Engagement Paper for the Animated Film *Mask*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Media Production

University of Regina

By

Xincheng Zhang

Regina, Saskatchewan

February, 2019

Copyright 2019: X. Zhang
UNIVERSITY OF REGINA
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
SUPERVISORY AND EXAMINING COMMITTEE

Xincheng Zhang, candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Media Production, has presented an Exhibition titled, *Mask* and a Support Paper titled *Engagement Paper for the Animated Film MASK*, in an oral examination held on January 9, 2019. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

External Examiner: Prof. Christopher Gehman, York University*

Supervisor: Prof. Gerald Saul, Department of Film

Committee Member: Prof. Ian Campbell, Department of Film

Committee Member: Dr. Philippe Mather, Department of Film

Chair of Defense: Dr. Troni Grande, Department of English

*Via teleconference
Abstract

*Mask* is a stop motion animation film that aims to discuss the impact of emigration on the newcomer as a subject within established societies. The story takes place within an imagined setting, in which a mask is the only official signifier of one’s identity. However, the story still reflects my personal experience in terms of language proficiency and a newcomer’s adjustments to living in Canada. Because of the film’s allegorical characteristics, one of my expectations was to have a diversity of interpretations of the film depending on the viewers’ personal background and experience, rather than the meaning being derived just from my experiences as an international student. In other words, this film’s plot emphasizes a newcomer’s arrival into a strange environment, but how one interprets the environment and character’s suffering changes based on the viewer’s experience. As a result, this paper only provides one way to discuss *Mask*’s multicultural and postmodern features that takes it beyond the boundary of the real into fantasy. This paper will also discuss how the main character, Puppet, is suffering a transformation from having a fear of being an unmasked puppet to having self abjection toward its own body because of an imagined national myth. Moreover, this paper will elaborate on the production process with the use of the 3D printer and explain several artistic and creative decisions that shaped the animation throughout the production.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Gerald Saul for his guidance, patience and encouragement. I could not complete this research project without his help. It has been my pleasure to be his student.

I would like to thank Dr. Philippe Mather and Ian Campbell for serving on my committee and giving me suggestions on my paper. With Dr. Philippe Mather help on my writing, the paper is much more critical and professional.

I would also like to thank members of the Film Department at the University of Regina. Their help and advice helped me finish the research.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, my wife and my parents. Their considerations helped me get through so many difficulties during my student career.
Dedication

To my wife, my father and my mother.
Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... i

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... ii

Dedication ........................................................................................................................................ iii

Contents ........................................................................................................................................... iv

Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 5

Chapter One: Critical context ......................................................................................................... 6

1.1 Multiculturalism ......................................................................................................................... 6

1.2 Postmodernism .......................................................................................................................... 15

Chapter Two: Theoretical framework .......................................................................................... 25

2.1 Abjection Theory ...................................................................................................................... 25

2.2 National Myth- Mythologies written by Roland Barthes ....................................................... 34

Chapter Three: Project Production Details ................................................................................ 40

3.1 Cinematic Influence .................................................................................................................. 40

3.2 Uncanniness .............................................................................................................................. 44

3.3 The content and form of Puppet .............................................................................................. 46

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 49

Figure A ............................................................................................................................................ 52

Bibliography ...................................................................................................................................... 53
Introduction

I have been living in Canada for almost three years. As an international student, it is difficult not to think about ways to integrate with the new country. I still remember that on the day I first arrived at Toronto Pearson International Airport, I gave one carrier a fifty dollar tip for his help to carry my luggage from the conveyor to the airport exterior gate. Obviously, fifty dollars was far too much for this kind of service since I only had two large suitcases and a backpack, but when he asked me if I needed help, I had assumed that he was being friendly and altruistic, characteristics I had come to expect at home in China. In other words, I had expected positive attitudes from Canadians when I was to be integrated into this new country. Such an assumption becomes absurd or an untenable fantasy when it is confronted with reality. The contradiction between expectation and reality inevitably generates a hybrid identity that influences a traveler’s behavior when he or she is confronted with cultural conflict. This hybrid identity is an embarrassed in-betweenness I have not been able to solve, in which I want to keep my Chinese personality, while I still wish to be a “real” Canadian with the erasure of any conflicting original habits. As Homi Bhabha describes, “the people are subjects of a process of signification that must erase any prior or original presence so as to maintain the coherence of national culture.”¹ As I gradually get familiar with the rules and conventions of my new environment, the behavior of tipping, to some extent, embodies my hybrid identity. I become more likely to tip someone if the person comes from the same country as I did, as we have a collective consensus on the purpose and non-essential nature of tipping. This brings to mind the issue of Chinese restaurants in Canada and their

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 149.
relationship to hybrid culture. Chinese restaurants that I encounter in Canada can be divided into two categories. One category is the restaurant in which the cooking method is authentic and the decoration style is completely derived from China with water ink landscape paintings or Chinese characters. The other category is the local restaurant with waiters who speak English and serve meals rarely offered in China. I seldom “cross the border” to visit restaurants that use a hybrid of Chinese and Western cooking styles to cater to both Chinese people and Westerners: I strongly dislike meals that replicate the appearance of Chinese cuisine but use completely different flavors. From this perspective, border crossing activity not only has impact on one’s identity, but also involves one’s abjection toward food. Julia Kristeva states that abjection is an ambiguous term in that it is neither subject nor object but is “what disturbs identity, system, order and does not respect borders.” In my paper, abjection refers to Puppet’s inconsistent identity of the perceived purity and difference when it compares with other masked puppets. Kristeva also states that “food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection.” To some extent, food exemplifies the activity of border crossing, from the outside to the inside of one’s body. Therefore, as a cultural other, it is important to notice that the mediated identity results from the conflict between the home country and the host country in terms of tradition, convention and ideology.

_Mask_ is an allegory without any explicit reference to reality; the nations in question are not necessarily Canada or China. As Andrew M. Butler suggests, “allegory

---

3 The unnamed main puppet animated character in my film will be referred to in this paper as “Puppet” with a capital “P”.
4 Ibid., 2.
requires that we recognize that fictional X is standing in for real-world Y, but in reading science fiction we focus on X and are distanced from Y.”6 Indeed, the allegorical feature of Mask lets us pay attention to the “causes, effects, and interrelation of events”7 rather than the event itself. Although Mask dramatizes and visualizes the policy of the elimination of the unmasked puppets, the film focuses more on how Puppet lives and behaves under such an environment, and less on making a connection with political events that happened in the real world. In other words, Mask is not a political critique of how a real nation treats newcomers in terms of assimilation or conformity. Rather, Mask is an allegory that concentrates on Puppet’s behavior and reaction. Mask reduces real human beings’ differences into one physical and visible factor: the gap between its head and mask, a consequence of maintaining a hybrid identity. Eric Greene states that “addressing a problem through allegory may potentially allow the audiences to focus on the story without paying attention to the underlying conflicts and themes.”8

Language is another barrier that impedes the boundary crossing journey and influences one’s behavior toward cultural conflict, or specifically in my experience, the negotiation with the carrier about the amount of the tip. When the carrier asked for fifty dollars, my awkward English did not allow me to argue with him confidently. To avoid this embarrassing situation, I just gave him the money and left the place that made me uncomfortable as fast as I could. At that moment, I realized how important language proficiency is for an immigrant. To some extent, language proficiency has become part of the criteria that determines your potential ability to integrate with the new country and

---

6 Ulrike Küchler, Silja Maehl, and Graeme A. Stout, Alien Imaginations: Science Fiction and Tales of Transnationalism (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 100.
7 Ibid., 100.
culture. More specifically, clear articulation serves as one aspect of “the performance of nationality”\textsuperscript{9}. The national narrative that is told in \textit{Mask} refers to “an idealized representation of the nation.”\textsuperscript{10} Furthermore, the national narrative constitutes the national myth, which is another important concept in this paper. Based on Roland Barthes’s arguments about myth-making, this paper will define the national myth in terms of speech that renders the unmasked puppets’ dangerousness and unintelligibility as an undeniable truth. \textit{Mask} aims to visualize the construction of a hybrid identity through one solid but imagined national myth and its consequences on Puppet’s behavior in terms of abjection and self-hatred. The engagement paper will try to contextualize \textit{Mask} as an allegory, concentrating on issues of population management and technology/information saturation.

Based on the theories of Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, I would like to argue that in my animation, the protagonist suffers from an identity transformation that parallels my own personal experience which goes from the fear of becoming a social and cultural outsider to developing a hatred for a hybrid identity. From the combined concepts of multiculturalism and postmodernism, my research aims to describe and explain Puppet’s identity transformation from his multicultural experience by illustrating \textit{Mask}’s cyberpunk features and the conflation of simulation/reality. In other words, theories applied to this research support the idea that multiculturalism can cause abjection. Since multicultural policies categorize immigrants based on their profitability to the nation, subjects are more likely to suffer a conflicted sense of identity between who they are and


how they are identified by the nation, which is when self abjection takes place. Through the lens of postmodernism, Puppet’s cyborg nature as a mixture of organism and machine reinforces the embodiment of hybrid multicultural identity. The simulated society in Mask simplified my research by allowing me to argue that multiculturalism is the root cause of Puppet’s hybrid identity and abjection, without having to engage in complex, realistic representations of cultural difference. Furthermore, postmodernism supports discussions of the connection of multiculturalism and abjection since Mask’s hybrid nature triggers anxiety for a clear, well-defined boundary between simulation/reality and technology/human. Indeed, Mask’s cyberpunk setting provides a number of multicultural and hybrid embodiments like the hybrid city, the collapse of identity/technology and high/low technology. By setting up a negative figure who does not “respect order and border,” the nation myth functions to justify and solidify this negative figure’s abjection in terms of its unintelligibility and danger. Therefore, immigrants suffering from an identity conflict must avoid becoming the negative figure by manipulating their own personalities in order to match the nation’s idealized representation. As a result, national myth, in naturalizing and justifying the negative national enemy, supports the relationship that leads from cultural difference to abjection.

In the first chapter, I will briefly contextualize my research project within multiculturalism and postmodernism. Such critical context evokes discussions in terms of population governmentality, technology/information controlled society and other factors that influence Puppet’s daily life. In chapter two, I will try to theorize several key concepts, including abjection and the national myth, with help from Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes. Based on Roland Barthes’ book Mythologies, the contents of the digital
billboard can be considered as one national myth. Although *Mask* is an allegory, references to the real world stimulated my inspiration in creating the billboard. The slogan “See something, Say something” derives from an advertisement created by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that aimed to promote reporting suspicious activities executed by terrorist enemies. The myth of the enemy represented in my film by the unmasked puppet functions to generate abjection that unifies other masked puppets in terms of their self and community security. By setting up a dichotomized representation of unmasked and masked puppets, as Jack Lule states “Myth ritually and regularly portrays the need for order and the dangers of disorder. It celebrates the authorities who protect stability and degrades those who endanger that stability.” In chapter three, I will summarize the production procedures concentrating on the design of replaceable puppets and the use of a 3D printer. I will discuss the cinematic influences on *Mask* and Puppet’s familiar yet unfamiliar appearance in relation to abjection. More importantly, I will argue that the animation itself takes the same weight and importance in terms of both the content and the form. In other words, the form of animation, which is replacement stop motion animation, has changed the content it portrays.

**Chapter One: Critical context**

1.1 Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism refers to “the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity which multi-cultural societies throw up.”

---


this definition, we should pay attention to the feature of governmentality in multiculturalism. Throughout the research, I would like to think of multiculturalism as a political technique to govern population, which is aimed at “regulating and reconciling the tensions and conflicts raised by cultural, racial, and ethnic differences among a population within a territory.”\textsuperscript{13} In other words, in the name of multiculturalism, nation and society seem to congratulate the diversity, while simultaneously controlling and managing it. Therefore, the basic setting in \textit{Mask} parallels the multiculturalist strategy where each newcomer is issued a legally authorized mask in order to testify to its status. The government in \textit{Mask} attempts to restrict the unmasked puppets from existing in the city. More importantly, such a strategy generates a singular and “imagined community” which is the symbolic glue of a unifying cultural nationalism.\textsuperscript{14} This is further supported by Ien Ang who states “although multiculturalism gives migrant minorities the right to express their own identity, culture and beliefs, they are simultaneously obliged to subsume themselves within the pre-existing Australian imagined community”\textsuperscript{15} Stuart Hall asks the question, “Can a concept which means so many different things and so effectively draws the fire of such diverse and contradictory enemies really have anything to say to us?”\textsuperscript{16} I believe that it does, even though one must acknowledge that multiculturalism is a contested term and its interpretation and application vary in different local circumstances. On the one hand, it is impossible to reduce multiculturalism to one single societal background that renders the same result. As Ang states, “the meaning is

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
never settled and always attracting both passionate proponents and ardent opponents from both left and right, conservative and radical.”

17 On the other, within the age of globalization, multiculturalism becomes more contested as the borders for both nation state and individuals are no longer stable. In fact, the increasing number of border-crossing activities reconfigure the border of territory to the extent that multiculturalism is a governmental attempt related to the construction of nationalism. It also influences one’s individuality in terms of “the fluidity and multiplicity of identities, intercultural mixture and cultural translation.”

18 Therefore, what such a contested term has brought about for my research is a concentration on the fundamental mechanism in changing one’s ontological claim and the accompanied strategy in relation to the construction of an ideal, imagined community.

One commonality within this wide variety of multicultural distinctions that I need to mention is that, as Ang states, “they harbour different cultural, racial or ethnic communities who live together in a common polity while maintaining some of their different identities.”

19 Following Ang’s discussion on multiculturalism, the key element is the maintenance of different identities within such diverse communities. Based on the multiculturalist context, especially within the age of globalization, hybrid identity is another primary topic to discuss in my research. It is necessary to mention that hybrid identity is still one kind of personal identity that is both “an individual and a community construction, a dynamic state of consciousness that is the fruit of a long chain of

18 Ibid., 9.
19 Ibid., 3.
transformations.”

We should consider personal identity not only as a concept signifying a psychological construction, but also an interactive phenomenon that depends on others and environment in terms of cultural and social factors. Therefore, hybrid identity is the result when “marginalized groups construct their own identities in relation to dominant cultures.” More specifically, hybrid identity refers to a reconstruction of identity when subjects “partly detach themselves from their countries of origin without melting into the national community of their country of residence through a process of acculturation.”

As a result, in this paper, hybrid identity signifies the process and result that Puppet has to experience and accept in maintaining its original identity and accommodating a new identity because of the transgression of boundaries between two different countries. Rather than asking the question of what multiculturalism is, or further reviewing the historical construction of multiculturalist discourses in different nation states, this research project aims to explore how individuals maintain their original identities while living in the communities in which natives consider them as foreigners. In other words, multiculturalism not only helps me set up an imagined city that allows the story to proceed, but also provides me with some theoretical support about how individuals reconcile a new environment and their strategies in integrating into the new countries.

As I mentioned above, multiculturalism is one technique for government to stabilize the established power hierarchy. Indeed, multiculturalist discourse includes critiques of the superiority of whiteness power or Eurocentrism over a minority other, but

---

20 Alain-G. (Alain-Gustave) Gagnon et al., Contemporary Majority Nationalism (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011), 43
the goal of this research project is not to reverse the dualism between white and black, center or periphery, or colonizer and colonized. On the contrary, Mask aims to visualize the impacts of multiculturalism upon individuals, rather than one specific policy within its discourse. That is why I built a city in the animation without any references from any specific city in the real world. However, power relations still exist in this fantastic city. Individuals without masks are considered criminals whose illegal status does not allow them to enter public space. I agree with Rey Chow’s conclusion based on Michel Foucault’s description that “some humans have been cast as objects, while other humans have been given the privilege of becoming subjects.” With the consideration of multiculturalism as critical context, the concentration of this research is on the consequences of such power inequality and individual’s performative strategy toward it in the maintenance of their hybrid identity. As we can notice in the animation, Puppet’s effort to fix the gap between its head and mask embodies a performative strategy, in a way signifying individuals’ positive reaction in remaking their cultural identity from reality. Although, as Sneja Gunew notes “cross-cultural exchanges are not always happy experiences,” and in most cases, abjection represents the painful elements of hybrid cultural identity. From this perspective, the mise-en-scene of the backstreet in the animation reflects the idea of the privilege of hybridity and how the revolution of difference takes place. From the backstreet sequence, the neon advertisements signify that there is no class level depending on whether people have masks or not. One of the neon boards even shows that one can change the mask’s barcode which records the

24 Sneja Gunew, "Between Auto/Biography and Theory: Can "Ethnic Abj...
information about a citizen’s status and governmental controlled identity. In other words, this place ignores the existence of power relations that are established by the majority. Multiculturalism should not be considered the only technique for deciding policy and maintaining social and cultural order. Otherwise, multiculturalism may lead to hatred and abjection. According to Zhanbolat Kosherbayev: “designed as a tool to control and create conditions of mutual existence, the policy of multiculturalism leads not to mutual understanding and enrichment but to inciting … hatred.”

Indeed, the backstreet in the animation serves as a kind of cultural space that, on the one hand, celebrates individual’s difference without the purpose of controlling, and on the other, provides them with freedom and agency over their own identity. Although the environment of the backstreet makes the audience feel dirty, scared, and isolated from other lit up public spaces, it functions as what Rita Wong describes as “the Unregulated Zone,” in which “the potential for rebellion and liberation amidst exploitation exists.” In other words, what the backstreet sequence provides us is one possible way that multiculturalism is able to escape from government policy or majority’s management in terms of the established power hierarchies.

However, one could argue that there is no representation of the puppets’ differences in the animation in terms of their appearances, cultures, and beliefs. If there are no cultural differences between puppets, how can I contextualize the research within multiculturalism? Rather than visualizing the differences of puppets, I made three puppets with identical size, appearance and costume, with the exception of the puppet’s

---

26 Zhanbolat Kosherbayev, "POSTMODERNISM: THEORY AND PRACTICE OF MULTICULTURALISM IN EUROPE." Quality of Life (1018-0389), no. 2 (2016), 145.
internal head structure. One purpose of doing this was to reduce this research project to some feasible scales, but the primary reason is to focus the viewer’s attention on consequences resulting from multiculturalism. As I mentioned above, multiculturalism varies a lot in different specific locations and histories. Since related discussion topics will involve ethnicity, postcolonialism, racism and so on, it is important to admit that multiculturalism is so complicated that one single project cannot cover all of its aspects. Instead of visualizing the differences between puppets, I would prefer to discuss the consequence and impact on a subject’s identity when multiculturalism is applied to an imagined city. According to Raka Shome, when the topic involves multiculturalist governmentality, “one’s value to an increasingly privatized national sphere is determined by logics of profitability, and not by those of social rights and responsibilities.” Mask represents a similar world, in which government equates puppet’s value with its functionality. It is a process of distillation from which a puppet’s profitability derives from the function to solidify the unmasked puppets’ negative image. The conflict of difference in Mask no longer resides at the level of culture, ideology or belief, but at the level of physical differences. In other words, the authorized mask determines whether one puppet is useful and profitable to the nation or not. By simplifying cultural differences to one physical principle that is profitable to the nation, puppets are easily classified and identified into two opposed groups: the masked puppet and the unmasked puppet. That’s why I choose an approach that minimizes the representation of Puppet’s differences. It

---

28 By doing that, I do not need to design another puppet with difference appearance and body pattern, since 3D modelling and its output to 3D printer takes long to experiment.
implies how the real world deals with cultural difference when privileging one’s functionality to a nation.

Furthermore, multiculturalism brings two important concepts into my research, which are abjection and national narrative. The national narrative discussion emerges as Puppet takes a long-distance trip between two countries which forces it to maintain hybrid identity. The incompatibility of the foreign mask opens up the discussion of abjection. Abjection takes place when an individual is not able to declare the boundary between their supposed purity and difference. As Joanna Mansbridge explains, “the abject threatens the purity of origins and the integrity of boundaries while disrupting the distinctions between self/other, inside/outside, pure/impure.”

A national narrative is an instrument of state rule through “the reproduction of the collective illusion that the state is an imaginative correlate of an individual’s desires, the world s/he wants, rather than the world the state has already imposed.” Based on these definitions, we can notice not only the relation between national narrative and personal identity in terms of desires and imaginations of one idealized nation, we can also recognize strategies applied in the name of multiculturalism. Indeed, through the story we have been told by others, we construct ourselves as characters in the story to further rationalize and self-interpret our behaviors. As Angel Castinera states, “the acts of narration are acts of self-presentation made to others. Our consciousness of the I is not a point of departure for these stories but the point at which we have arrived through the stories we tell.”

---

has the power to construct a collusion with a state’s subjects in their own subjection.\textsuperscript{33} It is the process that a nation governs its individual’s differences to the extent that it establishes a collective national narrative of one common group identity. As Donald Pease argues, “[n]ational narratives encode…acts [of abjection] as at once political – racializing the national other – and psychic – internalizing the traumatic residue of these acts of abjection.”\textsuperscript{34} In other words, a national other or national enemy is created through the act of comparing two opposed narrated identities in the imagined relation to a “patriotic” national identity.\textsuperscript{35} What is constructed is a collective but illusory national identity by setting up one exemplary opposite with the process of abjection. Through this process of studying abjection within national narratives, we can see the role abjection plays in creating one solid dichotomous model between inside and outside, self and stranger, pure and impure. The mask, in my film, signifies the materiality of such illusionary national purity in the way that abjection physically takes place when Puppet cannot put on its new mask. Also, self abjection takes place as Puppet has to change or even destroy its body in order to reconcile its hybrid identity and match one imagined national identity. What makes the mask physically incompatible with the head is not for some visible reasons for the audience, but because of puppet’s internal structure: the height of the extruding part connecting with the eyeballs. At the end of the film, Puppet has to file away its internal structure in order to stably put on its new mask. The manipulation of Puppet’s internal structure actually reflects my personal experience in

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 6.
terms of the process to re-establish and reconfigure my internal self-identity instead of any personal habits or appearances.

1.2 Postmodernism

Postmodernism is another key concept that influences the whole research project. According to Jean Baudrillard, postmodernism is a culture of the “simulacrum” which is an identical copy without an original. Moreover, as Giuliana Bruno states, simulacrum is “a matter of internalizing the signs or the symptoms to the point where there is no difference between ‘false’ and ‘true’, ‘real’ and ‘imaginary.’” In other words, postmodernism is one culture in which the boundaries between reality and simulation is destroyed. Therefore, the imagined city in Mask is reproduced with some ambiguous references from reality. One could be familiar with some multiculturalist policies in maintaining social order that have been applied to some specific cities in the real world. However, the subject is a puppet, not a real human being, and the complexity of realistic differences is reduced to the possession of a mask. As a result, what is real in Mask has already been reproduced by the hyperreality which is entirely in simulation.

Postmodernism resides at the level of one simulated multicultural society.

---

38 Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 146.
Postmodernist discourse also involves topics such as the opposition between the natural and the artificial because of technology; the distinction between the human and the simulated cyborg. It is crucial to notice how *Mask* is a cyberpunk animation. According to Veronica Hollinger, cyberpunk can be read as “deconstructions of the subject – carried out in terms of a cybernetic breakdown of the classic nature/culture opposition.” Therefore, we can see the relation as the whole story is based on a heavily stratified, information-saturated and technology-controlled city. Technology has its own agencies to change a character’s behavior and subjectivity. Also, *Mask* exemplifies cyberpunk as a subgenre of science fiction from its representation of numerous hybrid embodiments. In my animation, the audience can easily notice that the puppets are made out of metal bars, wire and super glue. In contrast, the colour of the mask is relatively close to real human being’s skin and the voice is recorded from a real human being. According to Donna Haraway, “a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism… a creature of fiction… our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction.” Puppet is a kind of physical hybrid which can be considered as cyborg and reflects one of the most important topics in postmodernism; its ontology and its construction of self-identity. From this perspective, Puppet’s cyborg features correlate with individual’s hybrid identities when considering its political construction and its mixture of machine and organism.

Broadly, cyborg hybridity reflects one of the postmodernist discourses about the opposition between culture and nature. The technology is integrated with a human

---


being’s body and even mind but its consequence is invisible and unpredictable. There is a rift between Puppet’s mask and head. As we can see in the animation, this rift results in Puppet’s unclear articulation and speech which forces Puppet to change its interior body. In other words, the main topic of this research project still returns to the anxiety of unfixed and unstable boundaries, often related to speech, that influences one’s identity.

Also, from a computer screen in the airport when Puppet meets the customs staff, we can see that the production process of the mask is entirely based on data and information that only a computer is able to interpret. Moreover, the mask in the animation functions as one kind of storage that records all personal information about the subject’s birthday, travel flight number, and citizen status. All information has been integrated into one barcode behind the mask. The staff’s responsibility is for merely scanning the barcode, and even this kind of labor needs help from the barcode scanner. In other words, there are no physical documents like photo ID or driver licenses that can testify to one’s status, but only one graphical barcode. Puppets are living in an information-saturated society in which information has already established a virtual community. This is one feature of postmodernity that Virgil Nemoianu observes as “the postindustrial society” in which a mode of production arises that is based on the processing of information, not of raw materials.”

Likewise, *Cyber Wars*, which is Singapore’s first science fiction film directed by Jianghong Kuo in 2004, visualizes a similar society. For the purpose of controlling citizens, a government-issued chip is implanted into human brains. As a result, people’s lives are heavily dependent on this chip, which provides information about identity and payment services. Meanwhile, like the service that can change one’s barcode

---

in my animation, one underground service in *Cyber Wars* is to hack into the chip and manipulate information to one’s preference. It is important to notice this parallel of illegal manipulation of identity is not a coincidence. Rather the conflict between a human being’s action and technology-controlled societies falls into a classic trope in cyberpunk productions. This conflict signifies the “breakdown of the classic nature/culture opposition.” More specifically, it is an anxiety about the imbalance between a human being’s desire for individuality and the fast development of technology that marginalizes one’s position from the center of creation. According to Hollinger, the fear of technology derives from “the exhilaration of potential technological transcendence…which is the anxiety and disorientation produced in the self/body in danger of being absorbed into its own technology.”\(^{42}\) Such potential interconnections between human beings and technology, as Hollinger describes, “is perhaps the central ‘generic’ feature of cyberpunk.”\(^{43}\) As a result, the integration of machine and technology not only lies at the level of Puppet’s “corporeal” body, but also has impact on the construction of Puppet’s hybrid identity.

Another element in my animation that correlates with postmodernist thinking is the hybrid nature of this animation. As I have noted above, individual’s hybrid identity is one of the important topics in this research project under the context of multiculturalism. Moreover, if we closely examine this animation, more hybrid features emerge to the surface in terms of high and low technology such as the old-fashioned building style side by side with the modern cityscape. In my story, although technology has developed to the


\(^{43}\) Ibid., 31.
extent that one barcode covers all aspects of daily life, sewing is still one possible solution to fill the rift between mask and head. Such hybridity parallels with the postmodernist feature that “old media are not simply replaced by the new but are recycled for circulation together with the new.”

Another hybridity happens when Puppet is using a computer at home. In this sequence, the computer screen shows the action of typing and how Puppet searches for the solution of its speech ambiguity. This is to bring attention to the contradictory nature of one machine (Puppet) using another machine (the computer) mediated through a rudimentary keyboard. Rather than digitally compositing the computer screen as I did in the airport sequence at the beginning of the film, I chose to screen-record my real operation from my computer. The screen capture on Puppet’s computer contains a real web search from a contemporary web browser. Obviously, the question that I type is not grammatically correct and what pops up after clicking the search button is totally irrelevant to the question, as no one would really ask this absurd question “cannot speak clearly when putting on new mask.” To be honest, on the one hand, it reflects how I personally search for solutions on the internet. This sequence derives from my own experience, from how I feel off-centered using the English language on the web. The issue of language proficiency returns at this moment as one kind of barrier that impedes how I look at myself. Since my English question is not always the same as what a person’s question who speaks English as their first language would be, the results do not direct me to the best solutions. What I mean is that although my question possibly has the same content with others, the form, more specifically, the vocabulary or structure of my

sentence is so different that the search engine cannot get me to the solution that the majority would look for. Only after several attempts and changes, the right direction would show up and I realized how ridiculous and digressive my original question was. I have to change my behavior and improve my English skills as best as I can in order to match the common accepted identity. This is a process in constituting self-identity in interaction with the external environment. In other words, because of my insufficient English skills, I am not sharing a virtual collective space with others who have the same problems. Such virtual collective consensus establishes the national identity that also distinguishes the national other and distances them from the center of the accepted national identity. In this case, the computer screen constructs an image of the accepted national identity through which one can see that the national other contradicts some common personal attributes such as language proficiency. As Donald E. Pease notes, “the construction of the national other produced a totalized image of the national community at the surface of this national mirror.” On the other hand, this real computer screen recording makes the animation a hybridity between reality and fantasy. In other words, the sequence is one kind of simulacrum which is the negation of both reality and imagination. Audiences would find the same results on the internet, but these results are irrelevant and meaningless. Meanwhile, Puppet is not able to find anything useful since its results are also irrelevant and the mask is an imagined object. Instead of considering Mask as an isolated imaginary, it would be more appropriate to analyze this film as a hybrid in which the combination of both original and simulation has the power to visualize Puppet’s experience.

Unlike *Blade Runner* or *Cyber Wars, Mask* has no specific real world references that connect to the specific historical events. The city in *Mask* has neither history to trace nor central rules to obey. In fact, power relations are located at the level of simulacrum. Each space, like the backstreet, airport, or classroom, has the unique rules that Puppet should learn and follow, rather than one hegemonic ideology that controls all puppets. However, there are no explanations in the film to illustrate what specific rules puppets have to obey. What the audience can depend on are merely signs visualized in the film, such as the billboard or the vocal slogan. As Thomas J. Mickey states, based on Baudrillard’s postmodernist thinking, “What we see represented does not represent reality. It is a sign of sign.” For Baudrillard, “power in hyperreality, derives from controlling the means of simulation… that constitute what hyperreality is taken as being at any particular time.” In other words, the sign that consists of policy and rule in *Mask* becomes the film’s reality: a stylized and manipulated narrative with a combination of some elements from the real world. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce the second descriptive definition of simulacrum. It is a “simulacrum” in which everything that we can find original from reality is reduced to an image or commodity without in-depth meaning and “exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced…” Introduced by Fredric Jameson, the term flatness or depthlessness is “a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense.” We can hear the repeated slogan from the beginning of the animation: “the best mask makes the best life.”

---

49 Ibid., 9.
Such repetition of one single sentence coming from the audio speaker recalls the way that Chinese merchants advertise their commodities, like “clearance sales, one last discount.” The culture of images and surfaces derives its meaning from other images and surfaces and “stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum.”

More importantly, the two-dimensional image of the modern city-scape in *Mask* exaggerates the sense of “simulacrum” and “depthlessness.” As we can see in the animation, I make a vertical tilt shot in order to show both the modern cityscape and the old-fashioned building where Puppet lives. In this shot, one still image that is drawn by my friend embodies all modernity of the city. The modern buildings appear to be made of concrete with its grey colour and the old-fashioned buildings are made of brick because of its red colour. In this case, colour is the only factor that signifies a building’s degree of modernization and the difference of modernization further signifies the heavily stratified society where puppets live. Therefore, the sign of colour no longer represents the reality, but it enters into a reconfigured system of signs that the film builds up.

Moreover, one important element is that the buildings’ windows reflect nothing, even though they should have had some glint or glare at least. Furthermore, the image itself is depthless and does not provide another perspective or access to be seen by the audience. To explain what “depthlessness” is, I would like to use an off-topic example of Adobe After Effect, the well-known post production video compositing software. In that program, there is a button on the right side of each layer, called “3D layer.” By clicking this button, it allows the selected layer to be manipulated in three dimensions. However,

---

no matter what type of image you import into the software, by orbiting the view of camera, all you can see is a surface patch without volume along the z axis. Although the image is labeled as having three-dimensionality, it is still a container that all information is located on the surface of the image. Compared with the object that is created in classic three-dimensional software such as 3D Studio Max or Blender, the three-dimensional object in After Effects parallels the “depthlessness” in that there is no way to perceive its depth or get into its interior. In other words, for the image in After Effects, there is no distinction between inside and outside, the inside is on the surface of the outside. Here, I would like to borrow one more related discussion: Jameson’s explanation on the case of Wells Fargo Court in terms of “depthlessness” and “simulacrum” of architecture, from which

“a surface seems to be unsupported by any volume, or whose putative volume (rectangular? trapezoidal) is ocularly quite undecidable. This great sheet of windows, with its gravity-defying two-dimensionality, momentarily transforms the solid ground on which we stand into the contents of a stereopticon, pasteboard shapes profiling themselves here and there around us. The visual effect is the same from all sides: as fateful as the great monolith in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001 which confronts its viewers like an enigmatic destiny, a call to evolutionary mutation.”

51

Also, Hamid Shirvani further explains the term “simulacrum” based on Jameson’s argument that “surface is everything in a simulacrum; meaning, truth, and reference are replaced by surfaces which results in fragmentation of the subject and the loss of the distinction between inside and outside.”

52 Following Jameson, we can see that the cityscape’s “two-dimensionality” reflects postmodernist thinking so that the animated

52 Hamid Shirvani, “Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in American Quarterly, vol. 46 (1994), 293.
cityscape becomes a simulacrum of itself. More importantly, the surface of the modern cityscape signifies *Mask*’s allegorical feature in the way that the environment or surroundings where puppets live is no longer the most crucial element that builds the story. What matters is its impact upon puppets. In other words, the “two dimensionality” of the cityscape merely serves as a surface where we can find some meanings about the environment. However, the goal of this film and paper is to figure out the “causes, effects, and interrelations” of such an environment, and it is still located beneath this “surface.” Only after we peel off the “surface” of the cityscape or the surrounding where puppets live and realize that the environment merely serves as the foundation that allows the story to take place, can we pay attention to puppets’ reactions and identity development.

From a different perspective, when we pay more attention to Puppet itself, the mask, which is the only official identity document in the film, should be also considered as one kind of surface or shell that functions to control populace. In the process of establishing an archive of masks, each mask no longer represents one particular puppet, but abstract data and statistical quantities for the purpose of controlling. By doing that, as Hans Belting states, “because the [faces] no longer serve to recall individuals, the people represented have begun their retreat into lost time- the timelessness of death. The faces have been transported into an absence that bestows upon them their own and alien existence”53 Such an argument, on the one hand, is consistent with the postmodernist “simulacrum” metaphor in the way that the mask no longer functions as an image carrier that stores past memories, but merely one kind of shell that all information is based on the barcode on the rear of mask. On the other hand, “the timelessness of death” of

---

archival masks relates to Puppet’s uncanny appearance and the unmasked puppets’ alienness. This uncanniness and alienness helped me design Puppet’s structure and appearance in order to exaggerate its abjection. I hope that what I feel and recognize in Puppet’s uncanniness could evoke similar experiences the audience may have had with abject others in their own lives.

Chapter Two: Theoretical framework

2.1 Abjection Theory

Following Kristeva’s abjection theory, it is important to notice that abjection is not merely derived from corporeal margins, but from all other margins. As a result, this paper would like to argue that, throughout the animation, the main Puppet is suffering a transformation resulting from abjection toward the national other, which causes self-abjection. As I mentioned above, the national other is an imaginary opposite shaped through the act of abjection being compared with the “patriotic” national identity. Thus, the national abjection or, in other words, abjection toward the national other can be considered as both a process and condition in which a nation depends on the designation of the strange body in relation to the familiar “body-at-home.” With the help of the national narrative, the film tells us that the unmasked puppet is dangerous and should be exiled from the city. Abjection constitutes the strange body of the nation in the way that it functions to disturb identity boundaries between insider and outsider, self and other, or

national enemy and patriot. According to Joanna Mansbridge, the construction of a national narrative involves the performance of nationality through abjection.\(^{56}\) Therefore, when Puppet arrives in the new country, its identity is continually changing, from the fear of being one of the unmasked puppets to self-hatred in terms of its body that cannot put on the new mask. In other words, the suffering derives from the boundary of inconsistency. For Puppet, the border between inside and outside emphasizes both its surrounding saturated with the solid national narrative and the physical rift between its mask and head. Kristeva uses human being’s skin as a metaphor for the collapse of the border between inside and outside, “it is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one’s ‘own and clean self’ but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the defection of its contents.”\(^{57}\) Moreover, according to Kristeva, the acquisition of language and articulation of self through speech establishes one’s subjectivity through the repression of abjection.\(^{58}\) It is an important conclusion that explains why Puppet has to destroy itself in the process of fixing its rift, as the gap is the only reason that makes Puppet unable to speak. Without the ability to speak, abjection takes place because of Puppet’s vague subjectivity. This is one of the film’s most obvious sequences about abjection, taking place after Puppet is publicly embarrassed in front of his students by its awkward language skills and ambiguous speech. Based on the sequence, my goal is to visualise the tension between listeners and Puppet that although there is whispering when Puppet speaks, the students still show their respect to the presentation as the volume is relatively much lower than Puppet’s voice. After its mask

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 122.  
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 56-89.
falls on the table, no puppet laughs or talks. As a result, what this sequence displays is not humiliation or violence toward Puppet, but listeners’ indifference and Puppet’s embarrassment that no one cares about what it is saying. As Kristeva explains, the abjection originally derives from the process when the child becomes independent from its mother and rejects the maternal body. Through this process, the separation from maternal body signifies a loss of authority “that is the trustee of that mapping of the self’s clean and proper body.”\textsuperscript{59} After this process, with the acquisition of language, the subject has to continually negotiate with the alterity within its own subjectivity.\textsuperscript{60} In Kristeva’s own words, “language sets up a separation and, starting with discrete elements, concentrates an order, it does so precisely by repressing maternal authority and the corporeal mapping that abuts against them.”\textsuperscript{61} Indeed, language constitutes who we are and how we are perceived by others. Without a mask, what Puppet desires to be contradicts its perceived identity by others. Even though it has the new mask, its appearance and behavior make Puppet more like an unmasked puppet. Also, the national narrative tells Puppet that language is an elementary factor which consists of the accepted national identity. However, without language, Puppet becomes “alterity within its own subjectivity” because what Puppet is willing to convey is not exactly what is coming from its mouth. There is a gap not only between its new mask and head, but also between its national identity construction and the external environment where self-abjection begins to grow.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 72.
\textsuperscript{60} Jordan Stouck, "Abjecting Hybridity in Helen Oyeyemi’s The Icarus Girl," \textit{Ariel} 41, no. 2 (2010), 95.
Focusing back on the animation and the sequence when Puppet is scared of the unmasked one in the backstreet I argue that the aggressive gesture of the unmasked puppet and the scary, unhygienic environment account for Puppet’s fear. However, we have to ask the question why the puppet without the mask behaves so aggressively and dangerously, in contrast with Puppet (who has a mask) who behaves more gently and friendly. For answering the question, we should return to the billboard that illustrates the unmasked puppet’s illegal status (see Figure A). From this poster, it is reasonable to assume that there are puppets who do not have masks but are still living in the city, even though the mask is issued by the government and non-mask-wearing is illegal. More importantly, an unmasked puppet is labeled as dangerous and other puppets are responsible for reporting that illegal puppet for eradication. It constitutes or reinforces puppets’ imagined national identities. Although the unmasked puppets are not allowed to live in the city, Mask visualizes a hybrid city where different places combine into one entity such as the dirty backstreet, the countryside building, and the modern, illuminated city area in which boundaries become inconsistent and unmasked puppets always have a chance to hide from scrutiny. Like the city in Blade Runner, “it is a polyvalent, interchangeable structure, the product of geographical displacements and condensation” with Los Angeles, Hong Kong and Tokyo. Indeed, it is such hybridity of different worlds that causes the abjection which does not “respect borders.” Based on Kristeva’s abjection theory, Michael Herbst distinguishes between a process of abjecting where one party rejects and denigrates another party, and the state of being abject which is a disposition, a

---

place of exclusion. As a result, we can see the poster’s function is to make other puppets believe in the purity of their body such that community security can be maintained only through the eradication of the unmasked puppet. In other words, the unmasked puppet’s abjection is threatening the established social order and power hierarchies from which masked puppets derive benefits. Furthermore, with the comparison of the clean puppets, the dirty and aggressive puppet and the unhygienic place where it lives is the concrete embodiment of the threat they pose to the established social order. According to Tina Chanter, abjection can be read as a political strategy, and more specifically, to systematically exclude certain others: “Subjects are abjected by identificatory regimes that preclude them and render them unintelligible.” From this perspective, we can notice that a lack of a mask in the film functions as one parameter that distinguishes the national other through the act of abjection. The unmasked puppet’s dirty appearance, aggressiveness, and its private but unhygienic living environments result in abjection. More importantly, as the national narrative renders the unmasked puppet as unintelligible and dangerous. No matter what this group of puppets do, they cannot escape the negative stereotype related to abjection. The nation has to set up a negative, strange and exemplar figure for other puppets to recognize themselves as part of the nation. According to Kristeva, being labeled a stranger or foreigner is an indirect recognition of the “strange within us,” through which the self-boundary risks to break. That is why Puppet tirelessly seeks solutions to put on the mask. Avoidance of being labeled as the unmasked puppet leads to self-abjection towards the body.

---

63 Michael Herbst, "Goya’s grotesque: abjection," Los Caprichos, Desastres de la Guerra and Los Disparates, Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (1999), 16.
Another element that supports the discussion of the abjection in relation to my statement is the social taboo that I depict in the backstreet sequence. In addition to language proficiency, social taboo is another national narrative that reinforces the unmasked puppet’s negative image. According to Sigmund Freud, the proprieties of taboo are “sacred, consecrated; but on the other hand, it means uncanny, dangerous, forbidden and unclean.” Based on Freud’s finding, it is easy to conclude that the execution of taboo is another form of abjection because of its unclean features and hybrid properties. As I have discussed, the function of the mask is as a signifier of political and ideological correctness connected with community or national unity, therefore the destruction and discarding of a mask can be considered as a social taboo that falls into the scope of abjection. Also, the manipulation of a barcode on the mask is another taboo that explicitly ignores the social order established by government. To summarize, all actions and manipulations that are applied on the mask without agreement from the official government should be considered as taboo that the government will seek to totally eradicate. Moreover, one neon board advertises sexual services between an unmasked puppet and the normal ones. Similarly, in District 9 (2009), the Nigerian prostitutes embodies one kind of taboo that offers sexual services to aliens. Adéle Nel explains that “this taboo holds the additional threat of the intermingling of alien DNA with human DNA, with possibly catastrophic consequences.” In that case, based on Kristeva’s conception, the act of sexual intercourse between humans and beasts is also a “taboo

---

form of behaviour,” the “catastrophic consequence” still involves the threat of boundaries that different racial sex will destroy the maintenance of purity that the majority occupies. *Mask* does not provide clues indicating the racial and organic differences as *District 9* does, the puppet’s differences in the animation are reduced to only whether one has a mask or not. By doing this, the prerequisite of abjection is simplified to the extent that the unmasked puppet is regulated through taboo imposed by a collective consensus in relation to pure sexuality and unity. According to Sophia Fredriksson based on Kristeva’s argument, “The abject takes form as sites of defilement, connected to either sexuality and nourishment, where it exists as taboo, something that must be excluded in order to remain pure in spirit.” In other words, taboo represented in *Mask* serves as the national narrative in the way that it must be repressed and controlled for the sake of community’s progression, safety and purity. The unmasked puppets understand that they are rendered and propagandized as dangerous. Other masked puppets understand their role in the national narrative to repress abjection through taboo. What emerges is one solid national identity that guarantees the established power relation. The masked puppets do not want to break it and the unmasked puppet is not able to break it.

We have discussed several aspects of abjection in rendering the unmasked puppet as the national other. Moreover, this chapter explains why the new coming Puppet is scared of the unmasked one in the backstreet sequence. There is one last question we need to consider: that is why Puppet chooses to mutilate itself, which is self-abjection, at the end of the film, rather than at the beginning. In other words, what eventually causes

---

Ibid., 560.
Puppet’s self abjection toward its body? For answering this question, we should realize the narration illustrated with the digital billboard not only generates the national other’s abjection, but also destroys the boundary of Puppet in how it perceives itself and how it is watched by others. As we can see in the animation, because of this crack, Puppet cannot speak clearly, and its mask frequently falls off in front of other masked puppets, which seriously affects its daily life. That is why Puppet just takes off this inconvenient mask when it is at home. Although taking off a mask is considered as a social taboo, this is only from within the public space. As a result, Puppet does not need to respect the established order at home, where self abjection takes place. This is one process through which the abjection of the national other projects onto an individual’s identity. Anxious identity stems from the fear of being exiled like the unmasked puppet. Leonie Sandercock states that “individual identity is often suffused with anxiety, and that these anxieties are projected onto the figure of the strange, the alien, whose very presence seems to challenge and undermine the known social order.” As a result, we can notice the process of self identity construction is in the form of anxiety of being alien and strange. It is this anxiety that triggers Puppet’s self abjection. Furthermore, we need to understand that one’s identity is also constructed through the gaze of others. As Rey Chow explains, based on Freud’s argument, “how we look at ourselves and how much we value ourselves, that is, depends a great deal on our sense of being watched, approved of, and loved by others.” In the Mask story, there is one moment when the main Puppet does not hold its falling mask in time within the public environment. In the post production, I purposely elongate the last frame when the main Puppet and the witness are watching each other.

70 Leonie Sandercock and Peter Lyssiotis, Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities in the 21st Century (London; New York: Continuum, 2003), 110.
and the freezing eye contact concentrates the impact of other puppet’s gaze on the subject. Like the protagonist, Wikus van de Merwe in District 9, who continually hides himself from the gaze of other human beings at the initial phase of his corporeal transformation from human being to the alien, Puppet suffers a similar experience of hybridity. What results is the collapse of its pure identity and its impression of the solid national other. Therefore, the appearance without a mask will continually be a reminder of becoming the national other. Puppet knows, from the gaze of others, that it has almost become an unmasked puppet. The only way to solve this problem is to substantially manipulate its internal body. It is a transgression of boundaries not only between its internal structure and external rift, but also between what it wants to be and what it is imposed to be by others. Puppet has to change its internal structure in order to solve one external problem about its corporeal rift. From that moment, self abjection takes place due to the collapse of boundaries between its internality and externality; its expected identity and imposed identity.

So far, we have discussed the transformation that Puppet suffers, from having fear of the abject national other to becoming self-abject itself. However, one thing we need to realize is that the idea of abjection developed by Julia Kristeva is not merely a theoretical framework to support my argument, but rather it is one descriptive term that guided me to build the animation and visualize the abjection upon Puppet. Moreover, with the help of the national narrative in the form of clear articulation and the repression of social taboo, Puppet has been told a truth of the unintelligible and dangerous nature of the unmasked puppet. Furthermore, this negative image has been naturalized into an undeniable fact. The question remains as to what characteristics of this truth are so convincing to Puppet?
In the next chapter, I would like to mythicize both the narration being told in the film and the film itself based on Barthes’ theory. According to Roland Barthes, “myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden – if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious – but because they are naturalized.”

Roland Barthes’ argument in terms of mythologies and myth-making will be introduced in order to discuss two topics: one is the mechanism and principle of this imaginary national myth in *Mask* and the other one is mythical feature of *Mask*. Both discussions prove how national myth can naturalize and abolish cultural difference to the point that abjection takes place.

2.2 National Myth- *Mythologies* written by Roland Barthes

In this section, I would like to discuss the content of the digital billboard in the way that what it conveys to Puppet can be read as one kind of national myth. It is the national myth that makes Puppet believe not only that the unmasked one is dangerous, but that each puppet is responsible for the return of a national golden age which is characterized by purity and safety. According to Barthes, “myth is a type of speech, a system of communication, that it is a message.”

And when myth correlates with nation or nationality, national myth takes place in the form to “provide an idealized representation of the nation - its membership, its defining features, its fundamental values and principles.” Based on the allegorical nature of *Mask*, the following discussion will define the national myth as a speech that tells us that the unmasked puppet is absolutely not allowed to live in the city because of its dangerous and unintelligible behaviors. I

---

73 Ibid., 107.
have already discussed how the billboard functions as a narration that reminds puppets of the unmasked puppet’s strangeness. One would argue that although this national narrative gets puppets to share one collective ideology that constructs a common national identity, there is no aspect representing the mythical characteristic of the narration. Moreover, according to Roland Barthes, “myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification”. However, as we discussed above, the poster explicitly addresses the danger of the unmasked puppet and its rejection from public space. What the billboard is trying to convey appears to contradict Barthes’ argument, but it does not contradict Barthes’s argument since the process of eliminating unmasked puppets has been developed to the extent that it is a naturalized process that must be done and cannot be denied. In other words, the myth created by the billboard does not deny the dangerous nature of the unmasked puppet, rather it explicitly supports the basic idea of elimination and expulsion, no matter what reasons the dominant masked puppets are able to come up with. The question is how the dangerous unmasked puppet is naturalized and how it relates to myth-making.

To answer this question, it is necessary to assume that the oppression of the unmasked puppets is the most idealized representation for the nation. In Mask, all differences of puppets are reduced to only one physical feature and its subsequent speech issue. This simplified setting contradicts the realistic issues about difference within the multiculturalist context but supports how the national myth operates in deciding policies. The national myth functions to simplify the complexity of change and transformation.

---

We can see that political strategies have been executed in the name of multiculturalism in order to simplify or even erase the real cultural diversity. For instance, in Ben Gehrels’ article *Sounding Canadian: Language and Asian Canadian Identity*, the author writes that “linguistic biases at the level of immigration can greatly reduce the country’s cultural diversity, a reality that the state continually attempts to debunk through the performance of cultural tokenism in its multicultural propaganda.” In this case, language bias or proficiency can be considered as one national myth in the way that “it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible.” Language is a tool of state power that renders visible difference invisible in the eyes of the state, for the purpose of governmentality. No matter where the subject comes from and what beliefs he or she may have, language proficiency is one official criteria to decide whether the subject is part of the nation. Although my research is not directed at any nation in the real world, one specific example related to Canada can support my argument. As Gehrel states “to be Canadian is to sound Canadian, and to sound Canadian is to be proficient in English and French.”

On the contrary, in the imaginary world of *Mask*, with only one visible difference, myth is made simple and easy to create since myth does not need to disguise itself in order to be qualified as “natural and external justification.” The low-quality living environment and aggressive behavior explain why the unmasked puppet should be exiled.

---

In reality, language proficiency can be considered as a singular national myth to the level that it minimizes complexity as much as possible, but in *Mask*’s over-simplified world, the oppression of the unmasked puppet includes all elements consisting of one imagined national myth. From this perspective, we can conclude that the national myth in *Mask* is not denying the idealized representation of nation, rather the oppression of the unmasked puppet is the most desired national status because they are the only unstable element that need to be eradicated. Similarly, in *Blade Runner*, the manageable difference between human beings and replicants is reduced to one parameter: the programmed memory. Although, at the beginning of the film, we learn the replicants “were superior in strength and agility, and at least equal in intelligence, to the genetic engineers who created them,” the only way to distinguish a replicant from a human being resorts to the machine. The machine focuses on the subject’s eyeball when it is answering the questions related to the replicant’s manipulated memory and real human beings’ unique and precious memory. As a result, the myth in *Blade Runner* directly points to the manipulated memory, ironically only detectable with the help of a machine. Jonathan Zogby states that “society in *Blade Runner* has bought into the myth of replicants being less than human and the need for professional blade runners, whose function is to hunt down replicants because they are dangerous and banned from Earth.” Based on the case of *Blade Runner*, the myth of the replicant is not in denying the impure national status of strangers, but rather it is celebrating the power relation that has been naturalized as a statement of fact and encouraging with the brute force executed by blade runners to arrest

---

80 *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (1982), DVD.
81 Jonathan Zogby, Mark Soderstrom, and Marianne Arieux, "An Examination of Psychoanalytic and Semiotic Film Theory Using Metropolis, Blade Runner and The Matrix A Case Study" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012), 63.
replicants. Such a naturalization process of myth is another important feature from Barthes’ discussion: “what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason.” Following Barthes’ words, the argument of the billboard as a national myth becomes reasonable since, in this imaginary world, the lack of a mask totally accounts for the unstable national identity and represents threats to the transgression of community boundaries.

Another aspect of myth, according to Barthes, is that “the function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence,” which in return provides a natural image without “historical quality of things.” By considering this idea in regards to *Mask*, the animation itself could be seen as a myth in the way that all complicated but realistic issues have been erased. To some extent, *Mask* provides a mythical imagination that abolishes “the complexity of human acts” by using a puppet as the character. On the other hand, in retrospective of the production process, the objects that are shown in the animation have been robbed of their production track and memory. By doing that, the figures actually parallel Barthes’ discussion that things in myth can be interpreted by themselves. No explicit reference is necessary in order to understand the story and “what we see represented does not represent reality. It is a sign of sign.” As I mentioned in the introduction, the billboard also takes “If You See Something, Say Something” public

---

83 Ibid., 142.
84 Since most things in animation were made by 3D printer, the supposedly layered structure has been wiped out for the purpose of coloring. In other words, the trace of the 3D printer has been effaced as much as possible to match the overall natural style in *Mask*.
awareness video as reference. Although the film and paper do not tend to make any ironic or political statements toward terrorism, the process of convincing citizens of the national enemy is still noteworthy. When it comes to the topic about national security, the process of myth-making of the enemy after the events of 9/11 provides me an exemplary case to build my own artworks. Briefly, “if you see something, say something” campaign was a creation of Madison Avenue in the Federal Civil Defense Administration during the early years of Cold War. After the event of 9/11, the Metropolitan Transition Authorities turned it into an advertising campaign which was broadcast in public areas.\textsuperscript{86} The video was created by DHS (U.S. Department of Homeland Security) in 2011. From the video, we can easily focus on the strategies of how to simplify the complex reality and set up an abstract opposite. As the male narrator says “the American dream draws people from across the globe, bringing different cultures, traditions and ideas to the fabric of our great nation. At the same time, there are individuals in the United States who seek to carry out acts of terrorism and violence against our communities and our country.”\textsuperscript{87} With celebrating its cultural diversity and without noting the complicated cultural conflict or racism, the video exclusively concentrates on the enemy who is seen to endanger national and individual security. Moreover, as the narrator comments, “reporting suspicious activity should not be based on a person’s race, religion or gender, but rather on behaviors that seem suspicious or out of the ordinary.”\textsuperscript{88} The video does not give the answer why someone has the potential for terrorist behaviors, nor does Mask answer the question why an unmasked puppet is not allowed in the city based on historical reasons.

\textsuperscript{86} Deepa Kumar, "National Security Culture: Gender, Race, and Class in the Production of Imperial Citizenship. (Essay)," \textit{International Journal of Communication (Online, 2017)}, 2166.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 04:02.
Are there any historical events that makes the unmasked puppet off-centered? Are there historical reasons that led to government rendering them as unintelligible and dangerous? There is no history in *Mask* to answer the question. For myths that are created in both videos, it is just about creating order out of chaos by identifying good and bad figures without reasons. According to Jack Lule, “Myth is an essential social narrative, a rich and enduring aspect of human existence, which draws from archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models for social life.” Similarly, *Mask* sets up an exemplary figure of the unmasked puppet in order to make some implicit connection with events happening in the real world. *Mask* is an allegory, or in Barthes’ own words, a depoliticized speech, in which I purposely depoliticize my film to the point that one imaginary nation myth builds up the story, and abjection takes place in the form to depict what Puppet suffers. Therefore, the next chapter involves a discussion to interpret how this allegorical film relates to the real world in terms of my production and post-production. I would like to introduce my approaches and methods throughout the whole production process and try to explain several artistic decisions that changed the shape of the animation. Moreover, the entire research is shaped both by the hybridity of some practical strategies and by the theoretical discussions, with neither being given a higher priority.

**Chapter Three: Project Production Details**

3.1 Cinematic Influence

As noted above, three films, respectively *District 9*, *Blade Runner* and *Cyber Wars*, inspired me in how to build the animation in terms of plot, character and mise-en-

---

scene. In fact, there is another puppet animated film entitled Anomalisa (2015), directed by Duke Johnson and Charlie Kaufman, that has impact on my research. The film tells a story of Michael Stone, an author and speaker primarily on the topic of business customer service. Although his career is successful and his new release sells well, he can neither deeply interact with other people, nor experience excitement from his boring life. His repetitive daily life impels him to find something out of ordinary which happens on one business trip when he meets Lisa Hesselman, a girl who is extraordinarily different from others. However, when Michael Stone eventually decides to leave his son and wife and stay with Lisa, he finds that it is impossible to escape from his boring and repetitive life and Lisa is becoming normal like everyone else. Throughout that film, we can see Michael Stone’s failure of finding something different from his boring life. Based on the screen credits, we can see that only three people worked on character dubbing, by which David Thewlis voiced Michael Stone, Jennifer Jason Leigh was for Lisa Hesselman and Tom Noonan was responsible for the voice of everyone else. Therefore, each puppet in that film looks and sounds the same. During my production, I am interested in building some connections between my artwork and Anomalisa. After meeting with Lisa, Michael believes that he has found an escape from his previous reality where he could be reborn with her. However, at the end of the film, Lisa’s voice starts to transform from her previously unique tone to the common vocal stereotype, which falls back to the trope that Michael hates and that disgusts him. In search of the unique and special, Michael eventually returns to the familiar life with his son and wife. Indeed, self-abjection takes place over Michael's inability to change his own life because he cannot clearly declare

---

90 In fact, Christopher Wilkins and Leslie Murphy gave their voices for Michael and Lisa’s likeness and background narrators.
who he wants to be and who he has to be. As David L. Smith concludes, “the film explores the tensions between the yearning for fulfillment ‘elsewhere’ and the possibility inherent in our immediate circumstances.”\(^9^1\) From this perspective, this tension between the imagined fulfillment and disappointed reality is the prototype of *Mask* throughout my production process. In other words, the rift between Puppet’s mask and head metaphorically derives from its desire and disappointment. As my personal example of tipping at the airport indicated, newcomers of a country will presuppose that the new environment is different from his or her original living place. A similar thing happens to Puppet. The bubble of hope for integrating into the new environment breaks when Puppet finds the rift that cannot be solved. According to Jessica Langer, “dystopia imagines a world in which the criticized aspects of the author’s society are overgrown and run amok, displacing them into an alternate universe where life is defined by them.”\(^9^2\) *Mask* visualizes a hopeless dystopic world in which Puppet is not able to fix its problem, and where the government is not able to completely erase the unmasked puppets from the city. As a result, after watching *Anomalisa*, the basic outline of *Mask* was created in my mind. Puppet has been looking for the solution to fix its rift, but “the possibility inherent in its circumstance” is something that inevitably breaks and contradicts with its initial expectations. More importantly, according to Smith, “what results from these pursuits of happiness is sometimes farcical, sometimes tragic, but it is always disappointing. Even if Kaufman’s protagonists get what they want, it turns out that the goal simply replicates the syndrome they sought to escape.”\(^9^3\) That explains why Puppet’s mask, after so much

bloody and ruthless effort, still cannot be held onto its head, until eventually Puppet self-
manipulates and destroys its body to the extent that both new and old mask (dirty and
dusty) cannot be held on its altered internal structure.

There is another plot point in Anomalisa that influences my basic setting in Mask.
When Michael is running in the hotel hallway to find Lisa, we can see his mask is falling
on the ground and Michael’s mechanism as a puppet becomes visible to the audience.
Most stop motion animations tend to conceal the structure of the puppet, no matter if it is
made of clay or created by a 3D printer. Like Kubo and the Two Strings (2016) or
Coraline (2009)\textsuperscript{94}, films featuring replacement animation erase the visible seams between
the puppet’s head and its replaceable face. On the contrary, in Anomalisa, the seams are
left visible in the way that it complicates the relation between artifice and reality. As
Michael starts to realize that he is not different from the others but is just another type of
puppet, Smith comments that “artifice and reality, thing and person, this world and the
beyond: these are the polarities that lead Michael into solipsistic distortions when he
pursues one pole to the exclusion of the other, missing the point that life as such is a
relationship of both.”\textsuperscript{95} Although Mask does not visualize the polarity of artifice and
reality as much as that in Anomalisa, it is still on the border of artifice and reality when
Puppet starts to pick off its mask and its internal structure becomes visible to the
audience. Puppet, similar to what Michael suffers, is looking for the purity of its national
identity with the complete exclusion of the opposite other. Another example related to
artifice and reality happens when Puppet uses a computer at home. As I have already

\textsuperscript{94} Although there are many other animations using the 3D printing technology, but these two films’ behind-
the-scenes videos are what I find during my production process.
discussed, what shows in the screen is actually a recording of my real operation and the search results should be the same if others type the same question. By doing that, on the one hand, the boundary of artifice and reality begins to collapse which parallels one crucial topic about the hybrid nature of the animation. On the other, I have a personal desire to leave some tracks in the animation, such as my design of puppet’s structure and the operations on the computer screen. I hope my artificial design left in the film could exaggerate audience’s impression between Mask and the real world in terms of my personal identity as both an animator and international student.

Another interesting plot point in Anomalisa happens when Michael is looking at the mirror in the bathroom. When he tries to check his face, his mask starts to shake, his mouth contorts and moves out of his control and his facial expression becomes meaningless and uncanny. It is easy to deduce the animators randomly picking the mask from puppet’s expression library and shooting it in a relatively short duration. At this moment, Michael’s appearance becomes uncanny and strange. Similarly, throughout my whole production process, uncanniness of Puppet was one of the main practical goals I wanted to achieve in order to tap into the audience’s personal memory of abject others.

3.2 Uncanniness

In this paper, the concept of uncanniness is introduced as a practical strategy that helped me design Puppet’s structure and build up the animation, rather than as a psychoanalytic theory. Kristeva describes the uncanny as “nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become
alienated from it.”⁹⁶ Also, Freud concludes that “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced.”⁹⁷ Therefore, the uncanniness refers to something fundamentally familiar yet unfamiliar based on Freud’s arguments. Also, it is necessary to introduce the Uncanny Valley graph developed by Masahiro Mori in 1970. According to Mori, a robot is human-like but there is a point when a robot comes as close as it can to a real human being’s appearance and begins to fall into the scope of strangeness and uncanniness.⁹⁸ One important aspect based on Mori’s finding is that what becomes uncanny and strange derives from what looks familiar or similar compared with real human beings. As a result, when I created the prototype of puppet’s face in my computer, I used a three-view photograph of myself as reference. What I mean is that puppet’s mask is designed upon one human being’s facial appearance, rather than a drawing or a computer-generated character. Also, after each mask was completed by the 3D printer, I decided to use sandpaper to file away the visible layered structure in order to match human’s skin texture to the greatest extent. Throughout my preparation of the facial expressions, I carefully picked the colour applied to the mask which was closest to real human being’s skin colour. Mori also states that the presence of movement changes the shape of the uncanny valley graph by amplifying its peaks and valleys.⁹⁹ As a result, in the animation, Puppet’s rigid and discontinuous movement distances itself from the scope of a normal human being. Moreover, when Puppet detaches its mask from its head, the appearance of two extruded eyeballs exaggerates its alienness from a real human being. By doing that, puppet’s

⁹⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The "Uncanny",” *New Literary History* 7, no. 3 (1976), 636.
⁹⁹ Ibid., 99.
appearance oscillates somewhere between human and robot, between living and dead. According to Freud, man’s attitude to death, connecting with “animistic mental activity” comprises how things become uncanny. That is why I decided to emphasize Puppet’s uncanniness, for it relates to Kristeva’s abjection theory in the way that a corpse is an obvious embodiment of death that will most likely trigger abjection. According to Kristeva, “the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.” By connecting abjection with uncanniness, there is a space of negotiation building on Puppet’s body. The hybridity of the practical strategy of being uncanny and the theoretical thinking of abjection takes place, rather than a process of exclusion that takes place when one or the other have a higher priority.

3.3 The content and form of Puppet

During the production process, the 3D printer played an important role in shaping the whole animation in terms of the puppet’s replaceable structure and decoration in different scenes. It is not difficult to understand the operating principle of a Fused Deposition Modelling (FDM) 3D printer. By heating up the terminal nozzle to the melting point of the thermoplastic filament, the melting material will be forcibly extruded on a plate. A 3D printed object is made of strings of material, layer by layer. Based on my practical experience, this generating process is so slow that one puppet mask, which is approximately 5.8 cubic centimeters, would take three to four hours. This gave me enough time to observe the whole process. In fact, the more time I spent in observing, the deeper thinking I came up with. Each 3D printed object is a product of crystalized time.

---

100 Sigmund Freud, “The "Uncanny"," New Literary History 7, no. 3 (1976), 634.
and labor. Although we need to admit such labor of creating objects is totally executed by machine, the thinking recalls the mechanism of animation in terms of individual frames that constitute animation. While the machine is working, you can see how each layer of material comprises the whole object, but at the same time, each one is covered by the new layer and becomes partly invisible. As Ewan Wilson connects similar thoughts about Oskar Fischinger’s 1927 experimental animation \textit{Wax Experiment}, “If each frame of Fischinger’s \textit{Wax Experiment} is representative of a period of labor, of sculpture, then each frame is also a signifier of both the new expired form the object took in that instant and the period of time that has transpired since the last frame.”^102 Following Wilson’s words, we can see how similar it is to the mechanism of a 3D printer without considering the difference of whether the labor comes from an animator or machine. Each layer that comprises the mask is representative of a period of labor, and each layer is also a signifier of the passed time and its indexicality among the whole mask when it is covered by a new layer. In other words, we can conclude that the mask, in the animation, not only takes meaning as one kind of content that stores puppet’s personal information and signifies the criteria to distinguish the national other, but also it carries meaning as form in the way it represents one period of time and labor that the 3D printer contributes to the object. However, one would ask the question, if a 3D printer has such important meaning, why not film it and represent the generation process? One reason I need to admit is the difficulty of assembling the smaller scale version of the printer’s components.\footnote{Ewan Wilson, “Diagrams of Motion”: Stop-Motion Animation as a Form of Kinetic Sculpture in the Short Films of Jan Svankmajer and the Brothers Quay,” \textit{Animation: an International Journal}, Vol. 13 (2018), 153.} More importantly, if we look back the customs sequence when Puppet gets its new mask, the

\footnote{In fact, after several failures of assembling small parts of printed objects, I am not confidence in 3D printer’s capability and accuracy of printing small objects at around 5 cubic centimeters.}
generation of a mask is represented on the screen and the whole process is based on the immaterial data. Compared with the importance of the 3D printer’s mechanism to the film, I prefer representing the process in which immaterial data transforms to the material mask. A puppet’s daily life oscillates on the border between electronic, immaterial data and the material mask which signifies their superiority toward unmasked puppets and builds a national myth about the community’s purity and security.

Another aspect that involves the interconnection of content and form happens on Puppet’s body. Although Mask is labeled as replacement animation, Puppet’s facial expression is frozen at most times. As a replacement animation, at least part of the animated subject is replaceable, and the substitute pieces should look similar with subtle differences. However, very few shots visualize the movement on Puppet’s face, even though I created almost thirty versions of the mask. One mistake I need to admit is that not all masks had the same, consistent skin colour, and it makes the facial expression weird and unusual, which I do not expect. To avoid such an unexpectedly awkward result, I decided to minimize the movement on puppet’s face and focus on Puppet’s body movement. However, such a decision deepens another effect that I am willing to show to the audience, which is the concentration on the puppet itself. As previously stated, most replacement animations purposely hide their puppet’s structure and its replacement mechanism. Most of these films focus on the story, movement and mise-en-scene, rather than puppet itself. We can access knowledge and insights to a puppet’s structure from many “behind the scene” videos but not from the film itself. On the contrary, Mask puts heavy weight on Puppet’s structure to tell the story. When Puppet detaches its mask from its head, the audience can figure out what is inside Puppet. More importantly, its internal
head structure is an essential story point as it explains why Puppet can no longer hold both the new and old masks because it files away too much on the extruded part of its internal head to hold the mask. However, the blood that comes out from Puppet’s body contradicts such an argument since Puppet, which is made out of plastic, cannot bleed. By doing that, I hope the audience would still remember Puppet’s corporality and get the impression of abjection or self-destruction that happens on such a corporeal body.

Furthermore, during the production process, I create two types of puppet heads, one has a lower extruded part that a mask is able to connect with the head without a rift, and the other one has a higher part. During the shooting, I would replace puppet’s head instead of its mask, depending on whether the gap is visible or not, along with how the story proceeds. In other words, puppet’s form establishes the story, like in Jan Švankmajer’s film *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982), where what is repeatedly destroyed is not as important as the final form of such repetition destruction and “overt display of destructive energy”\(^\text{104}\) shows up through the process of this repetitive destruction. Similarly, in *Mask*, through the destruction of Puppet’s formal body, what concentrates is the destructive energy visualized in the last frame, energy involving self-hatred and abjection.

**Conclusion**

The paper discusses the transformation in *Mask* of how Puppet suffers from the fear of becoming one of the unmasked puppets to self-abjection toward its body. By analyzing the film within multiculturalist and postmodernist discourses, this paper explains why the film is a simulated allegory and how cultural difference generates abjection. Also, the paper involves discussions about how to interpret the digital billboard

as a national myth in the way that makes puppets believe they are pure and uncontaminated. By employing Kristeva’s abjection theory, I am more aware of the impact of language on the construction of personal identity. Also, Barthes’ thinking and argument on myth-making provided me with a different perspective to check the influence of national forces to differentiate groups of people. In retrospect, in this research project, the thinking about governmentality and hybridity plays an important role in contextualizing the film and theorizing several frames visualized in the film. More specifically, Mask is a cyberpunk, hybrid animation that combines fantasy and reality, in which Puppet is a hybrid cyborg in terms of its body and identity that challenges the boundary of self/other, inside/outside, pure/impure. However, this paper does not discuss the positive possibilities of hybridity in terms of rebellion or the opportunity to speak and act on both sides, nor does Mask visualize any positive results from self-destruction or self-manipulation. My personal experience tells me there are not just negative consequences, but possible personal development. However, this is not represented in the film. It is important to note that, according to Jessica Langer, “beneath the surface of dystopianism of the violence and cacophony of these metropolitan spaces lies a positive and the potential for subversion…”105 In my future research, I will continue focusing on these similar themes within a relatively closed or imagined world, based on which a new intruder arrives in a new environment. However, rather than focusing on its negative consequences, my future research will be concentrating on the positive result and influence. Like Ben Gehrels concludes in the case of Asian Canadians, I should remember in the future research that “the ‘in-betweenness’ of Asian Canadian subjects is

useful for describing a hybrid position in which individuals sometimes utilize the
difference embedded in the ‘Asian’ designation in ‘Asian Canadian’ and sometimes take
advantage of the sameness involved in being ‘just’ Canadian.”106 As an international
student, I should realize my identity is not fixed without changes. On the contrary, my
flexible identity and position based on different cultural contexts make me closer to the
conflicts about cultural difference and easier to find shared knowledge from each side. It
is the opportunity that allows me to speak and act on both sides.

Figure A: The digital Billboard in *Mask*
Bibliography


*Blade Runner*. Directed by Ridley Scott. 1982. DVD.


