ALEXANDER
A DIVE INTO IDENTITY, INSPIRATION, AND RELEASE OF THE CREATIVE SELF

by

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ABSTRACT

Alexander is a story of overcoming the fear of personal artistic expression. Alexander is the son of an affluent family who was found to have musical talent at a young age. Alex grows to enjoy music, but rote exercises alone begin to disillusion the promising musician. Regardless, Alexander dutifully practices piano exercises daily, bored by the lack of creative stimulation but afraid to openly admit it. After an accidental music note sparks his imagination, Alexander escapes into fantasy: a colorful visualization of the original music he creates. Within this fantasy, a warm, supportive community leads Alexander to his most significant source of inspiration: the Muse, an embodiment of his passionate creativity. As Alexander ages, reality begins to cloud his fantasy. Fearful of rejection, frustration and indecision over expressing himself in reality begin to outweigh his joy. Indecision leads to hazy inspiration, and Alexander's Muse becomes weak and colorless. The musician knows he must make a choice: commit to the narrow view of what his family believes art to be, or openly fight for his form of creativity. After seeing his own reflection in the piano, Alexander glimpses life without honest self-expression. He ultimately chooses creativity despite fear. This courageous action is met with real comfort as Alexander's artistic expression finally finds him community in his real world.

The paper accompanying my film deconstructs process and influences. I first discuss the importance of Japanese animation and musical theatre to my story and art direction. I then examine how queerness inspired my character creation, and how subverting traditionally gendered traits can encourage creative freedom.

Dedicated to my Papa, Andrew Garoogian, whose journey ended just as I began my own

as a graduate student. I create with you in mind, I love you.

ACKNOWLEGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Through creating my animated thesis film, *Alexander*, I discovered aspects of my own artistic perspective upon which I had not previously reflected. I combined my love of bright, colorful artwork with a passion for individual expression to shape the goals of my project. The film evolved over time from a simple story of Alexander defying his family's expectations to a universal search for community through creative expression.

When I was in high school, I was under the impression that in order to work in the United States (U.S.) animation industry I had to adopt a "North American" animation style. Much of my inspiration, however, originated from Japan and its plethora of animated series and film. In pursuing further education, I reflected on why I felt I was not "allowed" to draw with this influence in mind, and realized that it was due to lack of support, both internal and external. In *The Anime Machine*, Thomas LaMarre wonders, "Why do Japanese animations still need to be particularized and culturalized under the rubric of anime when clearly their history is as long and their scope as broad as any other national formation of animation production" (LaMarre xxii)? Due to this segregation of Japanese animation, or anime, from other animated media, many artists during the early 2000s felt a conflict regarding whether or not they should embrace their "anime" influences. This self-imposed moratorium of creative freedom was incredibly abnormal for me, as someone who strongly believes in their individuality. This emotional conflict would serve as a bridge toward writing Alexander's frame of mind in an environment which he feels is pressuring him from all sides.

In writing *Alexander*, I felt a kinship with the queer community's push to be powerfully authentic in the face of social ostracism. In fact, using the word "queer" is itself an act of rebellion as the word has, in the past, been meant as a slur against the LGBT community. In a blog post discussing this phenomenon, philosopher Laura Maguire considers the political rebellion of the word:

> The choice to identify as "queer" as opposed to "gay or "lesbian" or "bi" is often a political choice. Consider the defiant chant queer activists like ACT UP began using in New York in the 90's — "We're here! We're queer! Get used to it!" It's a refusal to fit into the neat, binary categories that mainstream society tries to enforce on us, it's a refusal to hide, to become "normal" or "respectable" or otherwise change. It is society that must change to accommodate queerness. (Maguire)

A fascination with queer media throughout my teenage years like television series *Glee* and the music of Adam Lambert developed into an interest in queer theory, which then combined with my love of self-expression to create characters like Alexander.

Within this paper I discuss Alexander's queerness in terms of sexuality, gender, and creativity. In this discussion, queerness does not necessarily only relate to sexuality; it also encompasses other aspects of personality and media. I am interested in what it means to be "queer" in a creative sense. One can look at musical artist Lady Gaga as an example of queerness in creativity: through her adherence to individuality, rebellion, and social and political change, she has inspired a new form of feminism that queer theorists like Jack Halberstam have lauded,

known in one context as "Gaga feminism." Sexual fluidity, opposing gender norms, and embracing the unknown are celebrated by media giants like Lady Gaga and Madonna, and are concepts I would like to channel through my interpretation of queerness for the purposes of this paper (Halberstam, "Gaga" 27). It is this form of "queerness" which fuels and guides Alexander's artwork and sense of self.

When deciding on the style of my film, instead of going with strictly Western or Eastern-inspiration, I asked myself what attracted me to each method. Ultimately, I ended up with a combination of Japanese animation-inspired style with the theatricality of a Western stage musical, particularly musicals like *Moulin Rouge!* Theatricality has influenced my work since I was young, adding a characteristic feeling of drama and liveliness to my art even during the moments where I doubted myself. Joining these elements for the first time was when, after years of searching, I felt the first traces of freedom in my work. I sensed confidence in my art returning and I began moving forward. This sentiment parallels Alexander's breakthrough at the end of my film, where all his color spills into reality. Art combines his creative and pragmatic worlds to create one powerful source from which he can be inspired.

STORY

My thesis film, *Alexander,* is centered on the titular character, Alex, who comes from a creatively barren background where his talent is celebrated only through technical accomplishments. The musician tries to escape through fantasy, but eventually the pressure of his reality, performing to various expectations, catches up with him. My intention was to tell this story in a realistic setting with fantastical flourishes. Both "slice of life" anime and live theater were major influences to achieve this.

"Slice of life" is a popular cross-platform genre with the term derived from French playwright Jean Jullien in his statement, "A play is a slice of life placed on the stage with art" (Carlson 279). Seeing only a "slice" of a character's life, stories of this nature both reflect the truth of everyday life while dramatizing limited circumstances for the sake of brevity. In *Understanding Manga and Anime,* Robin E. Brenner states about the slice of life genre in anime, "these stories are not clear-cut realism—or more accurately, they employ an exaggerated sense of humor and contrivances more akin to melodrama than strict drama… the point is a good story rather than a precise reflection of the world" (113). When crafting a slice of life story, writers push relatable situations to their dramatic limit. In lieu of a remarkable setting or plot, focus is strictly on relatable feeling and connection between characters and the viewer. This emotional communion with the audience influenced the writing of my thesis film. I want the viewer to feel what Alexander is feeling as he experiences his personal struggle, and cheer for him when he discovers what he needs to grow.

Slice of life originated on the stage, which is where I found some other useful methods of storytelling. As I researched music references for the sound of my film, I discovered the song structure with which many popular Broadway songs are written. Stage musicals in particular are another major influence of mine, and due to this I became inspired by this method. The structure, known as AABA or American Popular Song Form, is well-known on not only Broadway, but also early-to-mid 20th Century American radio. The "A's" indicate the melody, with the first "A" introducing an idea and the second developing the idea. The "B" signifies the release, the bridge, or in story terms, the low point (Songstuff). The final "A" melody is grander with a melodic twist, to communicate a feeling of emotional release to the audience (Musicals101 2000). This structure reflects the telling of a story, which composers and lyricists impart through each song of a musical. The use of AABA is analogous to the exposition, conflict, and resolution of a story (Block 222).

When music and narrative structure are combined with matching visuals, the harmony of these components strengthens a story's intensity. This union is the core of animation. In *The Visual Story*, author Bruce Block expands on this concept: "a writer uses words to create story intensity. A musician uses melodies to create musical intensity, and… space, line, shape, tone, color, movement, and rhythm create visual intensity" (235). In my film, Alexander plays the melody of his original piece twice before releasing to the bridge. This bridge is synchronous with the low point of the story. The piece then breaks out into the final, heightened melody in an explosion of color. The more powerful melody in conjunction with the lively visuals and story conclusion create the sense of catharsis and freedom one can associate with the final belt of a big

Broadway number, or the AABA song structure. My love of the stage acts as both an influence

and a guide for telling stories with intensity and dramatic flair.

CHARACTER

Throughout the film, Alexander is on a journey of discovering, embracing, and finally allowing his creative self to flourish in reality. Due to my film's focus on artistic identity and inner conflict, I wanted Alex's design to visually reflect these themes. The audience needed to empathize with and root for my character in less than three minutes, a difficulty explained in *Ideas for the Animated Short:* "In the animated short… there is precious little time for the audience to get to know your character. Therefore, it helps if we understand the character's personality and function the first time we see him" (Sullivan et. al 106).

When I began designing Alexander, I thought about the story I wanted to tell. I wanted to expand on Alexander's childhood and teenage years, as those times are formative for many. Although one can have a creative breakthrough at any age, I found Alex's age comparable to when I felt a breakthrough with my art. This strengthened the meaning behind both his design and the story as a whole. As I iteratively progressed through versions of this story, his design fluctuated as well. Alexander went from having one teenage design to three representing different times of his adolescence, but, due to my three-minute time constraint, finally back down to two. This editing process was crucial in focusing the main messages of my film.

<u>Two Designs</u>

Alexander has two different designs throughout the film: one at age 13, and the other at age 17. Due to this, I had to create two designs that were both cohesive and communicated natural growth. This proved to be complex as I researched what made an adolescent boy look younger versus older.

At 13, the main evidence of his age is his large, round eyes. Circles in character design are generally associated with innocence, as seen in the generally rounded, cute characters of family-oriented Disney films (Sullivan et al. 106). Rounded features, especially in relation to the eyes, immediately generate appeal in a character. These features are seen in Alexander's rounded cheeks, which communicate youth and naiveté. His conservative environment is reflected through design as well, with the outline of his character closed and solid and his hair gelled into sharp lines and shape. Alex is tightly controlled, down to the tuck of his clothing. The colors of his private school uniform are muted, a reference to my own past experience of wearing uniforms and another reflection of his environment. His skin is desaturated as well, as if life is subtly draining from him. The only lively aspect of this character's color palette is the bright blue of his eyes. Alex's eyes, reflections of his inner creative light, are reminiscent of the sky. This connects to the sky-like fantasy Alexander creates, an environment which represents freedom.

I reinforced the theme of self-restraint in Alexander's 17-year-old design. Rounded cheeks become a squarer jaw, associated with strength and pragmatism; big, round eyes slightly square off as well (Sullivan et al. 106). Alexander's hair becomes even more obviously pressed,

with almost no curves surviving the repression of his fantasy over time. Hints of adulthood including his square jaw appear, but a tall, lanky body suggests the awkward in-betweens of adolescence. Muted colors continue to dull Alex's shine. His bright blue eyes, however, remain a glimmer of hope.

The Importance and Unimportance of Gender in *Alexander*

Another important aspect of Alexander's character is gender. Though I was born and continue to identify as female, the main character of my film is in many aspects my male alter-ego. Growing up, I always gravitated toward creating male characters. Even as I was introduced to more relatable female characters in media, I still felt less connected to femininity both in my writing and outward expression. Through personal reflection I realized that I did not identify with the way that social norms portrayed traditional American femininity, which embodies passive traits like gentleness and modesty (Vetterling-Braggin 5). I was hesitant to write or express traits that did not encompass my personal interpretation of being a woman. These discoveries ultimately lead me to the conclusion that, for me, gender is simply another aspect of character rather than a universally defining trait. I am more interested in developing characters that use gender as a manner of expression rather than something that is determined by outside expectations. I have found that playing with gender expression, dissecting what it means to society, and seeing how I can push those preconceptions to their limit is what I enjoy writing. When I write male characters, I create them with my interpretation of femininity and gender expression in mind.

In my personal search for how to present myself to society, I found traits of masculine clothing and attitudes to be very appealing; I integrated these qualities into my interpretation of femininity. In accordance with Judith Butler's ideas on gender, I view gender as a form of expression rather than something innate or concrete. Butler explains this in *Gender Trouble:*

> Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex (Butler 9-10).

Under the theory that gender is constructed by our environment, including media and our communities, every character that is presumed male or female is written according to an "ideal" of how that gender "should" be presented. The masculine ideal is largely based on several traits including stoicism, bravery, and capability. In the article "How to Write a Damn Good Man," Robert Wood explains, "It's not that every male character is striving to be brave, stoic and able, but that they understand that these qualities are what society expects of them" (Wood 2016). Men are written to be the "strength" of the story, which throughout societal history has indicated the character who does not feel and only acts for the sake of the greater good. Even if they reject this ideal, they are aware that it exists. This has inflated over time into a cycle of media in which male characters embody an augmented humanity that reality cannot maintain. Deep emotion, something more traditionally associated with femininity, goes against this "ideal man" that both men and women are commonly reluctant to challenge. Men cannot currently feel emotion and empathy without feeling like they are defying a social precedent. Media has massive power over

social precedent, which is why, through the medium of animation and storytelling in general, I want to work to contradict this notion.

It is important to communicate that though it is not a trait of this "ideal man," including empathy in character writing does not automatically denote a lack of characteristics such as strength or reliability. Rebecca Sugar, the non-binary (outside the gender binary of male and female) female creator of cartoon series *Steven Universe*, provided much of my inspiration as I crafted the emotions of my male character. The main character of her series, Steven, is male, but he is allowed to feel every emotion associated with the large, pressure-filled task he is given within the series. Societal concepts of gender are erased within *Steven Universe*, which Sugar finds incredibly vital in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*:

> My goal with the show was to really tear down and play with the semiotics of gender in cartoons for children because I think that's a really absurd idea that there would be something radically different about a show for little girls versus a show for little boys. It's exciting to me to play with a lot of that language, because everyone's very familiar with it but it really doesn't make much sense. I used to really enjoy shows that were aggressively targeted to boys when I was a little girl and I know the same can be true the other way around, so why not have something that everybody can watch? (Sugar 2019)

At its core, *Steven Universe* is about Sugar's relationship with her brother, and how she and her brother enjoyed media together growing up, regardless of gendered targeting (Sugar 2019). The supporting cast of *Steven Universe*, the alien gems within the show, are female-presenting but in

actuality are "non-binary women" (Sugar 2018). These characters can be interpreted in two

ways: as powerful female influences for Steven, who embody both strength and sensitivity, but

also as a testament to the non-binary experience. This is another way in which Sugar blurs the

line of gender: she asserts that traits are an indicator of personality and self, not gauges of

gender. As opposed to sex, as Judith Butler states is biological, gender is rather a combination of

feeling and personal expression. Traits such as stoicism and bravery do not necessarily have to

equal "male", nor do traits such as sensitivity and empathy equal "female." All of these traits can

simply contribute to the overall creation of a character rather than a "male" or "female" ideal. As

Jack Halberstam states in *Female Masculinity,* "the human potential for incredibly precise

classifications has been demonstrated in multiple arenas; why then do we settle for a paucity of

classifications when it comes to gender" (Halberstam, "Masculinity" 27)? Halberstam asks why

gender must be stated as either one of two options or an othered "third", when in reality gender

can be as varied and specific as whether someone has blue, green, or brown eyes. A more

playful, elastic look at gender can greatly enhance the strength of a character's individuality.

My intention in writing a male character is to illustrate how a woman's perspective can

expose the flaws of the "ideal man." By writing a man from the perspective of someone who

does not have this ideal in mind, more open interpretations of character outside of gender-related

conditioning can be considered. Through creating Alexander, I wanted to illustrate the

connection between my creative voice and my personal interpretation of masculinity while also

showing others that it is acceptable to write men with emotional subtlety. Alexander himself

throughout the film performs within the context of the expectations of "the ideal man," which

further his feelings of confinement. Alexander emotes with passion within his fantasy, feeling

exuberant joy within his created world. When he is removed from that world, Alexander

represses those emotions, reflecting that "ideal" stoicism of male societal belief. This results in

mounting frustration within Alex, culminating in a bang on the piano keys.

Figure 1: Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting Alexander's mounted frustration. *Alexander –***2020**

Following a return to his fantasy, where Alexander feels emotionally free, this anger is

alleviated. Within Alexander's unrestrained fantasy, he is free to express himself in any manner

he wants, not pressured by any expectations including ones based on his gender. Given courage

to do so publicly by people like Rebecca Sugar, I want Alex's creative journey to lead him down

any path, including one which opposes the social norms of male sexuality.

Alexander's relationship with the Muse, a supporting character in the film, also helps

distance him from the social implications of the "ideal man." The Muse is represented as male to

illustrate Alex's "queerness" both creatively and sexually. My intention was always for his sexuality to remain ancillary, or an aspect of character which is just as commonplace as the color of his eyes. This goes back to gender as a manner of expression. I see both gender and sexuality as methods of performance in character. Gender, sexuality, and other traits contribute to Alex's overall identity, and one is not dominant over another. If Alexander's sexuality resonates with others that is wonderful; but gay is not all that he is as an individual. At first, my inclination toward male, queer characters was part of a search for freedom. I wanted to maintain my personal sexuality, being attracted to men, while remaining honest in my creative expression through writing male characters. I now aim to merge that feeling of freedom with the concept of queerness beyond sexuality. Alexander's queerness deals not only in sexuality or gender, but ultimately his identity as a creative. Within the world of my film, queerness is represented and celebrated through my male protagonist's creative and unique passions changing his reality for the better.

<center>Inspiration and Support: The Muse</center>

The character of the Muse acts as a universal symbol for creativity within my film. His concept can be separated into two parts: one being his connection to Greek mythology, and the other being his connection to Alexander's personal sexuality.

The Muse's name is a reference to the Nine Muses of Greek Mythology, female deities who sparked creative inspiration for individuals on Earth. Mark Cartwright elaborates, "Their gifts of song, dance, and joy helped the gods and mankind to forget their troubles and inspired musicians and writers to reach ever greater artistic and intellectual heights" (Cartwright 2012).

The Muses' mythology developed throughout art history to personify a force of inspiration for the typically male artist. Art critic Balasz Takac describes the history of the Muse within the context of visual art:

> However, it wasn't until…Romanticism [1800s] that the muses became an important part of paintings and sculptures, while Modernism [1860s – 1970s] brought muses of flesh and blood who were usually relatives, spouses or lovers of the artists. Interestingly so, these women played a notable role in some artistic practices, since they did more than just posed and inspired; as a matter of fact, they suggested and in some cases navigated the careers of the artists who represented them. (Takac 2019)

As noted, these muses were regularly women, with very few men compared to women documented as such. This is most likely due to the general prominence of men versus women throughout art history, but it has regardless established a precedent. What I subverted within my film is this relation of the Muse to femininity. The Muse is a source of joy, creativity, and action for Alexander. He also represents Alex's repressed longing for connection through a romantic partner. Opposing precedent, Alex's Muse is male. This inversion of sex is a nod to Alexander's "queerness," presenting another aspect of his conflict with society and how that conflict affects his art-making. Though Alexander's sexuality is ancillary to the film, it is still an aspect of his personality that I intended to establish and celebrate.

The Muse is also a symbol of Alexander's need for community and connection. Alexander feels like an "other" within his society, and has to put on an act to be seen as what he

has interpreted as normal. What this character ultimately wants is to find a community where he can be his most candid self. Among that community, Alexander wants to find a romantic partner with whom he can be honest. This goal is illustrated in the Muse, who encourages Alexander to live the life he secretly desires.

In the reality of the film, the Muse is just another manifestation of Alexander's creativity, but to Alex and the audience he is a tangible character. He can be interacted with directly, instead of acting as a celestial source of strength as with the Greek Muses (Cartwright 2012). This physicality allows the audience to acknowledge the Muse as something Alex can both protect and lose, as opposed to an incorporeal force. When the Muse loses his color towards the end of the film, it is representative of Alexander losing his own vibrancy and creativity to the stress of inner conflict. The audience empathizes with this loss, as if someone important to Alexander is fading away from him.

Figure 2: Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting The Muse draining of color. *Alexander* –2020

The Muse is drained of color the moment Alexander's feelings of indecision overtake his imagination. Reminders of the real world cloud Alexander's ability to create and he is thrust back into reality as the final traces of color disappear from the Muse. He reaches out to Alex, afraid, but Alexander's fear prevents him from responding. The viewer at this point feels the Muse's positive influence slipping from Alex. This is especially evident later in the film, when the Muse reappears in a weakened state. At the end of the film, the Muse is happy and filled with color once again, sitting with Alexander among the musician's newly-created community. As a result of the established empathy between the audience and both characters, this ending feels triumphant.

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON COLOR AND PRODUCTION DESIGN

A Larger Discussion of Color

Color is a main component of the visual language within my film. Alexander's grey, sterile environment represents creative stagnation, while the colorful interior of his mind represents inspiration, freedom, and a desire for change. Throughout my process, I assigned thematic meaning to each chosen color.

I established the colors of my film during the production design process. When I began pre-production, I knew I wanted Alexander's fantasy world to be colorful but I had not yet identified my palette. Deciding Alexander's eye color ultimately determined later color choices. Alexander's eyes are a bright, sky blue, chosen to contrast with his black hair. I was once questioned on the color of his eyes because one Western understanding of blue is coldness. Instead of this meaning, my personal interpretation of blue in the context of my film is the color of a clear sky. Consequently, this conversation made me consider Alex's inner mind space in relationship to the sky. The variation and brightness of color within the sky inspired me to utilize its full spectrum within his fantasy. In my film, the environment of sky and clouds is a symbol of freedom that Alexander visualizes through these fantasy sequences. As a child, Alexander's inner sky is lit by dawn, with many light purples and blues among the bright yellows, oranges, and pinks. These colors signify new growth and innocence. As a young adult, in contrast,

Alexander visualizes a sunset. This signifies both the end of childhood, and the start of new possibilities.

Another unique aspect of the fantasy is the use of flat color, with characters and setting remaining unshaded. This represents the raw yet abstract energy that the fantasy generates. Expressionists at the turn of the 20th century sought to capture the "inner state of the artist" using relatively simplistic line, color, and shape (McCloud 122-123). I wanted to visualize the inception of an idea or a feeling using only simple expressions of color, as Expressionists did to release their innermost thoughts as art. In my personal creative process, the beginning of an idea is usually abstract. The idea consists of tiny explosions of thought and inspiration which eventually culminate in a clear concept. Therefore, everything in Alexander's expressive mind, however, is wild, pure, and new. When these creative impulses intersect with reality through outward expression, they can be refined with complexity of color. Crossing that threshold is Alexander's dilemma throughout the film.

Within his mindscape, Alexander himself is yellow: this is symbolic of the sun, which is a focal point of the sky. This idea suggests that Alex is the main focus of his sky-like fantasy. Yellow is also a Western symbol of joy and youth. This design also reads as the opposite of his "real" self with saturated color and his edge defined by rough, pencil-sketched lines. Complimenting Alex, the Muse is a bright red, symbolic of the passion and drive that the Muse embodies within Alexander. Combined together, these colors create orange, the most pervading hue of the film. The other figures, or "audience" within the fantasy, are varying shades of orange

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as well. This color, while being prevalent in both a dawn and sunset sky, is also a universal symbol of creativity.

The color palette within the fantasy is reminiscent of an energetic, bright 1980s aesthetic, an influence which for me is rooted in musical artists like Def Leppard, Mötley Crüe, and other glam metal bands. I wanted to invoke these bright colors in order to communicate a feeling of enjoyment and whimsy. In stark contrast to Alexander's vibrant fantasy, the colors within his reality are desaturated and dreary.

The colors I chose for the music room where Alexander resides throughout the film are white, grey, and black, with the occasional pop of red and dull jewel tones. The white, while in Western culture associated with innocence, here imparts its alternate meaning: emptiness and desolation. In East Asian cultures, white is also symbolic of death—I created the room in this color to represent "death of self" for Alexander. I chose the monochrome grey and black in order to represent the Modern aesthetic of the room, to show the sophistication of his family, and to further convey to the "lack of color" in Alexander's life. The desaturation of any hue visualizes where bold creative expression is absent in this space. As time moves within the space, not only do years pass, but the day also passes into evening. As this occurs, the room becomes even less saturated. This also reflects the sky within the fantasy, which is also progressing from dawn to sunset throughout the film. The instances of red in the music room represent the diminished presence of creativity in the room. I gave Alexander affinity to this through red in his clothing in order to indicate his ability to claim this creativity, something he succeeds in doing at the end of the film. The difference between the red of the Muse, which represents passion, and the red of

the music room is the level of intimacy and comfort. The Muse's red is bright with warmer, more inviting tones, while the music room has cooler reds, complementing the colder color scheme and atmosphere. The cooler tones also mute the brighter, more energetic feeling of the color red, reflecting the muted tones of the space overall and making the color feel less approachable. On Alex the red is a more neutral tone, or in between cool and warm, which signifies how he operates amidst both fantasy and reality. Due to the stark contrast in color between the real world and Alexander's fantasy, it is easy for the audience to know when and how Alexander's creativity is flowing or waning within the film.

The white piano in the music room is not only the vehicle for Alexander's fantasy, it is also the centerpiece of the film. The piano is based on an ivory grand piano that belonged to my grandmother, which is in the care of my parents. My connection with my grandparents is very strong, so I wanted to represent my grandmother's piano and my grandparents' love of the arts in my film. In the reality scenes of my film, the piano is a cold white color, illustrating its affinity with the rest of the frigid room. Within the fantasy, the piano is ivory. This warmer tone connects the instrument to the warm, inviting environment in which it now resides. The yellow tones in ivory also compliment Alexander's yellow color in the fantasy, as the piano is another representation of his joy. I was happy to incorporate the ivory as a symbol for warmth and joy, as homage to my loving grandparents. For me, personally, the piano is a symbol of peaceful nostalgia.

<u>The Music Room</u>

As I began to add further detail to Alexander's setting, the music room became a space where Alex is meant to both practice every day and entertain guests for the occasional cocktail party. His piano is placed in the alcove at the center of all the awards he has received, yet it is still located away from gathering guests. Alexander is under a microscope in relation to all his awards, but relegated to the background.

When I was conducting research for the style of this room, I was drawn to the Modern architectural aesthetic from the early 20th century. It further characterized Alexander's family as pragmatic, minimalist, and refined. This style of architecture also complimented the monochromatic color palette I applied to the space.

Many areas of this music room have sharp edges and simple shapes, including objects like the couch and the family portrait on the wall. This illustrates both the reference to Modern furniture overall and the repressed nature of the room. Loose lines and rounded shapes associated with a more organic feel and relaxed creativity are excluded. I wanted to create further pressure and irony for Alex through displaying the awards received for his piano-playing. They loom behind Alex as he plays the piano, reminding him that his environment only acknowledges music through technical accomplishments.

Within Alexander's imagination, many elements of the music room disappear. Each element that remains in his fantasy: the fireplace, the award shelf, and the piano are all things that have some importance to Alex. The burning fireplace represents passion that could exist in

the room. The award shelf now only holds a photo of Alexander and his mother, whom he cares about regardless of the pressure placed on him. Finally, the piano remains present as the vehicle for his creativity. Specifically, regarding the piano, Alex wants the instrument to only be a source of warmth, stripped of any negative association as a result of his strict studies. It is not only the vehicle for his fantasy, but also something he wishes to carry to his destination. All other objects in the room have disappeared, as they do not carry any personal meaning for Alexander—only items which he has emotionally connected to exist in his mind space of private expression.

PROCESS

Storyboards and Animatic: Camera

I drew many of the storyboards from Alexander's subjective point of view (POV), only revealing what is revealed to Alexander himself or subjects in whom he takes interest. I wanted to communicate a very clear dialogue between both Alexander and his Muse and Alexander and his environment. This dynamic can be seen in anime series like *Sound! Euphonium* and *Your Lie in April* in their illustrations of character relationships through camera close-ups and dynamic two-shots.

Figure 3: Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting the main character and his support. *Alexander* –2020

The two anime I referred to also have a focus on music. I was inspired by these anime in how the relationships between characters and their instruments are presented. This is executed in

my own film through Alexander's relationship with his white grand piano. Each main characters'

respective instrument in both *Euphonium* and *April* are extensions of their creativity, and I

wanted to convey this closeness between Alex and his piano as well.

Another influence for staging within my storyboards is the film *Bohemian Rhapsody.* In

this film, the piano is highlighted during the Live Aid performance scene when Queen frontman

Freddie Mercury is shown playing. The camera highlights both a close-up of Freddie's hands and

the reflection of Freddie in the piano itself. This focus illustrates how Freddie communicates to

the world through his music, and how piano is essentially the "key" to this communication.

Freddie's image being reflected in the piano provided the primary inspiration for an important

shot in my film, shown below.

Figure 4: Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting Alexander looking into his reflection. *Alexander –* **2020**

Camera direction within my film is intimate, with many close-up shots and few mid or wide views of either prominent character. This intentionally brings the viewer closer to Alexander, facial expressions made clear as he interacts with the imagined audience and his Muse. On occasion the Muse even acts as a stand-in point of view for the audience. The camera allows the audience to breathe in time with Alexander, seeing only what he or the Muse sees and experiencing a subjective view of Alexander's world.

When the camera is wide in reality, the viewer disconnects from Alexander as it switches to an omnipotent view.

Figure 5: Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting Alexander sitting at the piano. *Alexander* **– 2020**

Any time the audience loses close connection with Alexander, it highlights the loneliness and dissonance within this character. When the camera cuts to a full shot Alexander at 17-years-

old, it is cramped, boxing Alex into the frame. This is the only point in the film where the closer

camera is not framed as intimate, but instead as stifling. Alexander decides in this scene to play

his own music, thus both the fantasy and playful camera return. This signals affinity to the first

act, and the audience is reunited with Alexander's wish to embrace his colorful inner self.

Another time the camera utilizes open space in reality is during the second act, at the

cocktail party. In this instance, I use the wide shot to indicate Alexander's complete

disconnection from his environment and cause the audience to feel disconnected from him.

Figure 6: Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting Alexander at a cocktail party. *Alexander* **- 2020**

Alexander is not the focus of these wide shots, it is the guests instead. He is held captive

by the way the camera frames these guests around him. The camera returns to Alexander as he

examines his own reflection, feeling lost. Alex's weakened and faded Muse then appears beside

him. This sight deeply disturbs Alexander, and causes him to finally confront his indecision. The musician's hesitation then, finally, turns to action. The wide shot in the fantasy after this moment no longer feels stale or stifling, and instead highlights Alexander's creativity bursting beyond containment. This altered use of open space positively influences the guests of the cocktail party, and these characters both metaphorically and visually surround Alex with warmth and support. The wide shot, at the end of the film, represents the broadened scope of Alexander's creative reach.

Animation (Production)

The North American animation industry has begun to adopt Japanese influence more liberally, which has in turn given me the freedom to assert my own personal style. Anime-inspired, American television series released within the last ten years like *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, *Voltron: Legendary Defender,* and *The Legend of Korra* assisted me in finding a sense of belonging in the animation industry. In particular, I referenced *She-Ra* to determine where to place cuts. I studied how the anime-influenced reactions and movements could integrate into a series' style without feeling emotionally or culturally inappropriate. All of these series are action-based, however, and my hope is for North America to draw more influence from a variety of anime genres, including the less spectacle-driven, everyday ones like "slice of life".

A notable aspect about animation is the subtlety that can be achieved through minor facial, hair, and body animation. Slice of life anime generally motivates the viewer to stop, look around, and appreciate the present. In a series with this slower pace, regular and extreme close-ups indicate even the slightest change in a character's mood: a finger twitch when a character is bothered or a slight sniffle when they are sad. This, I feel, is executed with grace in the works of Kyoto Animation. KyoAni, as the studio is referred to by fans, is a Japanese animation studio which emphasizes even the smallest affects to a character's mood through intricate, subtle animation. Subtle animation can in some cases be more difficult to execute than high-action animation, as movements have to appear both incredibly realistic and seamless in order for them to be read as human. Emphasis on human feeling to this degree targets empathy in the viewer, convincing them of life existing within a character. This is the goal of any animator, but in series like *Sound! Euphonium* and *Violet Evergarden,* extreme close-ups and detail shots illustrate the importance of humanity to each of these series. The exaggeration seen in the detail of these shots is used for emphasis of any feeling—this exaggeration is where animation uniquely excels. Nick Creamer discusses KyoAni's careful exaggeration in an article focusing on the series *K-On!:*

Focusing both single shots and lengthier sequences on capturing the key physical/emotional variables of characters at the pace those characters are experiencing them creates a sense of unrivaled intimacy in their productions, meaning the audience can be situated in the characters' headspaces without any need for broad, verbally spelled-out character motivation. The audience doesn't have to feel tied to a scene specifically

because of some character's narrative or arc-based motivation in that scene—they can experience it as an almost tactile sensation, and empathize with the characters on the level of sensory immersion. (Creamer 2015)

The ability to push visual language in animation and bring the audience into this form of "sensory immersion" is one of the most unique and powerful traits of this medium (Creamer 2015). Subtle yet poignant emotion is what I wanted to convey in my own film, with moments like Alexander's contemplation over his life situation.

Figure 7: Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting Alexander's frustration. *Alexander* **– 2020**

The subtle contortion of his face as he balls his hand into a fist tells the audience that the frustration is internal and wants to be released, but this character has long practiced stoicism. These feelings are all intentionally communicated through this single character action. Creamer

also states, "KyoAni's style can represent 'animation as a storytelling medium' (where the animation itself tells the story) more directly than almost anything else" (Creamer 2015). I similarly seek to create empathy through careful movement in my animation.

"Feminine" Versus "Masculine" Animation

Another interesting aspect of subtle animation is how it is associated with feminine-oriented animation; while masculine-oriented animation, conversely, is generally high-action. Due to the social coding of masculine and feminine, action is seen as "tough and edgy" and "for boys," while animation that pays closer attention to feeling, including romance and drama, have been associated with the "soft sensitivity" of women. "Shoujo [girl] energies," as Thomas LaMarre in *The Anime Machine* phrases it, contrasts against the larger movements of squash-and-stretch animation. LaMarre states, "shoujo appears to enable a *displacement* of technological boundaries, allowing for an exploration of the perimeters of boyish mechaphilia," which indicates that in peeling back action and mechanics, subtle emotion can be explored (LaMarre 215). In general, however, series aimed at boys focus primarily on large movement and high action, avoiding subtle finger twitches or the grip of a shirt in favor of a swift kick or intense punch. I applied this thought to my beliefs on gender not determining behavior or media and felt encouraged to subvert the notion and have a male character as the focus of my film. Similarly to *Steven Universe*, where main character Steven defies gender norms by staying in touch with his emotions, I wrote Alexander to discover creative expression through connection with his feelings. In *Steven Universe,* alongside bombastic action scenes is equally subtle animation, used as a gateway for the audience to process more complex feelings. Importantly, *Steven* never

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indicates that these deep feelings have any association with femininity specifically. *Steven Universe* blurs the line between "feminine" and "masculine" oriented animation, and inspired me to animate subtly in Alexander's movements as well.

Animetism and its Connection to *Moulin Rouge!* and "Slice of Life"

Animetism, as stated in *The Anime Machine*, "begins when you allow some degree of play or openness to appear between the layers of the image, or when you flatten the layers to make them look and feel like a single layer" (LaMarre 37). Animetism "favors 'open compositing', in which layers of the image are allowed to move more independently of one another" (37). Animetism exposes the layers that create an animated sequence rather than trying to mask them. Masking the layers is more characteristic of cinematism, which is a "sustained sensation of movement into depth" for a more "realistic" feel in animation (LaMarre 27, 31). Cinematism, though capturing realism, is not necessarily superior. The reveal of the layers in open compositing showcases the art behind animation, with viewers able to see the push and pull that creates these works. In Japanese animation in particular, animetism is commonly used. Anime often times invokes subjectivity rather than realism, asking the viewer to feel before they think. I adopted a similar technique in creating my animation. Shots like the opening sequence of Alexander's fantasy, where the layers of crowd slide away, were drawn and then manipulated to highlight the mechanics of animation and expose the medium as what it is: a combination of techniques which create one cohesive piece of art. Within this shot, I looked to invoke both animetism and theatrical fantasy.

Another major influence was the musical film *Moulin Rouge!* directed by Baz Luhrmann in 2001. Luhrmann states that in creating *Moulin Rouge!* he wanted to expose the realism of film as an art form and reveal the plot through "heightening emotion through visual language devices and, most of all, the music" (Luhrmann 2019). A particularly inspiring aspect of *Moulin Rouge!* for my own film was the "Your Song" musical sequence.

Luhrmann draws inspiration from Surrealism for a scene which transcends reality into a stage-like sky, exposing the film as fantasy as the characters literally float over Paris. However, Luhrmann always keeps the characters grounded through realistic human emotion. The love that the protagonist Christian translates to his love interest Satine within this scene is amplified through the use of fantasy and manipulation of the "layers" of film, or the "stage." Luhrmann uncovered and separated the composite parts of a shot, which traditionally intend to stay combined and invoke realism, in order for audiences to experience film as art rather than a representation of reality. This is also an example of how an artist can manipulate reality for the sake of story or emotional intensity, similar to the techniques of the slice of life genre. These notions all echo the intentions of animetism, and ultimately the intention behind my own film. Within *Alexander*, fantasy is shown as a means of escape, evading reality for the sake of expression. As opposed to his reality, which is depicted more realistically, Alexander's fantasy purposely exposes animation as a composite of layers creating one deliberate scene. It is easier in animation to expose these layers while maintaining the viewer's belief in the work, as they are already keenly aware that animation is not reality. Composer Howard Ashman discusses the unreality of animation during his Lunchtime Lecture at Walt Disney Animation Studios,

Obviously, the animated film works in a totally different way [than live-action film]. There is no collective game being played that this may have really happened and the camera just happened to be there. We know it was drawn. So we know that the basic reality that we're dealing with is totally, totally different. (Ashman)

He further discusses how this base of unreality furthers the believability of musicals in animation, but this also applies to audience belief in general. Because of this loosened reality, animation can be manipulated using the concept of animetism with impactful results.

Within slice of life anime, as well, animetism is frequently used. Rather than flying into depth and creating high-action point of view shots for which cinematism is known, slice of life more regularly celebrates subtler moments, focusing instead on the deep emotions of a character to engage the viewer. Animetism is frequently used within slice of life in order to reinforce the melodrama of the story, sliding set pieces and environments to guide the viewer's eye toward moments of profound emotion. Character and body language are the main focus of these movements. These scenes starkly contrast the deep space of cinematism, which slice of life strategically uses on occasion to punctuate high points of emotion. This typically occurs during the climax of a series, film, or single episode. According to Bruce Block's theory of visual intensity, "The greater the contrast in a visual component, the more the visual intensity of dynamic increases" (Block 11). The intensity that is created through the strategic use of cinematism in slice of life anime is what I aimed for in the shot pictured below, where Alexander reaches his breakthrough.

Figure 8:Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting Alexander's moment of creative release. *Alexander –*
2020

The switch to cinematism in this shot emphasizes Alexander's shift in perspective as the

turning point of the film. During this moment, the camera swivels around Alexander to visualize

Alexander's inner stagnation evolving into action. Alexander's creativity bursts forth from the

piano keys in this moment of release, joining his real and fantasy worlds. The point of view of

the camera swings from omnipotent, an extreme down shot above Alexander, back down to his

personal level. I wanted the active camera to perform alongside Alexander, mimicking his

change of mindset. Using cinematism I positioned the character in the real world, allowing the

viewer to see the character from this omnipotent or objective point of view as the he reacts to his

surroundings. Rather than the subjective view of Alexander or the Muse, the viewer is distanced

in order to further the feeling of disconnection and loneliness. This occurs until Alexander's

decision allows for the viewer to return to Alex's point of view. From this point forward in the

film, Alexander's previously-intimate POV is wider—it is the driving force, his action now affecting not just the viewer and his fantasy but his real environment as well.

<center>Music: *Alexander*'s Sound</center>

With a white grand piano as the centerpiece of my film, music is also a major element. As I solidified my script and developed my style, decisions about music became an early consideration as they were integral to the film's rhythm.

Style was a major element of Alexander's original piece. How exactly would this original piece sound, and what would the audience hear as the manifestation of Alex's creativity? Due to the importance of these questions, finding a composer that would fit my film was crucial. I was directed toward Dane Bryant Frazier, a music student at Berklee who worked well with me in building the sound of my film.

When Dane inquired about my intentions for the style of Alexander's piece, or theme, I pulled from multiple influences: Freddie Mercury, Billy Joel, and indie synth-pop band Computer Games. I wanted a jaunty piano piece which radiated positivity. Dane suggested an upbeat swing sound for the piano, which I found to be perfect. As mentioned, Freddie Mercury and Queen were very influential in the creation of this film, and a particularly important song to finding Alexander's sound was Queen's "Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy." The lively melody of this song along with an addition of Broadway-style theatrics lead to the final version of Alex's theme.

What also resonated with me throughout this process was Freddie Mercury's personal and universal celebration of individuality. Mercury strived to inject every performance, both solo and with Queen, with electric spirit and a one-of-a-kind energy. Artist Lady Gaga spoke on Mercury's extraordinary theatricality, "Freddie was unique—one of the biggest personalities in the whole of pop music. He was not only a singer but also a fantastic performer, a man of the theatre and someone who constantly transformed himself" (Gaga 2009). This type of energy is what I aimed to inject into Alexander's theme. Alex's theme is meant to produce feelings of joy and freedom in the viewer and musicalize radiant light. Ultimately, Dane and I created a theme that accurately executed the intention behind my story and themes.

I knew from the beginning that I wanted the score to be diegetic, or based in the world of the film. The music is generated by Alex himself, and the original piece he plays spans the length of the film. The only time when the score is non-diegetic, or unsourced within the film, is when he is contemplating playing his own music in the shot below.

Figure 9: Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting shot nine; Alexander thinking about his original music after a moment of frustration. *Alexander – 2020*

Alexander hears a nostalgic version of his original melody that he discovers earlier in the film. This melody is repeated to emphasize the elation and comfort he feels toward playing his original piece. As an older teenager, Alexander has further restricted his own creative energy. Frustration burns from this restraint, but remembering the tune he wrote as a child leads him to his fantasy once again.

Contrasting the theatrical, upbeat piece Alexander plays, every time the fantasy is interrupted a distinct lack of melody pierces the scene. There is instead the sound of the *Hanon* piano exercises, the sound of mumbled voices, or complete silence sans the hum of a central air conditioner. None of these sounds signal joy for Alexander, and the silence in particular discomforts both the character and the audience. I employed the silence to symbolize the

opposite of creativity, with the vacuum of noise further communicating how unimaginative and emotionally barren this space is. It also signifies the pressure that Alexander feels, with the drone of the air conditioner heavying the weight that the silence forces. Alexander playing his original piece is an act of rebellion against this silence, and the juxtaposition showcases the disparity between his inner and outer world throughout most of the film. In Bruce Block's *The Visual Story*, Block asserts how contrast heightens visual intensity (Block 11). This can apply to not only visuals, but every aspect of storytelling including sound. Because of this principle, the silence which interrupts Alexander's happiness can produce more aural intensity than the music itself.

Visual Effects

The use of graphic versus realistic representation in my film is an identifying trait of my visual effects, and acts as a further homage to both anime and musical theatre.

In Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, McCloud dissects the visual language of feeling found in both manga and American comics. Drawing from the Expressionists of the late 19th Century, comics adopted manners of visualizing feeling through art (McCloud 118 – 127). Visual depiction of an artist's emotions evolved from the heart of an art movement to a staple in American comic books. As language disseminates and develops, so does visual language—with the introduction of American comics to a Japanese audience in post-WWII Japan, manga (Japanese comics) and eventually anime would adopt their own forms of symbolic representation (Widewalls 2016). In many anime, abstract shapes and simple colors replace realistic backgrounds in order to create a subjective space. This concept connects to animetism—

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individual layers of anime frequently consist of these simple shapes and colors. All of this is done to invoke the emotions of the character highlighted or the scene as a whole.

The "metaphorical marks" that comprise the visual iconography of anime are known as *kei yu*. They are separated into two types: 'manpu' and 'kouka.' 'Manpu,' as categorized by Takekuma in 1995, are marks that are incorporated into images, "such as action lines to depict motion," while 'kouka' are "often background patterns, such as flowers to convey emotions related to love, or vertical lines to imply gloom" (Cohn 162). Within my film, particularly in the fantasy portions, I utilize iconographic 'kouka' to illustrate Alex's creative freedom.

Figure 10: Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting Alexander bringing others into his fantasy.
Alexander **- 2020**

I employ anime's visual iconography in conjunction with the concept of animetism in the shot above. The solid square shapes surrounding both Alexander and his audience are simple representations of color in the fantasy, used in order to highlight the characters and communicate the bright, joyous feelings of the scene. These shapes appear on top of another simple background, highlighting the layers of animation and furthering the colorful, expressive nature of the fantasy. The symbolism of passion, joy, and the sky are all seen through these flat colors, visualized clearly for the audience as Alexander's fantasy is fully realized.

I also utilized these concepts through the abstract, warm-toned shapes which dance throughout my film, animated in order to conjure a feeling of uplift in the viewer. In scenes where the drawing style is more detailed and realistic, the simplistic, super-flat quality of these warm shapes immediately alert the viewer that these are not a representation of reality, but instead of Alexander's imagination.
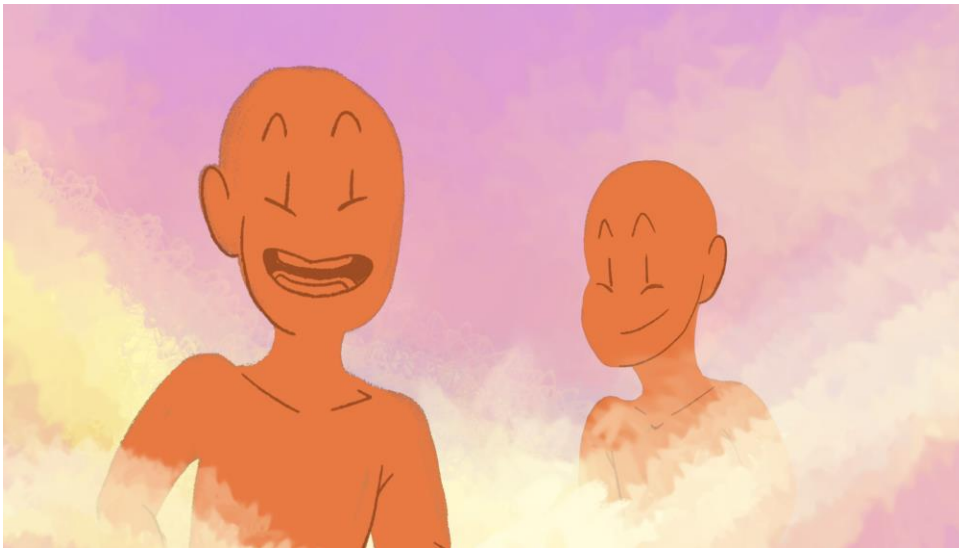
Figure 11: Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting the juxtaposition between flat versus depth in context. *Alexander - 2020*

Shapes like these and simple, expressive backgrounds can be seen in the opening and ending sequences of anime like *Sound! Euphonium* and *Keep Your Hands Off Eizouken!* to express a feeling of fun, joy, and freedom.

Representations of the inner mind as a place of freedom are also quite common in anime, seen as a vast landscape of clouds along a clear, reflective ocean. This striking trope in anime, seen in series like *Your Life in April* and *Kids on the Slope* is reminiscent of the stage-like sky in *Moulin Rouge!*'s "Your Song" sequence, referenced prior. Like animation, audiences are aware that theatre is fantasy, so pushing the limits of emotional expression through symbols and iconography within the theatrical space is easier for a viewer to digest. Both animation and theatre's graphic influences build Alexander's mindscape, an atmosphere which is completely otherworldly. Specifically, in accordance with *Moulin Rouge!*'s musical sequences, anime's visual iconography, and the theory of animetism, I used the clouds within Alexander's fantasy to create a "stage" which manifests based on Alex's personal thoughts and feelings. The clouds, manipulated in space like a set piece in theatre or the layer of a composite image, simulate depth while also showing the audience through color and texture that the space is not real, but instead an artistic creation. In the "Your Song" sequence of *Moulin Rouge!* as well, surreal clouds indicate that the characters have transcended into a space based in expression of internal feeling. This harkens back to the Expressionists: these spaces are a visualization of feeling through art. Just as how in fantasy, on a stage, or in an animated project one can manipulate elements to

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create their own form of expression, both Alex and I, the artist, can manipulate these elements of iconography to construct the fantasy in which Alex wants to reside.

Figure 12:Screenshot from author's thesis film depicting clouds among the figures in Alexander's fantasy. *Alexander - 2020*

CONCLUSION

Throughout the development of my film, I discovered much about myself and why I create the art that I do. I now have a more distinct goal concerning where I want to take my artwork, and a clearer vision of my influences and where I fit into the animation landscape.

In learning to understand why I gravitate toward male characters in storytelling, I also reflected on my creation of female characters. I realized that the women I had tried and been uncomfortable with writing in the past may not have been true to how I view femininity. A particularly powerful influence for me regarding this conflict was 2019's *Little Women*, directed by Greta Gerwig. Gerwig's adaptation of the character Jo March encompassed how I wanted to write femininity: a scrappy, creative woman who does not abide to social gender norms. Instead of rejecting her femininity entirely, she asserts her worth not only as a woman, but as a person and a writer by penning a story about the powerful women in her family. This character solidified how I saw myself as a woman, and in turn made me more comfortable with the thought of writing other interpretations of women. It was not that I was uncomfortable with femininity in general, but I was instead discomforted by how I saw it portrayed in popular media. This highlights the importance of depicting a variety of characters, genders, and expressions of self in media—I may not have had this revelation if I had not seen *Little Women*. It is important to portray multiple interpretations of femininity in a normalized setting, as is done in *Little Women*, because women who identify with more masculine traits, sexually queer or not, can feel ostracized by society due to focus on the strict interpretations of male versus female. This thought inspired me to apply my interest in playful gender expression and personal interpretation of femininity to more female characters in the future. I now feel encouraged to celebrate all types

of women after resolving my own femininity. I no longer feel as much discomfort with writing women because through both creating my film and expanding my influences, I now understand what kind of woman I want to express both personally and creatively.

Both the art and business of animation are changing exponentially. Women are being heard more than ever and different voices are being celebrated rather than sidelined. The animation industry no longer exclusively focuses on fitting into a "Western" mold but on what idea will work if given a chance, as evidenced by series like *Legend of Korra*, *Castlevania (2017),* and *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. All of these series are overt in their anime influences. My film is both evidence of and a further proponent of this notion.

As the children who grew up watching anime in the 1990s - early 2000s are making their way as 20 - 35-year-old adults into the U.S. animation industry, it is no longer about East vs. West. Companies are embracing anime-influenced art styles, which is changing the idea of what an animated series can be in the U.S. and to whom it can appeal. Companies like Netflix are expanding both minds and project funding within animation, which is allowing more creators to enter and find their niche in the industry. A recent addition to Netflix Animation was their trainee job position, which is specifically looking for individuals with less than three years of experience—they want to give new, unique talent a larger voice. These open doors of creative expression echo the feelings of freedom Alexander revels in at the end of my film. I am looking forward to entering an industry where pre-conceived ideas about me as a person or my art style matter less and less. I believe there is still a long way before full creative freedom is achieved—I am not certain if that will ever be the case, but I have never been more excited to enter the

animation industry and have my film stand among the different voices of so many innovative newcomers.

I want audiences to look at my film and see that they, too, can head toward clarity and creative freedom with courage and a gentle push from their inner inspiration. Utilizing techniques of subtle animation and animetism guided by my varied influences, I have created my first animated musical and hope to create more. Animation has an advantage of suspending the viewer's disbelief the moment they decide to watch it, something which can only otherwise be seen in live theater. When adherence to realism is completely removed, music and song can be introduced without being seen as unbelievable. This phenomenon was further explained and lauded by Howard Ashman,

> "… It may be that music plays such an important role here—can play such an important role here—that music may have more license in the animated film in the same way it does in the theater, simply because level of reality is different. There is no game being played by a theater audience. We know that's happening right in front of us and it's painted scenery and it's not real." (Ashman)

These thoughts on the animated musical both fueled my inspiration for *Alexander* and encouraged further work of this type. They facilitated my belief that there is something special about the animated musical—something which makes me feel deeply when watching one. Animation is, at its core, a skillful blend of media techniques which can enhance formats like the musical through its inherent unreality. My intention in my film, my paper, and in future works is

to celebrate animation as art. Mirroring how Alexander released his creativity to the world, I enjoyed examining and showcasing composite layers and techniques of animation to ultimately provide a jaunty, whimsical musical exploration. I look forward to sharing the magic of animation with an audience who is ready to be taken to a fantasy.

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