

# Lost and Found Fruit:

An Animated Exploration of Queer Hope in a Dystopian World

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## Abstract

This practice-oriented research inquiry considers how a dystopian world, depicted in a storybook illustration style, forms the basis of an animated short film. Central to the film's iconography is the metaphor of forbidden fruit, representing hope found through companionship and the authentic expression of queer identity. Drawing on dystopian literature (*We*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *High-Rise*), and short animations (*Model Citizen*, *Prince Ivan and the Clockwork Heart*, *Ce fruit*), the research project depicts a dystopian world where knowledge is power, and knowing becomes an empowering force that cannot be controlled. The study is motivated by my personal interest in preserving individual freedom and self-expression in the face of political and social agents of invisibility and oppression. Using iterative drawing, storyboarding and animatics as methods, this short film demonstrates how a metaphor can convey empowering knowledge and the agency of hope in defiance of dystopic silence and oppression.

**Keywords:** Animation; Dystopia; Hope; Narrative; Queer identities

**Research Question:** How might an animated short film that employs a storybook illustration style depict finding hope through queer companionship in a dystopian world?

## Contents

Abstract.....	2
<b>Research Question:</b> How might an animated short film that employs a storybook illustration style depict finding hope through queer companionship in a dystopian world? .....	2
List of figures .....	4
Attestation of Authorship .....	5
Acknowledgements.....	6
Ethics.....	6
Introduction chapter .....	7
Positioning the researcher .....	8
<b>Contextual Review of Knowledge</b> .....	9
Overview.....	9
Narrative.....	9
Dystopia .....	10
Queer theory and the meaning of “queerness” .....	13
Forbidden Fruit.....	14
Hope .....	15
Stylistic Inspiration.....	16
<b>Research practice design</b> .....	18
Methodological statement .....	18
Methods .....	19
Autoethnographic Drawing .....	19
Practice-oriented production pipeline.....	25
Dramaturgical Analysis .....	26
<b>Documentation</b> .....	27
Knowledge and illumination .....	27
The significance of Fruit .....	32
Aural Landscape .....	37
Eye symbolism.....	38
Drawing pictures in a (digital) story book.....	41
Discussion and reflection .....	44
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	45
Appendix.....	46

## List of figures

<b>Figure 1.</b> Screenshot of Best Friend, showing the protagonist with his virtual best friends. ....	11
<b>Figure 2.</b> Screenshot from Best Friend, showing yellow lighting behind the protagonist as he is confronted by the addict.....	11
<b>Figure 3.</b> Screenshot from Neighbours, showing the flower on the lawn between the neighbours. ....	12
<b>Figure 4.</b> Screenshot from Neighbours, showing the fence and the destroyed houses. ....	12
<b>Figure 5.</b> Leaf shape exploration, created prior to settling on fruit as the subject matter. Rai Zhang, 2024.....	20
<b>Figure 6.</b> Silhouette explorations of character and scenarios. Rai Zhang, 2024.....	20
<b>Figure 7.</b> Photograph of early whiteboard planning, scene ideas and light-shadow dichotomy. Rai Zhang, 2024. ....	21
<b>Figure 8.</b> Early style test frame featuring a corridor-like background. Rai Zhang, 2024. ....	22
<b>Figure 9.</b> Early style test frame featuring a sunrise-like background and human-bug scavengers. Rai Zhang, 2024. ....	22
<b>Figure 10.</b> Textures on character design for an early (now discarded) protagonist. Rai Zhang, 2024.....	23
<b>Figure 11.</b> First iteration design of Carmine (now outdated). Rai Zhang, 2024. ....	24
<b>Figure 12.</b> Sketches of current characters. Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	24
<b>Figure 13.</b> Drawing of the production pipeline map. Rai Zhang, 2024.....	25
<b>Figure 14.</b> Photograph of early whiteboard planning. Rai Zhang, 2024. ....	29
<b>Figure 15.</b> Character design and expression sheet for Avery, the main character. Rai Zhang, 2025.....	29
<b>Figure 16.</b> Background depicting light and dark shadows. Rai Zhang, 2025.....	30
<b>Figure 17.</b> Storyboard iteration 3, depicting the glass eye. Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	31
<b>Figure 18.</b> Storyboard iteration 3, depicting an early lighting attempt. Rai Zhang, 2025.....	31
<b>Figure 19.</b> Digital style frame sketch without textures. Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	32
<b>Figure 20.</b> Initial whiteboard planning of Lost and Found Fruit. Rai Zhang, 2024.....	33
<b>Figure 21.</b> Section of storyboard iteration 2, depicting Avery eating the forbidden fruit. Rai Zhang, 2024.....	34
<b>Figure 22.</b> Initial planning sketches of Avery (left) and Carmine (right). Rai Zhang, 2024. ....	35
<b>Figure 23.</b> Character design sketch ideas on paper. Rai Zhang, 2024. ....	36
<b>Figure 24.</b> Digital character design sheet for Father Laurence. Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	37
<b>Figure 25.</b> Planning sheet for eye stained glass. Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	39
<b>Figure 26.</b> Pencil test of Avery’s eye with a stained glass eye reflected within it. Available at: <a href="https://youtu.be/WYTVn3xnk5w">https://youtu.be/WYTVn3xnk5w</a> . Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	40
<b>Figure 27.</b> Fruit hitting the rainbow-stained glass. See Figure 26 for source. Rai Zhang, 2025.40	
<b>Figure 28.</b> Screenshot of the animation process showing the slapping fruit in the sketchier style. Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	41

<b>Figure 29.</b> Work-in-progress pencil test of the squeeze fruit shot. Available at: <a href="https://youtu.be/yIjFbNMcNRM">https://youtu.be/yIjFbNMcNRM</a> . Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	42
<b>Figure 30.</b> Animating fruit squeeze scene. Coloured shot available at: <a href="https://youtu.be/pXAHEFIUgs">https://youtu.be/pXAHEFIUgs</a> . Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	43
<b>Figure 31.</b> Still from “Lost and Found Fruit” scene. Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	47
<b>Figure 32.</b> Still from older iteration of “Lost and Found Fruit”, without the shrug posing. Rai Zhang, 2025. ....	47
<b>Figure 33.</b> Still from “Lost and Found fruit” final film. Available at: <a href="https://youtu.be/E_1K0gQ4VBY">https://youtu.be/E_1K0gQ4VBY</a> . Rai Zhang 2025. ....	48

## Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed

06 May 2025

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Special thanks to Welby Ings for your support and mentorship.

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This project is dedicated to my younger self, who was still finding out who they are.

## Ethics

This research project does not involve human participants; therefore, the researcher is not required to obtain ethics approval.

Note: Although “queer” and “genderqueer” can also be understood as distinct identifiers rather than umbrella terms, in this paper, “queer” is used specifically as an umbrella term to represent the LGBTQIA+, unless otherwise stated.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> LGBTQIA+ denotes Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and other diverse gender and sexual identities.

# Introduction chapter

This thesis project explores how forbidden fruit can be used as an allegory for queer identity in an animated dystopian world where knowledge is controlled by the church. This project is primarily practice-oriented, using iterative, autoethnographic hand-drawing as a method of both thinking and being.<sup>2</sup> This project draws on the contexts of various dystopian novels and animations, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, *High-Rise*, *Model Citizen*, *Best Friend*, as a basis for the narrative.<sup>3</sup> The aesthetic of the animation is inspired both stylistically and aesthetically by the hand-drawn picture-book qualities of *Prince Ivan and the Clockwork Heart*, *Genius Loci*, and Hayao Miyazaki films such as *The Boy and the Heron*.<sup>4</sup> This thesis explores how the practitioner's autoethnographic experiences – analysed through a dramaturgical lens – inform the drawing practice as a method of thinking, and in turn shape narrative development, character design and aesthetic choices in the making of *Lost and Found Fruit*.

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<sup>2</sup> Anna Ursyn, "Drawing as a Way of Thinking," *Interalia Magazine*, April 18, 2018, <https://www.interaliamag.org/articles/anna-ursyn-drawing-way-thinking/>.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (McClelland and Stewart, 1985); J. G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (Jonathan Cape, 1975); *Model Citizen*, directed by David James Armsby, YouTube video, 5:03, posted January 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVLrBJYGxk4>; *Best Friend*, directed by David Feliu, Varun Nair, Juliana de Lucca, Nicholas Olivieri, and Yi Shen, student film, GOBELINS, l'école de l'image, 2018, YouTube video, 5:46, posted November 9, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j01Hg4QJ6NE>.

<sup>4</sup> *Prince Ivan and the Clockwork Heart*, directed by X. K. Balashov, student film, California Institute of the Arts, 2022, YouTube video, 3:38, posted April 25, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xme3tNS4rnc>; *Genius Loci*, directed by Adrien Mérigeau (Kazak Productions, 2020), Vimeo video, 16:26, <https://vimeo.com/715848386>; *The Boy and the Heron*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (Studio Ghibli, 2023), film.

# Positioning the researcher

*Lost and Found Fruit: An Animated Exploration of Queer Hope in a Dystopian World* was born from the idea of coded representation and the use of metaphors in animated narratives, both of which can speak to hidden topics without the use of words. In this sense, the project explores what queer identity and visibility (and by extension, invisibility) means to me as a closeted queer person who identifies as transgender non-binary. Within queer theory, studies on gender identity and sexuality have historically focused on binary constructs.<sup>5</sup> As a result, non-binary and gender non-conforming identities have only recently begun to be acknowledged and theorised, leading to their limited representation in media.<sup>6</sup> However, it is only natural to want to gain recognition for your identity, and gender is no different.<sup>7</sup> Given the limited scope of films that portray queer people in a positive light, along with the personal risk of being outed through a viewing of this project, I chose to explore coded representation through the metaphor of fruit in this animated short film.

Various symbols, such as flowers and fruit, have historically served as coded references for closeted identities. This thesis film incorporates symbols such as the pomegranate as the forbidden fruit, and the stained-glass eye with the intention of using the animated narrative strategy of metamorphosis to create an experimental short film inspired by autoethnographic experience – one that may potentially resonate with others.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the fruit represents more than just being an identity. Specifically, the uneaten fruit can bring out both a sense of anticipation and existential dread: the tension of knowing who you are in a world where being such an identity is forbidden. As a symbol, the fruit holds personal significance for me, serving as a vessel to represent the act of embracing one's identity despite the uncertainties and potential backlash. The way the fruit is treated in the film illustrates that hope can take many forms, and no one is truly alone in their suffering or in their feelings of existential dread.

In this thesis film, the fruit depicted is inspired by the pomegranate, both for its physical properties and its rich symbolic associations in biblical texts and the myth of Persephone. These symbolic associations are explored in greater depth in the following contextual section.

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 2004), 42–43.

<sup>6</sup> Stayci Taylor, "Not Getting Your Story Straight: Queering Heroes' Journeys and Heteronormative Timelines," *Media Practice & Education* 25, no. 2 (July 1, 2024): 174–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2024.2324120>.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 131–51.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 1st ed. (Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), 69.

# Contextual Review of Knowledge

## Overview

In the wake of a disaster, fruit becomes a rare commodity, tightly controlled by the church. How can this dystopian world serve as a vessel to depict despair and hope as two sides of the same coin? What is hope, and how is it found in human connections through shared identity? In this contextual review chapter, the following sections examine how various contexts informed the key aspects of *Lost and Found Fruit*. These include narrative structure, the dystopian genre, the interpretation of forbidden fruit as queer identity, and the ways in which hope is connected to companionship and to queer identity itself.

## Narrative

Narrative in animation differs from that of novels or other text-based media, as it can transcend traditional storytelling through visual and aural landscapes, elements moulded entirely by the practitioner's hand. There are animation-specific strategies and creative possibilities unique to the medium that are often used to communicate an animated narrative. These animation strategies include metamorphosis, condensation, symbolism, fabrication, penetration, acting and performance.<sup>9</sup>

In particular, metamorphosis holds significance within the animation medium, as it enables different images to be linked together in a single fluid motion that directly transforms one object into another.<sup>10</sup> This gives animation the unique ability to depict narrative progressions in ways that might defy conventional logic, collapsing space and time, dream and reality, into however long or short a moment the animator desires.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding narrative structure, a queer approach to storytelling can simply involve defying the norms of traditional frameworks. Taylor suggests that there is no single way to tell a queer narrative, as many such journeys follow a non-linear path.<sup>12</sup> This parallels the lived experiences of many queer people, who may not follow the rigid benchmarks imposed by heteronormative society – such as being born, marrying, reproducing and dying in a prescribed social order.<sup>13</sup> For example, a queer approach to the Hero's Journey might involve refusing to follow its structure entirely, or never heeding the call at all.<sup>14</sup> Taylor further suggests that a queer character does not need to be strictly defined as an active agent who drives the plot from one

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<sup>9</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 68–126.

<sup>10</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, "Not Getting Your Story Straight," 174–87.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. (New York University Press, 2005), 14.

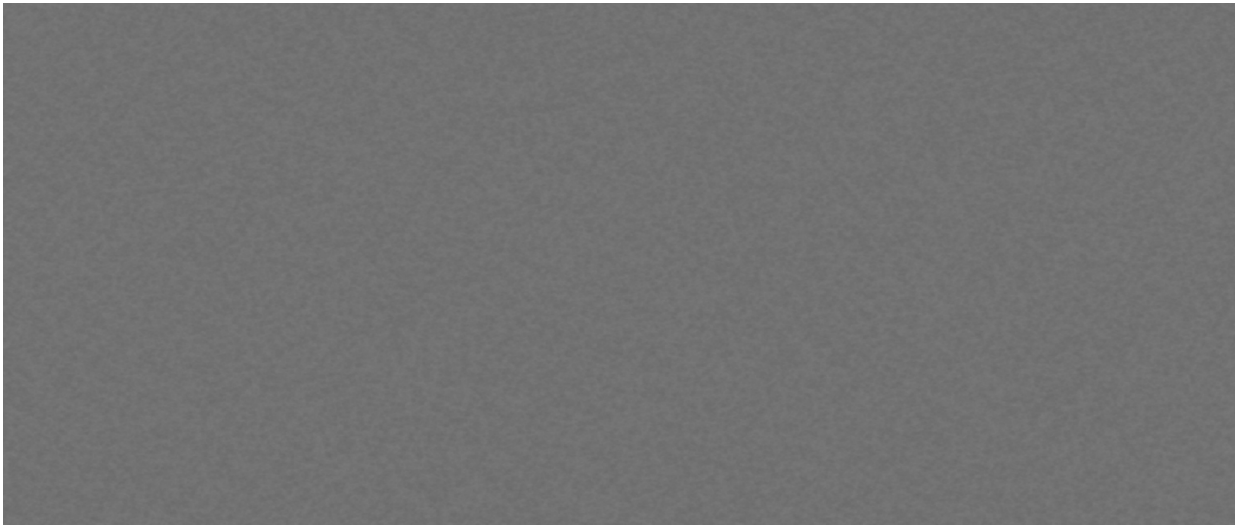
<sup>14</sup> Taylor, "Not Getting Your Story Straight," 184.

point to another; instead, the character can navigate relationships and experiences without striving towards a goal that fits within existing normative margins.<sup>15</sup>

## Dystopia

Dystopia has varying definitions depending on the paradigm or scenario in question. For this thesis, I define dystopia through a queer lens within a Western perspective, where being invisible and not spoken about is the main injustice of the fictional world, directly reflecting real world experiences. In the early stages of my contextual research on dystopia, I focused primarily on dystopian worlds shaped by climate collapse and natural disasters. However, upon further introspection, I realised I could instead share my worldview on a queer dystopia, one in which it is unsafe to exist authentically without fear of violence or rejection.

Short films depicting dystopias are often tied to a central moral. *Model Citizen*, a dystopian animated short film from the series by David James Armsby, presents a world where people are content to live in a dystopia, thus drawing attention to dangers of unquestioningly accepting the status quo.<sup>16</sup> In *Best Friend*, the colour yellow and the eye drops associated with the Best Friend service become representative of the protagonist's addiction to it.<sup>17</sup> Companionship is so highly sought after in this world that it becomes a marketable product, often causing addiction. The film depicts a dystopian future in which friendships are entirely virtual – illustrated most disturbingly when the protagonist's virtual friends passively watch as an addict violently removes his yellow forehead implant with a knife.<sup>18</sup> The addict serves as a foil to the protagonist, and is marked by facial scarring. After the violent encounter, the protagonist is also left with a scar of his past implant, suggesting that he too will follow the same path once his eye drops run out.



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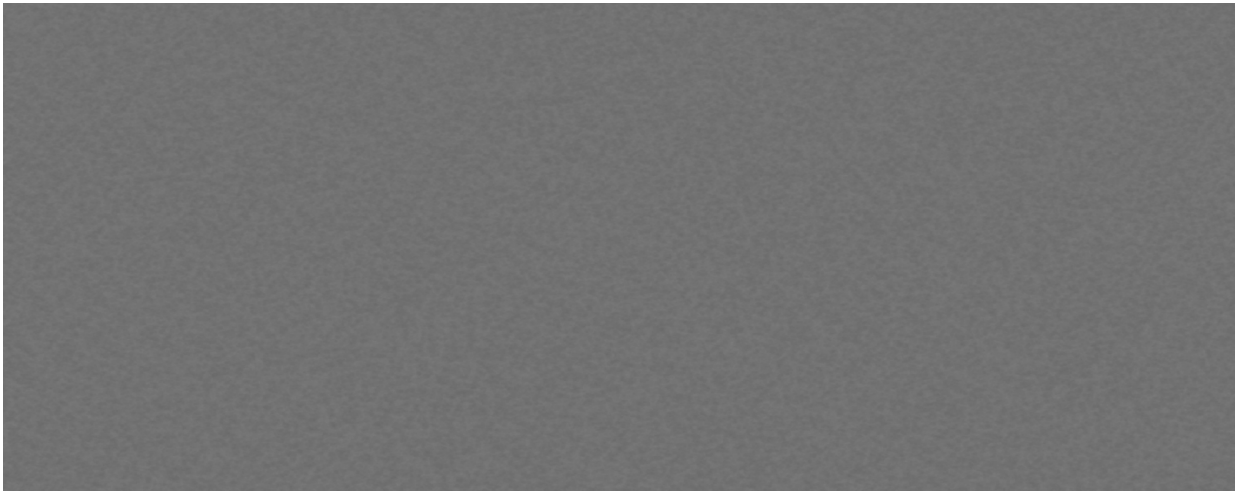
<sup>15</sup> Taylor, "Not Getting Your Story Straight," 182.

<sup>16</sup> *Model Citizen*, directed by Armsby. This film depicts a world where parents are killed by a robot after fulfilling their purpose of raising a child.

<sup>17</sup> *Best Friend*, directed by Feliu et al.

<sup>18</sup> This implant allows the user to see their virtual best friend, but it must be recharged with yellow eye drops dispensed from specific vending machines around the city. These machines emit the same bright yellow glow as the implant itself.

**Figure 1.** Screenshot of *Best Friend*, showing the protagonist with his virtual best friends.



**Figure 2.** Screenshot from *Best Friend*, showing yellow lighting behind the protagonist as he is confronted by the addict.

*Neighbours*, directed by Norman McLaren, is built on the simple premise of “love thy neighbour”, while depicting the worst consequences of failing to do so.<sup>19</sup> The film centres on two neighbours whose escalating conflict over a flower growing in the middle of their shared lawn leads to an explosive exchange of blows. A queer reading of the film by Emilio Martí López suggests that McLaren was grappling with his own closeted homosexuality through the film, which features recurring phallic imagery.<sup>20</sup> In this interpretation, the flower symbolises homosexual pleasure.<sup>21</sup> The fence the two men erect between themselves can be read as a metaphor for their internal psychological defences, a way to avoid confronting their homosexuality, hiding it from both the world and themselves.<sup>22</sup> In their efforts to possess the flower (and what it represents), the two men eventually succumb to their desires, striking and grabbing at each other with increasing desperation – a moment of repressed longing erupting under the strain of denied desire.<sup>23</sup> This can be interpreted as a frantic expression of being queer and closeted: McLaren’s repressed desires are unattainable in a world where acting on them threatens to unravel social order, just as the conflict in *Neighbours* leads to total destruction. Although McLaren describes the film as an antiwar and anti-violence work, the fight between the men can also be understood as a venting of frustration by being closeted. Their desperate physical struggle symbolises resistance against repression of homosexuality and the societal control that enforces it. As the violence escalates, the environment collapses – houses, families, and social structure – revealing that their homes, wives, and children are mere stage props in a theatrical façade of performed heteronormativity.

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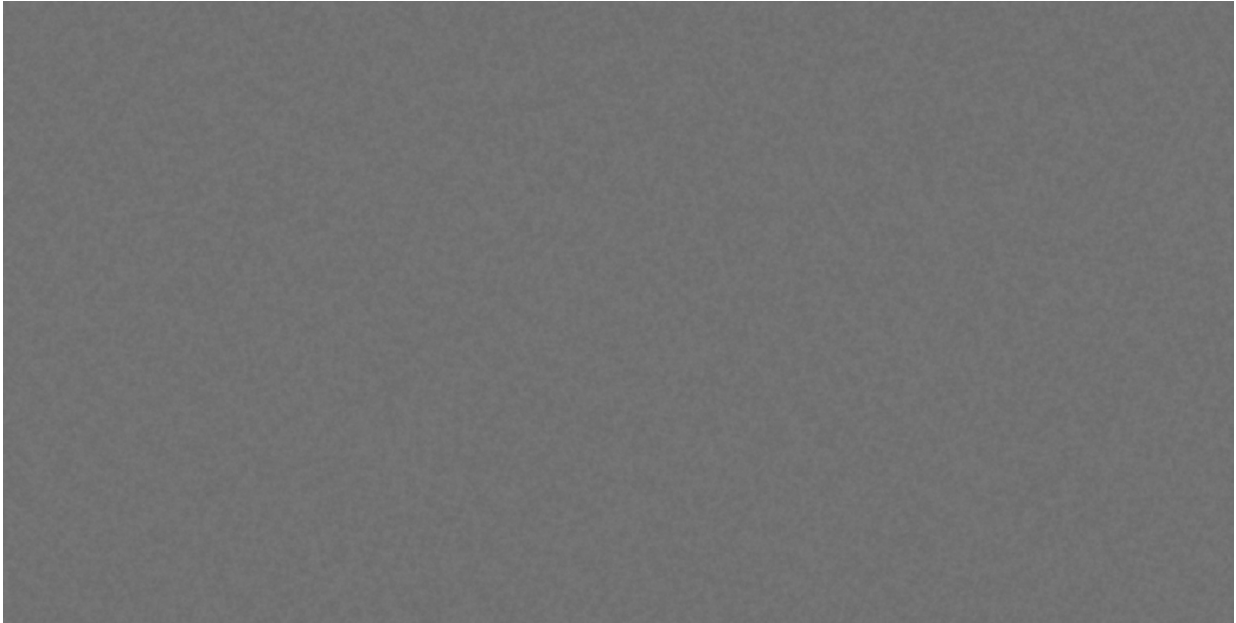
<sup>19</sup> *Neighbours*, directed by Norman McLaren (National Film Board of Canada, 1952), video, [https://www.nfb.ca/film/neighbours\\_voisins/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/neighbours_voisins/).

<sup>20</sup> Emilio Martí López, “McLaren’s Closet: Expressing and Hiding Homosexual Desire in Norman McLaren’s Filmography through the Reinvention of the Body and Space,” trans. Anthony S. Nuckols, unpublished manuscript, Academia.edu, 2016, 2–3, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://www.academia.edu/33057370/>.

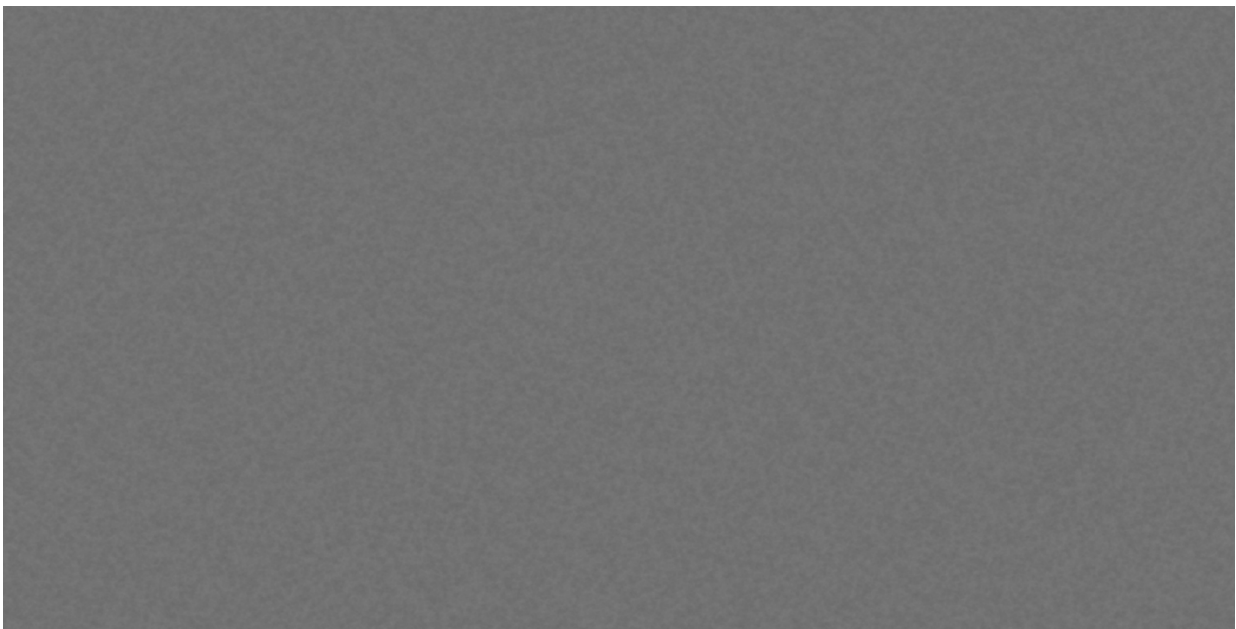
<sup>21</sup> López, “McLaren’s Closet,” 11.

<sup>22</sup> López, “McLaren’s Closet,” 19.

<sup>23</sup> López, “McLaren’s Closet,” 19–21.



**Figure 3.** Screenshot from *Neighbours*, showing the flower on the lawn *between* the neighbours.



**Figure 4.** Screenshot from *Neighbours*, showing the fence *and* the destroyed houses.

These short films each convey a significant idea within a brief runtime, using visual motifs to make their messages both easily understood and identifiable, such as the colour yellow in *Best Friend*, or the flower in *Neighbours*. These serve as a framework for how fruit functions symbolically in this thesis film, where red is the primary colour within an otherwise black-and-white palette. The colour red is used both in lighting and as the defining colour for the fruit. This contrast is intended to establish a distinct aesthetic for the animation.

## Queer theory and the meaning of “queerness”

Queer theory has evolved through history as various academics sought to affirm or challenge the legitimacy of queer identity. The term “queer” is fundamentally rooted in otherness and can only be defined in relation to what it is not, as it exists outside of normative boundaries.<sup>24</sup> In his queer reading of Genesis, Huddleston suggests that the term “queer” is formed and shaped by people and the world around them, therefore “queer” as an identifier was from a place of “othering”. This framing implies that queerness is not chosen but ascribed: it is determined by what one is not, rather than what one is.

However, nonconformity to the norm can be dangerous, especially when becoming the norm is expected. Butler argues that, because of the inherent violence directed at those who do not conform – such as homosexual or transgender individuals – the act of killing them can be perceived by society as a form of restoring order. In this view, the removal of the uncategorisable is seen as restoring things to the so-called natural way.<sup>25</sup>

Homophobia and the intolerance of homosexuality in the Western world have roots in the church, and its interpretation of the Bible.<sup>26</sup> Boswell suggests that factors beyond scripture contribute to Western society’s condemnation of queer people. He posits that the same books (the Bible) that condemn gay people also condemn hypocrisy, and that those who claim homosexual acts bar from one heaven ignore that the same texts also condemn greed and hypocrisy, but only queer people were burned at the stake.<sup>27</sup> This shows how the Bible has been selectively used to justify homophobia or to condemn any sexual relationship deemed unacceptable. Huddleston suggests that the homophobic interpretations of Genesis condemning queerness is hypocritical, as that would mean the book of Genesis is condemning itself.<sup>28</sup> This is not only limited to queer sexual relationships, but also any relationship that participates in sex for pleasure without the intent of creating a child.

In his queer reading of the Bible, Huddleston suggests that although queer characters are often written out of scripture through conservative interpretations, the Bible does not inherently exclude them.<sup>29</sup> In his poems, Huddleston reclaims portions of the Bible, such as in “Stained Glass Wedding”, which critiques the inevitability and (perceived) desirability of heterosexual marriage.<sup>30</sup> The poem ends with a passage from Genesis 3:1–5, framing queer marriage as a forbidden alternative to the heteronormative ideal.

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<sup>24</sup> Bradford C. Huddleston, “Queering the Beginning: A Poetic Exploration of Genesis and Creation” (honours capstone project, University of Texas at Arlington, 2024), 5.  
[https://mavmatrix.uta.edu/honors\\_spring2024/21/](https://mavmatrix.uta.edu/honors_spring2024/21/).

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 17–39.

<sup>26</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 35th Anniversary ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2015). This book explores how the Bible is often used to justify intolerance towards homosexuality in the West.

<sup>27</sup> Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Huddleston, “Queering the Beginning”, 11–12.

<sup>29</sup> Huddleston, “Queering the Beginning”, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Huddleston, “*Stained Glass Wedding*,” in “Queering the Beginning”, 21–22.

## Forbidden Fruit

In the context of Genesis 2–3, the idea of forbidden fruit can be interpreted as a metaphor for queer identity – forbidden knowledge that is present, desired but not allowed. In the Bible, the forbidden fruit is commonly understood as the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God warns Adam that when he eats from it he will surely die (Gen 2:17 NIV). Knowledge, then, becomes something dangerous, if acquiring it is framed as forbidden.

To tempt Eve, the serpent says, “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). If acquiring forbidden knowledge makes one “like God”, forbidden fruit as queer identity then becomes the knowledge of discerning good and evil from an ally to someone who may harm your safety.

After eating the fruit, Adam and Eve realise they are naked (Gen 3:7). Before eating the fruit, they were still naked but oblivious to the fact. In a similar way, queer identity is not chosen – it is already present – but only awareness of it changes perception. However, just as Adam and Eve’s realisation exposed them to shame, realising the naked truth of one’s queer identity can also expose a person to discrimination or harm. For many, invisibility becomes a safer option. God’s command to eat from any tree in the garden except for the one bearing forbidden fruit becomes a controlling move, where queer identity is suppressed and hidden away.

Although the identity of the fruit in Genesis is highly debated, this thesis specifically adopts the pomegranate as its symbol. The pomegranate appears as the forbidden fruit in the mythology of Persephone, who is bound to the underworld for one third of the year, based on how much of the fruit she ate. In the retelling by Ritsos et al., the pomegranate seeds are described as “glass phials filled with blood”, alluding to flesh in nature, which aligns with Glenn’s observation that fruit often symbolises sexuality.<sup>31</sup>

Historically, the term “fruit” or “fruitcake” was used as a homophobic slur, but it has since been reclaimed by some queer people as part of their identity.<sup>32</sup> This is demonstrated with the use of fruit as a symbol in queer films. In *Ce fruit*, every person is born with a fruit for a heart; heterosexual couples with different fruits exchange theirs as a symbolic exchange of love.<sup>33</sup> However, when same-fruit couples attempt to exchange hearts, theirs is taken and crushed in public execution. The fruit becomes a literal representation of love, and its destruction reflects the punishment of queer alternatives by the heteronormative system. *Fruit: A Gay Love Story* shows footage of fruit as characters in the setting of a kitchen to depict a queer love story,

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<sup>31</sup> Yannis Ritsos, “Persephone,” trans. Peter Green, Beverly Bardsley, *Grand Street* 6, no. 4 (1987): 143–56, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25007018>, 148; Justin Glenn, “Pandora and Eve: Sex as the Root of All Evil,” *The Classical World* 71, no. 3 (1977): 179–85.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Lamour, “How a Gay Slur Became a Luscious Part of My Identity,” *Bon Appétit*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.bonappetit.com/story/accepting-the-word-fruit-identity>.

<sup>33</sup> *Ce fruit*, directed by Morgan Bernaudeau, Yannick Boh, Maxime Brochet, Jeanne Chisloup, Pauline Colin, Alice Pierrard, Nina Sterpellone, student film, École Supérieure des Métiers Artistiques (ESMA), 2022, Youtube video, 6:31, posted August 6, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8Y0VdBYJH0>.

where the lemon and watermelon characters end up in a fruit salad.<sup>34</sup> A more hopeful portrayal is found in *Fruity*, a short film that uses fruit as a metaphor for lesbian sexuality and forbidden queer love, celebrating it rather than condemning it.<sup>35</sup>

## Hope

In Greco-Roman mythology, Hesiod mentions a woman named Pandora, who is often depicted as the one who opened the “box” that released evils into the world, leaving only hope inside.<sup>36</sup> However, as Jane E. Harrison points out, the container commonly referred to as a box was, in fact, a large clay jar (*pithos*), not a small chest (*pyxis*).<sup>37</sup>

Pandora was created as the first woman; by this definition, she represented a radical alternative that challenged male patriarchy.<sup>38</sup> However, this challenge led to her being blamed – as a woman – for unleashing evil. Glenn suggests that society’s fear of sex and sexuality often leads to the manipulation of religion and mythology to regulate societal perception.<sup>39</sup> He argues that Pandora opening the jar may be seen as a sexual euphemism, as jars and boxes can be understood as a symbol of female sexuality. By extension, since the jar held hope, hope itself might also be understood as dwelling within female sexuality, and more broadly, within queer identities.

Mathias Thaler considers hope and despair not as complete opposites; they can be weaved together, such as critical dystopias where humanity struggles and eventually “prevails against extreme hardship”, thus “nurturing hope”.<sup>40</sup> Human sexuality is often used as a trope of rebellion in dystopian literature. This is evident in *We*, and in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, both of which depict human sexuality as forbidden by the state, yet ultimately uncontrollable.<sup>41</sup> In *High-Rise*, where society slowly devolves into chaos, the opposite is true, yet female sexuality is still treated with the same degree of fear and suppression.<sup>42</sup> As such, sexuality becomes a manifestation of rebellion against systems of control.

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<sup>34</sup> *Fruit: A Gay Love Story*, directed by Adam Noyes (2016), Youtube video, 10:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jtto0KLQq18>.

<sup>35</sup> *Fruity*, directed by Anna Mouzouri (BBC, 2021), video, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p097t05f>.

<sup>36</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, line 700, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (1914), <https://sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/works.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Jane E. Harrison, “Pandora’s Box,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 20 (1900): 100, <https://doi.org/10.2307/623745>.

<sup>38</sup> Elissa Marder, “Pandora’s Fireworks; or, Questions Concerning Femininity, Technology, and the Limits of the Human,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 47, no. 4 (2014): 388. <https://doi.org/10.5325/philrhet.47.4.0386>.

<sup>39</sup> Glenn, “Pandora and Eve,” 179–85.

<sup>40</sup> Mathias Thaler, “Bleak Dreams, Not Nightmares,” *Constellations* 26, no. 4 (2019): 607–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12401>.

<sup>41</sup> Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Gregory Zilboorg (E. P. Dutton, 1924). This is evident in D-503’s infatuation with I-330, whom he later turns in for rebelling against the One State; Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale*. This is evident in Offred’s interest in Nick, which later distracts her from investigating her Commander.

<sup>42</sup> Ballard, *High-Rise*. This is evident in Jane Sheridan and Anne Royal’s women-only group, which hunts men and engages in implied cannibalism.

## Stylistic Inspiration

Another area of significance to this research project is the use of an illustrated, moving storybook style to depict an allegorical short film. As such, this research project draws stylistic inspiration from Studio Ghibli films – in particular *Spirited Away* and *The Boy and the Heron* – which utilise painted backgrounds and hand-drawn characters to bring fantastical worlds to life.<sup>43</sup> In terms of narrative, the research project is inspired by the free-flowing structure of Studio Ghibli films, where the personification of animals and the environment often serves as visual metaphor for deeper thematic concerns, or simply conveys a sense of childlike whimsy. For example, the heron in *The Boy and the Heron* transforms via metamorphosis into an older man, visually expressing his character; while in *Spirited Away* Chihiro's parents are transformed into pigs as a metaphor for gluttony.<sup>44</sup> These Studio Ghibli films are examples of the animation strategy “metamorphosis” mentioned in Paul Wells “Understanding Animation” that is unique to animation.<sup>45</sup>

Stylistically, the short film *Prince Ivan and the Clockwork Heart* uses patterns and textures to show a magical stylisation of the Slavic fairy tale, creating an animated picture-book style.<sup>46</sup> This research project draws upon similar visual elements: texture, charm, and stylisation, to create its own animated picture-book aesthetic.

Another short animation from which this research draws stylistic inspiration is *Genius Loci*, notable for its unique watercolour aesthetic and fluid transitions between locations.<sup>47</sup> The short film's use of silhouette and character staging, which contrasts starkly with its backgrounds through negative and positive space is especially compelling. The character Renee's mental breakdown is depicted through metamorphosis, as she shapeshifts from a human into a dog.

In thinking of black and white aesthetics with expressionist elements, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is widely considered a forebear of German expressionism.<sup>48</sup> Its film sets feature shadows painted at sharp odd angles, creating a surreal, playful world where the environment becomes a character in its own right.<sup>49</sup> The film's use of monochrome shots, interspersed with tinted frames and intertitles, places emphasis on the instrumental music and expressive acting to bring the narrative to life.

Hope in the context of queer identities is a complex concept that is subjective in nature. The films, mythos, and literature discussed, serve as a basis for my inspiration, and inform the theoretical knowledge of sexuality being explored through animated mediums. The pomegranate is chosen specifically due to its associations with forbidden knowledge and sexuality. By using fruit as a symbol, both allegory for forbidden knowledge of good and evil and

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<sup>43</sup> *Spirited Away*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (Studio Ghibli, 2001), film; *The Boy and the Heron*, directed by Miyazaki.

<sup>44</sup> *Spirited Away*, directed by Miyazaki; *The Boy and the Heron*, directed by Miyazaki.

<sup>45</sup> Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 69.

<sup>46</sup> *Prince Ivan*, directed by Balashov. The film is a steampunk, queer retelling of the Slavic fairy tale “The Frog Princess”.

<sup>47</sup> *Genius Loci*, directed by Mérigeau.

<sup>48</sup> *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene (Decla-Film, 1920), film.

<sup>49</sup> In this case, the distorted setting reflects the delusional and erratic mental state of Francis, who is experiencing mental hallucinations and believes that a man he perceives as “Dr Caligari”, the asylum director, is a murderer.

as a queer identity marker, this thesis project connects sexuality to a hopeful outlook in a dystopian society.

Hope is illustrated in my own practice by how the fruit is treated. In the narrative of this film, fruit is controlled, yet ultimately gifted to the protagonist, despite the expectation that it should remain censored. This act demonstrates hope through connection and companionship. Hope is also found in new beginnings, such as the film's ending, where the discarded fruit grows into a new plant. This symbolises a hopeful future filled with endless possibilities, and the chance for the protagonist to begin a new life, reborn from their past identity.

# Research practice design

## Methodological statement

This research is primarily practice-based, with the animated short film serving as the central artefact and basis of the investigation.<sup>50</sup> The project aims to tell a story inspired by the practitioner's subjective experiences, in the hope of encouraging conversation about hidden aspects of the self, what it means to exist authentically without fear, and how one might discover what hope means.

Using autoethnographic drawing – including mind maps, storyboards and animatics – as a thinking and making process, alongside dramaturgical analysis of autoethnographic experiences as methods, leads to the creation of a dystopian narrative centred around control, and the idea that hope can be found within despair through the connections of human companionship. Autoethnographic drawing includes both drawing and experimental texture design as methods to evoke a hand-drawn storybook aesthetic, and includes storyboarding, animatics as well as concept art and sketching. Blair, author of *Animated Autoethnographies*, states that autoethnographic animation forces the practitioner to dissect the self and reassemble elements of personal narrative in a way that it can lead to new knowledge – for both the self and others.<sup>51</sup> Textures that evoke the storybook aesthetic in my subjective view informs the visual identity of the animation. This iterative drawing method underpins both the pre-production and production phases. The production pipeline includes scriptwriting, sound design, as well as reference video recording, and encompasses the production phase of the research project.

Dramaturgy is also used to analyse dystopian literature, films and animation to support world-building and to inform the script. Dramaturgical textual analysis helps assemble the narrative through the lens of personal, subjective social performance, ultimately conveying the visual metaphor of forbidden fruit, an allegory of being queer in a dystopian world where fruit is tightly controlled and forbidden.

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<sup>50</sup> Gjoko Muratovski, *Research for Designers: A Guide to Methods and Practice*, 1st ed. (SAGE, 2016), 38.

<sup>51</sup> Jeremy Michael Blair, "Animated Autoethnographies: Stop Motion Animation as a Tool for Self-Inquiry and Personal Evaluation," *Art Education* 67, no. 2 (March 1, 2014): 6–13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2014.11519259>.



Figure 5. Leaf shape exploration, created prior to settling on fruit as the subject matter. Rai Zhang, 2024.

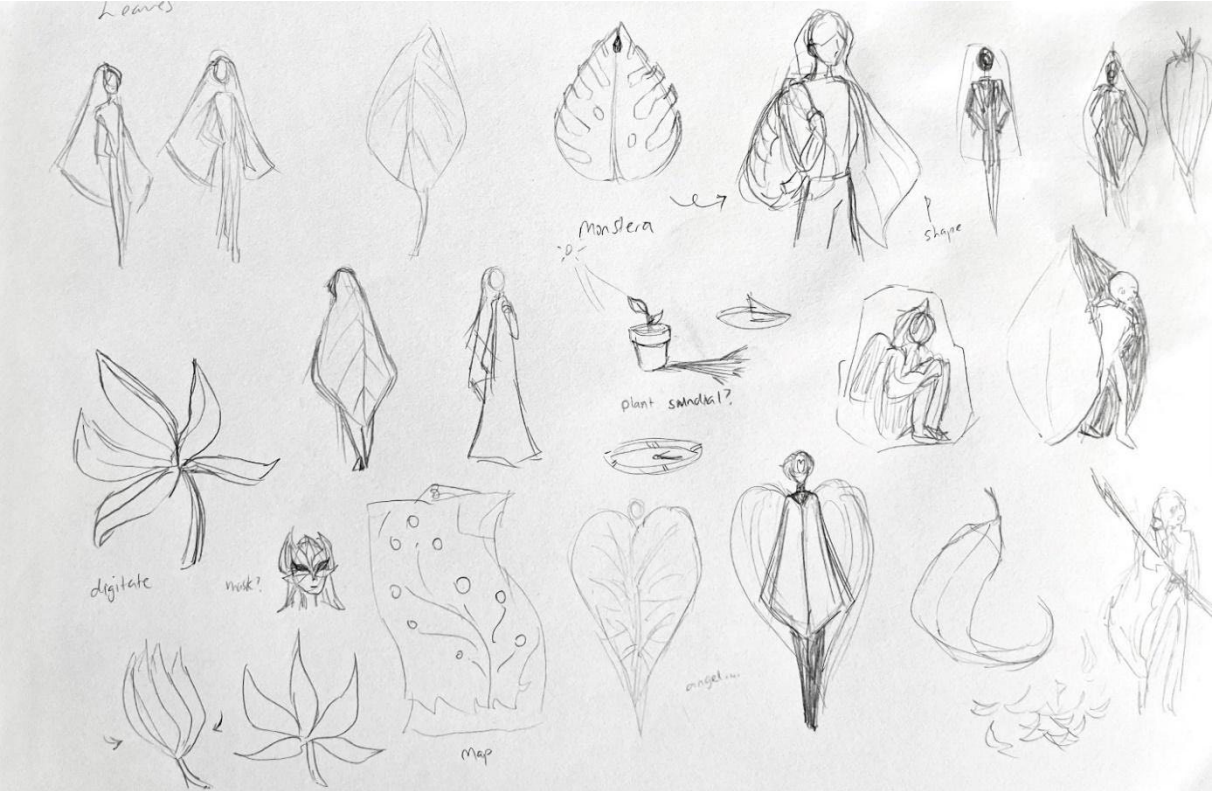
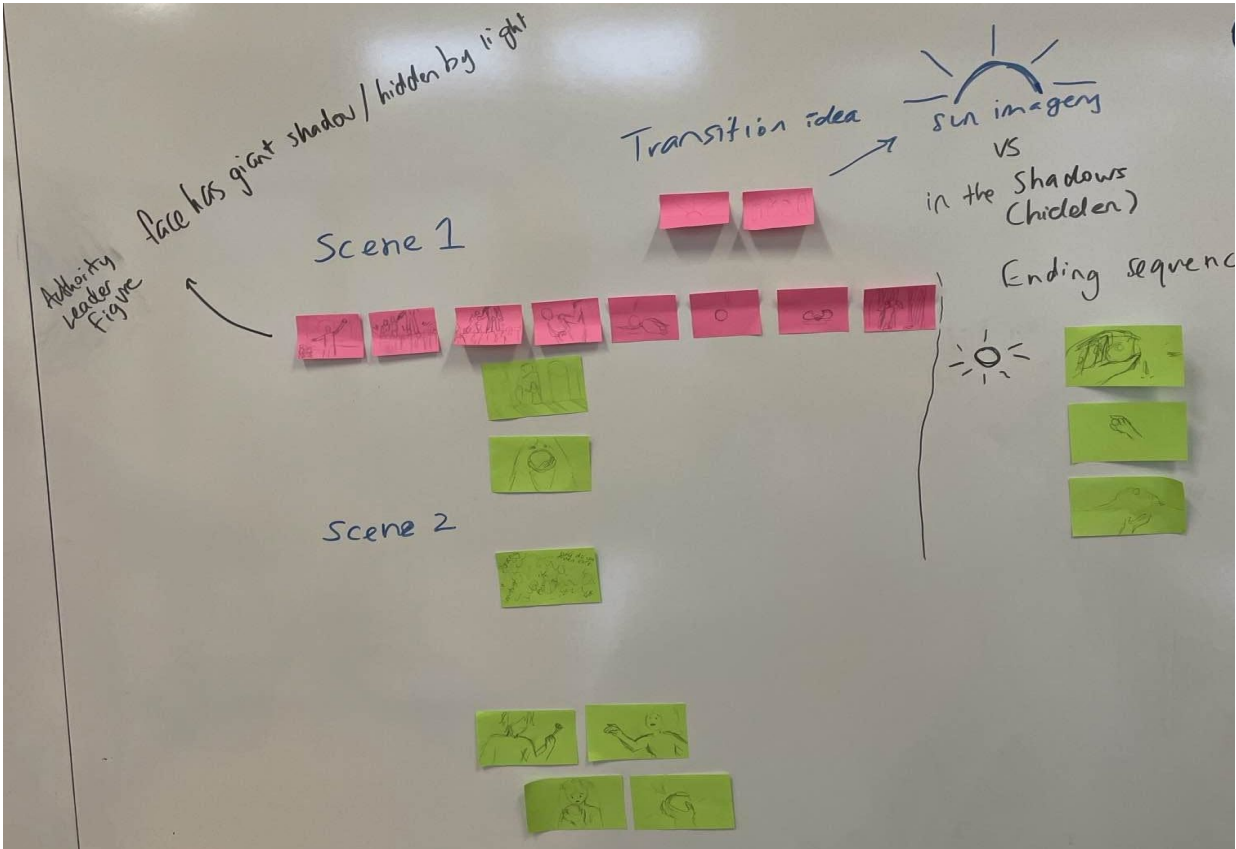


Figure 6. Silhouette explorations of character and scenarios. Rai Zhang, 2024.



**Figure 7.** Photograph of early whiteboard planning, scene ideas and light-shadow dichotomy. Rai Zhang, 2024.

Figures 5, 6 and 7 are sketches and doodles that gave rise to my early narrative. Tatjana Leblanc suggests that sketching and doodling are not only tools for a methodical approach (such as an autoethnographic approach), but also a way of demonstrating structured thinking.<sup>55</sup> These numerous sketches formed the starting point from which I gradually shifted my ideas – moving from leaf and bug concepts towards using fruit as metaphorical language. I then used the digital medium to refine these initial ideas. The digital process made overlaying textures easier, as layers could be adjusted or turned off as needed. By experimenting with negative and positive space in a monochrome palette, I was able to achieve the first iteration of the storybook aesthetic.

<sup>55</sup> Tatjana Leblanc, "Sketching as a Thinking Process," in *DS 82: Proceedings of the 17th International Conference on Engineering and Product Design Education (E&PDE15), Great Expectations: Design Teaching, Research & Enterprise*, Loughborough, UK, September 3–4, 2015 (2015), 606–11.



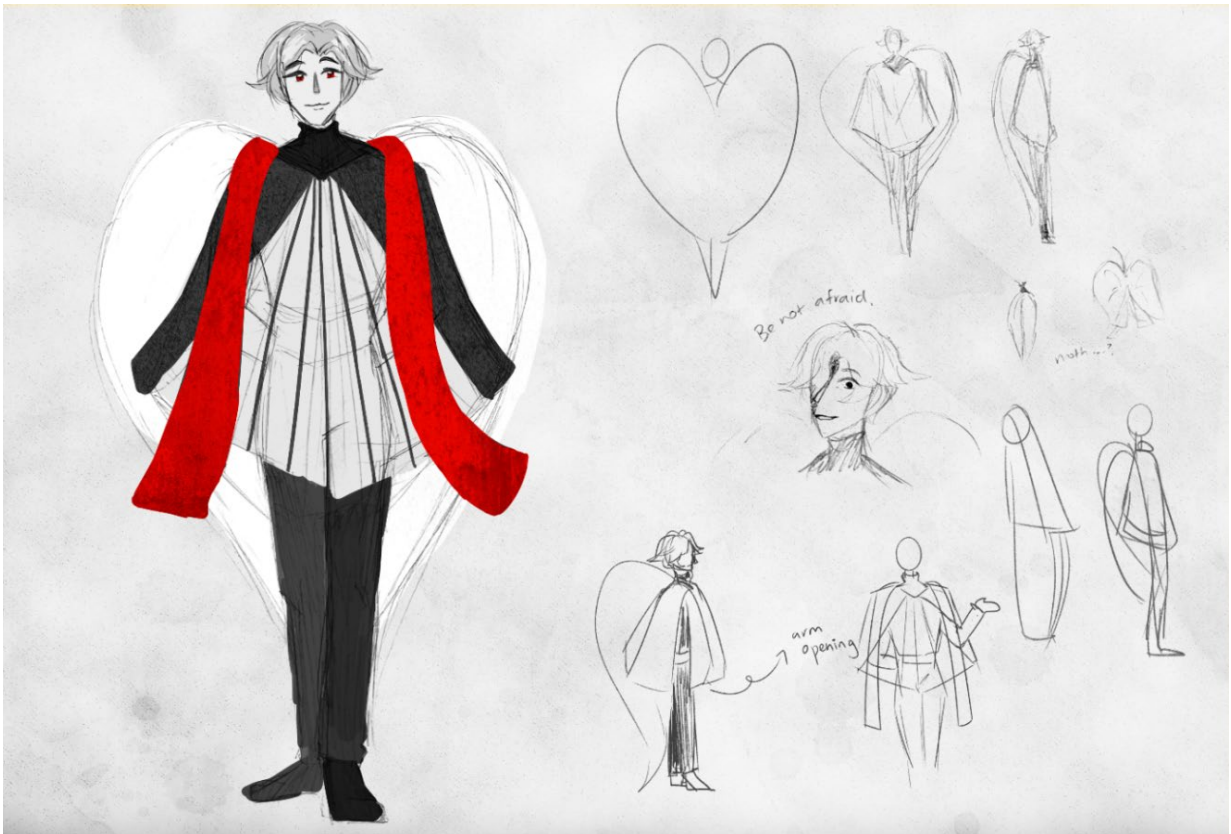
Figure 8. Early style test frame featuring a corridor-like background. Rai Zhang, 2024.



Figure 9. Early style test frame featuring a sunrise-like background and human-bug scavengers. Rai Zhang, 2024.



Figure 10. Textures on character design for an early (now discarded) protagonist. Rai Zhang, 2024.





grounded in autoethnographic experience. Personal emotions such as existential dread and fear of being perceived form the foundation of this creative process.

## Practice-oriented production pipeline

This animation project is practice-oriented, with animating and drawing comprising the bulk of the research. As Renee Dunlop states in *Production Pipeline Fundamentals for Film and Games*, the production pipeline is a tool that is used by people, and must therefore reflect the needs of the people using it.<sup>56</sup> Unlike machines, people require rest and work iteratively, learning from their mistakes. The production pipeline must account for breaks, recuperation, and reflection.<sup>57</sup>

This research follows a modified version of the animation production pipeline, adapted to the limited resources and constraints of a one-person thesis project. With only one year to create a short film of three to four minutes, the constraints are time dependent. Therefore, it represents a realistic and manageable workload for me, and differs from the production pipeline for a studio with hundreds of employees working on a blockbuster film.

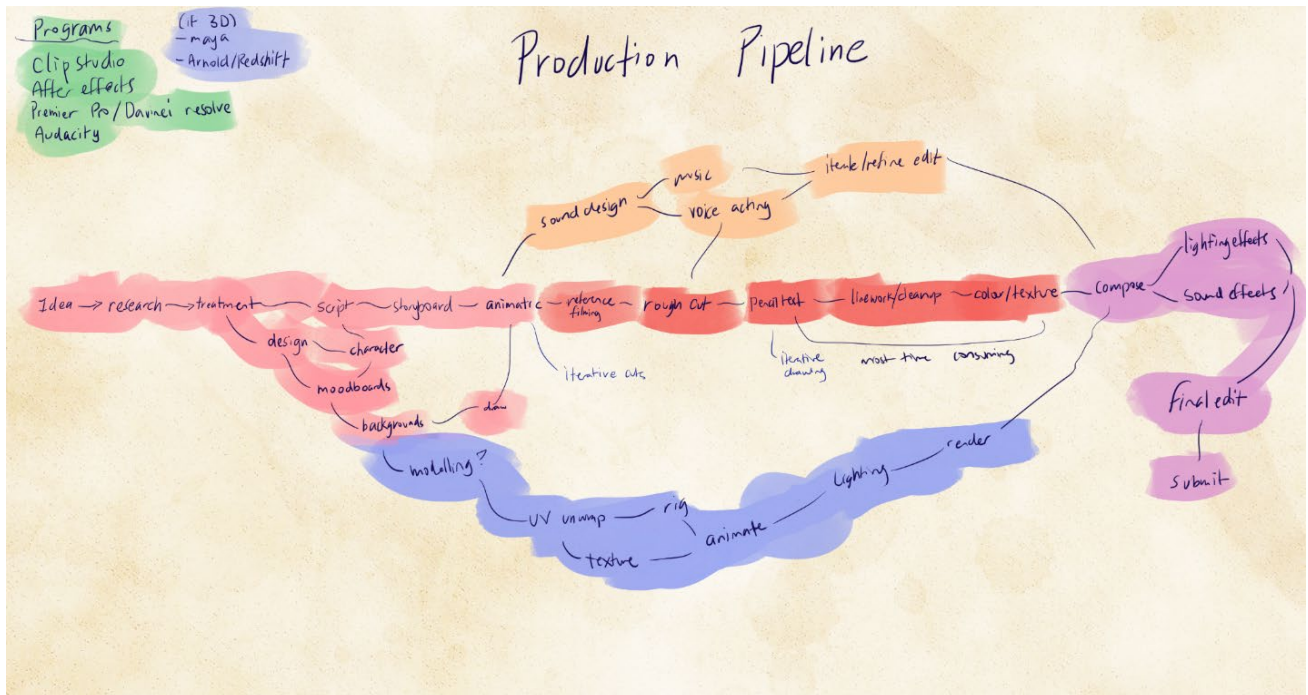


Figure 13. Drawing of the production pipeline map. Rai Zhang, 2024.

Figure 13 shows the production pipeline I attempted to follow for the thesis. Mapping it out helped me understand the workflow more clearly, particularly which parts would require the most time – namely, the animation. Although the animation is hand-drawn, it relies on digital software, using sketchy lines and textured patterns to evoke a storybook aesthetic. The textures

<sup>56</sup> Renee Dunlop, *Production Pipeline Fundamentals for Film and Games* (CRC Press, 2014), 240.

<sup>57</sup> Dunlop, *Production Pipeline Fundamentals*, 243.

are either scans of real materials or digital recreations that aim to replicate a tactile appearance. These textures are used to overlay layers over the base colours, with minimal lighting; instead, scenes use negative and positive space to show the textures.

Not depicted in Figure 13 is the cyclical nature between storyboards and animatics. I developed many iterations of storyboards, which were then turned into animatics to support narrative development. The first iteration of the animatic had no sound, including no dialogue. After sitting with it and refining later iterations of animatics and storyboards, I made the choice to have the characters remain silent. Their voicelessness became a deliberate plot device, used to parody the silencing of queer narratives. This exemplifies the cyclical iterative making process of the production pipeline.

## Dramaturgical Analysis

Dramaturgy is a methodology based on the theory that social life is a series of performances, scripted and staged – thus fundamentally linked to theater.<sup>58</sup> It assumes that by understanding theatre or films, one can better understand the self and others through connecting to the performances. In this project, dramaturgical analysis serves as a form of textual analysis, used to examine dystopian literature, films and animations. Elements from these sources are deconstructed and reassembled to inform both the narrative and script, as well as the textured storybook aesthetic of the animation.

Benford, in “Dramaturgical Analysis”, suggests that aspects of life follow a predetermined script.<sup>59</sup> Within this framework, hiding queerness is often necessary due to societal expectations rooted in heteronormativity. Authenticity is seen as something alienating or deviant – since going off the script is not socially acceptable. This connects directly to the allegory of forbidden fruit: being queer is forbidden, and the act of eating the fruit becomes a metaphor for gaining self-knowledge and confronting one’s queerness. By recognising and reflecting my own social performances through an autoethnographic approach, as the practitioner and researcher, I developed a narrative that seeks to convey the weight of that knowledge – and ultimately, how hope can be found through companionship with others who also deviate from the social script. The final narrative is crafted using these methods, with autoethnographic drawing – in the form of storyboards and visual experimentation – shaping the finished animated film.

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<sup>58</sup> Robert D. Benford and A Paul Hare, “Dramaturgical Analysis,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition)*, ed. James D. Wright (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 645–49, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.32046-3>.

<sup>59</sup> Benford and Hare, “Dramaturgical Analysis”, 646.

# Documentation

## Knowledge and illumination

“Knowledge is power” is usually attributed to Sir Francis Bacon. In his work *Meditationes Sacrae* from 1597, the phrase is “*nam et ipsa scientia potestas est*”, which is translated as “for knowledge itself is a power whereby he knoweth”.<sup>60</sup> If knowledge is controlled by those in power, then those in power also control who has access to it. In this thesis project, forbidden knowledge is represented allegorically through the motif of forbidden fruit from the Bible.

My approach to creating this narrative was to give the church seemingly all the power, holding dominion over the fruit, and controlling the knowledge and use of it. In this world, the fruit becomes the focal point; it may be seen, even touched, but never eaten. My work shows a world where this church would rather let the fruit rot, than be eaten.

In Genesis 2:17, the forbidden fruit is described as the “fruit of the knowledge of good and evil”. A queer reading suggests that the “knowledge” gained from eating the fruit is the realisation that the world was never made for us. Upon this realisation, one becomes “othered” – viewed as deviant or evil – even though queerness was already present, albeit unrecognised. The “self” is constructed based on how one appears to others in the “outside world”; thus, identity continually changes in response to cultural and social factors.<sup>61</sup> By eating the fruit, good and evil are revealed, and what was hidden in plain sight becomes undeniable. Acceptance or rejection is made equally clear, just as suddenly as Eve and Adam become self-conscious of their nakedness. Similarly, in recognising the naked truth of one’s identity, homophobic and transphobic behaviours become apparent; microaggressions, once subtle, now suddenly reveal themselves as clear attempts to deny that identity.<sup>62</sup>

In this reading, by eating the fruit, a newly fledged queer person will then see the world in a new way. To show this, I decided the use of colours in the film would be a point of emphasis. Early into practice, I chose to reflect this transformation visually by using a limited monochrome palette throughout most of the film, with red as the sole accent colour. When the main character finally eats the fruit, the world will finally be in colour to represent this change in paradigm.

Because of the restricted colour palette, shadows and negative space plays a significant role in defining the composition of each scene. Textures are used to add depth and visual interest, as well as to distinguish tonal values.

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<sup>60</sup> Francis Bacon, “De Haeresibus,” in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, vol. 7 (Longman & Co., 1859–74), 241.

<sup>61</sup> Kaori Yoshida, “Animation and ‘Otherness’: The Politics of Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Identity in the World of Japanese Anime,” (PhD thesis, University of British Columbia, 2008), 1, <https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0067003>. Yoshida discusses the construction of the “self” in relation to the West’s perception of Japanese *anime* as the “other”, framing the Orient as a construct based on “otherness”.

<sup>62</sup> See the contextual chapter above for a discussion of Genesis.

In particular, this project was inspired by the film noir, as well as German expressionist aesthetics, such as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, where the film uses deep focus and an expressionistic use of light and dark to show the depth of emotion and inner turmoil. As Porfirio argues, film noir expresses an existentialist view in which protagonists, confronted by a godless world without inherent meaning or moral absolutes, must reject societal norms and instead choose an authentic path, creating their own values in discerning what is good and evil.<sup>63</sup> The black-and-white aesthetic of the animation reinforces the protagonist's existential dread as they face the choice to eat the fruit – an act that will irreversibly alter their worldview, though they remain uncertain about what will happen if they do. In this short film, the church controls societal norms and perception of the fruit. In the darkest hour, God does not magically appear to save Avery. Although God has not forsaken or ignored Avery, the oppression of the church is not challenged by anyone else other than a fruitless attempt from Carmine. In the end, Avery must decide where their own values align, and defy the church to eat the fruit against accepted societal norms.

In this project, I use red within a black-and-white palette to emphasise climactic moments of dread and to draw attention to the fruit. As the longest wavelength of visible light, red was chosen for its properties as a primary colour and its eye-catching quality. Symbolically, red is rich with associations, commonly linked to danger, love, and passion. These meanings can be expressed depending on how the colour is used; for instance, red lighting in the film signals a moment of danger for the protagonist.

In the early planning stage, as shown in Figure 14, I mapped out the project's central concept, identifying existential dread and fear as key themes from the outset. These emotions are carried through to the final film, expressed through the protagonist's hand-drawn facial expressions. Because this is a hand-drawn animation rather than live action, I have greater control over lighting and expression, allowing me to shape the emotional tone of each scene with intention. Avery's expressions, as shown in Figure 15, are directly informed by my own autoethnographic experiences of existential dread and the inner conflict of living as a queer person.

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<sup>63</sup> Robert G. Porfirio, "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir" in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (Limelight Editions, 1996), 81, 87.

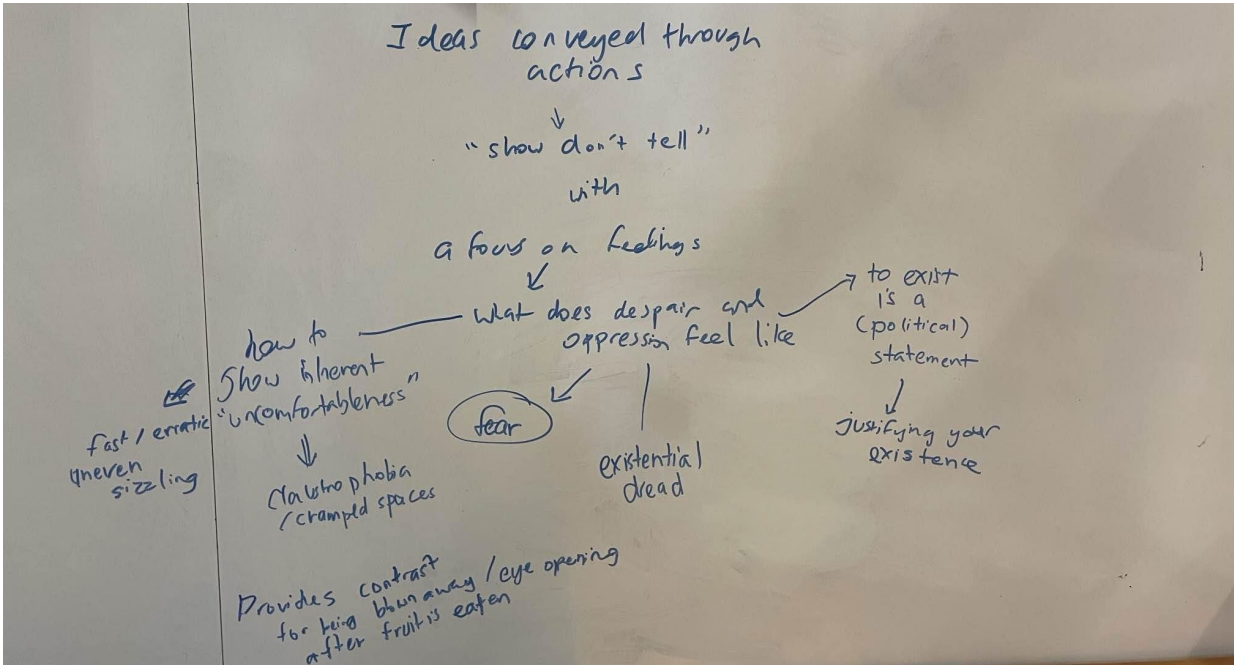


Figure 14. Photograph of early whiteboard planning. Rai Zhang, 2024.

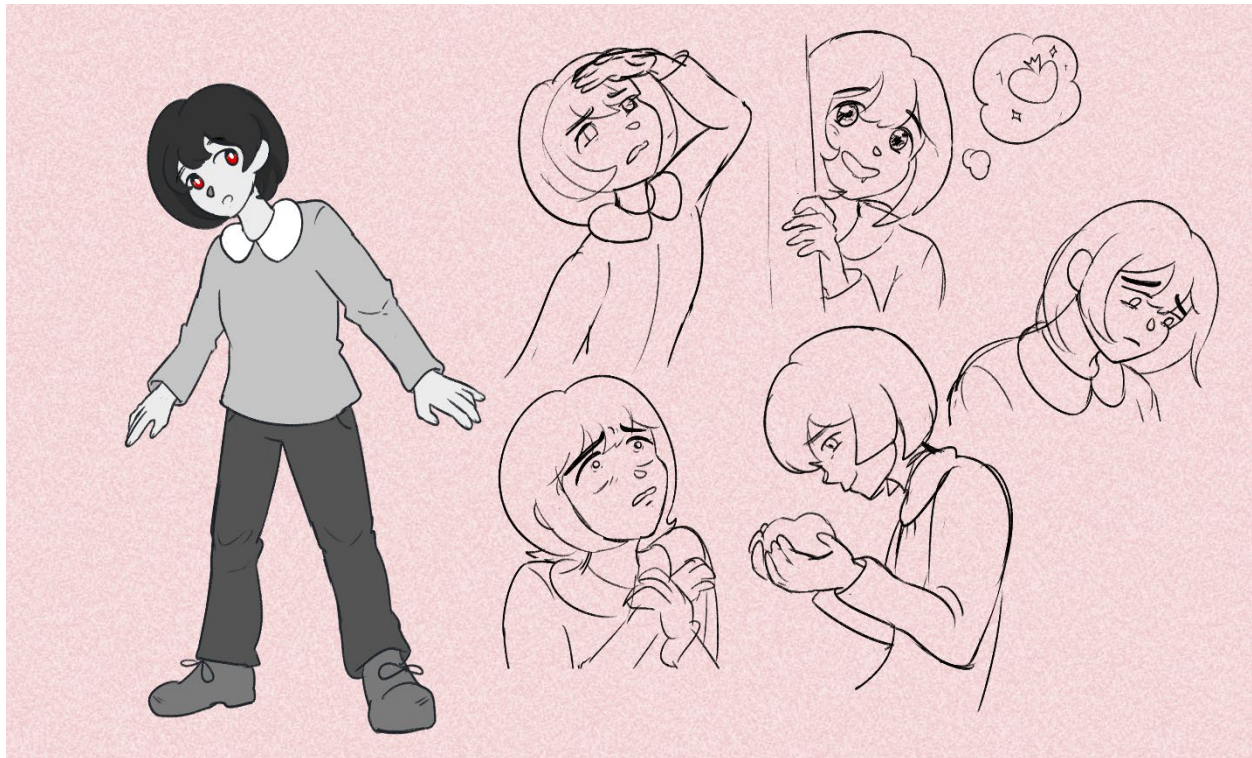
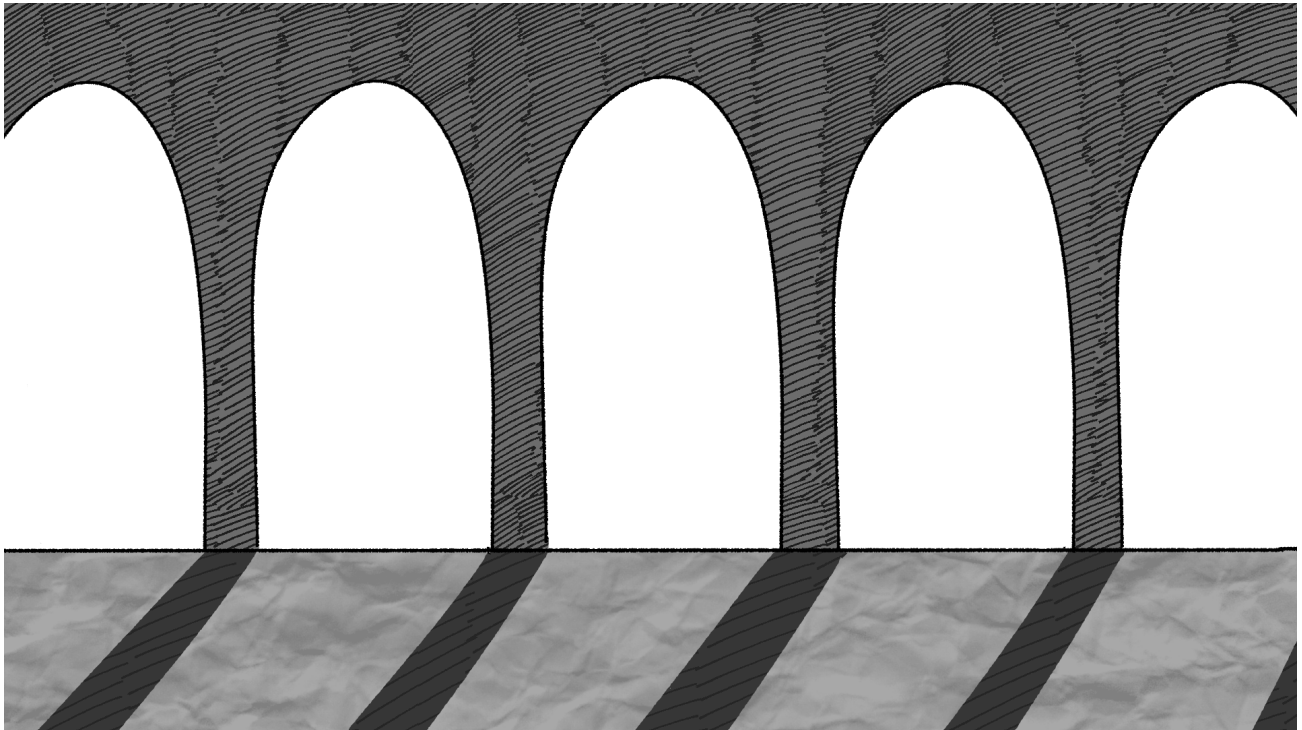


Figure 15. Character design and expression sheet for Avery, the main character. Rai Zhang, 2025.

Lighting was also planned as a significant visual element from an early stage, with the sun initially conceived as a motif representing an all-seeing force that reveals what is hidden in the shadows. In later iterations, this symbol evolved into an all-seeing stained-glass eye positioned at the highest point of the cathedral. This all-seeing eye allows light to pass through it,

illuminating every corner, creating a space where shadows cannot form and stay hidden. Symbolically, this lighting represents existential dread within a binary world of black and white, where there is a set “good and evil”. The protagonist chooses to eat the fruit in the hidden shade of the arched doorways, but is pushed into the light after consuming it, revealing them both physically and symbolically as now having inadvertently chosen a side of either good or evil. Forced to be visible after trying to stay invisible, Avery becomes subject to existential dread triggered by the crowd’s reaction to their act of consuming the fruit.



**Figure 16.** Background depicting light and dark shadows. Rai Zhang, 2025.



Figure 17. Storyboard iteration 3, depicting the glass eye. Rai Zhang, 2025.

Below are examples of experimental lighting applied to storyboard shots, in which the protagonist is confronted after attempting to eat the fruit. This is one instance where lighting is used in this project to convey feelings of existential dread.

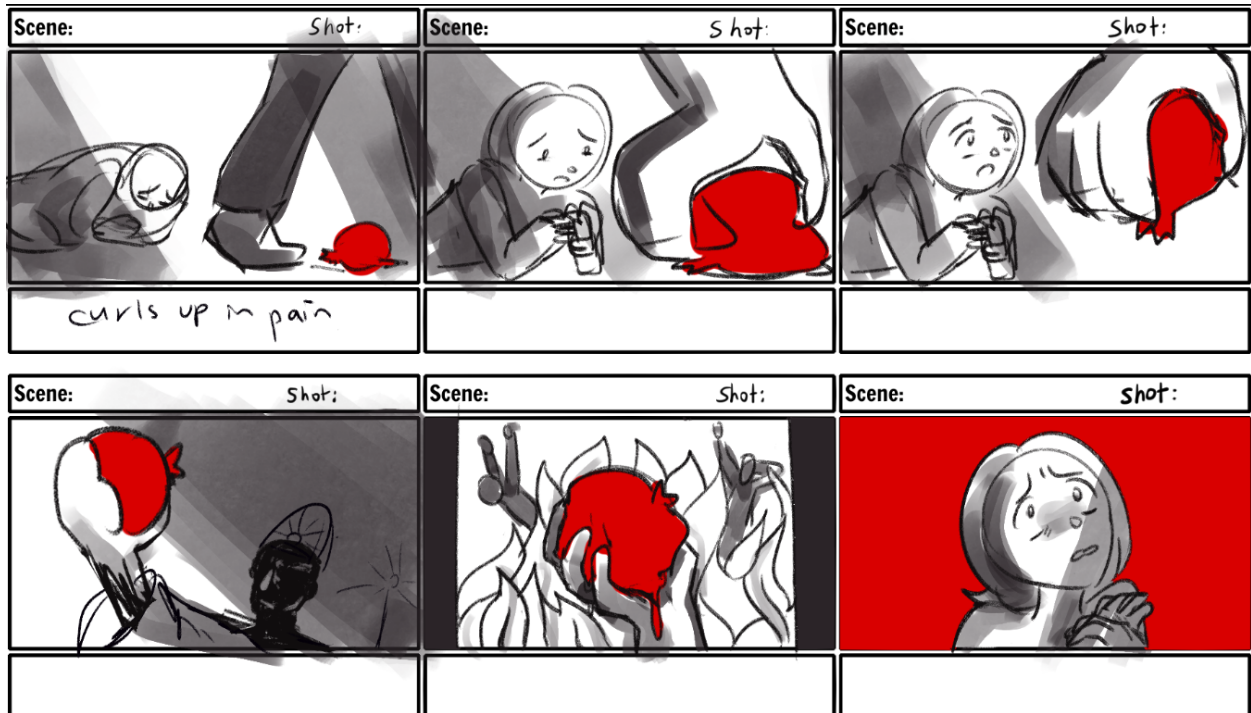


Figure 18. Storyboard iteration 3, depicting an early lighting attempt. Rai Zhang, 2025.



Figure 19. Digital style frame sketch without textures. Rai Zhang, 2025.

In animation, it is common to depict a lightbulb above a character's head to signify a moment of realisation or insight. In this research project, the animation slowly builds up to the "realisation", a visual illumination, in which light and shadow are used to visually show the "illumination" of realising one's own identity. The shadows hide what remains unseen, not simply just the darkness of the night. As such the significance of shadow to hide from others or hiding from the true nature of self is shown to be in the shadows, so far untouched and unrealised. The forbidden fruit is left to simply rot under the shade of the tree, not allowed to be eaten. Until the protagonist decides to bring it to light, only to face the consequences of defying the social order.

In this way, lighting and framing will be used in this research project to express the attainment of knowledge, and the emotional weight of realising one's true self.

## The significance of Fruit

"Fruit" has historically been used as a slur against queer people, often paired with "gay" in a pejorative context. However, the term has since been reclaimed by many in the queer community.<sup>64</sup> Taking this reclamation literally, each queer character in the film was assigned a fruit in the early stages of development, to inform both plot and characterisation. Red fruits, such as pomegranate, apple, or even tomato, carry varied symbolic meanings across different cultures and religions. Drawing on contextual research and my own intuitive knowledge, the

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<sup>64</sup> Joseph Lamour, "How a Gay Slur Became a Luscious Part of My Identity."

images below show an early brainstorm exploring these fruits and the visual language and composition.

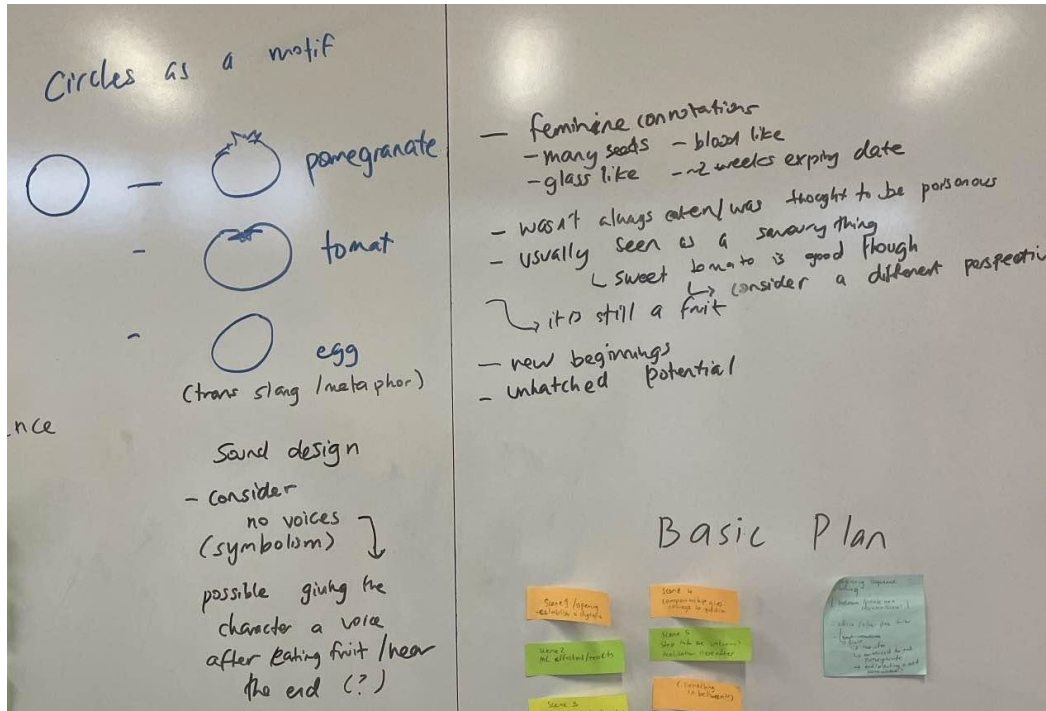


Figure 20. Initial whiteboard planning of *Lost and Found Fruit*. Rai Zhang, 2024.

The pomegranate is often associated with feminine energy and sexuality.<sup>65</sup> In this film, it is linked to the main character, a budding queer individual with the potential to be any “shade of the rainbow”. Fundamentally feminine and youthful presenting, Avery symbolically echoes Eve, Persephone and Pandora. Their rounded bob hair shape mirrors the fruit’s circular form.

Avery can be interpreted as a symbol of hope and thus serves as the film’s protagonist. In most narratives, their passivity might be criticised, but their non-confrontational nature and quiet rebellion creates a queer narrative structure through their inactions of not confronting the great evil.<sup>66</sup> They are simply trying to live; the confrontation was unexpected. Their eventual, forced confrontation with the bishop and the crowd makes no sense to them. It was just a fruit after all, and they would rot if the fruit was not eaten. How wasteful. Wasn’t all life meant to be precious? Although this innocent outlook makes them young and inexperienced, through the encouragement of others, the protagonist can then try to attain this knowledge of good and evil for themselves as well as others in the future. If utopia is “no place”, having hope for a better future is still more attainable than an “impossible place”.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> See the Contextual Review chapter, under the discussion of Persephone.

<sup>66</sup> Taylor, “Not Getting Your Story Straight.” 174-87

<sup>67</sup> Douglas Harper, “Utopia,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/utopia>.

In later iterations, the shape of the forbidden fruit was exaggerated from the original circular pomegranate to resemble a heart, a clearer, more universal symbol. This connection was made to connect the physical body and identity to love and self-acceptance, where the fruit becomes a beating heart, red, fleshy, and appearing to bleed. When the fruit is squished to a pulp, its feeble attempts to keep its shape shows the loss of identity and sense of self.

The fruit retains similar physical properties to a pomegranate, which is reflected in the protagonist's interaction with it. Unfamiliar with how to eat a pomegranate, they bite into the fruit twice rather than breaking it opening to eat the flesh inside. Due to the limitations of time constraints, the ending does not include another character showing the protagonist how to eat the fruit, a moment that would provide a clearer visual cue of their lack of knowledge, while also establishing a mentor figure or guiding presence.

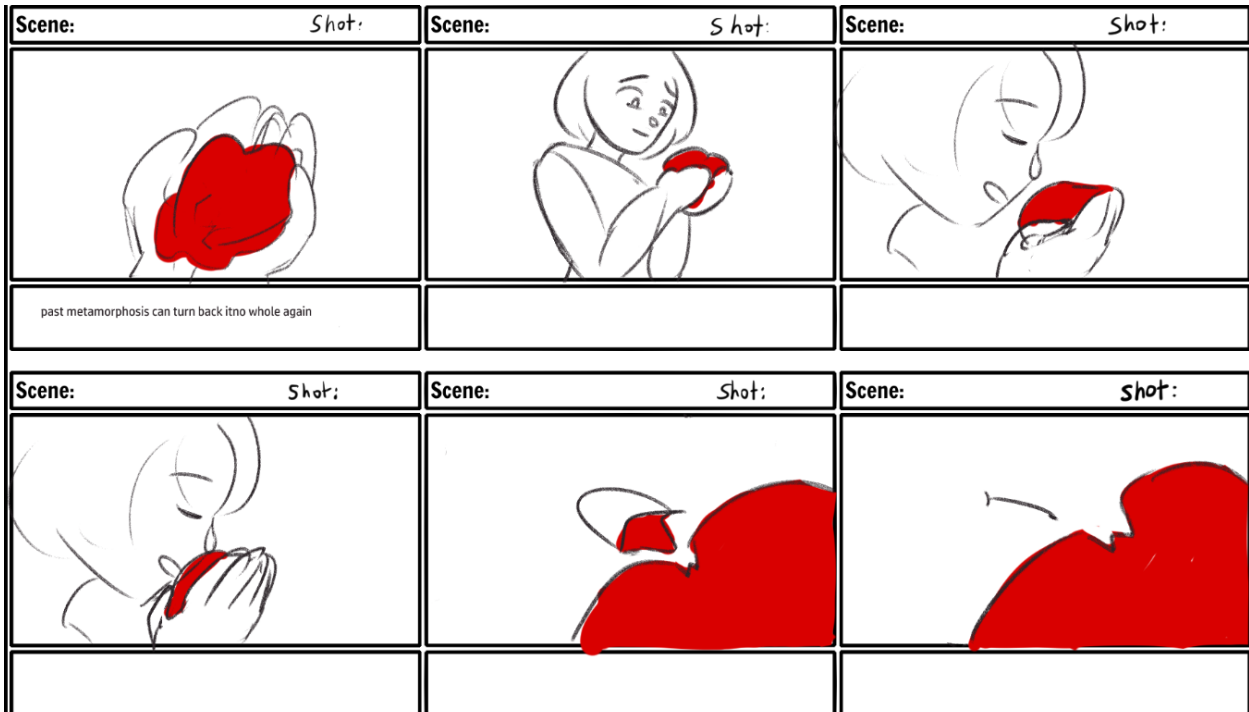


Figure 21. Section of storyboard iteration 2, depicting Avery eating the forbidden fruit. Rai Zhang, 2024.

The tomato, considered either a fruit or a vegetable depending on whether one takes a botanical or a culinary perspective, serves as the perfect symbol for a priest named Carmine, an unexpected ally to the young protagonist.

My aim for this thesis project was never to suggest that religious belief is inherently bad, but rather to critique how interpretations of religion can be used for justifying bigotry and intolerance of queer people. Religious belief itself is not a force that condemns the rainbow community; rather, it is people who use religion to justify their own biases and prejudices.<sup>68</sup> By cultivating an environment where sin is inherent in every person, this creates fear of the unknown – in this case queer identities). By controlling how people perceive the fruit (with fear and disgust), and who is allowed to eat it, knowledge is withheld, and no one is allowed to eat the fruit. In the animation, this is symbolised by the fruit left to rot at the base of the tree, untouched and uneaten.

### Character Design Notes



**Figure 22.** Initial planning sketches of Avery (left) and Carmine (right). Rai Zhang, 2024.

A fascinating aspect of the character designs was my decision to portray both Avery and Carmine with gender-nonconforming presentations. They are not assigned specific pronouns or sexualities, allowing viewers to project multiple different interpretations of the characters. Despite this intent, in introducing these characters to others, many people still default into using gendered pronouns for them, much to a twinge of dismay from me. As Taylor states, while there are attempts to be inclusive in the framework of the Hero's journey, the metaphors still fall within a binary divide.<sup>69</sup> In some ways it is easier, since singular "they" pronouns can get confusing

<sup>68</sup> Greed and hypocrisy, though condemned in the Bible, were not sins punished by burning at the stake, as Boswell notes. Intolerance towards gay people, therefore, was not solely due to biblical condemnation of "unnatural" behaviour, but rather a case of the Bible being used to justify scapegoating queer people.

<sup>69</sup> Stacy Taylor, "Not Getting Your Story Straight," 183.

when there are two of them that use those pronouns. The response to this is interesting, as I feel it reflects the current state of the world at large, understanding of non-binary identities to an extent of being tolerant and supportive, yet still subconsciously trying to fit them into the binary categories of gender that we are all taught.

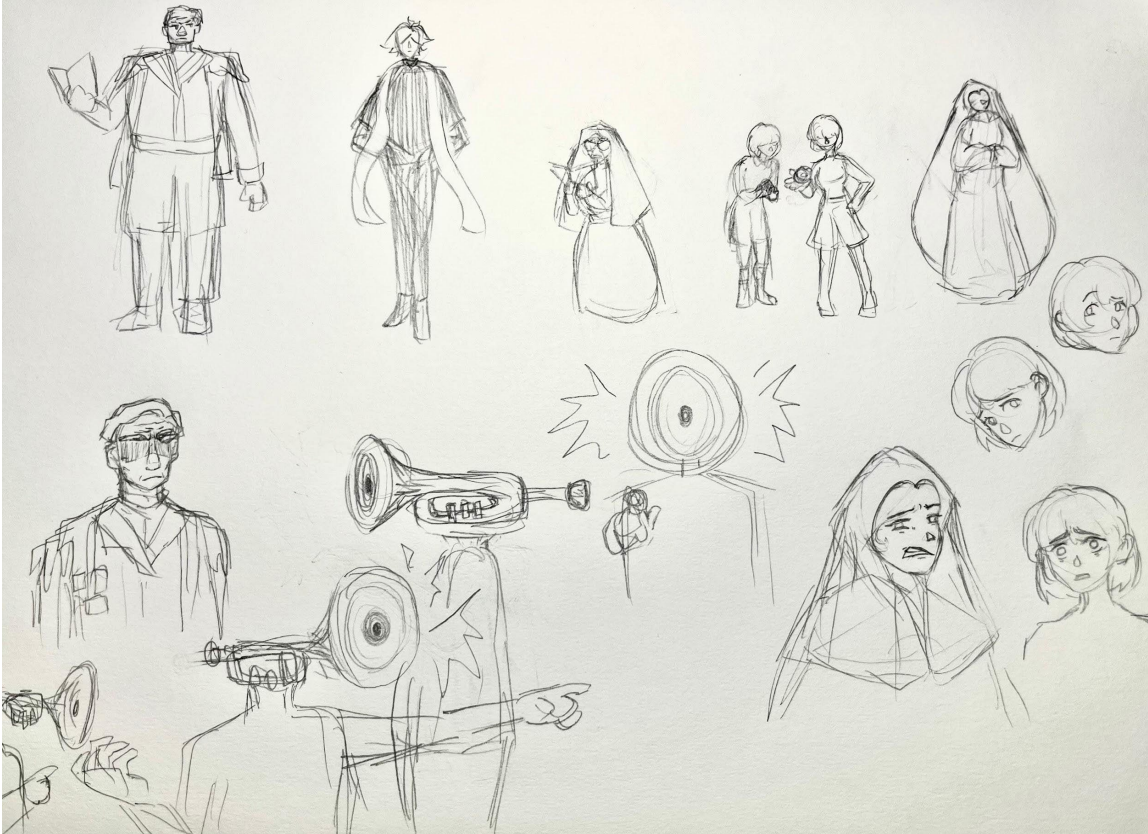


Figure 23. Character design sketch ideas on paper. Rai Zhang, 2024.



**Figure 24.** Digital *character design sheet* for Father Laurence. Rai Zhang, 2025.

The initial antagonist, a square militaristic authority figure, was later redesigned as a bishop to better align with the project's biblical allegory. According to character and visual design principles, sharper or angular silhouettes often suggest danger, the bishop was given a more triangular and sharper shape. This character also draws inspiration from Claude Frollo, the villain in Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, particularly in silhouette and demeanour.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, Father Laurence was born, with dark shadows that cloud his eyes, forever hiding his true thoughts and intentions under his hat. This is the most complex character design in terms of patterns for the characters in this animation, but I thought it was necessary, as the bishop character represents control in the form of an ever-watching eye. He also represents someone who guides people to the enlightenment (spirituality), and of physical light, that brightens every corner and uncovers every shadow where someone may hide. Therefore, this character contains the eye symbolism in his design as well as stripes representing rays of light, connecting to the glass eye on the church.<sup>71</sup>

One particularly symbolic character is the trumpet head character, as depicted in Figure 22. This character idea comes from an exaggerated image of someone who is very loud but cannot think for themselves: a mouthpiece for others. The trumpet plays along with the idea of a mindless crowd that parrots whatever the authority figure says through them. While the trumpet is traditionally associated with elegance and classical music, its name also bears some resemblance to a certain authority figure who became a president that spouts conservative views; thus, becoming a subtle metaphor as well, where some classical things such as conservative or traditional views that often also are antiquated and not always worthy of spreading further. In some ways this character is a nihilistic view of some lesser educated general public being stuck in their ways and yet believing that the authority figures who are louder or more charismatic are always the correct ones.

## Aural Landscape

When editing the audio aspect of the film, in earlier iterations of the storyboard, specifically during the scene where the fruit and Avery is condemned with pushing and yelling, I experimented with using audio of a crowd yelling. However, this made the audio overly chaotic, pulling focus away from the visuals and creating a rowdy atmosphere more like a concert than the solemn tone I intended. Additionally, since there is no spoken dialogue in the film, the sound of a crowd shouting created a sense of disconnect.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise (Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, 1996), film.

<sup>71</sup> Refer to the section on eye symbolism below.

<sup>72</sup> The use of silent characters was a purposeful choice as a nod to all the queer people in history who were silenced, invisible or misrepresented.

When viewing the music video of *Blood, Sweat & Tears*, I was inspired by the use of choir audio that played when BTS member Jin gazes at a painting, a moment intended to signify the holiness and grandeur of the object.<sup>73</sup> Drawing from this, during the third iteration of the storyboard, I replaced the chaotic crowd noise with church choir sound effects, using them as the central motif around which the film's soundscape was built. The result was less cluttered and added to the dramatic mood of the film that I was intending. The choir also clearly evoked a church-like atmosphere, because of the association of choirs in churches in western Christian and Catholic religion.

The soundscape blends these choir elements, used to indicate changes in mood, with diegetic sounds such as rustling, slaps, and the sound of the protagonist collapsing on the ground. Although unintentional, a friend later remarked that the juxtaposition of the choir sound effect and the slap sound created an unintentional slapstick effect. This surprised me, but not entirely, as I tend to use humour to cope in distressing situations. In some ways, this coping mechanism is also a dramaturgical performance of daily social life, where humour is used to make a distressed situation feel less dire. Despite the existential dread of realising my identity years before, the effect of existing daily while trying to hide a core part of myself is exhausting and causes an intermittent passing fear of being perceived. In some ways using humour as my coping mechanism unintentionally shows itself in the sound audio of my film because of this. Later iterations of editing audio remedies this effect, reducing the slapstick tone while retaining the emotional intensity.

## Eye symbolism

Eye symbolism is widely used in religious contexts, particularly in Christianity, to evoke God's all-seeing nature. For this project, however, the symbolism of the eye is influenced by its use in *The Handmaid's Tale*.<sup>74</sup> In Margaret Atwood's novel, The Eyes are undercover enforcers of Gilead's laws, capable of being anyone in daily life. In order to warn possible offenders, namely those who discuss life before the regime, executed bodies are hung from The Wall as a display. The common greeting "Under his Eye", when spoken between handmaids, becomes a quiet threat of always being watched. A certain unease of being watched always follows, where safety is never present. Being watched is a common trope in dystopian narratives, where privacy is disregarded and everything is shared, and lack of personhood is inevitable.

Given this context, an eye as symbolism was too powerful to not include. The setting for this animated project was set in the church, therefore the subject of stained glass comes into the picture. Because of this, the eye imagery was implemented into the stained glass as part of the church, symbolising that the citizens are always under watch in the church. This links to the general feeling of being watched, which draws on personal experiences of daily performances, where for my own safety, I must pretend to be a cisgender person as perceived at large by

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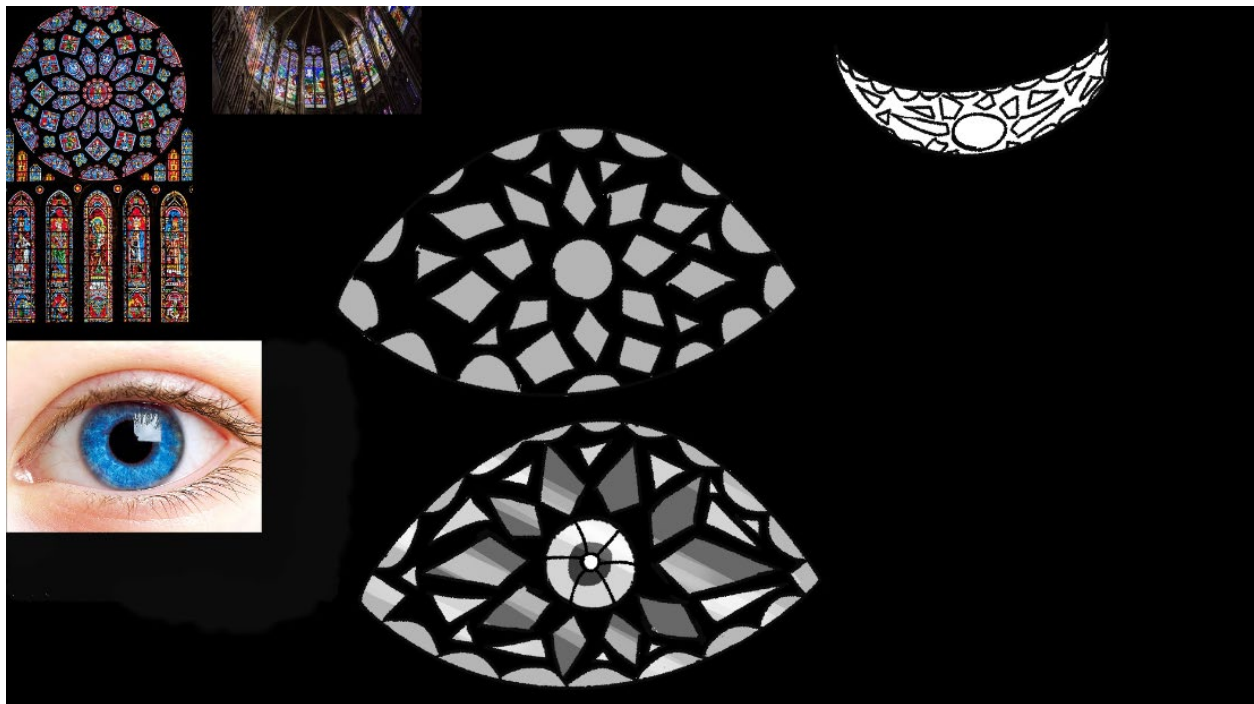
<sup>73</sup> BTS, "BTS (방탄소년단) '피 땀 눈물 (Blood Sweat & Tears)' Official MV," music video, YouTube, 6:03 October 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmE9f-TEutc>.

<sup>74</sup> Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale*.

society. Due to this constant fear of “being found out” for not following the social script (being heterosexual and cisgender), this constant watchful gaze is represented by the light, which allows people to see, and yet also judge silently.

Because of this, an eye motif is a key symbol as the constant state of being watched also reflects my own subjective feelings of existing in society as a queer person. The fear of not performing the right social script during interactions or accidentally revealing who I am as a person to someone who is not accepting but is constantly watching. This experience then allows me to use autoethnographic approaches to create based on these feelings of existential dread which I express on Avery’s facial expression in the animation.

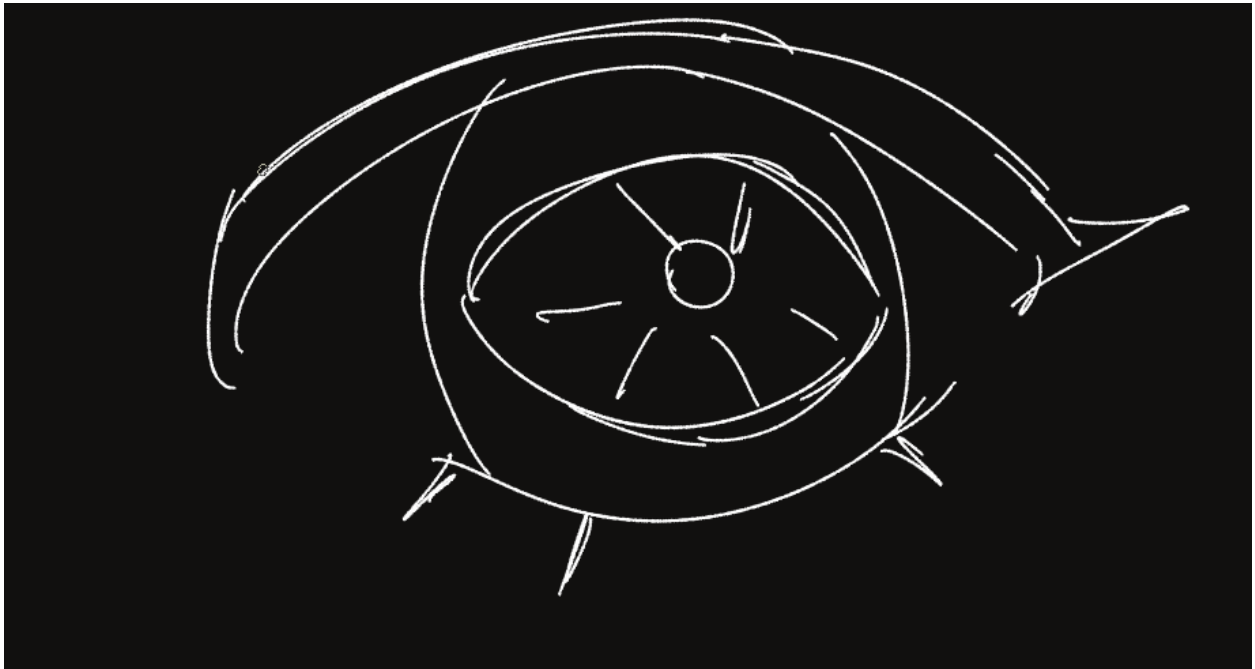
Shadows and darkness offer a contrast to this eye which has connections to light, with links to light being both showing enlightenment (of the self, of identity), as well as something that is feared; once something is brought into the light there is no longer the luxury of hiding in the shadows.



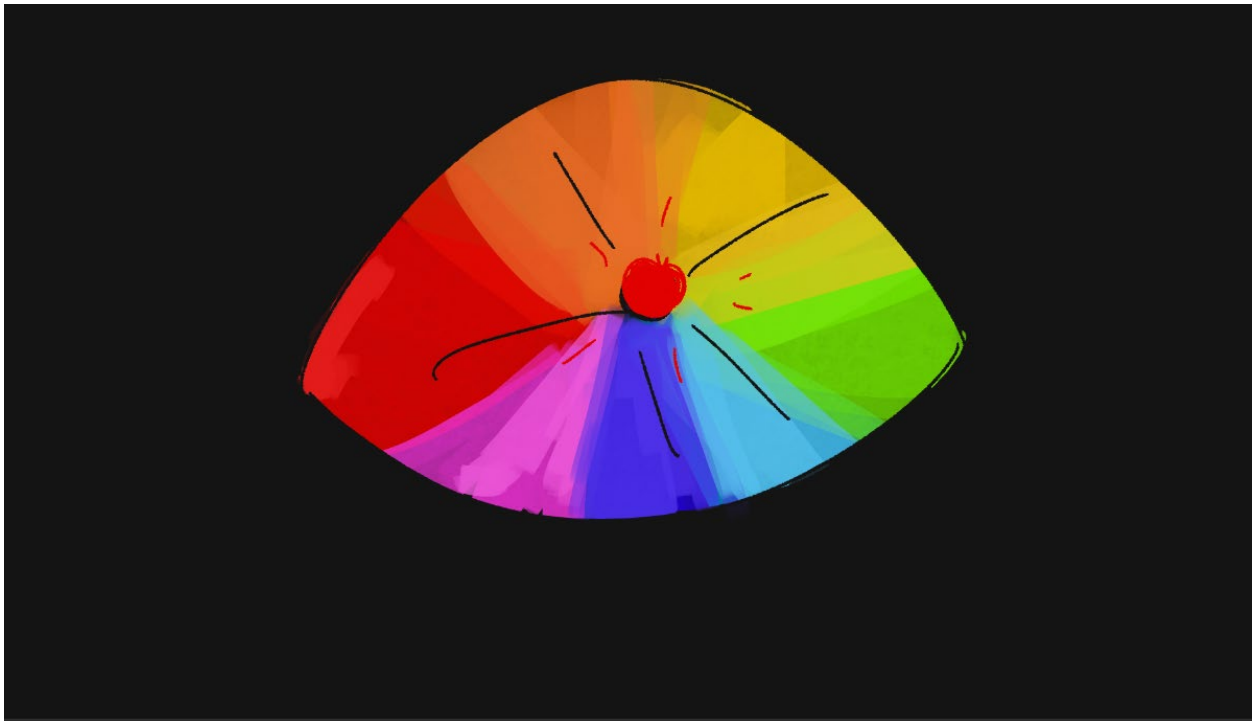
**Figure 25.** Planning sheet for eye stained glass. Rai Zhang, 2025.

Metamorphosis can be implemented now with the blink of the eye, such as a transition effect into another scene or from the stained glass eye into the eye of Avery, the main character finally taking in the world in colour. This strategy allows the moment of realisation to be conveyed abstractly, transforming the world from a logical reality into a dream-like space: a pitch-black abyss filled with lines and colours. In a literal blink of an eye, the world will change, and things will never be the same again. Change is rarely easy, and often painful. When metamorphosis happens – the pain of being slapped out of the more child-like sketchy animation of this

realisation – Avery is confronted by the harsh red background of being found out, and the style reverts back to the cleaner version it once was.



**Figure 26.** Pencil test of Avery's eye with a stained glass eye reflected within it. Available at: <https://youtu.be/WYTVn3xnk5w>. Rai Zhang, 2025.



**Figure 27.** Fruit hitting the rainbow-stained glass. See Figure 26 for source. Rai Zhang, 2025.



**Figure 28.** Screenshot of the animation process showing the slapping fruit in the sketchier style. Rai Zhang, 2025.

## Drawing pictures in a (digital) story book

What defines a picture-book style slowly becomes a full picture as I progress through the practice. Using a picture-book-inspired drawing style for the animation reflects the tactile way I explore how to draw and bring the film's world to life. Although the lines laid out are rough and things wiggle out of form at times, these flaws and imperfections represent the human touch of the practitioner, and my own experiences of raw human emotions captured with lines on a page, a drawing as thinking and being.<sup>75</sup> The practice itself becomes the research, as I come to understand, implicitly, what this process means to myself. When the character's wobbling uncertainty comes alive on screen, or the unwavering aggression towards the forbidden fruit, the world slowly comes alive, a picture book that is animated from the practitioner's hand instead of a reader's voice.

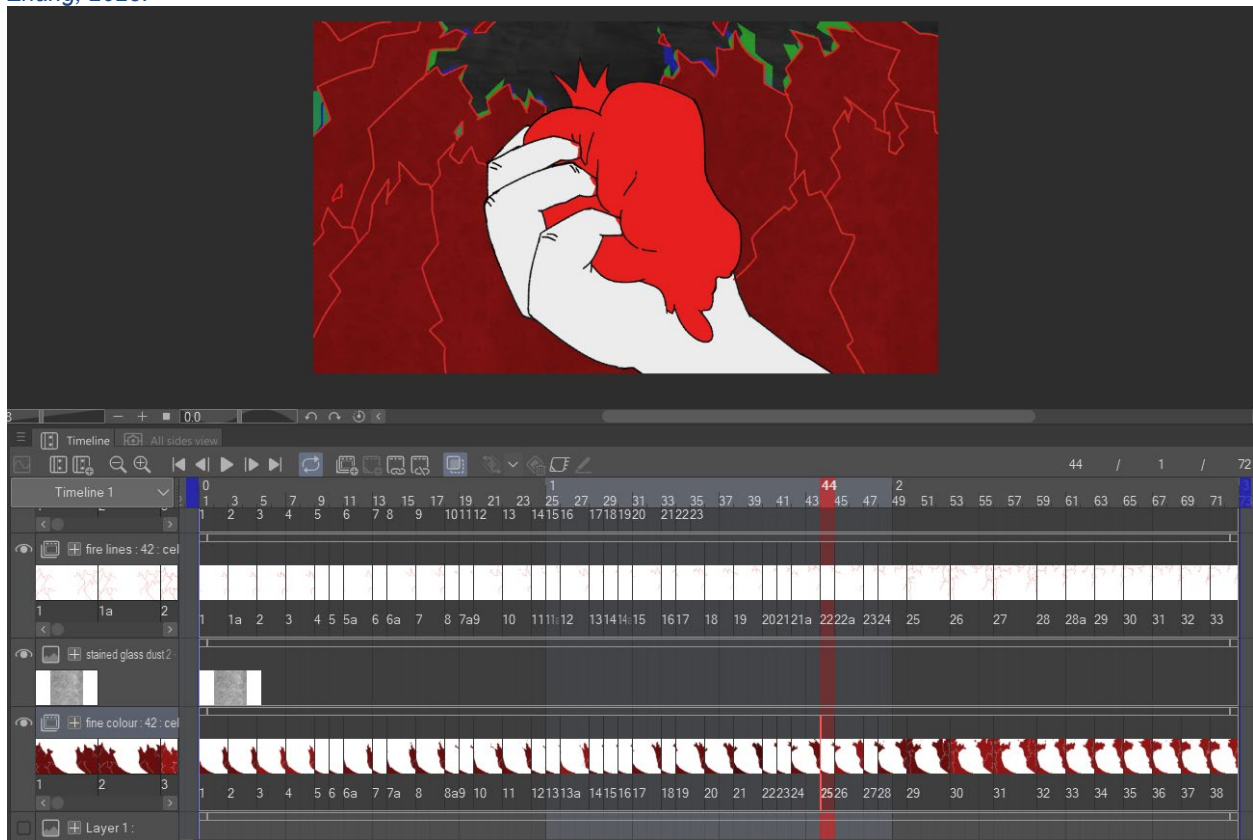
Imagining sound effects also helped me better visualise how objects should move, allowing me to more accurately construct a world seen only through a two-dimensional frame. One example of this is the fruit-squeezing scene, with people burning in the background. While animating this scene, I imagined the apple making a squeaking noise as it was forcibly squeezed, as if slowly losing its life. Because of this association, the rough animation ended up looking like a heart beating, then bleeding as it got more battered from being squeezed. This was not an intentional

<sup>75</sup> Leblanc, "Sketching as a Thinking Method," 155.

effect that I thought of when first imagining this scene, but an unexpected happy accident. Although this imagined sound effect will likely not be added as it would hinder the serious tone of the scene, this imaginary more comical sound effect was still helpful in the production process.



**Figure 29.** Work-in-progress pencil test of the squeeze fruit shot. Available at: <https://youtu.be/yIjFbNMcNRM>. Rai Zhang, 2025.



**Figure 30.** Animating fruit squeeze scene. *Coloured shot available at: <https://youtu.be/pXAhEFIUugs>. Rai Zhang, 2025.*

Early in the ideation of the project, the voiceless characters were a deliberate choice, in showing the unseen and unheard figures of queer people in history. At one point, there was consideration given to having the main character, Avery, have a speaking voice, or representing it with on-screen text. In the end, this was never realised. In some ways, it is poetic that the only sounds heard are diegetic, created by the characters in ways other than speaking: the crunch of a bite, the shuffling of steps, the rustling leaves. The decision to make it a mostly silent film also echoes early cinema, particularly the Expressionist era, with films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, where the acting speaks for the characters.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, directed by Wiene.

## Discussion and reflection

The research question posed at the beginning has gone through many changes and yet has never lost its original identity of finding hope in this dystopian world. Through the research and practice of this thesis project, I have come to terms with subjective, personal reflections on what it means to be visible and to exist as a queer animator. The research topic of dystopia has evolved since its genesis, where dystopia was a biblical apocalypse or the end of the world.

Most dystopian narratives tend to focus on a more heteronormative view of sexuality and femininity, such as in the tales of Persephone, Eve and Pandora, as a means of breaking free from a totalitarian society.<sup>77</sup> While this perspective reflects the lived experiences of many, reframing dystopia through a queer lens allowed me to recognise the everyday social performances through dramaturgy that a queer person must perform to avoid drawing attention to themselves.<sup>78</sup> A queer dystopia, where it becomes a “bad place” simply to be queer, addresses and realises the forbidden nature of queer identity and knowing that it is hidden out of sight to pretend it is out of mind, something that not everyone wants to see or accept.<sup>79</sup>

A more hopeful way to look at this dystopian reality, as I found through practice-oriented research, lies in connecting with like-minded people who are going through similar situations. A true queer utopia would focus not merely on tolerance but on this companionship and understanding on a community wide scale. This can be through fostering positive mindsets of understanding what it is like to hide a core part of your identity.<sup>80</sup> The key message of planting a seed, symbolising the fostering of new beginnings, was always an important ending message for this animated short film, where education and access to resources can gradually change society from mere tolerance to genuine acceptance of queer identities.

However, due to constraints, this research does not deeply discuss the many nuances and societal issues of queer identity, rather it focuses on its forbidden nature, and thus neglects to discuss this aspect in depth.<sup>81</sup> Even in practice, the clear-cut events of the narrative, the short film’s duration, and the mostly monochrome palette makes the narrative simple to understand yet has room for misunderstanding specific characters as two-dimensional, as purely “good” or “evil”.<sup>82</sup> While the simpler narrative does aid itself in being represented as “storybook like” as I

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<sup>77</sup> See the contextual chapter above, particularly the discussion of *We*, *High-Rise*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

<sup>78</sup> Benford and Hare, “Dramaturgical Analysis, 646.”

<sup>79</sup> Douglas Harper. “Dystopia,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed April 29, 2025, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/dystopia>.

<sup>80</sup> Lucy Nicholas, “Queer Ethics and Fostering Positive Mindsets toward Non-Binary Gender, Genderqueer, and Gender Ambiguity,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 20, no. 2–3 (2019): 169–180, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1505576>.

<sup>81</sup> These matters include questions such as whether fitting into a binary gender construct is necessary at all, what deconstructing or constructing identity might mean, how labels originating from being “other” (queer) have evolved, and the nuances between sexuality labels throughout history.

<sup>82</sup> Due to time constraints and the short film’s limited duration, there is little room for nuanced or layered character development.

intended, it serves little for nuance and other developments of the character or world. The black-and-white aesthetic may also mirror a black-and-white representation of the world and social circumstances at large. In the future, with more time and resources, a short film depicting navigating a binary world as a gender non-conforming person would be another area of possible discussion and development.

In choosing not to reveal my own identity too deeply into this research project, the animated short film inevitably lacks more personal views of my paradigm imparted on the characters. There is a bittersweet feeling to this omission, yet it does not diminish the fact that this chosen storybook style and coded representation still embody my own worldview. I hope that through the scribbled motions of the animation, from one queer practitioner to the world, this film can offer a hopeful vision of a future where companionship may be lost, or found, through one's queer identity. Despite being forbidden, the fruit still exists and will continue to do so, whether it is eaten or not.

## Conclusion

*Lost and Found Fruit* is an animated discussion of forbidden fruit as an allegory of the forbidden and invisible nature of queer identities. Through the thinking and making of this practice-oriented research project, the forbidden nature of existing as a queer person is examined and reimagined. By engaging with the dystopian contexts of Zamyatin, Atwood, Ballard, whose narratives are often shaped by heteronormative perspectives, and the implied forbidden femininity and sexuality of Eve, Pandora and Persephone challenging a patriarchal society, this project depicts how rebellion against control can be found through authentic existence of queer identity. Hope for a brighter future is found in the companionship of the characters who eat the fruit together.

As this master's project progresses, deeper reflections on my experiences as a queer person help me understand more clearly how invisibility continues to affect me. Personally, daily life often comes with the existential dread of having to reveal my identity to strangers or to old friends who only knew a past version of me. By eating the forbidden fruit, the character in the film reclaims their identity and embraces the knowledge of their queerness, an act that silently but powerfully challenges the oppression of the church. If one must face backlash simply for existing authentically, it could be argued that, in some cases, living invisibly might seem easier. However, invisibility often carries the persistent feeling of being watched, much like the all-seeing stained-glass eye of the church depicted in the animation. Discovering exactly what these experiences and their accompanying feelings mean to me has helped craft the narrative and character motivations in *Lost and Found Fruit*.

To conclude, I turn to a quote from Blair: "By expressing ourselves in works of art that enclose our crystallised feelings and attitudes, we are revealing ourselves to our peers in the hope that others will identify."<sup>83</sup> In creating this animated short film, I hope that my own distilled

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<sup>83</sup> Blair, "Animated Autoethnographies," 12.

experiences can bring hope that no one is unloved and alone in this world. Everyone deserves to be loved, no matter how they identify, and whether or not they choose to eat the fruit.

## Appendix

Knowledge of the self and of the animation craft has been found now that this animation research project draws to a close. Though there is no tangible way to quantify this knowledge, knowing that this animated film, the allegory and message behind it is needed at this current time serves enough value to justify its existence. In this current dystopian society, trans people are forced to be closeted or slowly hide themselves in fear of being targeted as the new scapegoat by conservatives and the alt-right. Now more than ever, this film answers the research question, hope is found in the companionship of other trans or queer people and our allies.

Through the progression of this film, I have also learned more about animation principles in practice, and how these principles can be applied more effectively to show my voice in the animations I create. I also have learned how I may have included far more animated actions where scenes could have been stills. Effect storytelling should also consider a realistic timeframe for a one person project, and learning restraint is something I have begun to understand better. Storytelling as an art and skill is always something to improve further upon for myself.

The final completed thesis film has not yet had an exhibition at the time of writing this, due to my final exam being completed online on July 25<sup>th</sup>. After the exam, while waiting for the results, I cleaned up some parts of the animation, to more clearly convey some ideas, and keep the proportions more consistent.

One sequence that was edited was this “pondering before picking up fruit” scene. The staging of adding a shrug pose as a key helps clarify the emotions and intentions of Avery in the scene, showing a clearer reason why they pick up the fruit.



**Figure 31.** Still from “Lost and Found Fruit” scene. Rai Zhang, 2025.



**Figure 32.** Still from older iteration of “Lost and Found Fruit”, without the shrug posing. Rai Zhang, 2025.

Without this pose, it is unclear why Avery glancing behind them was meaningful. This shrug poses explains that the intended emotion of this scene is “why not” when Avery goes to pick up

the fruit. Redrawing this scene also helped fix the proportions of the drawings, as this was one of the scenes I had to rush in the production to fit into the schedule in time for the exam.

A few visual inconsistencies were also fixed, such as the stained-glass eye opening sections of the film not having a #0C0705 (completely black) background. Fixing this made the title transition smoother. Some final tweaking of sound effects were needed as well after the exam, to ensure a more cohesive viewing of the film. Without these tweaks, some sound effects or random flickering in the animation would have been distracting from the story.

The thesis project was fully wrapped up at the time of posting this animation on YouTube. The final animation “Lost and Found Fruit” has a total run time of three minutes and twenty-nine seconds at an HD1080p dimension, 1920 by 1080 pixels. The sound remixing and editing was done in Premiere Pro 2024 while the animation was done in Clip Studio Paint EX and After Effects 2024. Though my time with this project has come to a close, by placing it on the vast expanse of the internet, maybe someone can also find themselves and understand their once lost but now newly found identity. If this film can bring hope to someone else in the world during this turbulent time, then it has found its people.



**Figure 33.** Still from “Lost and Found fruit” final film. Available at: [https://youtu.be/E\\_1K0gQ4VBY](https://youtu.be/E_1K0gQ4VBY). Rai Zhang 2025.

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