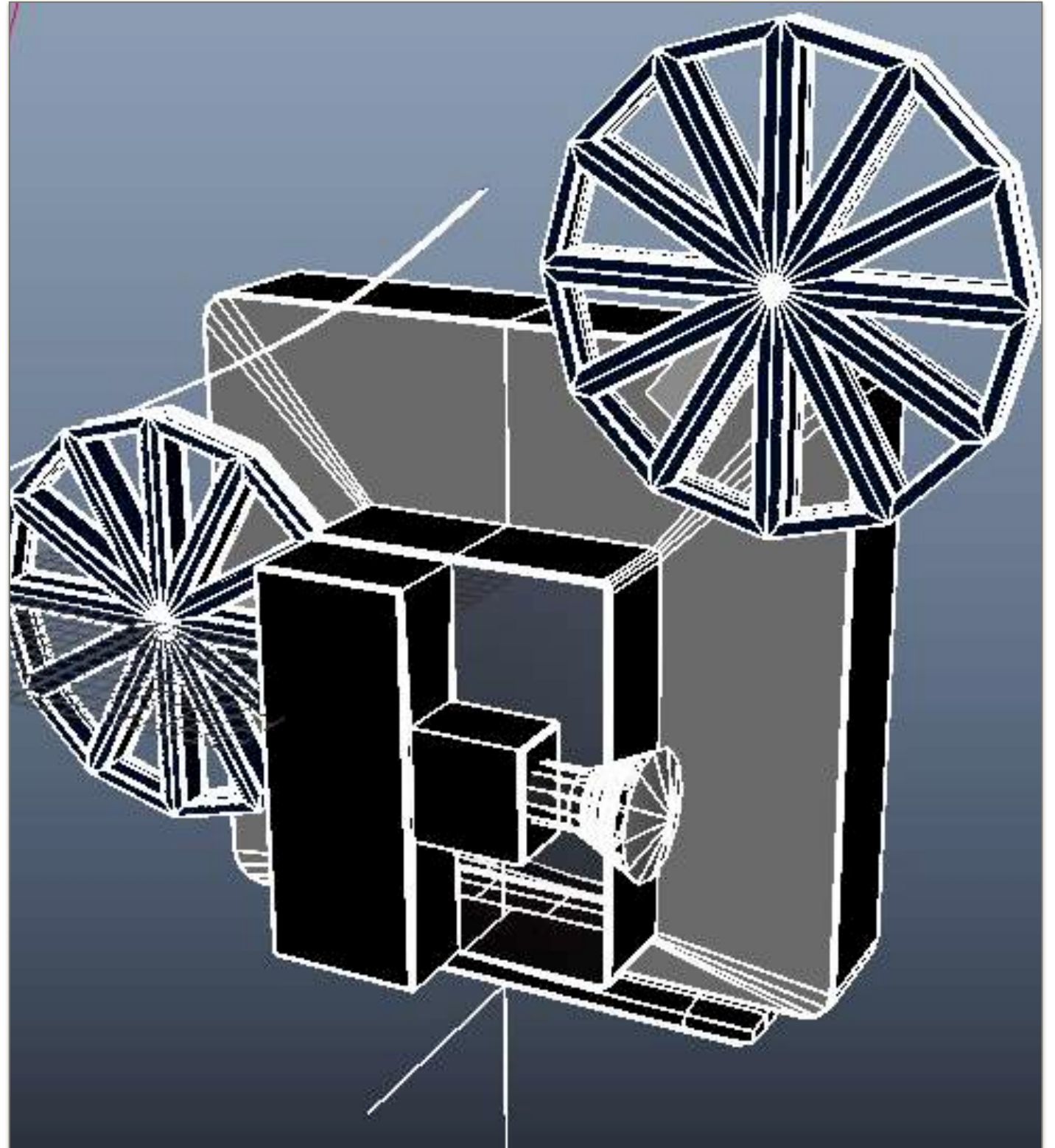
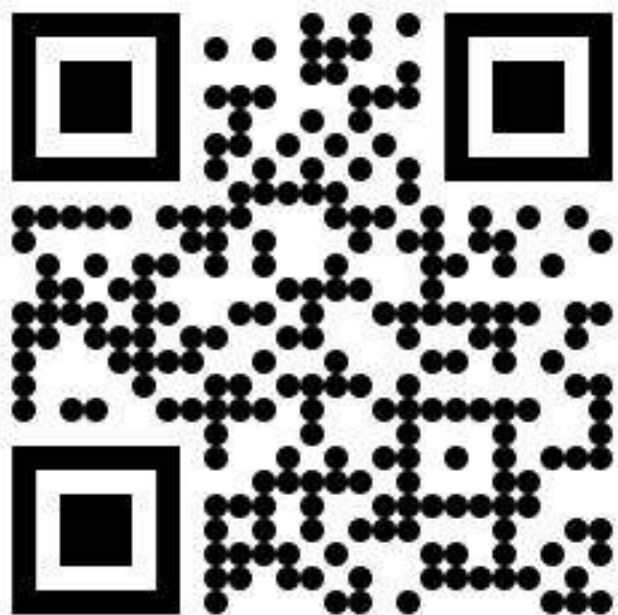


I'd like to walk around in your mind

Made as part of my Srishti pre-thesis
project “Being, that I am not”







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Project Brief

In the animated world we can play God and hence are free to do what we want.

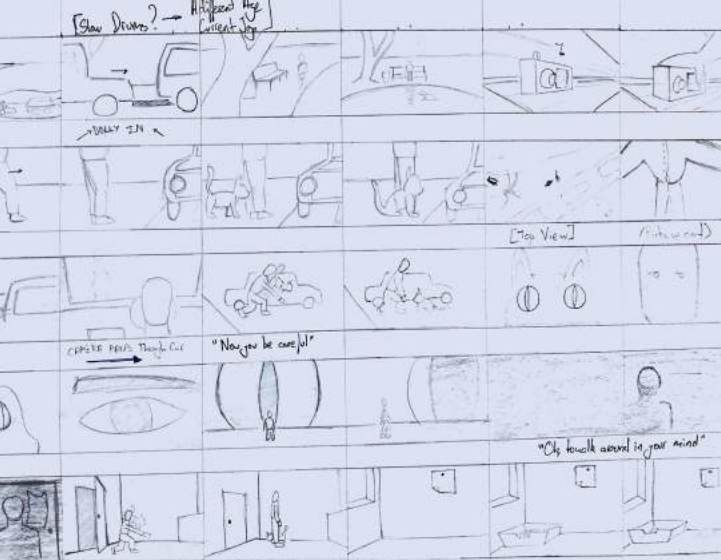
Can I ever really know how my cat feels and what they think ? Will I ever be able to perceive the world through their senses ? How do they sense pain, pleasure, happiness, anger ?

The project is a space to dwell in these kinds of impossibilities and engage with the complexity of inter-species interaction/communication through the process of art making. Inquire into the nature of our own behaviour, prejudices and conditioning exhibited through media, where we are constantly and rigorously representing/consuming animals for entertainment, information and wonder. How do we negotiate the in-between space of dominance and affection, master and slave, protection and caged, utility and pleasure, in our relationship with animals.

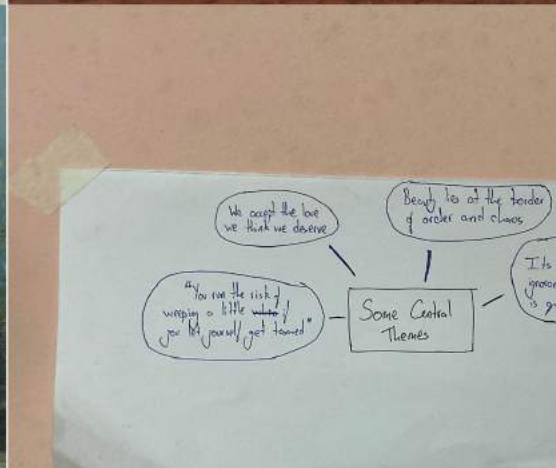
The objective of the project is to go beyond anthropomorphism as mere stylisation, and consider it as a tool to discover/reflect on ourselves and other beings, incorporating knowledge from other sciences.

Introduction

The inquiry into the world of house cats involves understanding their history, relationship with humans and the profound personal significance that they hold for me. Over the course of three months, I have curated material that has helped enrich my understanding of cats and create a compelling narrative that features cats as integral elements.



Pre-production



'Gleaning'

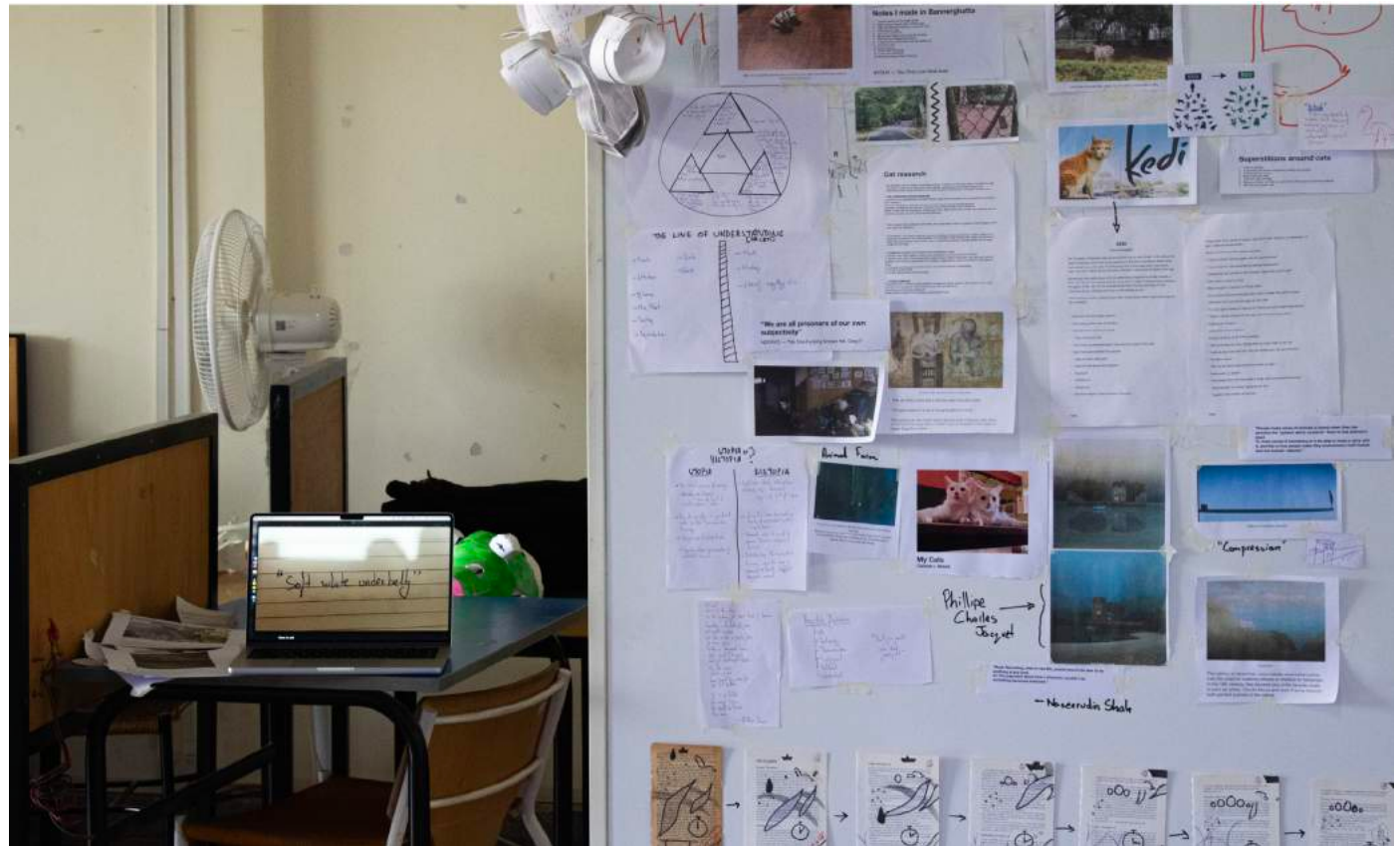
"Good artists borrow, Great artists steal"

To critically examine how we represent animals in animations, films, paintings and other related media, and to gain inspiration, my first step was to "glean".

To glean means to obtain information from various sources, often with difficulty. Or as shown in the popular Agnes Wardha film 'Gleaning Truths', To gather leftover grain after a harvest.

Either way, over the four weeks, I began compiling works from different artists and cultures that I could use as inspiration or knowledge to help my craft my final artwork.

Over the next pages, I will try to slowly unwind all the material that I collected, providing citations and references wherever necessary.



My Cats

A Personal Anecdote

To be a little personal about this, I wanted to talk a little bit about my cats.

I adopted two mixed breed cats before the quarantine during the time the COVID pandemic was imposed.

Over time, it became clear to me and my family that now that they are a part of our house, it was our responsibility to take care of them.

And while in the beginning it was extremely hard, to the point that my parents considered putting them up for adoption again, we did find a way through.

And admittedly, we all grew to love them a lot.

My dad, who was against the decision since the beginning, had over time accepted them as his own children, going so far as to often jokingly saying "When I die my will is going to be on their name".

In times of pain, anger and uncertainty, petting a cat reminded us of the absurdity

of life, that nothing ever makes sense, and in that moment, while petting a cat, everything seemed alright for a while.

I still believe cats have an uncanny ability to soak up our sorrows.

And often, it makes me think about the Bayside State Prison, where well-behaved prisoners were allowed to adopt cats.

Everyone has every excuse to be evil. And yet, most of us wake up everyday and choose not to. So when prisoners find purpose in taking care of their cats, I think that's huge.



My cats, Cookie (left) and Snowy

Cookie

While working on this project, one of my cats, Cookie, got into an accident.

He had fallen from my apartment, we don't know how. He was in the hospital for 5 days, and while he did fight hard, it was a lot of suffering for him as well.

He passed away on a Monday, early in the morning.

I had come to the tragic realisation that losing a pet is much harder than losing a person.

Me, and especially my dad, tend to be quiet stoic, but in that moment we cried the most. While I grieved, I felt like there was nothing in the world that was more real than owning a pet. My cats filled my soul with love and hope. Petting him calmed me.

I am a better person now because of him, and I really do hope he's in a better place now.



Some research around cats

The domestic cat is a highly successful species. Having originated from Egyptian populations of African Wildcats, the feline and its variations are now found all over the world. Multiple incidents have led to the domestication of cats, but the most popular one tends to be that they were used by mariners, to kill rats on ships, and in the process migrated to different parts of the world. They would often be used by farmers or kept as house cats because they would get rid of pests in the house.

Causes for stress in domestic cats

Stress in domestic cats makes for a great secondary action towards an arriving conflict. Here are some causes that could possibly be explored :

- Tensions with neighbouring cats, stray cats.
- Change of environment, changes in house.
- Owner leaving and then returning home.
- Arrival of a new baby.

“YOLN – You Only Live Nine Lives”

The Overpopulation Problem

Part of the reason why domesticated cats are such a successful species is because of their impressive capability to breed. Female cats reach sexual maturity in 6 months, have the capacity to breed 3 litters a year, with an average of 4 kittens per litter.

Toxoplasmosis

While researching, I found out that cats carry a parasite called toxoplasmosis, which I had only heard a little bit about. Although most people contract it from eating uncooked meat, it is also spread through cats. Some estimates say that a third of the world's population is infected with this parasite.

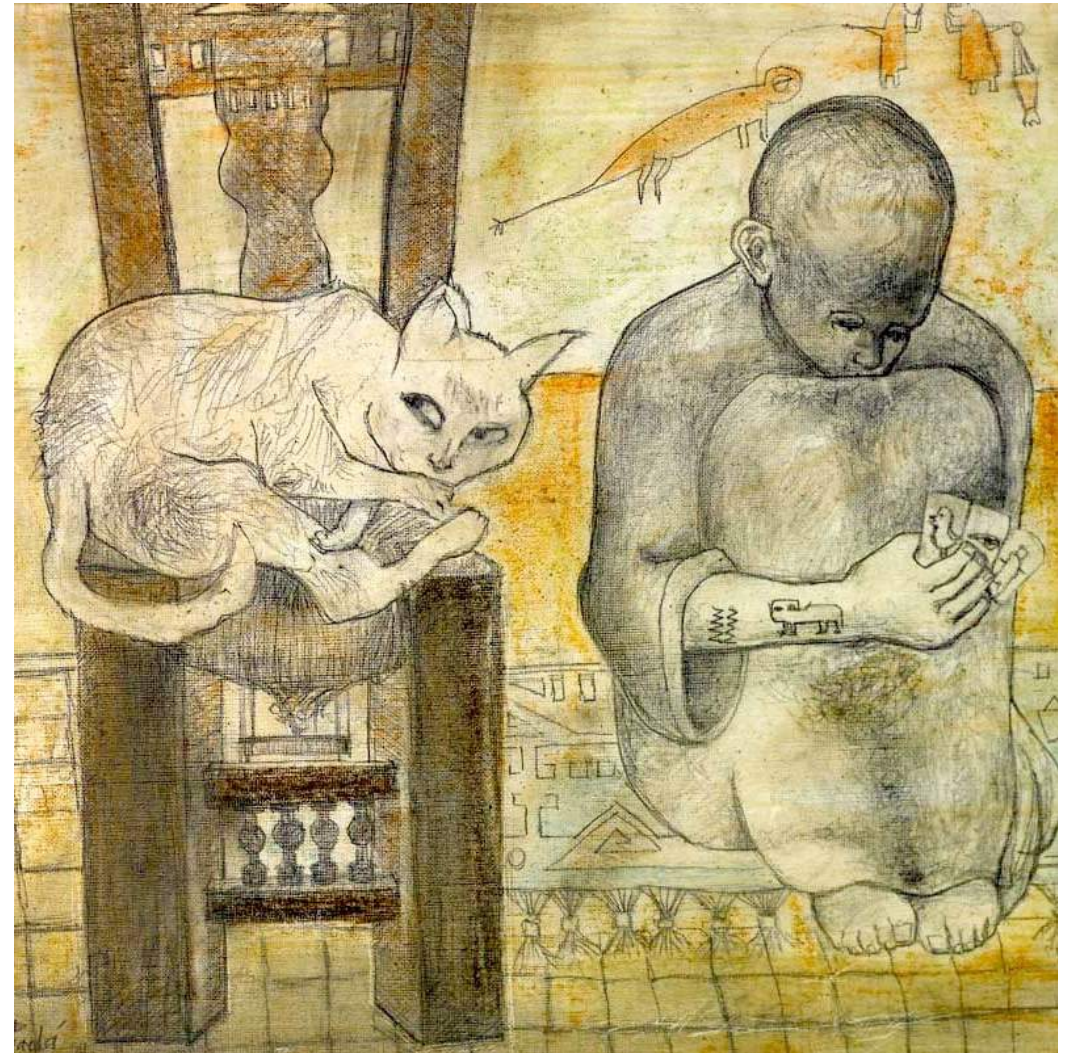
Superstitions around cats

Cats are superstitious animals. They tend to carry many different meanings and perceptions across different cultures. I like to believe its because they're such beautiful yet mysterious creatures. Cats always seem to carry a poker face as well.

I made a list of some these superstitions I found :

1. Cats are gossips (They talk about us behind our backs)
2. A grooming cat means unexpected visitors are coming
3. A sneezing cat is lucky
4. Black cats sink ships
5. Cats can raise the dead
6. Being a cat lady can help you get married (Pennsylvania German tradition)
7. Wet cats can make it rain

Superstitions like these can help me add in details to shots that people from different cultures and experiences will be able to notice.



Fortune teller and the cat by Hamed Nada (zoomed in) – The cat looks more like a fortune teller than the child

Kedi & Superstitions

Kedi

Having taken the advice of my mentor, Chaitanya Krishnan, I watched the documentary Kedi, a film about the cats of Istanbul, and much to my surprise, it showed a lot about relationship that people have with cats. It reinforced a lot of the ideas that I had about cats, but never talked about because I thought I was alone in feeling that way.

Something that really stuck with me after being exposed to other similar media is that cats tend to be represented as some sort of light in between the mundane struggles of life. One of my favourite lines from the documentary is "A cat meowing at you, looking up at you, is life smiling at you."

Here are some notes/ observations that I wrote down while I was watching the documentary:



Kedi, a film that explores human-cat relationships in Istanbul

Notes I made while watching Kedi

- Cats killed alot of the rats of Istanbul.
- Domestication of cats is not good
- They should be free
- Once they are domesticated, they become weak in the wild.
- Cats Have personalities just like people.
- Does he want affection?
- Does he (the cat) talk about his troubles?
- Cats look elegant, their posture is feminine
- "Dogs think their owner is a god. Cats think their owner is a messenger of god. Cats just know better."
- Some cats tend to have great character.
- "I want to meet her(cat) again, not my grand-mother"
- "I try to heal my own wounds by healing theirs(-cats)"
- "Interacting with people is not enough. Especially grown-ups"
- Cats used to stay on ships
- Were brought to Istanbul in these ships
- Every house would eventually have cats, to keep the rodents away.
- "Whatever is in our tip box goes to the cats"
- "I'm the main human in his(cat) life. Others are just supporting actors"
- "That's his(cat) mission for the day, there's no stopping him."
- Fighting for territory
- Cats have 'super powers' (9 lives, landing on all 4 feet, parkour)
- "We've picked up a few things after so many trips to the vet"
- "Just as you notice the cat, the cat notices you. Its very mutual."
- "Its like a mirror"
- "He can be quiet picky about the meat he eats.
- Aristocratic or street?
- They forget their cat-ness after a while (after being domesticated)
- "And rekindle our slowly dying joy for life"
- "I guess I was worthy of his love"

A Snapshot Perspective

Towards the end of compiling all of my material, it became more and more clear to me that something just didn't seem right.

We were all trying to understand animals, their relationships with humans, trying to critically analyse and be sensitive, but do we really understand animals?

How can we understand animals? We aren't them, they might have a much wider spectrum of emotions, they might have a completely different way to show these emotions as well.

Apparently when a monkey smiles, it isn't because it's happy, but because it's annoyed. This was also around the time that I got addicted to this YouTube channel 'Exurb1a', and he had a t-shirt on sale on his website that loudly read "No One F***ing Knows Yet, Okay?", which felt like an open chance to advertise the fact that we are all prisoners of our own subjectivity.

The nail in the coffin was when I attended a Q&A session with one of the Faculties at Srishti, who

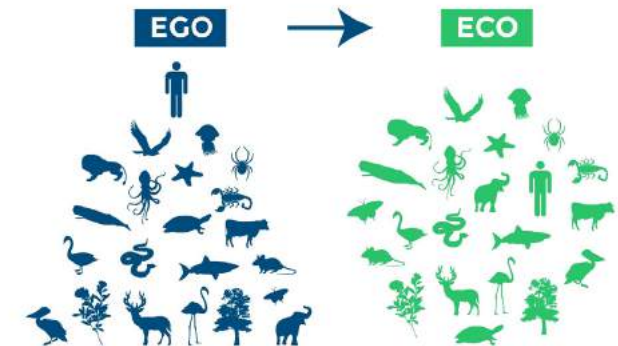
happened to be a Biologist, and he basically confirmed a lot of the ideas that I had, pointing to useful resources as well.

A little side tracked but, one of the resources that I found to be especially useful was the 'Ego vs Eco' chart, which was a pretty interesting way to show the relationship that we as humans have with the ecological world.

"We are all prisoners of our own subjectivity"

After this session, I felt more than confident to include these thoughts in my compilation of material.

I think it's important to accept that we really don't know anything, and we're just making an attempt to the best of our abilities to build the right perspective.



'Ego vs Eco' chart

Naseerudin Shah & Acting

On one of the screenings that we had, my mentor, Deepak Verma made us watch a lecture by Naseeruddin Shah.

In the lecture he talks about a lot of the principles of acting in a way that most people could understand. There was a lot to take away from that, like how acting teaches you how to live in your imagination, how attempting to perform an action that you perform everyday can be so difficult in acting. How when you're acting, you will never have to play a neutral moment.

My personal favourite though, was when he said that any character can do anything at any time. So when we say "that doesn't seem like something the character would do", that argument becomes invalid.

I found it especially interesting because its with great contrast to real life, where we do live as characters, but many times we choose to go out of our way to do something that we wouldn't normally do.



Naseeruddin Shah, "Koi bhi character kuchh bhi kar sakta hai"

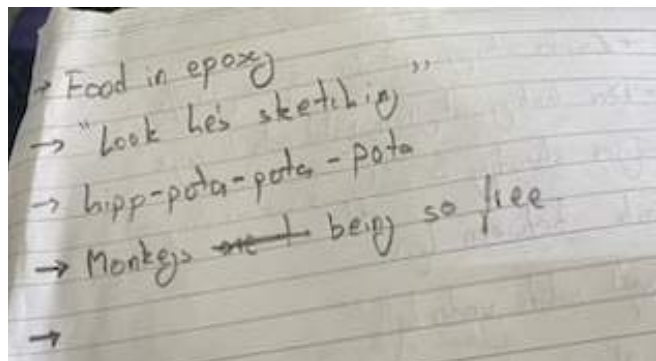
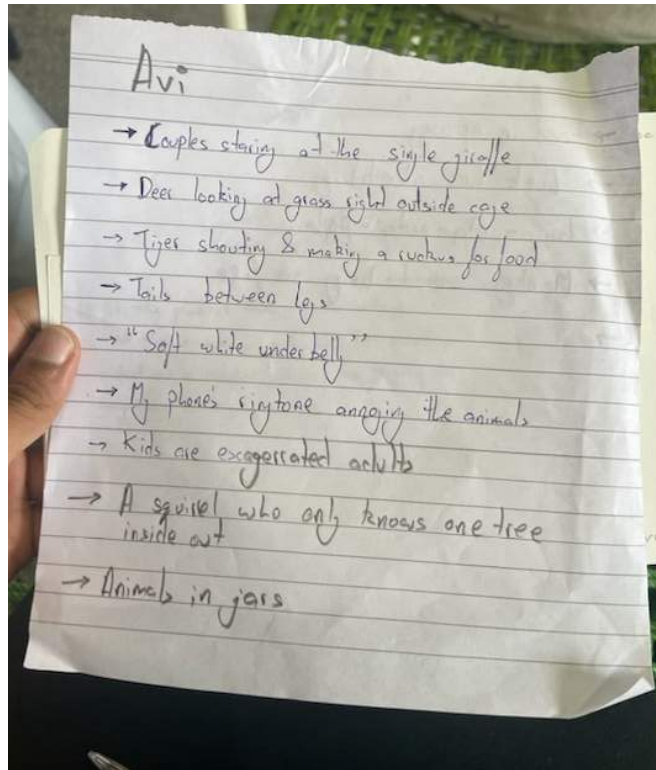
Site Visits

Bannerghatta National Park

Bannerghatta National Park is a national park located in the south of Bangalore. During our research, we were taken to the Bannerghatta Zoo, to observe the animals, and how they are treated. And while soaking in our experience, make notes, and figure out what really stuck out to us.

For me personally, I observed a lot of little tropes and one-liners that I thought were somewhat ironic or somehow made for a good shot in a movie. Here are the notes that I made:

- Couples staring at the single giraffe
- Deer looking at grass right outside cage
- Tiger shouting and making a ruckus for food
- Tails between legs
- "soft white underbelly"
- My phone's ringtone annoying the animals
- kids are just exaggerated adults
- a squirrel who only knows one tree inside out
- Animals in jars



Charlie's Animal Rescue Centre

Short for CARE, the animal rescue centre is one of the largest private ones in Bangalore that operates on donations.

CARE was really impressive. They had an extremely wide range of animals that they were sheltering, including dogs, cats, chickens, goats, pigs, horses and turtles.

While talking to them, they even mentioned that as long as there's funding, and as long as they have space, they're willing to help as many animals as they can.

CARE also had a trauma centre for injured animals, and it came as a surprise to me when I found out that Dr Lohith would often visit as the main doctor over there because Dr Lohith was also the same doctor who had treated Cookie when he'd fallen. My respect for him increased a lot after I found out



CUPA & Karuna

CUPA stands for Compassion Unlimited Plus Action. It's Bangalore's oldest animal care centre, also providing education and veterinary services. Established in 1991 by Ms. Crystal Rogers, CUPA now runs seven centres all around Bangalore that work with diverse causes. We went to visit the main CUPA centre near Hebbal, which had a veterinary clinic, a hospital and the Karuna centre. We were told that the whole establishment had started during the British Raj.

My experience with CUPA was really traumatic. It felt like something wrong was going on the moment we entered. We couldn't take a lot of pictures because people kept staring at us, and we couldn't get into a lot of places because they were just simply too scared to let us in, asking us to get an official permission slip from our college before entering.

After a little bit of asking nicely, one of the ladies let us into the Karuna Centre. We found out that it was a shelter for abandoned dogs. Dogs that had some sort of chronic disease, so their parents just dropped them here because they couldn't see them die. Or dogs that were just simply too aggressive to be a pet.

The moment we walked in it was extremely traumatic. The dogs were caged in little cubicles. They sit and sleep in their own piss. All of them were traumatized, screaming and

howling for dear mercy. Animals aren't meant to be caged that way.

The shouts and howls from the karuna centre haunted me for a week after my visit, and still sends chills up my spine as I write this.

And God,
please let the deer
on the highway
get some kind of heaven.
Something with tall soft grass
and sweet reunion.
Let the moths in porch lights
go some place
with a thousand suns,
that taste like sugar
and get swallowed whole.
May the mice
in oil and glue
have forever dry, warm fur
and full bellies.

If I am killed
for simply living,
let death be kinder
than man.

- Althea Davis

A poem I was reminded of on my visit



The couple of pictures I could get on my visit



Chasing Tails

Chasing Tails isn't an official site visit but I felt like including it here because I did gain some valuable insights while I was there.

The story goes that while Cookie was in the hospital, me and my dad went scouting for other nearby Vets, to get a second opinion about his situation. And it just so happened that chasing tails had recently opened up close to our house. And since it was a relatively new hospital, not a lot of people knew about it, so their main doctor was more than ready to simply just have a chat with us.

He was a very grounded, honest person, and he saw the worry on our faces as we were talking to him and gave us genuine advice.

But one thing I learnt was that in India, a lot of people still don't have the same kind of affection for animals to keep them as pets. In fact, only Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore have a market for veterinary clinics, and many states don't even have X-rays for animals. Maybe because of this, the veterinary courses in India teach mainly about domestic animals like cows, sheep and hens. This is also obviously because it is more economically beneficial to teach about these animals.



Crafting a Narrative

Medium of choice & Outcome

I work with 3D softwares such as Maya, Substance and zBrush. And I have always wanted to experiment with the medium of film properly, make a short film for myself.

So I have decided that my final output is going to be a 3D animated film.

Iterations

When it came to crafting a narrative, one of the ideas I had was to use a sort of dystopia narrative, where the protagonist's crafting bond with a cat helps him survive through a world slowly turning dystopian. His relationship with his cat helps keep him sane as well, and maybe in the process, he meets a girl. They grow old in this healing dystopia, and the cat passes away in the end.

In these scenes, the cat will be a symbol for everything that the protagonist has accomplished since he befriended the cat, like surviving the dystopia and gaining relationships.

Story first draft

An old protagonist sits close to the fireplace, he seems to be looking down on his right moving his hand.

We see that he is petting his cat, who is closer to the fireplace. The cat is sleeping on a towel, calm music is playing, there's a picture kept next to him of him and his owner buying bread from a bakery.

camera moves closer to the picture. sudden cut to a different time, same place.

The protagonist is patchy and poor, he walks into the bakery for food. He doesn't have enough money. The bakery owner is annoyed because this isn't the first time this has happened, and he can't have him scare away his other customers. In an act of selfishness, and to teach him a lesson, he takes the plate he prepared for him and throws it into the trash.

The protagonist retaliates. Two of the pedestrians catch wind and help kick him out of the shop. The protagonist falls to the floor. The environment is foggy, theres a street light that flickers, there's barely anyone around, its night and its cold.

as he opens his eyes on the floor, he sees half a cigarette, he picks it up, stands up and starts smoking it.

As he walks down the street, he passes by an alleyway. A dog looks up to him and runs away. He looks down and sees an injured cat.

The protagonist keeps walking, ignoring what he has just seen. He takes 5 steps and stops. He looks down. He looks at his wallet, without opening it. He looks at his broken watch. He quickly looks up. Looks down again, As he quickly breathes in, he turns around and starts running to the alley way. He picks up the cat in his coat and runs to his boat.

A woman from behind sees all of this. He boards his boat and reaches his small house. He uses his first aid kit to wrap the cats wounds, a woman knocks at the door, she happens to be a vet.

They somehow bond over healing this cat. Over time he finds himself less miserable (not quite sure how to show it yet).

As they calm down they see a bright flash of light through the windows.

~~Time passes, him and the cat are wrapped tight. Most of his problems are solved. He isn't poor anymore, he seems to be living a normal life. Newspapers fly around as he enters the old bakery in broad daylight. The owner gets a picture taken with him because he's been planning for a while to shut down the bakery. While this is all happening, the news reporter from the tv in the background slowly begins to shout.~~

~~The protagonists wife enters running into the shop, says run.~~

~~They manage to escape just in time.~~

~~The nukes fall~~

~~The protagonist, the cat, and the wife are stuck on the island for a while.~~

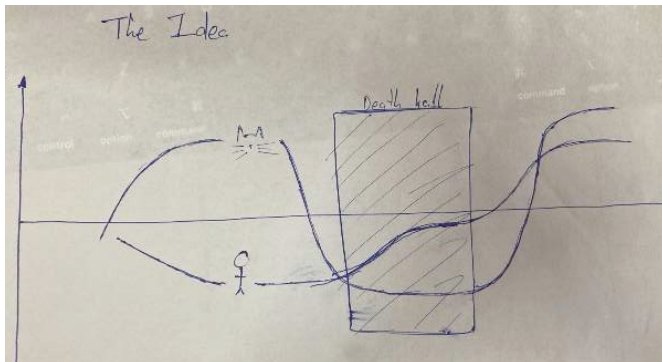
from the cat's camera perspective, we see time pass. We see the house grow larger, we see visitors come to give them a hug in the aftermath, we see the whole world sunken, with islands left behind. But we also see that in times of happiness and in times of sadness, the cat knows. The protagonist and the cat have always been close.

Cut to the present. There are two boats parked outside. The baker, the wife and the cat are sitting around the cat. The cat slowly blinks, switching camera perspectives he does it again but this time his eyes don't open.

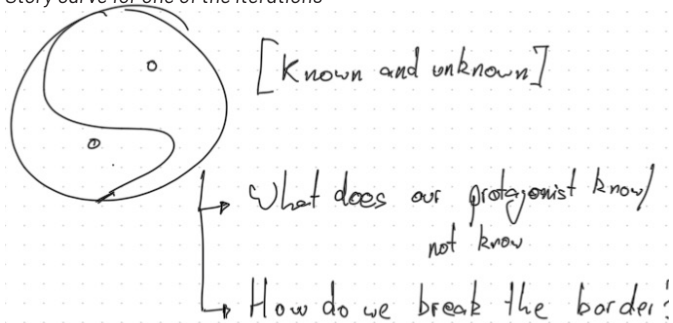
~~Cut to a white light, gods feet appear, god crouches down. The cat purrs. Fade to black~~

This, however, simply did not work. There were too many flaws with the story, like continuity errors, not being able to set it in a more relatable place, and just general dissatisfaction with the way that the film tends to force a feeling rather than being something more genuine.

Over the next couple of weeks, I kept experimenting with more ideas, like what if the protagonist could visually see what the cat was feeling? or what if the cat could visually see the protagonist's feelings? What if the whole film was from the perspective of the cat? What if the film was about the life cycle of the cat? What if instead of a life cycle the film showed a sort of death cycle?



Story curve for one of the iterations



None of these stories worked or were too unsatisfactory, for various reasons.

UTOPIA	DISTOPIA
→ The ideal version of society, no war, no disease, can be hard to create, even in fiction. → Animals can play a significant role in the communities harmony → Companions / cohabitants → Society values preservation of nature & animals	→ Not-so-ideal, lots of war, disease, easy to create. very sad, lots of disp → Animals can be used as tools of oppression & control - mutations. → Animals can be used to serve human needs & desires. → Relationship b/w animals & humans can be one of survival - both, helpful & dangerous animals.

ACT 1 "Establishing the plot"

A house cat, wakes up his humans, gets belly rubs, eats his food and then goes out to play

while playing he stands on the edge of the balcony, something ticks him off and the next thing he knows he's standing at heaven's gates.

He slowly opens the door, light fills the frame.

ACT 2

The cat travels to an island where he is explained of his purpose, which was to soak up the sorrows of an absurd life. he is then sent back to the real world.

ACT 3

he is now a street cat. he silently walks out of an alleyway and sits on a bench next to a homeless person.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT?

- what it feels like to have a pet die
- what it feels like to fight about survival over freedom
- what it feels like to own a cat

One of the story iterations noted down

My eventual story was born while I was reading a little notebook I have which is a collection of quotes from books, movies and songs.

This, combined with a song I had heard that day, named "I'd like to walk around in your mind" by Vashti Bunyan

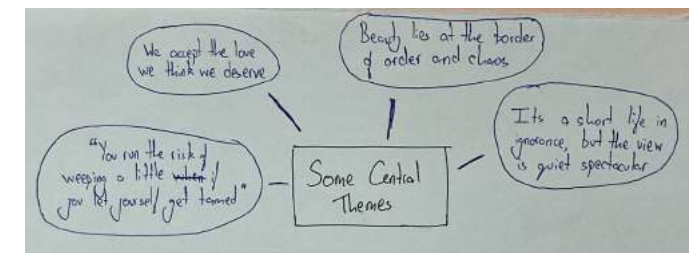
Here are some of the quotes that helped me craft my story:

- "You run the risk of weeping a little when you let yourself get tamed" (The Little Prince)

- "We accept the love we think we deserve"

- "Beauty lies at the border of order and chaos"

- "Its a short life in ignorance, but the view is quiet spectacular"



The story

While driving back home after work, the protagonist parks his car next to a lake and walks over to sit at its bay.

While he walks back to his car, as he waits for the traffic to clear up, he meets a cat that wants to cross the road with him.

He picks up the cat, helps him cross the road, and lays the cat on the roof of his car. While having a moment staring into his eyes, the protagonist finds himself entering a giant monument of the cat's eye.

During a moment of connection, the protagonist experiences a surreal journey into the cat's mind, witnessing the entirety of its life, from past to future, including the inevitable end. This vision ends abruptly as the protagonist sees the cat's death.

The evening has grown darker, and the protagonist still finds himself staring into the cat's eye. The protagonist quickly decides to adopt the cat, despite all the inevitable pain he has seen the cat's death cause.

The traffic begins to slowly clear up, and the protagonist drives back home with the cat.

Refining

Once I was confident in my story, and had shown it to my faculty Deepak Verma, I began refining the story. I started with trying to figure out a rough way to visualise the story. For this, I started browsing Pinterest to search for the exact paintings that in sequence roughly show the experience I was trying to craft



EXT. SUBURBS (DAWN)

We see a one-way road with moderate moving traffic of hatchbacks and family cars. A tree on one side of this road tries to hide the lake behind it.

A man is at the lake, listening to music on his speakers while fishing in the lake. He has his sleeves rolled up, he is wearing a cap, thinking of something by himself.

CUT TO:

He puts the fish in a basket, turns off his radio and prepares to head back to his car.

As he reaches the road, we see that the traffic has become stagnant. A cat approaches the man from behind, maybe for the fish. But the protagonist assumes he wants to cross the road.

He bends over to pick up the cat, before which he lets the cat smell him first to establish some sort of trust.

He picks up the cat and crosses the road. Lays down the cat on the bonnet of his car and stares at him in the eye for a while.

PROTAGONIST
(mumbling to himself)
What's wrong?

EXT. CAT'S RETINA MONUMENT

As they stare into each other's eyes, the protagonist finds himself in front of a giant monument of the cat's retina.

The monument of the retina is emitting light, almost calling him to enter it, and so he does.

EXT. DARK ALLEY IN THE RETINA

It is quite clear to the protagonist that he's living in fiction, premonitions of the future appear in front as he walks down the dark road.

He stops and sees a scene from the future, where he opens his door to his new-found cat for the first time, lays him down, and they share a moment of new found trust. The cat wraps himself around the protagonist's legs, looking up, almost thanking him and asking him for food at the same time.

CUT TO:

INT. PROTAGONIST'S HOUSE

He sees the cat's room get set up. What once used to be a useless corner of his house now has his litter box, his food bowl, and naively placed, a shoebox with a bedsheet that the cat can sleep in.

The cat slowly walks past it all and jumps onto the window sill to observe the rain.

It starts raining harder, the cat makes himself comfortable.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. DARK ALLEY IN THE RETINA

The protagonist continues walking down the darkness and sees a bit farther into the future.

INT. PROTAGONIST'S HOUSE (MORNING)

We see the same corner of the house again, a grown-up cat jumps down the window sill and walks across the frame.

He jumps atop the protagonist's bed to wake him up.

The protagonist wakes up, gets off the bed, and as he stands there for a while, the cat swirls around his legs.

The protagonist feeds the cat. A little bit of time passes by, and they play ball. Everything seems alright for a second.

PROTAGONIST

If this isn't nice I don't know
what is.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. DARK ALLEY IN THE RETINA

The protagonist continues walking, this time a little longer. Maybe because he wants to see the end of this tunnel now.

He reaches a cliff and just stands there for a while and waits. He doesn't really know what to do anymore.

After a while, a cat slowly walks up to him and sits by his side.

It's his cat, all grown up.

A light emerges ahead of the cliff, the cat walks off the cliff, is lifted into the air. His muscles become loose, his eyes close.

PROTAGONIST

Oh god.

CUT TO:

EXT. SUBURBS (DAWN)

The protagonist is still staring into the cat's eye.

We see him bend over from behind the car, so as to hide the cat.

CUT TO:

INT. PROTAGONIST'S HOUSE (EVENING)

The main door opens, and the cat is let into the house. The cat swirls around his legs.

FADE TO BLACK.

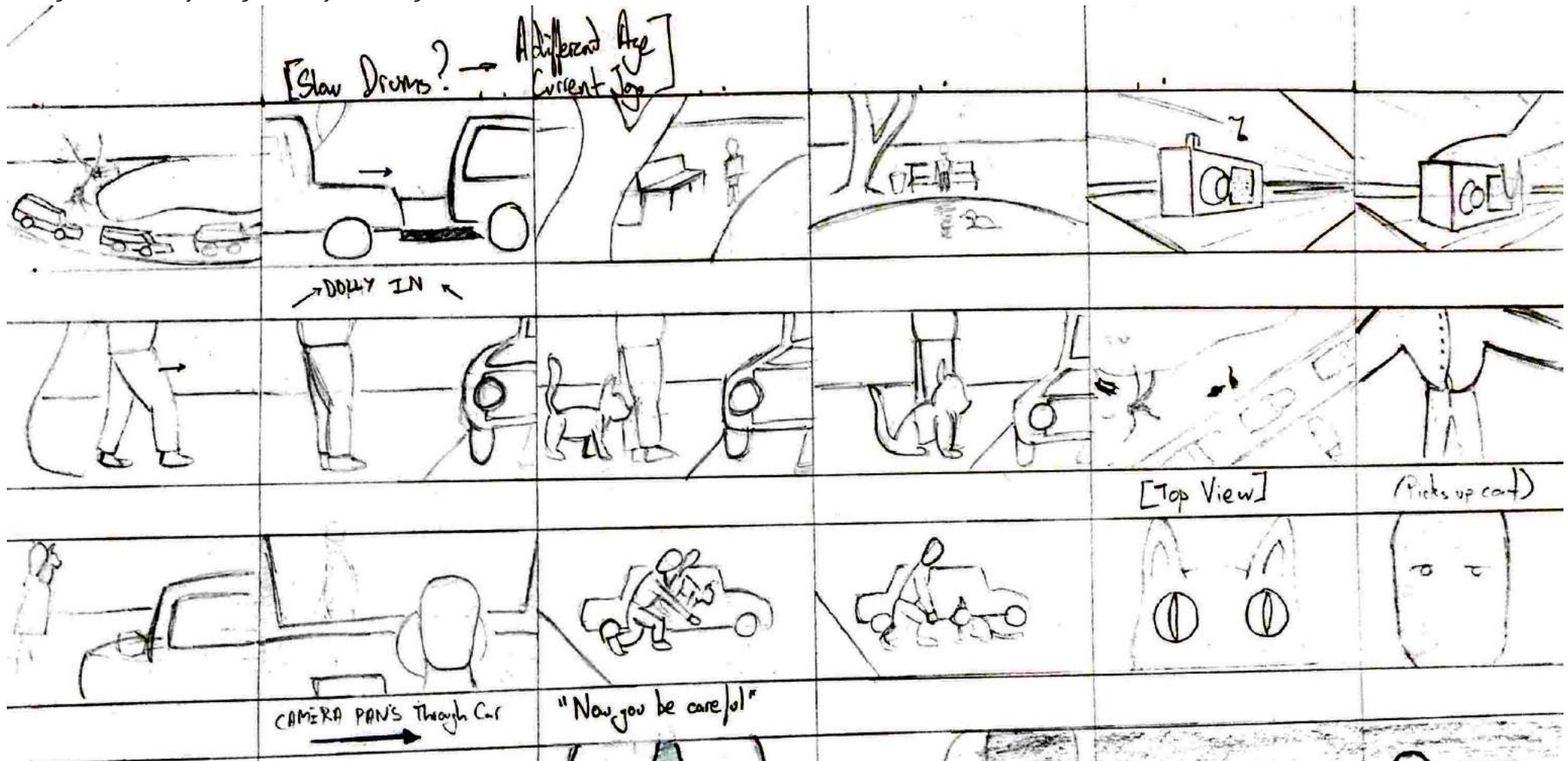
Storyboarding & Animatic

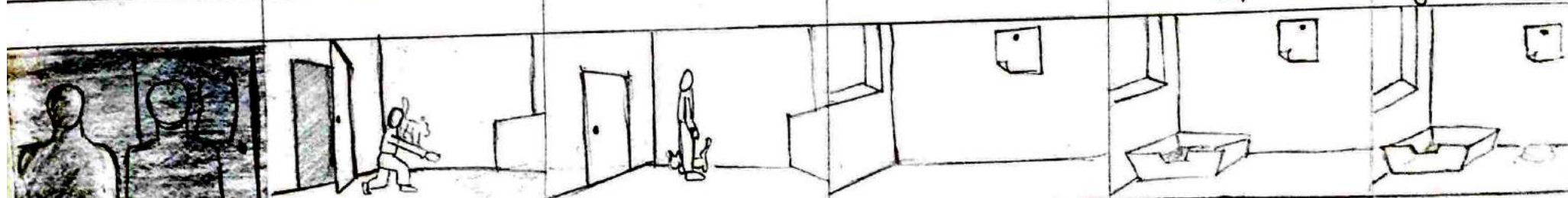
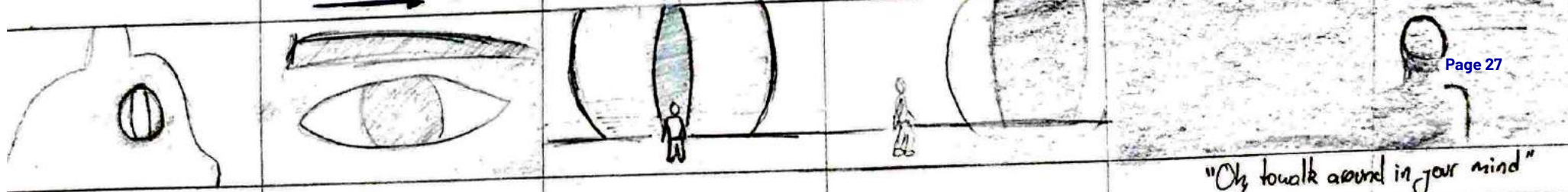
To get a rough understanding of the degree of difficulties and specificities of editing, and some production work, I made a quick storyboard.

An animatic of this storyboard would also help me understand how long the film could end up being, and if everything is really working.

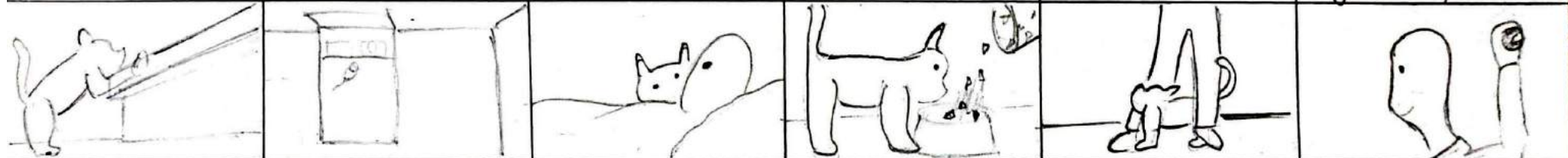


[Link to animatic](#)

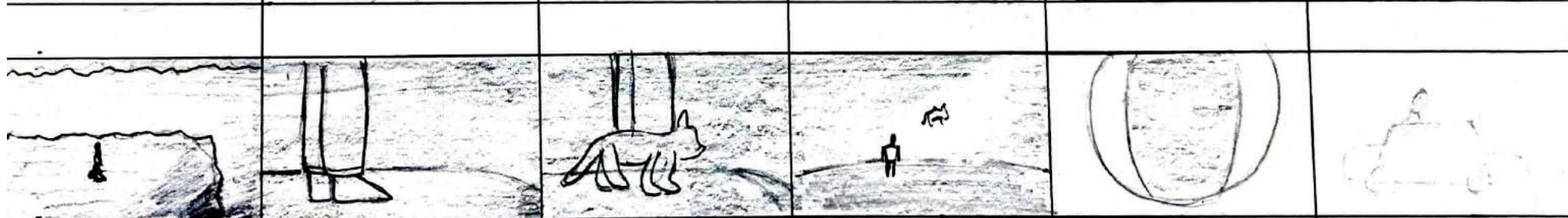
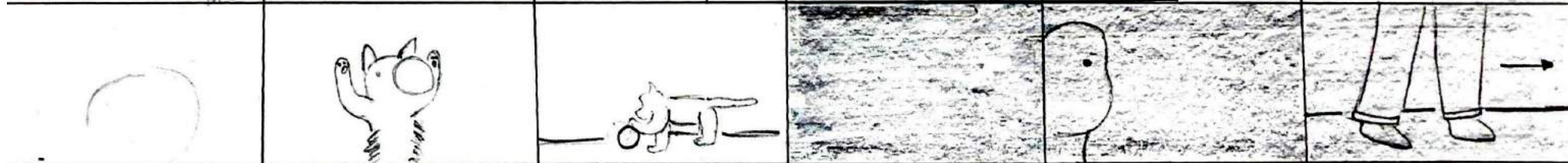




FADE OUT * lick tock lick tock * → DOLLY IN ← → Bed disappeared → Walls Low → Sign looks old paw stains.



PAN to side of the bed



"Oh God"

CUT

* Purr *

Character Design

Though I had an extremely iterative process in coming up with a story, my process with the character wasn't so iterative.

Because of the nature of the medium, I knew I had to hurry up with the characters. Making a 3D character is difficult, and back then learning to rig a 4-legged creature in Maya was something I was very much new to.

The Cat

For the cat, I made a basic mesh by sculpting it on top of the default Maya mesh of a cat reference. This helped save a lot of time.

After that, I simply tried to paint in all the details and got on to rigging.

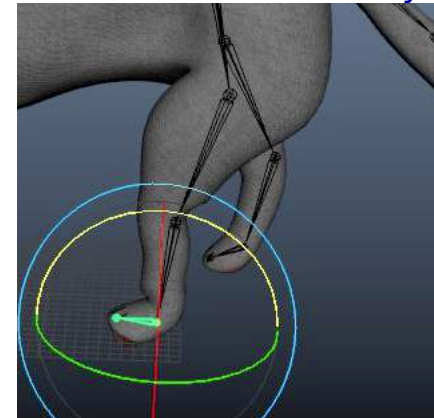
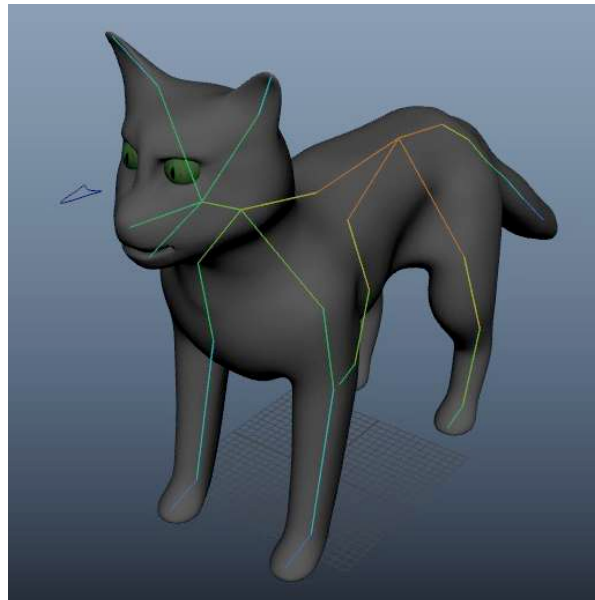
As mentioned before, rigging a cat was a challenging task, because it required me to learn every main aspect of rigging in Maya, which I had never done before. After about a week of rigging, I finally had a model that was somewhat working.

One of the big problems I ran into was that the cat model didn't actually have any fur.

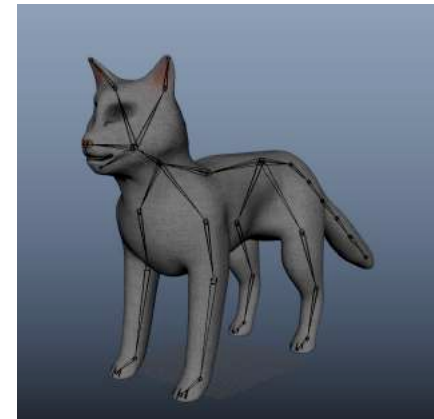
So, I made another model with some test fur. The test fur model was simply a particle system of planes on the base mesh of the cat.

But, I stayed away from this model, mostly because I was scared of overcomplicating a problem that I spent a week getting a solution to - rigging, and also because fur drastically increases render times, and I knew for a fact that would add up during my production month.

The character's design was simply based on the cats I have at home because early on, I was debating on whether I should use live footage.



A rigging screenshot towards the end of development



Some cat textures, and an early rig



Cat with fur

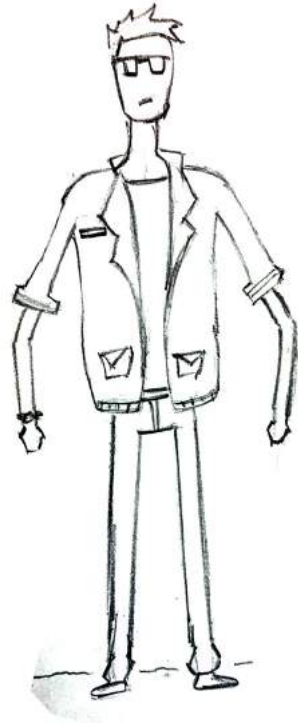
The Protagonist

With the protagonist's design, I had to make it fast because production month was extremely close, and I really just wanted him to feel somewhat relatable.

And to be able to rig and animate him faster, I had to make sure his eyes were extremely simple, he had no mouth, and he could be sent through Mixamo so rigging and animating wouldn't be a problem in the future.

Having these requirements in mind, I drew up a first sketch of a guy in a rough jacket. He's wearing a watch on his right hand and glasses and he has a badge on his side from his workplace, probably because he forgot to take it off. He has a thin physique, wears jeans, drives an old beat-up sedan and his hair is a little all over the place. In the final 3D model I decided to take off his glasses because it was adding unnecessary complexity to the render times.

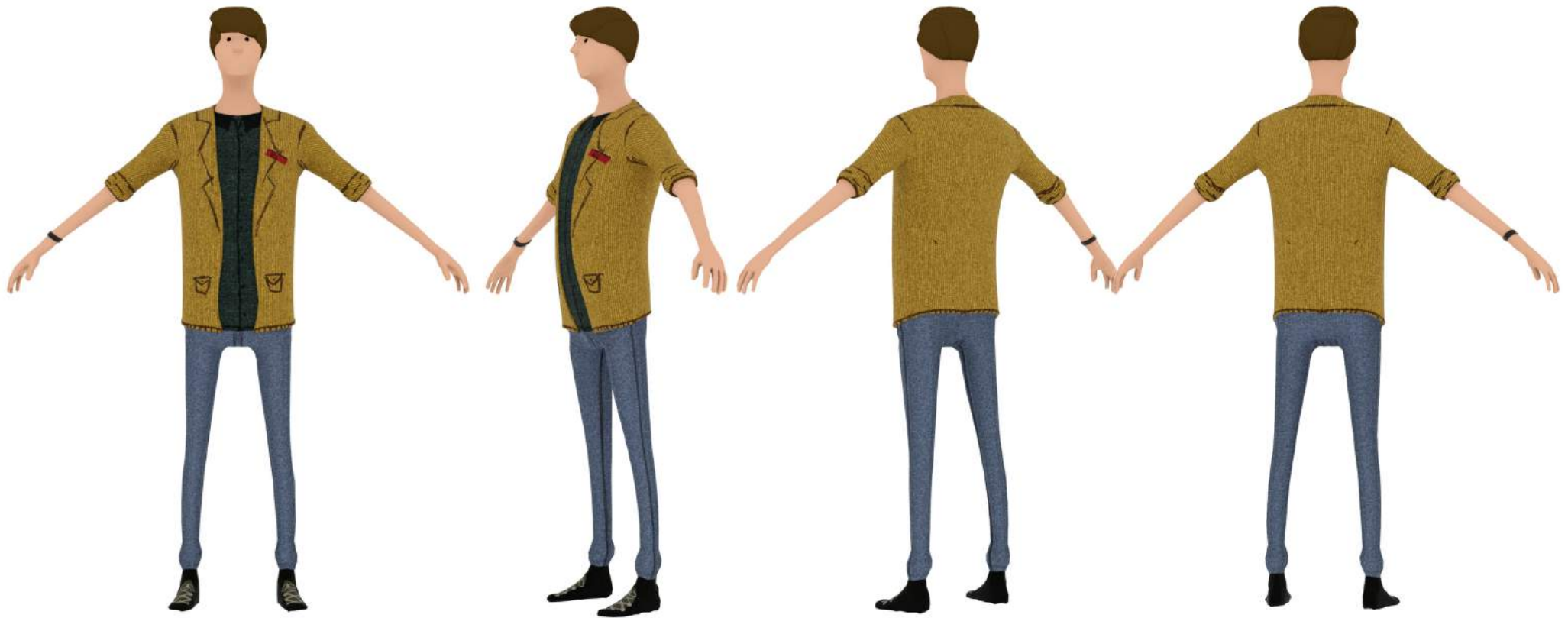
All of this implies that he's probably in his twenties working a small job and he drives the first car he could just barely afford.



A lot of the shots he was placed in required more actions and fewer close-ups because of the way he was designed, no complex facial expressions meant that close-ups looked off, which was very concerning considering I had one important close-up shot in the middle when the scene transitions to the monument of the cat's eye.



Character turnaround



Environment Design

Ext. Explorations

My explorations started with looking at some of the materials I had collected while I was re-searching for the project and crafting the narrative. A lot of the paintings had a sort of dark and gloomy colour palette. I especially liked the compositions in the paintings of Phillipe Charles Jacquette. His paintings often expressed a gloomy version of loneliness, and I thought it really worked well with the feeling that I was trying to sell in the first couple of scenes.



Travelling our Neighbour by
Chin H Shin

White cat watching a butterfly by
Arthur Heyer



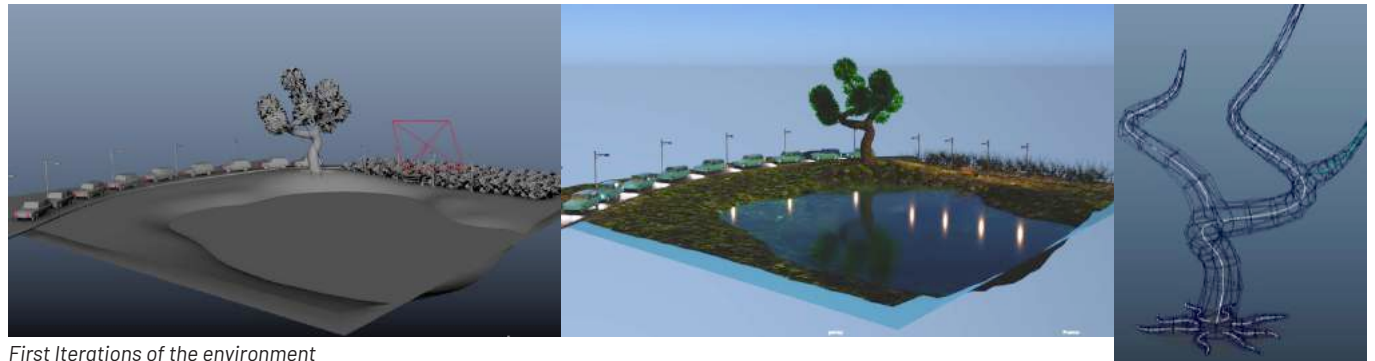
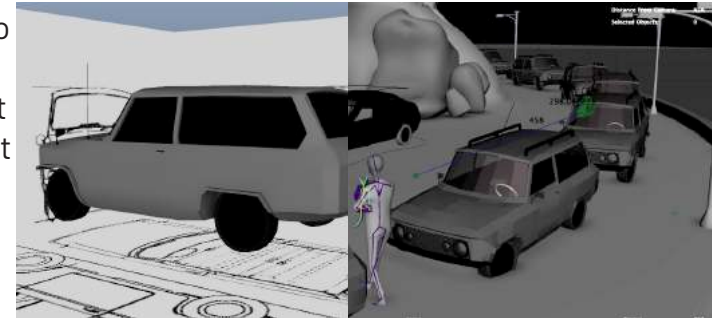
Phillipe Charles Jacquet Paintings

Building on those, I started making 3D scenes of a road next to a lake.

A lot of the results were unsatisfactory for various reasons. But as I kept building, I reached an environment that I finally liked. The big revelation was using fog. This helped with me not having to model a background, not having to search for the exact hdri, better lighting, and a gloomy atmosphere. This did, however, come at the cost of higher than normal render times, but it was worth it.

An asset that had to be repeated to represent the monotonous nature of 'the crowd' was the family car.

The 'family car used' in the project is modelled after a Mazda 800 estate wagon. They were all coloured grey, and to save time by not modelling the interior, I made all the glass materials frosted glass.



First Iterations of the environment



Experimentation of ground textures with a wide shot of the bench

Int. Explorations

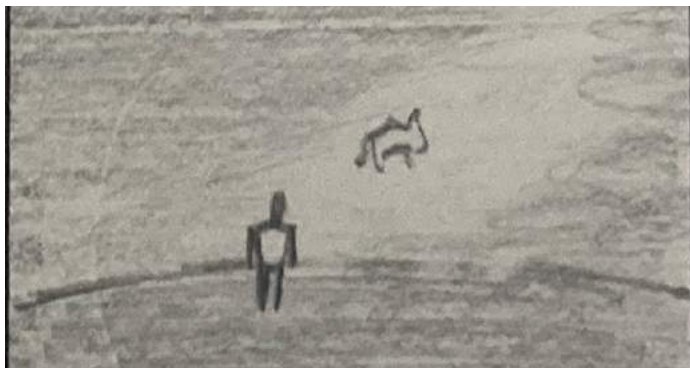
For the dream sequence, after the character enters the eye, I had different ideas and ways to go about it since I started storyboarding.

In the first iteration, the concept was that after the character enters, everything becomes monochromatic. The character keeps walking in a straight line, and he sees visions of himself adopting the cat, living the every day, and then eventually reaches a cliff where he sees his cat passing away. It was meant to be playing with black and white in some way.

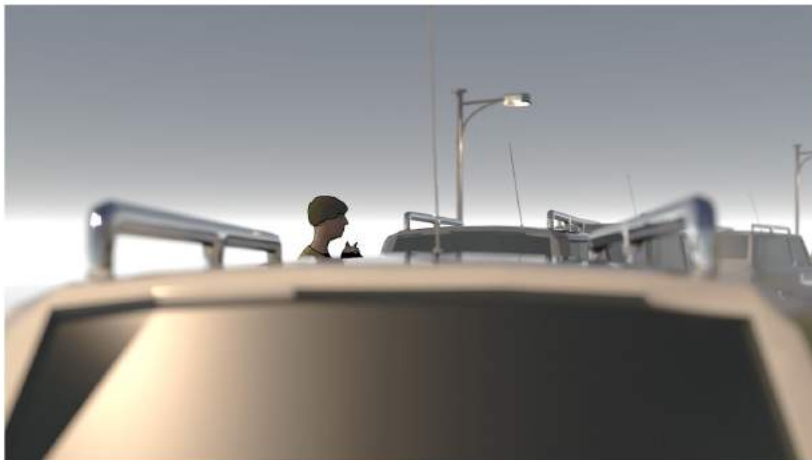
In further iterations, monochromatic evolved to a combination of yellow and green, representing the cat's gaze. This was also when I started considering live-action footage for these sequences rather than animating everything, due to time constraints. But while trying to get footage, I realized that getting my cat to do the exact thing I wanted him to do was impossible. In fact, my cat didn't even like to get outside the house, which was a huge downside because a couple of shots involved me getting a cat into the house.

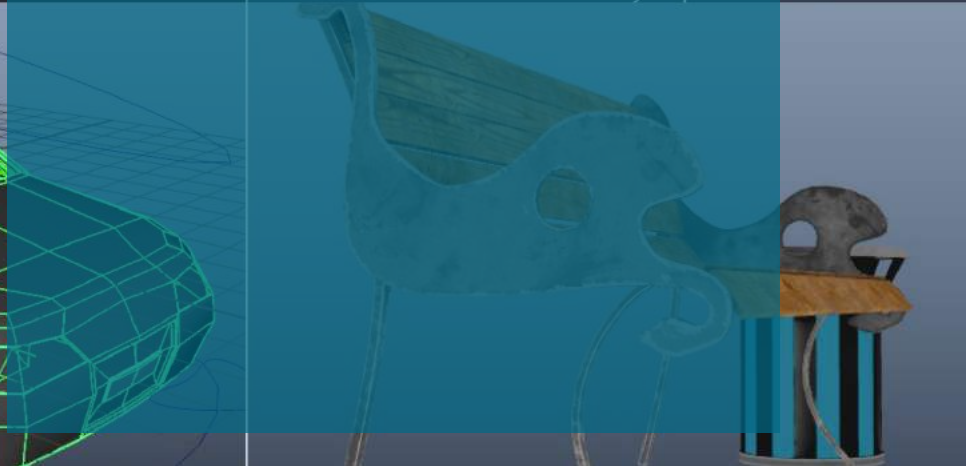
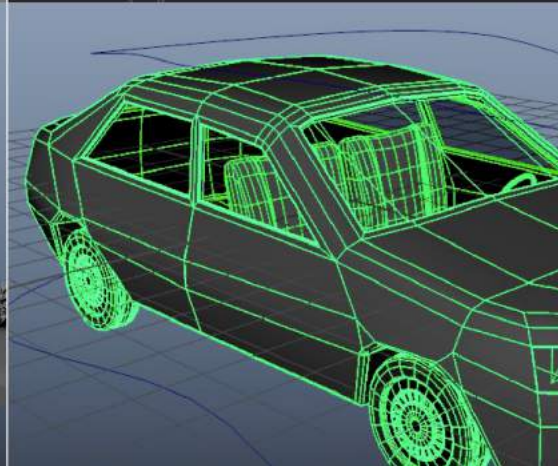
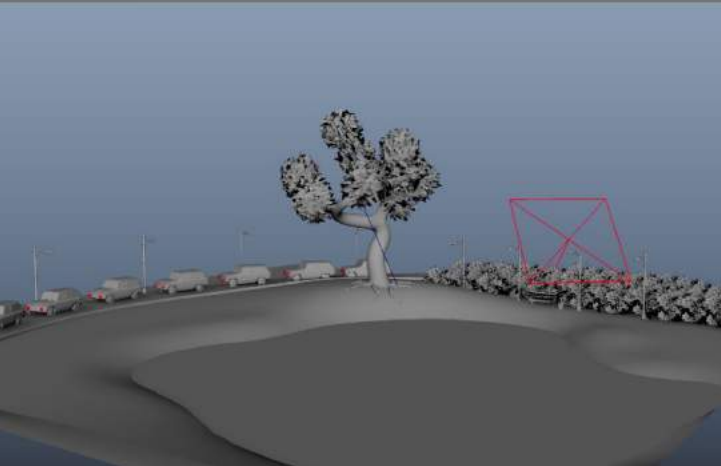
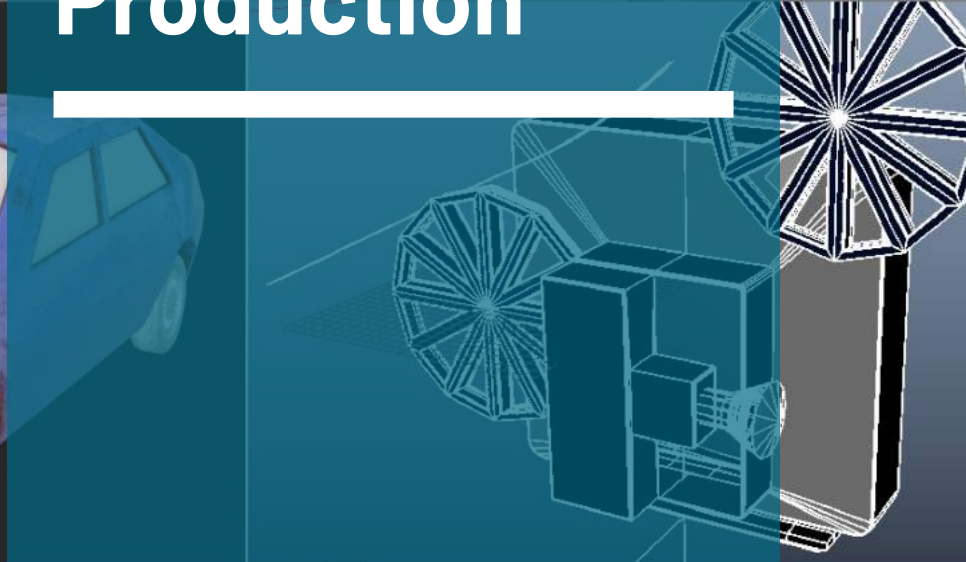
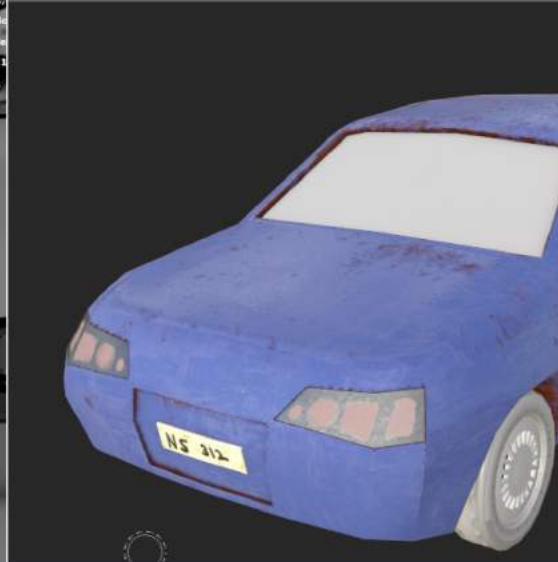
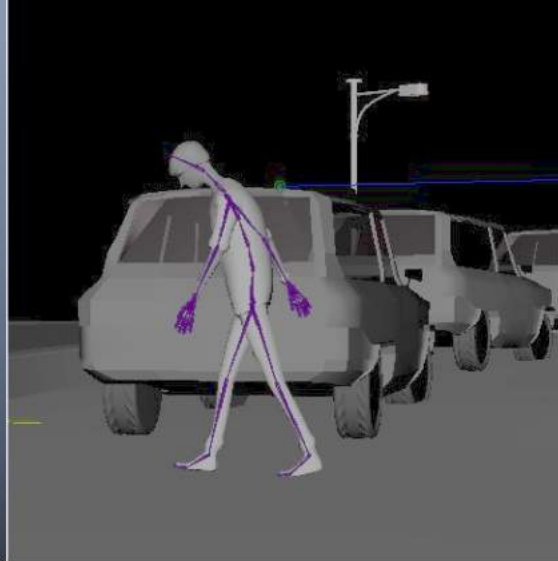
Eventually, what was settled on is that the character floats in instead of walking, establishing a surreal-ness. As the character floats forward, he reaches a film projector, showing a gallery of photos of a kitten in some sort of routine. After fading to black, another video plays of the same cat but older, in the same routine. This would be a video, establishing a sort of "past, present".

After this, the protagonist drops to the floor, gravity turns on again, establishing the character getting grounded to reality. He walks forward, reaches a cliff, and watches as his cat is lifted into the abyss, implying his passing away.



Some Stills



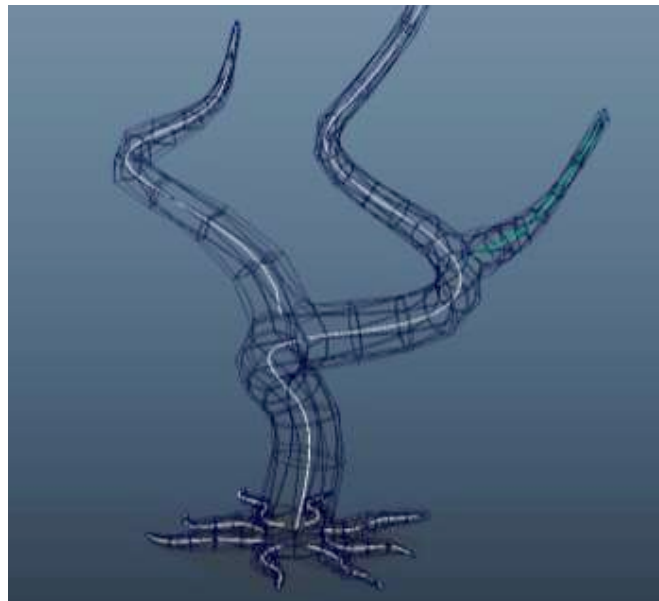
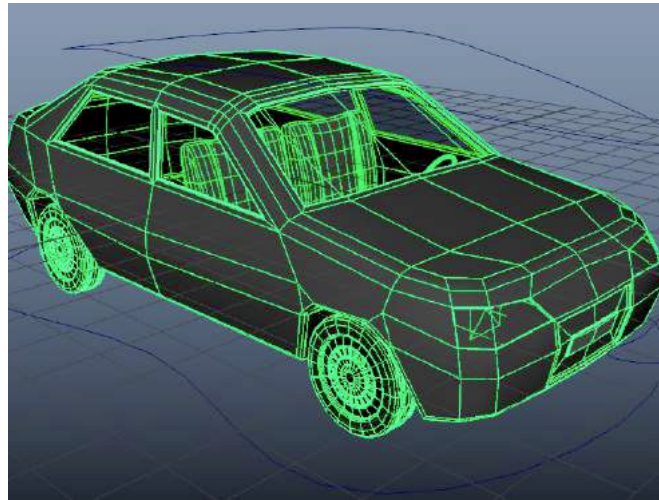
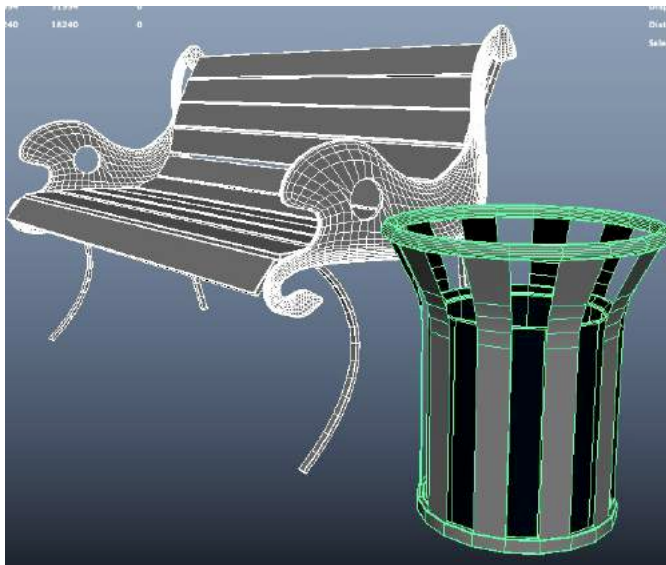


Modelling

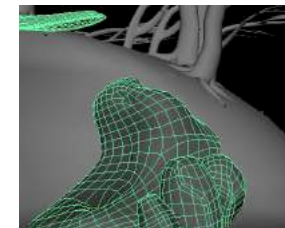
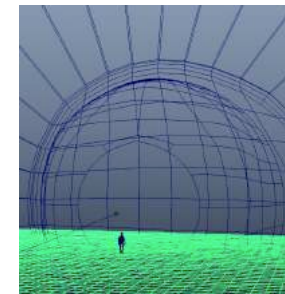
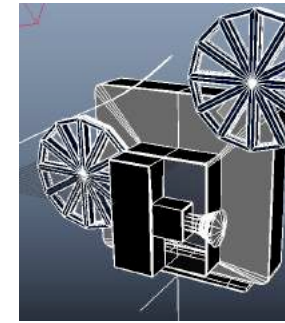
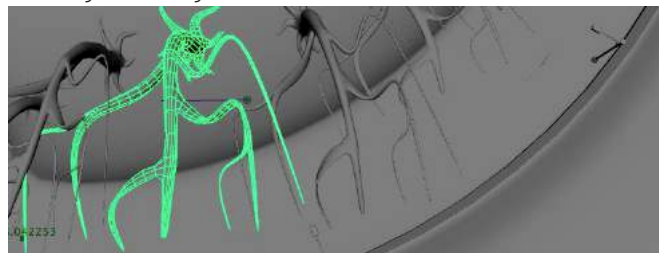
Modelling the assets was done using Maya. Most models were modelled using reference images that were either grabbed from the internet or drawn by hand.

Basic modelling techniques were used like extrude, bevel, scale and rotate for most models. Some models, like the characters, rocks and the landscapes needed sculpting. While modelling, topology was kept in mind.

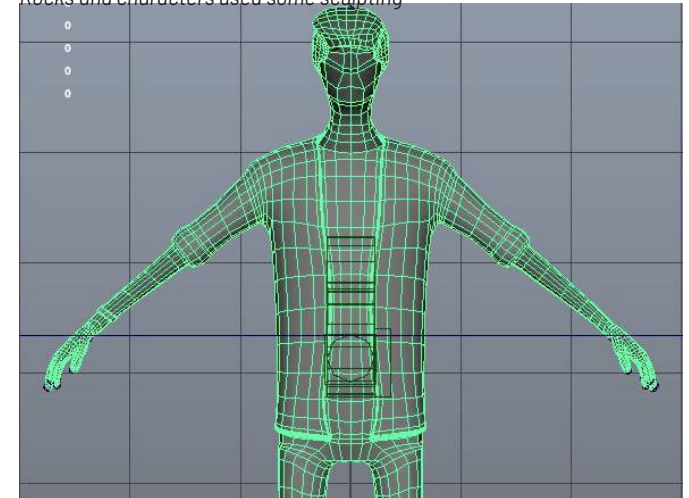
There's a tree that was made using curves and cylinders. Most models are optimized to have lower poly, with the increasing render times.



Modelling a tree using curves



Rocks and characters used some sculpting



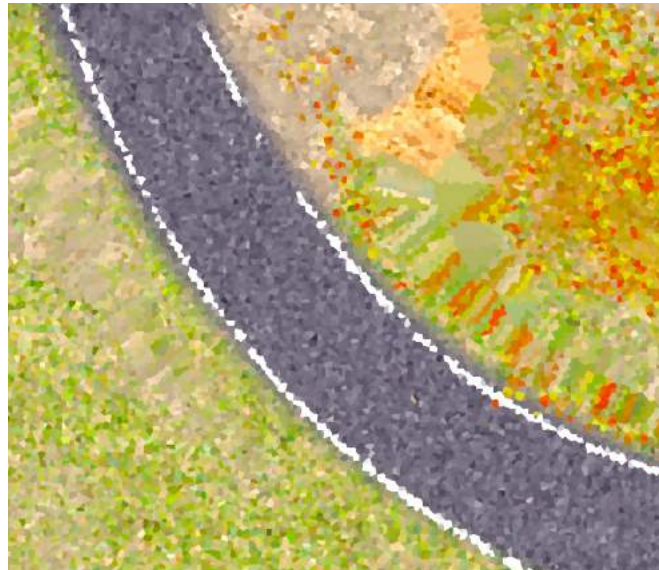
Texturing

Texturing was done using Substance Painter. To add complexities and subtleties, textures were either layered and smart masked, or smart textures were used.

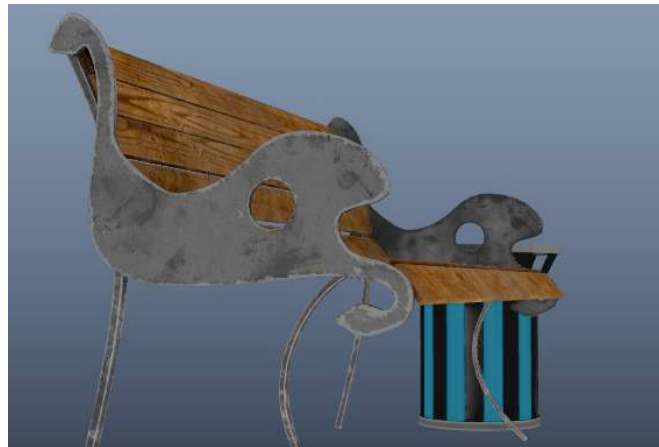
The textures for the terrain were painted. To give it a stylised look, a Photoshop filter was applied to give it a tiled/fractured look.

While applying the materials, a toon shader was used on the characters and the car, to make them stand out from their surroundings.

To make the character of the protagonist a little bit more expressive, I wanted to make him blink. This was achieved by making two textures, one with open eyes and one with eyes closed, and then using a keyframed mix node to animate between the two stages



Tiled/fractured look for the terrain



Closed eyes texture, to be animated later

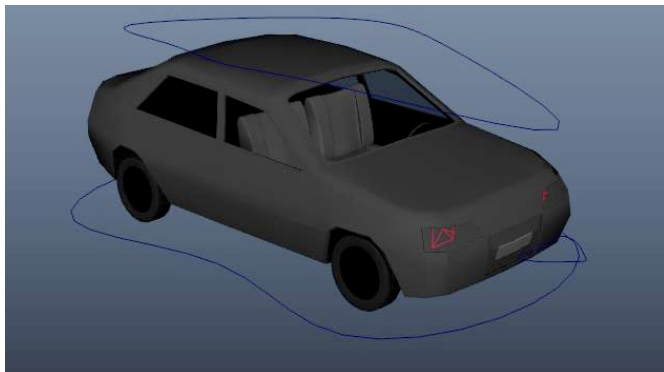


Rigging

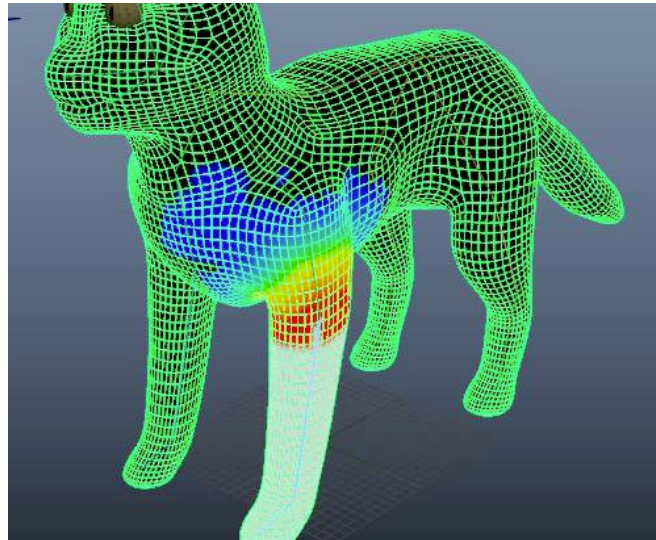
Rigging the cat was done manually because rigging creatures automatically simply isn't possible. For this, I had to learn how to make rigged creatures in maya, which involved learning where a cat's joints should be placed, learning bones, lks and FKs, weight painting, component editor, and hammering in the weights.

And rigging the main character was done automatically through Mixamo. Controllers weren't added to the final rigs. All of these were done to save time on the rigging process.

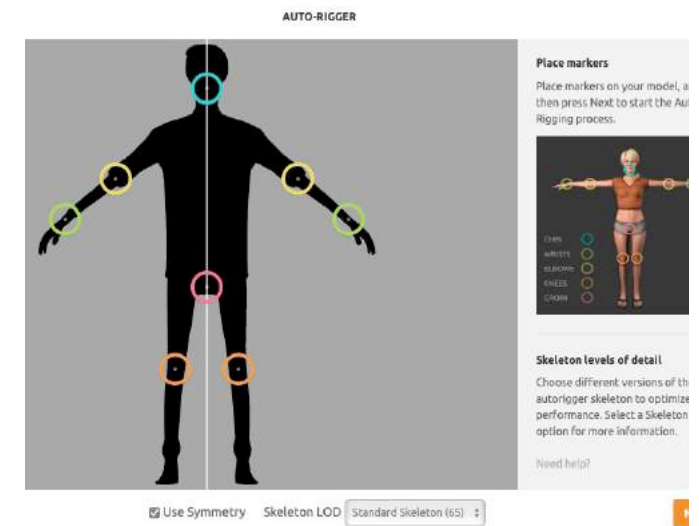
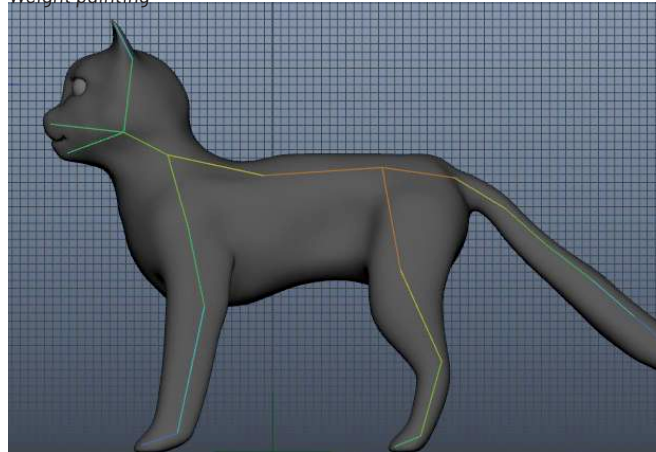
The car was also given a ver simple rig, to be able to change the direction of the tire, give it a suspension to enhance its stopping motion and make it follow a curve.



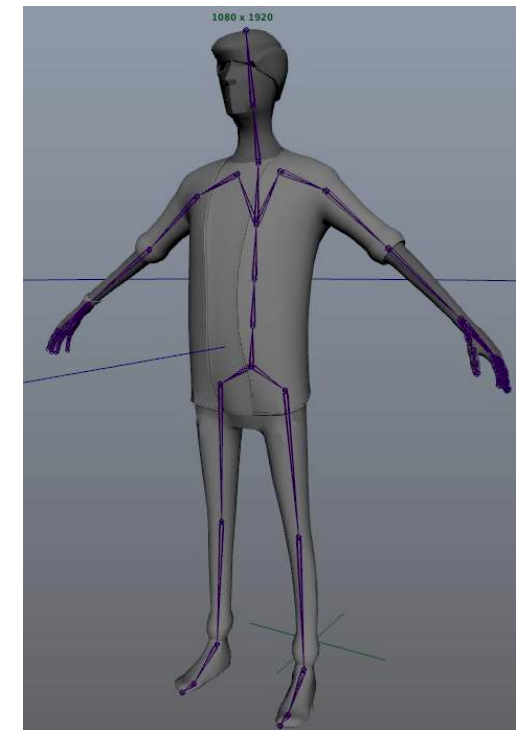
Car's rig



Weight painting



Mixamo auto-rig

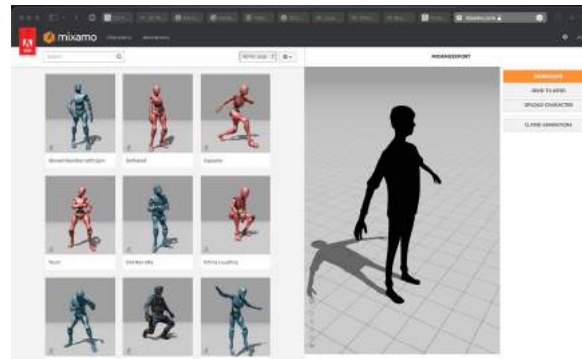


Animation

Animation was partly done automatically using Mixamo, and partly manually using keyframes.

Walk-cycles at the beginning of the film were done manually because I didn't know the time constraint would get in the way when I was starting out, and also because the automatic walk cycles weren't giving me the desired look.

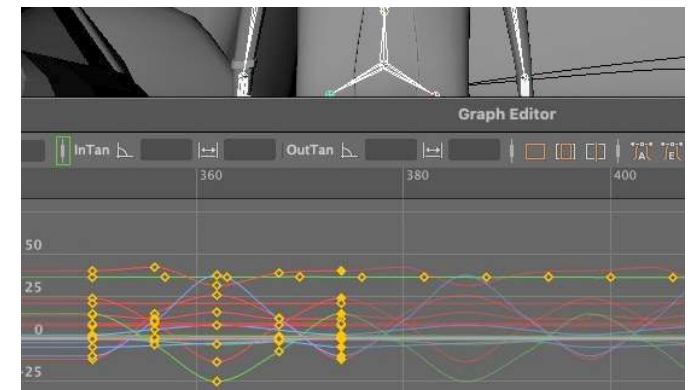
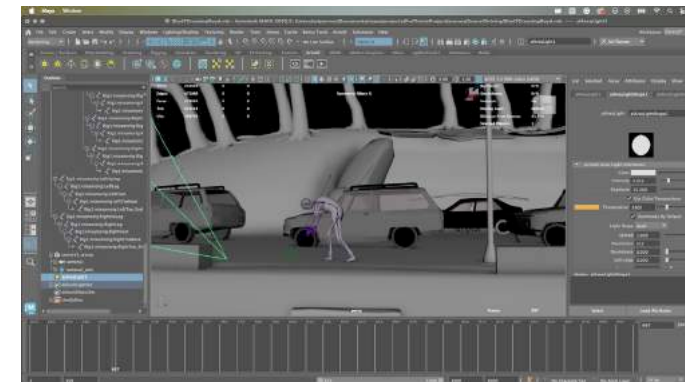
Animating the cat was done manually as well because animating it automatically is impossible. There were a lot of ambient animations as well. Moving the waves of the ocean was done by keyframing the location of the UV of the normal maps. The car was rigged and animated manually. The path of the vehicle was made using curve constraints. The giant eyeball monument was animated using blended shapes.



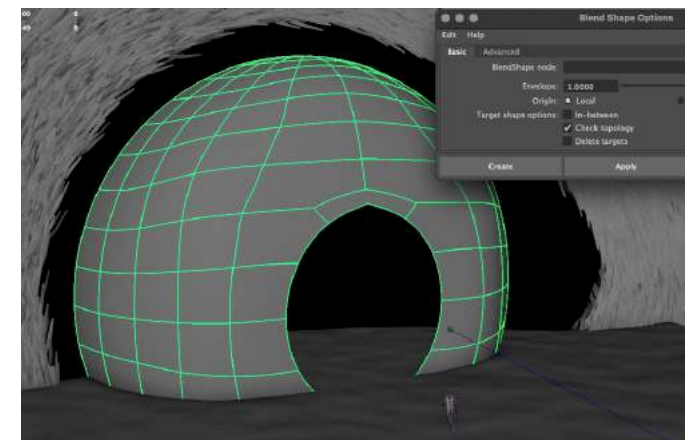
Mixamo animations



Manually animated walk cycle



Car animated manually, with keyframes



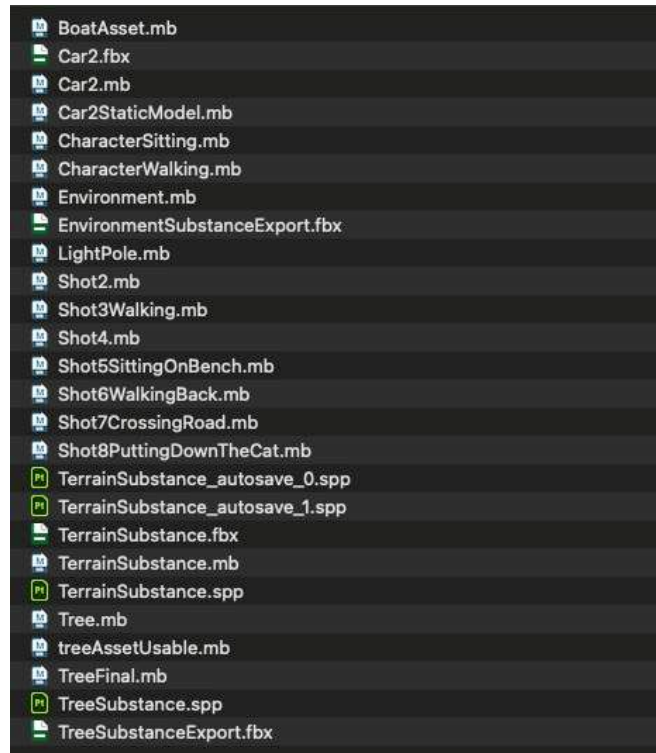
Rendering

Since rendering was predictably the biggest bottleneck in my pipeline, I made sure my computer was rendering all the time while I wasn't working. I also used the new computers in the Srishti Manipal campus to speed up the process.

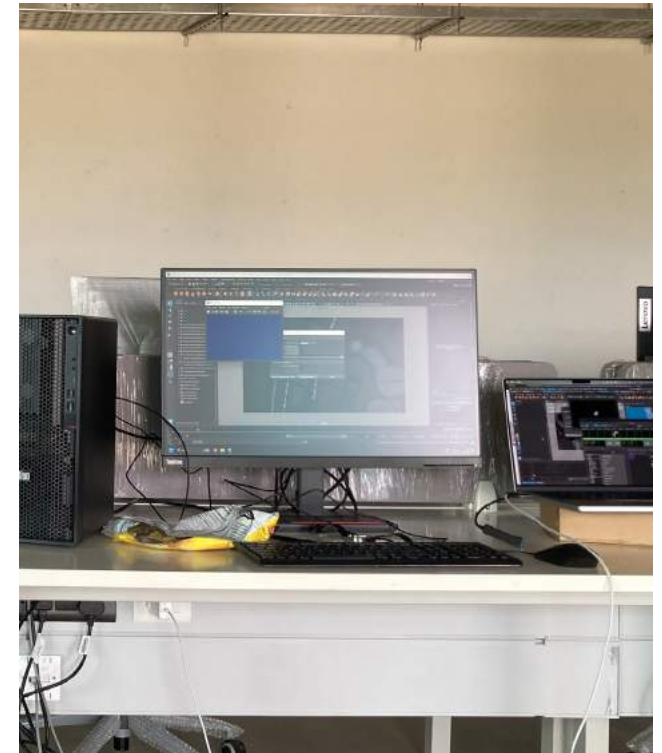
I also made sure that I had a separate Maya binary file (.mb) for every shot, so in case one of the outputs is broken or unsatisfactory, I can always go back and change what I need to.

This helped a lot later, when I did inevitably have to make a lot of changes and re-render a lot of scenes.

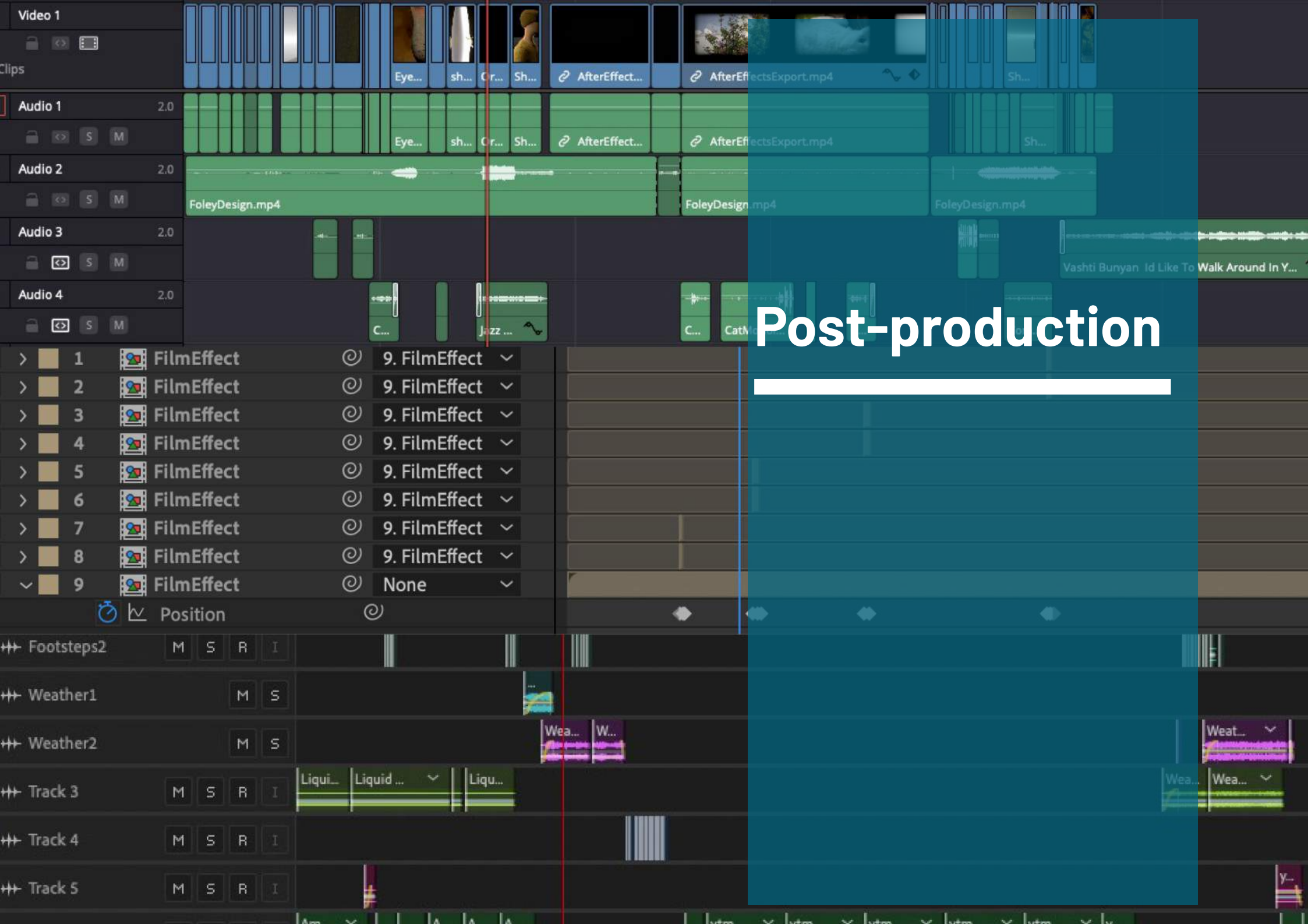
Since this is such a time-consuming task, I was rendering all the way up until the very end, and was left with very little time for post-production.



Multiple files made for every shot



Using more powerful computers for rendering



Post-production

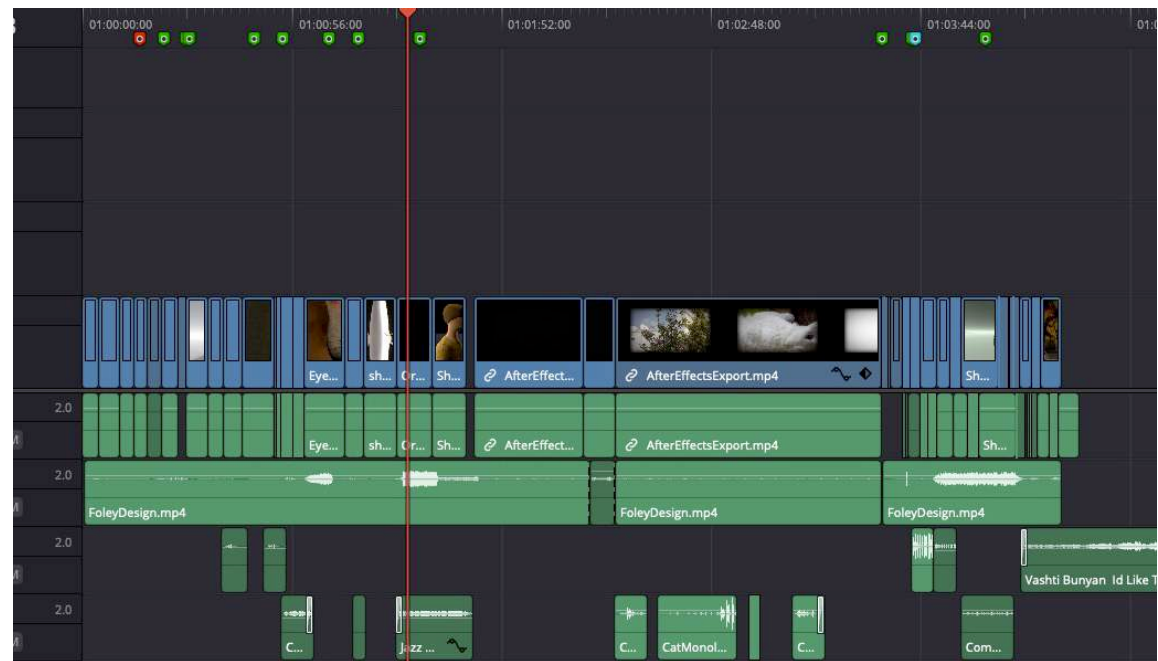
Video editing

Personally, I like to edit without any sound when I make my first edit. This helps me understand if my film, by just it's visuals alone, is getting the story or the experience across.

Editing this film was a fairly simple process. Since all the files were named chronologically, all that was left to do was arrange them together in DaVinci Resolve. Freeze frames were added in places that required gaps because many shots were incompletely rendered to save time. The only part of the film that required editing was the monologue of the live-action footage of my cat.

While editing, principles like change of camera position, change of magnification, providing context, and checking continuity were kept in mind.

Concepts like juxtapositions, metaphors and general meaning-making was mostly decided upon while storyboarding.



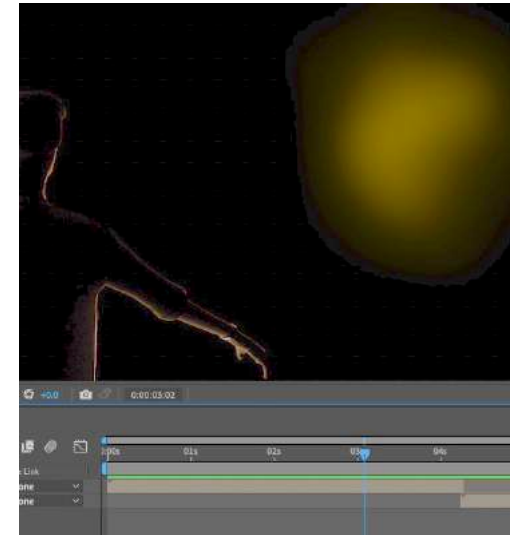
Compositing

There were a lot of shots that required modifications in After Effects. Like in the original shot where the protagonist is swimming towards a film projector, the yellow hue was literally a yellow orb which looked very odd.

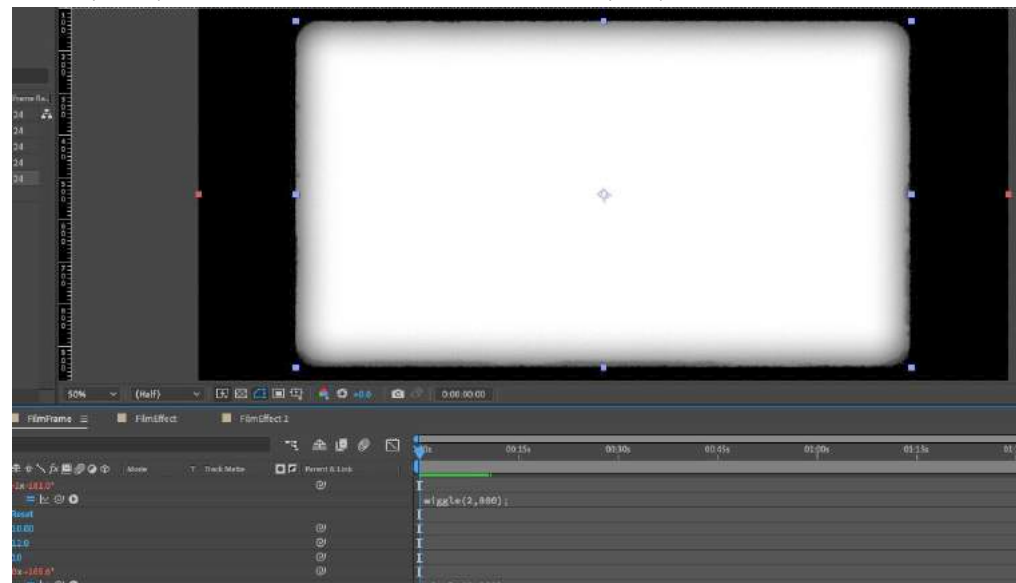
One of the compositing shots that I'm particularly proud of is the one where I made the live action monologue look like something being displayed on a film projector. This was done using a YouTube tutorial which involved masks, textures and randomness algorithms on some of the effect dials.



Orb shot (Before)



Orb shot (After)

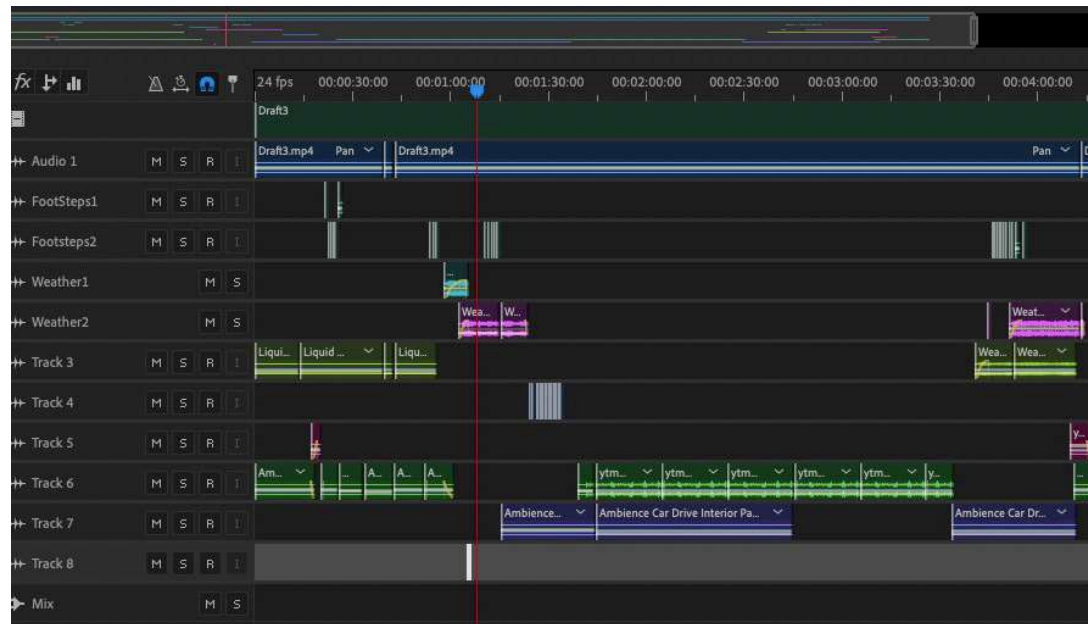


Film look using After Effects

Sound Design

Designing the Foley track was done on Adobe Audition. Music was layered on top of foleys in Davinci Resolve. Some iterations of the soundtrack were made over time, experimenting with the nature of the music, arranging foleys in conjunction with visuals for meaning-making and just generally trying to provide the intended experience.

Adding purrs, playing with the clocks ticking and foleys were added to convey the right experience.



Reflections & Acknowledgements

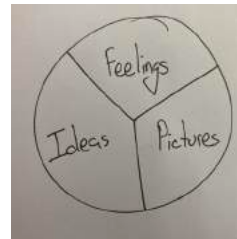
Reflections

As I sit here writing this docbook one day before the deadline, it occurs to me that I've been thinking about this a lot. Almost everyone I have talked to in my friend circle has not been so proud of their pre-thesis project. And a large part of the reason is because in one way or another we have failed the idea of the grandness that came with the idea of a long form project that we had when we first started working. But I personally think this is completely fine.

We must keep in mind that this is our first long form project, there's a lot of things that were unanticipated, problems we are seeing for the first time, and it was inevitable right from the start that we aren't going to make the exact experience that we set out to make. But that's ok, because we know if we've pushed ourselves hard enough, and we're going to do it better next time, and if we fail enough times, maybe one day we might actually be able to make something that is truly magnificent.

So keeping that in mind, I've got to say that for what it is, I'm extremely proud of my project. This was a test to my pipeline, and I pushed it really hard and came out the other end with a film. While I was researching for my film I ran across this little chart that said that a good film has to be able to convey a feeling, has to incorporate good ideas, and needs to have good

pictures (this is from one of the many exurbia videos I was watching at the time). And while crafting the story I tried to do exactly that, and have succeeded at the three in various degrees.



There are a lot of skills that I can improve on, or collaborate with others to fill in the space for, and these will be worked on in my next long-form project, whatever that may be.

I also just wanted to say that for me personally, this has been an extremely difficult period, and in more than some ways this has played into my ability to work on this project. Grief is not an easy feeling, and I was grieving for the first time.

And since the nature of the brief of this film happened to be about animals, I was continuously debating if a part of me was making this film in remembrance of Cookie, if I was involving too much of myself with this film, and sometimes if I really even wanted to make this film.

And of course, as mentioned before, all of these thoughts did play a role in my experience while making this film, in some way or another.

Acknowledgements

A thank you to my mentors, Deepak Verma and Chaitanya Krishnan.

They were always there for me, be it for when I was grieving, when I needed advice or when I needed equipment to get the film done and that means a lot.

I wouldn't ever be able to tell it in person because of the way that I am, but I think it's important to put it into writing when I say that I have always felt that Deepak's guidance has been extremely meaningful through the whole project. I will always be appreciative of the library of films he has, his ability and his patience to teach, and his meaningful advice that played a role in the storymaking of my film.

A small thank you to Vashti Bunyan as well, without whom I would have never heard the song "I'd Like To Walk Around In Your Mind", and the basic story of my film would have never entered my head at that creatively drier period of my life. I think it's important to be grateful to artists who make art.