"Judged by Fear"

A creative project by

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Judged by Fear

An Honors Thesis

By

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Abstract

My senior thesis is a short film that fulfills the requirements for the art department's senior thesis course per the focus of my major. This film was created in response to a personal need to produce more than just a normal demo reel. I hope to possibly attain an area director position of a studio in the far future, and figured the best way to show qualification for higher duties would be in the form of a short film. This film illustrates my thoughts on the human capacity for empathy, and the society that erects barriers between the individuals preventing the ability to empathize with their suffering. The film was used for applying to grad school and presented in the spring senior thesis show as my senior art project. It is the climax of my time with the animation program, and in the department of art.

Looking back on my four years at Ball State, I feel that my senior year has accumulated the successes of previous art pieces, creating my best work from the influences and instruction from the art department. The attention to detail alone that I give to my own art now far surpasses what primary education expected, and justifies the purpose of coming to this school for the fine arts. This senior project pulled from many ideas that have been seeded throughout the curriculum of my major, of the honors courses, and of the core classes.

The biggest lesson I have taken from being here in the art department, is if you succeed in nailing down what content a piece should represent or embody, you are three-fourths of the way done because people will associate with work from the context of their own experiences to the point that the form and media is dwarfed by their expectations. In the arts, professors push their
students to break away from shallow reasoning, and base decisions only after thinking through why they choose the form or media. It is not to say we give every line meaning, but we must strive to give the overall picture purpose. Often I think art can be dull, especially of my own, when the artist creates it out of necessity instead of desire to illustrate an idea that serves the purpose of influencing the audience's thoughts. Landscapes and figure drawing are nice and all for the technical development of artists, though they do not offer the stimulation of the mind which I prefer. My own technical studies have mostly been without creativity, but only because I myself could not comprehend some of the inquiries first give by my peers to liven up the work. Now after four years of schooling, I have developed the skills but more importantly I know how to run with my ideas, and turn figure studies into mind-boggling narratives. I find it humorous to conceive that I came to an art program because I enjoyed creating small sculptures and fantastical images, only to learn that my interests were kitsch and narrow minded, and ultimately relearn how to be creative and incorporate the former inspirations and desires with more contextualized ideas.

Now as every artist, we are faced with misinterpretation, or dealing with an audience who just cannot associate with our work because the environment from which they come did not expose the same ideas as the artist. So on top of trying to fill my work with content, I also try to minimize the visual imagery, and use that which is almost universal. My most successful work from these two semesters embody this as I often appropriated recognizable street sign language taken out of original context and even from across borders, and the narratives I formed were comprehensible and unique. I seek in my work to firmly announce the main topic, because the last thing I need is a backwards interpretation from the audience when I add so many unclear
references or meanings to my work. Often I reflect on things I added then later regret, or vise versa the things I wish to add to create more depth to the work.

When I chose my topic for my film, I had to break away from several earlier ideas, because I could not think of a way to bring content to them. They were based more about skills than a narrative or thought evoking ideas, and the route I want to embark on as an animator is that of a storyteller. Perhaps I have been beaten over the head too many times by politics in art, but I do feel from what literature and art interests me the most often are allegorical or metaphors for our society. So this film is that metaphor for a tragic truth to the human condition by trying to highlight the heartless situation of the character. It has been for me more involving and entertaining to create a piece that tries to symbolize a problem than one that is just flashy or technical. In making this film I have definitely sparked my own interest to pursue this career path, and hope to one day be in the position to reflect upon this as the first success in a long line of successes. I think with more experience the storytelling could be improved upon, but I feel it has been a success and a step in the right direction.

My short film Judged by Fear is a narrative that addresses what I see as one of society’s greatest troubles, the inability to emphasize with another individual’s circumstances. I feel that we have created a nation that is all about the ego, and ignorant of compassion or society’s responsibility for the circumstances of others. Often I have witnessed and studied the practice of shifting the blame for troubles to outside sources, ignoring the universal truth that our own actions are not existing in a void, and how they impacted others often create our own situations. Too often we shirk responsibility to others and in the end, the attempts to avoid responsibility have taken away our ability to relate to the suffering of others. This happens because we are egocentric, no matter how hard we try to think of others, we often focus from our perspective
and on the ego. Because it is easier to understand ourselves, we will give our reasoning higher value over another’s. I chose my message because we may see films that get us to empathize with the protagonist, but it is always clear who is at fault, one individual or group, which leaves people not thinking further beyond what was portrayed. This led me to think that if the sides of right and wrong are blurred enough, then I can get the audience to approach the situation as a whole. Is the caretaker at fault because he sees nothing wrong with the box? No, he is at fault for not stopping to take the time to fully realize his patient’s situation. These ideas have been born from taking honors humanities and anthropology courses that stress the need for understanding the circumstances that situations are composed of and their global impact, implying that our interaction with the world is enough that small events can cumulate into how the world views whole nations or cultures. The issues of being able to empathize and placing the blame elsewhere seem to go hand in hand; from listening to debates and discussions of war, economics, and politics I have concluded that once people start blaming others for their troubles, they lose the ability to see the world from another viewpoint. I hope that the audience understands that this film encompasses that opinion, and it is trying to put the audience as a universal bystander who witnesses the truth and the uncompassionate treatment. The film may be foggy, it may not come across at all as a cry for empathy in our society, but that is the meaning I give it, and with practice the technical issues would no longer obscure my philosophical intent.

This short film has taken me nine months to complete, and personally I feel it could use a few more. The character is a modified model from a program called Make Human, and of the software assets took the longest to finish as I had to cut out the body, create clothes, and make the skin shallow and sunken, to try to indicate a malnourished character that is depressed and seldom eats. Skin and wall textures are a combination of pictures taken by myself, and modified
with Adobe Photoshop. As for the rest, most are made through procedural elements of either Photoshop or Maya itself, and a few textures pulled off of the free CG Textures online. Rigging the character to move was by far the most challenging, and I have learned from this experience where I can improve it in the future. The errors in the rig are evident in the twisting joints, and because of time limitations I chose not to go back and rework these errors.

Now all of this work pales in comparison to the time I took to animate the character. I completely became involved in my film once animation started to take off, particularly when I reached the final sequences. I enjoyed creating the motion and movement, and am ecstatic about my intentions coming across the most there in the last few moments. The biggest issue I ran into was not taking the time to do everything properly, by which I should have created reference videos to base the animation on, a step beyond acting it out and trying to mentally picture it in animation. Of all the troubles of my film, taking that step further to improve the animation would have made it much more powerful as a short film. Though I must say I am proud to have created it, and acknowledge the room I have to grow before becoming a good narrator through my animation and eventually hope to become an outstanding storyteller. Rendering and compositing this film was a cinch, as I have been given a lot of experience in this area from the courses here, especially that of the 2009 summer immersive learning project. I believe it serves its educational purpose of showing the skills and technical knowledge taught to me by my professors and mentors of the art department. I plan on taking the knowledge gained from mistakes and successes to improve my work in grad school, and create new short films in the future.

As an animator, I wanted to open the minds of people to the deficiencies of our compassion and empathy towards people in the hope of improving themselves to improve
society, by promoting a more humane treatment of the individual. In the creation of this film, my goal was to narrate a situation that made it clear that this man who is tormented by this box, has reason to fear it, and through the lack of communication and misunderstandings, is treated indifferently by his caretaker. I want to put the audience in the position of the misunderstood individual, to hopefully feel or understand his suffering. I intended for the box to be clearly possessed of some supernatural power, as it moves on its own, and not just the delusions of the incarcerated. In the original concept of this piece, the evilness of the box was going to be amplified by black wispy matter that comes out whenever the caretaker is not around, however this made the situation focused between the supernatural box and the man in the room, so I simplified it so that the situation that needs to be addressed, the way he is treated, is more of the focus. I personally think that only the ending though captures that as my main goal, when the viewport is shut in his face. This section is really the one that I enjoy the most because I feel my point is clearest on indicating the lack of empathy towards this man and his need for being consoled.

The courses throughout the honors program and core curriculum helped bring me to this conclusion that because out of greed or pride, we cannot as human being remove ourselves far enough from being egocentric to prevent society from walking the ever so obvious path to violence. Therefore, as an artist I want my work to try and stimulate the emotions and to provoke people into action to grow past and overcome these obstacles. I have long known that media shapes the mindset that people live in, so in my art I hope to popularize notions of sympathy, honorable deeds, and self sacrifice for the greater good. The two freshmen readers, “First They Killed My Father” and “A Long Way Gone” as well as course texts from honors 189, 201, 202, and 203, and Anthro 101, are what brought me to this conclusion. Mostly the first
hand accounts of war and poverty have really struck deep into my thoughts, and I ponder what I would do, or how I would help if I ever became the bystander to another person’s tragic circumstances. These memoirs attest to the unglamorous human psyche that lacks the ability to emphasize with victims when it's not the self and its this mentality of us versus them, or glad it's not me, that I want to attack with my films.

During the production of this film because of the scenario I placed it in I often debated on how dark this film could become, or how far into the human psyche I could delve, because much of my current work has become darker and more sinister. Much of it has been to the same tune of satirizing the society I am surrounded by, which goes to show my irritation with the conditions we built for us and future generations in. Just as we inherited the troubles of our ancestors, and I am not talking about territory or racial grudges, but far closer to home with how we treat differences in a person’s tastes or the raising of children. I am absolutely disgusted with the route we are pursuing and as such my work has become harsh and crude. Wisely, I kept this film clean and focused on a serious atmosphere, sort of testing the waters with this first film.

However, in the creation of Judged by Fear, I came to the conclusion that I would rather make future films either lighter and intended to be comedies to address these issues or go over the edge into darkness. In either course it fits my nature more to come up with humorous satires such as many of my two dimensional work have been in both drawing and encaustics, than to create dramatic animations. This film has serves both to test my abilities and judge the reaction of others to my working style, and the responses I received have been less insightful than I would have expected. Partially this is due to my inexperienced animation, but as I stated before, the majority of art is based on content more than form, so I fee the culprit here is my shyness to go to the extent of one direction or the other. Some of my best work out of Ball State have been the
encaustic sign symbol pieces that incorporate found symbols, along with a few that I engineered, used to illustrate a story or explanation for the condition of a subject. These pieces have been said to be quite hilarious and well received by the professors and students, and have given me the response that I feel I want from my work. Also much to my surprise, when I go the darkest routes that I have in my work, I have for the first time been asked how much would I want for this piece, and I see a real interest and experience the feedback I lacked from this film. So in the future, I plan on exploring the use of both comedy and my darkest imagination in order to express my ideas on empathy and the human condition. I hope my work will become something akin to the works of the essayist Jonathan Swift, because I am drawn to dry humor and allegorical farces that push for changes in the society they are born from.

Even this film is not devoid of my dry humor, I intend for the audience to find the animation to be humorous, though the situation has a grave seriousness as this man suffers from the terror of the box. This is evident through my exaggeration of body movement and facial expressions, like that of his startled jump at the door, the length to which he hops up, and the unnaturally wide eyes. I think with some experience observing theater or taking acting classes will improve this form of animation that seeks humor through exaggerated movement, and fills my particular problem of not wanting to rely on verbal humor. Once I become more familiar with the movement and body form, I feel pulling together a comedic film that bears my message will be very possible and successful.

I do regret that this film is lacking of my darker imagination, though I would be a fool to think that this is in any way a child’s story. The film would not pass for a Brothers Grimm tale either, and I could probably spark more interest in it, had I become creative in that sense with the narration. The reason for this is unfortunately based mostly on my own tastes, and I know that
could spell the downfall for any artist, but I will stick to it for one reason: I will enjoy making it. The whole purpose for me choosing to come to school for animation has been because I enjoy telling stories, I enjoy playing the part of the storyteller. The computer is my stage, the programs my actors, and I am the director who brings the story to life. The film, as mentioned, tested the waters for me. I know that I want to pursue this course in more work, and believe that if nothing else, it will have a place amongst cult classic pursuers.

Now for why did I choose to do a film, and more importantly why seek a Masters of Fine Arts after this? It is my hope to one day rise in the ranks of animators and concept artist to the position of art director at a studio, or even start my own. This film is the first step to explore and express my talent to others, and learn where I need to improve to progress further down this goal. I aspire to this career because I feel it is where I can impact the minds of people the most. Years of theater had taught me one universal truth: it is the director that is most important to the overall show, because one or two talented and gifted actors may be able to coach themselves, but the director is needed to pull everything together, because without him or her, the show would be a mud puddle of talent. I want to be the one who pulls together the talents of my peers, and create works worth watching, and bring meaningful messages another step beyond the ones we see in films today, as one can be sure, someone in the future will want to take it deeper than I. Definitely the future looms forebodingly, for I have yet to fully decide if I have the ability to fill such a role, but I do have the drive and desire to be such an influence.

This goal can be brought closer to reality by continuing my education and going for my Masters of Fine Arts, as this film and other works were used to get into graduate school at the Academy of Art University of San Francisco. It is my hope, that a more focused study of 3D character design and animation will provide me with the skills to better myself in this field, and
stand out more to rise amongst the ranks. The joy at having succeeded with this film to get to this next step is like nothing I can describe, for though I had faith in this film, it is still always a pleasant surprise when the careful blocks of planning fall into place.

It will be disheartening to take leave of the Midwest to further my education, however this is not to say I do not look forward to the opportunities of the West coast. After all, when I leave grad school, it is there that I will begin my journey to get my work out amongst society and publicize myself beyond the educational community. Plus it is from here in the Midwest that I base my critique of society, and it will be enlightening to experience a different approach to life and the world that raise new problems and subject matter to be the source of material for future films. Traveling to new locations is not enough of an immersion into the cultural differences, and my work will never be universal until I broaden my cultural knowledge to address issues not limited to my own concerns. Living elsewhere also carries with it the inevitable expansion of my database of resources and references. This senior thesis project will hopefully just be the forerunner to future films and therefore representative of my roots, and a milestone to see how far I can surpass this early piece. Because above being an animator, I am still an artist, and the animations I create will be accumulating into my life’s work and therefore the mark I leave behind. The impact of this film overall will hopefully be dwarfed by later works, because never would I nor any artist that I know wants to be known only for their first installment of their legacy. This senior project has been key to the development of ideas and will guide my course based on what was successful, and has become my masterpiece out of my undergraduate work. So now what is left is to surpass it with work created outside of the educational system and really experience being an artist.
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And of course, all my peers for without the many discussions on life with people around me, I would never have been able to conceive this project.
Author’s Statement

This project has become the highlight of my college career. However I must say that I hope to grow and expand far beyond the ideals represented in this peace and the techniques used to create it. I do not intend for this project to see the screen, because I simply do not think it is quality work, but it is in its own right an art piece still and the climax of my work here at Ball State. Judged By Fear represents a mixture of ideas that have developed over these four years and am proud to have produced a film to this extent. This project is a stepping stone used to leap forward into my graduate studies and beyond into the career of an animator, and eventually the goal of an art director or studio director.