Incongruous Surrealism within Narrative Animated Film

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INCONGRUOUS SURREALISM WITHIN NARRATIVE ANIMATED FILM

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in the School of Visual Arts and Design in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

A pop music video is a form of media containing incongruous surrealistic imagery with a narrative structure supplied by song lyrics. The lyrics’ presence allows filmmakers to digress from sequential imagery through introduction of nonlinear visual elements. I will analyze these surrealist film elements through several post-modern philosophies to better understand how this animated audio-visual synthesis resides in the larger world of art theory and its relationship to the popular music video.

This analysis coincides with the practical and theoretical experimentation evident in the film companion to this thesis, *Slapper the Cat: A Musical Cartoon*. A long-form animated music video with a satirical take on elitism, this film’s artistic and comedic influences form a bricolage through the use of signs outside of their originating context. I designed and recorded all music and voices along with visuals in the “total artwork” style.

The forthcoming analysis in this thesis shall also delineate the ideological characteristics of the cinema spectator and the connection between mediums. Elements of *Slapper* will be contextualized to illuminate the concept of high versus low art, success, and openness to innovation. Finally, this writing and accompanying film aspire to reveal the positive potentials for synergistic audio-visual experiences.
I dedicate this to my Mom, Dad, and brothers Mikey and Ryan.

It’s “Pizza Time.”
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I know I’ll never lose affection, for people and things, that went before. I know I’ll often stop and think about them. In my life, I love you more

—Lennon/McCartney

I would first of all like to thank my parents, Kathy and Tom McCabe; without you none of this would be possible. You inspire me every day to be the best I can be. I would like to also thank my brothers Mikey and Ryan McCabe, who always put a smile on my face and are the best brothers I could ask for. You have always been there for me and I am everyday thankful to call you my family.

Thank you to the Wolfson CinemaSlam Works in Progress Award, Miami Dade College’s Miami Film Festival, and the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives. My film would not be nearly as incredible if not for your amazing archive footage and support.

Thank you to my fellow cohort members; you know how much I enjoyed our class meetings full of academic discussion and laughter. One day we will form that jug band with moonshine jugs, one-strap overalls, and jam endlessly on Coltrane’s “Giant Steps.” Thank you to my Committee: Cheryl Briggs, Darlene Hadrika, and Jo Anne Adams. Your encouragement for me to push myself creatively, academically, and professionally is truly appreciated. Also, a big thank you to Phil Peters for your input during my film’s early stages and to Stella Sung and Michael Cabrera for your input during the later part of my film’s production.
A thank you to my inspiration, Walt Disney, for without whose desire to push the potential of animation, popularize its use with sound, and tell stories for the whole family to enjoy, I would not be in this field right now.

And above all else, I would like to give my most sincere thanks to God for His many continued blessings.
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INTRODUCTION

My thesis film, *Slapper the Cat: A Musical Cartoon*, is an animated musical comedy about a zany anthropomorphic cat named Slapper who auditions for an orchestra run by an authoritarian conductor. The characters, visuals, and storylines convey multiple layers of meaning in a satire on elitism. Additionally, the film functions as an artist autobiography in the context of my struggle between the reliability of convention and the freedom of abandoned improvisation in both music and visual art. My film combines multiple visual, musical, storytelling, and theoretical influences. These include abstract design, American animation, doo-wop, rap, the Marx Brothers, the Fleischer Brothers, surrealism, and postmodernism. Through analyzing both the influences and creative process for my film, I explain its multiple layers of meaning and encourage its further exploration by the reader.
PRE-PRODUCTION: FILM DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Artist Background

I began like many young artists, drawing my favorite cartoons as they were playing on the screen. A particular film that sparked my imagination was *Space Jam*, for its hybrid animation approach and eclectic storytelling style. The film included self-aware 2D animated characters, live-action actors, and 3D animation. Viewing these different elements working harmoniously inspired me to combine visual styles I previously saw as disconnected. Another program informing my variety show-style approach to art was Disney's *Sing Along Songs* series of home videocassettes. They also encouraged my appreciation for music, as they exposed me to a broad timespan of movie music presented in a frame story format. In theaters, I learned animation and storytelling through movies like *The Lion King* with its inspiring visuals, music, and narrative.

In school, I aimed to take every art class I could and creatively challenge myself in new ways. At times I grappled with the concept of high and low art, considering digital art inferior. However, as I began to analyze the medium, I started to see it not as something that would eliminate traditional art, but as another form of expression. This realization had a profound effect on the themes of my art. Similarly, I began studying music and how I could incorporate this medium into my artistic goals as well. Through bringing music’s immediacy of expression to my visual art, I found a unique artistic voice.
Early Ideation

Character sketches and story treatments began the creative process for my thesis film. I formed the idea of a fish-out-of-water story involving a “jazz cat” dealing with a formal orchestra. The character’s name developed into “Slapper the Cat,” as a reference to the “slap” style of playing bass. This style involves slapping the strings to get unique percussive sounds from the instrument and is popular in the genres of jazz, rockabilly, and funk.

Figure 1: The Author Presenting Storyboards to UCF Faculty and Students. Photo by Cheryl Briggs, 2018. Used with Permission.

Once storyboarding began, I iteratively presented visual gags to my school’s cohort and professors to ensure the film’s appeal in an approach similar to that favored by director Chuck Jones at Warner Bros, who stated animation is traditionally presented in “visual terms from the very beginning (Jones 275). To improve the posing and layout of my boards, I studied the design and clarity of Floyd Gottfredson’s comic-strip art.
This approach allowed the story to expand and condense without wasting valuable production time. During this phase, the addition and removal of multiple tertiary characters occurred, including Slapper’s gang of friends and love interest. However, with the importance of successfully completing my film on time, I condensed my focus down to Slapper and the Conductor’s conflict. It was at this point that I incorporated stream-of-consciousness visuals to add the spontaneity of musical improvisation to my story, along with conducting extensive creative research where I reviewed film language, sound design, and visual techniques.

I then recorded an original song for the film and timed out the storyboards in a story reel. Utilizing Carl Stalling and Chuck Jones’s exposure sheet technique, I timed the reel out at 180 beats per minute, making a ‘beat’ hit every eight frames. According to Art Babbitt, this was the timing style used for the animated Tom and Jerry shorts (Williams 110). Because the film’s timing adheres to a specific beats-per-minute, additional sounds following the same tempo can be lined up with the original story beats, benefiting my workflow of overdubbing vocals and sound effects later in production.

Description of Film

My 2D/multimedia animated film displays a satire on the hypocrisy of elitism through the story of a zany cat auditioning for an orchestra run by a strict conductor. The conflict between the two characters draws influence from my pursuit as both a musical and visual artist to follow structure and principles while remaining creative and unique. The film’s relevance derives from its theme’s relation to animation’s status as a “popular” art form which garners less respect than fine art (Katz).
These themes drove the decision to have my film primarily animated in 2D with an eclectic assortment of composited elements disregarding conventional space and physics. To also portray my thematic goals, I decided to tell the story through funny animal characters. This pivotal choice allows themes dealing with weightier issues to have a more relatable core, emphasizing the humanity of the situation without the preconceived traits the audience may assign to the human form. Using funny animals also allows the focus to remain on the characters and nonsensical actions to feel grounded, while the resulting reduction of reality encourages the focused appreciation of visual rhythm.

Satire, Song, and Slapstick: The Influence of Early Hollywood

Theories of Humor

To better understand the goals of Slapper’s comedy, a brief overview of the three main types of humor is necessary. The first theory developed was the superiority theory. Developed by philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, it states that humor arises from the viewer feeling superior to the subject (Smuts). Mark Collington, author of Animation in Context, adds to this study that superiority theory “enables us to laugh at and correct our own innate prejudices” (103). Relating to my film’s autobiographical qualities, it draws inspiration from times when I dismissed the integrity of art forms such as modern pop music or digital painting because I was preoccupied with the social construct of high and low art.
The second classical theory of humor to develop was the relief theory. Philosophers of this model focused more on the physical cause of laughter than the psychological. Theorist Herbert Spencer states that nervous system tension builds up within us until it releases in a burst of laughter. Theorist Sigmund Freud asserts that laughter results from releasing the mental energy used for repressing “hostile” emotions (Smuts).

Figure 2: The Conductor about to take a fall. Created by author - 2021

The relief theory, therefore, explains part of physical humor’s appeal. As the audience sees the Conductor mistreat and demean Slapper, a buildup of mental energy occurs. When later, as the above figure, the Conductor takes a doozy of a beating, the audience responds in laughter, thereby releasing their mental energy.
The final classical theory of humor to develop, and the one predominantly accepted by scholars, is the incongruity theory. Aristotle stated this concept as presenting an audience with an expectation and then delivering something different. More recent theorists such as Schopenhauer and Koestler have added the idea of reference frames to this theory. In their views, incongruity can arise from a gap between signifier and signified (Craig). This is seen in my use of a pop song to underscore a manic chase scene, characters’ anachronistic designs, and the collage of mediums.

Charlie Chaplin’s Acting
Comedian Charlie Chaplin used a physical form of comedy known as slapstick. The importance of slapstick comedy to Slapper is evident in details such as the titular character’s name. Slapper's broad, physical altercations follow many traditional slapstick principles. Comedy theorist Andrew Stott defines slapstick as "physical humor of a robust and hyperbolized nature," beginning in the time of Aristophanes, but reaching its modern form in early American cinema (qtd. in Peacock 17). It was in this era that Chaplin was able to use slapstick’s universal language of physical humor to elicit laughter on the shared human condition. Chaplin’s working-class associations and precise physical timing served as inspiration for Slapper’s character design and movement.

Animator Richard Williams, in The Animator’s Survival Kit, noted Chaplin’s mastery of anticipation when quoting Chaplin’s three-step process for acting: “Tell ’em what you’re going to do,” “Do it,” then “Tell ’em you’ve done it” (qtd. in Williams 273). This simplicity of thought towards physical acting informed my film and acting approach.
The above example shows the use of clear anticipation in my film. The Conductor demonstrably raises his hand in the left image, making his pose read well even in silhouette. Animators refer to this as “anticipation,” one of the building blocks of the art form’s technique. In the next frame, exaggerated foreshortening and silhouette make the Conductor’s actions noticeably clear. And in the frame on the right, the Conductor uses his eyes, face, and entire body to show his reaction to what he has just done, thus illustrating the completion of Chaplin’s acting cycle.

Chaplin’s films often feature what Collington refers to as social incongruity, where actions are “out of place with their environment” (103). This type of mismatching occurs in *Slapper* at 00:30, where an announcer’s voice says, “Ladies and gentlemen, your Conductor!” While the visuals portray a traditional theater, the announcer’s voice parodies World Wrestling Entertainment announcer Michael Buffer’s ring-master style, disrupting the paradigm. It is also worth noting that there is an audience here to watch the audition, showing there is community love for and involvement in the orchestra, furthering the social incongruity of this orchestra audition.
Vaudeville’s Influence on Songs in Film

The use of an original song defines the structure of *Slapper the Cat: A Musical Cartoon*. This style of song incorporation traces back to vaudeville, where shows often featured musical performances shoehorned amongst unrelated comedy and magic acts. This style of performance came to Hollywood along with the introduction of synchronized sound films, causing anarchistic humor to dominate Hollywood in the ensuing era. Vaudeville’s “disruption, fragmentation and impulsiveness” acted as a foil to Hollywood’s “established conventions…concerned with narrative coherence and causality” (Conrich 2). I parallel this symbiotic relationship in *Slapper*, with the film’s song acting as anarchy within the narrative format’s convention.

“Follow the Bouncing Ball”- On the Inclusion of Sing-Along Lyrics

In my film, I chose to use a bouncing ball with sing-along lyrics for its historical significance, my personal connection to the tradition, and the Dadaist principles that using it implies.

The ‘bouncing ball’ predates synchronized sound in film. The Fleischer Brothers’ *Song Car-Tune* series of animated shorts was the first to use this technique. However, the ball was not animated; it was live action film cleverly composited with animation (Maltin 91). My reason for including sing-along lyrics in *Slapper* coincide with what animation historian Leonard Maltin states was accomplished with the *Song Car-Tune* series, they “created a unique bond between the film and its audience—a two-way communication that transcended the traditional active-passive roles of performer and viewer in a lively and entertaining manner” (91). This device was also framed with Koko the Clown cartoon sequences, similar to *Slapper*. Historically, it is important
to note that a theater organist accompanied these films, and the singing came from the audience members.

My personal connection to the sing-along comes from my childhood videocassette collection, which had many tapes from the *Disney’s Sing-Along Songs* series. These consisted of songs from Disney animated movies, a small introduction to the songs and interludes from various characters. The viewer would watch a "ball", usually in the shape of a Mickey Mouse silhouette, bouncing upon the on-screen sing-along lyrics. Two songs next to each other could vary wildly in style, creating an almost vaudeville-style show structure, and furthering my appreciation for spontaneous variety in art.

The last reason for using the bouncing ball presents itself in the intertextuality of my thesis film’s presentation. Instead of presenting a serious point of view or lesson like many of my colleagues, I chose to include the frivolity of a “bouncing ball” sing-along. This decision was is in no way an effort to deride my classmates, rather an effort to have my art coexist without changing its presentation to fit expectations. This is similar in execution to what the Dadaists did with the art community through their ‘anti-art’ pieces.

**Marx Brothers’ Satirical Films**

Another early Hollywood influence on my film is the zany comedy group known as the Marx Brothers. Their films’ writing style often lampooned the elite with satire, or “the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices” (Lexico). With humor drawing from the incongruity theory, Turner notes that the Brothers’ “incongruous
juxtaposition of irreconcilable concepts undermine and question the very nature of semiotic meaning.” (Turner 88). By focusing their humor on things all people dealt with, like language, the Brothers were able to create a comedic style that appealed to the masses.

The Brothers also used music in their style of comedy. Author Martin A. Gardner noted that in the Marx Brothers’ early films, “the musical interludes are the relief we need from the ongoing Marxian madness just as they were in the Brothers’ vaudeville shows” (The Marx Brothers as Social Critics 126). This statement suggests that the purpose of the songs was not satirical for the Marx Brothers’ films. However, in the context of musical performance, these songs are incredibly subversive. For example, Chico’s piano playing style consists of well-executed technique interspersed with shaping his right hand into a pistol and “shooting” a key in the high register. This disarming visual and musical element adds comedy to the film and relieves the pretensions of a serious musical performance.

“The Marx Brothers challenged musical conventions. They modified recognizable compositions, their interpretation and popularization of music was distinctive and unique and their method of playing unorthodox, yet they still managed to remain respected as musicians” (Conrich 7). This quote relates to my character development for Slapper. He rebels against conventional playing but wants nothing more than to be respected for his musicality. Similarly, I created a cartoon with a lightweight pop song that viewers can still appreciate for its artistic merit.

Another important aspect to the Marx Brothers’ influence on Slapper is that their characters could do and say things that the viewers wished they could. Watching this creates an emotional
release that Collington refers to as catharsis, which he identifies as a necessary component of comedy. This explains the popularity of scenes such as Groucho outsmarting an intrusive policeman, Chico tongue-tying a nasty lemonade vendor, and Harpo chasing every blonde he sees. Harpo himself once said, “… we’re sort of a safety valve through which people can blow off steam” (qtd. In Mills 9). This type of catharsis humor allows writers to create situations, such as I did with Slapper’s failed orchestra audition, in which outlandish actions parody the real-life event. With its narrative of parodied events, my film’s satire on institutionalized music provides catharsis to anyone who’s ever been frustrated at a failed audition, tryout, or job interview.

Tex Avery’s Visual Style, Humor, and Pace

Animation can take the type of physical freedom displayed in slapstick to unprecedented heights, allowing the chance for the viewer to let go of the constraints of physical wellbeing for a few minutes. As stated by Luca Raffaelli, Italy’s foremost authority on comics and animated cinema, “it is the duel of emotions, of nerves and muscles, which is portrayed through the most complete, liberating and devastating physicality” that perhaps gives animated physical humor its appeal (123). One director to use this potential to its fullest was Tex Avery. Avery explored the cartoon format’s two-dimensionality and artificiality. This exploration gave his comedic delivery a snappy pacing and created a foil to the style of movement the Disney Studio’s animation used by the 1940s.

As a result of Avery’s tenure with Warner Bros animation, his unique storytelling style led to an increase in other directors’ use of gags and story pace (Canemaker 14). His influence extended to every studio for which he worked. During Avery’s tenure at MGM, he even caused directors
Joseph Hanna and William Barbera to speed up and increase their gags’ graphic nature (Canemaker 17). The speed of shorts increased so much that Avery even started reducing the number of frames considered necessary to register a hold from six frames down to five (Williams 293). His stories featured gags designed to make himself laugh and he did not try to replicate Disney’s family entertainment. However, Avery’s visual humor depended heavily on the groundwork set by Disney’s illusion-of-life style animation (Canemaker 14). Therefore, the two disparate styles depended on and complemented each other.

Figure 4: The Conductor does a wild ‘take.’ Created by author - 2021

Avery is well remembered for his wild takes, where character’s eyes pop out of their heads in extreme ways when shocked. My film includes multiple examples of these as a nod to Avery’s influence. One of my wildest takes occurs as the Conductor lands on a recently cleared marimba beam, causing him to contort his expression uncontrollably. Emulating Avery’s play with film
formatting, I made this take so extreme that it knocks the black bars from the format ratio out of the screen and causes the Conductor to morph into abstract shapes. The extremity of the take pushes beyond even the character showing pain. The entire world around him becomes engulfed in graphic angled triangles that spin out as the Conductor’s outline becomes bright yellow with his fill consisting of translucent gradients to show the slapstick pain swirling throughout his being.

Modern Examples of the Vaudeville Aesthetic and Parody
Numerous modern examples of the manic satirical stylings of vaudeville exist in a more modern context. Both Animaniacs and The Muppets include a broad physical comedy style, using wit and verbal humor to parody convention and satirize formality.

As Lisa Scoggin points out in her work, *The Music of Animaniacs: Postmodern Nostalgia in a Cartoon World*, the Animaniacs featured several musical parodies that lampooned various genres and institutions of music and MTV through the postmodern pastiche of the musical styling of Carl Stallings. Writing also exists on the postmodern aspects of Animaniacs, including the show’s use of intertextuality, parody and pastiche, textual awareness, and blending of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture (CriticalCartoons). Every one of those elements plays an influential role in Slapper, down to the similarity in character design. Both characters have a 1930’s “ink and pen” aesthetic and demonstrate significant intertextuality, including signifiers such as breaking the fourth wall.
Slapper’s most prominent breaking of the fourth wall occurs at the beginning of his orchestral journey. After standing in awe of the Orchestra’s audition sign, Slapper then turns to the audience. With a Groucho Marx-inspired eyebrow-wiggle, he displays his non-conforming mentality to the audience.
Figure 6: The Conductor awaits his next challenger. Created by author - 2021

Slapper furthers this postmodern spin on vaudeville with extensive use of parody. A notable example occurs before Slapper’s audition begins as the Orchestra’s announcer finishes his introduction, stating, “…and now, on the right, our latest challenger weighing in at eighty pounds will begin by showing us his bowing technique.” This whole moment further parodies a formal orchestra audition by showcasing it through the lens of a rowdy wrestling match. The Conductor adds to the parody by looking down and sideways at the audience while shaking his head, demonstrating the type of exaggerated machismo the wrestling characters typically showcase.
*Figure 7: Slapper satires multiple Hollywood endings. Created by author - 2021*

*Slapper* develops numerous instances of parody into satire, including the multi-layered example shown in Figure 7. Occurring after Slapper successfully receives applause and the Conductor’s approval, Slapper reaches down and pulls up onto the stage a beautiful young woman and gives her an enormous kiss. The viewer can see multiple images of Slapper spinning around referencing the trope of the end of a dream. The purpose of this action is twofold. First, it is an Easter egg to one of the early story concepts that revolved around Slapper’s attempt at joining the orchestra to win this girl’s affections. The second is that this is a rapid-fire satire of classic Hollywood finales, particularly the ubiquitous guy-gets-the-girl ending and the Wizard of Oz style ‘it was all a dream’ ending.
Abstract Rhythms: The Influence of Art Theories

Dadaism

The Dadaist’s views on art tremendously influenced my film. Dadaists reduced the serious nature of fine art and questioned what ‘art’ is in the first place. Author Dean Wilcox in his writing “Surrealist Heroes: The Marx Brothers and the European Avant-Garde,” states that “as an anti-art form Dada attacked everything, including itself, and set the tone for serious art to embrace playfulness and a childlike wonder combined with a pointed attack on culture” (48). Wilcox further states that these artists used the element of “chance,” incorporating accidents into their work, “nonsense words,” and “simultaneous juxtaposition of disparate elements,” all to dismantle the “time honored artistic tradition of logic order and harmony” (Wilcox 48). I incorporate these theories into my film through the purposeful use of juxtaposing disparate elements, such the eclectic use of archival footage.

Figure 8: Example of rhythmic movements. Created by author - 2021

In incorporating Dadaist elements, my film directs its focus towards rhythm rather than classic structuralism. Hugo Ball, a German poet known for co-founding the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, states similar intentions in proclaiming that a Dadaist’s goals should be to “introduce symmetries and rhythms instead of principles” (qtd. in Jackson 29). This intention is visible in the movement
of my characters. Rather than focus on formal physics, I instead decided to focus on physical rhythm. As seen in Figure 8, when the Conductor slams his sledgehammer on the ground the visual rhythm matching the music takes precedence over any physical reaction of a floor. Instead, a swirling clockwise movement segues the viewer into the next portion of the chase.

Surrealist Film

American Surrealist film’s historical ties to advertising

Keith Eggener's writing, "'An Amusing Lack of Logic' Surrealism and Popular Entertainment," details how the fundamental appeal of surrealism parallels that of advertisement, with eye-catching visuals based on strong emotions (31). It may then come as no surprise that one of the first uses for songs in animation was to sell sheet music. In fact, Warner Bros started their Merrie Melodies series of animated shorts with the understanding that one of Leon Schlesinger's primary goals was to increase sales of Warner Bros-owned sheet music (Maltin 224).

Figure 9: Examples of personal product placement in my film. Created by author - 2021

I take this one step further in my film through parodying the in-cartoon advertisement. Noting the intertextuality of a thesis film, Slapper is contrarian in nature in that it does not attempt to
conceal its capitalistic goals. With catchy jingles and the repeated showing of my name, the whole film could be compared to an animated commercial for sugary cereal.

Eggener seems to concur with the close association between cartoons and surrealism, particularly in America’s initial exposure to the art form (32). In this exposure, the average pop-culture enjoying American of the 1930s did not associate the art style with any kind of revolution but merely appreciated its surface design. Eggener states, “when Americans at this time spoke of Surrealism’s attachment to Marx, they were usually talking about Groucho or Harpo” (33). One could go as far as to say 1930s America wished to appropriate the intriguing visuals of surrealism without wanting to understand its origins or underlying philosophy. However, this behavior is not far removed from how the surrealist artists used Dada elements in their work. Eggener feels that “while Surrealism represented the mental anguish of an old and dissolute Europe…America, pure and innocent as a child, had no part in Surrealism’s battles and was unlikely to understand or sympathize with them” (38). This ties into the postmodern use of recreating new meanings for symbols and my goal of finding creative uses for incorporating earlier art forms to reference society’s creative history while adding my voice.

Incongruity in Surrealism

For the sequence playing during my film’s song, I designed an abstract surrealist sequence to illustrate the free-flowing creative mind-state. To understand how this art form ties into comedy, I researched significant works in the surrealist film genre and noted their connections to theories of humor, particularly incongruity. As Sandy Flitterman-Lewis states, Surrealist filmmakers were pioneers in the visual representation of dream-logic and challenged traditional cinema’s narrative (443). Flitterman-Lewis then states the three “classic” Surrealist films, *The Seashell*
and the Clergyman, Un chien andalou, and L’Age d’or, evoke “the marvelous through the creation of the unexpected, the incongruous, and the enigmatic in works of ‘Convulsive beauty’” (446). Although these examples are not comedies, they do share a common trait in their use of incongruity. This ties to Aaron Smuts statements in his writing “Humor,” that incongruity is only one part of comedy and does not alone constitute something as humorous. Rather, adding the correct features to incongruity can produce surrealism or humor, depending on both the creator’s intent and, in my opinion, the audience’s disposition.

Surrealist editing style and its connection to music video

Film scholars often regard Un chien andalou as an ancestor to the contemporary music video in its editing style (Dancyger 166). However, Ken Dancyger, author of The Technique of Film and Video Editing, states that the Richard Lester-directed Beatles movies A Hard Day’s Night and Help! added the necessary element of “music that has a narrative as well as emotional character” (166). This addition shows the successful coexistence of surrealist editing with the song’s narrative, which satisfies the audience’s need for story while allowing the visuals to enter a state of non-linearity.

Dancyger also discusses MTV’s self-reflexivity, where the station’s programming loses the “restorative power of the classic narrative” and instead openly criticizes its omnipotence (171). This ties MTV music videos into the postmodern quality of medium awareness, a considerable influence on my film.
This same style of medium awareness is seen in the above figure, as the Conductor steps on the podium. First, a title card, in the style of one used to introduce a music video’s title, fades onto the screen. In this title, the viewer can see “Slapper the Cat” as the song title and “The Beat Brothers Band,” as the musical artist. By putting my band as the artist, I am parodying media’s artificiality, promoting the idea that the viewer is watching fiction. Other notable surrealistic elements in this shot include the music stand collapsing into the ground and the baton disappearing from the Conductor’s left hand and reappearing in his right.

Thematically, the music video industry parallels Slapper. In his writing “Postmodern and Music Video,” John Mundy discusses postmodern music videos directing parody at consumerism and the effect when placed in the intertextuality of its broadcasting channel. Alongside youth-targeted commercial segments, these music videos address the viewer in a state of total self-reflexivity. Mundy postulates that while many music videos take Jameson’s definition of pastiche further into parody, they receive no commercial consequence from the overarching corporations they mock. This is due to the videos still serving the broadcast companies’ corporate goals, such as the music videos for Dire Strait’s Money for Nothing poking fun at the very system that makes it profitable. This, in turn, increases their profitability, making the music video industry satirical in nature. My film satires the institution from which it originates as well.
In many ways, the University system functions as a gatekeeper, promoting the formal institution of the arts. Therefore, the necessity of my thesis film meeting formal graduation requirements mirrors a popular music video satirizing the corporate production of music.

Surrealism’s Surface Connection to Variety Theatre and Absurdism

My film’s comedy, presented with quick-cuts and non-linear elements, is based on the earlier mentioned vaudeville and variety theatre aesthetics. Wilcox noted the Marx Brothers, with their variety-theatre style plots, “share with the avant-garde a fragmented structure that willingly and frequently juxtaposes unrelated elements” (Wilcox 43). The thought process behind surrealist film that best applies to my work comes from the director of the surrealist film, Un chien andalou, who stated “our only rule was very simple; no idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted. We had to open all doors to the irrational and keep only those images that surprised us, without trying to explain why” (qtd. in Wilcox 46).
Figure 11: Slapper the Chef tastes his freshly made treat. Created by author - 2021

As seen in the above figure, I show nothing “that might lend itself to rational explanation.” The cat, who just a few frames ago was playing basketball, has now flipped a pancake onto a plate as the food takes the form of cake. Parodying how a chef will take a small taste of his creation, Slapper outstretches his tongue and licks the entire cake. All the while, disparate clothing textures replace the character’s regular colorings. This action occurs in front of a slideshow of archival footage featuring the Jacksons and the Beach Boys, furthering the “irrational” surrealist visual theory.
Postmodernism

Origins
Postmodernism’s origins trace back to modernist pieces such as Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, a work of Cubism which stylized art and separated it from photography’s increasing predominance. This stylization continued in machine aesthetic art movements such as Weimar Bauhaus and Italian Futurism. These artists’ objective to show beyond the physical form was furthered by Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists, who completely abandoned representational art in their style. While Pollack was merging his influences of Surrealism and Navaho sand paintings, Dadaists such as Marcel Duchamp protested the fine art community’s institutionalized ideals with his readymade pieces *Bottlerack* and *Urinal*. Disassociating these objects from their original meaning is what gives them their artistic significance (Appignesi). These influential moments in fine art history deeply affected all mediums, including film. Film historian William Moritz summarizes these characteristics in his description of filmmakers Norman McLaren and Jules Engel, who he classifies as postmodern, "…someone who loves irony and double coding, rejects the privileged status of high art as opposed to popular art, feels free to mix elements of past and present, abstract and representational, appropriated and invented, all redefined and reconciled to a new audience" (Moritz 106).

Music Influenced Visual Approach
Postmodernism in music traces back to the early twentieth century. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* considers Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* to be a defining modernist work. Theorist Frederic Jameson asserts the piece’s position as a Postmodern precursor, which Sam L. Richards
defends through a description of its incongruity between expectation and object. Although billed as a ballet, the piece’s performance featured “uncivilized” choreography and music not resembling what the audience was expecting (81). Musicologist Glenn Watkins has even likened the value of Stravinsky’s influence to that of Cubism’s on Postmodern philosophies (2).

Postmodern components such as irony and quotation are vital to music. Giving structure, influence, and other elements new meaning when placed in one’s work provides music its combination of originality and familiarity. This notion is particularly true in jazz, which Ingrid Monson discusses in “Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation: Irony, Parody, and Ethnomusicology.” Richards notes that quotation forms the bedrock of music composition and even practice (80). Richards argues that artists can layer quotation into a more in-depth version, where it becomes so multi-layered and overlapping that it creates collage. This collage creation is directly comparable to sampling in rap and hip-hop.

Giles Hooper argues this assertion, declaring hip-hop’s lack of postmodernism through disconnecting sampling from postmodern music-making (16). However, when considering philosopher J.F. Lyotard’s theories on hyper-reality as a significant component of Postmodernism, the simulacra of images combined without their original context is directly comparable to sampling in hip-hop. Furthermore, musicologist Peter L. Manuel states music borrowing has the potential for modern or pre-modern usage. In his writing “Music as Symbol, Music as Simulacrum: Postmodern, Pre-Modern, and Modern Aesthetics in Subcultural Popular Musics,” he discusses types of musical borrowing. The first type is embodied-borrowing, such as incorporating a reggae rhythm into a modern pop song. The other type he calls referential-
borrowing, which is like using the sound of steel drums to invoke Caribbean culture and imagery. Illuminated with this ideology, sampling in rap is very postmodern.

Furthermore, Manuel gives multiple examples of how sampling’s self-referentiality in a rap track is crucial to its functioning as simulacra. The crux of its enjoyable qualities, therefore, depends on its artificial existence and lack of meaning. The samples’ inorganic quality gives the track an ironic undercurrent and makes it appealing, and consequently is an excellent example of Postmodern art (233). Manuel feels that rap lyrics are Modernist in nature due to their search for meaning, and thus Modernist elements proceed to coexist with Postmodernism in the same work (234). Jeffrey Broome sees a direct connection between layered sampling, such as in the Beastie Boys’ *Paul’s Boutique*, and Postmodern bricolage methodologies (38).

A considerable influence on the collage style visuals of *Slapper* was the Beastie Boys album *Paul’s Boutique*. The group created this album as the follow-up to their multi-platinum debut album. Although the record company and management wanted a sequel in the same style as the group’s previous album, the Beastie Boys refused to stalemate creatively and instead created something entirely new. This album is influential to my film through its unique use of many different samples of popular songs from a large span of years and genres. Through the Beastie Boys’ unique and creative utilization of taking these samples out of their original context, the group creates a multilayered piece of music. Sampling songs from the Beatles’ “The End” to the Jackson 5’s “I’ll Bet Ya” to Curtis Mayfield’s “Super Fly,” the Beastie Boys were able to create new and exciting textures through old material.
Tying back to film, composer Carl Stalling, most well known as the prolific composer for the *Looney Tunes* shorts from 1936 to 1958, is often labeled as Postmodern. This declaration is due to his defining characteristic of utilizing popular songs as part of his scores. As he had uninhibited access to four decades of Warner Brother’s music publishing, he could draw from a wide range of songs, “…build[ing] a new system of musical meaning by taking apart an older system and rearranging its pieces” (Goldmark *Tunes* 43). This connection to Postmodern ideologies deepens from the intertextuality of Stalling’s music. The Warner Bros. cartoons, along with their scores, used intertextuality in referring to themselves as cartoons, locations outside of the narrative world, and cultural references for comedic purposes. This intertextuality, therefore, situates their existence alongside the Postmodern art movement.

**Postmodernism and Music Video Style Editing**

The type of fast-cut editing synonymous with music videos can be traced back to director Richard Lester’s outings on the Beatles’ films *Help!* and *A Hard Day’s Night*. The type of energy the editing created to the Beatles’ music mirrored their “zany mix of energy and anarchy.” This style became highly influential and is often called the beginning of music videos (Dancyger 134). Will Straw analyzes the music video’s impact on both the artist’s image and postmodern culture in his article “Music Video in Its Contexts: Popular Music and Post-Modernism in the 1980s.” He discusses how 1980s music videos began referencing the rock music genre’s originating years. Although the purpose behind such was primarily for aesthetic reasons, it still holds significance for Postmodern analysis.
As seen in the light of Hollywood films, musicals provide a context for which music videos can draw from or oppose. Blaine Allan makes connections between the film musical and the music video in his article “Musical Cinema, Music Video, Music Television.” He notes how the visuals are many times “incoherent” and “heterogeneous,” but the music track stays “continuous” (5).

Alf Björnberg discusses the deconstruction of narrative within the music video format in his writing “Structural Relationships of Music and Images in Video.” While these writings are compendious, the discussion of animation or visual effects is notably absent. When taking on-screen musicals as a form of the music video, Mark Langer’s “Regionalism in Disney Animation” articulates how song acts as a defining framework and creates an opportunity for visual contrast and dream state animation within narrative Disney films.

**Story Development**

**Chase Sequence**

William Hanna and Joseph Barbera’s *Tom and Jerry* shorts for MGM (1940-1958) informed my film in its plot style of beginning with exposition that quickly sets up for action. For *Slapper*, the chase continues after the film ends, adding my thoughts on the cyclical nature of conflict, while showcasing that even though neither character changed at their core, they could still be successful in their larger goal of entertaining the audience.
As showcased in Figure 12, the Conductor, in rapid pursuit of Slapper, jumps after him. However, since Slapper’s antics knocked all the keys off the marimba, the Conductor lands directly on the instrument’s horizontal support beam. This type of slapstick gag draws influence from MGM’s *Tom and Jerry* style antics, where Jerry would commonly leave something behind in his trail. In his pursuit, Tom would not be able to approach this thing the same way as Jerry, inevitably causing Tom to receive pain in classic cartoon fashion. The particular example my gag references is in *Solid Serenade*, where Jerry jumps into a sink and drains the water, causing Tom to smash into the dishes piled up in the sink (3:48). However, my camera work was based more on a Laurel and Hardy expression-based direction, where the viewer does not see the hit occurring, and the character’s reaction is what draws the comedy.

Everyman’s Journey

The type of character-based comedy that Jones refined has affected the notion of the traditional hero. In his writings, Collington speaks of the offshoot of the archetypal Hero’s Journey called the ‘Everyman's Journey.’ He bases this type of development on such characters as Chaplin's
Tramp and Pixar's Wall-E. The everyman begins his journey by living in a world that tells him what to do. When a call to action comes, it is usually in the form of something that breaks his routine. Next, "a chaotic and uncontrollable chain of events follow his unconventional actions" (99). By trying to "set himself free," the everyman becomes the "unwitting hero" (99).

Slapper's story follows the Everyman's Journey starting at the beginning where he follows his place in the world order, mopping a sidewalk, although he wants to be playing the bass. Next, his routine is physically disrupted with the call-to-action of the audition sign. The chain of events following Slapper's "unconventional actions" are "chaotic" and "uncontrollable." And by the end, Slapper has brought the audience to a new level of joy, happily surprising the Conductor, and therefore becoming the story’s hero by providing the audience with satisfactory entertainment.

**Song as Narrative for Non-Linear Visuals**

Particularly pertinent to *Slapper* are discussions on song's narrative potential, which allows visuals to become non-linear without the piece leaving the realm of narrative film. Numerous examples of this exist within the animated spectrum. The best example of an influence on my story writing for *Slapper* is the Fleischer Brothers' jazz cartoons. Including such famous jazz stars as Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong, these shorts emphasized the musical performer in a way not found in other animated productions. Shorts such as *Minnie the Moocher*, featuring Cab Calloway, even began with filmed footage of the artists performing before the animation started. In particular, the function of song in the Fleischer Brothers’ *Snow-White* had a strong narrative influence on my film. In this film, Surrealist visuals accompany a narrative story. However, once Koko the Clown begins to sing “St. James’ Infirmary,” the plot shifts to a stream-of-
consciousness storytelling style. This is similar to Dancyger’s thoughts on the film *A Hard Day’s Night*, where "audiences are willing to accept a series of diverse images unified only by a sound track" (135).

In “From Sync to Surround: Walt Disney and its Contribution to the Aesthetics of Music in Animation,” Laura Lazarescu-Thois discusses the Disney Studio under Walt’s guidance in its early years. During this time, the studio pushed the art form’s boundaries, demonstrating what animation could achieve when combined with music. Marianne Letts discusses a notable example of another studio’s combination of song and animation in her analysis of the movie *Yellow Submarine*. She notes the film’s use of the Hero’s Journey while showing the competing parties of high-brow and low-brow musicians in jeopardy from the Blue Meanies. In Letts’ analysis, “conventional society” is represented by the classical musicians, and a “rebellious youth culture” symbolized by pop music. Only through both parties joining together can music be saved.

By setting the majority of my film to music I wrote and recorded, I was able to exercise more freedom in breaking the conventions and rules of cinema, such as twisting continuity issues like entering and exiting from a different screen side. Ward Kimball used this type of continuity break in the title music sequence for *The Three Caballeros*. This purposeful distortion of what is considered good technique visually portrays the film’s theme to the viewer through adding to the collage-like effect of incorporating different mediums of animation and live-action into a comically disjointed world. Thus demonstrating how I like to portray the world, not everything (or everyone) needs to look the same to exist in the same space.
Entertainment for Self-Improvement

The book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) by Roald Dahl, along with its 1971 adaption, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, directed by Mel Stuart, have always inspired my fictional storytelling. The chocolate factory’s owner, Willy Wonka, with his eccentric behaviors, comically teaches the audience morals such as avoiding gluttony. It is through this likably odd behavior that the story comes off as a comedy and not a lecture. This inspiration led to my original idea of having the Conductor learn at the end that he needed to reduce his formality and let Slapper have some musical freedom for the audience to enjoy the show. However, to tell the most compelling story possible in the shortest amount of time, I decided to adjust this idea. Instead, the Conductor now does not change his feelings towards Slapper, and his expulsion of Slapper stops because of audience applause. This also functions to show the viewer that both characters had the same end goal in mind and only saw different paths towards achieving it. Establishing the characters’ connection harkens back to my effort to include the commonality of mankind as a central theme in my work.

Visual Development

Character Design

**Anachronism**

I based much of my characters’ design of the principle of anachronism. Firstly, the greyscale color scheme of the two main characters signifies that these two do not adjust to the brightly colored world in which they reside, and instead continue to exist as an unfiltered representation of their inner creatives. However, the anachronistic contrast between the two characters’ clothing serves to symbolize their differences in societal standing and culture.
The Conductor represents the late nineteenth-century European Victorian style, wearing a simplified tuxedo, while Slapper embodies working-class America in the early twentieth century, with his baggy pants and newsboy cap. The latter of which dates to the Irish working-class culture in the fourteenth century, when Queen Elizabeth I mandated that all males over the age of six needed to wear a wool hat. Although the country repealed the law in less than thirty years, the style was still ubiquitous three hundred years later when the Irish emigrated to the United States en masse (Peaky). Incorporating this hat with its historical and cultural significance was essential to Slapper’s characterization, as he draws reference from my family’s Irish immigrant ancestry.

The power of the comic hero

In designing my film as a comedy, I decided to center the story on a comic hero archetype. This character dates to the “Fool” in ancient storytelling, who like Slapper, exists in both worlds of “reality” and “imagination,” acts as an “intermediary” figure, and “dissolves events” in the plot (qtd. in Frierson 89). Animation often uses this archetype with comic characters such as Bugs Bunny becoming mainstays of popular culture. These types of “cocky wise guys” are what animator Preston Blair calls “the screwball type” and he feels “the antics of these looney characters have been some of the funniest on screen” (50). On writing stories starring Bugs Bunny, Jones noted the difficulty of writing for a comic hero character. He feels Bugs “is such a strong character that he can easily seem to be a bully unless he receives some serious knocks in the course of a story” (Jones 135). This potential problem led to the establishment of “certain rules” that every director working with Bugs followed at Warner Bros, “the first of which was that Bugs must always be provoked rather than being the aggressor” (Jones 137). This “rule” is
perhaps best encapsulated in one of Bug’s signature catchphrases, lifted from Groucho Marx in *Duck Soup*, “of course you realize, this means war!”

In writing for Slapper the Cat, I gave him many similar characteristics to Bugs Bunny that, if misused, could position him as a “bully.” Initially, in early story ideations, Slapper was going to cheat his way into the Orchestra by physically harming a musician showing up to work as part of his plan to get in the theater and impress a girl. Although it was going to be presented in a lighthearted fashion, having my main character injure an innocent bystander and then derail a guiltless Conductor did cause Slapper to feel like too much of a “bully.” To remedy this, I gave the Conductor some bullying behaviors, such as picking up and throwing Slapper. However, I did not want the Conductor to be an entirely sadistic character. Therefore, in the final version of the story, I designed the Conductor as a dedicated elitist performer that believes his behavior is the best way to entertain the audience.
Also crucial for Slapper's correct characterization was that his behaviors were an expression of his innocent joy. As seen in Figure 13, Slapper often winks at the viewer, creating a bond that reduces any impression of malice his actions could otherwise portray.
I also needed to present the motivations behind Slapper’s behavior correctly. The basis for all of Slapper’s actions needed to remain his joyous love for music. In our first glimpse of this character, he is performing the manual labor job of mopping sidewalks clean. When Slapper shirks his mopping duties to jump atop his mop, it is the joy he demonstrates in plucking it like a bass that creates sympathy for Slapper.

The use of funny animal characters

My film’s primary characters are Slapper the Cat, a cat, and the Conductor, a dog. I have humanized these animals in the tradition of Aesop’s Fables, placing them in the genre known as “funny animal.” The ability for viewers to not associate animals with preconceived notions as
they do with human characters allows the animals’ inner personalities to shine as the dominant force. Similarly, Chuck Jones has stated, “it’s much easier to humanize animals than it is to humanize humans, so that’s why I stuck with animals” (Jones). Furthermore, by choosing a cat and dog, I aimed to predispose my characters to their antagonism, adding humor by referencing this supposed instinct for dogs to chase cats.

Character Design Influence of Ub Iwerks

The visual aesthetic of my characters was informed by Ub Iwerks. Disney and Iwerks’ first cartoon animal, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, used rubbery animation and started to develop humor based on the character’s personality instead of pure slapstick. However, it was not until the team lost Oswald to their distributor that they created the world’s most iconic cartoon, Mickey Mouse. With Disney defining the personality and Iwerks designing the look, Iwerks single-handedly animated Mikey’s first short, Plane Crazy, by drawing seven hundred drawings a day (The Hand). A significant step in personality animation, their creation became so popular that theaters sometimes billed the Mickey Mouse cartoons above the feature film (The Hand).

The modern influence of Iwerks’ can be seen in examples such as the video game Cuphead, which further pushes the surrealist elements of Iwerks’ style. Similarly, Paul Rudish’s Mickey Mouse shorts uses an updated version of Iwerks’ fluid character designs to give its actions a universal slapstick appeal. The modern usage of Iwerk’s style of funny animal designs informed the aesthetic of Slapper and the Conductor in their dark fur contrasting with the large whites of the eyes, allowing for easily understood expressions.
“A cartoon of a cartoon”- The influence of Animaniacs and Space Jam

Figure 15: The Conductor stretches out Slapper. Created by author - 2021

A cornerstone of Postmodernist work is its self-reflexivity, found in examples such as Seinfeld referencing itself as a show and architects purposefully leaving internal structures exposed (Felluga). This type of self-reflexivity extends into the animated medium, such as in Space Jam, where the animated Looney Tunes characters exist in a world below Earth’s surface. After bringing basketball star Michael Jordan to help save their freedom, the two mediums interact and demonstrate an awareness of their originating medium. At the turning point of the final basketball game, Bugs explains to Jordan that anyone can follow the cartoon physics of their world when within its borders by picking Daffy up and stretching out his neck. I referenced this pose when the Conductor picks up Slapper at 00:51, as seen in Figure 15. An homage to Space Jam’s influence in my formative years, the Conductor here subverts the meaning of this
pose. Whereas Bugs demonstrated cartoon physics for information’s sake, the Conductor here mocks Slapper’s cartoon nature by presuming this pose. However, the Conductor is now also engaging in cartoon physics, allowing this whole incident to symbolize the hypocrisy of art superiority, wherein ‘fine’ artists and ‘classical’ musicians mock the frivolity of popular media without realizing their interdependence.

Barthes’ Garment system: Designing the Character’s Clothing

As part of my film’s multi-layered parodying, I comically purvey what Roland Barthes calls the garment system of syntagmatic dimension (Collington 23). This ideology states that when pieces that do not carry a specific meaning on their own are contextualized with others, they create meaning. My use of the syntagmatic dimension draws inspiration from the societal signification in Marx Brothers films. Mills sums up the societal power that the Marx Brothers imbued into clothing by stating “in the world of the Marx Brothers you are who you say you are as long as you have the right props… The clothes don’t make the man, the clothes are the man” (7).

Figure 16: Examples of Barthes’ garment system in Slapper. Created by author - 2021

Similar to the Marx Brothers’ type of rapid wardrobe and scenery changes in the manic vaudevillian stylings during the war sequences of Duck Soup, Slapper the Cat sporadically
changes outfits throughout the film. During Slapper’s demonstration of bowing techniques, he instantly changes outfits, exaggerating the type of radical extremity between poses in stylized animation through his clothing and position. His first two syntagmatic dimensions parody the idea of multicultural dining. As Slapper proclaims he can “French bow,” he dons a beret and striped shirt, pulling the bow out of his cloche as if he is a waiter at a French restaurant. Similarly, as Slapper demonstrates his “German bow” proficiency, he instantaneously wears lederhosen and presents the bow with a sloshing beer. The next two archetypes that Slapper parodies through syntagmatic dimensionality are the “Hobo” and the “Robin Hood” archetype.

Evident in the fifth image of Figure 16, the background is gradients of painterly texture. While it begins in beige tones to provide continuity with the stage, as Slapper jumps into the shot, a star of color expands, transforming the beige colorings into a colorful turquoise/sun-yellow gradient. This scenery invokes the natural summer colors of the beach, as the marimba similarly becomes brightly colored. The syntagmatic dimension arises with Slapper’s instant wardrobe change into board shorts and a puka shell necklace, signifiers commonly associated with surfers. Throughout, Slapper remains in greyscale. I made this decision to show continuity in Slapper’s identity; while he is at times a surfer persona, or later a chef persona, his history and heritage remain. In Slapper’s case, it is an early black-and-white cartoon, but the audience can easily interpret ramifications outside of the world of funny animals. For the viewer, this parallels the idea of the American dream, where people can achieve social mobility through “hard work” regardless of their background (Collington 173).
Modernist Influence on Character Movement

Collington notes that animators have the potential to “play with space, time and emotion-by squashing and stretching human form, editing sequences in any order… [and] using sound to evoke abstract feelings,” which he states “defines animation as a modernist art form” (Collington 152). Much of modernist art developed in the early part of the twentieth century as scientific analysis of reality became increasingly abstract. This inspired artists to represent new subjects such as visual representations of sound, many times purposefully showing the technique of their medium. All of this had the effect of moving art away from realism. An animated example of this is Oskar Fischinger’s *Composition in Blue*, released in 1943. The film uses shapes, rhythms, and color to create abstract visuals designed to represent the sound itself, making a type of art called visual music.

![Figure 17: Example of stylized movement. Created by author - 2021](image)

I stylized much of my characters’ movements to showcase my interest in creating visual depictions of speed and rhythm, visible in Figure 17. The characters stretch and contort not based on anatomy or physics, but to create a visual rhythm to the accompanying music. This draws from the practice of stylized animation that grew in popularity during the 1950s, which drew inspiration from Cubism and abstracted design and movements with “exaggerated key poses and sometimes radical… illogical in-betweens” (Collington 131).
Designing the characters’ relationship

As a comedy duo

The interaction between two people can function well as a form of comedy, as discussed by film professor Wes Gehring in his analysis of comedy duo characteristics. He notes that a duo’s humor often relies on the comedians’ contrasting body types, exemplified in comedians Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. Similarly, many comedy duo relationships build themselves on hostility. The most obvious example of this is the Three Stooges, with Moe repeatedly smacking and eye-poking his fellow stooges. Gehring declares that the Stooges’ cartoonish indestructibility combined with Curly’s over-the-top vocalisms is what gives the antics humorous qualities. In contrast, Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin based their comedy dynamic on friendly rapport, with Lewis playing a younger brother-type character trying to imitate the charisma of his older brother (Gehring). In my film, Slapper and the Conductor have an extremely hostile relationship. There is a moment of friendly rapport when the Conductor realizes Slapper’s behavior is popular with the audience, but they return to hostility when Slapper oversteps his boundaries once again.
As opposing sides of the same coin

*Figure 18: The Conductor’s grand introduction. Created by author - 2021*

In Figure 18, the Conductor takes a pose mirroring the Brechtian pose Slapper was holding before the fade to black. What this does is connect the two characters while highlighting their differences, as both characters have taken the same pose but for different reasons. As with Slapper, the Conductor is an entertainer who puts his whole being into the energy of connecting with an audience. He turns his head in time to his introductory theme music. His eyes are fierce with determination as his floppy ears slap across his face while turning. However, instead of Slapper’s personal connection to the film’s viewer, the Conductor communicates en masse to a large crowd within the film. Slapper’s subtle eyebrow wiggles are supplanted by the Conductor’s wild gesticulations. Thus, we have been introduced to our first aspect of the Conductor’s character: that he sees his duty as to the classical music audience and feels he must entertain them how he determines best.

World Design

**Abstract Backgrounds**

Chuck Jones, as a director, is well known for adding intellectual humor to the otherwise extremely slapstick visual antics of Warner Brothers animation. Jones’ early work visually replicated the Disney style, but as he continued to work with Warner Bros, he visually
experimented, and started using abstracted backgrounds beginning with *The Unbearable Bear*. The characters’ interaction with these backgrounds allowed the visuals to remain believable regardless of the abstract quality. Jones furthered the semiotic potential of his abstract backgrounds in such films as *The Aristo-Cat*, in which he used the background’s malleability to show the character’s mental state.

![Image](image-url)

*Figure 19: Abstract backgrounds in my film. Created by author - 2021*

I similarly utilized the malleability of abstract backgrounds throughout *Slapper*. Figure 19 showcases multiple examples of my film’s abstracted scenery showing the character’s mental state. In the top-left image, the complementary colors purple and yellow represent the pulsating of the Conductor’s pain from his fall. Additionally, the sharp angularity of triangles behind him further visualizes the pain of this slapstick gag. In the top-right image, the background consists
of paint splatters. Visible at 01:19, these splatters begin to build up and form a Pollack-inspired design as Slapper pranks the Conductor. The layering of paint symbolizes the Conductor’s growing infuriation at his control over the music declining. This enrage ment causes the turn of events seen in the bottom-left image of Figure 19, where the red background represents the Conductor’s rage as he rips up the sheet music that symbolizes the song inside Slapper. To visualize Slapper’s intense despondency at this moment, I abstracted his color and made him a monochromatic blue. This image, along with the bottom-right image, abstract the character’s size to symbolize the growing power that the Conductor feels he must wield to keep his music high-caliber enough for the audience to accept.

**Stylization**

A noteworthy influence on the visual aesthetic and storytelling potential of my film’s set design was Maurice Noble. Best known as the animation layout designer for *Looney Tunes* in the 1950’s, Noble created the worlds for such films as *What’s Opera Doc* and *Duck Dodgers in the 24 ½ Century*. When designing a layout, Noble would start with natural perspective and skew it from there. He said, “Classical perspective is important to understand, and is useful when composing layouts but can become a little dull. Especially when composing a more satirical, fun type of film. Look for the fun in your compositions” (qtd. in Polson 163). This “fun” in his backgrounds often took the form of visual puns; however, director Chuck Jones felt these never got in the way of the character’s gags or story, and instead made them even better (Polson).
In my film, I use the world design as one of many tools to add visual puns. At 01:49, as pictured in Figure 20, Slapper and the Conductor proudly take a bow in response to the audience’s applause. The visual pun is the massive pile of rubble burning on fire behind them that goes unnoticed due to their fixation on the audience’s applause. Using live-action footage of fire burning intensifies the incongruity between the characters and what is behind them, adding a level of dramatic irony to this pun.

Despite Noble’s stylized graphic visual approach, he was not a fan of the burgeoning UPA studio, feeling that UPA was designing “style for style’s sake” and asserted “design should support the story, not the other way around” (Polson 27). He stressed the importance of making the scenery match the character and show their personality. Noble also liked to use color “chords” when designing, relating them to how chords in music evoke a certain feeling (Polson).
Discovering this method opened all sorts of new doors for me creatively. As I traditionally struggled with color relationships, placing them in a musical context gave the interaction of color the immediacy of a time-based art form that allowed me to approach them differently and understand them better.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 21: Slapper demonstrates his “bowing technique.” Created by author - 2021*

A creative approach to coloring my backgrounds is clear starting at 00:39, as seen in Figure 21. The background design is a loose, graphite-style sketch outlining the stage on which Slapper and the Conductor stand. The watercolor-style coloring of this background changes through the next few seconds. Using mood-representing angular flat color for backgrounds is a common practice in limited animation (Collington 131). In addition to Noble, the Bill Melendez directed *A Charlie Brown Christmas* served as inspiration for this time-based color method. In this film, Charlie Brown’s friends become fed up with his choice for the school play’s Christmas tree. Rapid camera cuts of individual children yelling at him represent these turbulent emotions. The shots’ backgrounds consist of a watercolor-painted color card, which changes color increasing in intensity with each cut. I folded this method into my design in the section where Slapper
telegraphs exaggerated poses of his bowing demonstration as the color contrast increases to match the scene’s visual intensity.

Postmodern Graphic Design

The concepts of postmodernism extend into another visual process essential to my film, graphic design. A group of designers from Milan, Italy, formed the Memphis Group in 1981. Rebelling against the status quo of the previous decade’s straight-line based aesthetic, they used geometric figures inspired by Art Deco, Pop Art colors, and 1950’s visual elements to create bold aesthetics (Barnes). Examples of their influence are seen in the production and set design of television shows such as *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse* and *Saved by the Bell*. My film’s theme shares multiple goals with Memphis Group through mutual ties to postmodernism and rebelling against overinflated establishments of traditional design (Poynor).
In the above Figure 22, appearing at 02:00 in my film, I use many elements inspired by the Memphis Group. Geometric figures and bright colors dominate the image. Utilizing what could be considered as gaudy design in an informed way, my use of this imagery directly showcases my film’s theme.

Use of Archival Footage

It was imperative to my artistic goals to use archival footage, as opposed to stock footage. While stock footage serves all sorts of generic uses, archival footage represents a specific capsule of a moment in time. This timeliness is what appealed to me. Visually, the footage presented another advantage. With differing types and levels of film quality, I could use a clip for its unique color saturation or contrast that is the imagery’s purpose as opposed to what it representationally
My thanks to the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives for their permission to allow me to use their footage in my film.

**Music Development**

**Self-Produced**
I recorded all voices, music, and most sound effects, with the exception of those from Adobe’s SFX library and Apple Loops. By self-producing the music, I could personally bring my vision to the music production pipeline. This approach was inspired by Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys, who self-produced the band’s music. Through research and practice, I used the same modern production techniques that allow the recording of pop hits in people’s bedrooms. This includes the use of digital audio workstations such as Apple Logic Pro, allowing near unlimited overdubbing of parts. With this technique, one or two people can layer instruments and vocals to create the sound of a larger-sized group, as I did for the song “Slapper the Cat.”

**Influence on Story**
Music influenced more than just the sound of the film; it affected the dynamic of the film’s infrastructure. Rock n’ roll came from the melding of blues, hillbilly, and pop music. It blurred genres and ethnic lines to create a universal language. Much of my exposure to this genre came from examples without their originating context. Such as in the early 1990s, the doo-wop group the Jive Five singing Nickelodeon jingles in their signature style for the station. The average child, like me, would have had no associations or memory connections with doo-wop music. However, we could appreciate it solely for musical enjoyment, much as the kids who first heard...
this genre in the 1950s did. This methodology informed my film’s self-aware repurposing of past elements, allowing the reduction of past signifiers to an appreciation of its aesthetic. For example, the 1930s character design, 1990s graphic design, and 1960s music design all are combined together in this way to function as postmodern bricolage.

**Taking a Multi-Disciplinary Approach**

Norman McLaren once stated:

> If a person’s a static artist and a musician, the chances that he or she will be an animator are much higher, because he’s interested in motion—the whole flux and flow of what’s happening. Music is organized in terms of small phrases, bigger phrases, sentences, whole movements and so on. To my mind, animation is the same kind of thing (qtd. Rogers, “The Unification of the Senses: Intermediality in Video Art-Music” 5).

Multi-disciplinary artistic creation lends itself well to medium Pushing pieces. Disney animator and director Ward Kimball was a bandleader and first trombonist for the Dixieland jazz style band The Firehouse Five Plus Two. This group achieved such notoriety as performing with Bing Crosby, multiple television appearances, and recording a dozen albums. His musical skills translate visually in his animations seen in such sequences as “The Three Caballeros” title song from the Disney film of the same name. Breaking cinematography conventions and using swift action to move between musical phrases visually are some of this animation’s creative achievements. Eric Goldberg states the textural variety of rhythms and actions as the animated
characters in the sequence alternate between “wild scrambling” and “contained measures” is an excellent example of animation to music (178).
PRODUCTION PIPELINE

Technology Utilized

I created Slapper through entirely digital processes. The software for 2D animation was Toon Boom Harmony Premium 17, and for 3D assets was Autodesk Maya. Compositing and Effects were added primarily with After Effects, with video editing in Adobe Premiere. I recorded and edited the sound with Logic Pro X using a Focusrite Scarlett Audio Interface and Yamaha Keyboard as a Midi Controller. For recording vocals, an MXR 660 condenser was used, and the guitars recorded were a Fender Stratocaster and Fender Jazz Bass.

Animation Techniques

Hand Drawn Animation

For my film’s 2D animation style, I primarily used a traditional frame-by-frame approach. Preston Blair’s book, Cartoon Animation, informed my approach and animation technique. In particular, his notes on “line of action in animation,” “rhythm and design in cartoon art,” “the wave principle,” “fast action-impact-speed,” “the cartoon ‘take,” “emotion-gesture-reacting,” and “composition-staging-drama” provided a reference in executing my frame-by-frame style of animation (92, 94, 142, 146, 148, 152, 179).
Blair describes a method for working with fast action, which I utilized for *Slapper*. He explains how a character starts in position, moves back in anticipation, then forward from a “stretch shape” into a “multiple image blur” (146). To exaggerate and put a unique spin on this method, I had my character stretch forward before moving back in anticipation, as visible in Figure 23.

Blair states, “multiple images of a fast-moving hand (or leg) carry the illusion of movement better” in this type of action, and that as a result of this build-up, “characters explode from anticipation out of scene with animated speed lines” (146). Figure 23 displays both techniques as well.
Twelve Principles of Animation

The Walt Disney Studios, to advance the techniques of animation, developed practices in their early years that eventually became known as twelve principles of animation. Of these, Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston state that the principle of squash and stretch was “by far the most important discovery” (47). This principle breaks the rigidity of a “fixed shape” moving across the screen (47). Instead, it adds life to an object by showing “considerable movement within its shape in progressing through an action” (Thomas 48).

![Figure 24: Example of squash and stretch. Created by author - 2021](image)

As with Norm Ferguson’s animation on Pete from *Shanghaied*, the type of squash and stretch on the Conductor in Figure 24 at 01:21 shows a “broader action [that gives] the impression of a solid round character with a combination of life and spirit—and fat” (Thomas 50). In exaggerating this principle here for comedic effect, I reference Jack Campbell’s animation of Pete on *The Riveter* where he used an action so “broad [it] loses realism, but gains a type of comedy” (Thomas 50).
As Slapper mentions his bowing techniques, he telegraphs from one pose to another with limited mouth movements in each pose, as seen in Figure 25. One of the first films to develop this technique was Chuck Jones’ *The Dover Boys*, which utilized “stylized” character designs, “angular shapes,” and telegraphed from one pose to another within a few frames (Cavalier 141). Slapper telegraphs into his next pose using dry brush lines to show the arcs of movement and prevent the character’s actions from appearing like a strobe.

**Process and Timeline to Completion**

Animation began by breaking the film into six scenes and creating a Toon Boom Harmony file for each. Importing in the storyboard pre-timed allowed the major key poses to have their timing already set up. My cohort members added 3D as well as painted background assets to the first scene in my film. For this, I created an art style guide for them, as seen in Appendix A. Using archival footage from the Wolfson Media Archives added a new subtext to the film’s incongruity and theme. When compositing the animation, I put extra care in matching tones and shadows to ensure all assets occupied the same visual space.
I completed this film, including preproduction, over the course of my six semesters at the University of Central Florida while earning my Master of Fine Arts in Emerging Media. Preproduction took three semesters, production took two semesters, and postproduction took one semester.

Technical Considerations

Volumetric Lighting Effects

An essential element to blend the 2D traditional animation with live-action footage or 3D elements is toning. The traditional, labor-intensive process of painting shadows or highlights onto the character was not an option for this film’s timeframe. So, a procedural process that created the same visual effect was necessary.

One of the most recent 2D films breaking ground in the creative use of procedural toning is Sergio Pablos’ Klaus. Pablos oversaw the creation of a visually appealing lighting system influenced by 3D aesthetics introduced into a 2D workflow. Teaming up with Les Films Du Poisson Rouge, they created a tracking system that could follow drawn vector or bitmap lines and give the artist a real-time tool to create these effects in a relatively short amount of time. Their animation process began in Toon Boom Storyboard Pro, then followed through with Toon Boom Harmony to the ink and paint phase. Afterwards, the animation was taken to the lighting phase, where up to eight layers of different types of lighting such as ambient occlusion, rim lights, or specular highlights were added in a proprietary system. The team created these in a similar fashion to how a traditional toning effect would be made, where they draw tones and
highlights on top of the animation layers. The difference lies where instead of having to carefully
in-between painted tonal layers, vector tone shapes tracked to the lines present in the animation.
To composite this seamlessly with the backgrounds, a texture was added on top that could give
the look of oil, wash, or other brush effects. The final step consisted of the compositing phase,
where the relationship of effects was delineated to produce the proper look (Failes).

I found a viable working method for my film’s toning by researching Australian animator Adam
Phillips’ Toon Boom volumetric lighting techniques. The resulting method does not have as
much control as the methods used on Klaus but takes significantly less time. Using Phillip’s
technique, Toon Boom allows the user to set up a lighting system with highlights or shadows
created procedurally. Therefore, two dimensional images can be used to generate three
dimensional ones.

For this effect, at least three nodes must be attached between the node containing the animated
character and the node compositing the visuals. These are the Volume Object node, the Normal
Map node, and the Light Shader or Tone Shader node. The volume object node assigns the
drawing layer a unique object ID. This object ID is what the next two reference for their
calculations. The second node, named the Normal Map node, creates a bevel height and
smoothness, both of which are manipulatable. The Light Shader node and the Tone shader node
are interchangeable as far as their position in this node workflow. However, both serve different
purposes, depending on the desired outcome being shadows or highlights. These two nodes can
also connect to a Light Position node controlling the direction of the simulated light. This
direction is controlled by two Peg nodes connected to whichever shader node is used, one of which controls where the light faces and the other controlling the base of the light’s location.

Figure 26: Example of Volumetric Lighting effect in Toon Boom’s Node Tree for my film. Created by author - 2021
Through this working method, shown in Figure 26, I created highlights such as in the shot beginning at 01:46 for the audience members and the characters on stage, the visible results of can be seen in Figure 27. I achieved the difference in color for their highlights using the “Use image colour” selection in the ‘colour’ section of the Light Shader node. I chose the shading type as smooth as it is visually similar to the kind of toning used for compositing 2D animation with live action for films such as *Space Jam*.

Rigged Features in Toon Boom Harmony

Toon Boom Harmony Premium rigs offer many professional solutions for 2D animation, with a robust system for developing rigs with a multitude of complexities. Many studios, such as Mercury Filmworks, use this program to create popular television series (Goodman). The
primary goal of using the rig is to reduce the amount of time needed for clean-up animation. With this method, creating the final clean linework and filling in the different colors is no longer necessary as animators need only to move the rig’s parts with controllers.

For some shots in Slapper, I chose to use puppet rigs when animating on ones was necessary to match a camera move. While most of the film uses hand-drawn frame-by-frame animation, my goal for a few shots was to test the potential of rigged Toon Boom parts to blend in with hand-drawn animation. Matching the camera move on ones was necessary for the close-up shot beginning at 00:23. This shot used drawing substitutions for the face and envelope deformers for the torso and arms.

Figure 28: Toon Boom node tree for Slapper’s eyebrow wiggle. Created by author - 2021
In the quick eyebrow wiggle starting at 00:28, having smooth and consistent line quality was necessary so the focus would remain on the quick acting and not obscured by boiling lines. The features are broken into separate layers so the rim lighting can appropriately circle features such as the nose and eyes. The eyes use three-point constraints for their movement. The parameters set in the dynamic spring node control the ears’ follow-through animation. A transformation limit node restricts the pupils from resizing to the same capacity as the whites of the eyes. Envelope deformers warp and animate the arms, torso, and hat, although I used an alternative method of using these deformers.

For the hat’s envelope deformer, I created a series of control points with Bezier handles around the shape’s entirety. Doing this allowed me to modify the overall contour when changing perspective. For the arms and torso, I ran an envelope deformer through the center of their forms. By then moving their Bezier handles, it allows the whole shape to move in a manner very conducive to a modern-day rubber hose animation style.
In postproduction, I added sound effects timed to the music and underneath the dialogue in the third scene where Slapper is auditioning. I used Adobe After Effects to add sing-along lyrics and film grain simulation. Adding the film grain gave my film a subtle increase in richness and variation of color. Going through the animation with a second pass allowed me to incorporate the professors’ feedback and fine-tune elements. These included having stand-up basses spinning around Slapper’s head after he got dizzy and adding dry brush effects to Slapper’s bowing technique prop humor, visible in Figure 30.
FILM ANALYSIS

Simulacrum, Bricolage, and Signification

French sociologist Jean Baudrillard coined the term simulacrum to describe the collapse of the border between art and reality. He writes that simulacrum occurs when the distinction dissolves between signs and what to that which they refer. First, art acts as a reflection of reality, then proceeds to alter it. Next, art becomes absent of reality, until finally, it has no ties to said reality and exists solely as simulacrum. Through simulacrum, art becomes hyperreality as images coexist alongside one another, losing their original significance (Appignesi). This theory ties directly to French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss’ theories of bricolage discussed in 1962’s *The Savage Mind*. Based on the concept of the bricoleur, who “works with his hands in devious ways,” this methodology uses “signs already in existence…for purposes that they were not originally meant for” (Mambrol). Simulacrum exists throughout animation’s history, evident in such films as *Rabbit of Seville*, which historian Alex Evans declares exists as the simulacrum of the theatre experience (All Right). Evans bases this claim on the assertion that the short uses the operatic storytelling style to lampoon the opera.
One can see simulacrum’s purposeful use throughout my film, with a multilayered example occurring at 00:28. At this moment, Slapper is looking up at the sign pointing towards the door to the theater holding the orchestra’s auditions. Without Toon outlines or shading, the 3D modeled signs for the audition and theater door visually contrast Slapper’s 2D animation, subverting the primary goal and intent of 3D animation to create more detailed and space-defining worlds in animation. Their design derives from early twentieth-century theater marquees and Las Vegas nightlife signs with chasing lights, flashing text, and an inviting host on them outlined in animated neon lighting. The type of signification normally associated with these signs exudes a subtext of cheap entertainment, gambling, and other forms of “low art” directly contrasting with the modern orchestra’s formal affair (Lee). Furthermore, these two visual styles
showcase to the backdrop of a paint-on-glass style animation. Most popularly associated with Aleksander Petrov’s naturalistic art, it here displays a modernist approach to urbanism. The moving lights, representing the cars driving by, showcases a love for the aesthetic of speed in the style of Italian Futurism. By combining these three contrasting visual styles, I disrupt the viewer’s expected notions of “proper” animation’s visuals. This of course ties into my film’s theme and uses Dadaist elements to deflate the pomposity of medium purists.

Postmodernism is also heavily preoccupied with language. Swiss professor of linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure analyzed the theory of signification. He stated that a sign consists of a signifier and signified, or a word and its concept. His idea of signification concluded that whether the signified refers to the actual concept of something or the thing itself is determined through collective learning. Therefore, he concluded that meaning in this system of representation becomes meaningless (Appignesi).

Figure 32: Slapper demonstrate his “bowing technique.” Created by author - 2021

Jones explores the idea of questioning the true meaning of words in his film’s exchanges between Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd. For Slapper, a manic deconstruction of language starts
with Slapper stating, “Well ‘ya see, I can French bow, German bow.” Although genuine bass bowing methods, examples have Slapper instead showing something more reminiscent of a waiter’s presentation at a restaurant. From here, Slapper’s semiotic deconstruction rises based on the homophone of “bow” used in the context of a non-sequitur. Next, he plays the oboe, i.e., “Oh-Bow,” while levitating from screen-left to screen-right symbolizing that his enthusiasm for music physically overtakes him. This lack of restriction to physics furthers in the next pose, where Slapper is hanging upside down from the top of the screen, dressed in ripped clothes and holding a sack over his shoulder, which invokes the Barthes’ syntagmatic dimension of the hobo, or “Hoe-Bow.” The nonsensical audition antics reach their zenith with Slapper’s next demonstration as he places an apple atop the Conductor’s head and says, “…and of course, bow and arrow.” While finishing this statement, Slapper dons the syntagmatic dimension of a “Robin Hood” style character with a feathered bycoket as he pulls on a bass bow and arrow.

Deconstructing the language here serves to parody the formal affair of the audition process. As Druger noted in the similar verbal deconstructions from Groucho Marx, he demonstrates language’s “falsity” and “conventional function” as a “concealment and alienation” (qtd. in Turner 98). Dismantling the language, therefore, creates comedy through reducing the high status of the tools that alienate those lacking grandiose diction.

**Cinema of Attractions**

Film historian Tom Gunning coined the term “cinema of attractions,” which describes films at the turn of the twentieth century’s “theatrical display dominat[ing] over narrative absorption,”
and that films from that era’s “energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inwards toward the character-based situations essential to classical narrative” (384).

This theory’s influence presents itself multiple times in my film by referencing my name and Slapper’s interactions with the viewer.

Figure 33: Slapper and the sign present a “cinema of attractions.” Created by author - 2021

The best example of how my film incorporates the “cinema of attractions” displays once the rolling of the film reel ends 00:19, and the viewer now sees Slapper’s regular world. From the first frame of this scene, three main elements are visible: Slapper mopping the sidewalk, an urban cartoon environment complete with dancing buildings, and a large sign breaking the format ratio that reads: “Danny McCabe presents.” Perhaps best compared to a magician or vaudeville act’s title card, the goal is to imbue some kind of incredible entertaining power to the name. Further aligning this element as a “theatrical display” to the viewer is the fact that the sign
breaks the fullscreen format ratio. Through doing this, I accomplish something Richard Kostelanetz talks about in his *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* as the “alienation effect,” a notion of defamiliarization which “works to keep the audience aware, engaged, and possessed of the knowledge that they are watching a performance” (Wilcox 49).

Slapper’s competition for attention with the sign, shown by him jumping around it to be seen, and his proceeding behavior of smiling and looking directly into the camera to start the show is reminiscent of how a comedian will recognize the audience before beginning a routine. It also uses a similar concept of Brechtian acting as the Marx Brothers used in that “they are not stable and naturalized as so many film characters are, but theatrical, visible, constantly calling attention to themselves as constructed characters” (Wilcox 50). This idea adds Slapper as a character to the spectacle of the “theatrical display” that the sign has created.
Scenery Textures

Figure 34: Example of moving paint background. Created by author - 2021

After receiving a solid smack from the wooden board, Slapper falls to the ground as the scenery cross dissolves from the crisp 3D modeled buildings to soft, organic painted backgrounds. Drawing inspiration from sequences such as “I Just Can’t Wait to Be King” from Disney’s *The Lion King*, the backgrounds now have an organic, flowing, moving paint style, promoting the music’s humanity. As Slapper begins his musical journey, the lines between success and failure are blurred, represented by the physical blurring of the scenery’s lines. This symbolizes that while there are rules such as the principles of design, the success of an art piece is up to interpretation. This contrasts with the Conductor’s clear-edged 3D modeled sign, telling the viewer that this Conductor does not see anything but following the rules of art as his path to success.
The Use (and Misuse) of Film Language

Screen Direction and Movement

According to Louis Giannetti in his book *Understanding Movies*, in Western culture, the antagonist generally moves toward the left of the screen (88). In my animation, Slapper repurposes this semiotic convention by beginning the film with entering from the right side of the screen and walking to the left. Slapper is therefore “antagonizing” the institution of the orchestra that the Conductor has set up. The Conductor then naturally occupies the left side of the screen.

Metafictional Devices

Chuck Jones said, “[t]here is something strange about the edge of the frame in animated films” (146). In shorts such as *Bully for Bugs*, matador Bugs running off screen causes the bull to no longer be able to see him. Playing with the idea of the screen as a stage, with no coherent reality behind it, influenced my film, as in Figure 35.

*Figure 35: The Conductor is annoyed at Slapper for interfering with a metafictional device. Created by author - 2021*
As the conventional iris out proceeds, Slapper ends the film in the same way he began it, by waving to the film’s viewer. His medium awareness in a “cinema of attractions” style of showcase now gets him stuck in a metafictional device, infuriating his foil, the Conductor. After Slapper nervously looks at the Conductor, he rips out of the screen and runs off screen left for the first time, signifying his journey is now complete.

Format Ratio

My film plays with the convention of film format ratios, employing both standard full screen and widescreen formats. My initial use of the full screen ratio is an homage to the early twentieth century’s most common film format, but I also imbue it with deeper semiotic meaning through context in my film.

In the film’s bumper, which takes place from 00:00 to 00:18, there are black bars on the sides as well as on the top and bottom. These represent the bumper’s constructed nature, playing as if it were projected on a screen in a dark movie theater. This imagery is similar to how local movie theaters often show a slideshow of advertisements for local establishments on loop until the “official” trailers play before the film. From what I have seen, these early advertisements project in a confined ratio like my film’s bumper, therefore showcasing the constructed nature of my film. Once the film strip rolls across the screen, referencing movie film projectors, the film begins its standard full screen format ratio.
While Slapper walks outside, two things go across the black bars and break the format ratio, the sign reading “Danny McCabe presents” and the block of wood that hits Slapper in the face. Both symbolize the animator’s hand and the control of the animated film by an outside force.

Throughout my film, the breaking of the format ratio symbolizes Slapper’s musical aspirations and methodologies. In the top right image of Figure 37, the sign telling Slapper about the Orchestra Auditions breaks the format ratio because Slapper is expanding his world. Whereas earlier he merely dreamed of performing music, this sign shows him the direction to follow his dreams.
The second image of Figure 37 shows the text that appears at the end of the announcer’s introduction of Slapper, appearing as he says “…his bowing technique.” This lettering’s exaggerated graphic design references bold and stylized design elements and breaks the format ratio. This phrase breaks the ratio because Slapper’s showcase of his bowing technique is going to ‘break’ the status quo of the Conductor’s Orchestra. Like the Conductor’s sign introducing the Orchestra, thus visually representing Slapper’s aspirations as larger than reality. The next six images in Figure 37 show how each “instrument” Slapper “plays” during his audition breaks the format ratio, symbolizing his breaking of the audition’s formality. He takes something typically approached with caution and restraint and instead puts every ounce of his being into it. Here he is ignoring any convention that could limit his potential, including gravity.
Throughout *Slapper*, I have placed numerous “Easter Eggs,” or small visual elements containing meaning other than their primary function. These elements are usually not noticeable upon first viewing and act as a reward for multiple viewings of the film. For *Slapper*, the Easter eggs hold significance to the film’s extensively iterative creative development process. As the film went through several liberal rewrites, elements from the older versions began to carry meaning as a log of creativity. It is particularly relevant as most rewrites occurred due to the necessity of keeping the film at a minimal run time for practicality of completion. Some Easter eggs appear in
the archival footage referencing my musical heroes who have inspired me creatively. I also included myself in the credits interacting with the Slapper the Cat’s antics after my film's main plot ends, as seen in Figure 38. This sequence extends my film's narrative and demonstrates theories of medium awareness, intertextuality, and playing with metafictional devices.

Figure 39: Slapper recoiling from an unexpected intrusion. Created by author – 2021
A particularly poignant Easter egg occurs when Slapper’s singular fixation with grabbing the audience’s attention causes him not to notice a plank of wood hurling toward his head, viewable in Figure 39, and occurring at 00:23 in my film. Beneath its surface function as a comic prop, the wood acts similarly to the animator’s hand in Jones’ *Duck Amuck*, where the animated character must bend to the will of its creator. The Easter egg here is that the plank of wood is a photograph of the former Walt Disney Animation Studios Florida Desk that I worked on in my Graduate Research Space, as seen in Figure 40. Including an image of this desk is my way of thanking my program director for repurposing these desks so students can work digitally on them and as an act of appreciation for Walt Disney Feature Animation Florida and the opportunity to study under two of its alumni.
The Significance of the Audience

At 01:40 in my film, all of Slapper and the Conductor’s antics culminate in audience applause. As visible in the first image of Figure 41, the Conductor is initially befuddled while Slapper smiles. At last, both Slapper and the Conductor got what they both were seeking; their definitions of success came from the same signifier, even though they saw the paths to achieving it as radically different from one another.

The applause changing Conductor’s mind shows that his commanding behavior was not out of personal spite or malicious intent but an attempt to keep his audience happy. In the Conductor’s commanding and excluding actions, it is clear from the audience applause changing his mind that he only behaved that way because he thought it would bring him success. He had become lost in following rules and regulations to try and find success. He no longer could see the larger picture. That is why when Slapper came in with a fresh approach to ‘bowing techniques,’ with no relation to what a traditional bowing technique should be, the Conductor was so outraged he threw Slapper out. Once the Conductor finally sees the success of someone’s method other than his own, he gives Slapper a pat on the back, as seen in the third image of Figure 41. Slapper’s
smile towards the viewer bookends his earlier eyebrow wiggle at 00:29, showing that this is what Slapper was dreaming of when he first saw the audition sign.

Surrealism: Dream versus Reality in the postmodern frame story

Figure 42: The bookends of my film.
Created by author - 2021

By my film’s end, what has “actually” happened to the character versus what “show” the characters were part of is purposefully ambiguous. The film begins with a character telling the viewer to “enjoy the show,” and ends with the main character popping out of a VCR. I am further exaggerating metafictional devices by including myself hearing a sound in the VCR at the end of my film and going over to inspect it. This sequence has the effect of showing the viewer that the film they just watched was just a videotape playing on a television screen, but Slapper does exist outside of it.

Multiple instances in my film cause the viewer to question the reality of what is occurring in that what they see could be a dream or character’s internal thoughts. I deliberately left this ambiguous
to give the viewer a chance to read into the story, allowing their interpretation of meaning based on personal preference and experience.

Figure 43: Slapper potential dream signifiers. Created by author - 2021

The first question presents itself after the block of wood hits Slapper at 00:23. The sudden change of world design can carry the meaning of entering a dream state. Using a cross-dissolve to transition between the two backgrounds furthers this signification. Additionally, the audition sign is never seen before the hit, and the surreal nature of following events all gives the viewer reason to question the plot’s reality. Without including an explicit “waking up” scene such as in Wizard of Oz, I chose to leave the question of whether what occurred following Slapper’s injury was “just a dream” purposefully unanswered. Although, if the viewer analyzes the visuals closely enough in the rightmost image of Figure 43, the spinning duplicates of Slapper circling the screen as he suddenly kisses his “dream girl” out of nowhere could be interpreted as the ending of a dream sequence.

Figure 44: The Conductor’s rage materialized. Created by author – 2021
At 01:23 in my film, the Conductor has just received a pie to the face from Slapper. The camera now zooms into the Conductor’s eyes as his pupils transform into silhouettes of him and Slapper in a manic chase sequence, as in Figure 44. Again, whether the screen shows the Conductor’s thoughts, or we see the actual result of his rage set free, is intentionally unclear. This moment can be interpreted as the Conductor letting go of his rationalizations and rule-following, acting on impulse for the first time. Slapper is now for the first time on the run, although he remains unbound to the world’s physics and logic. The Conductor joins Slapper in playing with the medium, creating objects out of thin air and changing the environment. Such as seen in the third and fourth images of Figure 44, when the Conductor hits the ground causing it to spin and the direction of the chase to change. Each of the following mini-chase sequences references different film tropes and histories.

![Figure 45: What you just saw may have not occurred. Created by author - 2021](image)

Another significant “dream or reality” question occurs in second and third image in Figure 45. In this shot, the Conductor is furiously pointing for Slapper to leave. After a cut, the Conductor is now holding Slapper’s neck. I chose to use this pseudo-continuity issue to mirror the leftmost image of Figure 45 when the Conductor was initially throwing out Slapper after his “bad” audition. Mirroring this pose creates the question of when, exactly, the audience started applauding. Did they “actually” celebrate Slapper’s initial audition, with the sequence the viewer
just watched merely the thoughts of Slapper and the Conductor? Or did the musicians “really”
just join these two on a “musical trip”? The question of reality is furthered by the disorienting
flip of the 180-rule between the middle image of Figure 45, and the rightmost image, which
immediately follows it in the film. The purpose of this is twofold: for the viewer to feel
disoriented and question the reality of images just seen, and to represent change in the dominant
character. Before this, Slapper was trying to join the Conductor’s Orchestra, now the audience is
applauding Slapper’s song. In the end, the question whether what occurred was a dream, a dream
within a dream, or a dream within a videocassette has the same purpose as the Easter eggs, to
encourage repeated viewings and creatively reward those who do so.
CONCLUSION

Over the past three years, I have created an animated film from start to finish that makes me overwhelmingly proud. On its surface, it is a goofy comedy, with appealing characters, catchy music, and a silly story that, with repeated viewings, can bring appreciation for the tremendous amount of academic research, theory, and symbolic meaning put into its creation. I have designed this film so the more the viewer learns about the film’s origins, influences, and themes, the more the viewer feels encouraged to extend their knowledge on these topics. As a satire on elitism, my film combines many postmodern methodologies, including parody, medium awareness, and juxtaposed high and low art, with surrealism and slapstick to present its point in an appealing, entertaining, and universally understandable way. I sincerely hope that my film brings you joy, laughter, and the encouragement to follow your dreams, all while loving every bit of life along the way.
Bouncing Buildings

3D model and rig/blend shape (or any other method you find most effective) dancing buildings

These will do a double bounce to a 4/4 time signature at a tempo of 180 bpm (this info is for reference of the context of how they will move, in case that helps you)

I will keyframe and animate them (unless you have time and want to, in which case let me know before you do)
Create a:
- gaudy
- tacky
- over-the-top
- cheesy
Las Vegas style neon sign, that comically contrasts with that fact that it’s advertising Orchestra auditions

Utilize a font that is readable yet cliché

This would be good created in 3D, so it can match Ron’s buildings he will be making and that way objects in reality space can have a separation with these out of time and space characters, you can use any medium you’d like however that you think would be best. Let me know what you think

If you have time, a matching scrolling text sign to go over the entrance door would be awesome
In the above image, the moving hold will be extended in length of time from where it is in the storyboard. The vision is now that once he looks up at the sign, it will quickly turn to twilight and toward night time.

The moving background will provide a lineless contrast from the character and sign, helping them stand out.

The section labeled cars is where I would like the movement of cars implied and as the sky in the back darkens, the dull sight of car lights rises.

The nature and wonkiness of where the sidewalk ends and where the building’s perspective lies is intentional and should be played with and enjoyed, even pushed slightly toward a '50s style UPA background, where only key props are important and the perspective is visualized as a humorous 2D image.
REFERENCES


Briggs, Cheryl. “The Author Presenting Storyboards to UCF Faculty and Students.” MFA Fall 2018 Final Critique. 7 Dec 2018


*Minnie the Moocher*. Directed by Dave Fleischer, Fleischer Studios, 1932.


*Plane Crazy*. Directed by Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, Walt Disney Studio, 1928. Austen, Jake. "Hidey Hidey Hidey Ho... Boop-Boop-a-Doop! The Fleischer Studio and Jazz Cartoons."


Snow-White. Directed by Dave Fleischer, Fleischer Studios, 1933.


*The Three Caballeros*. Directed by Norm Ferguson, Clyde Geronimi, Jack Kinney, Bill Roberts, and Harold Young, Walt Disney Productions, 1944.


