BLACKOUT: FROM FILM NOIR TO 3D ANIMATION

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"The mood of tragedy is enhanced by a strong contrast of deep blacks and glaring whites: shadows and highlights. In drama we light for mood, we paint poems. Lighting with its ups and downs becomes a symphonic construction paralleling the dramatic sequence." – John Alton

Film has always been an intriguing medium to me. Not only is it visually stimulating, it also engages the mind as plot points and visual compositions are connected to achieve an understanding of the story. Much like reading a book, we are transported to a different world, time and viewpoint. The conventional or classical form of storytelling in film has not always been such a "warm" medium. In the late 1930s, Film Noir, as a style and genre, made a break with linear, explicit plot lines. Through several techniques, it has taken the medium to a complex level with a modern aesthetic. Visually and psychologically, the influence of the Noir style has changed the way films are made and viewed.

I have a great variety of interests, among them art, languages, dance and music, and I always look for new learning opportunities. I find that through developing films myself, I can incorporate these aspects. Each short film allows for in-depth research on the particular subject, because to convey a concept a full understanding of that concept is

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required, as well the opportunity to combine music, visuals, storytelling and editing techniques, and different viewpoints to arrive at a finished product.

The first documentary film I made examined bilingual international students, and their experiences using different languages. For my Master of Arts Degree, I wished to continue my work in film. My interest in 3D animation began with an interest in creating stylized credits for film projects I had worked on. I started looking into what Maya could do for me in this area, and soon discovered that the software is extremely expansive and can be used for far more complex projects. Since Film Noir broke with so many film traditions, experimenting with the style through a digital medium that allowed full lighting options felt like taking the style to a new level. Even though Film Noir was an eye-opening and new experience in the 1940s, the style has been well established since then and now has become a style to be taken into new directions. Taking all these aspects into consideration, I decided to focus my work on creating a short-film, in Noir Style, using 3D modeling and animation.

Is Film Noir truly a genre or merely a style? This is a question often debated by film critics. The term "Noir" is used to describe the look, mood and themes of certain movies produced during the 1940s and 50s. Even though many genres of film can be shot in a Noir style, we also associate theme with the term. The existentialist philosophy, as well as the overall mood felt throughout the depression, factor into the story lines; a feeling of doom, fatalism, corruption and isolation dominate the character’s lives. Noirs often revolve around crime and corruption and inspired “hard-boiled” fiction writers such
as Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and many others.\textsuperscript{3} Visually Noir finds its source in German expressionist film and clearly follows the pessimistic mood of the Weimar street-film, which concentrated on social realities of the time. (1919-33).\textsuperscript{4} Fritz Lang's "M" (1931) has a criminal as its protagonist in a crime filled world. Noir became a dark mirror on post-war America society. The term Noir was first used to classify five films shown in Paris in 1946: John Houston’s \textit{The Maltese Falcon}, Otto Preminger’s \textit{Laura}, Edward Dmytryk’s \textit{Murder, My Sweet}, Billy Wilder’s \textit{Double Indemnity} and Fritz Lang’s \textit{The Woman in the Window}. Soon other films of the era were classified as Noirs.

Visually, Film Noir is very distinctive. The imagery conveys the feelings of doom and entrapment. Instead of using well-lit stages, as had been done up to that time, Noir always plays with heavy shadows. Low key lighting and direct light, without the use of fillers, creates a high contrast chiaroscuro effect. Shadows are deep black. Characters and locations are often only partially lit, giving the feeling of something lurking in the darkness beyond. Reflections and reflective surfaces add to the atmosphere of confusion, entrapment and instability. (See Figures 1 and 2)

Camera use also breaks with convention. Previously, films were to be comprehensible for large audiences. Sound stages were well lit and filmed from the best possible vantage point to aid in exposition of the plot, which was usually through direct, frontal shots. The viewer should under no circumstances feel disoriented.\textsuperscript{5} Noir, however, uses off-angle compositions, creating an unstable world (see Figure 3). Through the development of lighter-weight cameras the mobility of the equipment became greater

\textsuperscript{3} Andrew Spicer, \textit{Film Noir} (Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), 2.
\textsuperscript{5} Andrew Spicer, 46.
future, introducing “replicant” people living among us to darken human existence (see Figure 6). Also Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) depicts a dark and violent crime drama. Some of David Lynch’s and the Coen brothers’ films can be considered Neonoirs for their visual style and storytelling.

Additionally, there are several cartoons that use the dark style of Noir that have been created in the last decade, the main one being “*Batman, the animated series*” in which Gotham City, Batman and the villains get the full dark shadows and bright highlights treatment (see Figure 7). Graphic novels and cartoons have often paid tribute to the style, such as Frank Miller’s novels, which have recently been adapted for film (see Figure 8), as well as the Batman comics. As of yet, I have not found any 3D animation in the Noir style.

The first half of the 19th century does not only find film and literature reflecting this darkness and isolation. Realist painter Edward Hopper’s work depicts many of the motifs, architecture and characters found in Film Noir. One of his most famous paintings *Nighthawks*, shows a corner bar in a deserted city at night (see Figure 9). Inside, a few people are present, yet they do not seem to be engaged with each other. A sense of isolation and loneliness hangs in the air. Of the work *Office at Night* Stand points out that “the characters that could step out of a noir film are present” (See Figure 10).

Hopper paints pictures as a director would create stages: the viewer is invited to construct a narrative for each painting. His work conveys the alienation of people in a world they cannot escape. The isolation of his figures is portrayed by picturing them lost
in their own thoughts, shut off from any interaction or communication. A woman at a window is a common motif in Hopper’s work that is commonly used in Noir films (see Figure 11). I see his pieces as stills from a film. *Night Shadows* looks like an image that can be directly placed in my drawn out storyboard (see Figure 12).

My animated short film *Blackout* combines established Noir and Hopper’s styles with new digital media in a format that is returning and starting a new life in the digital age: the short film as a format has been given another chance with the introduction of broadband Internet. Short films used to be shown in theaters before features up until the 1970s but have since made room for revenue-making trailers and other advertisements. Only film festivals have shown shorts religiously throughout the last century. Yet, with the enormous growth of the Internet, short films now get an even larger audience. Short films are the only practical kind of film on the web, as they are relatively small in size and easy to stream or download.⁹

Users of mobile entertainment devices, such as iPods and cell phones with video capabilities, have downloaded more than a million Oscar nominated shorts through the website ITunes.¹⁰ In the last five years these shorts have again gotten theatrical releases nationwide because of their renewed popularity. Some critics argue that short films are more interesting since they are tightly written and not a minute goes to waste. They are

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often wittier and grittier than feature films since there is no major sponsor or studio backing the work to demand adjustments.¹¹

Several websites also introduce episodic animations with new episodes coming out weekly or monthly. *Strongbad* has become a favorite among students as well as more obscure animations such as David Firth’s *Salad Fingers* (see Figure 13), and *Strindberg and Helium* (see Figure 14). These animations are independently produced by individuals or a handful of people, and are mostly created in Flash. Because 3D animation is so time consuming to create, serial shorts would be difficult to produce unless working with established sets and characters. However, the Computer Graphics Society, an online resource for graphic artists and animators, has a vast archive of 3D animated short films. In the future I hope the site will cater to a broader audience, rather than other artists, so that the independent 3D computer animated films will gain greater popularity.

*Blackout* can take full advantage of the newly found interest in shorts. As a result, my film takes Noir into a new direction spanning the gap from the 1930s to today, using a relatively new animation technique. In our current culture we are often pressed for time and have gotten accustomed to getting a lot of information visually. 3D animation has become part of our culture, even though 2D animation has been around as long as film itself has. A three-dimensional image can convey more information and more detail, as it is a more realistic representation of reality.

The creative process involves writing a provocative storyline, modeling and animating characters and settings. As in most media, creativity and process are tightly

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related. Initially experimenting with Maya itself gave me inspiration to work in a Noir style, as lighting can be fully manipulated and adjusted. Through working with the software and learning about the program’s possibilities and limitations, I created models for the city as well as for the four characters. Composition of the frames and lighting were aspects that I introduced gradually throughout the modeling and animation process.

The sets I created are based on 1940s architecture and decoration. I enjoyed modeling details after images I looked up in books and on the Internet. They are elements we are all familiar with, yet I wanted to give them an authentic 1940s look to add to the mood and nostalgia I felt when watching black and white movies. I aspired to create a familiar setting to introduce the modern, digital animation. Lights were placed in spots where actual light fixtures would be found in a real interior and exterior environment, as these were the light sources used in Noir filmmaking. Playing with brightness and lighting angles proved to be what I needed to create distinctive deep shadows and bright highlights. Alton points out that it is useful to regard shadows as a “volume of darkness” and give it its own, adequate amount of space\(^\text{12}\). Letting shadows fall where they naturally would, and intensifying them through the use of harsh direct light without any filler created this negative space of blackness that signifies the style.

The narrative story developed as my sets developed. I had certain frames in mind that I wanted to see, much like Hopper painted pictures that could be stills from a movie which you can somehow connect to form a story. Key elements I had in mind were the silhouette of a man on the phone, a silhouette of a woman in a window in a city at night, a man being dragged away (see Figure 15), a confrontation of the woman with a gun, and a

\(^{12}\) Alton, 51.
bar scene, inspired by Hopper’s *Nighthawks*. The story came together after working with the characters for a while. I created a storyboard to organize the elements I wanted to work with, switching scenes around for the most dramatic result. I included flashbacks and edits to keep the audience guessing about what is going on. It might not always be immediately clear what is actually happening and the film might need multiple viewings to fully make sense. This is exactly in line with the disorientation techniques used in the Noir style, as well as the type of movies I like to view.

Because of technical limitations, I was not able to render my animation in full quality until the very last moment before the exhibition. This resulted in the inability to make changes after the render was complete, rather than be able to alter and adjust small details at the end. A lot of the animation was not as smooth as I had planned and had previewed when using a lower quality render. It set me back a little to find something different than I expected, yet the outcome gave the film a strange, intense quality.

The characters move in an almost robot-like fashion, with limited facial expressions. It is as if they are even more estranged from the world and from each other than in classic Noir films, which works very well with the theme. But can we identify with these people or are they too far removed from us? The sets are familiar, the story classic with its twists, recognizable compositions and motifs. I think we can. It makes the viewer reexamine a genre and style, as well as feel the isolation, confusion and doom that are inevitable when watching a Noir. It shows that these themes will always be part of the human condition, even in a future with robot-like people.

While creating my story, one issue I was concerned with was the morality of the piece. Does the Noir crime story advocate violence? Does it trivialize deception and
murder? Whatever one puts in front of an audience conveys a message, possibly even unintentionally. Would Blackout condone the behavior it portrays? Many Noir films contain violence and moral inconspicuousness, yet often the final message they send is that crime does not pay. Criminals are caught, doomed, and cannot sustain themselves in our society. The fact that crime is present in these works is a comment on a problem in our culture and on self-inflicted destructive behavior, rather than glorify the criminal actions of the individual. Blackout is almost a caricature of the classic genre. The femme fatale is even colder, the male characters stiffer, more set in their ways, the violence doomed to repeat itself over and over again without escape.

I included printed stills from my animation Blackout in my final exhibition. Instead of leaving the images black and white, I used muted colors. The prints correspond with Hopper's work. Each piece invites you to escape in a story, or connect them with each other to find the plot lines. The stills can be shown together but work equally well on their own, as an observation of a life: a snapshot in a movement. Additionally, I displayed my full storyboard for the film, as it is aesthetically interesting in itself, as well as shows the audience the process of creating a film or animation.

My animation Blackout fits in a unique place in the world of art and visual communication. A true understanding of film Noir, Hopper’s work, graphic novels and 3D modeling and animation was needed to accomplish the piece. Additionally, putting it into a format that has vast possibilities and potential makes the project a worthwhile exploration with several future applications. I brought a classic style to a modern
medium and in its turn the modern medium added a unique and unexpected quality to the work. I will work further in Maya as I have learned the possibilities and am now further aware of its capability, as well. I also have learned through working on this project, as well as other pieces throughout my MFA experience, that one of my creative strong points is visual storytelling. In my Radio/TV/Film studies I was taught to show what is happening, not tell it. With just minimal dialog, my animation does just that.

The communication department's annual video expo screened *Blackout* this May and I am planning to enter the piece into more festivals. I also uploaded the film on the Internet and have been getting positive reviews. Through the Internet's revival of short films, the world is now my audience.
Figure 1. Still from *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles (1941)

Figure 2. Still from *The Killers* by Robert Siodmak (1946)
Figure 3. Still from *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles (1941)

Figure 4. Still from *The Killer That Stalked New York* by Earl McVoy (1950)
Figure 5. Still from *The Maltese Falcon*, Humphrey Bogart as investigator Sam Spade, by Roy Del Ruth (1931)
Figure 6. Stills from *Blade Runner* by Ridley Scott (1982)

Figure 7. Still from *Batman: The Animated Series*
http://img387.imageshack.us/img387/7823/ac7e792c2c9cb92c73e3850gu3.jpg
Figure 8. Image from Frank Miller's *Sin City* and still from the movie adaptation by Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez (2005)
Figure 9. Edward Hopper. *Nighthawks* (1942).
Figure 10. Edward Hopper. *Office at Night* (1940).
Figure 11. Edward Hopper. *Night Windows* (1928).
Figure 12. Edward Hopper. *Night Shadows* (1921).

Figure 13. Still from animation *Salad Fingers* by David Firth from http://www.fatpie.com/salad.htm
Figure 14. Still from the animation *Stindberg and Helium* from www.strindbergandhelium.com/
Figure 15. Still from *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Otto Preminger (1951)
REFERENCES


