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LE COUPLE

By

Junran Mo

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IMAGING ARTS/COMPUTER ANIMATION
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION
COLLAGE OF IMAGING ARTS & SCIENCES

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
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ABSTRACT

“LE COUPLE” is an animated graduate thesis film with a total timescale of 6 minutes and 40 seconds. The intent of “LE COUPLE” is to talk about a story of love, but not in a clichéd manner. Since Jieting Chen¹ and I worked together before, we have a very strong personal connection. As usual, we wanted to make the film into a comedy.

The film is a hand-drawn animation that was produced primarily in TVPaint Animation Software.

This paper outlines the entire film creation process from my point of view. It details the very beginning of the story development to the final moments of finishing the film. It describes all my intentions, obstacles, failures and successes, as well as technical specifics of process.

¹ Jieting Chen: 2D computer animation MFA student.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First I would like to thank my partner Jieting Chen. Without her dedication to this film, the number of good ideas visualized would have been greatly diminished! She was of great support to me, kept me motivated and encouraged throughout entire process, and most importantly, she helped me remain excited about making this film. Another person important to me during the making of this film was Professor Brian Larson, my thesis advisor and chair at the School of Film and Animation. He acted as a third professional “eye” for Jieting and me, helping us to keep the whole film together from beginning to end. I’m very appreciative of all the valuable suggestions Professor Larson offered. It’s very easy to go off the road when two people work on one thing for one and half years. I am very appreciative of Professor Tom Gasek and David Sluberski, also. As my committee members, they offered many very interesting and constructive suggestions, as well as helpful feedback. I also would like to thank our composer, Yuya Takeda, who was so talented and patient when working back and forth with us, and Professor Stephanie Maxwell for giving such a beautiful speech on our screening day!

Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to my family and friends; without their support I could have not produced such a great film.

INTRODUCTION

The making of the graduate thesis film “Le Couple” began in August 2012 and lasted until December 2013 as a final project within the MFA animation program at the School of Film and Animation of Rochester Institute of Technology. It’s a two-MFA-student collaboration, consisting of me (Junran Mo) and Jieting Chen. It’s the first time MFA students have been allowed to collaborate on one thesis film. Our work was done under the supervision of our thesis committee members, Brian Larson, Tom Gasek and David Sluberski. The whole process consisted of:

- 1.preproduction: story development, concept design, storyboards and layouts
- 2.production: animation and coloring
- 3.postproduction: compositing, visual effects, sound and music design

I had several goals to achieve for this project. The first was to tell a story as a director; let the audience understand what I am trying to deliver in this story. “Le Couple” is based on a simple situation but told in 3 different parts, so it was a challenge for me and for Jieting.

My second goal was to be able to handle the serious emotional character animation. I wanted to apply all my knowledge of animation principles to this film to bring out the personalities of the characters.

My last goal was being able to stay dedicated to this film till the end. One and half years is a long time for a project, I knew we would make it eventually, but I also knew I had to deal with lots of problems. It was a very precious learning experience of my life.

PRE-PRODUCTION

Story development and proposal

The creation of the story was not that difficult for Jieting and me since we already had a lot of ideas in mind. I was going for a love story between a couple; she was thinking about doing a fantasy world with a bunch of little monsters. We both wanted to make a comedy. We had collaborated before on our two-quarter film, which was the second project we were required to produce in year two of our MFA programs. We were comfortable working together and didn't worry too much about coming up with an idea. Similar to the way we came up with an idea for our two-quarter film, we wanted to have fun in animating our thesis film, especially since it would take more than a year to produce. Most importantly, we wanted everyone who watched our film to laugh. That's the simple idea behind it.

We didn't have too much stress on the story creation. One day, I was telling Jieting my idea, saying:

...The story happens at a café and involves four people: one couple and two girls. The two girls featured are also best friends with the girlfriend of the couple. The situation is the girlfriend complaining to her friends about her boyfriend while he is sitting in front of them. I really want to show the boyfriend's point of view. How does he bear with her? What is his reaction when he is embarrassed and angry... ?

As I dug deeper I found it would be so interesting if I showed what actually happened in his mind. For everyone else, he was wimpy and nice, however, his mind was in a totally different world. It was a good start, but I couldn't give that story an ending. However, I got inspired to start exploring the essence from that first story:

An imagination world and a reality world.

I could put whatever I desired into the imaginary world, and by playing around with the contrast between those two, I could have a fun story. Jieting's idea was then being able to combine with mine. It was a win-win case. But again, we still didn't have the story. It's just a model of how Jieting and I could tell a story that incorporated both our ideas and goals.

Making a simple story with a big meaning behind it.

We both agreed we wanted the story to be simple, but the meaning behind it to be big. The beginner's first mistake is often trying to make the story too complex and then later on finding out it is out of control. Brian's suggestions and comments on the story were:

“...Are you comfortable to make that? Is that in your skill set? Do you have to learn to do more in your thesis, or you do it with the knowledge you have? Thesis is a final presentation showing how much you learned from the past.”

I understood that, and I also wanted to learn from the process when I made my thesis film, since it's a long project. It was a matter of how much I needed to learn opposed to how much I already knew.

The story was narrowed down to one couple in an apartment as below:

“LE COUPLE”

It's a quiet peaceful night. There is a couple sitting by the dining table. A bony, wimpy guy looks at his wedding photo and smiles. In the photo, the wife is very sexy and beautiful. As the camera pans down from the photo, there sits the

same woman, but she looks very different from the wedding photo. She is now quite fat, years after their marriage. She is watching a funny TV show, starts to giggle and turns to laugh. The look on his face suggests that this is a nightly occurrence.

The husband starts to drink from the soup bowl in front of him, the whole time glaring at his wife. But, suddenly, his wife's loud laughter makes him choke on his soup. Meanwhile, she is so happy that she starts pounding the table. All the things on the table are dancing. The soup splashes on his face, hair, and everywhere. The husband clenches his hands, grabs the soup bowl and throws it at his wife. The bowl hits her forehead, bounces into the air and drops onto her face.

He shakes his head wildly and is quickly brought out of this imagined scene and back to his living room. The wife, unharmed, gets up from the couch and leaves the room.

The wife walks into the kitchen and starts to wash the dishes.-She turns on a radio near the sink and begins to dance and sing to the music playing. Her heavy steps crack the floor with a squeaking sound and the whole house is bouncing along with her. The husband, standing in the doorway holding his empty soup bowl, glares directly at his wife. He cannot stand it. He starts looking for something that can shut her mouth. He opens his eyes wide and searches on the table. He finds a paper towel. He quickly grabs it, wraps his wife, puts her into an Egyptian coffin, and locks it. Then the doorbell rings. The UPS guy is at the door. He gives the coffin to UPS. It is shipped onto a plane, onto a ship, onto a camel's back, and arrives at the center of the Egypt. But it's not enough. He then builds a pyramid around it.

He is again by the dining table. His wife, with a night mask on her face, takes the dessert out of the fridge. She eats the cake like a lady, fingers up and delicate, but shoves the food in her mouth without a hint of grace or poise. Sitting next to her, the husband snarls his lip as he stares at her sloppy mouth. Slowly, his imagination turns her in to a non-stop eating machine, food and fingers flying everywhere with no end in sight. She bursts into a big monster and starts to eat the plates, the dinner table and everything that she can reach. The man cannot hold himself in anymore. The fire of anger bursts out of his back and he turns into a giant masculine man. He jumps on his wife and plugs one of his hands into her throat. He drags the food out from her stomach. His

wife starts to shrink, becoming a stack of boneless fat meat on the ground. It disgusts him. He stuffs her into the dishwasher and turns it on.

We got stuck at that point. We didn't know how to end it. Every detail was so exciting, but how could we keep that excitement till the end? We had the perfect build up, but it was also a tough one to handle. We turned to Brian for help. His suggestion not only solved the problem, but took our story to the next level. Here is how he ended it:

Husband sits in the bed, hands folded across his chest. Meanwhile, wife is taking the shower. She turns off the water, and smashes the door open. Under the purple silver moonlight, there stands a sexy fat lady in a slinky, sexy nighty. He is stunned. She runs to the bed, causing the house to shake again. However, his face doesn't seem annoyed by that. Instead, as the wife's shadow covers him gradually, he smiles more and more happily.

Yes, that's the one he loves!

We were extremely happy about that ending! It was a little R-rated, but that was our style.

We used this version for our thesis proposal. I clearly remember presenting the proposal; it was in Room 1118. And, the people in the room were: Brian, David Long², Malcolm Spaul³ and Charles Bandla⁴.

Brian explained the story and how can we work together as a team for our thesis film. All of them had questions about this "fat wife" we had in our story. They said it's a little prejudiced, and everything she does shows us pointing the finger at "fat". Malcolm suggested we show the wife's point of view, how does she react to husband's reaction, so she is not just a mindless obese woman. He

² David Long: Associate Professor, BS program Chair/Film & Animation

³ Malcolm Spaul: Professor, Administrative Chair/Film & Animation

⁴ Charles Bandla: Lecturer/Film & Animation

suggested we show the interaction between the two. After roughly 15 minutes, Malcolm and David raised hands for passing, Charles passed the story, but rejected the teamwork.

There is no precedent of MFA students doing collaboration for the thesis film. Jieting and I became the first to do so. Charles said the MFA is a degree proving you are an independent artist, not an ordinary art employee. MFA requires creativity and independence, as well as having executive ability. Jieting and I both agreed and disagreed with that. Brian was on our side. He explained that all production needs cooperation, from big to small, and live action to animation. Even the independent animators in the industry were all hiring a small group of artists for help. (It turned out Jieting went to work for Bill Plympton⁵ while we were working on our thesis.) Jieting and I had already proved our independence and executive ability on our One-Quarter film, which was our first film project in the first year. We all did that on our own. And we had experience working with each other on the Two-Quarter film. The school decided to talk about our case in the faculty meeting.

The result was not unexpected. We could work together, and we needed to sign the contract⁶ of our duty in our thesis film.

We kept working on our story, since we felt there was a little bit of violence on the third imagination part. After all, they were a loving couple. They wouldn't have thoughts to actually hurt each other. So we changed the third imagination into an even more abstract scene:

⁵ Bill Plympton: Bill Plympton is an American animator, graphic designer cartoonist, director, screenwriter and producer best known for his 1987 Academy Award-nominated animated short *Your Face* and his series of shorts *Guard Dog*, *Guide Dog*, *Hot Dog* and *Horn Dog*.

⁶ Contract: See appendix A

The wife loves to eat dessert after dinner. Just like usual, she takes the vanilla pudding from the fridge. She walks to the tiny couch which could have accommodated both her and husband. But since she gained so much weight, she takes 3/4 of the space and squeezes the husband into a match.

Sitting next to her, the husband snarls his lip as he stares at her sloppy mouth. Slowly, his imagination turns her in to a non-stop eating machine, food and fingers flying everywhere with no end in sight. She bursts into a big monster and starts to eat the plates, the dinner table and everything that she could reach. The man cannot hold himself in anymore. The fire of anger bursts out of his back and he turns into a superman. He jumps into a food world and she chases him right behind. After several rounds of battle, he slashes her into pieces and she explodes.

As to Malcolm's suggestion, we agreed with him and understood his point of view, but that was not the type of story we wanted. We wanted to play the contrast of fast and slow, noisy and quiet, big and small, sloppy and sexy. It was a story based on a man's point of view showing how much the couple loves each other. It would flatten out the whole story and pace if we added the wife's point of view. According to Brian's words:

"...It's your film; do whatever you want. There is no limitation for animation."

We got Brian's encouragement. And the story was ready to go.

Concept Design

Background Design

Concept Design consisted of the character and background design. It began in September 2012. I was in charge of the character design and part of the storyboards, and Jieting was doing the animatic storyboards and most of the background design. We did not move on to the background painting till one year later. I was taking classes in Gnomon School of Visual Effects in Los Angeles. The journey in California definitely helped me on my thesis film, as well as in making my career decision. Jieting at that time, was in New York City being the intern for Bill Plympton. It was a complex situation for Me, Jieting and Brian. We were in the different cities as well as time zones. Jieting flew back every once in a while for the meeting, and I was on the other side of the SKYPE.

In the very beginning, I didn't have any particular style in my mind. Meanwhile, , Jieting and I did a rough storyboard based on the story. We had to plan out the layout for the living room. The TV, dining table, and wedding photo were the main elements. So, the dining room and living room should be in one space. I started the living room design to give each of us a direction. Whether it worked or not, at least we would have a beginning design:



image 1: first draft of living room.

Then we started to have a picture in our mind, based on this very first draft. We talked about the style we wanted to do, and based on the complexity of the whole process, we decided going for Jieting's style decision: simple organic shapes, simple line and texture.

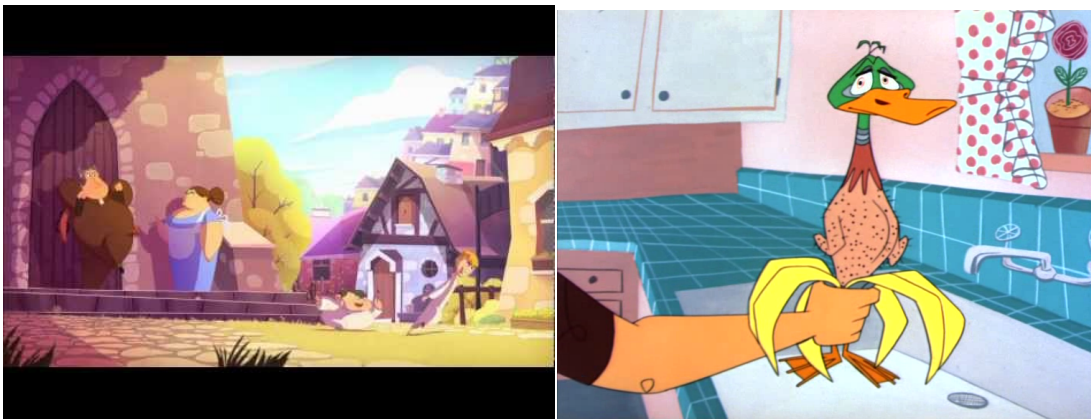


image 2&3: Picture on the left is my style sample image(Goblins-Annecy2012, short film "Hurley's Irish"). Picture on the right is Jieting's sample Image: (Tex Avery cartoon)

Then I did the prop design based on the style sample:



image 4: furniture design

She soon got a living room concept done, as below:



image 5: living room concept

In the very beginning, I was thinking about using 3D background in the film as a timesaving technique, since the shots we had on the storyboards consisted

of different camera angles. And before we actually moved on, I blocked out the living room and bedroom just for a test, based on the concept Jieting gave me. See the 3D rendering below:

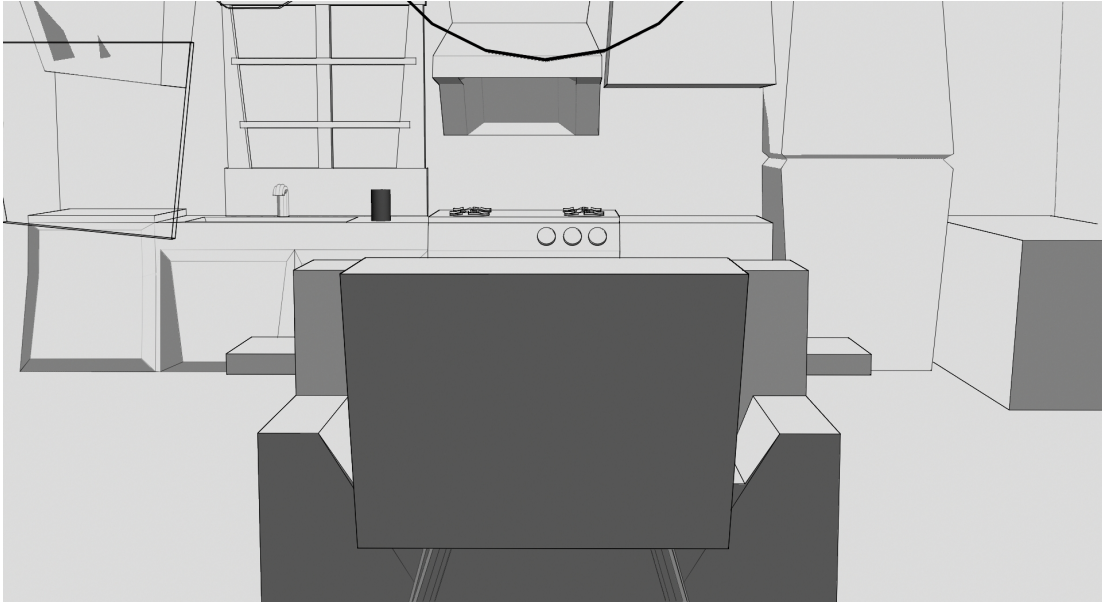


image 6: living room 3D blocking

Jieting didn't like the "neat" and "clean" outline that 3D rendering had. She wanted it looking like a loose hand-drawn style. I don't have much experience on the cartooning rendering in Autodesk Maya and there was no one around who had that aspect of experience. It was then we decided to go back to a full hand-drawn background. The 3D blocking rendering was not wasted, because we used that as a reference background for our animation as well as for our later background painting.

The story in the living room is mostly happening around the dining table, kitchen and couch. We got two different moods for the living room. In the very beginning, it's in a fun and relaxing mood, we used the bright colors to suggest that. Later on, we used a very dark blue tone for the build up for next "food

monster” scene. I chose purple blue for cool and pink and lemon for warm tones to suggest the sexiness in the bedroom.



image 7&8: third scene in the living room

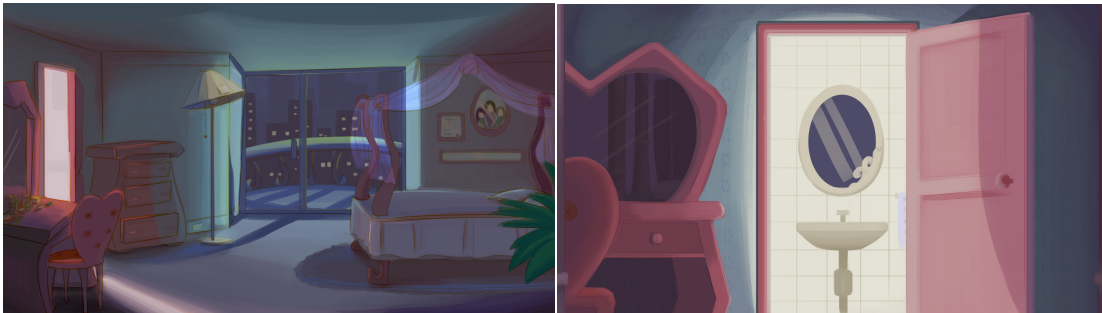


image 9&10: last scene in the bedroom

I also designed the opening shot background, however it was quite a long development before we decided to use the final one. The idea behind that was, I wanted an open shot of the street where the couple lived. At the same time, I wanted the audience to be able to look closer and longer and see the apartment in which the couple lived.



image 11& 12: The first try and second try



image 13&14: The third and final: it's a pan up shot, everything was done in separate layers

I did not like the color choice or the mood in the third version. I finally came up with the one on the right, and I am satisfied.

Character Design

There are two main characters and two side characters in the film. The husband and the wife are the main characters, while the USPS deliveryman and the food monster are the side characters. The character design, the initial background design and the finding of the style were happening at almost the same period. I was thinking about the Goblins style (*image 2*) while I was doing the first draft of character design as a base for exploring. I found out it required a background story for the characters because our film is highly dependent on character animation. Only by truly feeling my characters as I designed it, could I bring out the personality in design language. We discussed the character traits and background story through Skype, and here they are:

Husband

Key words: wimp, tolerance

He is a good employee: 9 AM to work, and 5 PM to home, never late for work, never late for home. He is a simple person; he does not require much in his life, a family and job are all he wants. He proposed marriage on their first anniversary, and thought he was the luckiest the guy in the world when she said “yes”. However, life becomes watered down by the daily trifles. Nothing was exciting after several years of marriage. None of that mattered now actually; what bugs him more is her. She changed so much since the day they met, not her personality,her size. Everything she does now is not that bearable. But, don't get him wrong, he still loves her; it's complex. He doesn't want to talk about that, because the problems are so small, insignificant. Men don't whine. That belongs to women. But as the trifles build up, it really can drive people crazy. He wants to find a way to let out everything.

Wife

Key words: happy, sexy

She is a happy woman, a housewife. She doesn't have much skill to make a living, but her cooking is outstanding. She is a nice person, sometimes clumsy. She was a beauty back in the college days. It was quite an image when she was walking on the campus with all the admirers following behind. But she doesn't care about that. I would say she is not programmed in the same way as everyone else. She likes to stay in her own little world, does things she likes, never forces herself to do anything to please someone else, does not care other people's thoughts, but nothing she does offends or harms anyone. She is a pure angel, I would say. After marriage, she started to enjoy cooking, and nothing makes her happier than to see her husband eating. She noticed that she gained "some weight", but she doesn't worry about it so much. What's more important is her hobby. She doesn't sense his upset state of emotions, because in her mind, everything is ok and will be ok.

Food monster

Key words: sloppy, eat

The food monster is hungry all the time; it needs to eat to keep itself awake. All the things it eats are absorbed in its body. It retains the stuff it eats, and grows bigger and bigger.

USPS deliverymen

Key words: fast, funny

They are ordinary deliverymen, they have their own lifestyle outside of this job. The short guy is a street rapper, and the big guy is a body builder and personal trainer. This job is just another income resource for them to support their hobbies.

My job after this was to translate all the words into designs. The shape and proportions had to be associated to the personality. I was constantly asking myself about the design, “does this look like the one from the story?” “what’s missing?” I always walked away, then came back and looked at the design so I would have a fresh eye.

I looked at the key words when I drew the big shape. For husband, he is wimp and tolerance. Bony, skinny limbs with a big head couldn’t fit those words better because he is a person that takes pressure, and cares about others words: negativity is in his life. He couldn’t be fat, or strong. I let him wear an unbuttoned shirt and underwear to suggest he just got off work.



image 15: husband design

I exaggerated the wife’s fat, making her look round, because the round shape suggests approachable and nice subconsciously. I also spread her eyes apart to hint “low intellectual”. I made her get into a pink pajama to emphasize her happy and sexy personality. Again, the exaggerated shape could let the audience feel what he feels towards her.

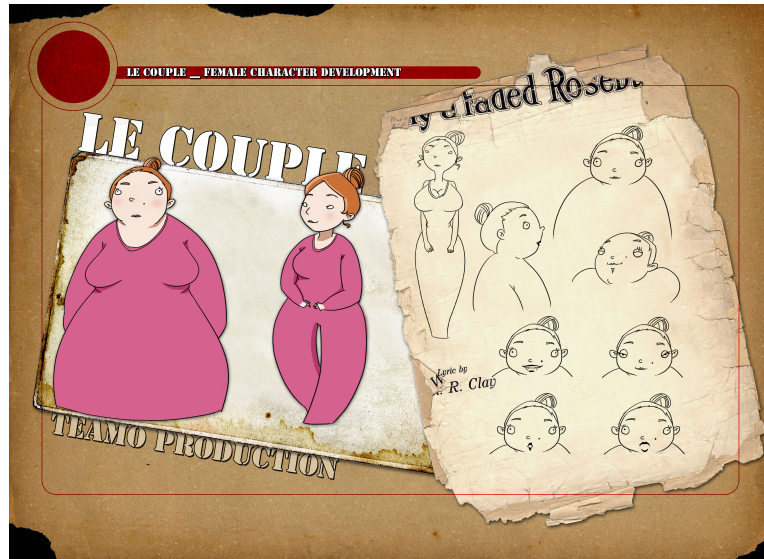


image 16: wife design

I wanted to make the deliverymen funny for the first impression since they would only be on the screen for about 5 seconds. Because of their brief appearances, I needed to give a deep impression to the audience of what they are, what they do by the design.



image 17: USPS deliverers

When I designed the food monster, I was thinking about how to make it not as scary, but bad at same time, because it represented his wife. It was a fine line

for me: if I went too far, the food monster would look evil, which was going against the topic of the story “love”. He loves his wife, he just wants to vent in his own imagination. He does not intend to kill her. He just simply wants her to stop eating. So I gave it a round shape and bright color. The inspiration came from the creature slime.



image 18: food monster

Storyboards

Storyboards were the first step of visualizing the story; Jieting and I both did some storyboard work. She did the first draft, then I did the second draft based on it. The second one focused on adjusting the camera angle and movements to give the story a beat, a dramatic effect. For example: the scene when husband stands up and grabs the paper towel. In the second draft, I changed the camera angle to looking down on him as he stands up, because I wanted a dramatic look to that transition. The second draft was our base for the future development work. I created 3D environment block-in for the rough animation. Jieting did the animatic based on that second draft.

The animatic was a brief visual introduction of what exactly happened in the animation. We had a shot list, which was about the shot length, the action, and the background number. The animatic was based on that as well as the storyboard. It showed the whole rhythm of the story. We would get a sense of whether it was too long, too slow, or too fast. Timing is the key to the storytelling, especially in this film. It's a comedy. When we came up with the story, we knew it would depend heavily on timing, not only the animation timing, but the plot timing. For example, we timed the shots in order to build the audience's expectation, then timed the shots for the punch line.

Because of the huge amount of background designs, we had to cut down some of the shots, or change the shot to compromise the background.

Production

Animation

The animation began in December 2012 and lasted until October 2013, from rough key to clean up. Based on personalities, the treatment for each of the characters was different. The husband has a stiff personality. His movements were designed to be limited. On the contrary, the wife has an open personality. Her movements were designed to be lively, same for the deliverymen and food monster. The other reason for this set up was creating a contrast between the characters, adding an extra vitality to the film.

For the technical aspect, I had two options in front of me: digital all the way through, or hand drawn key frame, then scan. When I first tried to draw on the TVPaint, I was not satisfied with the line work. The characters appeared jittery, instead of the smooth quality that the pencil gave me. Drawing on the tablet feels totally different from a sheet of paper. So I did the rough key on first shot. It took me almost three hours. The reason it took so long was because I erased a lot. If I did it in digital, I would have saved a lot of time by using “un-do”. I figured out I needed to get used to my tablet. I was using digital all the way after that.

Coloring

It took us almost 2 months to do the coloring. As usual, I was cleaning up and fixing animation at the same time. I always got a better idea as I looked at the shots. And the same time, we were doing the background painting. Jieting and I shared a drop box, we kept each other updated with the new info. We had a color chart as reference, as well as the concepts of living room and bedroom. Everything was quite in order. Jieting told me a way to make the coloring

process easier and painless, which was to fill the character with solid white, then lock the paint layer and color on the top of it. The benefit of that is the paint would not go out of the whites, which saved a lot of time.

The character should always pop out from the background, so we slightly altered the character's color palette. I was thinking about tinting a character in purple as the background, then I didn't do it because the character would lose its focus to the audience.

Postproduction

Compositing

Even though we had a shot list and a clean up version, it still needed an adjustment of the timing for the final colored version. Another reason for adjusting the over-all timing is the music. Sometimes, one more second of a pause means a lot to the overall feeling.

There were not many VFX required being put down in After Effects. The only part having the effects is the food monster-fighting scene, and Jieting drew everything. I added particle effects in the last scene, the purpose being to bump up the overall atmosphere.

For the title animation and ending credits, we didn't do a fancy design. We wanted everything to be brief and simple. However, we did have some fun when creating the ending credits. We used the music from the Egypt scene, and I sang along with the beats, and every beat was a film credit.

Music and sound

Luckily we found Yuya Takeda, who graduated from RIT, and was the composer for another undergrad's thesis. When we had most of the animation done, he was in Japan. We had enough time for him to come up with the music and explore the one we both liked. It was hard for Jieting and me to describe what kind of music we exactly wanted due to lack of experience in music composition. All we could do was show him the example we liked. Fortunately, he understood our animation, as well as our broken words. However, it was still a long development. Sometimes he hits the right direction, and we encouraged him to go ahead, then he would totally go off path. Sometimes he played around with the experiment of his own understanding, and it totally surprised us. We loved working with Yuya, and he delivered a great music piece.

We had a blast when we were making the sound effects for the film. We didn't like the sound effects library on the Internet. We wanted to design it on our own. First we were just doing the regular sound recording. For example: I patted the table to mimic the sound of wife thumps on the floor, scratched the bulb to mimic the sound of spoon in the bowl. But then we soon found out there were some sounds we couldn't make with the limited tools we had in the Foley Room. An epiphany showed up in my head, and I said, "let's just play!" Then I did all the sound effects on vocal mimicry. The final result turned out great and natural.

Reflection

Working as a team:

Jieting and I were working remotely during the whole production. We were comfortable with this, since we knew each other.

We spent a huge amount of time on the visual development. It was an on-going thing for us. Actually, we were still doing our background painting while coloring, which was the last stage of the animation. We didn't wait for each other coming up with the design, we all had our own version of the design, some of them were on the storyboard, some on the sketchbook, some were fully rendered. We picked whatever had the best appeal, showed them to each other, and chose what was the best that fit the story. Of course, we had a same standard for the quality of our final image, so we always gave feed back to each other when anyone of us had some work done.

We all had our own distributions on work. Jieting was in charge of all the BG design for the imaginary scene. I did the reality scene. Everything was half and half, just to show that we all have the ability to do everything in the whole animation process. Working as team was just a choice of being able to tell a better story in a short amount of time. (compared to the size of our project, one and half years was fair enough for both of us working on it.) The story was told in two parts: imaginary and reality, and that was our distribution: I did reality, and Jieting did the imaginary.

Challenges and triumphs

There was an issue about our story. In one of the committee meetings, Tom was asking about how we would distinguish between the reality and imagination since it was really easy to confuse the audience. In the storyboard, we played

around with the camera movement and angle. It was more dynamic and exaggerated in the imagination than in the reality. This was especially true of the first imagination; it only had 9 seconds and would be overlooked very easily. The solution we had was to clarify all the elements that suggested the “exotic” to the imaginary scenes:

- More abstract background design. There are no details for the background design, and there is monochromatic tone for the background. High contrast shadow.
- Color glazing on top. A red color multiplied on the top.
- Exaggerated animation. Jieting used limited animation technique. The character was placed into the other “world” which was obviously not in the same space.
- Transitions. The first time it was used is in the huge camera pan with everything changed back into the reality. The second time it was used was in the “cloud” faded out. The third is the big explosion.
- Music. Dramatic music matched the theme in the animation, which was totally different than the reality’s.

The challenge of doing storyboards is first: creating the things on a blank paper. We had a few discussions about how the shots would look like. Jieting did a great job by coming up with the first draft. Mostly it was based exactly on the story. The second is the film language. How can we make each shot connected to each other, how can we create the sense of continuity? We had to change some shots to fit the story.

Animation was one of the most exciting parts of my thesis production. I was a little afraid of starting it because I had a high expectation of the final look. I always set a goal that is probably higher than I can reach. It is a good and bad thing. The good side is I will keep moving and improving. On the other hand, if I can't deal with it, I will soon get depressed. So, during the whole production, especially in the animation process, I experienced ups and downs a lot.

I was in a learning and doing status throughout the whole process. There were lots of challenges for me, but luckily I had Jieting and Brian. I had difficulties on the dancing scene. Originally, on the storyboard, it was depicted by some close up shots of dancing feet. Then Jieting showed the animatic to Bill Plympton. He said it happened too fast, and was not depicted well. It didn't deliver the message of "she is heavy and annoying" enough. It needed more shots to describe it. So I deleted those irrelevant close ups. It took me quite a long time to come up with the final dancing scene. Also, I always had problems with the continuity from shot to shot. I guess it was due to the lack of experience. For instance, the pose from the previous shot does not match the pose from the next shot. Another example was when she turned up the volume, the husband didn't have a reaction right after. It seemed like the two characters were doing their own stuff, they didn't exist in the same space. Brian's suggestion for that shot is below:

...Her dance across the screen (1:13) to get his plate is too fast. This almost needs to be twice as long. It's a new event and sets off his next act of rage. When she turns up the volume, can he react? He could turn back and glare at her, I don't know if he needs a whole new cut to do this. If he looks at her, THEN at the wall, it at least motivates the cut to the picture on the wall, otherwise, why are we looking at this and then back at the girl exercising or dancing on the TV?

We had several committee meetings during the production period. In one of the meetings, Jieting and I showed the rough animation, and we got some really valuable suggestions:

One was the idea of her squeezing herself into the couch, and knocking off his cake. It made me laugh for a while in the meeting when I heard it, as well as when I was animating that scene.

Another one was we needed to pay attention to the subtle facial expressions.

The third one was the sound indication, which would help a lot for telling the story in the Egypt scene.

The fourth one was the most important. Brian suggested slowing down the pace for the last scene when the wife came out of the bathroom. It needed a slow build up. Lots of cutting back and forth from the wife's action and the husband's reaction would really add some flavor to the climax. We needed to give time to our audience to taste that moment.

I spent a large amount of time fixing my animation. The more I animated the better I was. I had spacing problems, especially in the shot when the wife sat down on the couch. Instead of easing in and out, I bunched the spacing together, and that took me 3 days to fix. Sometimes when I looked back at shots I did weeks ago, I was amazed at how bad I was, so I went back and fixed them. I was animating, learning and fixing at the same time.

Conclusions/Experience

The experience I gained from the whole process of creating this thesis film is invaluable. I started this film as an ambitious amateur, thinking I could do whatever necessary to make it great. During the production, I gradually realized how much further behind I was than I initially believed. I was frustrated, but only by moving forward can I improve. I was not 24/7 committed to the thesis film, and school required us to do some thesis research. I was taking online classes at the same time, and found out there was a whole new world out there and I was so small. I am glad that I “woke up” that time. I learned that everything, I mean EVERYTHING is connected to each other. That means, when I was learning the background painting, I was also getting the knowledge of creating the character. When I was learning the character design, I was also getting to know how to make a strong pose for my key frame in animation.

I am super fortunate to have all the people that helped me on this film. The experience was incredible for me; soon I began to understand Brian’s point of view as he gave out the suggestion for the film. It was not simply fixing the animation based on his suggestion, it was gaining another aspect of the knowledge and applying it to my work. It’s more than a thesis film; it’s a lifetime fortune that I found.

Appendix A

“Le couple”
by Junran Mo & Jieting Chen

GRADUATE THESIS

Approved for submission by:

Brian Larson(Chair)

Synopsis

'Le Couple' takes place in a pathetic, boney, wimpy husband's imagination. He imagines multiple (and over-the-top) ways to express his grievances about his fat, loud, messy wife, but never carries it through, as there is one profound quality that she alone possesses that makes him stay with her.

Rationale

Our goal is to create a 5-minute animated short. The story is about love and warmth in life, and we will try to convey it in an interesting way.

The design of the characters will be quite dynamic, as well as the animation itself. After exploring the progress of film making, we discovered that the biggest difference between our animation and the professional's is not only the ability to animate, but also the method of storytelling. So we want to challenge with the storyboard, to study different approaches of showing images and movements, and to experiment with transitions between shots and scenes. Thinking of the nature of animation, we decided to push the limit while designing animation. The humor and gags will be mainly shown through the acting of the characters, and also the physical nature of their figures.

Teamwork

After collaborating on a 20-week project, we found our animation style and sense of humor match very well. There are strengths we could share, and weaknesses we could improve upon during the film making progress. We share the same sense of humor, and our different techniques could contribute to the concept. Junran Mo's strength in story development compensates for Jieting Chen's lack of interest in this area. Also, Jieting can do character animation and sound editing. Junran can do the compositing and VFX. We have found that teamwork produces better works in the same amount of the time.

The division of work is listed below:

The work of script writing is shared to make sure both of our idea can be included in the final piece.

Since the storyboard is an important part of our process, we are planning to split the duty in order to get a better result. Junran will be in charge of the reality

sequences and gag development. Jieting Chen has a stronger cinematic sensibilities and fantasy effects; as a result, she will be responsible for the imagination sequences and battle scenes.

We will both search for a unique style of character and background designs, and engage in the design process. We will each design several sets of characters and backgrounds, and then pick a final set for use.

We will work closely throughout the animation process. The scenes and shots will be devised according to the action. We will divide the work evenly, assigning shots according to our strengths. The same applies for background painting.

During postproduction process, Junran Mo will be responsible for editing and visual effects, while Jieting Chen will design the sound effects and edit the sound.

Treatment

It's a quiet peaceful night. There is a couple sitting by the dining table. A bony, wimpy guy looks at his wedding photo and smiles. In the photo, the wife is very sexy and beautiful. As the camera pans down from the photo, there sits the same woman, but she looks very different from the wedding photo. She is now quite fat after their marriage. She is watching a funny TV show, starts to giggle and turns to laugh. The look on his face suggests that this is a nightly occurrence.

The husband starts to drink from the soup bowl in front of him, the whole time glaring at his wife. But, suddenly, his wife's loud laughter makes him choke on his soup. Meanwhile, she is so happy that she starts pounding the table. All the things on the table are dancing. The soup splashes on his face, hair, and everywhere. Husband clenches his hands, grabs the soup bowl and throws it at his wife. The bowl hits her forehead, bounces into the air and drops onto her face. He shakes his head wildly and is quickly brought out of this imagined scene and back to his living room. The wife, unharmed, gets up from the couch and leaves the room.

The wife walks in to the kitchen and starts to wash the dishes.-She turns on a radio near the sink and begins to dance and sing to the music playing. Her heavy steps crack the floor, with the squeaking sound and the whole house is bouncing along with her. The husband, standing in the doorway holding his empty soup bowl, glares directly at his wife. He cannot stand it. He starts looking for something that can shut her mouth. He opens his eyes wide and searches on the table. He finds a paper towel. He quickly grabs it, wraps his wife, puts her into an Egypt coffin, and locks it. Then the doorbell rings. The UPS guy is at the door. He gives the coffin to

UPS. It is shipped onto a plane, onto a ship, onto a camel's back, and arrives at the center of the Egypt. But it's not enough. He then builds a pyramid onto it.

He is again by the dining table. His wife with a night mask on her face takes the dessert out of the fridge. She eats the cake like a lady, fingers up and delicate, but shoves the food in her mouth without a hint of grace or poise. Sitting next to her, the husband snarls his lip as he stares at her sloppy mouth. Slowly, His imagination turns her in to a non-stop eating machine, food and fingers flying everywhere with no end in sight. She bursts into a big monster and starts to eat the plates, the dinner table and everything that she could reach. The man could not hold himself anymore. The fire of anger burst out of his back and he turns into a giant masculine man. He jumps on his wife and plugs one of his hands into her throat. He drags the food out from her stomach. His wife starts to shrink, becomes a stack of boneless fat meat on the ground. It disgusts him. He stuffed her in to the dishwasher and turns it on.

Husband sits in the bed, hands folded across his chest. Meanwhile, wife is taking the shower. She turns off the water, and smashes the door open. Under the purple silver moonlight, there stands a sexy fat lady in a slinky, sexy nighty. He is stunned. She runs to the bed, causing the house to shake again. However, his face doesn't seem annoyed by that. Instead, as the wife's shadow gradually covers him, he smiles more and more happily.

Yes, that's the one he loves!

end

Timeline

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Character Design																			
Concept Design																			
BG Design																			
Storyboard																			
Animatic																			
Reference Shooting																			

	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39
Animatic																				
Reference shooting																				
Animation (Rough KFrame)																				
Animation (KFrame CleanUp)																				
Animation (Inbetween)																				
Animation (Paint)																				
Background																				
Music																				

	40	41	42	43	44	45	46
Animation (Paint)							

Background							
Visual EFX							
Compositing							
Title/Credits							

Budget

Categories and items	Cost
Hardware and Software	
Drawing supplies (pencils, paper, paint)	\$100
TVP Animation 9.5, Student discount	\$335 * 2 = \$ 670
Adobe Creative Suite, Student discount	\$359 * 2 = \$ 718
Sound	
Composer	\$300
Release	
DVD + case	\$50
Promotional posters	\$50
Festivals	
Entry fee	\$300
TOTAL	\$2188
Contingency 15%	\$328.2
FINAL TOTAL	\$2516.2

Contract

This is a thesis animation project for Rochester Institute of Technology MFA degree.

AGREEMENT made in _____, by and between Jieting Chen and Junran Mo.

Both Jieting Chen and Junran Mo shall do their duty, and be responsible for their jobs as follows:

Character Design: Junran Mo, Jieting Chen
Background Design: Junran Mo, Jieting Chen
Concept Design: Junran Mo, Jieting Chen
Storyboard and animatic: Junran Mo (reality)
Jieting Chen (imagination)
Animating: Junran Mo(reality)
Jieting Chen (imagination)
Postproduction: Junran Mo (compositing and VFX)
Jieting Chen (sound editing)

During the filmmaking process, both Jieting Chen and Junran Mo shall offer help to each other if one of them is unable to finish the job on time. Both Jieting Chen and Junran Mo will understand and accept any contingencies and delays during the production, and will finish the animation for the purpose of receiving the MFA degree.

Signature

Date

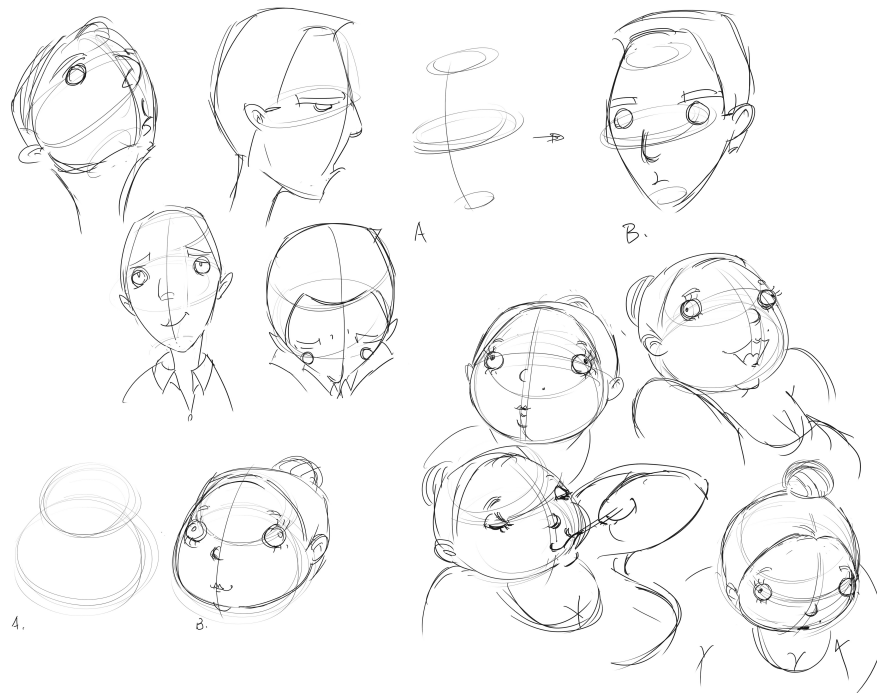
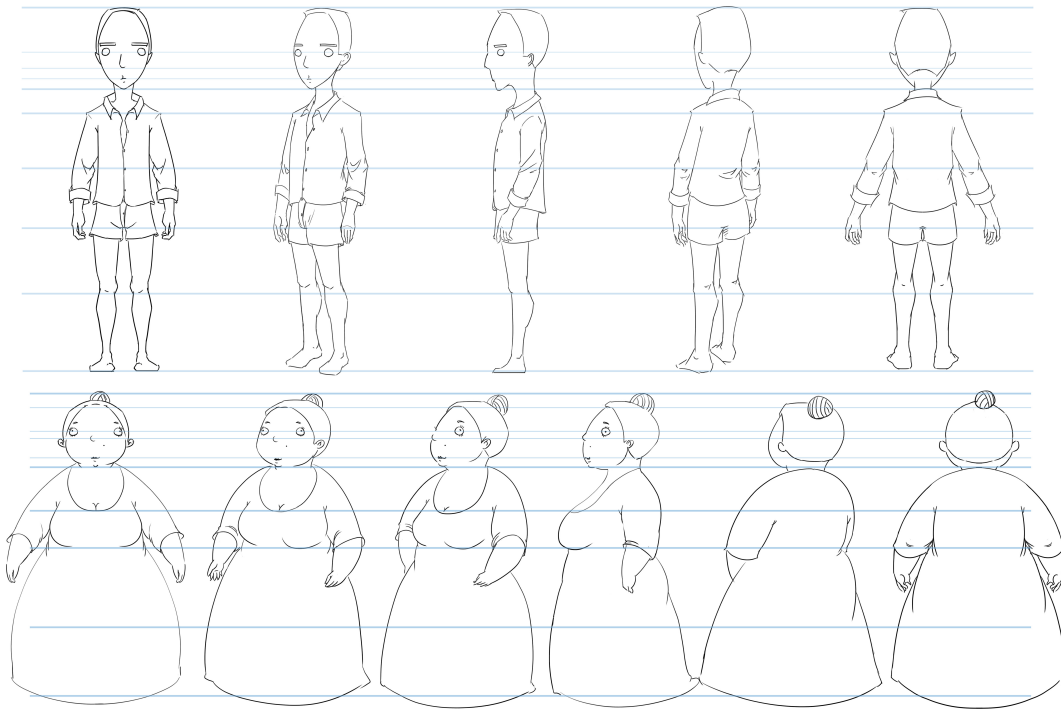
Signature

Date

Witness by

Appendix B

Model sheet



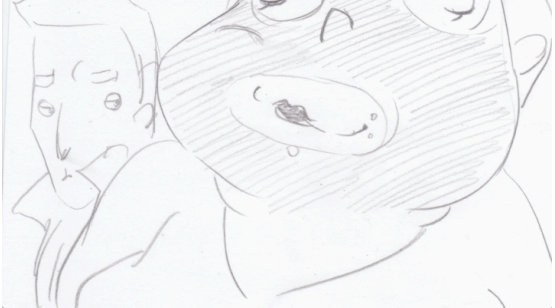
Appendix C

Shot List

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	#	Shot	Action	BG	Length	
	1	Establish shot Pan	Night street.	1	4s	
	2	Wide Zoom in	Outside the window of the Apt.	2	5s	
	3	Full shot	Husband stares at the wall.	3	2.5s	
	4	Full shot	Wedding picture of the wife on the wall.	4	2.5s	
	5	Middle shot	Husband stares at the wall.	5	1.5s	
	6	Full shot Fast pan down	Camera swifts down from the wedding picture to the wife who is obviously not in a good shape. Wife is eating her dinner happily.	4	6s	
	7	Middle shot	Husband sighs, stirs his soup	5	5.5s	
	8	Wide shot	Couple is eating. Wife is watching TV.	6	1.5s	
	8.5	CU	The show on TV		1.5s	
	9	Middle shot	Wife bursts to a big laugh.	7	4s	

10	Middle shot	The laughter is loud. Husband chokes while sipping the soup.	3	2s	
11	Middle shot	Wife is pounding the table, facing the TV	4	2.5s	
12	Middle shot to a close up	Husband watching his wife, speechless. Camera slightly zooms in. Husband becomes angry.	5	3.5s	
13	Close up	Husband grabs the bowl.	8	1s	
14	Wide shot	Husband stands up, throws the bowl toward his wife.	6	1.5s	
15	Close up	Bowl hit the wedding pic on the wall	9	1s	
16	Close up	Bowl hit the light.	10	1s	
17	Close up Camera rotates	Bowl hit wife. Camera rotates from wife to husband.	11	6s	
18	Wide shot. Bird view	Two people sitting by the table. Fan rotating. Music coming from the TV	12	5.5s	
19	Wide shot	Wife put down the bowl and spoon, stands up, turns left.	13	4s	
20	Over the shoulder	Wife walks to the left	3	1s	
21	Close up	Husband looks to the left.	5	2.5s	
22	Wide shot	Wife dances through the screen, sings along the TV.	15	3s	
25	Wide shot	Wife dances and grabs husband's bowl. Then she walks out of the frame to the right.	3	3s	
26	Close up (Foot)	Wife dances.	16	1.5s	
27	Full shot	Teapot shakes.	17	2s	
28	FS	Wedding photo shakes	4	1.5s	
29	Full shot	Plates thrown into the sink	18	1.5s	
30	Middle shot	The house is shaking. Husband's hair bounding.	5	1.5s	
31	Close up	Water runs	19	1s	
32	Full shot	TV program.		1s	
33	CU	Clock ticking on the wall.	21	2s	
34	Close up	Wife is washing the dishes.	18	1.5s	
35	Wide shot	Wife washes dishes in the house. Music and noise mumbling	23	3s	
36	Middle shot	House shaking. Husband's hair bouncing.	5	3s	
37	CU	Phone rings. Wife picks up the phone, camera zips to the mouth	24	1.5s	

	38			24	1.5s	
	39	Full shot Fisheye effect	Husband stands up, reaches to the right. Wife back faces to the camera	26	6s	
	40	Close up	Husband grabs the kitchen towel.	27	1s	
	41	Middle shot	Husband grabs the kitchen towel.	5	1s	
	42	Middle close up	Wife talks to the phone. Husband wraps his wife with paper towel.	28	3.5s	
	43	Close up	Husband rotates his wife. Wife spins.	28	2s	
	44	Full shot	Wife spins	29	1s	
	45	Wide shot	Wife spins in to the coffin. Coffin closes.	29	3s	
	46	CU	3 Lockers on the coffin locks down one by one Door bell rings.	30	1.5s	
	47	Wide shot	Door bell rings. Husband zips to the door, opens it.	29	1.5s	
	48	Middle shot	Husband opens the door. Outside there are two UPX men.	32	1s	
	49	Wide shot	UPS men zip to the coffin.	29	1s	
	50	Middle shot	UPS men zip out. husband hair follows the wind	32	1.5s	
	51	MS	The coffin on the plane. Plane noise.	33	1s	
	52	wide shot	Ship on the screen. Ship alarming	34	2s	
	53	Extremely wide shot	Camel carries the coffin. Camel is very small on the screen. Silhouette. Very, very quite. (follow next shot)	35	3s	
	54	Extremely Wide shot Zoom out to Middle shot	A huge, huge pyramid (almost cover the whole screen) drops on the top of the camel. Camera zooms out of husband's head.	35 6a	8s	
	55	Middle close up	Wife wearing a night mask opens the fridge door.	37	2s	
	56	Middle shot	Husband sitting. Wife squeezes in. starts to eat. Husband glances at her.	6a	6s	
	57	Close up	Wife squeezes in the couch. Husband stares at her boobs.	6a	2s	
	58	Close up	Wife tries to use the spoon like a lady but takes a big chunk of cake.	6a	1.5s	
	59	Close up	She eats the cake with a loud sound. Husband's head 从妻子左□探出来, looks embarrassed, watches his wife. Wife is eating with a happy face. 这个镜 头的构图和景别改成原 61shot。	39	4s	

						
60	Extremely close up	Wife eats with her mouth full.	39	2.5s		
61	Close up	Husband is watching.	39	3.5s		
62	Close up	Slow motion. Wife is eating. Camera drifts in.	39	1.5s		
63	Close up	Wife takes another big chunk of cake.	6a	1s		
64	Close up to extremely close up	Camera zooms in. Image of wife in the pupil slowly turns into an eating monster.	N/A	6.5s		
65	Middle close up Fisheye effect	The monster scares husband.	43	2s		
67	Full shot	The monster crawls down the sofa, approaching the camera.	6a	5s		
68	Wide shot	Monster approaching husband, eats the TV.	45	3s		
69	Full shot	Husband is scared, hides from the monster. Monster approaching.	6a	4s		
70	Extremely wide shot	Environment change to a world full of food. Monster bursts out. Husband jumps back.	47	3s		
71	Wide shot	Monster chasing the husband.	48	4s		
72	Wide shot	Husband jumps on the ground. Monster follows.	49	2.5s		
73	Full shot	Husband turns a chopper out. Monster jumps toward him.	50	2.5s		
74	Full shot	Fighting sparking.	51	3s		
75	Full shot	Husband jumps, waving his chopper.	52	1.5s		
76	Wide shot	Monster dodges, flies toward the camera.	51	2.5s		
77	Extremely wide shot	Husband runs, monster follows.	53	2s		
78	Full shot	Husband jumps down. Monster follows. Husband jumps up to escape.	54	2s		
79	Full shot	Slow motion. Husband waves his	52	1s		

			chopper.			
	80	Middle close up	Slow motion. Husband waves his chopper.	52	1s	
	81	Full shot	Chopper flashes through monster's body, she explodes.	55	2.5s	
	82	Extremely wide shot	Light ray flashes through the sky.	47	2s	
	83	Full shot (side view)	Husband sitting on the bed, looks depressed. Camera moves to the left, shows the door of the bathroom. The door is slightly open and the warm light leaps out.	56	5s	
	84	Close up	Wife takes a shower. Steamy.	57	2s	
	85	Close up	Sound of turning water off. Wife steps out of the bathtub.	58	3.5s	
	86	Wide shot	Husband sits on the bed. Wife walks in the bathroom.	59	2.5s	
	87	Middle shot	Wife puts the sleeping dress on, pulls her hair out.	60	3.5s	
	88	Middle shot	Husband looks at the bathroom with an expecting face.	61	1.5s	
	89	Close up	Wife closes the button	62	2s	
	90	Close up	Light suddenly hit on husbands face.	61	1.5s	
	91	Full shot	Wife stands by the door. Silhouette. steamy.	59	4s	
	92	FS	Slow motion. The shadow of wife steps out of the door	56	2s	
	93	Close up	Slow motion. The house shaking, the hair of husband bouncing.	61	4s	
	94	Middle shot	Slow motion. Wife running towards her husband. (side view)	56	6s	
	95	Close up	Slow motion. The shadow on his face gets bigger.	61	6s	
	96	Middle shot	Super slow motion. Wife runs toward the husband. The house is shaking.	63	4.5s	
	97	MS	The bed shakes, and curtain flows, suggesting that the wife lands on the bed.	64	4s	
	98	Full shot	Wife jumps on the bed and hugs her husband.	65	1.5s	
	99	Close up	Husband stuck in her breast. He smiles with a happy face.	65	2.5s	
	110	Close up	Wife pulls the rope on the bed to close	67	1.5s	

	0		the curtain.			
	110 1	Full shot	Shot of the mirror in the bathroom. We can see the bed through the mirror. Wife and husband lying on the bed. Curtain closes. House starts to bounce again.	68	4s	