UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
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It’s Painful Being A Wisp Of Smoke

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Art

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

It’s Painful Being A Wisp Of Smoke

By

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Master of Fine Arts in Art

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Professor Antoinette LaFarge, Chair

A collection of short essays, observations, and dérives. The piece negotiates the collage of research and experience that informs the creation of a long-form project, in this case the execution of an animated film. Reflective of this, the writing jumps from topic to topic, following the scent of meaning in an art practice. A walk through Los Angeles abuts the screen memory of 20th century animation, leading to a metaphysical discussion of time. The piece muses on the ethics of representation in pornography, while exploring the effects of severe depression on a maker. As with the animated film, Smoke’s Last Thought, the scope of an individual widens over the span of the writing.
Introduction: Why Smoke?

I discovered the character of Smoke before I found her story. Three years ago, walking around Echo Park Lake, some rough version of the following struck me all at once:

Unlike a skeleton whose mobility is limited to fixed spots along the joints, a wisp of smoke eternally shifts. It has no frame to restrict it. Endlessly, it mutates into new, unique forms. Smoke molds like clay to mimic the external. She is a shapeshifter, tethered to the liminal space of a body. The impact of the morphological cartoon character extends well beyond the arena of children’s animation. The shapeshifter influences social equality by offering a counter-narrative to the Newtonian world. In the realm of cartoon physics, an amorphous body has a unique resilience against outside forces because the soft body cannot be restrained or oppressed.

Along with all of its morphological manifestations, Smoke is also the index of a flame. To be Smoke means to suffer a loss. She has undergone a chemical transformation. True to Ovid’s depictions,¹ this transformation is painful, but it will illuminate new awareness in the transformed.² Smoke’s metamorphosis is violent because time bound-creatures cannot go back. Even if they do not want to return to an original state, a time before the present moment, re-chronization is unavailable. Melancholy is a byproduct of the metamorphoses, though not a void in the sense of absence. In the smolder, she emerges anew, complicated, but not weighed down by her change. In fact, Smoke rises. She also wilts, doomed to shrink and eminently vanish. At least for those of us in linear time, Smoke’s fear of disappearance is familiar. It’s this fact of our chronology that creates loss and suffering in the human (or extra-human) experience.
Before she was The Smoke, she was The Flame. The wielding of fire gave early humans the ability to provide warmth, and so to inhabit colder climates. Human digestion evolved with fire, and along with it a slew of culinary progress. That site transformed into the hearth, a dedicated space that eventually grew to include cultural production of storytelling.

Even in those early stages of our species, fire provided movement through animation. For Paleolithic humans, when a flickering flame wobbled across the pocket wall of the cave, painted images must have seemed to move. In the cave paintings of Chauvet, the artist(s) drew animals with five to eight legs, but not because they thought the deer had this body. The Hindu God, Shiva, dances with fire to both destroy and create life simultaneously. I personally experienced the devastation of light when in 2013, a fire condemned Open Space Gallery in Baltimore, taking with it an entire exhibition of my drawings. Fire’s destruction was brutal but all-encompassing. From that loss, I moved to Los Angeles and started on the path of becoming an animator. Sergei Eisenstein, in his writings on Disney Studios, wrote that fire appealed to humans because it was always in the process of becoming something else. He spoke of animation and fire simultaneously, because animation too is continually creating and destroying through change.

Perhaps the human fascination with fire motivated the production of electric light, and in turn, film and projection in the 19th century. Like fire, the projector’s light reveals rendered objects, the characters of a film. Flick off that projector, and that glow vanishes as if nothing was ever there. In the century following the invention of the projector, humans learned that light is a fickle material, both acting as a particle and a wave, proving that even at the smallest vantage point, light will not let us describe what it will be. Just as a film projector flickers on and off,
creating as much darkness as light, the transformation of Flame to Smoke describes presence, defined by absence. Life becomes precious, but stranger, when the void looms just out of sight.

The word animation means to imbue with life. At the time of animation’s invention, human beings optimistically saw themselves as inheritors of the power to create. In 1910, Edison [Cinema] Studios, (the studio of Thomas Edison, inventor of the longer lasting light bulb) revived Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the story of Man acting as God. The gimmick of this film is that moving image brings even a living actor into a state of falsified life. Early animated films like *Gertie the Dinosaur*, included vaudevillian tricks that pushed the separation between humans and his--in these years, they were always a ‘his’--creations. In the case of *Gertie, in situ*, Winsor McCay would talk to his animated creation, and his creation would disobey. This historical film would point to the next century of animative power. The magic of animation lies in the sentience of the created, life-imbued being. A being which has volition, but is created by humanity. My version of Smoke suffers. She has her own volition to do so, but she acts not as a known entity or a human being. Smoke is not a talking plant or animal, but something even further from the human form. She is a vaporous haze, inconceivably talking, thinking, dividable.

And so the Smoke in this film takes on the character of something that seems beyond human understanding. *Smoke’s Last Thought*, and arguably, all animations create empathy for the non-alive. I would argue that some of the incidental thinking that follows is that animations can develop empathy for many life forms, including unlike humans in the same city.
By drawing her body and journaling the above realizations, I started to uncover a narrative around an animated character, were she alive in the city I’ve lived in for the past five years. This is what began to be her journey:

The film begins by framing a flame, shortly to become a smoke. The shots frame her figure, but ultimately, the viewer’s lens widens. As the Smoke rises through a cartoon Los Angeles, the frame splits, a viewer encounters other disenfranchised beings, the Other bodies of the city, and the dividing self of a body that is no longer singular.

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1 “Marsyas.” *Metamorphoses: A New Translation*, by Ovid and Charles Martin, W.W. Norton & Co., 2004. “Even as he shrieked out in his agony, his living skin was ripped off from his limbs, till his whole body was a flaming wound, with nerves and veins and viscera exposed.” Another notable examples of pain and transformation would be: Ajax’s Blood, Echo and the removal of her body, and Philomela and the mutilation of her tongue. *Ibid.*
Upon transformation, Marsyas asks, “Why do you remove me from myself?” Showing Marsyas’ awareness of his own torture.


I’ve tried to recall, but I can’t seem to isolate what source I first learned this from. That said, a quick google search confirms that, at least when it comes to projecting film (and not video) both the modern shutter and the original shutter allowed for 50% darkness to blot out the projected image. I found this video to be particularly good: Hammock, Bill, director. *How a Film Projector Works*. Youtube, Engineerguy, 7 Jan. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=En__V0oEJsU.


Like most days, I spent today at a desk.

At the end of the workday, there is tension in my back and arm. I’m supposed to stand up and do stretches every 20 minutes, as recommended by my doctor and physical therapist. For the most part, I follow these rules, but making my work is still hard on my body.

I pour epsom salts into the tub, flip the tap and light a candle. The bathroom is the only room in my house with a door. I’ve shut myself inside, but it’s a cozy smallness. I crouch into the water slowly, till the needling pain of hot goes away.

The slight flicker of the wick pulses.

[Long interlude]

How long have I been in here? I need to get moving by 6:30 if I’m going to be on time, and anyway the water isn’t so hot as it was before. I should probably pull the plug. The drain gurgles.

Flat-backed on the porcelain, I linger just one moment, then I pull myself up. The first hoist pulls dead weight.

I’m dripping on the concrete floor when I lunge for the wax. Breath whacks the candle. Flame becomes Smoke.

I am wet, lumpy, tired, but her new body contorts like a Butoh dancer. Just as one tendril manifests a definite perimeter, the updraft flicks the stream and a new curve of Smoke writhes. She sings in agony. She ribbons in candy folds, clumping against the ceiling. Her wick still birthing. The Smoke lasts much longer than I expect.
I wipe down the mirror in one arc. A face pops out from the frame. I blink when she blinks. I show my teeth and pick for crumbs, and so does she. A face in sync must surely be mine, but her face is not. I know there’s something eerie in her features, the way when you’re drawing a portrait, if you change one line, the likeness vanishes.

Back in the main room, I dry off by my animation desk.
To Do List (There’s one of these for every shot)

Thumb out the shot

Export audio track from animatic in premiere

Import the palette in Toon Boom

Build the scene, build the layers, name them

Sketch the poses

Draw the background

Draw the key poses on Gil’s front body

Draw key poses on gil behind the towel

Inbetween Gil back and front body

Fill in the colors

Hair pass

Moles Pass

Body Wrinkles Pass

Face Wrinkles Pass

Face sheen pass

Face sheen highlight pass

Dripping water pass

Towel pass

Towel lines pass

Draw the water in the tub
Rubber duck

Candle wick and sink materials

Flame body

Flame face

Flame flickering tendrils

Flame glow

Flame body and wax reflection

5-D line sketch

5-D line drawing (bitmap)

Export each layer individually

Reassemble in After Effects

Blur and layer Gil

Add glow to flame

Color balance

Adjust focus

Add grain

Export from After Effects (will take 20 hours)

Import into premiere

Sync with audio

Watch it in the cut several times

Record sound effects

Add found sound (are there any?)
The Skin is the Largest Sack

Start small, nestled into dense folds and matrices. You grow, bursting through the membrane. You turn to look back at the lump. Its wrapper wriggles, and the organelle ekes out another mitochondrion. It divides. Around you, the city of the cell is bustling with vacuole, reticulum, and the haven of the nucleus. Each piece has its function, yet snuggles alongside another to form a whole. There’s no room for you now, as you grow again. Your head pokes through the cell wall, and there you see a hoard of cells gushing acid. It stinks here. The fumes dissolve incoming nutrients into energy, and the leftover gunk drips down the tubes. You grow, and climb through the stomach tissue to peer back at a hillside of guts. The endless rolling mounds make a bouquet of organs, packed tight, colorless in the dark of the body, but also wet, everything slippery. Are they rushing? No, they pulse. Waves of blood lap at the shores. Each mound connects through tissue, nerve, and vein. But don’t get comfortable. You are growing again and cannot rest. With the tickle of a hair follicle and the lubrication of a sweat gland, you pass through flesh, dense as an orange peel. You are almost out, but a foot is stuck in white muck. Sploosh! Your toes slip out through a puss-filled pimple. “Thank you for popping it!” A voice from above says. You glide through the weft fibers that encase a final sack. Your feet touch the concrete, and you stand looking slightly down at me, my animation desk, and the frame I am drawing.

The above experience could be realistic, if human beings weren’t so restricted by Newtonian Physics, if we could move at the scale of cells, organs, and permeable bodies. A smell
slips through a latex balloon. Why can’t we? If we could, we’d not just know but see: the body is just a series of sacks, all the way down to the cellular or even mitochondrial level. In the physical world, we prioritize the skin because it’s what we can see, but other organs also influence the whole of the self.

A good lesson in mobility is the western foundational animation exercise of the walking flour sack. Before an animator can practice a full skeletal walk cycle, she must practice imbuing a sack with life to make it hobble across the screen. Through this exercise, an animator learns how weight pendulates not just on but inside of the figure. She will also learn to overlap actions. A walk cycle is not a series of independent gestures. Even with a walking sack, one must move all parts simultaneously. The faux limbs of the bag’s corners, the heavity of the ‘guts,’ each has its own cycle of motion that overlaps slightly with the other objects. The student of this exercise must delve into the radically interior, to look for complexity where shallow observation eliminates the detail. Even the parts unseen effect the whole.

In the physical world, movement has a cost. In the American economy, a mobile body generates more capital. I know this intimately. In addition to my practice as an artist-animator, I also work for hire as a freelancer. When a client comes to me with a project, I charge based on several factors. First, is the cost of materials needed to execute the animation. The second is the finite resource of time. Time spent on a client’s project is time I will never have back for my own work or to spend with loved ones. The third feature I charge for is one that didn’t occur to me till later in my twenties when a repetitive use injury forced me to rethink my future in this profession. Animation is hard on the body. Repeating small motions for an extended duration strains the eyes, hands, arm, and back. The painful recovery period that followed my stressed
scapula injury--familiar to animators--forced me to know that the body itself is finite, and just as I charge for the wear and tear on my car when I bill for mileage, I must charge for the expenditure of increasingly limited capabilities of my body. In my early twenties, I used to stay up all night working. Now, almost thirty, I must take frequent breaks. I must sleep. I have reduced the amount of time I can draw to an eight to ten hour work day. I anticipate more changes in the years to come.

How will I continue to build expertise and execute meaningful animations, when the cost of labor is prohibitive, to the point of being absurd?

It’s not just my personal body involved. Animation finds itself in an international labor crisis. At the scale of Disney, Pixar, or even independent studios, production is nearly financially impossible. The only reason these studios can continue to produce content is because they treat human labor as an expendable, constant resource. Don’t let it fool you, the promise of automated animation through computer-generated imagery is, at least at the time of this essay’s writing, not without a significant expense of human bodies. Most of the time, larger US companies export their animation labor to Korea or Poland. Shows like *Adventure Time* are still written and carefully storyboarded in Los Angeles, but the drawing, color fills, and effects, the slow process of actually animating is handled by people who receive none of the credit, and hardly any of the pay. Why? It’s so much cheaper than paying domestic animators a living wage and if animation was any more expensive, it wouldn’t exist on larger networks or as broadly distributed feature film.

Isn’t that depressing?

I’ll change the scope.
In the cartoon world, the body is liberated. A stomach could break free and start its own homestead, maybe even have a family and kids. The body cannot die. Even dismembered arms have volition. There’s no conservation of mass. Mystery spinach appears in the back pocket of exhausted sailors. Magic is possible. Those who cannot speak are given a voice. It’s in the freedom of animation itself that I find a renewed spirit, and the motivation to work through these constraints of the physical body. As much as animation as a practice requires either abundant labor or sufficient capital—the actual space inside of the animated film is untethered. It’s a contradiction.15

In this nugget of confusion, I find the fraught optimism that inspires me to dedicate so much of my life to this form, this craft: animation. It is mainly with the resistance to the studio process listed above in mind that I tend to consider myself an ‘experimental animator,’ a catch-all term for those of us who animate beyond the commercial animation industry. But even with the free designation of an ‘experimenter,’ for me, the labor of animation and the freedom of the animated world remain an aporia of the profession. I prefer to embody the contradiction, for even when the western business-model incentivizes the erasure of labor, animation is a resource for viewers to rethink the burdensome realities of our human world without restriction. In animation, the most labor-intensive practice unshackles the possibilities of bodies unskinned, pluralized, and stretchy.

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14 My sources here are personal friends who work in the industry, particularly for Cartoon Network TV shows.
15 “The Illusion of Illusion.” The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation, edited by Alan Cholodenko, Power Publications in Association with the Australian Film Commission, 1991. p. 293 - 298 “The animator is trying to depict the equivalence between the movement of his hand and the movement of the character, but the enigma of his art is that this equivalence can never be seen.”
Life As Clouds 2

When I leave my apartment, I squint my eyes and cross my arms. It’s a gusty night.

Before I can leave for the night, I must make my rounds. I check on the garden, where the cabbages are thriving. I stick a finger in the soil, testing the wetness. All good. Next, I stop by the chicken coop and count the hens. Only five. So I need to look for Patti. I putts around the shadows of trees and agave, thinking like a chicken, looking for soft spaces. I find her perched on the top of the coop. “Patt-ieeeeee,” I say, and ball her into my arms. The girls have been having a bit of trouble getting in at sundown. I blame the unusually violent wind for their behavior. We’ve found rogue trash strewn through the yard, bits of Amazon packages or plastic containers I don’t recognize as ours.

Leaving the chickens behind, I open the gate to head for the street. The wind still echoes here, met with sounds of rolling tires and an even fainter hum of the 2. I topple downhill.

The first leg of this trip will be easy, though a little annoying. I never cross at Ave 40 where my neighborhood deposits me. That light takes forever. It’s much faster to hang left till avenue 36. But then, to my surprise, the light times perfectly. I run across six lanes, careful to make eye contact with the driver in the last lane, lest they decide to turn for the 2. On-ramp intersections are always less safe for pedestrians. Just as I hit the corner, the next crosswalk lights up, and I run across that stretch too.

I don’t like to stop. Walking is locomotion, constant change through movement. When I walk, every part of my body moves. I feel connected to this process, like my body was designed
to do it. So different from drawing, which is a type of movement I’ve practiced. Something I
willed myself to do so much that it became naturalized in me.

I notice a shrinking amoeba of wetness on the sidewalk. It melds with the pavement like a
shadow. This isn’t a fresh pour. It could be urine, but it could also be a spilled bottle of water.

A man looks back at me from the bench of my favorite bus stop, favorite because it takes
me right into Chinatown. I stare back at him till the point where I’d have to turn my neck too
much to keep his gaze. My thinking is that if he were going to follow me, then he’d have to
already have gotten up and started walking toward me by now. I’m a very fast walker. Besides,
this route is mostly very populated. I am still thinking about this interaction when I approach
avenue 36. I turn right, into the western half of Glassell Park.

Like most neighborhoods in Los Angeles, there’s no one architectural style to Glassell
Park. Spanish tile is—of course—dominant, but there are other looks and even hybrid styles. In
this neighborhood, modernist glass building-block structures sit right next to fairytale tudor (with
yards so green and grassy, their owners must want to pretend this isn’t a desert-city).

A garish pink building rounds the corner at Fletcher. It perpetually advertises, “Rooms for
Rent” with a vinyl banner across three balconies. I saw those rooms on Padmapper a few months
ago. The photos advertised generic studio apartments, starting at $1,100. Though that price
would suggest it, this building hasn’t made the switch into hipster-instagramable-sleek. There are
no brushed brass fixtures or carefully coiffed succulents decorating the exterior.

The last apartment I had in Echo Park had that kind of finishing, along with string lights
in the hallway and an unfinished wooden fence. The fence to that apartment required a gate code,
which made the residents of my building feel safer because I lived a block away from the largest tent village in Echo Park outside of the park itself.

I never saw the tent village being cleared, or I should say, I never saw the cops come and kick people out, but I witnessed the aftermath often. Every couple of days, I’d walk by, and the whole strip would be completely vacant: no carts, buckets, or tents. No people, but the smells lingered, the thick and layered smells of human waste. What little it rains in Los Angeles doesn’t reach underneath the 101 underpass.

The space never stayed vacant for more than 24 hours. In a day, the whole row would renew, with customized tents, carts strewn as walls, and communal spaces. From what I can tell, my neighbors in the tent village were more diverse than any other part of Echo Park I’d lived in. In LA, I haven’t noticed a dominant skin color, age, or gender among the homeless population. My last apartment, however, was 100% occupied with white, whatever I’m supposed to call myself (probably white) and Asian people, all in their twenties and early thirties.

I’m tired of Fletcher, so I follow a synthesizer-whinny from down a side street. To my surprise, even though it’s pitch black now at 7 PM, I begin to see an ice cream truck 100 feet away. The sound emanates from the truck, where I watch a woman and a child, maybe seven years old, both reaching out for ice creams. It’s only when I’ve walked beyond the truck that I sing the tune to myself and realize it. That song was Jingle Bells, and today is February 28.

In the kempt house next to a cluttered yard, a white cat sits in the window. It hasn’t noticed me yet, and so I whistle with one sharp whip of breath. The cat immediately turns to face me. I flick my eyebrows and blow a kiss. Then we both stare back at each other. The cat slinks its tail.
I pass the Tienda where we used to buy avocados for our breakfast, back when Booker had a sublet around here. If the Tienda didn’t carry it, Booker would have needed to drive to get it. I don’t like getting in my car to do just about anything. Sometimes it’s unavoidable, though I think most outsiders under-estimate LA’s walkability.

Four figures slump down the sidewalk. They’re lumbering, forming a dense shadow up ahead. As I get a little closer, I see that one of the figures is wearing a shiny shirt, though I can’t make out what it says. The men walk shoulder to shoulder. I can’t really see how I’m going to easily pass them. Should I slow down and wait? Create some distance so I can walk at my typical stride? A driveway presents itself, and I skip forward, nearly trampling over the unseen little chihuahua leashed and pulling toward the front of the herd.

I get a quick glance at them from the front. They no longer seem large and lumbering, but small and awkward. Their hair runs long, tucked behind their ears but poking out from their hoodies. The shiny shirt is a sports coat from the local high-school. The wind tonight is so loud. I couldn’t hear them from behind, but once in front, I can make out what they’re saying.

(Boy #1) “I wanna do it.”

(Boy #2) “you wanna do what?”

(Boy #1)“What we did last night man.”

(Boy #2) “What you wanna just go to your house?”

(Boy #3) “We can go to my house too.

(Boy #1) “I wanna play [unremarkable sounding video game]”

(Boy #4) [silent]
They recede. My walk is so consistent, my rhythm so quick, they stand no chance of ever passing me again.

As vapor, she precedes the taco stand. Traced by the burnt orange of street lamps, I see a wafting steam, a ground-bound cloud floating on the sidewalk just ahead. I enter it as an airplane into a cloud. Inside the white, a man in short sleeves scrapes the basin of a large pot. Is it even a pot? It’s two feet wide in diameter. He folds juice from a spatula onto glistening tears of meat. Like the wick, the sizzle births the Cloud. Though I stand at her very center, I am not inside of her. She has no inside. A vapor is a decentralized spray of particles, smells, a vagueness of color shifting in the eye of its beholder. Though I cannot place her, contain her, I feel her presence. She—her smell—her body nourishes me with warmth. Wind won’t touch me here.

(Hungry dude) “Do you mind if I put some of this on it?”

(Street vendor) “No, not at all.”

Outside the Street-Cloud, wind resumes.
Cartoon Physics

Here are the rules, at least in precedent, which is always asking to be reversed:

1, Goo

The first and most important feature of cartoon physics is that even negative space contains the possibility of spontaneous creation. Like the nutrient-rich algae from which evolved animal life, a primordial goo permeates the animated film as plasmatic fantasy-creation. In the cartoon, from even a blank background, a singular line can appear without provocation. This line can wiggle, extend, even express feelings. The goo of animation is manifold. It generates not just one line, but all lines, an entire setting. To a human perspective, it is unclear whether the goo is a singular being, a great many beings, or a non-sentient slush. The mass seems to express volition, but primarily through imitation. Like an undifferentiated stem cell, goo contains the ability to become all things, while simultaneously transforming into the next configuration. Goo-objects are in a state of becoming or dissolution. Because of that, Goo is what occurs in between. Goo is liminal and advocates for those who inhabit liminal space. This is the most basic law of animation.

In early animated films like Emil Kohl’s Fantasmagorie, the limned characters stretch with utmost elasticity. In this film and many others from the early animation-era, there is no
distinction between separate forms. All objects have the same weight when they crash into one another.

Toward the end of the short, a line emerges from a void to bisect the clownish protagonist, ripping off his head. The action does not appear to be malicious, or even painful for the clown. There is no lamenting gesture from the figure, and no spurt of blood to define the impact of the slice. In less than two seconds the head is restored on the body. The clown is whole. Watching this, a viewer perceives the entirety of the screen as active space.

Fantasmagorie was made by a single author. The production model he practiced in 1908, would look to a modern onlooker more like an artist painting in the studio, than a team of animators amalgamating a film. With animation in its infancy, filmmakers drew from pre-existing graphic conventions of the artist alone at a workbench, something identified in Fantasmagorie by the appearance of the animator’s photographed hands.

Single-author films are best drawn using ‘straight through’ animating, a process of drawing each frame sequentially rather than ‘pose to pose.’ Straight through animation creates organically composed sequences, as the artist has less control over where the drawings will end up by the end of a shot. The more organic the composition, the wobblier and therefore the more morphable the characters become.

Fantasmagorie, as an example of an explorative, wholly non-commercial endeavor, made in the straight through animation method, is an example of utmost morphology in a cartoon. For this reason, these characters do not seem to experience pain. Characters merge and morph without signs of fatigue. They’re utopian, even in their chaotic antics and highly gendered performance. (A significant portion of the film is spent removing a succession of hats of a plump
bourgeois woman). When all beings or objects can return to a singular plasmatic goo, there is no separation and no hierarchy.

2, The Intelligent Trickster

Because the animated world can generate life from any crevice, the animated universe privileges invention. There’s no shortage of material to limit enterprising solutions. For example, if a villain was chasing you down a narrow hallway with a knife, in a cartoon, you might choose to paint a hole on the floor and jump inside of it. You wouldn’t even need to have the paint on hand. You’d just pull the bucket out from behind your back. There are no material limitations in cartoons. Because of this, in the cartoon, there’s also no need for capital. You don’t need any money to buy that paint, you just materialized it from the goo. Yet if all the possible solutions to attack are endless, the more fantastical, exaggerated solution to the problem will always win. And so, the cartoon world favors intelligent tricksters. These characters use wit to overcome oppression or an oppressor. The oppressor is oppositely burdened by their own reliance on traditional human physics.

Based on his reputation as a perfectionist workaholic, it’s not surprising that Winsor McCay transitioned from drawing Sunday comics like Nemo in Slumberland, into the maximal process of animating his characters. He pioneered several new techniques in animated cinema. Most notably, McCay invented a method for more control in animation. His animation, Gertie the Dinosaur, which debuted in 1914, is the first use of ‘pose to pose’ animation. Pose to pose
offered an alternative to straight through, sequential animation and allowed studio systems to grow. The assembly line nature of the process meant more employees could animate on a single film. The essence of pose to pose continues to evolve; the concept informs the basis of ‘key-framing’ in digital animation today.\(^{21}\)

Unlike the straight through animation, pose to pose allows the artist to plan out a shot more carefully. The artist must first time the action, then draw the ‘keys’ or main poses from the sequence, then move through inbetweening. The result is a character that loses some vitality when compared to the straight through version of the same character. Perhaps a control-freak like McCay would have seen this predictability in the line and movement as a benefit of pose to pose.

Though McCay wanted more control over his process, he rarely implemented shortcuts. In *Gertie*, McCay and his assistant, John A. Fitzsimmons, had to physically redraw every line of the backgrounds in every single frame. It’s no wonder that in most of McCay’s oeuvre, the hand of the animator is ever-present. In these early films, the animator is akin to a solitary studio artist, producing cultural objects. This sentiment would fade with the burgeoning movie industry and the industrialization of the film process. In the year of Gertie’s creation, 1914, Earl Hurd patented the celluloid.\(^ {22}\) After this, detailed backgrounds would no longer be so remarkable, but the wiggly lines had disappeared.

With the advent of cel animation—the division of labor that it permits, as well as the newly stable image that results—the animism of early animation in which every element of the image fairly pulsates with life, becomes less evident, although it reveals itself in other ways.

Pg 114, Poetics of Slumberland
Contradictorily, the titular character, Gertie, misbehaves quite a lot. McCay drew her with precise timing, enough that he had a version with which he could act out a vaudevillian bit in live-adaptation. During which, he routinely referred to his unwilling creation as a ‘bad girl.’ Yet even with all the precision of the film, narratively, Gertie’s primary expressions all defy her master and creator. This is the first historical signal that in cartoons, characters have inalienable rights. Gertie’s legacy reverberates through many germinal cartoon characters of the 20th century, from Fleischer studio’s Koko the Clown to a handful of the characters in Looney Tunes. In *Chuck Jones: Conversations*, Chuck Jones, when asked why Bugs Bunny often dressed in drag said:

> The thing was at that time, if a man dressed up like a woman, there was no transvestite. Nobody even knew the term...We found out [he liked dressing in drag] as we went along.

3, Subverting the known

* Taken to an extreme, and always viewed in comparison to the physical world, animation demands anarchy. Narrative, even in the micro, depends on a reversal of expectation. Jokes operate by building a situation and then unraveling it in the punchline. If we understand the end of the joke at the beginning, how could something as spontaneous as laughter emerge? While in the Newtonian world, an apple falls to the ground, in the cartoon universe the most unexpected result manifests. The Coyote, for example, floats mid-air for a few seconds before he plummets into the canyon.
If in *Fantasmagorie*, a character can be decapitated without feeling anything, in the world of Mickey Mouse, a character can lose a limb or appendage and only experience mild discomfort. In one of Mickey’s earliest appearances, *Plane Crazy*, 1928, Mickey’s ears twirl off of his body in a moment of surprise, only to stick a landing back on Mickey’s head. In *Barnyard Battle*, a militaristic Pete squeezes Mickey with gargantuan hands. As Mickey’s body swells under the pressure of Pete’s force, Mickey squeals in pain. This Mickey has parts, arms, legs, and ears that are most certainly ‘his.’ Though he is still elastic, in the sense that those parts can be restored, Mickey is not free from the experience of pain. Early Disney is not the transcendent, gooey landscape of *Fantasmagorie*, but rather a playful--albeit survivalist--approach to a world that is falling apart. In this world, one might lose a limb and still have to amble on against an oppressor. Walter Benjamin, in a series of fragmented notes with Gustav Glück and Kurt Weill, wrote in 1931, “Property relations in the Mickey Mouse film; here, for the first time, one’s own arm, indeed one’s own body can be stolen.”

Anyone alive in the 1920’s, who, like Benjamin, had lived through the first World War could see humanity’s new dependence on technology, as much as they could see how that technology had failed them. In *Plane Crazy*, Mickey negotiates a cacophonous new world of technological impact. By paying stylistic homage to the American hero-pilot Charles Lindbergh, Mickey is then able to pluck scraps of trash from his farmhouse home to fashion them into flying machines. He is able to modify objects like the tail of a plane by pulling them in any given direction. These machines are unpredictable, and often catastrophic to Mickey’s health. Several times they veer into trees or down tunnels with spiraling lack of control from the pilot. Yet,
Mickey is of this world. He conducts the new language of cacophonous technology with animalistic humor.

Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being. He disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind.  

In *Barnyard Battle*, Mickey guffaws at authority figures like Pete, dressed in a military uniform, solidifying Mickey’s role as an anarchist and an advocate of the common person. Perhaps in Benjamin’s quote [above], he was explicitly musing on one of the concluding gags of the film. Here, Mickey ensnares the oppressive General Pete in a mousetrap, then surfs Pete’s Body like a wakeboard. As the protagonist, Mickey is able to refashion even his own death-trap into a tool for retribution, as well as leisurely fun. Mickey’s world-view is strictly non-hierarchical, insofar as he is willing to literally mold technological objects into his playthings. Furthermore, those who appear to be in authority, figures like this militaristic Pete, are fumbling idiots who will not adapt to the wit of the elastic body. They lose.

4, Railroad tracks

*Animation does have a few physical restrictions, however, the most notable of which is the difficulty of infusing randomness into action. Because there is an extreme time distortion in the labor process, objects in cartoons move precisely. There’s a musical timing to the cartoon. In an animated walk cycle, the artist knows the exact rhythm of the beats and the precise bounce*
and step of the figure. This is not the case in the Newtonian world. If you used a live action camera to film a series of falling leaves, the leaves would fall randomly, some entirely out of the frame. If you animated the same sequence, you would plan each leaf’s movement. Even if you wanted to get a ‘random look’ to the shot, in each frame, you’d be considering randomness as an additive process.

From its founding in 1915, to 1939, Fleischer studios went from 15 employees to 800 or more. In 1929, Disney studios had fewer than 30 employees. By 1940, that number would exceed 1200. More animators on a given project necessitated manuals, or standardization of the animation style. Animation studios used their own internal documents, but external sources also emerged during this period. One of the most popular and enduring of these is E.G. Lutz’s Animated Cartoons, initially published in 1920. When Fritz Freleng began to work for Disney, he used the Lutz manual to perfect his animation techniques, probably because Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse creator, UB Iwerks also championed Animated Cartoons. The book was a staple of animation tool-kits into the 1930s.

The book describes ‘correct’ methods for animation, many of which are still in use today. Lutz describes the proper way to animate a fight scene between two boys as a tumbling spiral of a dust cloud with a random leg shooting out at any given point. Modern animators recognize this cliché, but no longer seem to implement it as often in commercial animation. Other Lutz-ian methods are still very prevalent in animation today. In the most notable example, Lutz identifies a ‘boil’ or a method of cycling frames to extend a shot, and thus cut down on the labor needed.
*Animated Cartoons* was instrumental in standardizing, as well as accelerating the production process of animation. Whereas Winsor McCay’s use of pose to pose created more refined or controlled practices within cartooning, the Lutz manual created more speedy practices. A profitable studio, after all, had to keep producing shorts! Otherwise said, the book and the studios that emulated these methods prioritized quantity, in addition to the quality of the films.\(^{36}\)

To meet these demands, studios fragmented the workflow into an assembly-line, much like a Model T production line. The way to increase productivity was to give an animator or worker a specific micro-task. Thus, the invention of the Inbetweener. Inbetweeners fill in the frames in between the key poses.\(^{37}\) The keyframer would draw the main poses of the scene in a matter of minutes, and then hand them off to an inbetweener to mechanically draw everything that occurred in between. They would produce 50% of the animation but have no authorial function on an animated shot. Sometimes the frames would fragment further to include a breakdown artist. Next, the frame would be sent to color and ink, then overlaid onto its background, then digitized with a down shooter, and scored in the foley department.\(^{38}\)

5. Time = change

*Cartoons wholly embodying the above rules would be highly timed, gooey films. They would be boring, though transcendent. Work like this certainly exists in abstracted experimental animation, but many of these films negate the very nature of the filmic medium, by ignoring an essential element: Time. Time presents in animation not just as ‘timing’ in a particular shot, but also as the drama and tension that arises from moving between two points on a linear timeline.*
Time necessitates a change, which in turn creates narrative. In narrative stories, you need to differentiate objects so that they can affect each other. If you have a protagonist, then suddenly you need some kind of oppressor:

This is the first blow to the transcendental experience of the cartoon character. Until the creation of an oppressor, she was one with the primordial goo. To create opposition, she must sever ties with the mush, and eventually become singular from other bodies in the cartoon world. She must now learn not to ebb and flow with change, but to be squashed and stretched.

Over the course of the 20th century, cartoon characters become less elastic. In preparation for Fantasia, Fred Moore redesigned Mickey and other characters to have consistent mass. The volume of the new Mickey, as well as all other bodies in the Disney universe, became an absolute quantity. This Mickey could no longer stretch in every direction. He was and remains today, not a depiction of the graphic, but an inhabitant of space. Squeezing this Mickey would be like squeezing a live mouse. He would squash under pressure. He was, as Esther Leslie described in Hollywood Flatlands, ‘of flesh and blood.’ The new Mickey was so lifelike, it elicited empathy.

The more Newtonian characters required greater protections. A 1937 animation manual from Disney Studios reads:

When a sharp pointed stick is used as a prop, it should never pierce any living character...No living creature (even a worm) should be eaten, dismembered or destroyed in any manner. Even if a fly is swatted it should act punch-drunk rather than dead.
From these and other mandates on violence, the Disney crew became infantile, in need of protection.

Mickey seems to be the average young boy of no particular age; living in a small town, clean living, fun-loving, bashful around girls, polite and as clever as he must be for the particular stories.

The new Mickey was as a child. His was not the still-forming brain of a being in emerging adulthood, nor a teenager with libidinal auto-responses to sexual impulse, as the 1920’s Mickey had been. By 1937, Mickey transforms into a young boy, unable to conceive of, criticize, or detourne his chaotic surroundings.

10 As with many of the foundational historical animations, there are so many sources I could list on Fantasmagorie. It’s well treaded territory, but one I think that Esther Leslie handles the best of any I’ve read so far, in her preclusion to Hollywood Flatlands when she says on page 2: [The cartoon] has presented an illogical narrative of cruelty and torture, executed by people and things at war with each other. But the violence is painless, dreamlike, as if it were more of a utopian transfiguration of actuality’s discord. “Preclusion.” Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant Garde, by Esther Leslie, Verso, 2004, pp. 1–3.


21 After Effects, Premiere, Adobe Animate, and Toon Boom Harmony, among many other computer programs all use keyframing as a system of interpolation. The concept of a keyframe is very similar to the key ‘poses’ used in pose to pose animation.


24 For a modern update on Gertie’s subjugation, look at Lilli Carré’s CG adaptation, Jill, 2016, which uses excerpts from McCay’s original act.


27 Iwerks, Ub. Plane Crazy. Youtube, Disney Studios, 1928, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCZPzHg0h80.


29 Fragment written in 1931; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime.

30 Ibid.


36 “How Money Talks.” Ibid. pp. 91 - 105

37 In animation programs that ‘interpolate,’ (After Effects, Cinema 4D, Maya etc.) this feature is the digitized role once manually ascribed to the inbetweener.


39 Grant, Joe and Dick Huemer, directors. Fantasia. Walt Disney Studios, 1940.


42 Ibid. The other rules include quotes like “The eggs of any bird should not be broken unless for hatching purposes. The exception to this is the good old hen’s egg, which will always be a good throwing prop.”

43 Ibid. p. 45
Politics of Body

Transcript of ‘Ecstatic Elasticity,’ given on May 20, 2017. The talk was part of the Animation in the Public Eye Symposium, presented at the Echo Park Film Center in Los Angeles, CA.

Miranda: Hi. Hi everyone, um, I like to sit down when I talk so I’m going to be seated here. This is what I look like if you can’t see me in the back. Hello hello.

And let’s just get started, let’s jump right in. Slide.

[Audience laughter]

Great. Perfect reaction. Um-

EPFC Program Director: Miranda. If you like it like this. Uh, it can also be like this. I just wanna make sure--

Miranda: How can it be?

EPFC Program Director: No your preference! Is this a better vibe?

Miranda: ooh. What do you guys think?
Audience member 1: Yeah

Audience member 2: Yeahhhhh

Miranda: [Giggles]

EPFC Program Director: It’s a little cooler when it’s darker.

Miranda: Yeah, ok let’s do it.

Figure 7.1
So, I’m starting off with a squash and stretch illustration with which I think most of you will be very very familiar. In my animation class at UC Irvine, I teach from this, I’m sure many of you were taught from this exact same textbook.

So basically, this is talking about how to illustrate animation that is imbued with a sense of liveliness or movement. How do you stretch something apart and make it look like it’s made of a real physical material? Slide.

I think about this in two different ways. You can think about squash and stretch, or just being squashed rather, as forces from outside of the subject. So on the left, this is one of my favorite youtube channels, the Hydraulic Press Channel. Has anyone heard of it?

Audience member 4: Yes!

Miranda: Woo! There’s a lot of character to the people who make it too.

In this, you see a golf ball...smushed...by a hydraulic press. And so this is one of the physical forces you can think about when you’re illustrating squash and stretch. In some ways, the reason why a bouncing ball squashes is because it comes in contact with a ground, a very hard, material object. The other force being exerted on the subject would be gravity--pulling it down.
Eventually, the ball arcs back up and exerts itself. It stretches. Which is a little bit more like how this cockroach moves. And...I know that’s a little bit icky of an image for some of us, I am not a huge fan of cockroaches either, but I think the cockroach gif is appropriate in a talk that’s going to lead us into World War 2 and the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki since cockroaches might survive us all, but also, a cockroach can move from within, right? The ability to slip under a door like this is an elasticity willed from within. Like, so, you can think about elasticity that way too as like a personal autonomy. That the subject can just stretch out in multiple directs and then maybe squirm itself through something that otherwise it wouldn’t seem like that subject could fit through. Slide.

So, following from the 1800’s there’s a sense of animation in the air globally. By that, I mean not necessarily animation as moving drawing, but the definition of animation, which means life

Edison Company, *Frankenstein*, 1910

Figure 7.2
imbuing. Around the turn of the century, animation in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein is kind of like this act of God almost, but like delivered into a human hand. Through technology, human beings are able to imbue...almost...raw materials with life and actually will them into movement. And then the Edison company--which was the company who would do like, the cameras on the trains and move around...which leads to motion in the frame-- did this version of Frankenstein, which I find quite charming but, you could also think about this kind of film as an extension of animation, where things that don’t normally move are given a voice and given an opportunity to exist. Slide.

![Figure 7.3 Fantasmagorie, Emil Cohl, 1908](image)

This is probably another like, oh yeah, I’m-including-this but…it’s important because at this point, animation is also finding its own, and the way Emile Cohl was working is a lot closer to like a single-author studio-vision of animation. What we see from the elasticity of the subject
here, this character, is not only a lot of received violence, as this character is decapitated and thrown around, but also a type of elasticity that is untethered to the rules of reality. You can see in this frame he’s being flipped over, and that’s not based on our physical laws in this room right now. It’s based on animation. And then, the whole film, he’s got this big smile on his face. So you’ve got the sense that you could almost do anything to this character, and he would bounce back and be ok. Slide

But, by the nineteen-teens, elasticity takes a darker tone, in part because of the first World War. Which, of course, affected many nations, not just the European powers that were directly involved, but the newly elevated American superpower as well as the colonies that all of the superpowers possessed.

![Figure 7.4](image)
World War I really introduced a massive scale of violence previously unseen by the world, in part, because of the marriage of technology and warfare. After World War I, whether you were a veteran of these wars or whether you were just a human being living on the planet earth you would be familiar with the effects of global warfare because of the people who came home from the trenches. And because of World War I, people started to see types of movement that were previously unknown, for one, because you had amputees existing in cities on a scale larger than ever before. You can look at this painting by Otto Dix for a reference of that. Imagine if a certain percentage of every young man you knew moved with some kind of restriction due to a lost limb? But also because of the movements of shell shock victims, which, now we would think of this man as suffering from PTSD. With shell shock, well I always struggle with whether to include the videos that have made such an impact on me, the ones where you see the physical effect of warfare and how it can even on the scale of an individual soldier affect the way they move and take away a person's ability to walk or use their face with control. So even though this slide is just one frame from those medical analyses, you can see how the movements of this figure are curved or stretched. Slide.
And I include this picture in--well because I think it looks like a bunch of floating heads on a character sheet, but in terms of more uhh positive elasticity after World War 1, prosthetics became more nuanced, in part because of increased need. This photo comes from Anna Coleman Ladd’s ‘Tin noses shop’ which was a really popular location in France where people could get a facial prosthesis. Slide.

So on the left, that’s an example of one of these prosthetics. It’s not totally convincing by today’s standards, but hopefully, this kind of prosthetic would give someone a slightly better life than they would if they had a part of their skeletons exposed from war-mutilation. And then on the right, you can also start to think about elasticity of the skin itself, without even a prosthetic. The
first skin grafts were performed in 1917, which will eventually lead to how we think of plastic surgery now, where flesh is a really pretty mutable form. But also, just thinking about elastic optimism giving people the chance to heal wounds that otherwise would remain open. Slide.

And this is just an excerpt, but it’s from one of my favorite war reports. “It was, I think, the laughter of mortals at the trick which had been played on them by an ironical fate.” And in this passage, he’s talking about the ways that soldiers coped with violence at this scale. And so I think this is probably going to hit a chord with most of you because I know I’m familiar with this in my own life. When the world is incredibly violent and oppressive, sometimes humor is the best way to cope with that. So in this chapter, he ends up talking about how these Scottish soldiers he knew would like, hi-five corpses on the way out of the trench every morning. Corpses of people they’d previously fought alongside of, but in a gruesome war-filled life, your humanity bubbles out through making jokes. And that’s not obscene. Slide.
So back in the US, well *Swing You Sinners!* is from 1930, but in the 20’s you start to see the studio system changing in America. We’re no longer at this kind of Emile Cohl, single-author thing. *Swing You Sinners!* is the heyday of rubber hose animation, and so the stretchiness is not quite so dramatic and fantastical as Emile Cohl’s work, but you know what? this guy doesn't have bones so you can pull these character’s in any direction and when you let them go, they snap back into form. Similar to our cockroach analogy, if you have no bones you can kind of slide in anywhere and move freely. Slide.

But if Fleischer did some of my personal favorites based on their cartooning style and the way they were handling flatness, during the same time frame, The Disney Company is becoming well known. You can see in the early ones by Disney--this is just an easy one to compare to *Swing You Sinners!*--in the *Skeleton Dance*, they’re already moving towards a more epic--like what we
would think of as a very broad cinematic view of animation. The camera moves differently. You have grand views with a lot of formulaic affect so that these shots are really designed to make you feel just one thing at a time. The films are moodier, and in the characters, there is some elasticity, but it’s greatly reduced compared to the Fleischer film of the same era. Slide.

And no character was more famous during this time than Mickey Mouse. Mickey Mouse was really evocative of the times. Today, we often forget that Mickey is a mouse, rather than some ferocious creature. No, he’s a mouse, like the ones I don’t appreciate showing up in my kitchen, but with volition and humor. Well in this scene, he’s made an airplane out of basically a pile of trash, so he really makes the best out of a world that otherwise wouldn’t make sense. Mickey comes in and makes everything his own and uses this *detourned* technology to win the attention of the audience. Slide.

![Mickey Mouse and Pete in Barnyard Battle, 1929](image)

“Property relations in the Mickey Mouse film; here, for the first time, one’s own arm, indeed one’s own body can be stolen”

-Walter Benjamin, *Zu Mickey Maus*

*(Notes from a conversation with Gustav Glück and Kurt Weill, 1931)*

Figure 7.8
You can see that Mickey at this time is still really elastic. You can see that in this shot, he’s being squeezed very hard by Pete who is—or proto-Pete, he’s one of my favorite characters just cause of the sort of cartoon joke of the suspender. Like he only has one suspender, so it’s always handled in this flat way where he—or it has to magically jump from side to side.

But anyway, you get the feeling if you squeeze this Mickey as hard as you can and then you let go, he’s just going to blob down, then stretch back up to his basic shape. So this is an empowered mouse! He can do whatever he wants. You can’t do anything that would kill him. And Walter Benjamin wrote a little passage about this at the time, this is a fragment between friends where he really described Mickey as an anti-fascist figure because of his ability to lose his arm and then bounce back. Slide
But in the 1930’s Disney begins to change a lil’ bit. So Disney began to create objects that went alongside of the imagery. I think it's said that the Disney brothers were approached to put Mickey into schoolbooks somewhere in the late 20’s, and from there the manufacturing industry around the character grew and developed. So you start to see the characters of Disney break away from animation or cinema-driven content, and it starts to become married to the sales of these objects. And, it’s more apocryphal, but there’s talk of the relationship between Hitler and Disney in the 1930’s, I can’t personally confirm the stories about how...or why would I be able to personally confirm that?

[audience laughter] [Miranda laughs]

There are these forums on Reddit that tell stories about the relationship between Hitler and Disney how Hitler screened *Steamboat Willie* and how Disney had pictures of Henry Ford and Hitler on his desk, but that by the 1940’s his attitude toward Hitler had reversed, yeah I don’t really know how true that stuff is, though I find it quasi-possible given what else I can confirm, including that Goebbels reported Hitler’s pleasure at receiving some 18 Mickey Mouse prints for Christmas one year. Among these and other things is that Leni Riefenstahl toured Disney studios in 1935 and was at that time showed an early cut of *Fantasia*. Leni Riefenstahl is really important because she created a lot of the propaganda for the Third Reich and we’ll come back to this story later at the end. Slide.
So it’s not only Disney that’s going through internal changes at this time. The Hays Code changed the way animation existed with the studio system becoming more developed they also experience and demand more rules and restrictions around content. That’s another way we can think about elasticity and containing the way things move and exist. If in the twenties, Betty Boop was known for being a very vivacious, almost sex-hungry dancing lady, by the end of the thirties, the Hays code demands that she change, so her hemline comes down, and she’s less likely to be going out late at night, and the stories she’s involved in are more likely to be like, “Will I be able to clean my house in time for my guests coming over?” Things like that. Slide.
So in her late 30’s appearances, Betty looks an awful lot to me like Snow White. If you go back and watch *Snow White* now, and remember the film was lauded for being the pinnacle of realistic animation at the time, Snow White actually looks quite contained and conservative in her movements. She was rotoscoped, using source footage on the right. So if Cab Calloway and the Fleischer studios were capturing frenetic movements of an eccentric African American figure like Calloway, in Snow White you see the same animation method, tracing what exists of femininity at this time. It’s contained. Controlled. And really taking on the mannerisms of the time in a way that she can’t broadly move. Can’t Stretch. Can’t evolve with the story. Slide.

Mickey goes through changes at this time too. No longer is this the Mickey that you can just launch out of an airplane, let him fall to the ground and then bounce back up. His form becomes
more regularized and is a series of consistent shapes. And some of this is just necessity, right?

Cause the studio at this point has grown to about 1200 people. Disney’s moving out of the

Hyperion Studios where the Gelson’s is now, and moving to Burbank. So when you have that

many people working on something, you have to standardize, so that you can pass it from person
to person. But also, this, Fred Moore’s redesign of Mickey does seem to be fleshy. If you throw

this Mickey from an airplane, you get the feeling that when he hits the ground, he might actually

bleed. Slide.

And so at this same time, Disney has become so big, and in carrying on some of the notions of

the late 30’s in labor, Disney employees hold their own strike in 1941 and protest the way they’re
treated. For me personally, so this is just a little anecdote, I feel like the way Disney was running

their offices at this time with extra resources, like fun field trips in the middle of the day or they
had a ping pong room or something… slide….it reminds me a lot of how companies, particularly hip startups are run today. The way bosses start to expect labor in tandem with lifestyle. And so you can see in this quote, Walt Disney was like, “wow you know, I’m treating these guys so great and they’re so ungrateful after I’ve provided them with so much.” But to me, the Disney Strike and others around this time were really about treating those workers and their time fairly, regardless of how many lucky charm cereal dispensers you have in the office. Slide.

And I want to call out these two women from the Strike photo in particular, cause the sign is emblematic of what I’m talking about here. They’re saying, don’t treat me like this puppet. Don’t treat me and my body like something that is stuck in place. There are no strings on me. And also, these are two women. In the talks where Disney was commenting on the strikes, he often referred to his workers as ‘my boys’ when a big part of the labor force were women in the Color and Ink department. This is a picture of women working in the old Hyperion studios. Slide.
I just think this striker with the newspaper is funny. [audience laughter] And it just reminds me that strikes go on for a long time, maybe you still gotta keep up your routine.

Um so fracturing the narrative… Slide.

![Figure 7.15](image)

Audience member 6: Wha?

Miranda: Wha?

Audience member 6: Oh sorry I was just like, what is this?

Miranda: heh, gimme a sec. So around the same time America is dropping atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this film, *Momotaro's Divine Sea Warriors*, comes out by Mitsuyo Seo.
This is the first feature-length animated film coming out of Japan. Seo lists *Fantasia* as one of the inspirations for the film. So at this point, I want to just think about it like, it’s not very easy to create a strict binary of how these rules are enforced or how any one power structure or studio controls elasticity. If Leni Riefenstahl created propaganda for the Third Reich, then Disney brought her into the fold by letting her tour his own company, but then within a few years you have Allan Kaprow making his propaganda films in the US based on the same aesthetic conventions of *Triumph of the Will*, not to mention all of the anti-German cartoons Disney made during World War 2. Maybe these boundaries aren’t so definite even in terms of nation-states. Slide.

![Figure 7.16](image)

Keiji Nakazawa, *Hadashi No Gen*, 1983

But during this year, 1945, we, or I should say Americans like me, did drop those atomic bombs and bodies were exploded on a massive scale never seen before. Technology had gotten to the
point that we could explode entire cities, filled with living creatures, to the point that that radiation still lingers and effects the residents of these cities today. This is from *Barefoot Gen* which is based on a manga by a Hiroshima survivor. This shot isn’t a stretched coyote, but actually depicts the moment of the Flash where bodies were flayed, baked, and mutilated in an instant. Slide.

And just to go back to Richard Williams, that old standard, on the left, in this passage he’s talking about what an inbetweener from ‘the streets’ might do and how they might fuck up. Umm.. But! So he’s saying if you’re an animator that’s having things wobble around that that is markedly bad animation. We want to train animators to be refined and controlled. And tight. I think there’s an important side conversation to have here about why the boil, or wobbly movement, becomes such a hallmark of indie animation, aka experimental animation, where the
wobble is supposed to signify a refutation of the studio system. In some ways, the experimental community using that look is more of a dialectical reversal. It’s still related to the idea of tightness just by being so in opposition to it. It’s not necessarily its own thing, spontaneously created. It’s a response. But so there are obviously divergent paths that we could talk about here, but mostly I just want to use this moment to call attention to the fact that Richard Williams worked with and trained under many of Disney’s “Nine Old Men.” That’s honestly their term for themselves, not my term for them. This picture on the right was taken in 1973, but these guys were the heavy hitter animators working through the late 20’s and 30’s and really developing the ideas like squash and stretch that we hold so dear today. From this, you can see how power structures often limit the elasticity of the subject, as well as how power structures get handed down through generations. I remember being a young animator and feeling particularly alienated by the Richard Williams book cover, which has like ten characters on it, only two of which are women, and both of those women are beauty-objects, a busty redhead and a busty blonde. Slide
Well, the end of this story is not super bright to me. By the end of the 50’s Disney realized his dream of marrying commerce with the creation of content. So, Disneyland opened. At this point the idea that Disney is only a film studio becomes absurd. It becomes so much more of an immersive experience to be part of the Disney brand. And these characters, or any narrative they might have, is completely interwoven into commerce. So how does all of this affect us today? Slide.

Well, for one thing, animation doesn’t exist in a bubble. It took on the qualities and terminologies of things that came before it, namely the zoetrope or any other early animation device. On the right here, I’m sure many of you are familiar with the old Luxo Jr. Pixar animation. From this YouTube screencap, you can see that the clip uses the terminology of ‘Pencil Test’ even though
this is computer generated imagery and there’s no pencils involved. So in 1986, this new technology was using the lexicon of a former animation technique. And to me, even the content of this animation is inspired by squash and stretch. That’s why Pixar even made this film. Because they wanted to say, look we can still do the bouncing ball. We can still squash and stretch. So when a new technology like CG animation is introduced, it doesn’t happen in a vacuum. It’s deeply reliant on the previous power structures and types of representation that have come before. Slide.

And finally, you can think about elasticity not just on the level of physics of the cartoon, in some ways we’ve gotten to this point where representation has narrowed because we’re living in this era of reboots. So my students or even my niece and nephew who are like four are kind of still worshiping characters that I grew up with, that my parents grew up with, and in cases like
Mickey, that my grandparents grew up with. So these characters go through evolutions and changes. The patina is modified to fit the changing market. But ultimately, these are still the same characters, and I just want to leave you with a question of why that might be, by pointing to this Lego article. Lego is Warner Brothers, it’s not Disney, but remember that a reboot also reboots existing markets by tapping into nostalgia and selling more merch. And I guess, for me, a truly elastic stretchy empowered character is more likely to come out of left field, where the new character wouldn’t have to be so contained in these very very well-treaded universes any longer. Slide.

Oh, these are my sources. Thank you! That’s it.

[audience clapping]
In sequential order the sources for this talk were:

44 In sequential order the sources for this talk were:


“A Note on How Employees handled this pressure” *Seven Minutes the Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*, by Norman M. Klein, Verso, 1998, p. 95.

Seo, Mitsuyo, director. *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors*. YouTube, 99bit, 26 Apr. 2002, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ne-0e6P4jo. (Film was funded by the Japanese Naval Ministry.)

Masaki, Mori, director. *Barefoot Gen*. Gen Production, 1983. (The comic has diaristic accuracy, the film takes this account and pushes it into cartoon language.)


An additional final quote: “The more properly out of place all the cartoon elements are, the more often the medium intervenes deterministically. It is almost as if the medium steps in, not as the message but as the allegory for a conflict that continues to plague the animation business: corporate marketing dominating the hand drawn image. That domination is certainly the ongoing crisis, and is as true now as it was fifty years ago.” ---“Machina Versatilis.” *Seven Minutes the Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*, by Norman M. Klein, Verso, 1998, p. 79

All images in this section are excerpts of the Keynote slides from the presentation, with the exception of the final image.

45This final image is of me speaking on May 20, 2017
A Note To The Reader About The Previous Section

I know that reading words prepared for speech can be difficult, so I appreciate you staying with me and putting in the extra work on that last section. Personally, I enjoy a bit of extra work when I’m reading, but if you don’t, then I would like to add that I felt this method of transmission was crucial to this writing as a whole. I thought I must include that transcript of a talk that questions hierarchical power-structures to additionally examine the sentence structure I’ve inherited in the English language. (See the following section, All About My Girls.) As you probably know, people speak so differently than they write. In the interest of both working within language and acknowledging those without the chance to scribe their history, otherwise stated in Smoke, in the interest of working within a history to evoke an impossible language beyond it, I included in this text my own speech, suddenly turned to quickcrete, and therefore only indexing the fluidity I once experienced.
All About My Girls

It would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views, given the constraints that grammar imposes upon thought, indeed, upon the thinkable itself - *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler 46

The two women upstairs gave me a lot of trouble. Good trouble, I guess.

Once I had decided the film needed a sex scene, *because why shouldn’t life’s crisis and angsts also abut love and passion?*, and once I had decided that I wanted to focus that sexuality on female pleasure in the sexual act, *because I am very rarely satisfied with the representation of women’s actual orgasm in film and animation (with Renata Gąsiorowska’s Pussy from 2016 being my favorite exception)*, and then once I decided that the coupling should not be heteronormative, *cause I just like seeing more balanced representation of queer bodies in a moment that is not excessively privileged, eg, films not about ‘gayness, ‘but films that include queer peoples*, and finally, after I realized that one of my characters would be the African American representation of Betty Boop, *whose creation diminishes an homage to Baby Esther, the harlem Jazz singer whose performance inspired the catchphrase, ‘Boop Boop A Doop’, well, then I had to draw it. In animation, there are no found objects. I had to be accountable for each design, prop, and bite.

Without exception, every single shot in *Smoke’s Last Thought* called for intensive research and contemplative introspection. I can’t imagine that anyone watching the film could
possibly see all the moments that I asked myself things like, Why exactly do I want to draw this tampon in the tent village? Am I privileging a particular class or neighborhood if I draw the architecture with too many sleek lines and hipster embellishments? What type of person drives in LA and what do their cars say about them? Am I unfairly caricaturing the elderly? Is it ok to record a choir of senior citizens who couldn’t possibly know the nuances of the final piece, simply because it will take me three years to finish it? There were many more questions like these.

When I answered those questions with compositional choices, I tried to stay true to my intentions for the film. I came back to those principles as a nearly religious center. Essentially, I wanted the film to include moments of interiority, which manifested in the angst of the Smoke. I needed that emotional distress to appear in the film because I relate to the Smoke’s tendency for melancholy. That said, depression is not the whole of my experience as a living being. Though it sometimes contradicts my emotional state, I also know that angst can interfere with my ability to relate to my surroundings. I believe in striving for connection, even when the melancholy is aggressively dominating my life. Because of this, I wanted to try and make a film that evenly distributes attention between the interior and exterior space of the self. The liminal threshold of inside and out manifested as a series of dualities: The primary character/the supporting character, the very new/the elderly, the Flame/the latinx Streetlamp, the Smoke/the rest of her community, The Smoke/the pluralised versions of herself, the flattened cartoon character/the multi-temporal interdimensional line, and the Flame/all light in the galaxy.

A quirky thing happened. When I was nineteen years old, I got a tattoo of an illustration from Edwin Abbott Abbott’s *Flatland* on my thigh. It’s the only tattoo I have. The image
describes how a triangle sees in a two-dimensional universe. In the second dimension, the triangle see’s other shapes as a line. To a 3-D visitor, the line appears as shape. I got the tattoo to remind myself that no matter what I think I see, there’s probably an entirely logical way to see it differently. Then I forgot about *Flatland* for the better part of the next decade.

About two years into the production of this film, it occurred to me that *Smoke’s Last Thought* is an adaptation of *Flatland*, though an update for the present era. Unconsciously, I’d returned to the contradiction of my tattoo to ask, how can experience be manifold? As the Smoke says in her final moments, “Listen, whatever you’re experiencing, it’s just not how it feels for me.” Moments like the Smoke’s final thoughts re-appear throughout the film to remind a viewer of the limitations of sharing. On the other side of the proverbial lens, because animation requires so many decisions, and perhaps because I am this type of worker/maker, the concern of representation affected every grain of the film. I have to constantly try to inhabit unknown bodies, objects, and histories.

Back to the women upstairs.

June 2016. I was holding my script and a sketchbook in McGorlick park in Brooklyn. For several weeks I’d been working on the musical numbers for the film with my close friends, Sam Owens, Austin Vaughn, and Eli Crews. We only had access to the studio Sam works at after business-hours, so I typically spent my days storyboarding and fine-tuning the script. I mention this location because the early stages of a film are often idyllic, while the final steps of film-making so rarely are. I find it helpful to write the skeleton of a film in retreat from my daily life,
say, in an obnoxiously hip Brooklyn neighborhood on a pretty summer day when I do not have to work. In retreat, ideas flow freely. There’s a pleasure to this, though it’s not always to the service of the ultimate piece. Perhaps that pleasure lead me to reflect on pleasure, and I included a single drawing in the boards. In the third scene, where the Smoke rises past the lower landscape before climbing higher into the Los Angeles ether, I drew an arm extending out of an upstairs window, the fist opening wide into a flat palm. The hand was topped with stylish fingernails. It was a subtle illustration. I basically laughed to myself for adding what likely only I would recognize as a moment of orgasm within my film.

Within a month, I was back in Los Angeles, and several things about this scene started to bug me. Everything feels so brilliant when I’m writing it down in a park, but necessarily, back in the studio, things got critical. First, I realized I’d ripped off the orgasm-euphemism of Laura Dern’s character in David Lynch’s *Wild At Heart.* Second, I realized I had to ask myself what I was really afraid of showing? I’ve always known that my work, and particularly this film, would have explicit nudity, which depending on one’s parenting-style, was potentially not-suitable for a younger audience. Why should this moment be so subtle? With that in mind, I reworked the shot.

My solution was to adjust the animatic to cut back through the walls of the apartment building, so that a viewer finds themselves on a close up of a woman’s breast, being fondled. I decided I would be specific about the fondling, with a thumb circling the nipple. My belief is that this gesture made the moment seem geared toward the woman whose breast it was, rather than for the hand that got to grab it. Architecturally, I needed to get us back into the apartment to see all this. I’d used the cartoon logic of going through walls earlier in the film, so I thought it’d be fine to cut back into the building through the same mechanism. I composed the shot to include a
bit of the woman’s hair and ear, revealing a dangling hoop earring styled after the iconic Betty Boop.

I’d recently learned about Baby Esther, an overlooked figure of the Harlem Jazz Scene who was uncredited for her contributions to Betty Boop’s development. The official story is that Fleischer Studios ripped off the then-celebrity, Helen Kane, with their depiction of Betty, but the Fleischers themselves were unaware that Kane herself had plagiarized until Kane sued Fleischer studios in 1930. Kane copied Esther’s ‘baby’ falsetto and adopted Esther’s ‘Boo’s’ to a ‘Boop Boop a Doop’ catchphrase. Kane was already a success in white audiences, but she continued to have a performing career into the 1930’s. In newspaper articles from the Fleischer trial, Esther is often only referred to as a “negro girl from [a] nightclub.” While Helen Kane’s lifetime is easily tracked on Wikipedia, I struggle to find more information on what happened to Baby Esther. The most common search results conflate an image of a Russian model cosplaying as Betty Boop.

Whether or not the New York-based Fleischers really didn’t know about Baby Esther is inconsequential. To me, this story is emblematic of the repeated erasure of Black, and particularly female bodies in animation-history. Nicholas Sammond outlines this history in his helpful book, *The Birth of An Industry*. On the level of representation, Black women, their innovations, and their very gestures were stolen for the profit of white men in the industry, and libidinous consumption for a heteronormative audience.

I knew a Black version of Betty would appear in my film because *Smoke* collapses historical time into a screen memory, layering past references into a present context as if a message from the subconscious. In addition to the chronological storyline of the
interdimensional line, I collapsed time by incorporating color palette, grain, and Merrie Melodies set dressings into a world with iPads, tent villages and the 101. A revisionist history allowing Betty to be Black echoed these choices. In earlier sketches, the Betty character appeared as a woman drinking a beer and texting on her phone on the roof. Though Betty’s involvement in the film evolved, this setting remains; a viewer encounters it at the moment where the Smokes form a chain and try to grab onto a folding chair. When I see that shot, I often muse happily on Betty’s life beyond her appearances in the film.

At this point in the planning, I introduced what would eventually challenge my understanding of this shot. As I edited the animatic to include the fondling breast-iteration, I made two unconscious and sudden decisions. So often this happens in drawing. I set out with a few qualities locked, but as I begin to draw, I make additional choices that complicate the scene. A sentence about what you want to draw can never include so many details as an image. I’d intended to show the breast in closeup, thinking it would zero a viewer into Betty’s experience and body. Unfortunately, it’s not so simple to zoom into a single action. If a breast is being fondled, what is the hand that fondled it?

At that moment I, or I should say my wrist, instinctively decided: the hand would be a pale skin color, and the nails of the hand would be clean, with long-ish rounded fingernails.

For another six months that was all I had figured out about the shot. During this time, I showed the film to my trusted mentors and friends, always saying when I got to that frame of the animatic that I would have to, “figure that out a little more.”
In March of 2017, I began to transition the shot from animatic-sketch to fully-animated sequence. This usually starts with me redrawing the storyboards in my sketchbook. I do this to practice the gestures, and see if any more of those drawing-surprises come up. In retracing the action, the first thing that was immediately clear, and sort of unrelated to the challenges of representation thus far was that going back through the wall would dilute the impact of the earlier transition moment between inside the bathroom and the night landscape of Los Angeles. My loyalty is to the film as a whole, and not to the individual shots. In structural terms, I wanted the first half of the film to be a literal interior with emotional interiority, and the latter half of the film to be an exterior with a myriad of new characters and ephemera. To keep with the film’s values, if the proportion between interior and exterior locations fluctuated to 55% and 45%, one would become privileged over the other. So in this scene, the camera had to stay in the wide, rising along the side of the building.

Yet, if I didn’t go back inside, how would I compose a shot of a hand groping a breast? Lots of erotic visualizations followed. Ok, so she could be on her elbows facing the window. But *is prone really the position that says what I want here?* She could be fucking against the window! *First, that sounds unsafe. Second, then there’s nothing really specific about that depiction of sex that appeals to me. How would I show specifically female pleasure if I just showed a Black body getting pounded? (Though OBVI nothing wrong with that, either.)* Also, now that I’d made the hand of her other partner feminized, what would that mean as far as penetration? *Strap on, maybe? Sheesh, this is getting complicated.*

It continued to get complicated, but more on that in a moment.
My back to basics revelation came in the form of again asking what about sex was I afraid of presenting? Other than legitimate family awkwardness, [Sorry Mom and Dad, sometimes when I imagine you seeing my work, the little Bahá’í-girl in me gets really freaked out!] I asked myself why I was trying to keep things less explicit? Why had I been cropping out the other character at all? I realized the fear was of depicting sex in a way that verged on graphic--by simply offering up the female body for consumption, as it so often seems to be in porn. Porn’s all well and good, but it’s intentions are different from those in this film. After I identified that as the fear, at least because I was depicting and identify as a woman myself, the questions became more simple. After all, what do I, as someone with a vagina, like?

The scene became a woman receiving oral sex. I settled on my femme white hand-ed character growing into the body of a female white woman. I wouldn’t be coy with my cropping. I’d openly show the act in full body view. The limitation metamorphosed into a blessing. What worked so perfectly about the restriction of staying outside for the shot was that, by staying in the wide, the body of Betty would exist within the landscape. The shot wouldn’t obsess over her genitalia or breasts, but her as a full, complete woman in situ. Thank goodness for continuity issues; I hadn’t even realized that there were problematics in the close-up version of this shot!

The next part was mathy, so therefore complicated to verbalize and so I’ll breeze through it here. I would omit it entirely, but some combination of my ego and the level of difficulty of animating moving buildings by hand compels me to keep it in this writing, even though it doesn’t conceptually fit with the editorial flow. (If you can figure out a connection between representation and geometry, shoot me a message cause I’m all ears. mirandajavid@gmail.com)

Basically, I figured out the mechanics of the shot, which in this case involved shifting three-point
perspectives and so were rather complicated. I set up a maquette with strings and two metal rulers to track the changes in lines. Next, I built the scaffold-like structures of the big stuff (like the walls of the building) in Toon Boom with squiggles in place of the bodies. Once these monoliths could move, the shot looked ‘real’-ish and therefore I was ready to design the more nuanced scene-elements.

By March 2017, I began to design set-dressing and characters. Betty was easiest to resolve. Even when they’re challenging the laws of Newtonian physics, I draw my female bodies with weight. In the real world, when you see a conventionally gorgeous body in person--and when I was 14 I waited in line at Eastland mall with my friend Jamila to get each of Destiny’s Child’s autographs--they don’t look as glossy as they do in print. So when I cartoon, which by necessity means simplifying, I try to think about this principle. With Betty, who was now so familiar, I just had to ask myself questions like, how does she roll her shoulders back? What are the shapes of her nipples?

Betty’s partner was a tougher question, mostly because I didn’t know her so well yet. I kind of needed a framework, and since I already had Betty Boop in the mix, a character infamous for shameless lust...I thought I might as well drag down one of the puritanical Disney Princesses along with her.

To be honest, I would have enjoyed including Snow White in this little scene. When I think about femininity depicted by white men in animation, it’s hard for me to not think of poor Snow White. Though in 1940 when Snow White debuted, the film was lauded for its realism, in my opinion, the film hasn’t aged well. The primary reason I feel sorry for Snow White is the
fragility of her movements. This is in part because Snow White’s character, more true to the source footage than the embellished dwarves, was rotoscoped.\textsuperscript{56} Though one would expect tracing film to create heightened realism in a piece of animation, rotoscope animation often looks uncanny.\textsuperscript{57} I believe in part this is because there’s no dominant weight or skeletal framework for the animation. Though animators can include incredible amounts of shadow and fabric movement in rotoscope animation, the figures do not exist in a ground. They are awkwardly realistic, without acknowledging or subverting a viewer’s expectation of physics. In the case of Snow White, she not only looks like an automaton, but she moves with the now outdated gender biases of the era in which she was drawn, adding another dimension of awkwardness to her gestures.

But Snow White just looks way too much like Betty Boop. The Fleischers and Disney both exploited this similarity in the 1930’s with a variety of domestically-minded films and Snow White themed cartoons.\textsuperscript{58} Yet I didn’t find homogeneity productive in this context. As much as I’m high minded about the underpinnings of my decisions, there are times where I need to alter an appearance based on visuals alone. I settled on Aurora, from Disney’s flop\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Sleeping Beauty}.\textsuperscript{60} As an underdeveloped character also in need of a prince to save her, I thought, “she’ll do.”

While it seems like at this point, probably two weeks into truly animating, I had most of the ingredients sorted out, the next portion was undoubtedly the most difficult to resolve.

When I sat down to animate the motions, the literal motions of Aurora kneeling down and giving Betty Boop head, I realized I was entirely out of my league on this one. I’ve done my
requisite artist-experimenting, so I’m not altogether unfamiliar with each of the roles in that exchange, but I do not identify as lesbian, and I realized that I had no idea how lesbian sex might be different from heterosexual sex. I wasn’t even sure how to figure out whether it was different or not. I realized I was going to need to do some research. For my particular project, I was seeking reference videos of fellatio, particularly so that I could study the act on the level of micro gesture. Where do the hands go? Where does the partner’s body come into play? How much neck movement is there really? What’s even pushing the neck forward if she’s only a few inches off the ground?

Like most Americans, my first solution to the problem was with pornography. With the larger porn sites like Xtube and Pornhub, I suspect that using the I am (male/female) and I prefer watching (men/women) formats are disruptive to the search process. Additionally, because these are binary identifications, as searches, they likely limit the type of pornography one encounters. Call this small-batch artisanal data, but I believe the offerings for female-identified searchers preferring to watch women are never as diverse as the searches when I select that I am a man watching. If anything, the female-identified searches bring up less graphic, ‘softer’ videos, and far fewer of them at that. I did my best to use these sites to find fellatio but didn’t turn up much. What do you even put in the search bar? Most of the terms describing porn that I know are male-centered: cum shot, gang bang, creampie.

When I do find pornography on these larger sites with lesbian fellatio, the performance feels disingenuous to me. First of all, many of these videos end in some kind of heterosexual performance, typically one or both of the women having sex with a nearby man. Second, as an animator, I found that the neck motions of these performers were mechanical. There was always
either too much ease at the end of the motion--like a figure intensely finishing each lick with a flourish--or a ton of repetitious movements for a short duration, followed by kissing, and then usually followed by the aforementioned man to come in and fuck somebody. Even as a mostly heterosexual woman, I didn’t see any fellatio on these bigger sites that remotely resembled my own personal experience of sex.

My next tier of resources came from what are typically referred to as ‘ethical porn’ sites. Places where one can feel certain that they are watching participants who want to be there, who are being compensated fairly for their work. My friend and writer of Good Sex, Jessica Graham provided me with a list of these. They do cost money, and so are a little harder to sample before purchase. The upside to this being getting off with a better promise of fair labor practice, even in depictions of some kind of power play. My frustration with these sites is relatively minor in the larger scheme of sexual equality, but I do suspect that the performances in these videos are still in what Judith Butler calls ‘inherited grammars.’ Many of the sex acts seem to mimic the other porn sites. Though in ‘camming’ the camera becomes a sexual catalyst inspiring the performer, the larger-porn-gestures reverberate down to more traditional coupled pornography as well. In these, if the rare movement of giving head to a woman in an X-tube video manifests as a short burst of licks, then ethical porn learns its conventions from its predecessor.

A final note on traditional porn: Ultimately, some of the most realistic videos of sex I’ve seen are on Chaturbate or Reddit. Realism to me doesn’t always mean true-to-life, but in the sense of realism in literature, realistic porn should advocate for the experiences of real bodies and people. Though even here, in genuinely amateur platforms, cunnilingus is never prioritized. The videos I needed were still hard to find. I’ll concede that the physical interiority of the female
body might be part of it. It’s a hell of a lot easier to film an ejaculating penis, or hell, even the penetration of an asshole, than it is to shoot the light flick of a clit. So perhaps until Augmented Reality takes a further step in shared sensations, directional cameras will never be able to really ‘do much’ for the tastes of porn consumers, who seem to prefer explicit action in their depictions.\(^{65}\) That said, statistics on female orgasms are notoriously hard to verify, but considering the percentage might be as high as 75% of women that can only cum from clitoral stimulation, why is the representation of it so minimized in the pornographic experience? If you’re thinking it’s because women don’t watch porn, I’m here to confirm that’s incredibly untrue.

I found the best video-research for this film from OMGyes, a project which focuses not on pornography but the science and education of female pleasure.\(^ {66}\) It’s not a pornography resource, but an educational one. OMGyes films women masturbating, then interviews them talking about their experience of pleasure. They also have an interactive touchscreen simulator of real (and diverse!) vaginas. It was really helpful for my research to see and simultaneously hear verbalized thoughts and sensations the woman in these videos experienced.

It was through the guidance of OMGyes’s episode, ‘Layering,’ and a conversation with a frequent consultant for *Smoke* that lead me actually to de-emphasize the role of the clitoris in the shot. Believe me, these are words I never thought I would type. Jamila Reddy is not just a woman I shouted out from my Destiny’s Child anecdote a few pages back. In addition to being my childhood friend, she works as a life coach, specifically for Black, queer persons, and spends her free time Instagramming about body shame.\(^ {67}\) She is intimately familiar with my project. (In an early iteration of the film, Jamila played the role of a narrator who I later cut for reasons
beyond Jamila’s ability.) Throughout production, I always consulted Jamila about the questions where I thought she might kindly be willing to guide me toward an ethical solution. The layering episode reminded me of the interiority of the female body and made me worry a bit about a world where penetration is ignored entirely. In our particular conversation about Betty and Aurora, Jamila reminded me that it’s always specific to the people involved. She solved my question with humbling resolve. There’s no such thing as lesbian sex….at least not one general way to depict it. Because of her advice, I took a step back from the standardization of one kind of sexual act and again referred to my own experiences or firsthand interviews. Clitoral awareness might be part of a movement to empower women, but it’s not the only piece of the puzzle of equal rights.

When I teach 2D animation, I include a lecture titled, ‘Representation in Animation.’ As with my evocation of Sammond’s text on the erasure of Black bodies in early animation, there are countless examples of one type of person misrepresenting the body of another person. I include a personal anecdote in the talk. As a woman with middle eastern heritage, I remember noticing as a child that the knife-wielding villains in Aladdin always had features that looked recognizably Arabic, whereas the two protagonists looked the most Anglicized. Today, I see the insistence of Jasmine and Aladdin’s barbie-esque features as a sign that a film like this was animated by a western audience looking eastward. Was it Disney’s story to tell? Sometimes the answer seems to be: write what you know. Following my anecdote, I like to conclude my lecture by asking students to defend or critique: Should an author only write about experiences that they can directly relate to? Students usually end up fighting a bit about this question, because there’s no perfect answer.
The question plagues me as well. Was it ever even my business to draw a Black body engaged in sexual activity with another woman? Because of my practice hopes to evoke radical empathy, I feel I must logically ask myself this with each character, even if they are not human. It’s not as though I’ve lived through the body of a wisp of smoke either. Even with the stakes as high as depictions of race and gender, I must admit, animation is inherently imaginative. My personal solution to the problem of representation is to do my best, but acknowledge my shortcomings by asking for help from others, and to return to myself and what I do intimately know, even when it doesn’t translate synchronically. By Jamila’s advice, I needed to think of these women as complex holistic characters, but when in doubt to think about my own personal experiences.

So that foot kiss.

Well. My own life isn’t free of kink. While I’m not a foot fetishist myself, I’m an advocate for those who are. I know firsthand that decentralizing the body and appreciating even the lowliest appendage can bring unexpected feelings of love. In addition to lust, there is certainly also love between these two women. True, the act is sexual, but in some, if not many cases, having sex is about connection, admitting the limits of our flesh by pressing them against each other. The Aurora character is working very hard for Betty’s pleasure. She’s making eye contact, moving quickly in an awkward position and even after such labor, she’s still gracefully loving to Betty’s feet. If I included a sex scene to lighten the mood, I hoped to garnish that pleasure with respect and adoration.

I finished the scene by drawing each of these elements, then including a series of carefully selected props around their bedroom. Austin Vaughn composed a piece of music that
we pre-amped to make it a diegetic element. The women are listening to this song while they have sex, which I’m thinking they continue to do well into the next scene. In the viewer’s particular window into their delectation, it’s unclear whether Betty did finish.

But I wasn’t done with them yet. Because the women live upstairs from Gil, and because the cat, Frisky Cat, is their pet, I felt there was always some connection between the three of them. Frisky Cat works like a villain of the animation by thwarting the Smoke during her last chance to grab on. We see him in the shot of Betty’s chill-spot on the roof. To me, even the characters that, in some ways, I felt the most benevolent toward, were linked to the very villain of my film. Well, that seemed about right according to those initial concerns with interconnectivity.

Actually, the final appearance of Friskey Cat, Betty, and Aurora coincides. I wanted to complicate Frisky Cat’s power-dynamic with the Smoke by inserting him into a setting which was joyous, yet submissive. Additionally, I didn't feel it would be fair to show Betty and Aurora just once, and only in the wide shot, nude and sexualized. After all, they’re more than that. In the final montage of bats, Gil, and the ocean, we encounter Aurora reading an iPad in bed, while Betty scratches Frisky Cat’s tail. (Oddly, yet relatedly, if I make this same move for about ten minutes on my sister’s cat, Beauty, she actually squirts with pleasure.) The moment with the three of them in bed is relatively quiet compared to the earlier appearances. It’s quantitatively a much longer duration than the one previously described. To this day, I smile seeing Aurora wearing a band shirt and reading glasses, both wearing their wedding rings, while Betty takes pleasure in making her cat purr. And that really starts to remind me of living in Los Angeles.
Betty and Aurora appear in-coitous for six seconds of my seventeen minute film. Not including the pre-production aspects, like storyboarding and building the animatic, the actual animation of this shot took over a month of full-time work. While not every shot required this kind of attention to detail, the process, and recounting of it here is emblematic of the animation process. Part of the joy I find in animation is in the scale of elongated time. I get to spend weeks discovering the nuances of a movement. Sometimes I feel like a contemporary dancer. I spend much of my studio-practice musing over the implications of minute gesture. Even when the actions of my characters feel new to inhabit, the body remains my primary tool for synthesizing these ideas. I spend weeks trying to offer my consciousness up to experiences external to my own.

During production, how a character feels will inform everything I do. I’m happy to say that though at times very humbling, I’ve found the animative practice to be fairly helpful in deepening my experience of being a body in the world. Specifically in the Betty/Aurora dynamic, introducing new research into my own sex life, as during the creation of the coitus-shot, my partner was down to embrace my studio practice and its lack of boundaries as well.

Beyond my film, I also appreciate how the process of animation---the supposed tedium that long-form projects take to execute--always leads me to question my own position in society. Some of the political aspects of my film live in these moments of crisis, where I start a shot patting myself on the back for being such a progressive animator, then end up realizing there’s no such thing as lesbian sex. It’s a powerful studio practice!
Then again, I designed this project to accommodate these episodes of questioning. The Smoke is a permeable, dividable body. Because she is flexible, because the cartoon-universe privileges invention, I was able to adapt my project to the revelations. Through animation and this narrative, I actively wanted to question the dominance of my own angst, and open myself up to new experiences. I’ve heard animators sometimes describe the studio practice as one of retreat, disappearing into a dark room to sketch out fantasies. I find the opposite to be true. Every shot I animate requires a deeper learning of what exists beyond me. The space of animation is the fantastical space of connection, where I get to hope we can do more than just feel the surface of our lover’s skin. And though it is more complicated than this, I would not be offended if someone told me that my film was about a liminal space between bodies, where understanding could be reinvented, then shared. Where the sphere and the triangle can see that they are looking at the same thing.

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47 Gąsiorowska, Renata, director. *Cipka (Pussy)*. Lodz Film School, 2016.


A review in Variety from 1937 reads, "[so] perfect is the illusion, so tender the romance and fantasy, so emotional are certain portions when the acting of the characters strikes a depth comparable to the sincerity of human players, that the film approaches real greatness."


Betty Boop as Snow White, Betty boom domesticity films.


Jessica also has an article on ethical pornography on http://deconstructingyourself.com/mindful-sex-porn.html


The lecture transitions between the overt racism of early 20’s and 30’s western animation, the problematics of animated war propaganda, and the systemic questions that remain in animation today--both on the screen and in the studio.
Lo Siento

Lo Siento. Yo quiero aprender español escribir el lenguaje dentro mi película, pero yo no aprender mucho. (Yo tomo dos clases durante de mi producción.) Solo basta hablar poco, escribir el canto del LED luz con ayuda de Angela Stempel, y escribir esta nota.

Creó la lenguaje de Español es un parte de dibujando el ciudad de Los Ángeles, y también, un parte de nosotros país en infinitivo. Pues, lo siento. El próximo tiempo, espiero.

-Miranda
Life as Clouds 3

At Fletcher and San Fernando, a buildup of pedestrians hover on the other side of the street near another bus stop. Like me, they’re trapped until the walk signal flashes. I catch the eyes of an older woman in a puffy gray coat as she leaves the bus. In the coat, the puffs make her body into a cloud. She walks with a speed that makes me believe that she’s not just walking, but traveling. Her body is the vehicle. The energy she burns is her own. I imagine she’ll walk at this pace until she arrives at her home. The high school boys had a different kind of walk. They sludged down the sidewalk as if indefinitely. This woman and I, we are bonded through an instinct to know our bodies and use them. At least I imagine all of this while we pass each other.

As an animator and desk-worker, I appreciate the ability to accumulate exercise from other daily rituals. I spend so much time in one position, it’d be hard for me to not to feel to sedentary without my walks. I could drive to a gym, workout for 90 minutes, then drive to a social engagement, or I could just walk to dinner, get exercise, save fuel, and see LA at a pace that reveals complex details from the sidewalk to the sky. It’s not just about exercise. On walks like these, I feel like I can finally get outside of my own head.

I’ve been working on my last project for two and a half years, with another half a year to go before it’s really done. I love this work, love this film, but the work of an animator is incredibly granular. To me, if my work is to be art, rather than a hobby, then it must not only look inward to reflect the experience of being a singular body but also, outward, to try and grasp at what happens beyond the self. I have an obligation in my work to be more attentive to others, starting with my city and my immediate, sensorial surroundings. I use the walks as the studio
itself, lest I be isolated, lest my angsts and negative thinking, and even my destructive drawing habits spiral out.

In my animations, I have to choose and draw every detail of the surrounding environment. On the walk, those details encounter me. The world I inhabit is built by the myriad of human and inhuman objects. I’m liberated to be just a part of the whole.

I catch myself in prideful thoughts as the puffy-coat woman and any presumptions I have about her slip beyond my point of vision. I pass San Fernando and find myself at the most unpleasant part of this walk: The underpass.

While it is not true that people in LA don’t walk, it’s true that many roads in LA ignore the pedestrian experience. The underpass is one of those places. I stop just before walking down into its depths. I know I’ve looked at a map and sort of half calculated that not going through the underpass would require dipping into Atwater for a good while, longer than really makes sense or seems reasonable just to avoid some birdshit, but the last time I looked was a good while ago. It’s possible I’d overlooked something, and maybe now is my chance to do a little rogue exploring. I’ve often wondered about the fenced off area on the bridge. You never know if something interesting might reveal itself; sometimes LA surprises you with a strange little alcove for walkers.

My favorite of these are the staircases, which existed long before Los Angeles was a car-city. Another feature that, I’ll admit, scares me a little too much to make use of would be the tunnels that dive under the highways themselves. These ominous passageways are often preceded by a fence and a forbidding level of trash build-up around the entrance.
With the lack of clarity on the Google map, and with the hope that I’ll find something cool, I wander over to the top of the bridge. On my way, I see a woman in a security guard outfit with an ear to her phone. Her lips stick shut. She looks slightly upset, but not frantic. I’m halfway over the bridge and thinking about what this woman’s situation could be when the lights of an SUV point out that I’ve made a mistake. I can’t see too far ahead of me, but headlights are much more noticeable. The car drives up fletcher then circles back around to where I am, also on Fletcher. Dang. Turns out this isn’t a bridge so much as a U-turn on a plinth. The retreating headlights mark out a distinct curve, and arc back towards San Fernando. So this little jaunt doesn’t lead to the other side after all.

I slow down at the apex to watch the parlaying diamonds of the chain link fence. Below, the cars all look black, each preceded by the white light of piercing headlights. Unlike the SUV I just saw on my own level, when I see headlights from above, they aren’t so aggressive. Their light filters into cones, and depending on the air quality, the beam can even look like it’s own distinct shape. I walk back to San Fernando to reluctantly slink below the concrete ground.

It’s never so bad, but the sidewalk in the underpass has no extra buffer.

I arrive in Frogtown, where a Wafting Funk moves through me, the invisible sibling of the Street-Cloud from the food stand. It’s rotten, something’s happening down by the LA river. A thick bubbling goo of a smell.

On the bridge, I can’t see much. Towards Montecito Heights, I spy a smudge by the water. There are egrets down there during the day. I’d assume the silhouette is some kind of bird,
but from this distance, it could just as easily be a person. I imagine a figure crouching by that
water at this time of blue night. If this figure is a person, they’d be so low into the river, that the
hills of Mount Washington might not be visible. There are so many parts of LA where the only
clues of urbanism are the slight awkwardness of the supposed nature. Down by the river, which
is really more of a concrete funnel, the pavement chips and crags. I’ve only seen a river like this
one other time, in Seoul.

I walk by Zebulon. It’s still too early to see many people outside on the patio, but I say hi
to the giggly bouncer.

On Riverside, I notice a peculiar blob hovering behind a brick building. I wouldn’t have
noticed it at all if a woman in a Camry hadn’t inched out of the driveway. In the wake of the car,
I see the vague body of a vapor. Only the faint reflections of scattered streetlights and misty
moon shadow illuminate the Exhaust. She is waiting in the shadow, half covered. She peeks a
lack-of-an-eyeball out at me. What a coy figure, either frightened or cautiously waiting.

She slinks behind the building, and I do not follow.
Edwin Abbott Abbot wrote *Flatland* twenty-five years before Emil Colh animated *Fantasmagorie*. In the book, Abbot used mathematical thinking to prove an uncertainty in perspective. The math presented a flat plane (not too unlike the flat space of the cartoon world) that also doubled as a thinly veiled critique of the Victorian society Abbot lived within. It was a world where women had fewer rights than men and the expectations of society restricted social expression. Though a significant section of the book describes a 3-D sphere shocking a 2-D square into a more dimensional view of reality, at the end of the book, it’s the square that accurately calls into question the sphere’s world-view. The square says:

There, before my ravished eye, a Cube, moving in some altogether new direction, but strictly according to Analogy, so as to make every particle of his interior pass through a new kind of Space, with a wake of its own - shall create a still more perfect perfection than himself, with sixteen terminal Extrasolid angles, and Eight solid Cubes for his Perimeter. And once there, shall we stay our upward course? In that blessed region of Four Dimensions, shall we linger on the threshold of the Fifth, and not enter therein? Ah, no! Let us rather resolve that our ambition shall soar with our corporal ascent. Then, yielding to our intellectual onset, the gates of the Sixth Dimension shall fly open; after that a Seventh, and then an Eighth - How long I should have continued I know not. In vain did the Sphere, in his voice of thunder, reiterate his command of silence, and threaten me with the direst penalties if I persisted.
I borrowed from Edwin Abbott when writing *Smoke’s Last Thought* to create an updated satire that sees looking backward and forward in time as collapsed. To do this, I introduced the fourth dimension as time, an essential update to the 20th century perspective of quantum physics. In this depiction, time is flattened, in much the way that Deleuze described sheets of the past in *Cinema II*. As 4-D beings, humans cannot access memory discreetly, we can only see the third dimension in slices of our waking present. Because there’s no linear timeline in the brain, humans can only remember by metaphorically diving into the stack of memories, the multitude of which will pollute the original recollection. In my film, aesthetics of animation’s past intermingle with a contemporary view of Los Angeles. The black and white landscape, the black eyes with triangular highlights, and other stylistic details from the first four decades of the 20th century merge with the present technological moment. In turn, my version of the square was the flattened cartoon character, the Smoke. Like a World War I amputee, the Chronological Amputee, with ‘one arm behind her back,’ is able to see beyond even what she knows she doesn’t know, toward what she doesn’t know she doesn’t know.

In the film, time is a boundary for connection, when an interdimensional line dialogues with a two-dimensional cartoon character. Additionally, as the entire film is an extension of time through the elongated representation of a wisp of smoke, a viewer could think of the animated film as a form of time travel. In the real world, no human eye could linger with a fading wisp for sixteen minutes.

I’m less interested in characters revealing ultimate cosmic truths to one another like the Square does to the Sphere at the end of *Flatland*. In the society I exist within, that view of truth
would be shallow, too holistic to reflect my surroundings accurately. I’m more interested in the point of communication itself. In addition to quantum physics, I incorporated the ensō, a Japanese Zen drawing I practiced often in my early 20’s when I studied Chinese and Japanese calligraphy under Youngmi Song. The ensō is drawn as a simple ink circle. The perimeter of the symbol describes two pregnant voids. One is the infinite possibilities of the nothingness within the circle, the other is the same openness in the void beyond. Shunryu Suzuki once said:

“When we exhale, the air goes out to the outer world. The inner world is limitless, and the outer world is also limitless. We say “inner world” or “outer world” but actually there is just one whole world. In this limitless world, our throat is like a swinging door.”

As singular bodies, encased in large sacks of skin-flesh, we don’t have the privilege of a transcendent holistic experience of the universe. At least within the confines of a mind forged, as mine is, in western thought, I believe humans don’t get to ever truly experience the sensations of another, and so they must rely on outside perspectives to grow a complex view of the world. Humans need dialog and schism to develop. Likewise, the Smoke must learn to acknowledge the boundary between self and community as flexible. To do this, she must not only embody her materiality but also shrink. To me, the Smoke’s experience is not too far off from the phenomenon of being alive.

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70 “How, though the Sphere showed me other mysteries of Spaceland, I still desired more; and what came of it” Flatland, by Edwin Abbott Abbott et al., Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 138.


Triangle of Characters

If the ensō and Flatland are guiding structures of Smoke’s Last Thought, then who lives in that world? What are the mechanics that motivate the primary characters and what are their relationships to each other?

Gil

Gil is a flesh bound-human. He is...old, and that right there is a cartoon twist. Cartoon characters aren’t really supposed to age. For example, The Simpsons aired on December 17, 1989.75 I was born on September 1, earlier that year. That means that, at the time of this essay’s writing, Maggie should really be out of diapers. Yet, in cartoons, arrested chronology is an expectation.

So Gil is a representation of our human physics. His time is digestible to a human being. He’s chronologically at the end of his lifetime. Gil enacts a nightly ritual that concludes the waking day, an equally relatable experience to human beings. He washes his face and gets into bed. This series of actions evokes the minutiae of a lifetime, rather than the climax. Gil doesn’t benefit from much cartoon elasticity; he’s too human.

As a less cartoonishly free character, I animated him pose to pose, rather than straight through. Because of this method, Gil can have bones. The sense of his skeleton reveals his humanity. He’s constricted by timing, always moving within clear poses. Gil could not, for example, shapeshift into a missile to dive into the bathroom sink.
The Flame

Unlike Gil, The Flame is spatially flattened. Both Smoke and Flame’s bodies are almost all one color. They move as single shapes, transforming. Additionally, both the Flame and the Smoke are emotionally flat characters, behaving within the expectations of an early 20th century nickelodeon. She experiences joy and pain, but her ability to reflect on those traumas is infantile.

The Flame’s shallowness is especially acute. As she repeats over and over, life is but a ‘delight.’ She’s cute, drawn with eyes nearly as big as her face. True to early 20th-century animations of Minnie Mouse, Betty Boop, and Snow White, her cuteness signifies her femininity. I drew most of her movements directly from the scene in Snow White where Snow White herself leans into the wishing well. Scared by a few big noises, Snow White shrinks back coquettishly, but never garishly. The Flame similarly moves with the stilted ease of a feminized automaton.

When I was animating the Flame, I was always very clear to make the movement of the actual fire dominate the wax and wick. Unlike the candlestick in Beauty and the Beast, she is the Flame and not the Wick. Yet the Flame is not free to roam. She is dependent upon the wick and cannot move beyond its reach. Perhaps it’s not her fault she’s so naive. The Flame has never seen a world beyond her own brightness, and foolishly, she assumes that’s all, folks.

The Smoke

But when the Flame suffers a trauma, she metamorphoses into the Smoke. As the Smoke, she is more free to move through space. She becomes wizened to the larger room, the larger city and other alive light sources (like the LED). Eventually, she, along with the camera frame,
widens to reckon with the entire universe. Smoke is chemically different than the Flame. The change reveals to her new and useful features in her body: the ability to mimic other objects and the ability to divide. However, an indeterminate kernel of the Flame remains in the Smoke’s memory, much as a butterfly, though cellularly distinct from its former entity, remembers the lessons of its youth as a caterpillar.79

As a shapeshifter, The Smoke is the character most directly tied to the lost legacy of goo in 20th-century animation. She expresses her emotional state with unbridled morphology, but she is also all things because she can become them. Her very being points toward an ego death. If this cloud is in the image every object and being, her agony is not so singular. Similarly, if her own body divides, then it follows that outside objects (the rest of Los Angeles) could have been earlier divisions, other bits of self, cleaved off in a distant metamorphosis.

But it’s no fun. Go ask meditation teacher, ego death is always a painful process. With the loss of her Flame-ignorance, she experiences extreme anxiety and depression. To realize one exists, and in turn that one will disappear is—at first—much more painful than ignoring the linearity of time. The Buddhist principle of samsara reminds the practitioner that suffering is eternal.80 Awakening does not lead to bliss, but it does prove that she is alive. So Smoke’s agony isn’t so much a bleak and special moment, as part of the roaring hum of life.

We access Smoke’s internal suffering through song. In animated musicals, songs double as soliloquy. The musical creates a fantastical cinema space that allows the singer to reflect interior states on the setting. In the course of a song, a character unearths hidden transgressive thoughts like Smoke’s admission that she believes, “nothing will ever improve.” In Cinema II, Deleuze called musical numbers ‘World Images.’ He used the word ‘world’ to describe the way
that in a dance or song sequence, the surroundings morph and shift to adapt to the whims of the song. For example, in *Snow White*’s ‘Whistle While You Work,’ the forest animals along with the Seven Dwarves enter into the actions of Snow White’s soliloquy. They participate in a highly timed, seemingly well rehearsed, performance to accentuate Snow White’s point. In *Smoke*, the musical sequences have quicker cuts than the rest of the film. These shots contain worlds with ample morphing--unseen objects rapidly transform into one another.

The Smoke activates the legacy of the animated musical. Her songs trigger subtitles with a bouncing ball. In early animation, a ball like this was an invitation to ‘sing-a-long.’ Though Smoke’s songs are inner angsts, singularly expressed, a viewer is invited to sing along with her. There is a permeation, much like the vaporous body of the Smoke. Her inner complexities echo the limitless universe outside the self, just as the perimeter of the *ensō* denotes an arbitrary border between two like worlds. Softening the body perimeter acts similarly to the operation of pluralizing the Smoke in the second half of the film. It happens again when ‘Delight to be Light’ is reprised in Spanish by an LED street lamp or a choir of senior-citizen-O2 atoms.

Both as a divisible body and through the multiplicity of frames which make her an animated being Smoke is a pluralized entity. Though at times she still believes she is singular, a discreet being in the universe, the Smoke is vaporous. She divides endlessly. This quality allows her to look upon and reflect when her smallest tendril divides under the weight of a cicada wing toward the end of the film. That flexible body is also what allows her to become subsumed by the hazy jet stream of the airplane. The whack of the plane subverts the primacy of her final song, which was due to reveal her last thought, the supposed initiative of the film, at least according to the title. When the plane hits, it briefly fills the screen with static.
The Other Vapor

Static is a place of lost or lacking information. It’s the 20th-century representation of the void, pregnant as the bank space of the *ensō*. RCA technicians found cartoons to be a suitable tool to express the relationship between presence and absence when they sent the first TV transmission in 1928. For their subject, they chose a rotating *Felix the Cat* statue. It emerged from the white noise of the grey screen. When the transmission concluded, the receiver’s static resumed.

Static, that emblem of such a specific century as the 20th also contains evidence of the moment, so unfathomably long ago in human terms, that the universe and everything in it, burst from a single point. The big bang created atoms, that would spiral into galaxies of our expanding universe. In 1965 at Bell Labs, Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson kept hearing a humming buzz in the background of a new interstellar receiver. After confirming that this noise wasn’t just an accumulation of bird shit baked onto the dish, they identified the sound as underlying microwave radiation, still lingering from the Big Bang. It’s a phenomenon fading from consciousness as technology progresses, but in the era of telecommunication, when TV sets did not receive any signal from a nearby station, the set would pick up this existing radiation, which physically manifested in a random dot pixel sequence of static. In the 20th century, simple TV sets could display proof of our past in singularity.

The Smoke’s final moment is not to express her ultimate position, but to dissolve into an analogous haze. Whether that particular cloud is a pollutant or a vehicle of technological...
progress is never declared. When the haze of the jet stream clears, we are left with the community at large...so large, it extends into starlight.

The Fifth Dimensional Line

A fifth-dimensional being sees the whole of time, the so-called fourth dimension, as one point. By flattening all of time, this creature can access any moment in linear time in the fourth dimension simultaneously. According to those of us in the fourth dimension, they can time travel.

The animated line, who appears alongside of a fuzzy myriad of brushed drum sounds, is a fifth-dimensional character. The animated line can see the entire duration of the film as a whole. Equally, if a human could stand outside of the film, they would be able to see all the separate frames as points. A human could pick and choose which frame to address, could even shuffle them to a new order. As with this example, for the Line, the past is always relevant because there is no past.

In some places in the film, the Line generates the scenery. They imbue life like Dr. Frankenstein to the monster, steeped in the human optimism of progress found before the first World War. The Line is an animator themself, with the authority to create and destroy life. Stylistically, they are tied to hand-drawing on paper frames. Her manifestation as line-drawing references Paul Klee’s quote when he insists that drawing is “an active line on a walk moving freely, without goal. A walk for walk’s sake.”86 The wildness of hand-drawn lines makes them jumpy and unpredictable. They move with even more animated boil than the Smoke, who herself is quite wiggly and loose.
But the fifth-dimensional line is not me as the animating author of Smoke. She’s on a higher dimensional plane that we-as-Gil-type humans can’t fully comprehend. Additionally, just because they created a particular character doesn’t mean that character will behave.

Being in a more-dimensional state is not the same thing as omniscience. The Line can only influence the Smoke, the same way the floor influences the ball in the bouncing ball exercise. To highlight this, in one of the conversations between the Line and the Smoke, the Line attempts to broaden the Smoke’s worldview by calling attention to the atoms that encircle her. The Smoke responds to the Line, saying it feels different for her than it does for them. In this scene, the Smoke validates the existence of the self. She declares her right to exist. So even though the plasmatic goo of animation connects a singular wisp of smoke to a city, to the stars beyond which also emit light, there is still separateness. The Smoke, she’s not wrong to feel that way.


77 Disney, Walt, et al. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Distributed by Buena Vista Film Distribution Co., 1937.


80 “So if you see things without realizing the background of buddha nature, everything appears to be in the form of suffering. But if you understand the background of existence, you realize suffering itself is how we live, and how we extend our life.”

81 Deleuze Cinema II, pages “Dance is no longer simply movement of world, but passage from one world to another, entry into another world, breaking and exploring.


“Lost in the Cosmos.” *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, by Bill Bryson, Black Swan, 2016, pp. 11 - 12.

April 8

The teacher lights the candle. We do not speak. We do not make eye contact. There are alternating periods of sitting and walking. We try to eat lunch with grace. When the teacher blows out the candle, then we get to know each other.

“Hello, my name is…”

And it’s no big deal.
A photo of one of the Covington Senior Center Choir rehearsals for *Smoke* or one of the many ways that working on this film got me out of my head.
What I’m Not Talking About

Dear ________.

I’m so sorry that happened to you. That you’re feeling that way. It’s so tough to make things, and you do make really beautiful things. I agree. I don’t know what they’re for, exactly, but as objects or ideas out in the world, I can say firsthand that I’m happy they exist. I’m not just saying that because I’m your friend! I still dig up to those little spoken-word recordings once a year, at least. It was you who taught me to appreciate the word llama.

I certainly don’t think that everyone needs to be making art. To me, you’re no less of a beautiful person if you do stop. Ultimately, that decision is going to be up to you. What scares me a little bit is that some of what you’re describing transcends the anxiety around making and sharing work, and starts to sound like you’re in a repetitive cycle of pessimism. I know that, for you, like me, that’s a really dangerous place.

I’d like to understand how much of what you’re talking about is the creative struggle, and which part is the depression. Maybe you find that hard to answer. I think if you asked me the same question I would struggle to say something holistic. On the one hand, the depression is something I experience in clear episodes. I even experience precursor symptoms before it starts. If I look in the mirror and my face seems not like my own, like it’s sparkly but foreign, you can bet that within a day or so I’ll be posted up in bed, apathetic to my own existence. The totalness of the episode reinforces the idea that the depression is an illness. It flares up.
On the other hand, there are components of my personality that are classically depressed-person-ish. Speaking of art practice, I think the animation, which is a very solid part of my life with or without depression, seems to mimic the more extreme emotional states I experience. Sometimes it feels like animation is exactly the same as the manias and compulsions, the repetitive actions of drawing frames are eerily close to the hair pulling I do...the same thing over and over. There’s a little pain in individual moments, but stepping back to see the swath of cleared skin or the animation in total, I feel relief.

Also, sometimes depression helps me to see the world more clearly, like it’s a version of myself that cuts through all the bullshit of the day-to-day, and then just exists. I took a walk with my friend Lisa last week, she asked if depression seemed like the wrong word for what I was describing. I had to agree it probably was. Depression sounds like sadness, but there are elements of the depressive state that are free, untethered from life's expectations. I don’t even have to get out of bed if I want to! And it’s that part of it, and not necessarily the sadness, that’s still productive to my art practice.

Actually, this reminds me of a memory. Maybe I’ve told you this before? When I was 21, newly graduated, and the depression was really pretty bad (I’m sure you remember), I had a life-changing dream on a bus ride up to New York. That sounds so spooky, but it’s really the truth. It was one of those dreams where you’re still in the same spot you fell asleep in. So in the dream, I’m still on the Bolt bus, and I turn to the seat next to me and Tom Petty is sitting there. Not Tom Petty in 2011, the year I dreamt this, but 1989 Tom Petty, after the comeback and without the Heartbreakers. Free falling. Anyway, I start telling Tom Petty about how shitty I feel lately, and he asks me why I won’t go on medication, something multiple doctors had--at that point--
suggested I do. I’m not sure I communicated verbally, but my response was how I felt at that point, which was that I was scared to use medicine to alter my personality. I was scared of losing the true me. Tom Petty, and I swear, I still remember this in vivid clarity, the light, the blue of the bus seats, all of it... Tom Petty looks at me and says, “Yeah but your life is just your life. It’s not going to happen again. If you have an option to live with more happiness, then why not take that option.” I woke up in the bus seat to Pennsylvania highway. Maybe I saw you later that night.

I think Tom Petty changed my life. He told me that it was ok to seek a happier and healthier version of myself. After years of being without, I started medication later that month. I started to feel a little better. Slowly. Ok and feeling better didn’t just come from taking SSRIs, but also from getting more serious about meditation, getting exercise, all the things that make me a little more stable. I know I’m lucky that I’ve only had to deal with some limited side effects from the meds. I bring up this moment where I finally agreed to take them not to talk about how drugs fixed everything, but just to identify that there had been something I was scared of losing if I were to stop living in constant depression.

While I’m grateful that it’s pretty rare that I find myself stuck in bed for a long time or crying at a party, I wouldn’t necessarily want all of the depression-stuff to disappear. The secondary experience of truth-seeking is valuable to me, enough so that I still put up with some downer thoughts. My kudos to whoever is responsible, but one of the amazing things about SSRIs is they feel like they block the repetition of the thoughts, but not the content of the thoughts themselves. Like. My actual thoughts haven’t changed too much since I took that bus ride. About a year and a half ago, when Booker and I were on our first date, it was going really well. You think it wouldn’t find me there, on a pretty happy day of my life. But even then, I
remember seeing a bunch of broken glass on the hillside where we were hiking and thinking that I’d like to kneel in the shards and use them to scoop out my intestines to look at them. I don’t try to push away the supposedly obscene pictures that come into my head. The unwanted violent images still arise, but when something like that happens, and especially when I’m in the middle of a good day of my life, I don’t have to necessarily give into the cycle of them.

My advice, which you can take or leave, is that there’s no truth. No true you in your body. There’s just you right now.

This is where I talk about the making process now. As an artist, I feel I really have to acknowledge the dark thoughts, to let them exist so that I can uncover my intentions with the work too. Eh, and maybe I need the process of animation to absorb some of the depression? The more I think about it, the more I realize the two processes are alike. For me, time has always felt slower when I’m depressed. My tongue starts feeling thick, and the thought of moving it at the speed I’d need it to if I wanted to talk is absurd. It leads to a dissociative state, but maybe one not as extreme as in the Ferrante books. Animating helps with that because it actually asks me to slow down, dissect actions into a series of parts.

My work is narrative, so maybe this doesn’t apply to you, but it also doesn’t hurt to have access to an unstable mind when writing a variety of characters. It’s just given me an anchor point into more experiences to write about. Because I’ve had the experience of being inside of a mind that doesn’t make any sense at all, literally a mind that wants to do the very illogical thing of ending my own existence, then a week later feeling totally different and even somewhat chipper, I’ve learned not to take myself so seriously. I feel like I can’t see myself as always right because I can’t fully trust a singular perspective. Not only is that manifold perspectives thing a
huge freaking part of my work, what little I trust my own mind gives me sympathy for others when they’re acting in ways that feel cruel to me. I realize that they must think their way makes sense. This is helpful in my daily life too, but certainly, understanding both sides of a given situation is very useful in writing narrative, where I have to explain characters in conflict.

Hannah Arendt has a definition of thinking that embodies the Socratic method. For her, it’s an internal chorus of argumentative dialog. (Cutey, I can’t help but imagine little debate-team beings inside my body.) Thinking is not the acquisition of knowledge, it’s an activity, a fight between those voices! The depressed person knows their radical interior quite intimately. Let me guess...you’re sitting in bed hiding from the world when really the whole of your being is writhing in turmoil. That’s why it’s painful, cause parts of you are eating at each other. The cool thing is that, for Hannah Arendt, thinking was the only way that individual would survive in dictatorships, under the most banal and evil conditions. So there, skeptical depressives like you are so needed, _____.

Not coincidentally, making things, when it doesn’t become Art with the capital A or some kind of economic commodity is really good at embodying the thinking. Whether they’re literal objects you make or not, art often embodies the gerund, the ‘ing’ of thinking. It’s ongoing and in the present moment precisely because the voices contradict each other. And along with that definition of thinking and the present moment, you don’t have to ‘know’ anything to make art, you just have to be thinking. (Maybe the institutional Art world should stop saying the word thesis so much, and start using the word hypothesis.) I’m not happy your in pain, but eh, there’s something there that is useful about the way you feel now. Can you find a way to use it without destroying yourself?
What I’m saying is that maybe there’s a way to make the creative process work with the depression. (So long as you don’t go off and start worshipping your depression and start thinking it knows everything. It doesn’t.)

Phrased more practically than theoretically, unsubscribing to the notion of big Art might mean you have to design your whole practice from scratch, without emulating anyone else. There might even be some room for self-care in that discovery. If your depression means your practice is taking a two-hour bubble bath then drawing one doodle on a post-it, hey, then so be it. Don’t fight it.

You asked me. In terms of how connected the depression is to the work I do, I’d also say that depression feels mushy the way that animation does. The film I’m working on now, is kind of all about this stuff, mushy bodies. That thing I just said about wanting to rip out my guts? The violent nature of my depression makes me see my body as gooey, stretchy. Where obviously I wouldn’t want to actually cut into my guts, in animation, I can try and imagine a body that can receive that kind of action without any pain. It’s actually really therapeutic.

Being stuck in the real world where bodies can’t stretch at all can feel traumatic. I can’t remember my teacher’s name, but there was this professor at MICA who freshman year, showed us videos of shell shock alongside abstract expressionist paintings. Did you have him? This was well before anyone had diagnosed me, but I just remember being so wholly affected by those videos. I felt like I could feel their trauma in my own body. I was even nauseous after class. I remember going to the grass outside of Fox and lying down on my back. Sure, it was also a little performative; I was an art student after all, but I really felt like I could feel things that those men
felt an entire century before. I gotta believe that this weird body stuff and my relationship to mutilation has something to do with that.

Which brings me to another point. It’s pretty clear that you’re struggling not only with the feelings you’re having but also the guilt you feel for being so self-obsessed. Oof that’s a vicious cycle. You feel bad, then you feel bad for feeling bad, then because you tell yourself you’re such a piece of shit, and shocker, you still feel bad. In my experience, the whole fear-of-selfishness examination, at least when you’re so down, is not really a productive thing to explore. (This is my ongoing contradiction here. The idea that you, on the one hand, shouldn’t try and stop the depression from existing, while on the other you should recognize that you need to do things to make yourself feel better.) Maybe when you’re out of the weeds with this episode, you can reflect on your level of selfishness. Right now, you’re in no state. Just cross it off the list for now.

And in the case of the shell shock victims, I don’t feel like I was doing dead veterans any favors for feeling such intense sympathy. Though on the outside, I could describe that as an example of not being self-obsessed, of putting the pain of others before my own, the way that realization manifested was by feeling things in my own body. It ended up being a useful experience for me. I subscribe to the notion that there’s no such thing as a selfless deed. Have you ever seen that episode of Friends where Phoebe tries to do something truly selfless, donates a bunch of money to a telethon or something and then realizes she was only doing it to be selfless, which means that she was actually doing it for herself? Probably half the reason I’m taking your state of mind right now so seriously is because I’m projecting my own experiences with gnarly freak-outs onto your email. That said, my take on the ever-present selfishness is that it’s really not so bad. The selfishness is just a quality of existing, of being trapped in a body that
never gets to completely merge with any other living thing. Maybe that’s why you actually have
to keep making things, ______, because things like your drawings or your thoughtful emails or
whatever we make are actually the sites that attempt to call attention to what makes us human.
Art is just noticing that we’re alive, a series of TFW memes.

You have a lot of impact on people. I don’t know if you realized it, but last year when
you came to visit, and we were walking back to my sister’s house you said offhandedly,
“Everyone you know is going to die someday,” and then you stopped walking so that I would
take you seriously, you really stressed the point to me. “You. Me. Everybody is going to be
dead.” You made sure I really got what you were saying, that I imagined all the people I love
decaying. And I’m sure reading this now makes you cringe cause it’s a totally emo thing to say,
but I get it. It was a tough time for you, and the depression was letting you speak what was on
your mind. But if you’re going to acknowledge that part of existence, then you should probably
know that in the same way that the shell shock videos seeped in, those words got to me. I felt
them viscerally for a few days to come.

I don’t want you to feel guilty for saying what you had on your mind, but I do want to
remind you how you aren’t alone. I don’t mean you aren’t alone like you aren’t the only one who
feels this way, though that’s true as well. I mean you’re connected to the world, whether you like
it or not. You’re connected to your coworkers, to our friends. The plants in your apartment
absorb your CO2. You change the lives of people you never meet. You might not even know it,
but you might be connected to someone you see every day on the subway. They might have a
whole world of experiences based on just seeing you each morning before work. And you’re
connected to me, all the way across the country.
Maybe the way I just said that will trip you up. You’re not responsible for all the people you effect. It’s not a hierarchical connection. More like a web. Can you see yourself that way? Or try to? See yourself as just this human thing wobbling around in the world. Sometimes humans feel sad. Some humans spend a lot of their lives feeling sad. That’s ok. You’re still part of the group. You still deserve to be here.

One more thing. This is really important. I don’t think you can stop thinking of dying when you don’t want to live. You can’t want to live if you don’t want to live, but you can want yourself to want to live. Maybe address that first, and see what it means for the work next.

Ok, I think that’s enough for now. I’m driving home from Irvine around 9 tonight my time. If you’re up, feel free to give me a call.

Always,
Miranda
Do I have to stand on earth? What is my destiny? My heart suffers. I am unfortunate. You were hardly my friend here on earth, Life Giver. Ohuaya, Ohuaya!

How to live among the people? Does He who sustains and lifts men have no discretion? Go, friends, live in peace, pass your life in calm! While I have to live stooped, with my head bent down when I am among the people. Ohuaya, Ohuaya!

For this I cry - Yeehuya! - feeling desolate, abandoned among men on the earth. How do you decide your heart - Yeehuya! - Life Giver? Already your anger is vanishing, your compassion welling! Aya! I am at your side, God. Do you plan my death? Ohuaya, Ohuaya!

Is it true we take pleasure, we who live on earth? Is it certain that we live to enjoy ourselves on earth? But we are all so filled with grief. Are bitterness and anguish the destiny of the people of earth? Ohuaya, Ohuaya!

But do not anguish, my heart! Recall nothing now. In truth it hardly gains compassion on this earth. Truly you have come to increase bitterness at your side, next to you, Oh Life Giver. Yyao yyahue ahuuayye oo huuya.

I only look for, I remember my friends. Perhaps they will come one more time, perhaps they will return to life? Or only once do we perish, only one time here on earth? If only our hearts did not suffer! next to, at your side, Life Giver. Yyao yyahue ahuuayye oo huuya.

-Nezahualcoyotl (1402 – 1472)
The End of Thought/I’m Still Thinking

(A question from a friend, generated during a playful exercise.)

Amy Mackay: Do you believe in ghosts?

Socratic voice inside me number 1: No. I don't. I'd be happy to find out I'm wrong.

Socratic voice inside me number 2: is compost a ghost?
On Glendale, I hear an accident in the distance.

I look into the windows of a Starbucks. A man with Down’s syndrome, as large as the bouncer at Zebulon, sits next to a woman my age. The woman is laughing and showing him something on her phone.

I’m into Silver Lake now, and the 356 parking lot is always hell to walk by. I see a woman with volumes of wild hair and a dog to match her cut. I cross the street with them at the Neruda Center and head uphill towards the Reservoir. Up the hill, the view clears to reveal the hills of Silverlake. This time of night, the hills are black, with punctures of lights, tracing the spines of the mounds. I can’t make out much of the individual dwellings, but I know they’re nice places from what I’ve seen by daylight.

To my left, a stylized boxy house pokes through the surprising thrash of pine trees. These are the ‘real-deal’ fancy homes that those bougie hipster homes with the stainless steel are trying to emulate. In multi-million dollar Reservoir-facing mansions, the design elements are not applied to the exterior but reveal themselves in the bones of the building. I wind through the shadows of the miniature forest, thinking to myself that if any part of my walk were actually unsafe, this dark corner near the Res would be it. To do the opposite of what I feel, for a moment I walk with an erect neck and open chest, exuding confidence. From a patio just above my head, I hear,
“I told her, why would I be lying? Why would I hide myself from the ones I love? That doesn’t make any sense. I told her, she didn’t make any sense.”

I cross the street to take in the park. On the ground, dogs surround the Reservoir, another dry man-made wasteland like the River. From the road, I can’t see any water down there, but the dogs don’t seem discouraged by the drought. They kick dust in curls. A dog darts across the field for the chance to sniff a butt. Its owner graciously waves at the other dog’s owner. Near the park, a sign reads “Poop Time,” advertising an upcoming doggie social.

I have a theory that a certain color scheme of dog is in vogue right now. The dog park by the Rec Center, the apex of the doggie hangout, corroborates my theory that most dogs in LA are white with a few flecks of cappuccino colored spots. But maybe I don’t know enough about dogs. How many colorways of dogs are there?

Vapors, Smokes, Exhausts, do they always follow smells? Well, I smell weed, a light and fluffy weed, a little sweet. It doesn’t take long for me to identify the source. In the parking lot to the Rec Center, a huddle of round men with chihuahuas in their arms puff a vape pen. She is a crisp fluff, bright white, even in the darkness of night. Though she is a delightful coil of whipped meringue, I don’t have much time with her, before she rises beyond my field of vision. The men puff the pen. She is born-as-Puff again. Again, she rises and disappears. I notice that one of the Chihuahuas wears a sweater with a bit of tulle along the seam.

Again. Again.
I pass the restaurant. I’m ten minutes early, and rather than hang out around all the boutiques--stores I can only assume are funded by family wealth--I jut back into the residences of Silver Lake. The first road I find takes me into an unknown street that leads into a steep hill with no intersecting options. I trudge upward, realizing that until now my walk has all been downhill.

The houses here seem petite from the view of the front door, but I know better. There’s a lot of house that can be tucked into a hillside. Even the foliage here obscures the houses. I note the quiet privacy of the block.

On the right, something catches my eye. At first, I’m worried that it’s a private staircase, but since I don’t see any signs, I confirm that I’ve found a public staircase to shortcut up the hill. My thighs burn as I climb the steep incline. There’s a platform that could be a resting spot halfway up, but it's just a little further to the crest. I keep going. At the top, I stop for the first time in 90 minutes. I put a hand on my chest to feel the active pulse of my heartbeat. I haven’t been cold since I left my house, which by the way, I can see from here. Or not really, but I can see the house that’s blocking my house. It’s true, the Reservoir is just a puddle, but I don’t feel bummed out. The lights of the many houses sparkle toward the horizon. If I could make out stars from here, I bet they’d look pretty similar. I can see not only the Reservoir but the rolling hills of the rest of the city, surrounded by the San Gabriel mountains on my left, downtown to my right, and I know somewhere even further, there is the sea. Four airplanes fly across the sky. They cut through the Night Cloud, one general blob above the city. I say hello, and the equanimous being of the Cloud, she does nothing at all.
I walk down the hill and arrive at 8:30 on the dot. My friend Samantha arrives simultaneously. We hug and walk inside for a drink, where I’ll probably talk about how I literally spent ten days thinking about how the elderly get out of bathtubs. It’s good to get out.
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