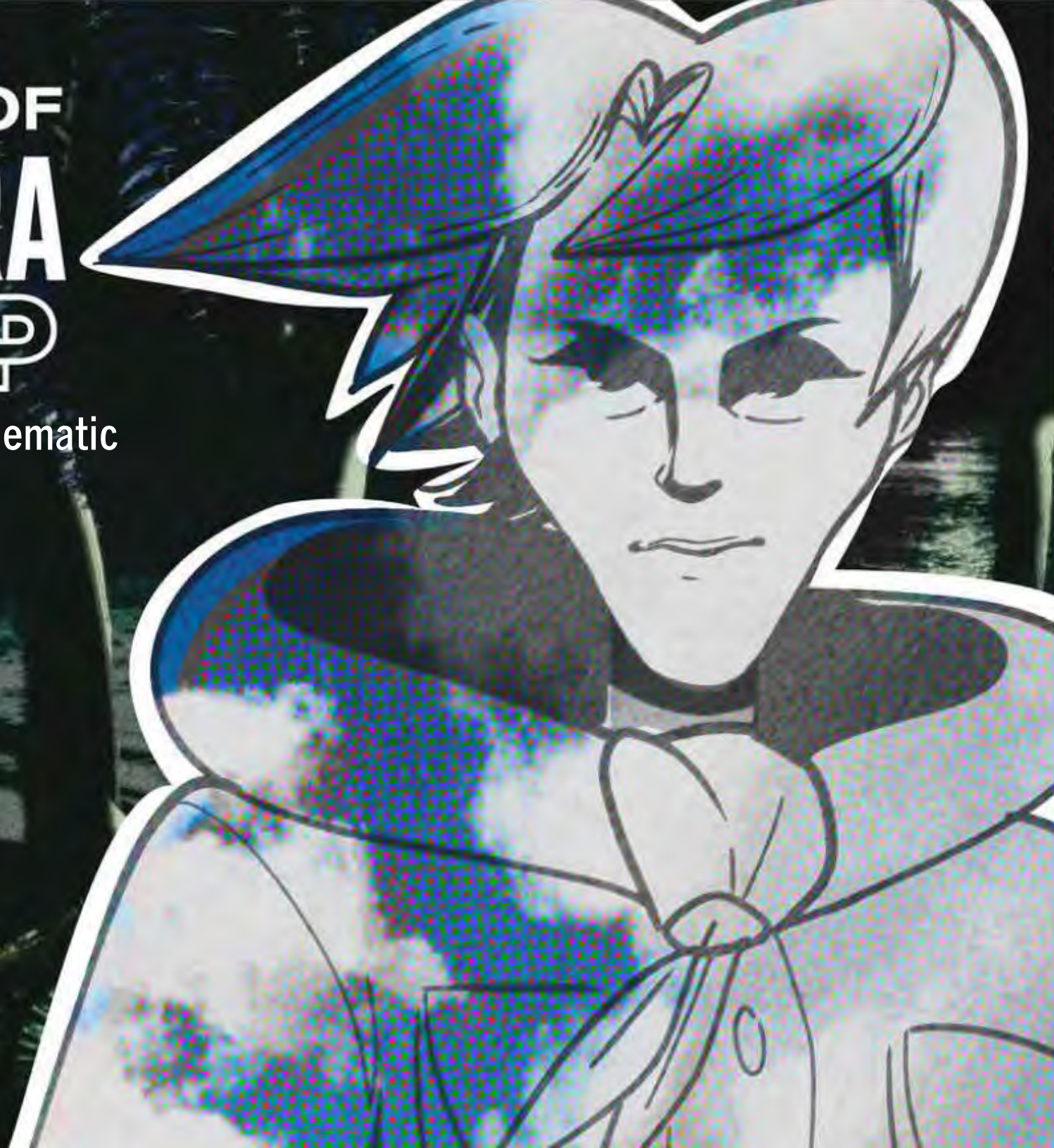


THE ART OF ELECTRA WASP

Weaving the Polythematic
Fabric of Story
Wasan Hayajneh



THE ART OF ELECTRA WASP: Weaving the Polythematic Fabric of Story

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Animation Department in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Animation at
The Savannah College of Art and Design

Wasan Hayajneh
Atlanta, GA
© AUGUST 2023

Prof. Matthew Maloney, Committee Chair
Prof. Gregg Azzopardi, Committee Member
Prof. Jason Butcher, Committee Member

DEDICATION

To my parents who first took me flying, my siblings who kept me grounded,
and every great teacher and friend in between.

And my cats, who provide much levity!

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Fig. 1. Wasan Hayajneh, *Early concept art*, 2021.

RESEARCH ABSTRACT

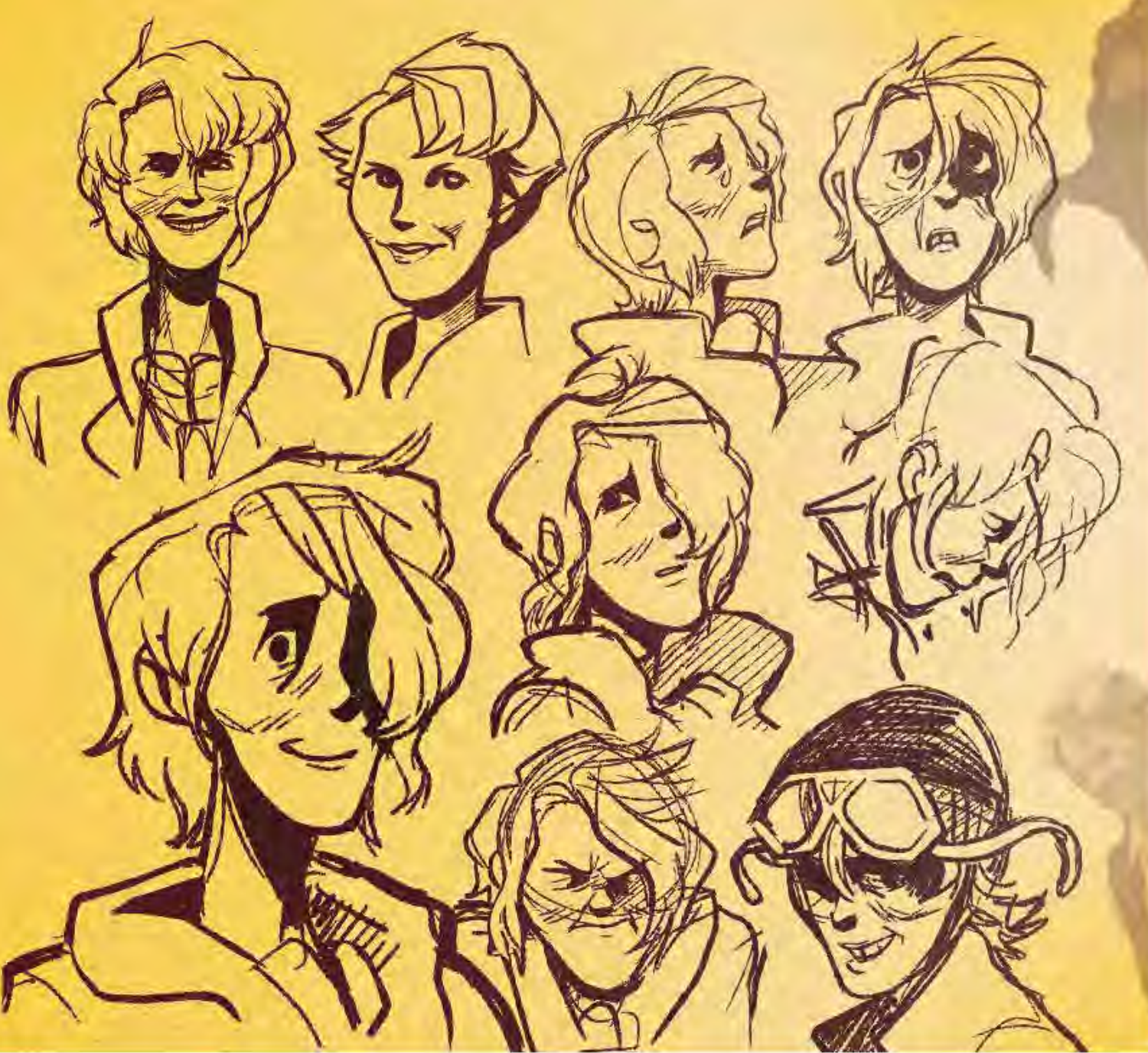
Weaving the Polythematic Fabric of Story

Wasan Hayajneh

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This thesis focuses on how to successfully employ polythemes in animated narrative to intrigue and challenge our audience's reading of the story. Using Scholes and Kellogg's elements of mythos, we can identify four categories of themes: the historic, mimetic, romantic and didactic. These elements offer different dimensions to a story and can be applied uniquely to animation because the nature of the medium is visually malleable and the materials and aesthetics can be loaded with meaning, and then layered to create thought-provoking associations in the mind of the viewer, thus bringing together a cohesive whole. By understanding how polythemes can be applied in film narrative through case study, animation filmmakers can enhance otherwise conventional or formulaic methods of storytelling.

Keywords: narrative, theme, polythemes, polythematic storytelling, Amelia Earhart



ORIGINAL PITCH

“Amelia Earhart has crashed on the shores of Gardner Island, Nikumaroro. Left with nothing but a pack of only three cigarettes, she is bitten by some horrible tropical mosquito. After spiraling through the recesses of her memories she emerges ascendant towards the sky for the last time.”

An earlier version of the story outline had a more conventional, spunky Amelia who went a bit loopy after being on the island for months. As the story team came to understand her personality better through research, she needed to be rethought entirely, along with the purpose of the film.¹

Fig. 2. Wasan Hayajneh, *First concept sketches*, 2021, Adobe Photoshop.

THESIS STATEMENT

While traditional methods of animated storytelling (and animation textbooks) have advocated the goal of conveying a simple, singular theme or idea, polythematic storytelling can express complex emotional depth and can converge layers of narrative into a cohesive whole.

INTRODUCTION

In any literary study the thematic content of the work is primary to its essence, and the body of the work (the style and form) itself is better read and interpreted in relation to its content.² When we speak of Tolkien's homosocial and warlike Middle Earth, it is inextricably linked to his experiences as he was writing it during his involvement in World War I, a historic event.³ Similarly, one cannot separate Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* from her emotional experience as a young mother seeing two of her children die in infancy, and how that informs the content of a story concerned with birth, death and reanimated flesh.⁴

Themes are an element of the content— one might separate those elements into messages, lessons, philosophy, and conflict, but these all could be said to be different kinds of themes. This is in literary terms— in animation, we speak of the theme of the story as if we are making pancakes, and the theme is an ingredient such as milk or eggs, a singular element that is defined early on and thrown in before we get to the “real” work.

Ideas for the Animated Short reads: “For the short, there should be one theme and you should be able to state it in one sentence. Keep it simple, clear and direct. It should have a viewpoint. There is little time to present an unbiased and balanced commentary.”⁵

When we teach a theme to be that sort of basic ingredient, we produce students who make pancakes— formulaic and simple work, results fit for those who aspire to be an egg or a cup of flour in someone else's factory produced flapjack. Sure, one can shake it up— add an interesting fight scene, or a cup of blueberries to keep viewers interested, but this regurgitation of the typical story formula often leaves both creators and audiences in a slump, less than inspired.

Changes in the entertainment industry have left many at a loss as cable television and the movie theater are no longer the dominant avenues of media consumption, overtaken by streaming, social media and Youtube.⁶ Creative people find themselves making less of a living than they did in the past thanks to the death of residuals and the lack of job security— algorithmically driven streaming services greenlight projects that they never intend to see to completion, leaving shows canceled on the first season and crews struggling to find the next paying gig.⁷ Netflix and Prime Studios don't choose to seek out the popularity or longevity of *Spongebob Squarepants*, instead preferring to put out as much content as they can afford before seeing what sticks.⁸

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In the midst of the AI boom, creatives witness a new threat loom on the horizon as studios refuse to address how artificial intelligence will impact the future of content writing⁹— but in a strange way, this destiny may have been self-inflicted. When the dominant theory of animated narrative teaches storytelling to be something so simple that a machine could do it, then one should not be surprised that there are those in silicon valley who have risen to the bait.

The solution is to teach the foundations of storytelling without adhering to the existing formulae that have resulted in the frustrations we face today. What we as storytellers have, and AI lacks, is human pattern-seeking and an instinct for creativity that allows us to weave meaning, so that we may see nuance and new ideas created through strategic and thoughtful combinations. This thesis proposes that dealing with stories by intentionally imbuing them with multiple themes, or polythemes as this piece will refer to them henceforth, is the answer to competing with the machine. Artificial intelligence can mimic the most basic human patterns, but cannot comprehend the psychological and social implications of a work, especially in terms of subtext.

Pursuing this goal means teaching animation so that the content and the form are in integral relation to one another; creatives should make decisions regarding the how of the form— the style, the visual world, the language, the characters— that is wholly based on the why of the content. The world is x because the theme we are dealing with is y , and so forth. With this method we won't have viewers rolling their eyes and saying "I've seen it before." While we can use influence as a factor in ideation, we don't wear it on our sleeves.

ELECTRA WASP is a psychological story, and thus deals heavily with mimetic themes. At the same time, it's loosely biographical, so undeniably historic even without being straightforward. Its romanticism is in its aesthetic qualities, which in turn are informed by the documentarian values of a historic account, and the mimetic quality of memory and its decay— and finally, an undercurrent of complexity ensures that the story is unencumbered with obvious didacticism, but more subtly concerned with human nature, and how strange and eclectic it is— perhaps that the psychologically rich life is also a good life. The goal of making this film was to prove that narrative themes in animation can and should be woven together, and that they can work together to create new understanding of the subjects.

WHAT IS MASTERFUL STORYTELLING?

Why do we tell stories? It is an ability inherent in our species that sets us apart from any other animal. We tell our stories to inform each other of the truth, or to entertain one another, or to connect emotionally— or to persuade others of our point of view. This was true for the people of ancient Mesopotamia, and it's still true for us today.¹⁰

We can correlate these functions with Scholes and Kellogg's four elements of mythos: to entertain someone is to tell a romantic story— a story that romanticizes events, real or fictional, and has idealistic attributes. To persuade is to tell a didactic story, because maybe we desire to impart an important life lesson to our listener. To inform is to tell of a historic, or factual account— we see this every day in the newspaper, and the details are crucial. And finally, to connect is to tell a mimetic story— emotions don't need to make logical sense, because we feel them inside of us and we are moved by these human experiences.^{11 12}

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Historic themes are more readily found in documentaries, history books, biographies and articles— accounts that seek to inform the viewer by contextualizing events and phenomena in their time and place, or to tell the truth. It's inherently informational, as the goal is not to get a reaction out of the reader but to impart facts or data and more importantly why and how things come to be. When a narrative is equally historic and romantic, you have a biopic. When it is equally historic and didactic, you have nationalistic or religious literature. The opposing element is mimeticism, which in combination with historicism might result in something akin to Picasso's *Guernica*. Historicism is inherent in the narrative function of informing.¹³

Didactic themes seek to teach a lesson, and are strongest in fables, proverbs, and moralistic stories for children. Didacticism lends itself to “preachy” storytelling, and some may find it grating in fiction if it isn't equally balanced out with humor (romanticism) or emotional truth (mimeticism). Didacticism is the opposite of romanticism, which only seeks to entertain the viewer, and is not concerned with teaching them. Didacticism is inherent in the narrative function of persuading.¹⁴

Romanticism, separate from romance as a genre, is concerned with making sure the reader is having a good time. Much of what is considered idealistic, low-brow or high concept entertainment is heavier on romantic themes than facts, morals or depth. When romanticism is combined with mimeticism, the thematic experience is concerned with psychological richness and beauty. Romanticism is inherent in the narrative function of entertaining.¹⁵

Mimeticism is the most abstract of the elements of mythos, and deals with emotional honesty. It can function independently of the other elements to create wholly abstract art, and in combination with them to create metaphors, surreal imagery and expressionistic work. The mimetic story doesn't need reason or plot to get its point across because it distills a quality that is felt in one's gut. Mimeticism is inherent in the narrative function of connecting.¹⁶

To give an example on how to intentionally use polythemes, Disney's *Strange World* (2022) was originally planned from the get-go to have two themes: philosophical and emotional. The philosophical theme was that the human relationship with the earth is a major issue of our time. On an emotional level the story was about fatherhood, legacy and the “good ancestor”.¹⁷ These themes, though different by definition, were actually quite married to each other and were in harmonious conversation throughout the story. To use Scholes and Kellogg's own definitions the environmental theme was didactic, and the theme of fatherhood was mimetic— and they were in beautiful balance with each other, persuasive without being preachy, and emotionally truthful without losing the plot.¹⁸ Of course there was a romantic theme as well— the nostalgia of explorative fiction from the 50s to the 70s, combined with pulp science fiction visuals. The historic theme was set aside, but the narrative resonated with real life conversations on colonization.

Coming into this with the hypothesis that successful stories will intentionally or not use all of these functions and elements, I observed the ways that themes appear in a number of films and analyzed them according to a model that I call the EPIC analysis: how the piece of media entertains, persuades, informs and connects with the audience.^{19 20}

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CASE STUDY: BARBIE (2023)

Despite much of the fanfare surrounding the film, *Barbie* is less of a feminist screed and more an allegory about girlhood, the journey of growing up and realizing how misleading ones childhood fantasies were about what womanhood entails, and how badly the world treats women in reality. The story is much like a little girl playing out with her dolls what she might imagine feminist consciousness-raising looks like— complete with repetition and pink jumpsuits.

The inciting incident in the story occurs when Barbie must make a choice between continuing her blissful life in Barbieland, and finding out the truth about the universe— of course, she chooses Barbieland, but discovers she doesn't actually get a choice from the shamanic figure, Weird Barbie, who is the bridge between their realm and the spiritual (real) world. She is given the choice once more at the end of the film, but this time by her creator, Ruth Handler. In her own words, Barbie wants to be the dreamer, not the one being dreamed— a juvenile version of asserting her subjectivity after spending her whole life being an object. If it feels like feminism 101, that's because it is quite literally the first feminist idea that a little girl must contend with and accept— and once she does, there is no going back to childhood.

EPIC analysis:

To Entertain us, the story explores the myriad styles of girlhood play and the visual language of camp culture, a colorful veneer under which there is a barely veiled cynicism getting laughs out of the audience.

To Persuade us, the story uses Ken as a cautionary tale regarding attaching your identity to your relationship, and how it devalues a person's relationship to themselves.



Fig. 3. Dir. Greta Gerwig, *Barbie*, 2023.

To Inform us, the story contextualizes Barbie's impact on girlhood play and how she changed the status quo for childhood aspirations, but we are also faced with the reality that she left many girls in the world with a lack of self esteem due to an unattainable ideal and very few alternative versions of womanhood.

To Connect with us, the story recounts the loss of innocence that young girls experience as they grow out of their childhoods, but also honors the bittersweetness of those memories and how much joy they bring us- along with the complexities of mother-daughter relationships and how they change as daughters grow up and desire different futures than their mothers did.

CASE STUDY: PINOCCHIO (2022)

Everything about *Pinocchio* (2022) feels right and appropriate— a wooden puppet character is best expressed in the medium of stop-motion, an irony that is never lost because the whole cast is puppets. In a nod to *Frankenstein*, Gepetto is horrified by his creation and rejects him, but unlike his predecessor soon warms up to him and treats him like the son he lost. The Blue Fairy is no longer a sweet fae maiden, but a biblically accurate angel made up of so many eyes.

Pinocchio is a film unafraid of complexity and willing to engage with the audience on a personal level, grounded in bonds between fathers and sons, the terrible joys and pains. The story is ultimately one of acceptance, knots and all, in a time of relatively ubiquitous unacceptance and unreasonable perfectionism. The tension from Gepetto's perfectionist nature as a carpenter is made clear early on in the film, setting up the main conflict of Pinocchio overextending himself to please him. An army general finds him to be the perfect soldier, however, as he cannot die. Ultimately the narrative subverts the original ending of the story by redefining what it means to be a real boy— not that he turns to flesh and blood, but that Pinocchio becomes imperfect and able to die, and that he is loved and accepted for who he is.

EPIC Analysis:

To Entertain us, the film aesthetically leans into Guillermo Del Toro's penchant for body horror, designing a world that is all at once idyllic, magical, uncanny and asymmetrical, matching rather nicely with the film's didactic element.

To Persuade us, the film makes a comparison between Pinocchio's outsider status and that of Jesus Christ, drawing parallels through his annunciation, immaculate conception, crucifixion, and resurrection. The point is that perfection is not as godly as we assume it to be, and that we are meant to be flawed as humans. The didactic element is subtextual.

To Inform us, the film is set in fascist Italy during the two world wars, and regardless of its fantastic elements still remains grounded in a historical truth.

To Connect with us, the film roots much of its character development in father-son relationships, the death of loved ones, the brutality and senselessness of war as well as the unbridled joy of being a small child who sees everything as shiny and wonderful.



Fig. 4. Dir. Guillermo Del Toro, *Pinocchio*, 2022.

CONCLUSION: STRIKING A BALANCE

While there are some narratives kneecapped by a writer who is convinced they must aspire to focus the most on a single theme, ergo only one element, most narratives give weight to multiple elements, using various themes to explore ways of looking at the story.

I would like to posit that finding balance between Scholes and Kellogg's elements helps give a narrative a sense of richness and complexity. We can use case studies to analyze the themes of animated shorts and films on multiple levels, based on the descriptions of the four narrative elements. Stories will often have a primary and a secondary element, which positions them between any of the extremes on this chart. Stories with the most thematic complexity come closest to the center.

I took the time to evaluate the narrative purpose of various films, books and popular media, and scored them according to how strongly they leaned on one elemental axis or another. It turned out the most complex stories contained a mix of these different elements. The simplest ones would end up on the extreme of one axis.

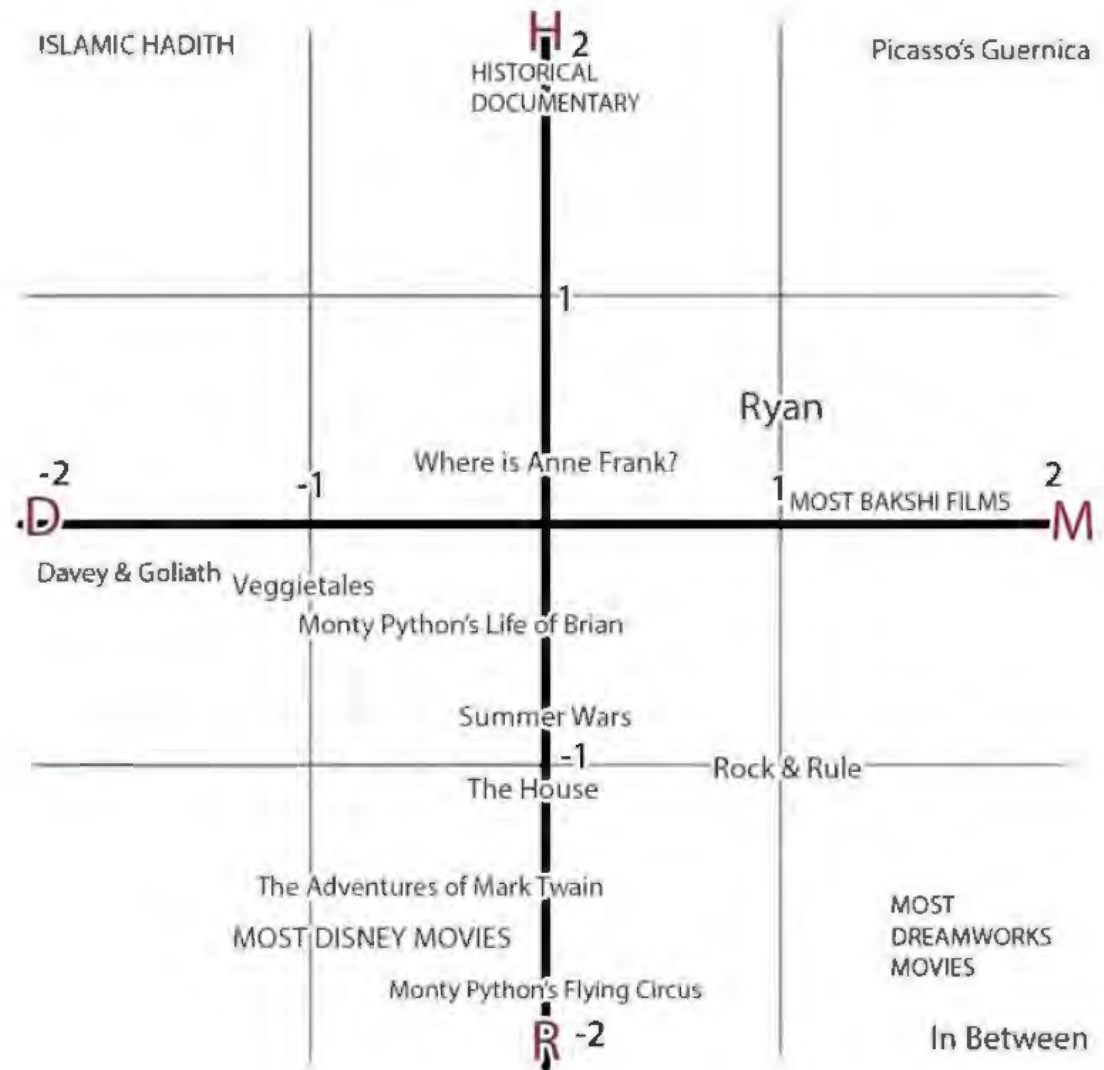
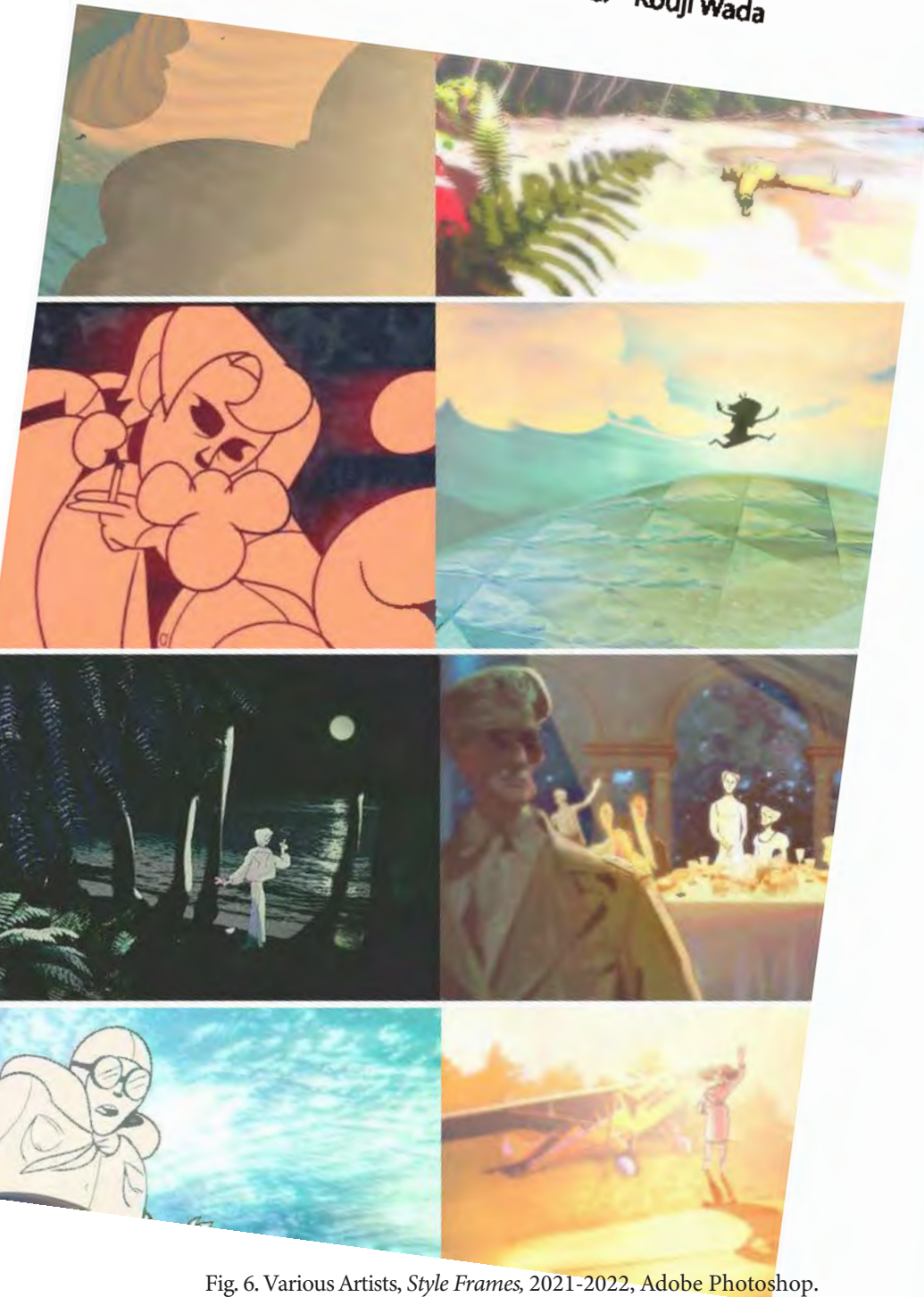


Fig. 5. Wasan Hayajneh, *Polythematic graph*, 2022.

"I'm sure we can fly, doing what you said couldn't be done." - Amelia Earhart
"Never interrupt someone who is speaking, on, my love." - Kouji Wada



INCEPTION

ISOLATION IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC

What interested me the most in exploring this narrative was putting a woman at the height of her fame in cruel isolation. The pandemic forced a generation to contend with the prospect of facing themselves, and the DNA of this film's story is so soaked in the phlegm and sweat of coronavirus that it's difficult to think of what my thesis would have been if the pandemic had not happened. Getting sick is familiar, but contending with deadly sickness on your own is an adult fear. Amelia Earhart actually dealt with the consequences of the Spanish flu epidemic during her tenure as a WWI nurse. She contracted sinusitis, the after-effects of which stayed with her for the rest of her life. Right before her fateful flight, she caught dysentery in New Guinea.

Amelia Earhart's iconic status renders her an American myth. Icon status is a kind of mask separate from the mask of identity; both are also separate from who someone really was as a person. My goal as a storyteller and director was to represent the multifaceted nature of this character while giving importance to every side of her. The part of her that was an inspiration to aviators everywhere and a champion of women in STEM is as important as the part of her that shot rats in the barn when she was a child, or the part of her that wrote poems with her sister, or the part of her that refused to conform to expectations of gender presentation, or the part of her that wrote a prenuptial letter that detailed her commitment to non-monogamy. All of it mattered.

This became the crux of my thesis: dealing with stories through the multitudes they can contain— polythemes. How do we represent complexity in an animated narrative, when the predominant tradition of animation has long been performance-oriented, and thus begged for

Fig. 6. Various Artists, *Style Frames*, 2021-2022, Adobe Photoshop.



Fig. 7. Wasan Hayajneh, *Exploration*, 2021, Pencil on Paper.

simple, straightforward answers to simple, straightforward problems? The answer lay in evaluating the purpose of storytelling— what the point of it all is! Different stories are told for different reasons— the main four being to entertain, persuade, inform and connect with others, correlating with Scholes and Kellogg’s fictional and empirical elements of myths. The storytelling imperative, as Tarkovsky described it, is “creating intangible bonds which draw mankind together into a community”.²¹

21. Tarkovsky, Andrey. *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. Translated by Kitty Hunter-Blair. University of Texas Press, 1989.

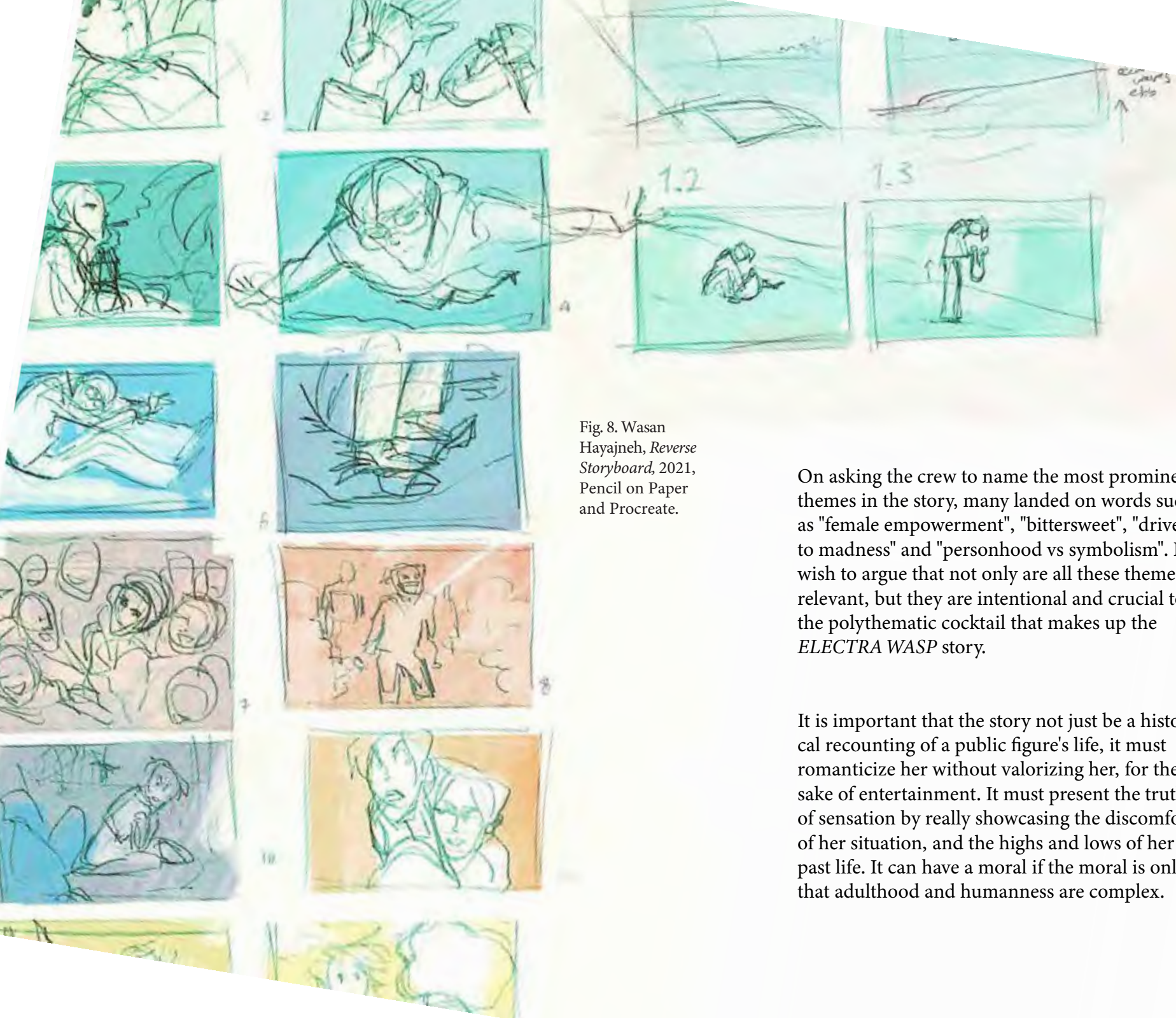


Fig. 8. Wasan Hayajneh, *Reverse Storyboard*, 2021, Pencil on Paper and Procreate.

On asking the crew to name the most prominent themes in the story, many landed on words such as "female empowerment", "bittersweet", "driven to madness" and "personhood vs symbolism". I wish to argue that not only are all these themes relevant, but they are intentional and crucial to the polythematic cocktail that makes up the *ELECTRA WASP* story.

It is important that the story not just be a historical recounting of a public figure's life, it must romanticize her without valorizing her, for the sake of entertainment. It must present the truth of sensation by really showcasing the discomfort of her situation, and the highs and lows of her past life. It can have a moral if the moral is only that adulthood and humanness are complex.

Fig. 9. Wasan Hayajneh, *Early style frames*, 2021, Adobe Photoshop.

THE PROOF OF CONCEPT

Over the course of an online Animation Aesthetics class taught by Jose Silva, I had the opportunity to develop the animated proof of concept for the film in tandem with concept art in a Storyboarding and Visual Development class. I took ideas that I had only begun to dip into and made the first version of the character turnaround, style frames and beat boards for the whole film.

Using the material developed in those classes, I began to build the core team at collab fair, honing in on three areas of expertise: production management, look development and script editing. In these early stages, the major concern was laying the foundation for a well developed story and cohesive visual style, while also allowing for experiments. While I had finished the first version of the script on my own, additional eyes helped to tighten and improve the finished product before we went into storyboards.

The earliest version of the script involved Amelia having a conversation in her head with Eleanor Roosevelt. Upon further research, I learned of Amelia's history with her flight instructor, Neta Snook, the first woman to run her own air-field. Neta turned out to be a puzzle piece that made the rest of the narrative fit together: Amelia flies because she loves flying. And she gets to love flying because she learned it from Neta Snook. The narrative ends at the beginning, with her going back to her first flight with Neta in her Kinner Airster, which she also crashed in real life. Through this narrative point, we had an opening for her to look back on the relationships she had with female friends in her life.



ELECTRA
WASP
DESCENT
#01



spring and the sun



Previous:
 Fig. 10. Wasan Hayajneh,
*Proof of concept story
 sketches, 2021, Pencil
 and Paper, Procreate.*



Right:
 Fig. 11. Wasan Hayajneh,
*Proof of concept stills, 2021,
 Photoshop, After Effects,
 Toon Boom Harmony.*



Fig. 12. Wasan Hayajneh, *Style Test 02*, 2021, Toon Boom Harmony.

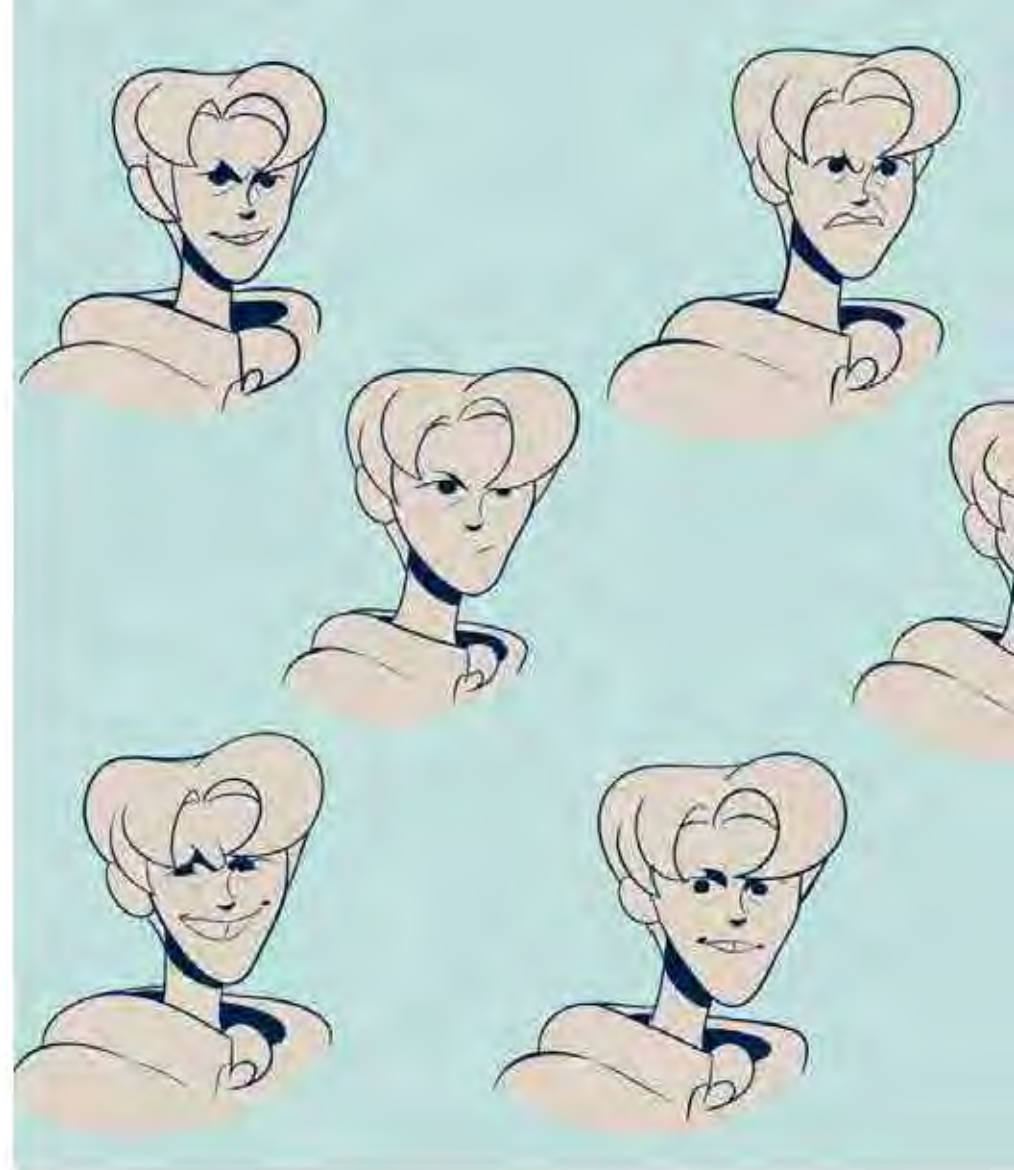
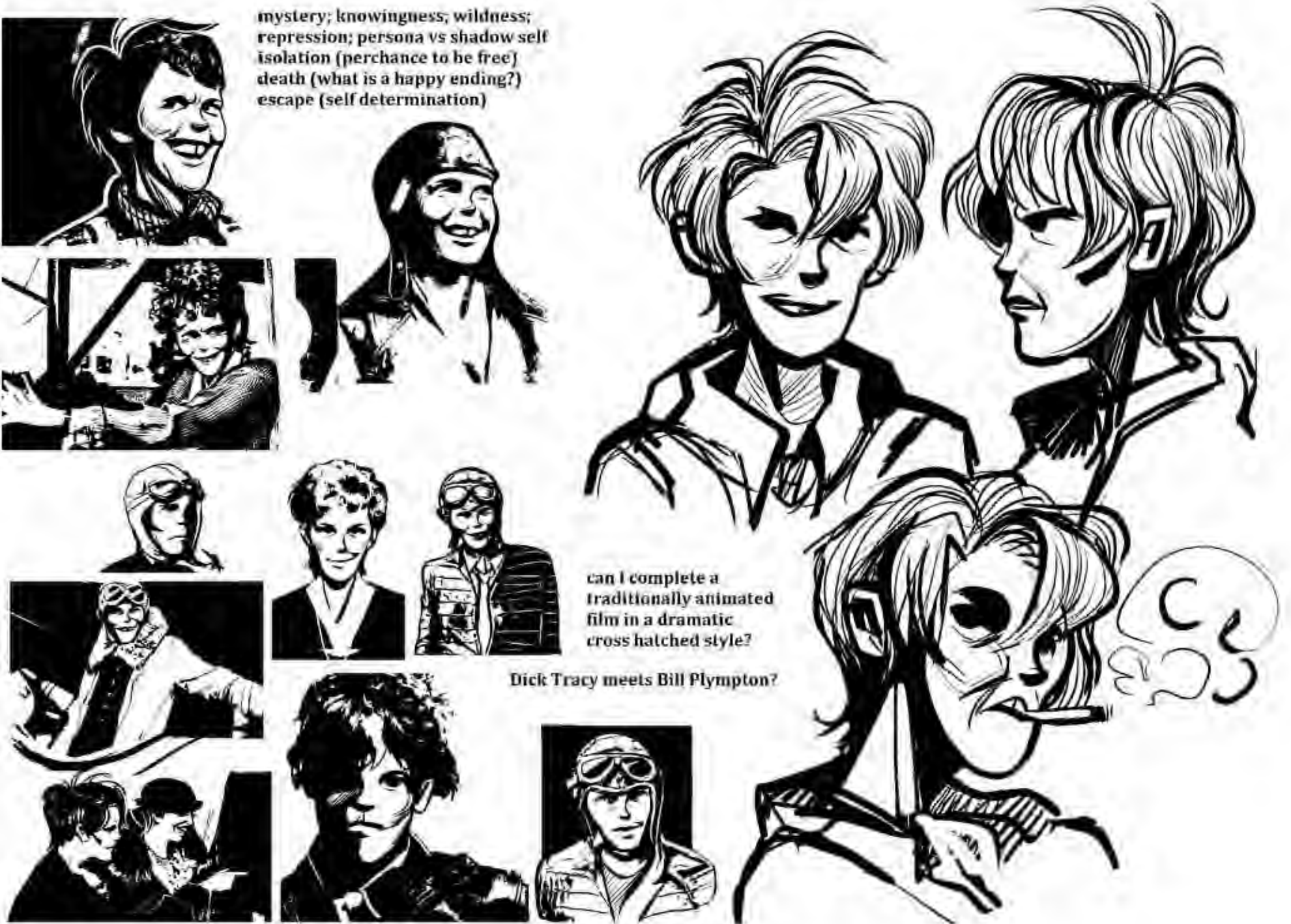


Fig. 13. Various Artists, *Amelia's Expressions*, 2022, Pencil and Paper, Photoshop.

DEVELOPMENT

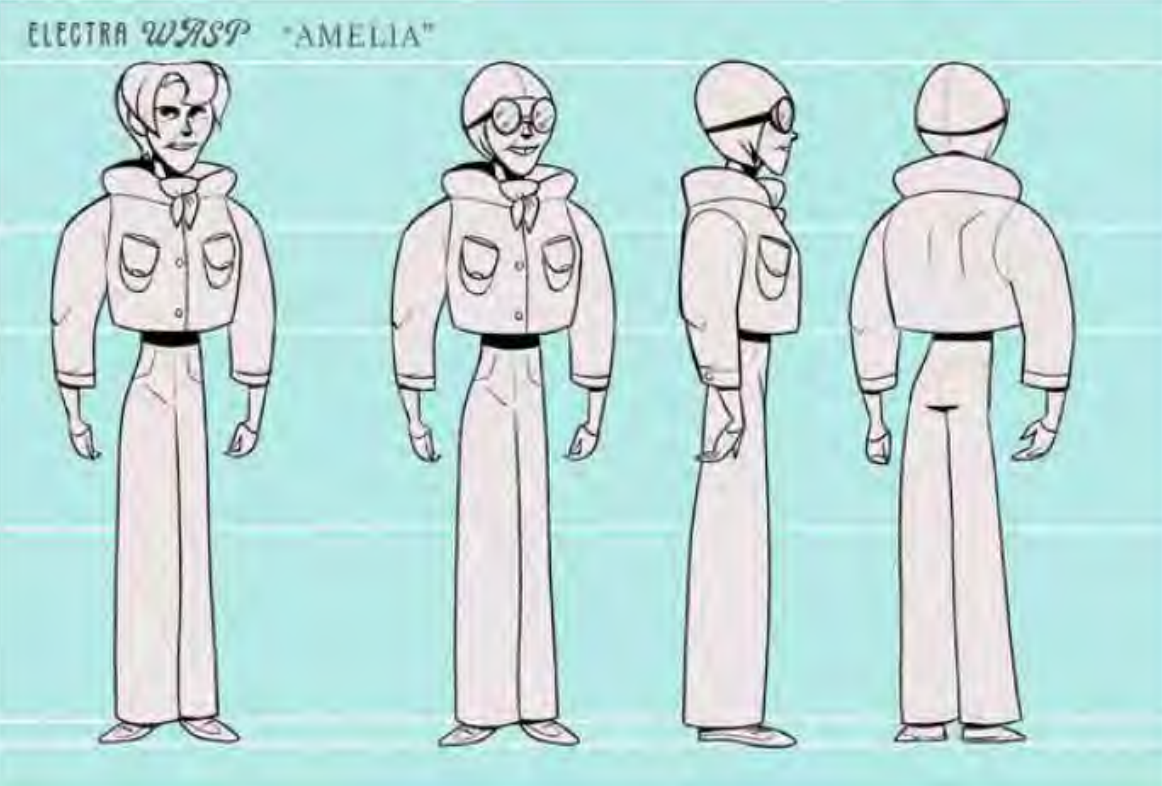
An important part of the research process was collecting a database of visual material with which to inspire and create backgrounds for the film. With the help of Tatiana Teixeira, we spent some evenings looking up material in the SCAD Atlanta library— mostly references for period typical interior design, artists such as Maxfield Parrish and J.C. Leyendecker, and natural photography of the sky, clouds and tropics. Additionally we were able to source our own photos of room decor from visiting the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum, as well as documents from The Purdue University Archives such as photos from her life, newspaper articles, letters and scans of envelopes, among other sundries.

Fig. 14. Wasan Hayajneh, *Early facial planar exploration*, 2021, Photoshop.





Left:
Fig. 15. Wasan Hayajneh, *Amelia*
Concept Art, 2021, Pencil, marker
and paper.



Above: Fig. 16. Wasan Hayajneh, *Proof of concept Amelia turnaround*, 2021, Photoshop.

Below: Fig. 17. Various Artists, *Amelia Hand Chart*, 2022, Photoshop.



Above: Fig. 18. Wasan Hayajneh, *Unused concept sketches for George P. Putnam*, 2021, Photoshop.

While George Putnam was more prominent in an earlier version of the film, he ended up only having a minor presence as a silhouetted figure in the final short.



Fig. 19. Finn Kulers, *Eleanor Roosevelt Concepts*, 2022, Photoshop.

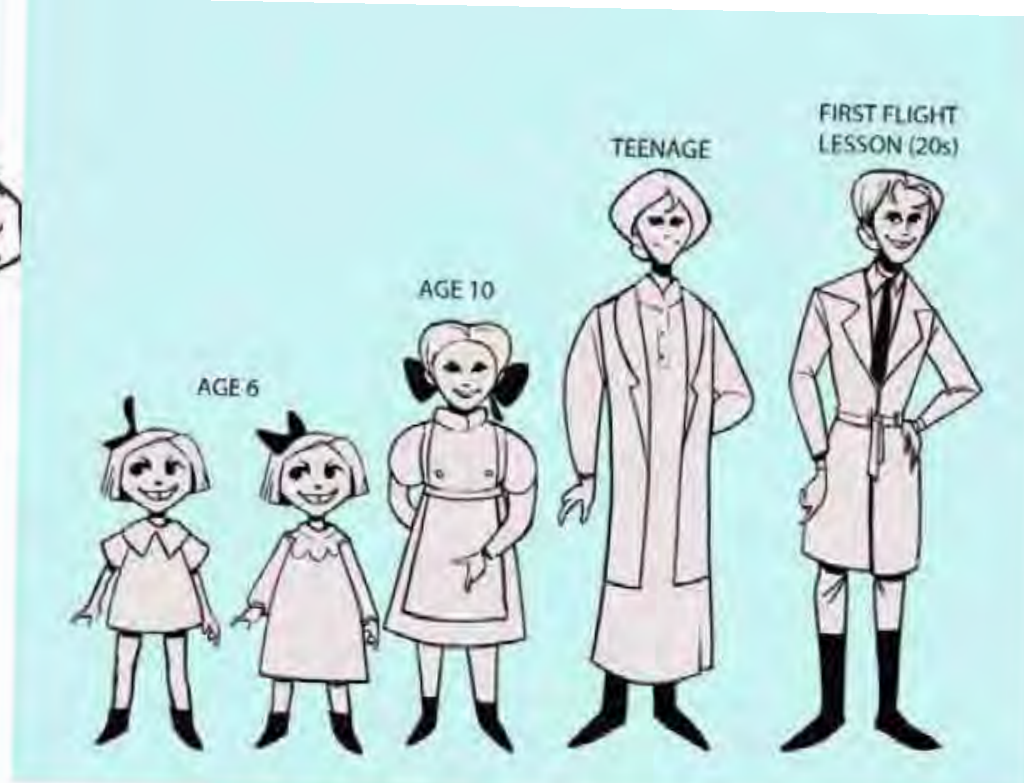


Fig. 20. Wasan Hayajneh, *Amelia at Different Ages*, 2022, Photoshop.



Fig. 21. Wasan Hayajneh, *Neta Snook sketches*, 2021, Pencil and Paper.

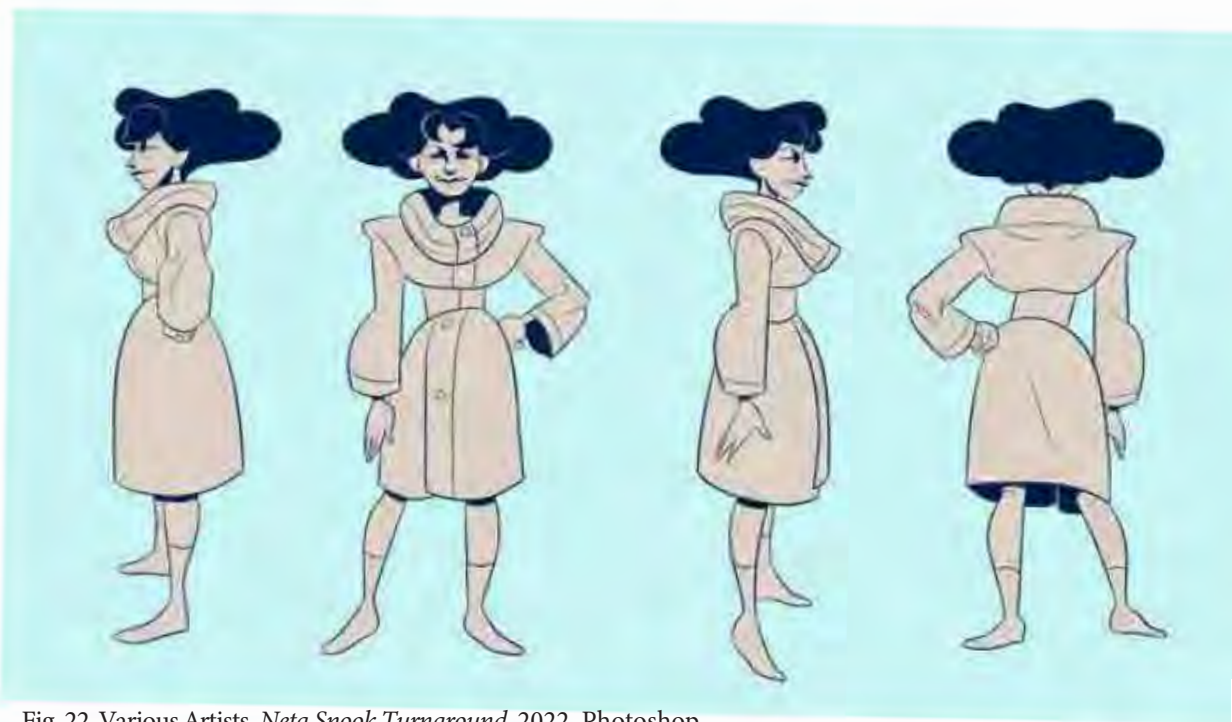


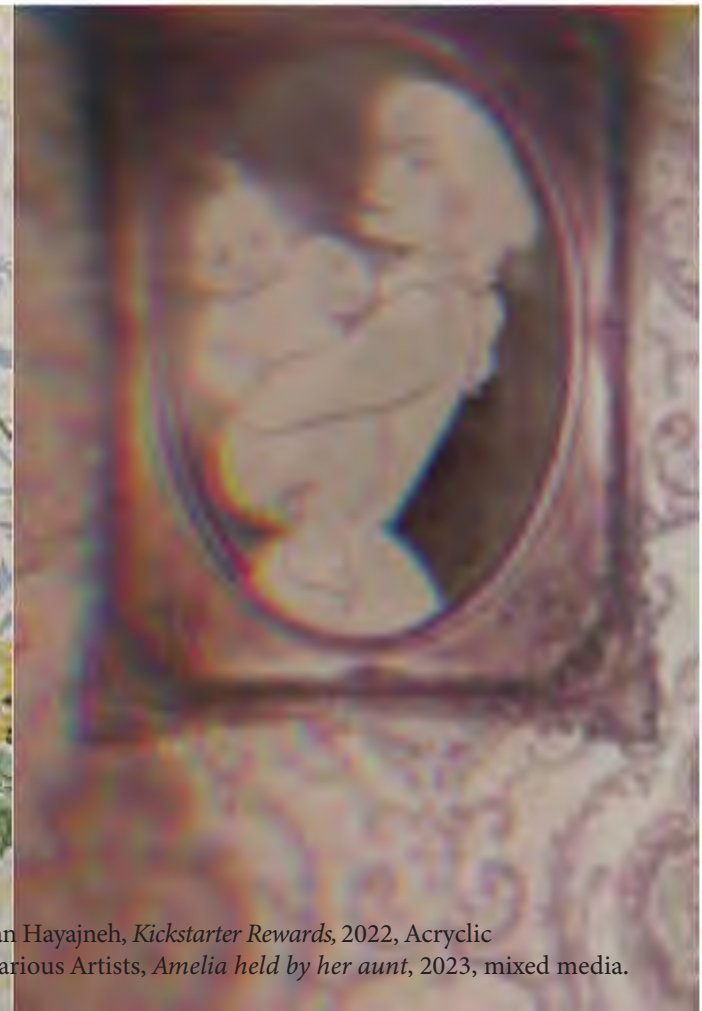
Fig. 22. Various Artists, *Neta Snook Turnaround*, 2022, Photoshop.

THE KANSAS TRIP

Integral to the film's creation was the generous contribution of one of our producers, Jan Kim Moon Langguth, who provided us with the funds to travel to Atchison, Kansas, the town that Amelia Earhart grew up in. During our time there we connected with the volunteer staff at the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum, along with the festival-goers who were in town to attend the Amelia Earhart Festival. I was accompanied by Joseph O'Hailey, our other producer, along with Yuting Shao, one of our writers.

We had two goals for the research trip: the first was to connect with our main character's place of origin, gaining insight into her childhood and upbringing. The second goal was to spread word of the film and sell artwork, donated by various artists from SCAD, to raise funds for our Kickstarter campaign.

The trip went well, and we got to know the lovely people of Atchison. The highlight was getting to meet Heather Roesch, director of the AEBM. Whatever art or prints did not sell during the fair were donated to the museum gift shop.



Left: Fig. 23. Wasan Hayajneh, *Kickstarter Rewards*, 2022, Acrylic
Above: Fig. 24. Various Artists, *Amelia held by her aunt*, 2023, mixed media.



Fig. 25. Wasan Hayajneh, *More Kickstarter Rewards*, 2022, Photoshop.

CROWDFUNDING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

While we were busy animating away, it was my task to promote the film's Kickstarter on social media. We created pages on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to connect with potential viewers. For the three months leading up to the Kickstarter's deadline, it was non-stop posting to inform our relevant interest groups.

EXPERIMENTS IN EBSYNTH

For specific sequences we explored the use of AI to simulate visual components for the story, whether it was generating Dalian backdrops to symbolize the main character's dying dream, or keyframing a liquid transition of scenery using painted over 3D footage, artificial intelligence is unencumbered by human rational sense and presents the closest thing we can get to subconscious neural imagery.

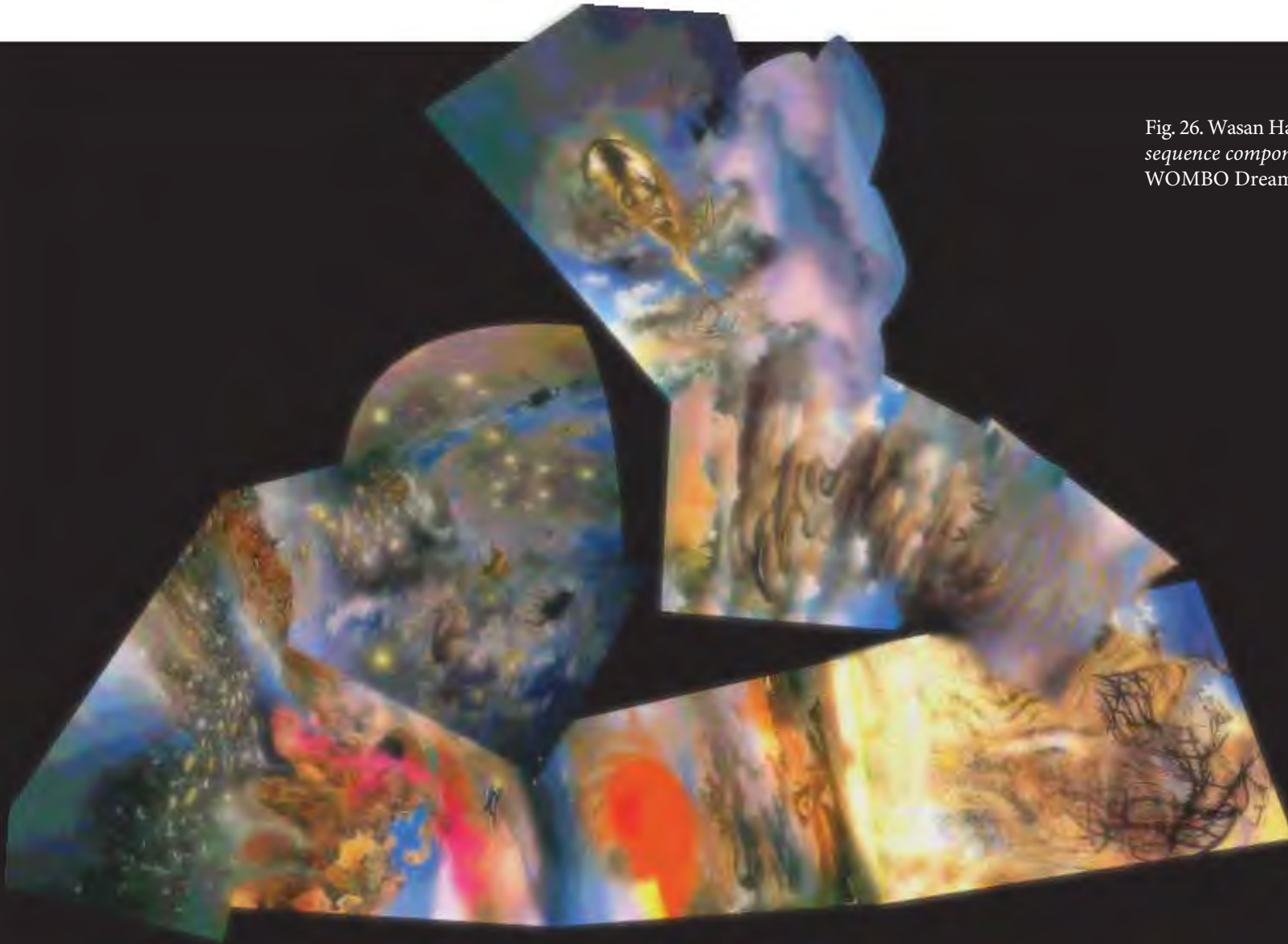


Fig. 26. Wasan Hayajneh, *Dying brain sequence component (Dali setting)*, 2022, WOMBO Dream.

Fig. 27. Various Artists, *EBSynth keyframes (living BG 02)*, 2023, Blender, Photoshop.

THE LIVING BACKGROUND

At the beginning of the film's development, there were a handful of SCAD productions that were already experimenting with the use of EBSynth as a compositing tool. Gabrielle Fernandes used it for texturing the characters and backgrounds in *Crossing Over* (2022)²² but what intrigued me was Kate Lowe's experiment on her film *Panic*, which didn't result in a clean camera transition in compositing.²³ The result was a little messy and surreal, and I thought that perhaps it would be possible to create a living background by setting up the OpenGL camera footage in a 3D program, then using specific points in the footage to create finished keyframes in Photoshop, thus rendering a background where the textures aren't fixed but in flux.

To get such an eclectic result, the footage had to be run through the program with each keyframe, then the opacity keyed in and out of each interval. Each sequence of footage is stacked over the original footage, and altogether plays seamlessly, with some very interesting bleeding in the volume formations. What results is a dreamscape that describes the out of focus, imperfect nature of memory and nostalgia.

Wombo Dream was used to generate the keyframes of the final flight sequence, in combination with EBSynth and footage of running water. The original script had a poem read over that sequence, until it was decided that having her describe what she sees as she flies doesn't work as well as seeing a visual dream interpretation of each line. Using the Dalian filter in Wombo Dream provided the scene with neurally generated imagery, senseless enough to read as images in ones own head but ethereal enough to speak to the truth and ecstasy of flight.

22. Fernandes, Gabriela Orlandi and Savannah College of Art and Design. Department of Animation. 2022. "The Making of Crossing Over: A Study of Method Acting and the 12 Principles of Animation Combined to Express a Character's Emotional Arc." Savannah College of Art and Design.

23. Lowe, Kate and Savannah College of Art and Design. Department of Animation. 2022. "Analyzing Methods of Communicating Individual Perception of Reality through 2D Animation." Savannah College of Art and Design.





Fig. 28. Wasan Hayajneh, *First Living BG Test*, 2022, Photoshop, EBSynth.

Fig. 28. was the first test of the EBSynth Keyframe pipeline, involving a layout made and recorded in Blender, as well as keyframes photobashed in Adobe Photoshop and compositing in Toon Boom Harmony with color correction in After Effects. The goal was to have an indistinct background with more memory of motion and decay than discernible details.

Fig. 29. Various Artists, *The Coconut Crabs*, 2022, Photoshop, Maya.

THE CRAB DEPARTMENT

The coconut crabs were a source of problems from the start; what began as a speculative idea of what might have happened to Amelia's bones eventually gained memetic infamy, becoming the most popular theory of her death among gen Z and millennials. Theories involving Saipan or WWII resonated much more with older generations for some reason. Regardless, the crabs would make or break the film.

Two things were important: they needed to be creepy and a little ridiculous. There is something absurd about surviving a crash on a tropical island only to be eaten by invertebrates, the land equivalent of vultures. The scene needed both gravity and absurdity. Every iteration of the storyboards came around to the same notes: the crabs need to be scarier. The plan was always to use hyper realistic 3D models in a stilted stop-motion style, to give the impression of a dead animal, a la Ladislav Starewicz.²⁴

Dominique Ebron provided the rigging and texturing for the model, and Andrea Lacher gave an excellent creature performance. When the scene played onscreen, it would always be silent, followed by chuckles at her reaction as it dawns on her that this is how she goes: eaten by crustaceans.



24. Hunt, Rosy. "Ladislav Starewicz: A Retrospective." Take One Cinema. Accessed June 30, 2023.

Fig. 30. Wasan Hayajneh, *Dying Brain Sequence*, 2022, Photoshop, WOMBO Dream and EBSYNTH.

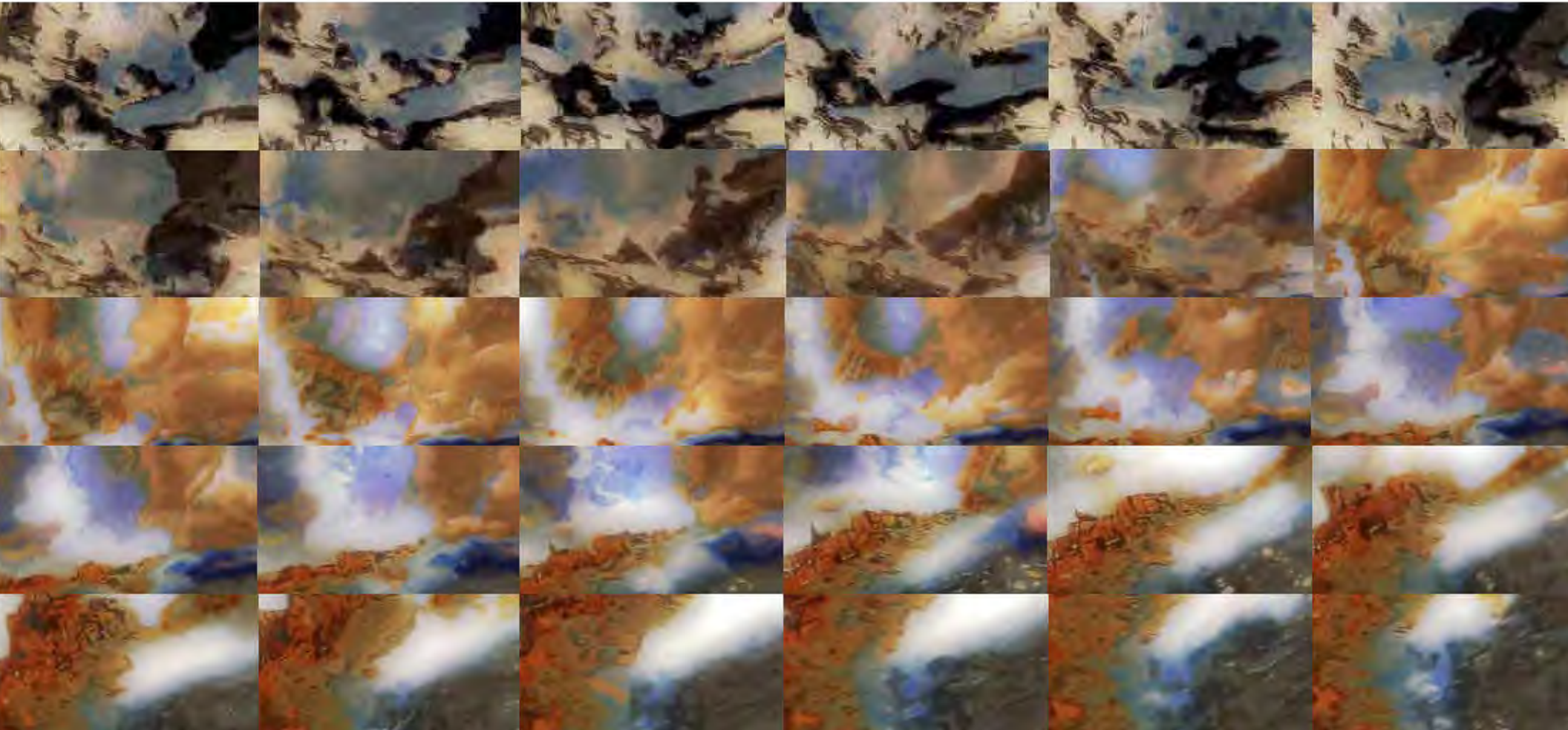




Fig. 31. Pictured: *Gabrielle Williams (look development)*, *Teri Parker-Brown*, *Wasan Hayajneh*, and *S. Miles (animator)*. 2021.

THE VOICE OF AMELIA

Thanks to resources provided by Langguth, along with his expertise in casting for voiceover, we were able to put our script out on an official voiceover website, and the casting of Amelia was done over a zoom call with everyone from production, art and script present. We would play each take for about 30 seconds, each jot down a rating next to the audition number, and we finally narrowed it down to Teri Parker-Brown— one of the few actors who chose a paragraph from the middle of the script rather than reading from the beginning.



Fig. 32. Pictured, left to right: Gina Anzures, Batz Keen, Shiuchao Ding, Tatiana Teixeira and Wasan Hayajneh (core story team).

STORY JAM

CRAFTING THE VISUAL NARRATIVE AS A TEAM

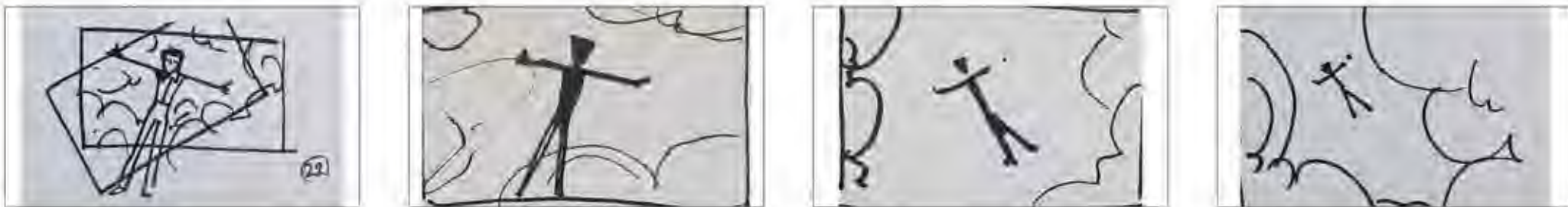
The storyboard was crafted over three weekends by a room of various team members; over this time we focused on each act individually and had the story done by the end of the month. The process had everyone doing quick thumbnails of the same sequence on sticky notes, then piecing together a new sequence from the most intriguing images and ideas. This was repeated for a total of three sessions, with the final thumbnail sequences scanned in and revised in Storyboard Pro.

I wanted to explore the implementation of polythemes by allowing all of the storyboard artists to shape the narrative with their own instincts and ideas. A list of script related themes and ideas were written on a whiteboard as a jumping point, some of them coming from the script and others suggested by team members. As we speedran the thumbnailing stage, we would all pin our sequences on a cork board— a literal old fashioned story board!— and chose our scenes over a vote of what felt the most appropriate.

Some scenes needed to be removed from the narrative for time and flow, though they would have lent very interesting angles to the character.



Fig. 33. Wasan Hayajneh, *Thumbnails (Act III)*, 2022, Photoshop.



Pictured above is an example of a thumbnailed story sequence drawn on sticky notes and flashcards. Some shots were cut or changed for better story flow. At this point it had not been decided that the film would be in anamorphic ratio, so the storyboards are all in standard ratio. The sequence in Figure 33 is from Act III.



The sequence in Figure 34 from Act I is an example of a revised sequence of storyboards, which would be used in the final animatic to time the animation and layout the film's backgrounds.

A shot closing in on Amelia looking out of the window from the outside was cut from the film for better clarity and time.

Fig. 34. Various Artists, *Story Revision (Act I)*, 2022, Photoshop.





Fig. 35. Wasan Hayajneh, *Story Revision (Dying Brain Scene)*, 2022, Photoshop and Storyboard Pro.

POLYTHEMES IN ELECTRA WASP

It was important in the story stage to hit all four elements of narrative; the film leaned most on its truth of sensation (mimesis), so implementing romantic, historic, and to a lesser extent didactic themes would help it gain a more balanced approach that makes the world feel more whole. The film, being loosely biographical, had historic themes built in.

The romantic theme is inherent in stories written for entertainment value, in many ways the value of beauty, and ELECTRA WASP's entertainment value is present in its aesthetic qualities; mixing photo collage and paint—over backgrounds, a hand drawn character who appears part newspaper clipping, part ghost—the visual elements needs to work symbiotically with the story being told.

It was trying to hit the didactic element that came last in terms of importance, since strongly didactic stories lend themselves better to PSA's and children's television, or even religious screeds. If there is an intentional philosophy in this short film, it is that being a person is complex.



Fig. 36. Various Artists, *Proof of concept 02*, 2022, Photoshop, After Effects and Toon Boom Harmony.

Though we had an original proof of concept, since the film had undergone additional development the new pipeline needed to be tested with a brand new shot. This scene included shading, color correction and visual effects.



Above: Fig. 37. Wombo Dream, *Prompt based imagery (Dali setting)*, 2021.

THE FRAGMENTED MEMORY WORLD

SCOURING THE COLLECTIVE UNCONCIOUS

Much has been said of AI as a threat to human art; for this film it was always the intention to have humans reinterpret any part of the film made utilizing AI generated imagery. What interested me was the use of Wombo Dream to generate color associations, lighting and shadows based on the words of the script. These color schemes could be generated based on common associations in the human mind; time of day, darkness, lightness, how fire affects its surroundings. Caleb Nelson, our assistant background lead, interpreted the computer's primitive dreams into the film's color script.





Fig. 38. Caleb Nelson, *Color script*, 2021, Photoshop.



Fig. 39. Wasan Hayajneh, *Background production art*, 2023, Photoshop.

DREAM SCRAPBOOK

The art form of collage is inherently conversational, as the meaning is construed by creating opposition between visual elements. If the ground plane from one photo presents one idea, adding elements from other photos creates a disagreement that can be blatant or subliminal, depending on how cohesive the elements are. The choice to use collage as a visual style is intentional, as it reinforces the duality and complexity of the main character's journey.²⁵

BREATHING LIFE INTO THE CHARACTERS

A TRADITIONAL APPROACH WITH A STREAMLINED FINISH

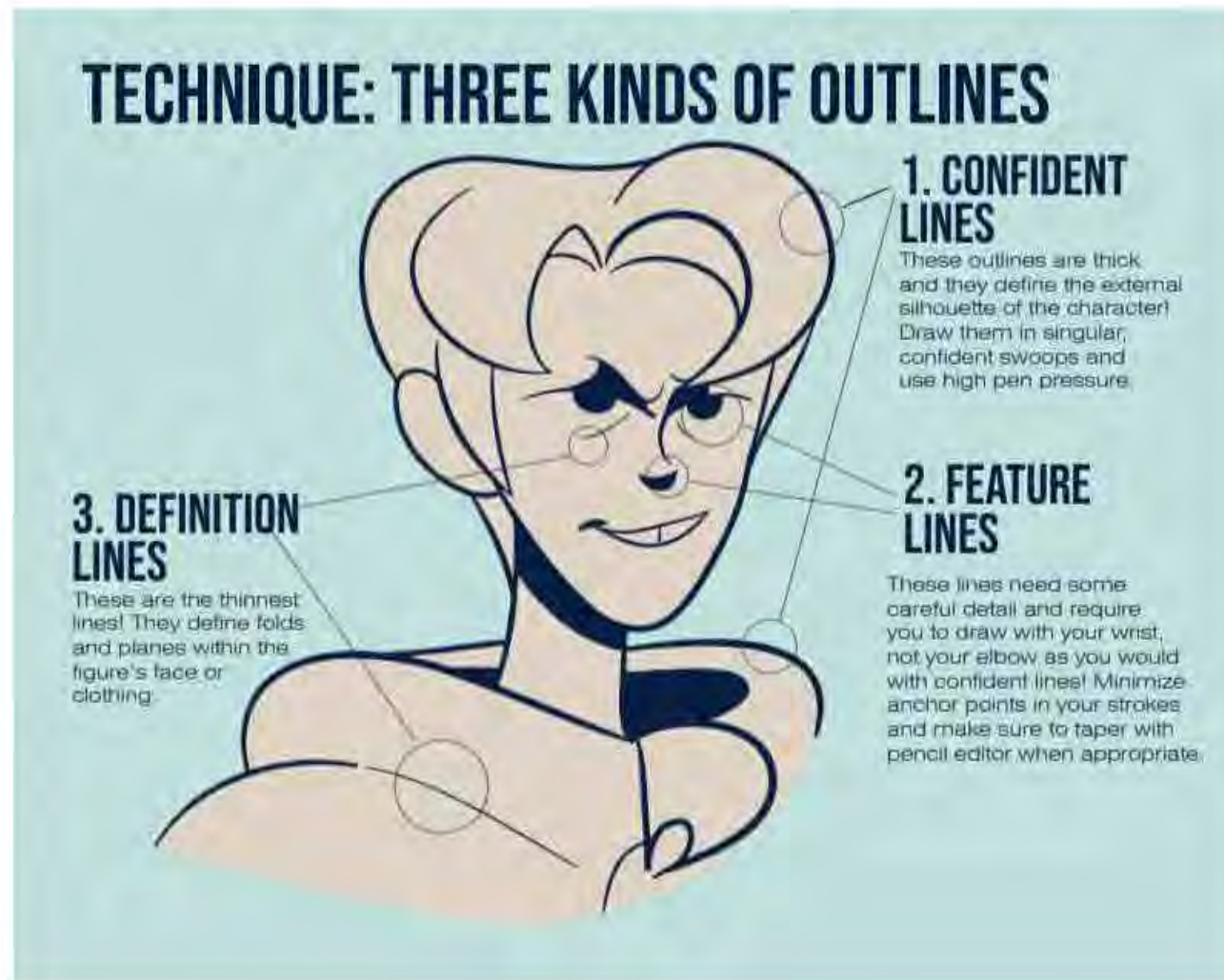
Amelia isn't a very typical female character in animation. She was very tall and very thin, with almost no curves. Many knew her to be unconventional in attitude and some even found her to have a rude personality. She had a very intentional image, constructed by the wiles of her publicist and writer husband, George P. Putnam. The Amelia known to the public was a larger-than-life personality, who was all the same relatable and down to earth.

People who knew her personally found her to be charismatic and persuasive. In a way, her first animated iteration was comparable to Peter Pan— impish, shrewd and artful in her flight. In Meyers Briggs terms, she was a virtuoso: an introverted, sensing, thinking and prospective personality. To compare this personality type to some similar figures in fiction, we can look at Spike Spiegel of *Cowboy Bebop*, Disney's *Mulan*, Toph Bei Fong in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, or even *Shrek*.

Looking at her biography, personal history and what people in her life thought of her, it's possible to construct an almost cubist perspective of who she was. To get that complexity in the story, we needed scenes that allowed her to be fed up, disgusted, tired, sick, embarrassed and ashamed— in the same vein as showing her triumphs, joys, talents, strengths, and ecstasies.

The performance needed to work before anything else and we had some great animators who understood the direction of her character immediately, leaving room for the cleanup team to perfect the look.²⁵

Fig. 40. Wasan Hayajneh, *Clean-up guide outtake*, 2022, Photoshop.



25. Stanchfield, Walt. *Gesture Drawing for Animation*. Edited by Leo Brodie. Independantly published, 2020.

SIMPLIFYING THE CLEANUP PROCESS

The option to use rigs was brought up very early on, but it was ultimately decided that the story needed to be hand-drawn. If the choice is between struggling to make rig animation look seamless, or struggling with a convincing hand-drawn performance, there is no question that a good performance is integral to this story.

In the process, something needed to give. Without a big budget you can have two of three things: a short film over 3 minutes long, good hand drawn performance, or silky smooth finished animation with colored cleanup. I chose to forgo a lengthy cleanup process, which can turn any production into a slog at the end of it. The finished character is only lines and a single fill color, two hex codes designated in the cleanup guide that can easily reflect the light and color of the lush scenery.

This is not without reason: we never got any color photography of Amelia from her time. And because the subject matter of the story deals with her demise, this aesthetic choice provides her with an almost phantom-like quality.



Fig. 41. Various Artists,
Amelia and Neta Clean-up, 2023, Toon Boom Harmony.

Below: Fig. 42. Various Artists, *Final Amelia turnaround*, 2022, Photoshop.

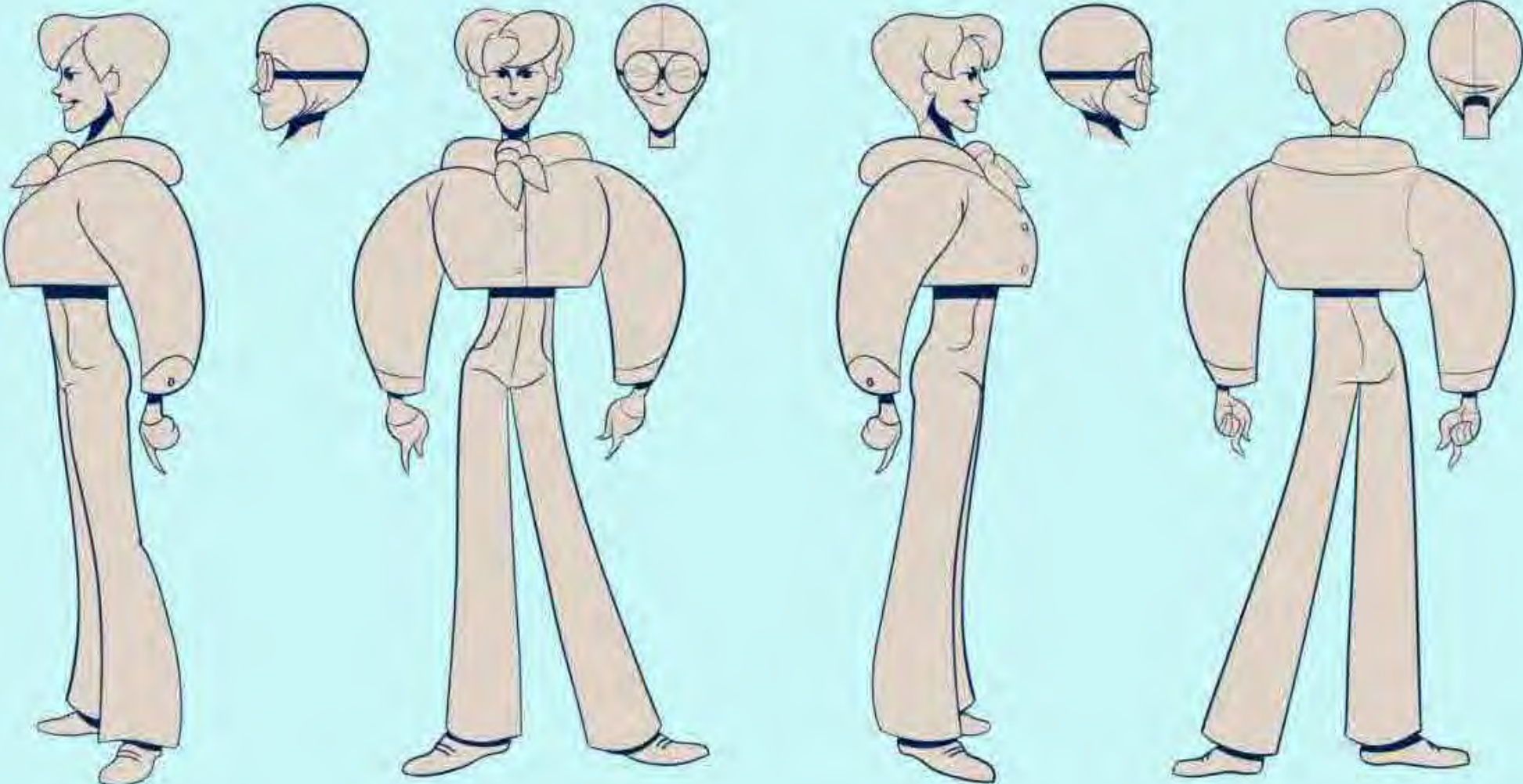




Fig. 43. Caleb Nelson, *Fields of gold*, 2022, Photoshop.

TRIPPING THE LIGHT: THE FINAL LOOK

The look of photo decay the film is after involved quite a bit of finagling in After Effects. There is a constant undercurrent of visual noise that is softened by a gaussian blur effect. An important distinction is not to have a pixel of pure black on the screen at any point—these different attributes lend a sense of reality and imperfection to the film without compromising the dreamlike quality of it.²⁶

Other effects included glows for more dramatic lighting that allows the ambient color to bleed into its surroundings, and ample use of color correction to further enhance pivotal moments in the narrative.

26. Parrish, Maxfield. *Worlds of Enchantment: The Art of Maxfield Parrish* Dover Publications, 2012.



Fig. 44. Wasan Hayajneh, *First promo image*, 2022, Pen and Paper, Photoshop.²⁷

THE SOUNDTRACK

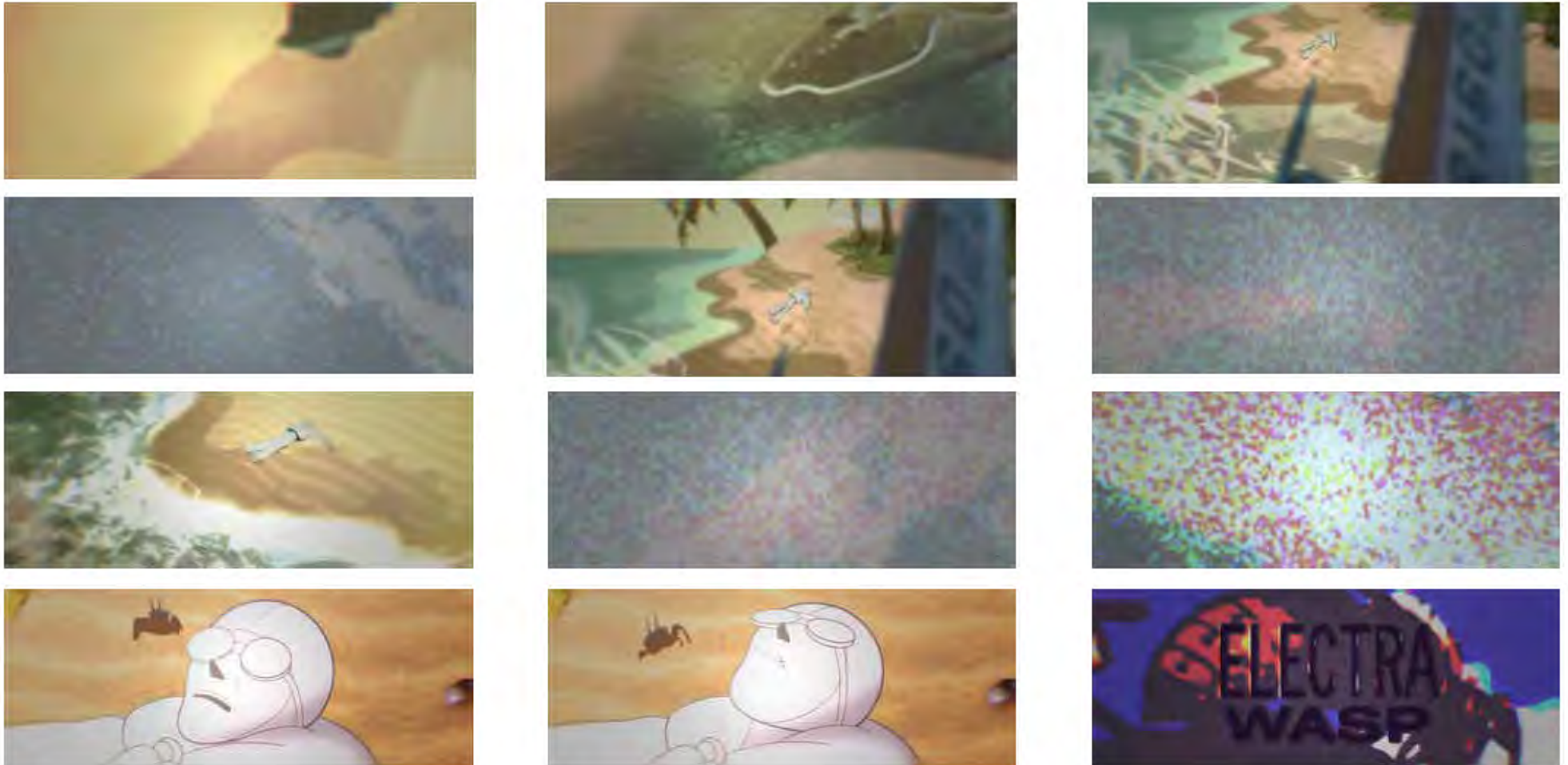
Early on I had done a rough piano recording for the first scratch track, which was in turn redone by Jo— then finally abandoned altogether when we hired our musician and sound designer, Michael Benedict. Michael brought with him a nostalgic sensibility with roots in ambient and noise rock, which was perfect for a film informed by imperistence of memory.

27. Goffman Cutler, Judy, and Laurence S. Cutler. *Norman Rockwell and His Mentor, JC Leyendecker*. National Museum of American Illustration, 2010.

DIRECTOR'S COMMENTARY

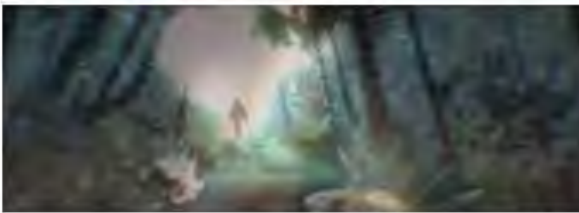
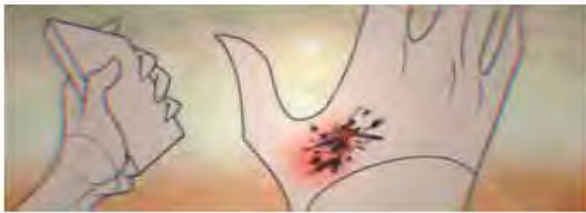


Fig. 45-62. Dir. Wasan Hayajneh, *ELECTRA WASP* Film stills, 2023.



The film had to open from the sky. The opening shot was based on a piece of concept art by Felipe Barral-Sechi and the final shot was designed by Jabari Brown. The opening is intercut with static and fragmented dialogue, meant to mimic Amelia's distress signal. Earlier on that would have been the backdrop for opening credits, but the decision was made to cut them early on.

As we come closer to her, details become clearer, such as sparkling waves in the water and the wing of the plane floating in the foreground. I wanted for there to be less emphasis on the crash itself and more on Amelia. A pixelated crab emerges from beside her head at the close-up, a detail added in by our resident stop-motion animator Jeech, who was also the brain behind the shell formations in the credit sequence. The title card came about as a placeholder, but later on with some After Effects compositing came to work nicely with the rest of the sequence, as the rich orange and blue hues contrast nicely with the next scene. There is a sickly, greenish undertone to the opening.



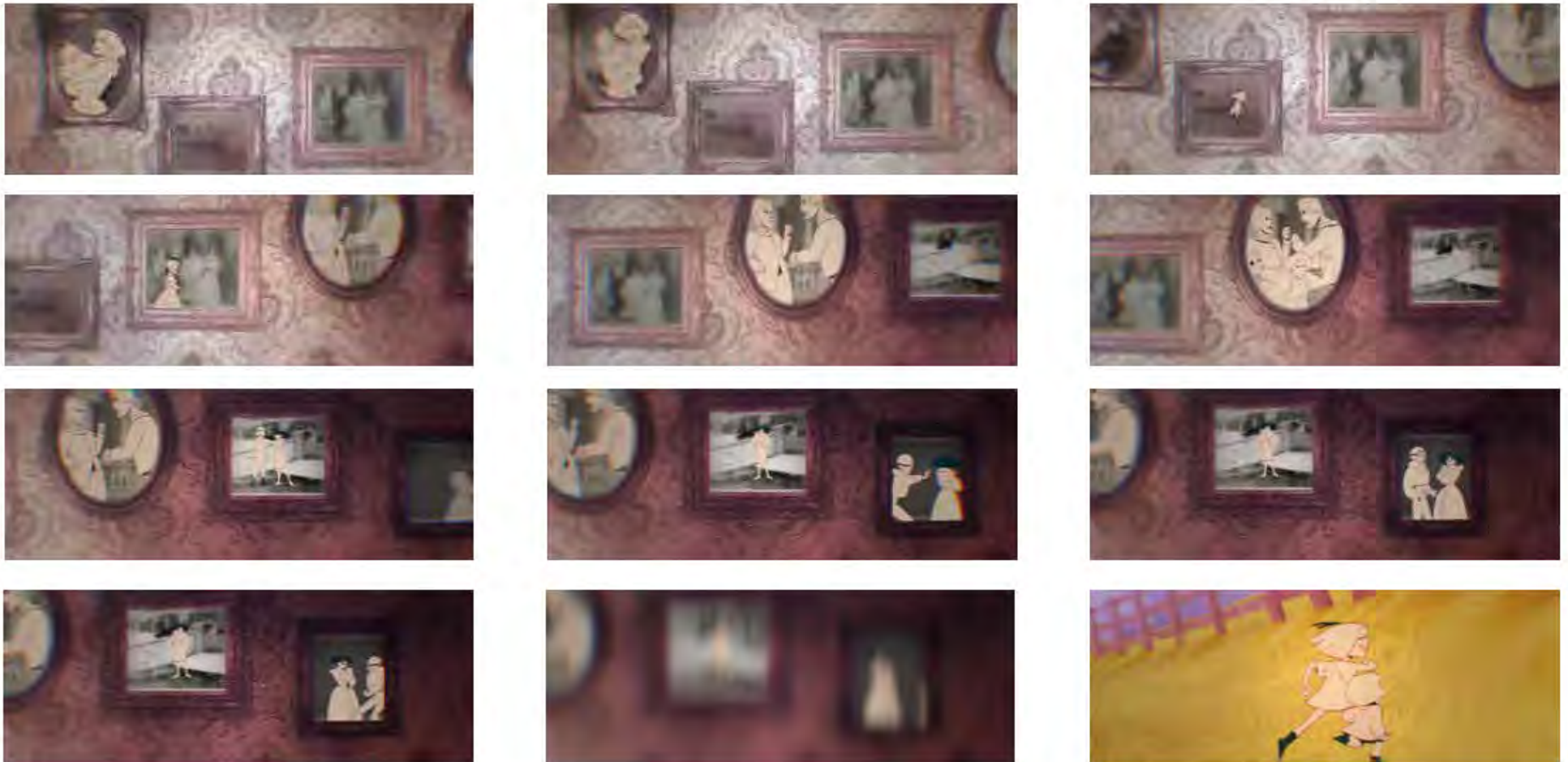
The first shot of this sequence was very nearly cut from the film for time, but we eventually found a way to get it back in. The “wasp”— not even a wasp, really, just an amalgam of a mosquito and a blue mud wasp— acts as a sort of grim reaper figure. The bug was the first key to getting this story down, because without this early disturbance in the narrative it would too easily shift into a survivor/adventure story. This is very much a story about descent into death, and for all we know its a little vague whether Amelia is even alive throughout the whole film or not.

The colors shift intentionally to somber, muted blue tones. Green, yellow and blue can all have sickly attributes, but the yellow is a bit more active, and the blue more passive. The jungle shot was based on concept art by Gabrielle Williams and the film background was designed by Annika Elyse. From here we begin to lull the audience into the retrospective spiritual journey that Amelia is on. We cross-fade into a contemplative shot of the fire, animated by Arthur Leach. It’s dark, and her location is a little vague.



The story henceforth is characterized by a series of fantasmagoria— I refer to them in the script as “ascents” and “descents”. An important note is that the real Amelia Earhart was a sober individual who did not drink or smoke. The fact that she is smoking the cigarette brand that her publicist husband used her face to promote is an act of moral exhaustion, and is meant to show that she is nearing the end of the line.

The first ascent is into her childhood memories. Our trip to the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum allowed us to take pictures of her original memorabilia, photos, wallpaper and wood grain from her house. This material was overlaid and used to create the backgrounds of this sequence. This is also our first use of the EBSynth deep space/living background, a combination of 3D environment that is digitally painted over with keyframes to produce a dreamlike and nostalgic effect, much like one would experience as a kid sliding down a bannister. Little Millie is much as she was described by historians— a ball of energy, a tomboy with no patience for the rules of society that desire to tie her down. A note from Yuting Shao, one of our script editors, was to show her being “allergic to gravity”: that even as a kid she is running, jumping, sliding, gaining speed, just trying to get off the ground.



We shift from deep space to flat space as we zoom into the wall. Flat space is better suited to humor and allowing a joke to land, deep space for drama. The flat space in this scene allows us to navigate it sideways, not embodying the character like we were in the last scene. We observe snapshots of how Amelia's life plays out: from her childhood to her family dynamics, all the way to her learning to fly from her mentor, Neta Snook, and finally Neta's retirement to start a family— something Amelia was deeply against as a women's liberationist and a professional. The flat nature of this sequence pulls the story back into its historic essence, as its harder to recount impartial history when we are being the character as opposed to watching her.

For much of her childhood, Amelia and her sister were raised by their grandperants. A shot in this sequence in which Amelia peeks in on her grandfather sleeping in an armchair was cut for time, so we skip straight into little Amelia and Muriel— Millie and Pidge— running joyfully over rolling hills, back to the “embodying” of the character. They jump a cartoonishly high fence and Little Pidge stumbles and falls flat on her face, as she can't keep up with her big sister. Millie doesn't notice, choosing to continue running until she jumps over the hill, and leaves her sister behind. Subtextually, this is about leaving her upbringing behind to seek out something new.

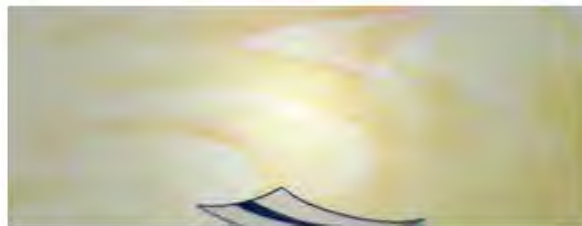


There is an intentional shift in color from the indoor, monochromatic reddish palette to a saturated yellow hill below pink skies and a purple/magenta fence. Memory is rosier than really remembering. The family photos involve the conflict between her parents, her frustrations, her disappointments and what really makes up a life, but the last shot in this ascent represents her tapping into the mimetic value of childhood joy and how good it felt to run wild and free. In this moment we are embodying her again.



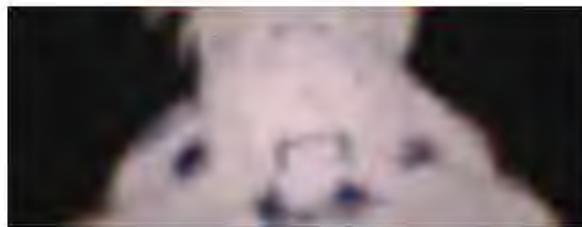
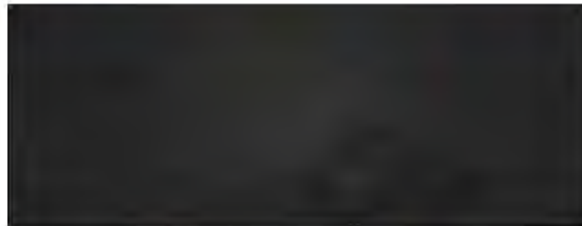
We crossfade back to reality, with Amelia standing at the beach. There was a scene cut for time here, where she would have noticed a little crab at her foot and stomped it, which would have called forward to another moment in the story where she is shooting a rat.

The transition back to ascent is swift as a result. We find ourselves looking in on a dinner party where Amelia and Eleanor Roosevelt are at a table. Details of this scene are collaged from fashion magazines and artwork of the time, particularly the works of Georges Melies, J.C. Leyendecker and Maxfield Parrish. Amelia and Eleanor then reenact a surreal version of their famous flight to Baltimore from Washington. The keyword of this ascent is old Hollywood— fame, fortune and influence. Imagery such as filmstrip, stage direction, newspaper articles and fashionable clothes are all important to getting this historic theme across.



Amelia is then the center of an article imploring lady aviators to join her organization, The 99s, which promised to provide a network for women in STEM and flight. Neta Snook is seen reading this, with her child in the background, and folds it up into a paper airplane, which she nonchalantly tosses. This response reaches Amelia and reads “No.”

Amelia, regretful that she can't reconnect with her mentor, sets it aside.



We zoom out to a silhouetted sequence meant to vaguely represent Amelia and her relationship with both her future husband, George Palmer Putnam, and his at the time wife Dorothy Binney Palmer. From Dorothy's own writings, she and Amelia had a very good friendship between them, so this sequence is less historically accurate than it is indicative of her non-monogamous leanings, and the emotional fallouts they may have caused. Another scene that was cut from the story involved her alleged relationship with aerospace engineer Gene Vidal.

Instead, this scene ends with a collage of articles and document scans provided by Purdue University's Amelia Earhart Archives, placing her in a position of fame and prestige. Amelia was provided with a lot of support from Purdue's science department, and it was through their sponsorship that she was able to take her final flight around the world.



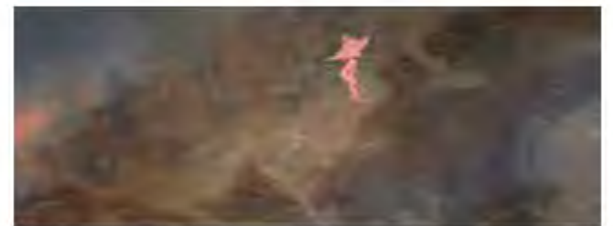
We ripple in from black into Amelia being overtaken by her fever. As she grapples with overheating and rips her jacket off, she hears the scuttles of coconut crabs approaching her. The crabs are an absurd element in this story: this is the most popular theory of her demise among millennials and gen z audiences. It's strange to imagine a mighty historical figure, larger than life, laid to waste by something so natural as a land pirhana.



One detail that needed attention on changing the film to anamorphic ratio was the shape of the bokeh. The anamorphic lens is oval shaped, not circular, and thus the bokeh in these scenes had to be changed to ovals.

Startled by these creatures, Amelia backs away from them. They scuttle closer to her and as she focuses on them she sees their beauty in detail watches them shift in and out of focus.

The irony is not lost on Amelia, who begins to laugh brokenly, sardonically as it dawns on her. If this is the end, it feels like a cosmic joke.



Amelia, coming to accept her fate, is silhouetted against the moon. She raises the last cigarette to her lips and prepares to take a drag, but pauses. She brings it down with a wistful look on her face. She closes her eyes and begins her final ascent, disappearing into the clouds. This blue is cold.

The background in this sequence is a combination of running water footage, WOMBO generated imagery that combines sky, ground and ocean elements, and a poem that was cut from the film in the animatic stage. As Amelia absconds, she relives the ecstasy of flight. Overlaid are clouds, the visual cues of maps, cities and landscapes. This is the climax of her final journey, and she gets one last look at her life.



The clouds in this last sequence were animated by Darayell Wright, our effects lead and production manager. The background was designed by Annelise Coello, with animation by Finn Kulers. Amelia is bathed in the color of the world.



The flight sequence is the most important sequence in the film because it is the culmination of her life passion and her spirit. We shift into a surreal sequence of her entering and exiting rooms in a tall apartment, and looking in to see scenes of her past. In this first scene we see her as a child, preparing to shoot a rat. This is based on an incident from her childhood where she shot rats in the barn in attempt to protect her family from the plague. This is very different from Amelia's future pacifist leanings, and Amelia appears troubled by this memory.

Color choice in this sequence is about contrasting with the former scene in order to present a new idea or situation. Red for childhood and joy, gold for adulthood and prestige and ubiquity, and blue for the sky, the real love of her life.



When Amelia flies out of that room, she looks into the next window and sees herself embracing someone- her husband? Her lover? Another woman enters the room and catches them. The dismay and disgust on her own face is palpable- yet another regret.

She flies even higher and finds Neta asleep in a chair. Neta, her mentor, who represents the gateway to her dreams and aspirations.

At this moment Amelia is overcome with a sense of affection and acceptance, and bids her former mentor goodbye. Silhouetted against the sunlight, she goes even higher.



Having broken past the earth's atmosphere, she finds that up has invariably become down, and her flight turns to a fall.

She lets go and allows gravity to overtake her. Night-time falls.

Distorted documents from her past are projected over her silhouette. This Amelia is ultimately a collection of our projections and ideas, and the things that she left behind.

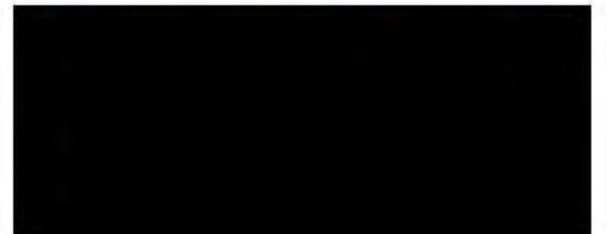
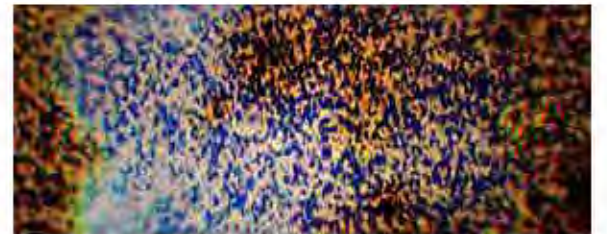
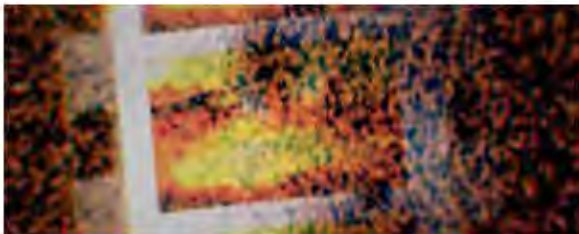


When Amelia lands, she is on a grassy hill in one of her memories. She hears her voice being called.

She sits up.

Neta Snook is calling her to her first flight lesson. When Amelia realizes where she is, she realizes that she is late and runs to meet her.

Neta embraces Amelia, and the camera zooms out, showing them to be on a strip of film, which slowly catches fire as Neta puts her arm around Amelia and turns to face the old Kinner Airster, otherwise known as the Canary, the first plane that Amelia ever crashed. The filmstrip calls back to the nature of old hollywood, and the fact that this piece doesn't presume to be a real biography, but only a dream.



AFTERWORD

People have argued until they turned blue as the sky about Amelia Earhart's disappearance. Theories run from the politically motivated, to the strange, to the outright silly. Through this film I wanted to put her to rest in the mind of the audience, and to offer the idea that perhaps mystery can allow someone to live on way past their death. In addition, death can be a kind of freedom, and a life lived to its fullest is not a tragic thing. Also that perhaps definitive answers are overrated.

I'm very thankful that I had the opportunity to tell this story at SCAD, and that I was allowed the space and freedom to pursue the image in my head and mold it into something I could truly be proud of. I am a very lucky person to love deeply what I do, and to pursue it with the mad fervor that has enraptured so many before me. I am not afraid to crash on this journey, for it would still be a privilege.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Wasan Hayajneh is a 2D animator, story artist and composer with a double BA in New Media and Illustration from Eastern Connecticut State University.

With this thesis she intends to earn her mastery in the field of Animation. She has dabbled in game development and comics as well. She likes to think of animated storytelling as a kind of puzzle with endless possibilities, and that tying everything together is the best part.

Wasan has two cats and is based in Atlanta, GA.

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