PRAGUE SCHOOL OF CREATIVE COMMUNICATION

Department of Visual Arts

BACHELOR THESIS

The Role of texturing, lighting and atmosphere in Storytelling - A better way to tell stories in animation

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Visual Arts

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The Role of texturing, lighting and atmosphere in Storytelling - A better way to tell stories in animation

Practical part: Animated Short Film

Theoretical part: Literature Review, Case Study Analysis

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2025

Declaration

I declare that I have elaborated my bachelor thesis independently and that I have listed all the sources and literature from which I have drawn. I confirm that all submitted copies of my bachelor thesis correspond to the electronic version in the UCC information system and I agree
that the thesis will be made available to the public for study and research purposes.

In Prague on..... Authors signature:

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Abstract Keywords

This thesis explores a better way to tell stories in animation through visual storytelling elements of texture, lighting, and atmospheric effects. Through detailed case studies of the animated short film “Crac” by Frédéric Back and the animated feature film “Flow” by Gints Zilbalodis. Exploring how elements like color, brush type, haze, and decay influence an audience’s emotion and can guide the narrative. The research highlights that the specific meaning of visual storytelling methods depends on their use in individual works by building patterns and attaching meaning. The findings are applicable to various animation techniques, including hand-drawn, hand-painted, or 3D animation. The thesis is focused on animation; however, that does not exclude the findings for live-action film or still painting.

Keywords: Visual Storytelling, Narrative, Visual Language, Texturing, Lighting, Atmosphere, Color, Animation, Filmmaking, Audience Perception, Visual Communication;

Table of Contents

1. Introduction **4**
2. Literature Review **4**
2.1 Beyond the spoken word 4
2.2 The Tactile Narrative 5
2.3 The Illumination of Emotion and Narrative 7
2.4 The Depth of Worlds 8
3. Case Study Analysis **10**
3.1 Crac: Mastery of Textures 10
3.1.1 Emotionally Loaded Brushes 11
3.1.2 From Humane to Mechanical and Back 12
3.2 Flow: The Flood of Light and Atmosphere 14
3.2.1 The Silent Language of Flow 14
3.2.2 Water's Dual Nature 14
3.2.3 Illumination of Comfort 15
3.2.4 Subtle Drops of Emotion 16
3.2.5 A Bright Future 17
4. Practical Application **17**
4.1 Disconnection in a World of Stress 18
4.2 Connection in a World of Tranquility 19
4.3 The Synthesis 22
5. Recommendations **22**
6. Conclusion **23**
References **25**
List of Pictures and Tables **27**

1. Introduction

In audiovisual mediums, artists often overlook the importance of building an atmosphere within their work, using textures and lighting to their advantage in storytelling rather than using spoken word or text for explanation. Artworks that recognise this are often more well-rounded and convincing to their audiences, as they recognize the cliché truth of "showing not telling" in a very detail-focused way. I will apply this principle in search of a better way to tell stories visually in animation. This, however, does not exclude the findings from live-action films or still visual arts.

It is not my intention to find the one true way of storytelling, since there is none. The way a story is to be told depends on many aspects and is, at the end of the day, a decision only the storyteller himself must make. There is a place and time for stories that are told more verbally than visually. The right way of doing so through dialogue, monologue, and narration is a skill of its own that is essential for animation as well as for live-action film. The balance that is struck between verbal and visual storytelling is every artist's decision. It is my intention to discover, amplify, and make aware of more and better methods to use visual storytelling to strike the right balance, since I am certain that most artists find themselves on the verbally heavy side of the scale.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Beyond the spoken word

In audiovisual arts, artists often overlook the importance of visual storytelling. It is way easier to say something than it is to show it, but does that make it better? When artists are able to use texture, lighting, atmosphere, and other visual elements to their advantage, they have the ability not only to enhance their work but also to find a more unique way to tell their story.

"*Whether you shoot on film or digital capture for a large, small, or tiny screen, the visual structure of your pictures often is overlooked, yet it's as important as the story you tell.*" (Block, 2008). Block argued that effective storytelling relies on an underlying visual structure that works independently of, but also in harmony with, the verbal narrative. He applied this in a general fashion to visual media. His ideas differ on the medium in use and, of course, develop with technology; however, the principles remain intact.

Block categorized the fundamentals of visual structure into six basic visual components: space, line and shape, tone, color, movement, and rhythm. He demonstrated that these components are not simply aesthetic choices but that they are the building blocks that communicate meaning, evoke emotion, and guide the audience's perception. A change of tone, which he defined as the brightness of objects in relation to the grayscale, can instantly convey mood, danger, or intimacy without a single spoken word, claimed Block. The targeted use of color can establish emotional states and guide the audience's expectations through either its inherent psychological associations or previously established patterns within the work.

2.2 The Tactile Narrative

I acknowledge the limitations based on my access to online and physical libraries. My search for a study that puts texture in the context of storytelling in animation was unsuccessful. Thus I believe there is a hole in literature on this specific matter. Therefore, in this thesis, I will try to work with more general ideas regarding the effects of texture on perception and put them into the context of my thesis.

Texture as a time machine. The yellow stain of a coffee cup, the amount of rust on a fence, the wrinkles on a person's face. It can be seen as a scale for age or condition. There is no need for someone to verbally communicate that a road is old when we can see the potholes and the grayed-out paint.

A sharp texture will never look as crisp as when paired with a soft one right next to it. This effect can be achieved by contrasting objects that share these attributes, say a foggy valley next to a sharp, gritty rock. However, using a shallow depth of field with a camera lens can create the same contrast. What exactly this contrast tells the audience depends on the individual work. In the case of Caspar David Friedrich's *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (eng. Wanderer above the Sea of Fog), a possible interpretation can be that the gritty, sharp-textured rocks are reality, as it is where the wanderer stands, and the smooth, soft fog is the future, as it is what the wanderer gazes at.

Why is it that in film, live action or animation, when a subject is supposed to be isolated, it is common practice to shoot it with a shallow depth of field? It is the same principle: the sharp texture draws the audience's attention to the subject, and the soft surroundings only enhance the focused look of the subject.

A good example of the contrast between sharp and soft in animation can be found in the animated short film *Edmond était un âne* (eng. Edmond was a Donkey). The main character, Edmund, sees his reflection in the mirror, as presented in *Figure 1* below. The reflection is blurry and jittery, in this case symbolizing that he does not really see his image in the mirror as his true self. Later in the film he looks in the same mirror while wearing his donkey hat, as seen in *Figure 2* below. There his reflection is a donkey, which is sharp and clear, showing the audience that he clearly sees himself as a donkey. The specific meaning behind the choice of texture is my interpretation; it is, however, supported by an interview the director Franck Dion gave at My French Film Festival in 2013, stating, "(...) *a character wearing a dunce's cap and who looked rather pleased with himself. And quite proud to wear it. That gave me the idea of a character who would choose an identity, which he'd be comfortable with.*"

Figure 1: Soft texture example

Figure 2: Clear texture example

2.3 The Illumination of Emotion and Narrative

Katatikarn and Tanzillo (2017) on why we light: "*Lighting is about taking geometry and transforming it to create a setting the audience can submerse themselves into, thus allowing the film to take them on a journey.*" They specifically focused their book on lighting in animation. Showcased with many examples how lighting sometimes clearly and sometimes subtly influences the viewer's journey. A strong showcase of clear visual storytelling with lighting was presented by Katatikarn and Tanzillo from the animated short film *Edmond était un âne* (eng. Edmond was a Donkey). When we look at *Figure 3* below, it is easy to understand that Edmund is unhappy, sad, or melancholic due to the desaturated cool blue color. After a few seconds a warm yellow ray of light enters the shot, as seen in *Figure 4* below, symbolizing a feeling of hope and optimism.

Figure 3: Cool color example

Figure 4: Warm color example

The way an audience reacts to these elements of light and color is deeply bound to the psychology of perception, more specifically color theory. "*The cool colors seem to*

evoke feelings of winter, night, sky, shadow, sleep and ice. (...) Warm colors make us think of fire, hot spices, and blood. They connote energy and passion." (Gurney, 2010). As Gurney suggested, there is a rather big range of what a specific color can evoke in the audience. Therefore, it is important to remember that the meaning of a color has to be established and manifested within a work itself. Coming back to the example of Edmond Was a Donkey, the film's lighting is almost exclusively restricted to cool blue colors; only in rare moments of hope and optimism does the color of the light shift into the warm yellows. Which perfectly represent the long periods of Edmund's depressive state that are only briefly interrupted by the feeling of happiness.

2.4 The Depth of Worlds

The concept of atmosphere is fundamental to experiencing any environment. As Böhme (2016) wrote: *"The atmosphere of a certain environment is responsible for the way we feel about ourselves in that environment."* While Böhme offers a clear definition within environmental aesthetics, the application of this term to dynamic mediums of film and animation presents a particular challenge. Film theorists often acknowledge the presence of atmosphere but struggle to articulate its exact mechanisms and significance. Spadoni (2020) pointed out this paradox: "*The number of times the word atmosphere appears, (...), attests to the importance that film writers continuously attach to it-yet few have paused to spell out why atmosphere matters or even to articulate what they mean by the word.*" This intangible nature of effective atmosphere in storytelling is the combination of multiple "atmospheric elements" working in combination with the narrative and the established world.

Instead of relying solely on verbal exposition to convey a character's sadness, a storyteller can use environmental elements. For instance, a character could explicitly express their sadness, but depicting them in heavy rain offers a far deeper and more nuanced way of delivering the information. This basic choice can allow for deeper psychological insight; a character might offer a forced smile amidst the rain, communicating a duality and a desire to conceal their inner struggle from others. This is how atmospheric effects, especially weather-related ones, become integral to visual storytelling, providing subtext and emotional depth beyond literal dialogue.

The captivating power of fog, mist, and haze is diverse. Dense fog can inherently build tension and nervousness. When dense fog surrounds a character, the audience will

start to become uneasy, and suspense starts to build. What lies hidden within? This effect is a core element in Yuri Norstein's animated short film, *Hedgehog in the Fog* (1975) (original title: “Ёжик в тумане”), where the dense fog not only builds suspense but also may symbolise the unknown itself. This use of fog is also a core element of film noir, as fog or mist often hides actions or characters. (Spicer, 2014). In contrast, a softer, diffused light filtering through subtle fog or mist can create an otherworldly or dreamlike atmosphere, often used to show memories or a dream (Spoonley, 2024). This method is exemplified by the iconic flashback scene in *Ratatouille* (2007). *Figure 5* below.

Figure 5: Diffused light and god ray example

This sixteen-second sequence is without any dialogue and heavily relies on the mood created with atmospheric effects, which wonderfully shows their ability to convey emotional weight. Of course, there are many more factors that fuel this moment's emotional impact, whether it be sound design or the juxtaposition of the scenes around this one. An interesting aspect of this montage is the strategic use of god rays, which appear from the combination of haze and shallow light. These shafts often symbolize the divine, a moment of revelation, or a glimmer of hope. This symbolism dates back to classical painting, notably with works such as Raphael’s “*The Transfiguration*.”

What about an unpleasant atmosphere? Rain carries a strong association of melancholy, sadness, and also loss. However, rain also possesses a contrasting symbolism of renewal and cleansing, suggesting the washing away of the past and the promise of a fresh start. (Gray, 2022). This side of the duality is powerfully demonstrated in films like Frank Darabont's “*The Shawshank Redemption*“ (1994), where the rain can be interpreted to wash the past off the protagonist after he finally escapes prison.

The use of falling and floating elements can enrich a scene's atmosphere even more. A gentle snowfall can evoke a feeling of serenity, quiet contemplation, or a sense of peace. On the other hand, smoke, dust, or ash can imply chaos, decay, and oppression. Additionally, a sense of grit and authenticity may be conveyed in environments such as battle scenes. The falling ash and embers during and after the bombing raids on Kobe in Isao Takahata's "*Grave of the Fireflies*" (1988) for the implication of chaos and oppression.

Lens flare in animation can suggest realism, making a scene feel more filmed and spontaneous, enhancing the audience's immersion. Beyond that, it can evoke a dreamlike quality or a sense of awe. The exact effect depends on the style and color; a warm, golden lens flare can induce a sense of nostalgia, while a strong blue one suggests tension. An example of harsh blue lens flare was used in "*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*" (2018). Heat distortion can subtly communicate discomfort and possible disorientation, adding psychological tension.

3. Case Study Analysis

The number of tools available in film and animation to tell a story visually is immense. All of them have their singular possibilities, but only when combined in a detail-focused way can they truly shine. It is essential to remember that the specific meaning behind an individual storytelling method is not set in stone. The artist must carefully craft the tool's meaning within the individual work and then stick to the set rules and only break them with clear intent, since the range of possible interpretations is too wide otherwise.

3.1 Crac: Mastery of Textures

Frederic Back provides us with an example as clear as it is insightful on how textures can be used to deepen, intensify, and shape visual storytelling in his 1981 Oscar-winning animated short film "*Crac*." The film uses hand-drawn and hand-painted animation on multiple layers. The story follows a rocking chair. From the tree the chair is made of, over multiple repairs and repaints, to the edge of its existence. The story is told without any form of dialogue.

3.1.1 Emotionally Loaded Brushes

In situations of clear contrast, the creative use of texture, or in this case variation in brushstrokes, can be easily understood. In unpleasant, stormy weather, Back uses long, heavy, and rigid brushstrokes, as shown in *Figure 6* below. For pleasant meadow weather, he employs more curvy, small, and playful ones, as presented in *Figure 7* below. To further enhance the effect, in the case of a pleasant scene, he redraws part of the landscape in each frame to likely create a feeling of movement that furthers the soothing emotional reaction. In particular, reflections in the water and the gentle wiggle of leaves in the wind breathe life into the landscape. Leaving the viewer with a deeper connection and understanding of the situation.

Another technique to create a higher contrast between these two worlds has to do with the animation style in use. The entire film is hand-drawn or hand-painted; however, it is done so on multiple layers. In the case of the stormy weather, these layers are clearly separate and behave more like layers in a cutout animation, thus giving a very rigid feeling, as seen in *Figure 6* below.

Figure 6: Brushwork and color palette for stormy weather

In the pleasant scene the layers blend nicer, due to the movement within the individual drawings, as presented in *Figure 7* below. In this example we can clearly see the intent behind the visual storytelling by Back, for there is no other reason not to redraw shapes in the storm clouds than to create the rigid and strong feeling instead of a more organic and soothing one.

Figure 7: Brushwork and color palette for pleasant weather

Not only does the color palette change drastically for dream sequences, but also the brush strokes that are used. Less tactile brushes result in a smoother surface, as well as rather small ones that are used for finer lines. Backgrounds are kept simple using a soft, somewhat misty gradient that gently changes in opacity, as seen in *Figure 8* below. All of these techniques result in an ungraspable feeling. Nothing is truly there, as it appears and disappears slowly and unnoticeably. Information flows into the image and flows away just as gently. This is what makes us understand it is not reality but a dream.

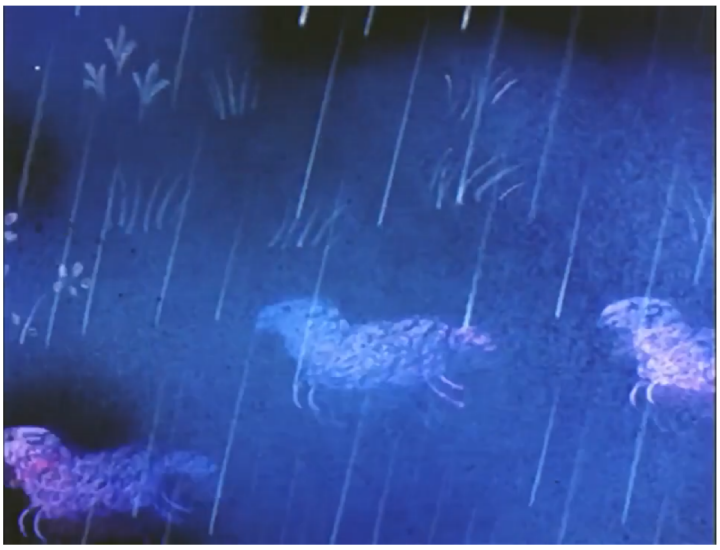

Figure 8: Dreamy example

3.1.2 From Humane to Mechanical and Back

As the story progresses, the world becomes more and more industrialized and man-made, and the strokes gradually change with it. Coming from the tactile brush's heavy strokes we've come to know throughout the film, the brush gradually loses its character, turning into smooth and edgeless pencil-made drawings, as seen in *Figure 9* below. Unless

there is movement of the object; nothing is ever redrawn, giving a still, lifeless feeling that may resemble the people's attitude and way of life in this part.

Figure 9: Smooth, edgeless texture example

Once the film begins to dive into the optimistic ending, the process is quickly reversed, using more and more characterful brushes, until at the pinnacle the style exceeds the impressionistic characterfulness of the brushes and ends closer to post-impressionist pointillism. This transition is presented in *Figure 10* and *Figure 11* below. This change goes in line perfectly with the story and makes us understand our somewhat inanimate protagonist, the rocking chair.

Figure 10: Increase in brush character

Figure 11: Pointillist brushwork example

These are just some examples of Back's clever use of texture and color in his film. In order to be able to tell a sophisticated story with 15 minutes of length, mostly visually, many more techniques must be applied. But even that does not compare to the methods that are needed for a full-length animated feature film without a single spoken word.

3.2 Flow: The Flood of Light and Atmosphere

3.2.1 The Silent Language of Flow

The 2024 3D animated feature film *Flow* by Gints Zilbalodis was a surprising critical success due to its unique approach to storytelling, methods of animation, and a budget of only $3.4 million (Zahed, 2024). The film is made entirely without spoken words; therefore, other methods must be used in order to deliver the details of the story to the audience. This makes *Flow* a prime example of visual storytelling. The movie uses textures, lighting, and atmospheric effects to establish mood and for narrative progression; however, it relies heavily on the characters emotional nonverbal displays that sometimes overshadow or even dismiss the need for more subtle, emotional storytelling potential from the film's sophisticated visual design.

Flow tells the story of a cat that finds itself in a flooded world, where all signs of human life have vanished. After an initial phase of panic, the cat finds temporary hope and shelter on a boat shared with other animals. Since all animals are of a different species, the communication and working as a group become a challenge for our protagonist, even more so than its inherent fear of water. The group sets sail to uncharted waters in hopes of finding shelter from the ever-rising water levels. As the movie progresses, the individual animals learn to be more accepting and understanding with one another and thus find better ways to work together against this force of nature.

I will explore how texture, lighting, and atmosphere work individually and collectively to build the film's world, define its characters, and convey its deeper metaphorical meanings.

3.2.2 Water's Dual Nature

The story of *Flow* centers around water, which has a dual nature within the work. Before the flood, the water is smooth and reflective, carrying a feeling of peace and calm. Post-flood, the water becomes rougher and more churning, with visible currents and a much larger size. The size and dynamic of the water convey power and danger and a feeling of being lost. In moments of clarity and reflection, the water often becomes clearer

and more calm. It serves as a literal and metaphorical mirror for the cat. This duality is, however, broken in one scene in particular. After an initial flood, the cat goes back to its comforting sleeping place; this moment of tranquility is then interrupted by the water levels rising around the house. The water rises calmly, and its surface is smooth. The feeling of danger is very intensely present, though, and I would argue that this is one of the most threatening scenes in the film. The reason this works is because the duality of water has been established before; now even the calm water is a source of danger, thus indicating the feeling that it cannot be trusted and that even things the cat once perceived as safe, its shelter and the smooth water, are now elements of threat.

3.2.3 Illumination of Comfort

Why is it that we perceive this house as the cat's safe space? Because it sleeps there, of course, but the reason this scene grips the audience so tightly is due to the smart setup of the house as a place of warmth and nostalgia before. Orange light enters the room at a shallow angle, resulting in a purely warm color palette on screen, which immediately results in a comforting feeling, reminding the audience of a warm summer evening. The emotional impact is further enhanced by a subtle haze, carrying the warm tones through the room. All comes together with the all-wooden texture applied that is soft, low in contrast, and exudes a feeling of tranquility and nature, as presented in *Figure 12* below.

Figure 12: Example for warmth and nostalgia

This setup not only adds tension to the following scene of the water levels rising, but it also prepares another emotional hit when the water literally washes away the tranquility and safety of this space, as the water's cool colors flood the scene with a sense of bitterness, as

seen in *Figure 13* below. This deepens the audience's connection to the cat, as they now have the emotional understanding of losing their home.

Figure 13: Example for warmth interrupted by cold

3.2.4 Subtle Drops of Emotion

The use of weather-connected atmospheric effects is a vital part of the film's language. The flood itself being the clearest one. However, also a more subtle use is applied. A good example is the scene in which the cat finds a temporary sanctuary on a boat and is surprised to find a capybara aboard. Due to the cat's skeptical nature, it stays away from the other animal. As a storm arises, the protagonist has to make a choice: either stay in the rain or seek shelter next to the capybara. The rain paired with the pale blue color palette may be a symbol for loneliness and sadness, as presented in *Figure 14* below. In order to escape the sadness, the cat has to conquer one of his two big fears: letting its guard down and working with others. (Zilbalodis, 2024). For a stronger emotional impact, the rain-covered area could have included a warmer color tone. This would have further enhanced the contrast between the sad, rainy area and the dry and cozy one. Of course subtlety is key, and the message can already be understood without the additional warm tone.

Figure 14: Rain Example

3.2.5 A Bright Future

Flow utilizes a full toolset to engage the audience in the film's story without the need for any dialogue. The team behind the film clearly has a great understanding of visual storytelling, including the methods of texture, lighting, and atmosphere. They often rely heavily on the animal's sounds and body language to convey meaning and emotion. These are undeniably important tools for storytelling; however, with a little additional focus on purely visual methods, the film could have potentially provided a better flow for the audience. The success of *Flow,* both critically and commercially, is a clear sign that visual storytelling goes a long way. Not only as an important tool, but even as the core source of information and emotion for the audience.

4. Practical Application

In order to understand the possibilities and impact of visual storytelling through lighting, texturing, and atmosphere, my project partner Hlib Bredelov and I created an animated short film, "*Wahl*" alongside this thesis. The short film features a combination of 3D and 2D animation. It is my duty to take care of the 3D part, which includes the conceptualization and execution of the environment design and some environment and character animation, giving me an excellent chance to test my theoretical knowledge on texturing, lighting, and atmosphere in a practical application. The film is made entirely without dialogue or text. Therefore, the rather fragile and detail-heavy story must be told exclusively visually.

"*Wahl*" follows a 28-year-old neurodivergent man who is faced with the challenge of voting at a political election. The pressure to make his decision puts him under immense stress, since he feels he can only go wrong, leading him into a nightmarish mental space that shows him what consequences his decision might have. Once outside after leaving the voting building, an old lady asks him for a cigarette. He is hesitant since the woman wears a political badge and therefore clearly stands for something our protagonist views as dangerous and negative. However, he is able to see further than the woman's political views, hands her a cigarette, and shares a moment of calm with her, realizing the beauty all around, on one hand in nature and sight, on the other hand in the gentle social interaction with the old lady. There he realizes that the important thing is not what indirect choice to make inside of the voting booth, but the real and direct choice outside with the people around him.

"*Wahl*" is a subjective film where the audience sees the world through the eyes of the protagonist. At the very core of this story are three worlds: inside of the voting room and booth, in the protagonist's thoughts, and outside, once the stress is over. Therefore, Mr. Bredelov and I used a clear division in style for these three worlds.

4.1 Disconnection in a World of Stress

The inside is full of stress, duty, and procedures, so the decision was made to go for a realistic, gritty, and uncomfortable style. A green tint in the light combined with the beige colors of the walls and ceiling creates a feeling of disgust and discomfort for us. (Kaya & Epps, 2004). As Gurney analyzed in his book *Color and Light* (2010), humans have a very specific and often problematic perception of the color green. It is an old book cover design saying that green covers don't sell. In color psychology, green, particularly when combined with yellow, stimulates the feeling of discomfort and disgust. (Sutton & Altarriba, 2016). This interpretation of color psychology is not new to animation either, since it is also supported by the popular Disney movie *Inside Out* (2015), where the character of disgust is colored green.

To present the audience with the feeling of disconnection between the protagonist and the world around him, the look of the protagonist, who is fully 2D, and the 3D environment are in high contrast, emphasizing that he does not belong there. Inside of the voting booth, the protagonist struggles more and more with his duty to make a choice. This struggle peaks in a frontal mid shot of the protagonist standing in the booth, frozen. There

the stickers and graffiti tags on the booth walls start slowly moving and distorting. Therefore creating a connection between his inner world and the outer, as his stress and confusion is depicted on the walls. This connection between his feelings and the change of environment is also a sign that the physical location starts to creep into his mind.

4.2 Connection in a World of Tranquility

Outside is a place of relief, absorption, and connection; therefore, it must look alive, vibrant, and comforting. The core idea was to create a style that gives the feeling of an impressionist painting. I specifically chose impressionism as my inspiration to enhance the audience's engagement and to allow their creativity to fuel the storytelling. The audience should feel that what they see is the sensory essence of their own personal memory of a nostalgic moment. In order to achieve this style, I went through a long process of trial and error to find the right style.

I created normal maps in the form of brush strokes in Photoshop, then animated these using After Effects. Normal maps create a sense of depth on an object, defining the way light interacts with dents and bumps. With these normal maps applied to an object's texture, it looks as if the surface is being repainted constantly, as presented in *Figure 15* below. Applying this technique on leaves recreates the look of them dancing in the wind. Applying it to shiny surfaces such as the hood of a car makes the reflection bounce around. The test was partially successful due to the constant repainting; however, the objects outlines were still too clearly defined.

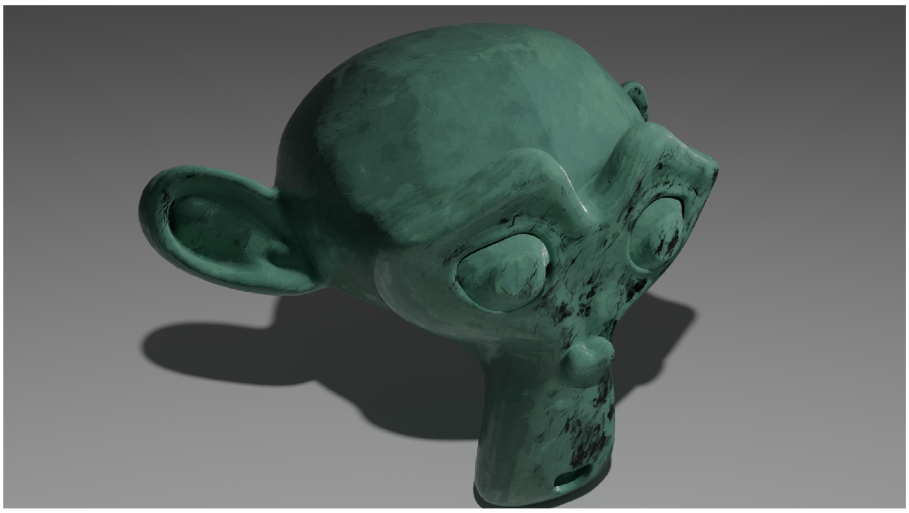

Figure 15: Stylized texture test 1

In order to address the issues in approach one, I decided to use an add-on for Blender 3D called "Stylized Asset Suite." This versatile add-on is filled with options to

create a more stylized texture for objects. The initial test was very positive, since the issues of the first approach were eliminated, as seen in *Figure 16* below. Unfortunately, I had some technical issues with the add-on that resulted in many crashes of the program. Also, I was not fully satisfied with the final look; it had potential, but the results were closer to toon or cel shading than to the impressionistic oil paint look that I was looking for.

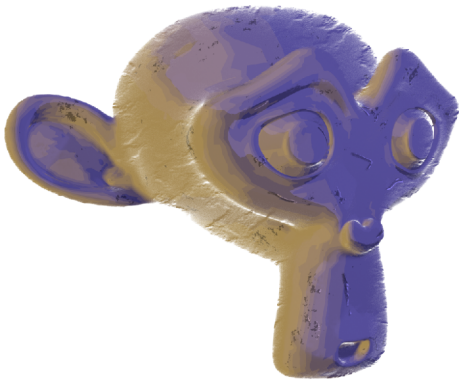

Figure 16: Stylized texture test 2

Just in time for me to finalize the style for the outside environment, another Blender 3D add-on called "Live Paint Filter," which had been on my radar for a long time, got a major update that included compatibility with Blender's rendering engine "Cycles," which I used for the project. An initial test showed very promising results, as the objects lost their three-dimensionality and the rendered images started to look more as if they were painted on a canvas, as presented in *Figure 17* below.

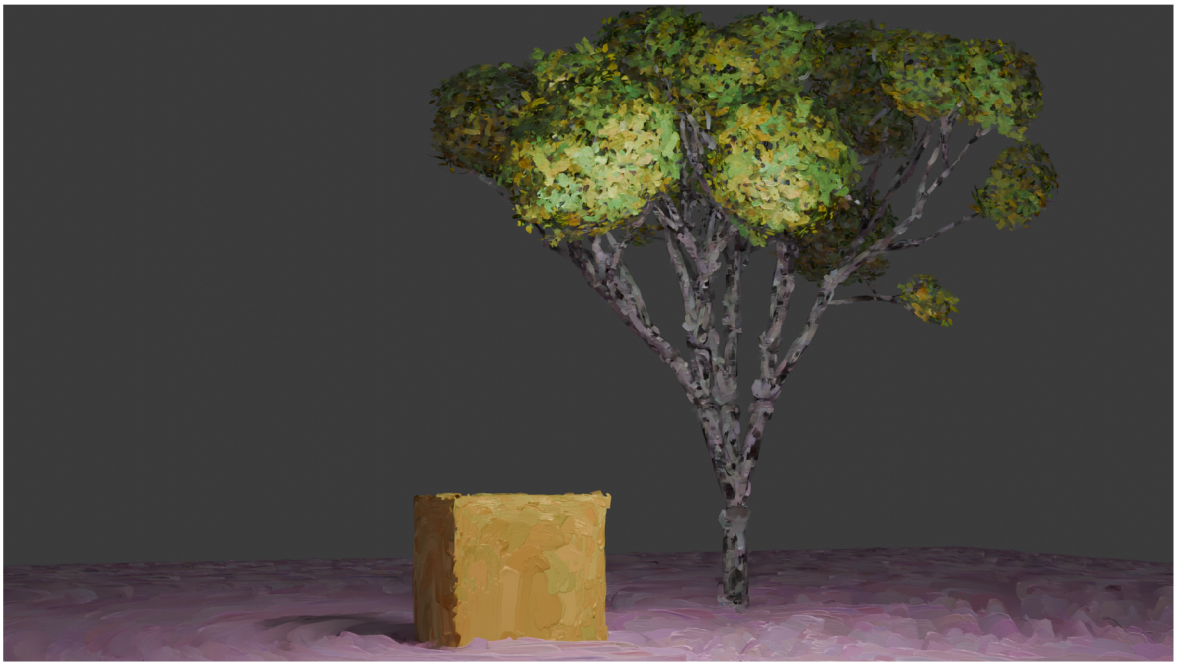

Figure 17: Stylized texture test 3

It was necessary to tweak the brushstroke's details and their connection between different objects further to create a more seamless oil paint look. Once I was able to produce satisfactory results, I fully reconstructed the outside scene to work seamlessly with the add-on, which led to a perfect first test, as seen in *Figure 18* below.

Figure 18: Stylized texture final result

This test result did not only fulfil the idea for the outside scene's look but also leveled up the entire film, since the stark contrast between the gritty world within the voting room and

the soothing quality of the outside enables the audience to very clearly understand the protagonist's subjective interpretation of these environments.

4.3 The Synthesis

Another aspect is the character of "grandma." She occurs in the stressful inside environment as well as the soothing outside. While it is the same person, our protagonist perceives her differently. Inside, Grandma is just one of many; she is part of the environment around the protagonist that he sees as a negative mass of stress and duty. Outside, Grandma is an individual, an equally worthy human being that deserves attention, recognition, and potentially our protagonist's support in the form of giving her the cigarette she kindly asks for. Thus the stylistic decision to make Grandma a 3D character inside, such as all the other people in the room, embedding her into the environment and creating a contrast between the protagonist and her. Outside, she is a 2D character, merging her look with the protagonist's, putting them on the same level.

These are some examples of the ideas, development, and final results of a potential practical application, using texture and lighting to guide the viewer's emotion and to lead the narrative. It is important to comment that the story of "*Wahl*" is not solely told with the discussed methods. Sound plays a huge part in the understanding of the spaces and the subjective perception of the protagonist. Composition, lens choices, and pacing carry a lot of weight in how the audience emotionally connects to the characters. It would be foolish to state that this short film is told only through visual storytelling; however, the harmony and balance between all of these elements make the story understandable without any dialogue. Just as an orchestra needs its violin, cello, and flute, storytelling needs texture, lighting, and atmosphere to create its symphonies.

5. Recommendations

The world of visual storytelling is broad, often unclear, and therefore intimidating. Especially in a medium with such a wide range of possibilities as animation. In order to shed some light upon this labyrinth, I have explored different possible methods of visual storytelling. This exploration includes the methods themselves, how they may be used, and what emotional reaction they may evoke in the audience, according to visual psychology. It must be clarified that this exploration does not include all possibilities to inform your audience visually, since the focus is clearly put on texture, lighting and atmosphere. Also,

we must keep in mind that storytelling is not always straightforward; often one must mislead, build contrast, and see things in relation to others. One of the core takeaways from my literature review in combination with my case studies, is that the meaning assigned to a singular element of visual storytelling, depends on how it has been developed throughout the work. There is no objective truth in the emotional impact of individual methods, only direction and tendency.

If these methods are applied there is one potential drawback. In case of an audience that is not ready to indulge deeply into the story, not ready to reflect and to put their own emotions and experiences into their viewing experience, they can feel that the work is unclear or under-explained. If viewers as such are part of the target audience, a shift of balance towards more common verbally driven storytelling style, can prove beneficial. In order to inform and evoke feelings in the audience best, it is crucial to find the right balance within storytelling methods. My findings show that the power of visual storytelling is not to be underestimated, since great films such as *Crac* (1981) or *Flow* (2024) have the power to create an immersive experience for the viewer, without any need for dialogue. Therefore I recommend to reflect and rethink your style of storytelling and to ask yourself if there is not a way to convey something to the audience on a deeper emotional level, maybe by showing, not telling.

6. Conclusion

There is no right way to tell a story! The best method always depends on the individual work, audience, topic and format. By analyzing individual elements of texture, lighting and atmosphere and contextualizing them as storytelling devices in animation, it becomes clear to see that they are powerful tools that can work solely or in harmony with other storytelling methods to deliver the desired emotion and narrative to the audience. With a deep dive into the methods applied in the short film *Crac* (1981), we can learn about the importance of texture in storytelling, how small decisions such as brushstroke length, or changes in drawing tool can make all the difference in how the story is perceived. *Flow* (2024) shows us the importance of atmospheric effects and lighting in storytelling. A subtle element, that can easily be devalued by calling an aesthetic choice, like the warm colors, combined with a gentle haze, that make the cat’s shelter feel like home, goes to show how important these elements are in the viewer's emotional perception of the story. The film’s critical and commercial success proves the importance of visual

storytelling. With the supporting project *Wahl*, I went on a journey of experimenting with these methods of storytelling myself, attempting to build a clear and gripping story without any dialogue. Ultimately research shows that overlooking the elements of texture, lighting, and atmosphere for storytelling is unjustified and that by utilizing the potential of these methods a film's emotional impact, narrative clarity and ultimately its success can be increased!

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List of Pictures and Tables

Figure 1: Soft texture example.

Note. Screencap that shows the use of soft texture in animation. From Dion, F. (Director). (2012). *Edmond était un âne* [Film]. National Film Board of Canada; Papy3D Productions.

Figure 2: Clear texture example.

Note. Screencap that shows the use of sharp texture in animation. From Dion, F. (Director). (2012). *Edmond était un âne* [Film]. National Film Board of Canada; Papy3D Productions.

Figure 3: Cool color example.

Note. Screencap that shows the use of cool-colored lighting. From Dion, F. (Director). (2012). *Edmond était un âne* [Film]. National Film Board of Canada; Papy3D Productions.

Figure 4: Warm color example.

Note. Screencap that shows the use of warm-colored lighting. From Dion, F. (Director). (2012). *Edmond était un âne* [Film]. National Film Board of Canada; Papy3D Productions.

Figure 5: Diffused light and god ray example.

Note. Screencap that shows the use of haze and god-rays. From Bird, B. (Director). (2007). *Ratatouille* [Film]. Pixar Animation Studios.

Figure 6: Brushwork and color palette for stormy weather.

Note. Screencap that shows the brushwork and color palette used for stormy weather. From Back, F. (Director). (1981). *Crac* [Film]. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Figure 7: Brushwork and color palette for pleasant weather.

Note. Screencap that shows the brushwork and color palette used for pleasant weather. From Back, F. (Director). (1981). *Crac* [Film]. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Figure 8: Dreamy example.

Note. Screencap that shows the hand drawn style used for dream sequences. From Back, F. (Director). (1981). *Crac* [Film]. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Figure 9: Smooth, edgeless texture example.

Note. Screencap that shows pencil drawn style. From Back, F. (Director). (1981). *Crac* [Film]. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Figure 10: Increase in brush character.

Note. Screencap that shows the intensifying character in the brushwork, F. (Director). (1981). *Crac* [Film]. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Figure 11: Pointillist brushwork example.

Note. Screencap that shows the most extreme brushwork. From Back, F. (Director). (1981). *Crac* [Film]. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Figure 12: Example for warmth and nostalgia.

Note. Screencap that shows the nostalgia inducing light and atmosphere. From Zilbalodis, G. (Director). (2024). *Flow* [Film]. Dream Well Studio; Sacrebleu Productions; Take Five.

Figure 13: Example for warmth interrupted by cold.

Note. Screencap that shows how the cold water takes over the warm room. From Zilbalodis, G. (Director). (2024). *Flow* [Film]. Dream Well Studio; Sacrebleu Productions; Take Five.

Figure 14: Rain Example.

Note. Screencap that shows how rain is used to convey emotion. From Zilbalodis, G. (Director). (2024). *Flow* [Film]. Dream Well Studio; Sacrebleu Productions; Take Five.

Figure 15: Stylized texture test 1.

Note. The test result of a brush normal map texture on an object.

Figure 16: Stylized texture test 2.

Note. The test result of a stylized texture attempt with a Blender addon.

Figure 17: Stylized texture test 3.

Note. The test result of an oil paint look attempt in Blender.

Figure 18: Stylized texture final result.

Note. The final successful test result of the oil paint look attempt in Blender.