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The Art of the Silent Story

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The Art of the Silent Story

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Digital Media Department
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With The Accompanying Animation Entitled

"Ascension"

In fulfillment of the
Requirements of the
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By

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Pantomime has been used in every culture dating back to the earliest times. It is the essence of human expression. It is a powerful dramatic tool for the animation artist and ensures that pictorial work transcends mere mimicry to convey a story with all the range and subtlety of the spoken word. The ability to tell a coherent and compelling story without any words is one of the most extraordinary things a visual artist can accomplish. This is especially true for animators, who strive to evoke all the nuances of life with their work. Pantomime conveys much more than just the basic movements of a character: it communicates subtle emotion and internal thought to the observer, and lends motivation and forethought to every action. Without the employment of pantomime a movement might be believable, but it will lack emotion and not be interesting to the viewer.

While pantomime is essential in creating interesting and believable movement, it can be taken a step further, conveying an entire story with movement alone. Charlie Chaplin was an undisputed master of the art of pantomime, creating some of the most memorable stories using movement and music. When asked about using dialogue in his films he responded: "For years I have specialized in one type of comedy - strictly pantomime. I have measured it, gauged it, studied. I have been able to establish exact principles to govern its reactions on audiences. It has a certain pace and tempo. Dialogue, to my way of thinking, always slows action, because action must wait upon words."

While dialogue does have its place in visual storytelling, wordless stories are not only engaging but "elemental" to drama. Pantomime is a universal

language, spanning cultural and national differences. As Chaplin stated: "This is because the eye is better trained than the ear. There is nothing in *City Lights* that a child won't follow easily and understand." (Chaplin, p.568) "Pantomime lies at the base of any form of drama. In the silent form of the photoplay it is the keynote." (Chaplin, p.569)

As homage to this ancient art form, and by incorporating the tools of the 21st century, I created a one minute 2D, hand-drawn, frame-by-frame animation with an original music score utilizing Toon Boom Harmony to demonstrate my ability to convey an interesting story without the use of any dialogue. I relied instead on pantomime, expressions, and context clues to communicate the story to the viewer.

I didn't want the story to be predictable or recognizable. I chose an original idea, forcing the viewer to interpret the characters' actions in the setting, instead of making any assumptions about what might happen next based upon played out tropes. I even tried to avoid giving the characters any physical traits that might have made the outcome too obvious so that the viewer would have to consider and interpret the characters' actions in the story more carefully to fully understand them.

The story in my animation revolves around two characters seeking a reunion. The first is a young boy-magician in possession of a magical book, and the is other a mysterious girl with antlers who appears to have a close relationship with the magician. As the story opens, the magician is approaching

his destination: a door inside of a cave on top of a mountain. He uses an incantation from the magical book to open this door, which creates a passage between two very different worlds: his own, lush, summery world and another, serene, wintery one. The girl comes through this doorway and is able to reunite with the boy. However, the reunion is brief, as the door begins to close again and the girl panics, unwilling to be cut off from her own world. She tries to return through the door before it closes, and the boy rushes in to prevent it from crushing her, sacrificing himself in the process. The girl grieves his death but the two are once again reunited, revealing that the girl's wintry world is actually a kind of afterlife.

The original, extended version of this story was an abstract idea that I envisioned while listening to the song "Milanó" by SigurRós. The tone, combined with the rising and falling energy of the music, evolved in my mind into this short, wordless story. While much of the slow pacing and lingering visuals were impossible to develop without the original song and additional time, most of the imagery remains the same. Even the character designs changed very little from my original concept. I wanted to keep the design fairly simple, both to make animation easier and to prevent them from being too distracting. It was important to me that the main focus remained on their expressions and movements instead of any significant details in their clothes or hair. The only exception was the female's antlers which are a simple but relevant addition. I needed to make her visibly different from the magician so that I could indicate the transition from the first world to the afterlife. I flirted with the idea of giving her wings but I felt it

would make her read too obviously as an angel and remove much of the suspense. However, antlers and horns are often used by other cultures to signify a spirit and would be a more subtle interpretation of this image. (Please see the following sketches by way of example.)

Throughout the animation I rely on the movements and expressions of the characters to convey the story to the viewer. There are also many moments wherein pantomime is used to communicate necessary information to the viewer. The boy's resolve is shown in the first few scenes when, while climbing the mountain, he falters multiple times, but always pushes on with a look of determination. His approach upon reaching the cave is cautious but unwavering, it is obvious through his actions that he has a clear sense of purpose and that he knows exactly what he is doing. The happiness and joy of their reunion is also

clear in their expressions and the way they rush towards one another and embrace tightly. He lifts her up briefly, emphasizing his excitement. While a kiss obviously shows their romantic feelings, the desperate embrace that precedes it speaks to their deep affection for each other; suggesting that while they may be lovers, they are also great friends who have been separated for a long time (or seemingly forever). As the doors close, the girl is surprised and frightened, moving towards it without thinking before the boy catches her hand, pulling her close and trying to convince her to stay. She is torn, hesitating before she pulls away from the boy who rushes after her in concern. She flinches as the doors close behind her. Opening her eyes after a beat she sees what has happened with clear horror and dismay etched across her face. The boy's agony is obvious, and she reaches out, wanting to help but unable to act. Her grief upon losing him is dramatic. She covers her face, cries out and collapses, sobbing. Their final reunion is bitter sweet, for the girl is still clearly distraught over the circumstances of his death even though they are now able to be together. (Please see the following images by way of example.)

I chose 2D animation tools to illustrate my story because they offer more latitude for artistic expression than do most 3D animation products which are rooted in physics with the goal of capturing realistic form and movement. 2D allowed me to develop a stylistic quality which I felt was better suited to my story. I wanted the viewer to move beyond realism to a more interpretive experience. I hoped to achieve this in the context of my original artwork and the music versus the technology used to create my theme. However, technology was central to my goals.

I began the development process with an animatic. My original effort utilized Adobe Flash. I switched to Toon Boom Harmony due to the limited drawing capabilities of Flash. Toon Boom Harmony offers the animator a greater selection of refined drawing tools. The drawings in the animatic were very simplistic, consisting of rough sketches outlining the important movements of the characters and occasionally their expressions. The backgrounds in particular were either more symbolic than fully rendered or completely nonexistent. The animatic was especially helpful in setting up my shots and cutting down the content so that it would all fit within a reasonable time frame. Most of the actions and how they would be conveyed were already scripted in my head, but it was very helpful to sketch them out more concretely in the animatic. I over worked many of the motions, fleshing them out more than is typical in a basic animatic, but I later found it useful to have many of the key poses and even "in betweens" already loosely sketched out. Even so, I kept the animatic at a very low frame rate of 6 frames per second and as a result there remained many "in betweens"

that I would have to develop later. I found it helpful to keep the frame rate low because it stretched out my timing. I often have difficulty with timing and have a tendency to make everything too fast and find myself needing to slow the piece considerably. The low frame rate also prevented me from spending too long in the animatic stage filling in all the extra poses, and pushed me to move on to the final version.

It took some time to acquire and familiarize myself with Toon Boom Harmony. I began by figuring out how to import the animatic to a background layer to work over. I had to make some adjustments to the frame rate from six to twelve frames per second in order to make it play at the correct speed. Once it was in the project I could keep track of the scenes and timing directly instead of having to reference the animatic separately. After I'd done this, I immediately began working on the backgrounds. I found it an effective way to familiarize myself with the artistic tools and layers and I knew it would be best if I got them out of the way first since I wanted to be able to focus completely on the animation while knowing how the figures would look within the scene. I did struggle with the background art, finding it difficult to choose a style that would remain consistent and didn't take too long to produce. I decided to use rough sketchy lines with more detailed, painterly colors with which to define the shapes. I used photo references of various landscapes and plants to try and accurately convey the regions and seasons I was going for. (Please see the following images by way of example.)

Once the backgrounds were finished, I experimented with various brushes and styles for the animation layer. I preferred drawing with a soft, textured, bitmap brush, finding it much easier to loosely sketch and refine my lines with; but I quickly discovered that it would be nearly impossible to add color to every frame if I used bitmap. Switching to a simple vector brush, I found it easiest to draw over the bitmap sketches I had already produced. While drawing everything twice ended up being time consuming, the quality of the drawings was far superior to what I would have been able to draw with free hand vector lines. At this point my main focus was on creating smooth, expressive animations and getting them all lined and filled before adding the finishing touches.

My last additions would be camera movement and special effects like lighting and glows. There were a number of still shots that I panned or zoomed in on to make the animation more dynamic and to be able to transition more cleanly between scenes. Once all this was done I only had to add the music and add a few finishing touches in Premier.

Music enhances any narrative animation or photoplay. As composer Bernard Herrmann wrote in the liner notes for a 1972 London recording, "I feel

that music on the screen can seek out and intensify the inner thoughts of the characters… It can propel narrative forward or slow it down. It often lifts mere dialogue into the realm of poetry."   With this in mind, I commissioned an original score by pianist and composer Katherine Benson. We met early in the project cycle to discuss my creative vision and agree on a time line for delivery. I sent her the animatic so that she could match the musical score to the timing of the actions and emotions of the piece. Once she finished and sent me the piece I synced it back up with the final animation. Katherine did an incredible job putting emotions into the music that helped emphasize the pantomime and enhance the story beyond what it could have been as a completely silent piece.

My final product, entitled *Ascension*, is an animation that successfully tells a short story through the use of pantomime and the "communicating link" of a musical accompaniment. (Herrmann) Like Chaplin's masterpiece, *City Lights* (1931), the animation does not rely upon any dialogue or heavy symbolism for the viewer to understand what is happening. Instead the actions of the characters clearly convey their emotions and motivations, which in turn inform the story. It is my hope that I have created a timeless vignette that transcends culture and nationality to deliver the elemental message of a lover's quest.

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