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Contaminated State: A 2-D Animated Short Film

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Contaminated State: A Short 2-D Animated Film

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in Your Major

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Abstract

Contaminated State is a short 2-Dimensional animated film centering around a girl experiencing her final hours on Earth. Her poor health and dire state are a result of the constant stream of pollutants that infect her world. I feel very strongly about environmentalism and the need to talk about climate change, therefore my capstone was a reflection on what I wanted to say through the medium of animation.

Contaminated State aims to draw viewers' attention to the trash inhabiting their community and to take those concerns to the voting polls during the election in November.

Executive Summary

Contaminated State is a direct critique of the consumerism culture that drives pollution in the United States and the world. The main pollutants focused on in the film are fossil fuels from cars and factory farms, as well as trash scattered about in cities and parks. I am aiming to present a world that mirrors one's every day experiences in which Americans often overlook and subsequently ignore the causes of climate change. This story is simply inspired by walking out of my apartment door every morning and seeing dumpsters and streets lined with trash and cars passing by blowing their exhaust into my face.

The animation features primary sources of news headlines pertaining to the environment, reflecting my own daily habit of tracking current events and the state of Earth's environment. I feel the authentic headlines that most individuals often do not come across in their daily lives are forcing the viewer to read these titles, no matter how uncomfortable they may make the viewer feel. As humans, we desperately want to ignore the impending doom of climate change.

The main influence on the film is Walt Whitman's poetry, specifically "I Sing the Body Electric" with its beautiful expression of looking at life on the smallest and largest of scales (e.g. atoms versus outer space). The lens in which Whitman views and describes the world directly inspired how I visually expressed connecting humans to nature and feeling in awe of the scale and magnitude of the world we inhabit. The antagonist of the story is the pollution in the world, driven by consumerism that is killing life on Earth.

The story evolved from personal anecdotes about lacking the ability to focus well on life's daily tasks. I soon realized that I do not feel motivated to tell such a story unless it has a social message to be conveyed to the audience. I believe animation allows for overt political content over live action film, in a similar vein to political cartoons. Live action is not only unaffordable on a school budget but it also has too many physical bounds.

I am purely attempting to scare people in an effort to snap them out of any idea that there is still time to continue our current, consumerism-based lifestyle. I want people to take this anger and concern to the polls to oust an administration that is so far from reality that they are denying the problem even exists. As individual consumers, we have the power to demand more from the companies that are continuing to pollute our planet and we need a change at the federal level.

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Chapter 1

Contaminated State

My capstone project is a short, two-dimensional animated film titled *Contaminated State*. My capstone project centers around causes of climate change in our every day life experiences. The log line of the film is: plagued by a polluted world, a girl spends her final hours trying to fully appreciate the beauty in life, but the condition of the United State's environmental policies and the litter that surrounds her, make distracting herself from her sickness and the world's impending doom impossible.

The synopsis may sound quite dramatic written out, but the urgency I feel for climate change is met by a society that does not talk about and act on the issue nearly enough. The effects of climate change are present in our daily life; for example, in the height of Spring in Central New York, there are still no buds on most of the trees. In May!

My hope for this film is that after someone watches it, they are more mindful of the pollution and litter that they encounter in their daily lives. It seems that people are often able to block out details of the world that's right in front of them, or at least easily not pay much mind to what is in front of them. When it comes to the constant exhaust of cars filling the air and the trash that litters the landscape, I find myself unable to ignore it, unlike many of other individuals. Being unable to ignore the evidence of our eroding environment is a symptom of "eco-anxiety", an ailment that plays an ever increasing role

and dominant voice in my head. Eco-anxiety is a “relatively new psychological affliction [and] is a chronic fear of environmental doom -- the concern that increasing human development and pollution are leading us into an inevitable scourge of floods, famines, heat waves, species extinctions, and ultimately, the demise of our planet” (Watson). My film *Contaminated State* is exploring my feelings of eco-anxiety, set in a satirical city that critiques the consumerism that is causing so much of the pollution in our world.

As a film major, I knew my capstone would be a short film, yet I did not know animation would be the chosen medium until I started animating in Fall 2016. Creating an animated film has been an amazing learning experience, wonderful drawing practice and overall quite fun. Animation’s challenges are numerous, mostly being that there is no way around it’s time consuming nature, but the satisfaction of creating a film with a message I believe so strongly is quite rewarding.

Chapter 2

Influences in My Animation

My work has been heavily influenced by classical paintings, a few animators, some animated videos I have come across on the web, poetry, and social activism. To begin, Walt Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric" from *Leaves of Grass* has been a major influence on my capstone project and the other pieces I create in my personal life. I admire the way Whitman's words ponder over the wonder and awe of life existence. Life is appreciated on a scale that looks at the whole picture of the world at once and how everything moves in harmony. Paying homage to our natural world is a key part of Whitman's poetry, and a key part of my art work.

Whitman muses over "teeming atoms" and considers the world around him in the greatest of detail and the greatest of scale. His consideration of science as spiritual seemed far ahead of his time. I began reading Walt Whitman in high school, and returning to *Leaves of Grass* to gather inspiration is still a practice of mine.

Whitman's work made it clear to me that I wanted to be an artist to some capacity, because I too wanted to connect the specific to the universal, and art allows a platform to express such feelings. This feeling of ubiquitous themes linked with very distinct stories is the basis of the first scene in my capstone film. A girl imagines and reflects on the connections between a leaf in front of her, space and her body. After this moment of reflection, the girl observes a bird chirping happily, she is peaceful when she finds joy in the earth and all its natural, life-supporting gifts. This moment of peace is abruptly broken by a plastic bag blowing past the girl's face. She is immediately taken out of her zen moment and forced to remember that she lives on an Earth that is

currently filled with litter and pollution. I wonder if Whitman saw the world in 2018 and the state of the environment, paired with our nation and culture's slow reactions to these problems, would he be surprised, outraged, or indifferent?

My favorite quotes from "I Sing the Body Electric" that have continued to inspire include "As I see my soul reflected in Nature, As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness, sanity, beauty" (I Sing the Body Electric Chapter 5) and "Do you think matter has cohered together from its diffuse float, and the soil is on the surface, and water runs and vegetation sprouts, For you only, and not for him and her?" (I Sing the Body Electric Chapter 6).

In terms of paintings, anything to with stars, landscapes, cityscapes, and realism has captured by attention and been of inspiration. In terms of character inspiration, John William Waterhouse's 1889 *Ophelia* is a favorite painting, and depicting a young woman in a field of grass has been a favorite painting since grade school and is reminiscent of the unnamed character in my film.

Bill Plympton is a well-known animator and his films are another source of inspirations. Bill Plympton's animation can be raunchy, but teach a valuable lesson; that there are things that work well in animation that would not work well in live action film. I think this applies to *Contaminated State* because overt satire would not read as thought provoking irony as I hope it does animated form, but perhaps as very simplistic (and not monetarily feasible) if the story were live-action. Animation allows you to both interpret and represent the real world through drawing it, making stylistic choices, in which I use the opportunity to focus on the pollution and capitalistic culture of a day in American life.

Chapter 3

Technique

In terms of animating technique, I am mostly self taught, aided by Lynda.com tutorials, yet my animation intuition is guided by the many lessons learned while attending film school for the past four years. Story, structure, composition, action, character and many more are elements I've studied during my undergraduate experiences which are all elements needed to tell a coherent narrative regardless of the medium.

As for the drawing, I practiced regularly throughout my youth and into college as well, even if in small bits as doodles. Drawing throughout my childhood was luckily encouraged and supplemented by many wonderful art teachers throughout my pre-college education. Many of the talented women I had as teachers in my adolescents engrained solid foundational skills such as composition, proportion, form, line, balance.

I was also raised in a family where art was extremely valued and always encouraged to pursue as a passion at both home and at school. Art supplies were a common gift item during the holidays and birthdays and no vacation was complete without time spent at the visited city's art museum. Additionally, art books lined the shelves in my home to read as a child and my older siblings were often creating pieces of work as well, putting me in a natural place to create visual images.

Chapter 4

Where My Work Has Emerged From

I think my work has emerged from film's ability to communicate powerful messages to a large group of individuals. Although I can only hope my film is powerful to some, it has a clear political and social message about climate change and pollution, themes that are tied to my identity as an individual. The health of our planet is of extreme concern to me and I see it as a potentially massive force for uniting people, as climate affects all of us. I also feel as a white woman who lives a privileged life in a developed country that it is my responsibility to be aware and active about climate change as I am a part of the demographic that stands to suffer far less than many other individuals as the consequences of climate change become increasingly dramatic and apparent.

I believe that films presenting the topic of climate change are generally documentaries, and although my film is peppered with primary sources, there are little narrative films that center around climate change. My film is attempting to add emotion to the world of climate change through a girl's body physically decaying and her world upending due to her sickness that is caused by corporations insisting on putting profits over the health of our planet and humanity.

My relationship to documentaries about climate change is strained because I find them too depressing to watch and often avoid them altogether. I wonder if this happens on a larger scale as well, and people avoid watching such topical films because they are left feeling hopeless and overwhelmed as I often do.

My work tends to solely focus on political and social issues and I've found that when I'm not creating work that does not carry such themes I lose interest and passion very quickly. I believe the film industry is expanding in its production of documentaries that explore extremely important topics and are also relatively widely available to the public, like Netflix hosting films such as *13th* or *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution*. These films tell of the gross injustices our country is filled with and offers important knowledge about disturbing racial oppression facts that are often overlooked by most. Although the people choosing to watch these types of films are likely already interested in the subject matter, I do feel that people want to consume meaningful films that cover important social topics, so the market for my type of work is growing.

I chose to create an animation for my thesis as opposed to a live action film because I was attracted to not only complete control over my image, but felt that animation allowed for a more overt political message as I would not be limited by physical means and little to no budget. Being able to draw anything image I imagine is what allowed me to explore the world on a cellular and molecular level in my film.

Animation also made it much easier to make political comments in the same way that a political cartoon can exaggerate characteristics or situations visually, creating a political stance or pushing one's viewpoint.

Chapter 5

Artistic Choices

The color strategy of the film represents the contrast between the natural world and the artificial objects we are surrounded by. Rich greens and an array of bright colors are met with gray tones, which aim to illustrate the lack of inspiration and detail of a lot of American architecture in many cities.

An important artistic choice was using actual headlines about climate change as primary sources in the film. I augmented these images to make the headlines match the style of the film, which allowed for a much more

In terms of the theory behind my film I believe I wanted people to feel the discomfort that I experience at the constant trash and carbon emissions in my daily life, drawing significance to what is the deterioration of our world all at the expense of a very few getting very rich. I would imagine that I am attempting to articulate a personal theory, or experiment rather, that if I show audiences a visually compelling animated world that mirrors our own, focusing on the things I find very troubling, perhaps they too would feel more troubled by such things. The call to action in the film is reviving democracy and hopefully in the midterm elections people will go to the polls to elect representatives who want to make headway on climate change. I show this call to action by the production company being called Midterm Elections Productions, so hopefully viewers will take a hint that they should vote in November for people who want to tackle this issue and are not indebted to polluters and big oil lobbyists.

Chapter 6

Changing Points in the Production of the Film

A huge moment of serendipity began when I was feeling very stuck with my project and not motivated by my story when my film was a personal tale exploring having difficulty focusing. There was a true moment of serendipity while I was putting off working on my project due to a lack of interest and motivation that I was browsing climatedesk.com, a website which gathers major articles on climate change and environmental issues. Suddenly, the idea about focusing my film on pollution and a hurting environment struck me. I was immediately excited and passionate about now putting the time into the project.

A specific situation that reinforced the main decision to feature litter and car exhaust as the main contact the character has with pollution is based off my daily experience of walking out my apartment door in the morning. Each day when I walk outside I see litter scattered about, overflowing dumpsters and cars. While walking to class, cars pass me and continually blow exhaust in my face which I have no choice but to breathe in. Everyday this routine is frustrating to me, and even when I'm trying to appreciate and absorb the beauty of Earth's environment, these pollutants constantly maim my view, as I find myself unable to ignore the constant drum of cars and trash seen on the street.

Another specific situation that mirrors my daily life which is a scene in the film is when the girl is on her bed, on her computer, reading articles about various climate crisis' and injustices. Her reaction is one of horror, and one that I hope inspires a sense of urgency in the viewers.

At the suggestion of my film teacher, I decided to conclude the film with the protagonist's death and so far I have liked the effect a lot, as I think it packs more of a punch for the audience, hitting on many of the serious negative health elements of my film. The film needed to reflect on the current moment where the President and his current administration does not recognize climate change and the Environmental Protection Agency is not doing its job to serve and protect the citizens and their environment. Living in a moment where the agency that is supposed to regulate the top polluters is being led by someone who is indebted to serving the top polluters (i.e. major corporations) is extremely scary and infuriating. Being sure to chronicle the current moment is extremely important to the film, otherwise there is a high risk that the film could be interpreted as a public service announcement that pollution does take lives, which many people are already aware of.

Chapter 7

Meaning of My Work

The meaning of my work to me is to capture the contemporary moment where our planet's ecosystem is known to be in dire jeopardy, where radical action is known to be needed; yet the United States, one of the most powerful countries in the world and one of the top polluters, is currently led by an administration that denies the problem's existence. Currently the government is actively rolling back prior regulations in an effort to make it easier for corporations to continue polluting our Earth. As if the problem of climate change was not plenty scary enough before the Trump Administration, the idea that what little protection there was in place is currently being dismantled daily. My work is attempting to comment on the issues that face all people on a worldwide scale, while also noting the every day impact pollution has on our daily routines, which is a direct by-product of consumerism.

After audiences see *Contaminated State*, I hope they feel a little bit more uncomfortable when seeing a piece of trash on the side of the road, or frustrated when a car blows exhaust in their face. Hopefully the audience will take this frustration to the election polls and will do their part to vote for politicians who aim to create laws that are radical in terms of protecting Earth's precious environment.

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