

I...AM: AN ANIMATED MFA THESIS FILM
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

BY

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I. Statement of the Problem

We believe what is real based upon a unique cocktail of sensory perception and faith. How do you know that you are alive? How does anyone confirm that they ever existed at all? This idea is one of the greatest philosophical debates to be raised over the centuries of human history. How can one person provide irrefutable proof that he or she ever existed? Or that the rest of the world even exists? You may very well experience these sensations right now, because your nerve endings are telling you that you are experiencing them. But, beyond those nerve endings, what is telling you of these sensations?

How do we know that we are not being fed sensations to build up a false perception of reality? It is with these questions and arguments that I will introduce you to my film and its characters, Dr. Keegan and Auto, and their unique positions on this complex problem. We will spend three minutes and fifteen seconds with Dr. Keegan and his mechanical assistant. In that time inside my created world, the characters will discuss and argue their varied opinions on the matters of life, death, and existence. Furthermore, I will discuss the influences on this animated short film, including classical artworks,

contemporary films and ancient philosophical texts.

II. Influences

The influences for *I...Am* are varied but share common themes. I have picked a number of works to touch on and describe how they have impacted *I...Am* as an animated film. These important influences are films such as *The Matrix*, *Shutter Island*, and *Inception* along with artworks by Thomas Eakins. Lastly, I will address the literature of Plato, Renee Descartes, Isaac Asimov, Keith Laumer and Philip K. Dick.

The science fiction film series *The Matrix* follows the story of Mr. Anderson (Neo) as he discovers that his life is not exactly ordinary. In fact, the hero learns that the real world is gone, and in its place is a reality filled with horrific robots that have enslaved the human race, using them as batteries for the machines themselves. All along we are kept at bay with a complex simulation that mimics real life in such great detail that we are all fooled and remain obedient. This film, and its two sequels, influenced me greatly by forcing me to consider what is real and where is the proof of this reality. It seems ludicrous to even suggest that what we experience on a daily basis might not be more than well timed impulses to our brain. However, the Wachowski brothers who

created and directed these films go at that notion with a fist full of cash and special effects. They used the story of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll as a plot device continually throughout the first film. Early on, Morpheus asks how far down the rabbit hole will Neo go? In my film, Auto is the quizzical child persona to the mentor Keegan's grizzled old man. Auto asks questions constantly. He is a child wanting to know everything there is, and it leads him to the same question that *The Matrix* proposes: How do you know?

In the film *Shutter Island*, Leonardo Di Caprio plays an FBI agent that investigates a missing patient from a mental hospital located on an island. As the film progresses, DiCaprio's character begins to mentally break down, until it becomes plausible that the FBI agent character is a facade being played out time and time again in this mental hospital. This film underlines the tentative hold we have on reality and how easily it cracks and crumbles under the weight of intense scrutiny. Everything you believe can be wiped away if someone poses the right questions, making yourself fall for the deception.

Another Leonardo DiCaprio film is *Inception* by Christopher Nolan. This film truly defines the term mind-bending as it dives deep into the human psyche as a team works to implant an idea into their targets' mind. The world breaks down as the main characters go deeper and deeper into each other's minds until finally we reach limbo and the excruciating hell of entrapment. Nolan brings up a brilliant question of time and space being simply relative to others encountering the same experience. He then wraps it

around other dimensions in a fashion similar to an onion, never knowing which reality is true, until one finally accepts it



Thomas Eakins, *Gross Clinic*, 1875



Thomas Eakins (1844-1916). "The Agnew Clinic of 1889" (owned by the University of Pennsylvania), in stark contrast to "The Gross Clinic", where the doctors are wearing street clothes. "The Agnew Clinic" shows 14 years later a more modern medical team wearing surgical whites.

Thomas Eakins, *Agnew Clinic*, 1889

Many of the plot driven themes in my film come from the questions raised by motion pictures, but I also have a number of artworks influencing my work as well. For

my use of color in this film, I found a few artists that matched the uncomfortable feeling I wanted to capture. Thomas Eakins, the 19th century painter, had a grotesque vision. Two of his paintings, *The Agnew Clinic* and *The Gross Clinic* were both instrumental in my layout of color and modeling detail. For me, *The Gross Clinic* is an important artwork that graphically illustrates surgery, and along with *The Agnew Clinic*, depicts the body as a machine. It is something to be studied rather than shrouded in mystic theory that medicine adopted previously. *The Gross Clinic* also established surgery as a teachable subject depicts Gross lecturing to his students. Eakins' colors in the *Gross Clinic* are visceral, illuminating our senses to a raw human body. This is in stark contrast with *The Agnew Clinic*, where we find an advancement of medical theory, as it is clean, brightly lit, and organized in a collegiate manner. *The Agnew Clinic* especially influenced my choice of color palette for my morgue. The warm values used and direct lighting in the painting I incorporated into my own film as the strongly lit ceiling lights the plainly dressed doctor, and the surrounding audience which I made into the six cameras watching the characters from the walls. In *The Gross Clinic*, the dark shadows were also brought into my film to center on the characters, illuminating themselves as well as the body in the warming glow of the ceiling lights and side lighting from the x-ray light boxes. I used these shadows as a story telling device at different times for Auto and Dr. Keegan. Two examples of this technique, first when Auto opens the cooler behind Keegan, he is nearly lost in the shadows but his ghostly eye lamps and hoverpads give him a sinister appearance of Death itself. Secondly I use the lighting to my advantage when Auto is in

the foreground of the film at the mirror, here we see a reverse shot of the reflection in the mirror and an over the shoulder shot of Auto looking at the doctor during his last words. Auto is illuminated but here Dr. Keegan becomes the subject of the shot, as he is brightly illuminated in by the ceiling lighting just before he dies.

While many of my influences are found in films and artworks, it would be negligent not to mention the wealth of philosophical debate I have taken from literature. Plato and other philosophers have debated the existence of knowledge, its sources, and the reasoning for reality itself for well over two thousand years. Auto Maton and Dr. Keegan both are loosely based on the teacher-student relationship between Plato and Socrates. Auto Maton was created as a characterization of Plato. Plato was well known for his recordings of life, ideas and experiences. I represented this idea by Auto being a highly skilled assistant to the elderly Keegan. The doctor, however, was created as an analogue to Socrates. Historically, Socrates is represented through the writings of his students such as Plato. Working with that limited historical view of the teacher, I chose a frail, elderly human whose last moments could be recorded in full detail by Auto and wall cameras mounted around the room.

Another philosopher who influenced *I..Am* is Rene Descartes. His famous quote, “Cogito ergo sum” translates to “ I think, therefore I am” is the first phrase that spurred the initial direction of this film. His reasoning of thought proves existence and doubt also proves reality. He doubts perception of the senses, understanding that they can be tricked into lying to oneself. This is a strong point that is true today with photo-realistic

animation and image editing abilities. From this, he brings up the Mind-body dichotomy of Dualism, which is a school of thought that discusses the incongruent nature of the mental and physical experiences that make up reality. Descartes' ideas on this subject, coupled with Plato's theories of denying the material world at face value, spawned my own personal philosophical ideas regarding reality. In particular, that reality is little more than the brief encounters between one's self and extra-personal relationships, events and communications. Each person has their own definition of reality based solely on their own personal meetings with other beings, but if that encounter never happens, then that unknown never existed in the first place, until it touches some portion of your psyche and alters it from that point onward.

I also incorporated ideas from the science fiction writings of Phillip K. Dick, Issac Asimov, and Keith Laumer. All three are well known authors from the twentieth century, and often featured automatons and cybernetic life forms in their work. Asimov established the rules of ethics for robots that nearly all science fiction uses today, namely, the three laws of robots:

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

With these three laws, I worked to create Auto as an interesting character to both see and hear. Auto follows the rules, avoiding conflict and inflicting harm onto his human master, but he is rather ambiguous about his intentions and motivations. Within the first minute of the film, it is clear that Dr. Keegan is not healthy, and in another sixty seconds he is dead on the ground. Auto does nothing about this and watches as this man dies a painful death while speaking on its own views of God. But Auto sees death everyday, and understands humans will die inevitably. It has prepared for Dr. Keegan's death, having watching him for years Auto knew today was end of the line. Afterwards, Auto falls back on his programming. The robot picks up the corpse and lays it down on the table. It then drapes a cloth on the body and utters the final words, "I will finish up here shortly" before shutting the door on Dr. Keegan

Keith Laumer co-wrote another series that I read as a child called *Bolo!* The short stories and novels concerned the lives of sentient robotic battle tanks, and how long-term combat affects these artificially intelligent beings. One idea taken directly from Laumer is the idea of measuring lifetimes for various beings. In many cases, these Bolos existed for many decades, centuries and in some instances, millennia, well past the lifespan of humans that controlled them. In the film, Dr. Keegan says to Auto, "And you Auto, YOU are just a machine, you will never die!" This line is a double-edged sword, both a compliment and an insult. Calling this robot "just" a machine means it will miss out on the events of life and death, growth and maturity that all life forms go through. Therefore, Auto being accused it will never die while Dr. Keegan breaths his last breath comes as

both an insult and a compliment to the robot. Whether Auto realizes this or even comprehends it is unclear. Auto raises a scalpel to examine it when he hears that comment from Dr. Keegan. If Keegan had survived the heart attack, he might not have survived much longer after those last words.

The influences on *I...Am* are varied and are incorporated in different ways into this film, as it discusses the question of empirical proof of reality as either a series of experiences between different beings or artificially planted into our minds. Films such as *The Matrix*, *Shutter Island*, and *Inception* all present the idea of reality being based on false assumptions, planted ideas, and personal constructs. With the paintings of Thomas Eakins, I took a more literal approach with identifying the color theory behind the works and modeling the morgue to mimic the visceral images of *The Gross Clinic*, yet following *The Agnew Clinic*'s strong lighting sources. In the script, I included the ideas of Plato, Socrates and Descartes concerning reality and how it can be defined on a number of levels. I also brought in previous ideas presented by Asimov, Dick and Laumer to distinguish the relationship of Auto Maton and the Doctor.

III . Description of the Artwork

I...Am. is a short film that lasts approximately three minutes and twenty seconds. To an animator, this is about two hundred seconds of animation. Taking this even further, at twenty-four frames per second, my film consists of four thousand eight-hundred frames. In the film, two characters, Doctor Otto Keegan and his robot assistant Auto Maton dissect a human cadaver in a rundown, grungy morgue and Auto, the ever curious robot, questions the meaning of life, much to his superior's chagrin. Most importantly, Auto builds a logical argument proving that what you see, hear, and feel is not real. The Doctor however, staunchly disagrees, and the argument comes to a head when Auto reveals that since he cannot prove what is reality, he coincidentally cannot disprove the existence of a god. This angers Doctor Keegan, stating that he has never seen proof of a divine being and that Auto, being a robot, has no business expounding on such ideas. The conflict abruptly ends as Keegan dies in a fit of pain on top of his cadaver. Auto, being the preprogrammed being he is, takes over and places the Doctor in a cooler and ends the film.

Both Keegan and Auto are at a pivotal place in their respective lives. Keegan is an elderly doctor, a surgeon that has worked most of his life as either the savior or deliverer

to death for many people. He is tired, and jaded to new experiences. Otto Keegan is no stranger to painful realizations of reality himself; twenty-four years previously, the Doctor was in a car accident, killing his wife and nearly himself. His mechanical arm is the painful memory of the day he survived and is a reminder of who he lost. He lives out his final, painful working days as a coroner performing autopsies on cadavers whose own realities have ended. Auto, however, is a Model-A medical assistant droid whose purpose is to assist and perform surgeries on patients, hence his internship with Dr. Keegan. While he is installed with a working knowledge of human anatomy, Auto's programming cortex is amazingly human-like, and therefore he learns through watching and mimicking his teachers. A side effect of his sapient styled autonomy is a deep interest in creativity and philosophical discussions, which is typically an annoyance for Keegan. Here we come across Keegan and his protégé as they are dissecting a victim. Soon Auto begins to reveal what he has been wondering for several months by asking "what is death?" and therefore inferring "what is life." Auto begins to ponder Plato's ideas in *The Republic* by defining an object, he gives it meaning, life, existence.

The film was created as an intellectual exercise to examine the concepts discussed by Descartes and Plato. Computer-created animation was an appropriate medium in my mind for this topic because three-dimensional animation allows an artist to artificially create a world built entirely from one's own creativity. As discussed previously, Dr. Keegan began as a frail and opinionated elderly gentleman, but his character often wavered from grandfatherly to antagonistic towards the robot. I settled on a middling

approach to his character and focused more on the Robot. Auto, the child of the duo, was conceived as an extremely inquisitive robot.

Initially, Auto was designed as a hanging structure of tentacles, but this changed quickly into the hunchbacked Igor that the audience is familiar with. The setting itself, a morgue, seemed at the time to be adequate as a work space that would force one to consider reality, life and death as it relates to humans and automatons. However, I decided to take this one step further. I designed a morgue from hell, a grimy, bloody room similar in tone to Eakins' paintings. The textural grime of this room was intended to questions about the reason Auto and Dr. Keegan are here in the first place. Is this a war hospital perhaps, or are they criminals dissecting corpses for the organ markets? That is a plot line I never touched on beyond the visual feel of the film.

I...Am. concept scripting began in May 2010 along with character and scene concepts beginning in April and May of that year. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to make a film that discussed reality as an improvable ideal. That reality is only what we accept, whether it is scientific in nature or religious. I chose the story of a doctor dissecting a cadaver as a uniquely dark way to address the finality of death. To contrast the elderly doctor, I created Auto Maton as an immortal, non-biological entity that both understood the world and misunderstood even basic concepts such as life and death.

The summer of 2010 was spent modeling, rigging and texturing the characters and the morgue scene. I utilized Autodesk Maya to create the base model for each object, then used Brush for high-level detailing. Rigging, the process of creating a system of

controllers for a character, began in July 2010 and became an ever evolving process as I realized later on specific animation, acting and artistic needs for the characters, such as Auto's buzz saw or rotating claws and implemented them into the reference rig for Auto Maton. In September 2011 I finished the Doctor's facial controls to create a better range of expressions for lip syncing and animation.

Layout and Scratch dialogue began in August 2010 with the layout of characters and scenes in place of the initial storyboards, while working on the script. The first layout animatic video, a very rough cut with no animation at all and only my own voice as dialogue, was twelve minutes long. This was quickly reduced to ten minutes of run time and I began to work in earnest at blocking the motions of the characters. At the end of August and the beginning of September 2010, I used the talents of students Martin Ryder and Ben Rockey as scratch voice artists.

Work on the film continued for the next year until August 2011 when Andy Beane, John Ludwick and I cut the film's running time. After painfully cutting apparent issues and getting the film to a workable three minutes and fifteen seconds, it was obvious that a complete reanimation of the film was needed. So from October 2011 onwards, I reanimated the entire film and I can easily say that *I...Am.* is better for it.

Starting in October I held a call for voice actors and received over twenty interested inquiries from talented theater students. Corey Rudell, a local radio host and telecommunications student, was chosen for the voices of both the doctor and robot.

Later, in January 2012, Nate Hess joined the film as a sound engineer to clean up the voice acting recordings and add in numerous ambient sound effects.

Animation continued through the rest of 2011 and into 2012. I finished animation by June 2012 and began rendering the film in May through July along with compositing the film with its sound, dialogue recordings and different render passes. When compositing this film together in After Effects, I used multiple render passes for each frame, each one designed to either bring out detail or soften undesired aspects of the particular target film frame. The render passes used are:

Master Beauty – This is the most basic rendering for the film, a straight rendered image using the Mental Ray render engine.

Ambient Occlusion – This pass darkens any possible occluded spaces, such as where two planes come together, useful for deepening a shot with blacks and shadows.

Shadow – This pass is for direct shadows as created by the light sources, it deepens shadows and gives control to shadows already created in the **Master Beauty Pass**.

No Refraction No Reflection – This pass is absent refracted lights and reflected images.

Reflection – Similar to the shadow pass, it adds detail to reflected surfaces

Robot lighting effects pass – With my robot having lit hover pads and lights on the eyes and hands, this gives control over the particle effects used in After Effects.

After compiling these different layers and color correction with Magic Bullet plugin for After Effects, the final look of the film was achieved. I then placed each of the composited shots into a Master file in Adobe Premier Pro where sound is placed and the final film is exported out and ready for cinematic viewing.

I...Am has been an arduous labor of love for the past two years. After spending well over 4,500 hours on a film that is less than four minutes long, I am pleased with the results. This film strove to discuss philosophical arguments about the nature of our world and present plausible conclusions within the context of a computer generated world. By using industry standard software such as Maya, Zbrush, Photoshop, After Effects and many others, this project certainly reinforced my skills and forced me to learn new lessons throughout the many months of production.

IV. Conclusion

I...Am is a film about humanity's relationship with life. It discusses the prospects of reality as a series of electrical impulses indistinguishable from a virtual simulation. Reality is merely a series of shared experiences by entities and our perceptions of those intersecting experiences. By drawing on a variety of sources from Hollywood films, to fine art paintings and philosophical literature, I have created an animated film that asks and attempts to answer a few of these universal questions. I created a story that centers on two characters. An elderly, mortal human, whose lack of faith in the unseen is underlined by his proximity to his final moments in which he gradually and increasingly feels pains, then suddenly dies on the floor of the morgue, only to be lovingly placed into a cooler by Auto. It was certainly my intention to create a unique relationship between the atheist human and his agnostic familiar. I drew on the writings of Socrates and Plato for their relationship, along with taking many of Plato's own thoughts about reality being experienced through the mind and not solely from the body. Then, I applied Descartes defense of thought as proof of reality. Through this film, I came to the conclusion that

existence is simply a list of experiences shared by multiple characters and interpreted by our own minds to fill in the gaps.

The last two years have been a mentally strenuous repetition of creation and destruction as I worked on *I...Am*, only to have it torn down by more practiced eyes through tough criticisms. Twenty-four months later, I am finally done. My experience with this film is nearing its conclusion and it will encounter new audiences as I submit this to film festivals for showings.

I...Am has been a journey for this artist. As a traditional sculptor, I came into the animation field with little experience as a filmmaker and had to find my way through the briar patches. However, I am proud of this film. It discusses my own ideas in a mature manner and the style follows my intentions as an artist. As a starting point in my filmmaking career, *I...Am* works how it is intended . It makes the audience ask questions that they cannot immediately answer. Nor should they, since these questions have answers as varied as each viewer and their own preceptions of reality.

V. Exhibition statement

This film is a dialogue piece between Dr. Otto Keegan and his assistant, Auto Maton in a rundown morgue. The robot begins to question life itself as they dissect a cadaver on the table before them, much to the chagrin of the mentor. It is evident early on that as the doctor defends his belief in science and a stance against the ethereal, punishment comes gradually and finally ends his mortal life. Thus, the mortal doctor can conclude the discussion with deafening silence. *I...Am* took two years to complete and eventually involved over a dozen students, professors, and professionals. The film also employed many software packages from Autodesk, Adobe, Pixologic, among others to create the dynamic look and feel. Finally, above all else, this film could not have been born if not for Rene Descartes famous words, "I think, therefore *I...Am*."

