wanted to "matte" these PICTS as castmembers onto a background in Director 4.0 right away, I could forget

about it. I have used morphing in all the computer animation that I have ever done, and although it sounds appealing, the clean-up can be exhausting. In the beginning I cleaned up in-betweens and morphs in the traditional fashion, importing them into Director 4.0 and filling in pixels. FORGET THAT!!!! If your hands aren't already dead from being a computer animator, that will do it. I found a way to cut down on the tedious pixel work in Adobe Photoshop 2.5.1. There is a clever little tool in there called a magic wand, and they're not kidding. This tool was helpful in taking away most of the white-ish pixel garbage that surrounded my castmembers, regardless of whether or not I created them in Morph 2.0 or any other program. However, even when I used the magic wand, I still had ample clean-up work to do in Director 4.0, but not half as much. The magic wand aided in saving my wrist.

One thing that I've learned about Morph 2.0 is that it doesn't always do the ideal morph or in-between every time and most of the work I ended up doing myself. Once Morph 2.0 generated my PICTS, I had to import them one by one into Painter 2.0 or Adobe Photoshop 2.5.1 and paint into them. Morphing created jaggy lines that needed to be smoothed as well and made my images appear washed out and chunked up. A lot of this depended on how well I placed my key points on the original images before generating in-betweens. I found that if I started out with an image that was too dark, and an end image that was likewise, my in-betweens came out just the right color.

Even though I did the rough sketches of Irene in Dabbler 1.0, I did very little of the animating at this stage. I used Dabbler 1.0 to make sketches of the major movements and either used Morph 2.0 to create in-betweens, or did them by hand in Painter 2.0. Dabbler 1.0 is not one of my favorite programs when it comes to painting, and I would advise anyone against using it. Painter 2.0, or the new program, Painter 3.0, are the painting programs that I would recommend.

Tools

My favorite tools in Painter 2.0 are water, distorto, and the airbrush. I did most of my drawing for *Goodnight Irene* with the airbrush in Painter 2.0 because I prefer the quality of line it has over the other drawing tools. It's soft and works very well in relation to the WACOM tablet. The pencils and pens tend to be more opaque. The airbrush allowed me to build up the surface gradually. I didn't fill the entire surface in with the airbrush. I colored the most important areas and then blended them together using the water tool. The water tool in Painter 2.0 played a major role in my Thesis. I used it to soften up edges, to blend colors together, and most importantly to create movement.

Early on I didn't realize the full potential of the water tool in Painter 2.0. Initially I used it to blend colors together and to give a more painterly effect to my characters and backgrounds. It was towards the middle of my Thesis that I realized how useful it could be in creating the illusion of movement. I realized that I could use it to make light appear to dance over the surface of the backgrounds and characters even when they weren't moving. This subtle movement added life to my animation in areas where no major movement occurred.

I recognized a need for something like this early on. In shot 4, Irene is sitting in her arm chair. Initially the only thing that moved in this shot was the smoke from her cigarette. My Thesis advisor, Marla Schweppe, pointed out to me that Irene was much too still. Even though Irene wasn't doing anything but sitting and staring at the television, some kind of bodily movement had to occur to make her seem life-like. I played with a number of things, but they just seemed to make her seem to twist around in her chair and my goal was not to make her appear antsy, but hypnotized. I didn't come up with a solution to this and decided to move on until I could figure something out. Many of my shots called for a similar solution. I knew that if I could solve this problem for shot 4, my problems would be solved in other shots as well.

Storage Solutions

As I mentioned before, any time I wanted to overlay a castmember on to a background in Director 4.0, I had a lot of tedious pixel work to contend with. I put up with this for a long time, cleaning up edges on all of my castmembers pixel by pixel. The magic wand in Photoshop 2.5.1 made it a little easier, but didn't solve my problems completely. I had a discussion about it with a fellow graduate student and friend, Elouise Oyzon. I explained to her how dealing with the edges of my castmembers was frustrating and how it caused a "stiff" quality in my work. I wanted my animation to appear more life-like, and I wanted my characters to interact with my backgrounds instead of just appearing to lay over top of them. Elouise was familiar with my work and expressed a concern for how tightly I was working. My previous work had been very loose and expressionistic, and my new piece was beginning to appear rigid and overworked. She asked me why I felt I had to lay my castmembers "over" the backgrounds, and suggested drawing right into them. At first I thought this seemed ridiculous. Because I was dealing with limited megabytes, the very thought of how big each of my PICTS would be was depressing and they would be very expensive to store. Then I started thinking it over and realized that she was right. The next step was to figure out how I could afford the memory that I would need accommodate all those PICTS.

It was about this time that the Iomega Zip 100 drives and discs were starting to become popular. I had an 88MB SyQuest drive I was using at home. 44MB and 88MB SyQuest discs are very expensive ranging anywhere from \$50.00 to \$75.00. The Iomega Zip 100 drive cost approximately \$200.00, but the individual 100MB discs cost only \$20.00 each. I invested in one of these drives.

One of the biggest reasons that I put up with the tedious pixel work in Director 4.0 was my limited storage space. That way, only one background needed to be imported into the Director 4.0 program, and the individual castmembers could be laid over top of it. Now that I had the Zip drive, and

memory was so inexpensive, I no longer needed to worry. I felt free to paint, and no longer had the handicap of pixel work to contend with. This was when I began to explore new possibilities using the water tool in Painter 2.0.

I had a good deal of my animation completed at this point. I was still bothered by problems like I had experienced in shot 4. My solution, now that memory wasn't a problem, was to export each of my frames out of the original Director 4.0 files and paint the castmembers into the background using the water tool. I still used castmembers and backgrounds, only now I got the movement correct in Director 4.0, paid no attention to the pixels, and exported the individual frames of the animation as PICTS to my HD. I then opened each of the PICTS up in Painter 2.0 one by one and painted the characters into the backgrounds with the water, and various other tools. I then imported all the PICTS back into Director 4.0, placed them on the stage and played them in succession. This took some time, but the results paid off.

Animation Shortcuts/Painter 2.0

It was at this point when I realized how I could use the water tool in Painter 2.0 to my advantage in cutting down on my animation time. For example, when I was creating holds at the beginning and the end of my shots, I didn't want those holds to be dead, or motionless. I wanted some sort of movement. It was the same movement that I was looking to create for shot 4. I exported the beginning and the end frames from each Director 4.0 shot as a PICT. Then, I opened these PICTS in Painter 2.0 and used the water tool to move the color around. I saved the new PICT as a variation, then opened the original and did the same thing about 3 to 4 times. Light appeared to dance over the surface as a result of the water work I had done in Painter 2.0 when I played them side by side in the Director 4.0 score. This was my solution for shot 4 as well. Instead of seeing just the smoke move in the shot, now light seems to dance over Irene and the background bringing everything to life and making an otherwise uneventful shot very dynamic.

Another tool that was great to work with in Painter 2.0 was the "distorto" tool. This came in handy when dealing with fabric. Fabric is very hard to animate. I had a couple of shots in my animation that required me to make fabric appear to move. One of the shots that required fabric movement was shot 42. In this shot I had to make Irene's evening gown appear to fall down the small of her back. I started with a drawing of the dress still up as if Irene were wearing it. Slowly, frame by frame, using the distorto tool, I pulled the paint down (the blue paint of the dress), and painted flesh tone where it had been. Using the water tool, I smoothed everything and blended the colors together. As a result it looks as if the fabric is actually falling.

Running Tests

I did rudimentary testing of movement in Director 4.0. This gave me an idea of how the animated shots would look, but the computer caused frames to chunk, and the wipes between each picture slowed things down considerably. Even when accelerated, the movement was inconsistent. This only served to give me an idea of what I actually had. I had to use my imagination to fill in the gaps. I didn't see the actual movement until I finally transferred my individual frames to optical disc towards the completion of the piece. Luckily I had taken the timing of my movements into consideration from the beginning and was relatively pleased with the results. One of the biggest disappointments to me was how quickly the shots went by.

A big problem of mine was trying to edit everything together from the very beginning. I got so anxious to see the pieces put together that I neglected some very important aspects of the editing process which affected my animation timing. Pauses were a big problem for me and I had to learn how to utilize them to my advantage. When I started animating I was thinking of the shots in succession, barreling into one another for dramatic effect. This caused my shots to go by too quickly. I didn't realize how quickly these shots went by until I dumped them to optical disc and did a rough edit. Erik

Timmerman, the Chair of my Thesis Committee, recognized this problem and spoke to me about pauses and dramatic effect. I needed pauses in my shots so that my audience had time to absorb what was happening in my animation.

I was fortunate that I tested my timing out on an optical disc and did a rough edit early on. This gave me time to do all my shot revision and to tighten things up for a good edit. It also served to give me a concrete understanding of what I had, and what I needed. My experimentation with the water tool in Painter 2.0 came in handy and made the holds that I needed and the revision work that remained quick and painless.

Credits

For my credits I used the opening shot of scene 2 where Irene turns on the bathroom light. As Irene turns on the light the beginning titles come on. Irene then turns out the light when the beginning titles are complete. After discussing my titles with Marla Schweppe, I decided to make the color of the font warm in keeping with the work I had done with lighting throughout the body of my animation. I darkened the bathroom wallpaper in the background so that the titles would be legible. I placed the end credits on the same background but left out the hand and light action. My main concerns when it came to the credits were that they fit into the context of the animation, that they were legible, and most importantly, that they were TV safe.

Editing/Problems and Solutions

The final edit of *Goodnight Irene* was yet another learning experience. Professor Erik Timmerman aided me in this stage of the process. Because I had followed the original storyboard very closely, the majority of my shots came together quite well, however, there were some adjustments to be made.

One of the most important adjustments that I made to the piece was in the beginning scene. Originally I had the anchor ask Irene where she was going, implying that Irene looked much too dressed up to be sitting around

her apartment. Irene then looked from side to side as if trying to figure out where the voice had come from. Upon realizing that it had come from the TV, Irene proceeded to crush out her cigarette and pick up her glass of whiskey. This shot then dissolved into the first shot of Irene at the bar on the stool. Professor Timmerman and I both agreed that this editing sequence didn't read well. We went to work trying to figure out a way to reconstruct the shots in order to clarify the transition from the living room to the bar. Our solution was to change the anchors line to "You're home early tonight Irene." and then, from a straight forward close-up of Irene, cut straight to the first shot of Irene at the bar. This sequence gives the audience a glimpse of what had happened prior that evening to make her come home prematurely. This eliminated the need for the dissolve entirely, and also eliminated the need for the shot in which Irene turned her head from side to side. That shot had been confusing and unnecessary. The shot had been one of the more difficult to animate, and was one of my favorites. As painful as it was, I had to get rid of it. Once all the necessary adjustments had been made, the pacing was correct, and I had my committee's approval on the final edit, Jon was free to begin laying the soundtrack.

The Soundtrack

As I mentioned earlier, I had decided to use the Leadbelly song "Goodnight Irene" as a basis and inspiration to my soundtrack. The original Leadbelly song accompanies the credits at the end of my animation. No permission was needed to use this piece. Leadbelly never copyrighted his version, and it is the property of the Library of Congress. Jon created variations on the original song and incorporated his own music into the soundtrack. His instruments included a twelve string guitar, a traditional acoustic guitar, an electric guitar, and a bass guitar that he recently built himself. Jon used digital delay and recordings of a guitar in reverse to create the eerie echoing effects. He recorded the soundtrack over the course of 4 days on a 4 track recorder in our living-room. Jon recorded sounds that could

be generated in our apartment such as the knock, and the switches. For the sound effect of the light clicking on, he recorded the sound of the light in our bathroom which is a pull string as well. Subliminal inspiration is a funny thing and ended up working to my advantage. Jon does all the voices in *Goodnight Irene*.

I've put my heart and my soul into animating *Goodnight Irene*. There are so many things that I wish I could go back and change or completely redo, but as Marla Schweppe says, that's for my next animation. There were times when I thought about dropping everything and heading west, but I stuck with it, and I'm glad. It's nice to have some closure for once this year. I feel confident in my piece and hope that others can gain some understanding as a result of my efforts. My hope is that *Goodnight Irene* is successful in creating a social awareness, and that everyone who sees it, both male or female, can gain some insight as a result of Irene's situation. Irene has no closure, she goes on. I in turn can say good-bye to her for now.

Goodnight, Irene.... I'll see you in my
dreams.