

# **“Illusory” Birds**

by

Ao Chen

## **ABSTRACT**

*“Illusory” Birds* is a two-minute 2D animation. The film reveals the overlapping relationship among real space, awareness of space, and text space. Uncertainty may be the key to unlock the gate of truth.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In my thesis project *"Illusory" Birds*, the core concept is uncertainty. The reason why I want to research uncertainty is because I think that it symbolizes the freedom of thought. As far as I am concerned, uncertainty is beyond traditional linear thinking pattern, being an interconnected and multidimensional net structure. In this reticulation, these webs are just like the forking paths of thinking space. Each pathway may be a possible and particular elucidation. Over time, a linear explanation is gradually replaced by non-linear interpretations. Uncertainty can be used to remove rigid logic chains. Once the chains disappear, various new possibilities will appear in my animation. Uncertainty plays an important role in helping me understand the changes of things. This cognitive process can improve my thinking system.

*"Illusory" Birds* is a two-minute 2D animation. The story is just like a shell, with the deep philosophical thought wrapped in the shell being the soul of the film. I want to convey the spatial transitions in order to reveal uncertainty. Hence, *"Illusory" Birds* is not a narrative film. Instead, it is an experimental suspense film. In this movie, I want to build a conceptual and foggy labyrinth. In this hazy maze, countless parallel and intersecting roads gradually arise. Audiences are just like players, experiencing the labyrinth game's intrinsic charm. Although a player may arrive at an ending point, this destination may be just a new starting point. In this misty maze, forking paths lead to unknown information, which is the key idea of *"Illusory" Birds*.

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCH

#### Response-inviting Structure

Wolfgang Iser, a German famous literary scholar who was born in 1926 and died in 2007, was the founder of reception aesthetics. He introduced response-inviting structure which was the concept of reception aesthetics. Under modern conditions, a research problem about the relationship between readers and texts needs to be addressed. This is an interesting question because it helps me understand uncertainty. It is problematic because I need to spend much time thinking and studying it. It is significant because it helps me create fresh visual language for *"Illusory" Birds*. I use philosophical thoughts to discover the theory of reader-response criticism.

Reader-response criticism advocates that readers should also actively make some contributions to texts, emphasizing the interaction between readers' experience and texts (Resseguie 307). In *"Illusory" Birds*, I want to build the overlapping relationship among real space, awareness of space, and text space. Audiences can fill in the gaps in order to rebuild spaces at any time. At the same time, uncertainty allows spectators to redefine this relationship. This experimental animation has no fixed point because all spaces are intertwined. In the meantime, this film can be shaped by viewers' changeable and internal perspectives, which is an activity of imaginative creation. More specifically, people choose and reframe the parts of the film and fill in the gaps in their own ways. Once the gaps are filled, the implicit conversation between audiences and this movie will emerge immediately. The gaps function as pivots, with the conversation revolving around



them. This movie subverts the authority of significance. The aggregation of spectators and this animated work generates many new explanations. These unprecedented interpretations ask viewers to rethink this art work and make a variety of potential assumptions in their brains.

Although audiences may not get a clear answer in *"Illusory" Birds*, they are empowered to make different versions of the animation in their minds. This is an opportunity for them to fill in the gaps left by the film in different ways and construct various possible links. The gaps are the indefinite parts of the movie, calling for spectators' participation. Different viewers have different feelings. Even the same person may have different perspectives after watching it several times. Nothing is always right and nothing is always wrong. Uncertainty may be the key to unlock the gate of truth.

## Signifier and Signified

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss renowned linguist who was born in 1857 and died in 1913, was the father of contemporary linguistics. Because text is one of the most important elements in *"Illusory" Birds*, I want to study his linguistic thoughts that have the features of times. He offered people a new way to understand the world by defining language systems. The world consists of various connections. Under any circumstances, the connotation of a factor is determined by other factors. In other words, people should have integral understanding of the world. When any two parts or more come together, a new product appears. This product does not have an existence independent of its parts. Not one constituent in all things exists in an isolated state. All things are interrelated and they have parasitic relationships with each other.

Saussure proposed the two concepts: signifier and signified. A signifier is a word's figure and pronunciation. A signified is a deep implication behind that signifier. To some degree, there is no necessary connection between signifier and signified. That is to say, a signifier may not correspond with a definite signified. Not only is *"Illusory" Birds* an animation work, but also it is a vocabulary game. In the game, different text combinations make vocabularies become intangible mirages. Besides, because the entire process of reading is flowing, the duration of a certain meaning is very short. The indistinct nature of words reflects the unstable corresponding relationship between signifier and signified. Some signifiers reveal the indefinite overlapping relationship among different signifieds (Fokkema 651). In modern society, people need diversified perspectives to reinterpret texts. Over time, with various ways of thinking, old explanations are constantly converted into new interpretations.

Suppose the first signifier is p. The signified of p is p'. The second signifier is q. The signified of q is q'. Because p has already influenced by q before p corresponds with p', p no longer corresponds with p'. Instead, p corresponds with p'+q'. For example, "apple" is an individual word that refers to a comestible apple. But, when "apple" combines with a single word "phone", "apple" no longer corresponds with an eatable apple. It turns out that an apple refers to an inedible apple phone (iPhone). In *"Illusory" Birds*, I want to show that any one of texts is a symbol containing infinite significations. People utilize their own experience to set up labyrinthine and complex thinking patterns.

### CHAPTER 3

#### ISSUES OF CONTENT

##### Script

The book pages are being quickly flipped. In text space, a black-line assassin bird is walking in the woods. At the same time, in real space, a colored assassin bird is also walking in the woods. He is wearing a bamboo hat, a pair of sunglasses, and a robe. In a rainy and windy night, he is walking to a building. After entering the building, he is slowly walking up the stairs. At this moment, in text space, the black-line assassin bird is on the second floor. In the meantime, in real space, the colored assassin bird is also on the second floor. Facing the door, he pulls a dagger out of his sleeve. In the bedroom, he sees a quilt on the bed. In order to make sure the assassination target is under the quilt, he decisively lifts up the quilt with his knife. But, it turns out that there is nothing under it.

In the study room, a colored reader bird is sitting on the chair and holding a book in his hands. He is wearing a Chinese jacket. At first, he is very happy because he is absorbed in reading the book. However, his facial expression becomes tense after he turns a page. In awareness of space, with flipping the book pages, a tiny black-and-white reader bird sees a gigantic black-and-white assassin bird looking at him. He is very afraid. The entire awareness of space is filled with an air of tension. Meanwhile, in real space, on the hallway, the colored assassin bird is walking to the second door.

In the study room, assassin bird is holding the dagger and approaching his target stealthily. At this moment, because reader bird is so obsessed with reading the book, the content makes him terrified. All of a sudden, assassin bird relentlessly stabs at the target.

In awareness of space, reader bird sees his death. He is desperately screaming. His blood is spraying on the book pages. He is being gradually devoured by the book. In real space, in the study room, the colored reader bird is frightened. He throws the book away and leans against the back of the chair. He is gasping. Suddenly, the colored assassin bird's head appears behind the chair. Simultaneously, real space, awareness of space, and text space are intertwined. The colored birds, the black-and-white birds, and the black-line birds are overlapped with each other. The uncertainty of the spaces promotes the development of different text combinations. New blurred word combinations may generate new spatial transitions.

## Storyboard

Before I decided on the final version of the script, I adjusted it several times. Because of the revisions of the script, the storyboard was also improved several times. The improvements of the storyboard helped me understand uncertainty and discover the visual language. I was very interested not only in the final visual effect but also in the process of refinements.

In the first version of my storyboard (Figure 1), the concept was very thought-provoking, but the visual expressive force was not very strong. For example, before assassin bird appeared for the first time, audiences saw three unnecessary details: First, reader bird went home; second, he got the book from his mailbox; third, he opened the book in his study room. The reason why they were unimportant was because they made the entire animation too clear, direct, and narrative. However, the most important thing about *"Illusory" Birds* was how to reveal uncertainty in an implicit way. Hence, these details needed to be removed in order to emphasize the obscure conversation between image and text. I would leave the gaps for spectators. The whole film would become concise and complex.

Besides, in the first storyboard, there was a frame of the top view of the building. At first, I added this image because I wanted to show different angles of the building. Nevertheless, this picture did not play an important role in promoting the development of the plot. Therefore, this shot also needed to be removed.

Furthermore, in the last frame, assassin bird appeared behind reader bird. But, the visual impact of the ending was not very forceful because this shot was not enough to convey the multi-layered spatial transitions. In other words, the movie lost a strong sense

of suspense. According to the revised script, I spent much time thinking about the visual expression. I needed to refine the storyboard so as to reveal the uncertainty of the spaces.



Figure 1. The first storyboard of “Illusory” Birds



Finally, I completed the final storyboard (Figure 2a and Figure 2b). From my perspective, the visual expressive force of the revised storyboard is very intense. This significant revision is mainly reflected in the three aspects. First, implication is a very interesting expression method. Second, the frame of the interior courtyard is very important. Third, the multi-layered spatial transitions are fully and implicitly expressed.

In the beginning, instead of showing reader bird, I show the transition between text space and real space in order to create some implicit visual metaphors for viewers. More specifically, an invisible character may be reading the book. Assassin bird may or may not exist. This unknown character may or may not have a potential relationship with assassin bird. These implications make people generate many different opinions. That is to say, to a great degree, the entire animation contains Infinite possibilities. A variety of suspenseful atmospheres are built in the whole film. Audiences can actively explore the multidimensional spaces and rebuild the spaces according to their own understanding.

In the first storyboard, because the frame of the top view of the building had no relationship with the storyline, it was a redundant shot. In the final storyboard, this frame is replaced by a frame of the interior courtyard. Not only can it show the interior stairs and the other interior structures of the building, but also it has a close relationship with the next frame. The reason why these two frames are related is because spectators can see a close-up of the interior stairs in the next frame. In addition, according to the plot, assassin bird may walk up the stairs and search for his assassination target. Hence, the shot of the interior courtyard can promote the development of the storyline.

Moreover, I add awareness of space so as to strengthen the visual expression of the uncertainty of the spaces. Depending on reader bird's reading comprehension, a series of images emerge in his mind. These pictures may be the products of his imagination or they may actually reflect a real assassination and his death. What is more, in the ending,

the overlapping relationship among different spaces becomes complicated. In the movie, viewers cannot easily determine whether everything is illusory or not.

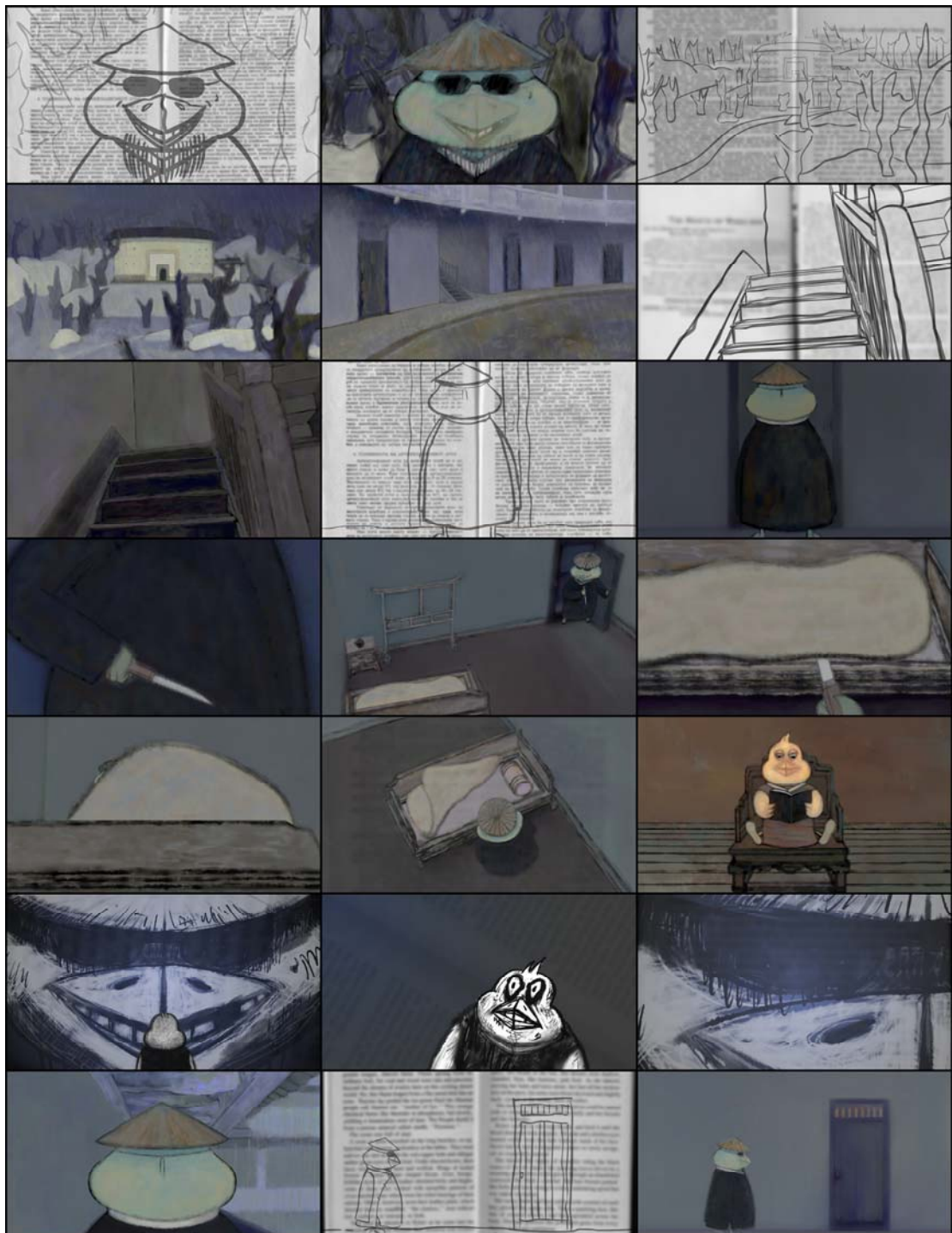


Figure 2a. The final storyboard of *"Illusory" Birds*

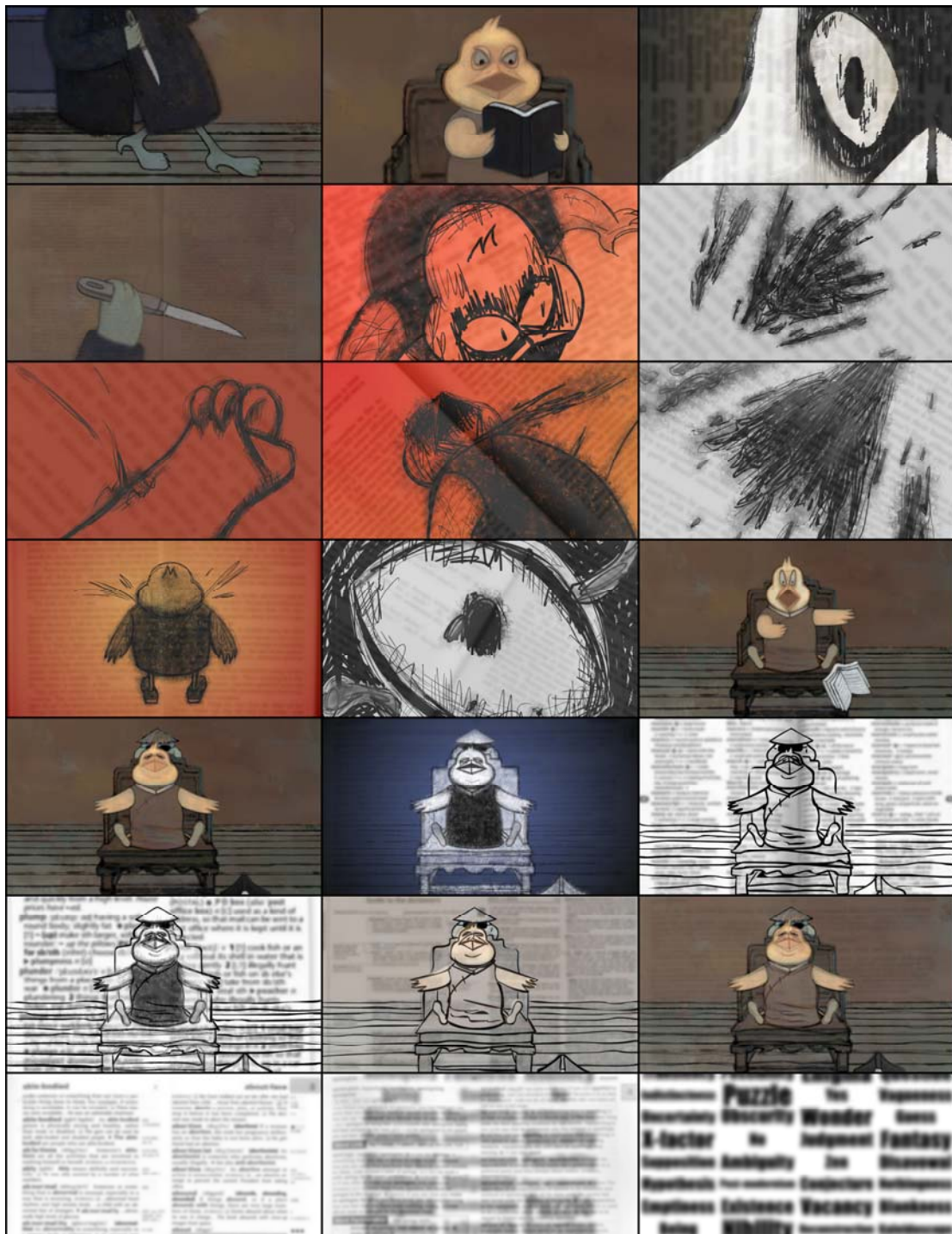


Figure 2b. The final storyboard of “Illusory” Birds

## CHAPTER 4

### AESTHETIC ISSUES

#### Color

A strong individual expression method is very important in painting language. I do not want to simply imitate objects' objective colors. Instead, I want to build an order that is above the realistic color of all creation. By this means, I can reveal color's intrinsic charm. In *"Illusory" Birds*, I use cold and warm colors and expressive brushstrokes to show different atmospheres and emotions. According to the implications of the color variations, audiences can deeply experience the uncertainty of the spaces. Depending on reader bird's complex mental changes, I utilize abundant subjective colors to convey the spatial transitions. I use non-saturated colors to paint the characters and the scenes because the book that reader bird is reading creates depressive and tense atmospheres. Different subtle grey colors bring spectators a dreamlike vision. From a psychological perspective, a dreamlike vision makes viewers feel that everything is an illusion or that everything is not an illusion.

Besides, aesthetically, each color area is influenced by ambient colors. For example, the basic color of reader bird's study room (Figure 3) is orange-grey. In this particular frame, every color palette contains the overall hue of orange-grey. In other words, all colors have a close relationship with each other. Furthermore, different colors have distinct levels of orange-grey. These color levels are just like musical scales. Multi-layered subtle tonal changes can form a tasteful image, with the picture revealing the musical color spatial relationship (Lubar 131). Not only do the variations of color scales

establish the sense of space, but also they strengthen the main melody of the basic color. In addition, I appropriately add some blue and green in this warm-toned frame in order to get color balance.



Figure 3. Reader bird and his study room in *"Illusory" Birds*

Moreover, in Figure 3, in the beginning, reader bird has a cheerful smile because he really enjoys reading the book. That is to say, he is a warm-blooded and happy bird. Hence, he is orange and yellow. But, assassin bird (Figure 4) is a cold-blooded and insidious bird with an evil smile. Therefore, he is blue and green. To a great degree, subjective colors can be utilized to express the emotional world. For instance, in the shot where assassin bird's gigantic head fills the entire awareness of space (Figure 5), the whole background is a blue-grey that creates an air of tension. This emotional color indicates that an assassination may arrive. The air of tension may be devouring the tiny reader bird.





Figure 4. Assassin bird in *"Illusory" Birds*

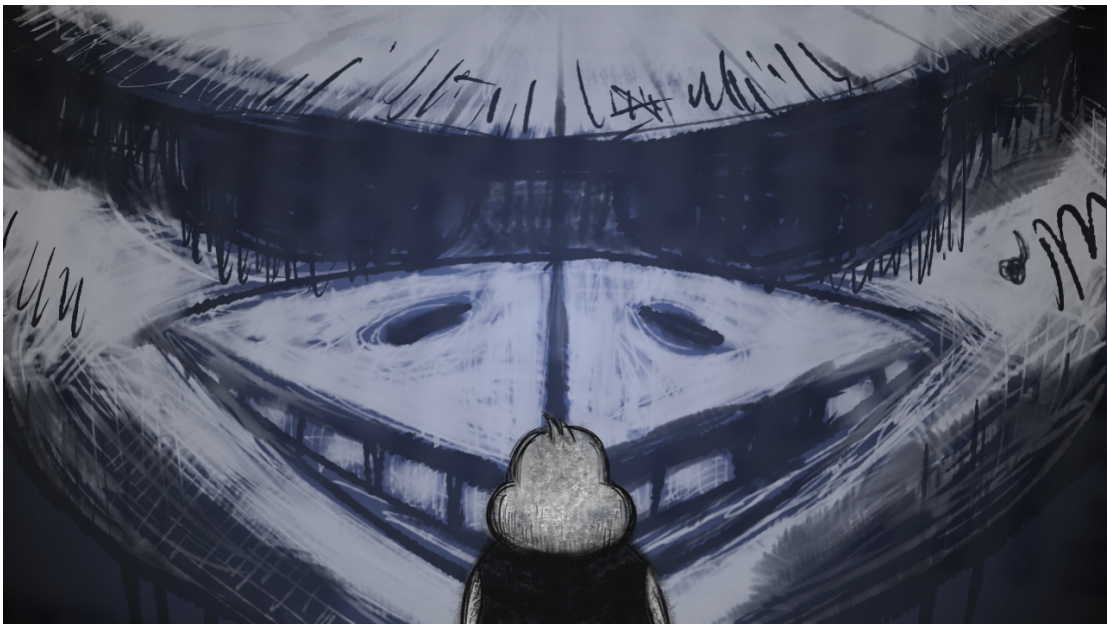


Figure 5. Awareness of space in *"Illusory" Birds*

What is more, line is one of the most significant modeling languages in art. It brings people the sense of rhythm and the beauty of melody. I draw fluent black lines along objects' contours to make each color area clear and definite. However, I do not want to use line to rigidly frame every color palette. Instead, I utilize uneven lines to break the boundaries among objects so as to make all colors penetrate with each other. In each image, every color cannot exist independently. In this way, I can get pictures that have a strong sense of wholeness.



## Sound

Sound is an indispensable part of film language. It has particular aesthetic features. Not only does sound enrich content, but also it transmits invisible acoustic impact into audiences' bodies and minds. To a great degree, it breaks the limitation of the frame of the screen and touches spectators' hearts. It helps viewers better understand a movie. Not only does sound create an appropriate tone, but also it promotes the development of plot. At the same time, to a large extent, it reveals a character's emotional changes. Hence, subjective audio elements and feelings bring about acoustic implications (Mastnak 78).

For example, in Figure 4, assassin bird is unhurriedly walking in the woods. He is very calm. In the meantime, it is a rainy and windy night and the atmosphere is a little tense. Therefore, walking sound, wind sound, rain sound, thunder, and instrumental sounds need to be added. But, the problem is that each sound has a variety of acoustic effects. I need to choose the suitable effects that correspond with the above-mentioned visual elements. By this means, these sounds can be used to reveal the atmosphere and the character's emotional variations in a potentially suggestive way.

Before I analyze these sounds, I want to explain some musical terms. *Pianissimo* means very soft. *Piano* means soft. *Mezzo-piano* means half soft or moderately soft. *Forte* means loud. *Fortissimo* means very loud. *Fortississimo* is the musical notation that is louder than *fortissimo*. *Sforzando* means suddenly loud.

First, because of the rain and the woods, assassin bird's walking sound should sound like he walks on a wet dirt trail. Also, the sound should be *forte* because the shot is close-up. Audiences can clearly hear it. Besides, he has not yet entered the building to

stealthily kill the assassination target. Hence, he can certainly make clear sounds on the outside. Second, neither a breeze sound nor a gale sound would be proper. Because a breeze sound is *pianissimo*, it cannot obviously intensify the sense of tension. However, if I select a *fortissimo* gale sound, he will be unable to move forward easily on the outside. Therefore, the wind sound should be *mezzo-piano*. Third, because the bone-chilling instrumental sounds, to a great degree, heighten the entire atmosphere, I do not want a *forte* rain sound to cover the instrumental sounds. Hence, the rain sound should be *piano*. Fourth, the thunder should also be *piano* because the atmosphere is only a little tense. The reason why it is only a little tense is because the emotionally stable assassin bird has not yet taken out his dagger from his sleeve to carry out the assassination. Fifth, the bone-chilling sound of a flute and the creepy sound of a Chinese zither, from a psychological perspective, can match the uncanny environment and create a strong sense of suspense for the animation.

In the building, assassin bird cannot make the walking sound. Otherwise, he may be easily found by others. In the bedroom scene (Figure 6), when he lifts up the quilt with his knife, the whole background sound suddenly becomes *sforzando*. This background sound indicates that he lifts up the quilt with a decisive personality. Meanwhile, the camera is not near to the hallway. Therefore, spectators cannot hear the rain sound.

Nevertheless, in the hallway scene (Figure 7), the rainwater is next to assassin bird. Hence, viewers can clearly hear the rain sound. Furthermore, the thunder should be exaggerated in order to imply that an assassination may be about to begin. Therefore, instead of the objective sound, this thunder is more like the subjective sound. It can be influenced by the character. In addition, it can show his emotional world. Appropriate acoustic exaggeration is conducive to promoting the development of the storyline.



Figure 6. The bedroom in *"Illusory" Birds*

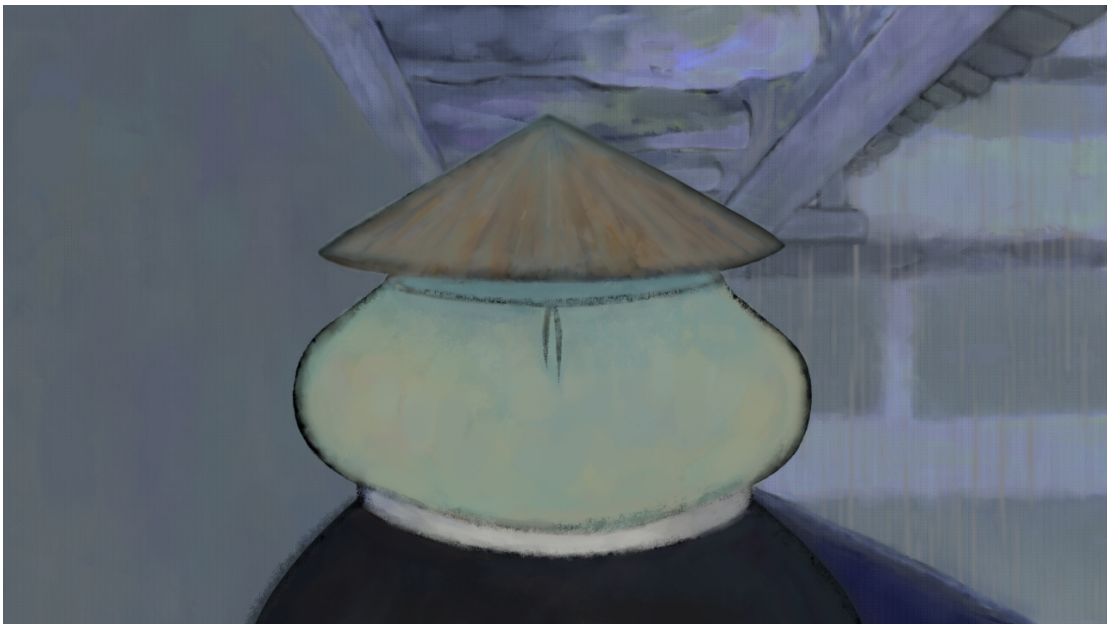


Figure 7. The hallway in *"Illusory" Birds*

Before reader bird is frightened by the book, he really enjoys reading it. In Figure 3, the thunder should be *piano* because nothing terrible happens to him. But, in Figure 5, the thunder should be *sforzando* because he sees assassin bird in his mind. Then, in the bloody awareness of space (Figure 8), the thunder should be *fortississimo* because he screams and his blood sprays all over the place.



Figure 8. Bloody awareness of space in “*Illusory*” *Birds*

In the end, with the sound of flipping pages, a new suspenseful conversation between image and text (Figure 9) may start.



Figure 9. The conversation between image and text in *"Illusory" Birds*

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **TECHNICAL ISSUES**

#### **Selective Color**

Easy Paint Tool Sai is a painting application. I used a variety of Sai brushes to paint my characters and scenes. This program focuses on drawing and painting, but it does not focus on color adjustments. In Sai, the only adjustments are Brightness/Contrast and Hue/Saturation. If I utilized them to adjust colors in an image, every color would be changed. But, I did not want to modify all colors. However, if I used brushes to repaint a particular color area, the original expressive brushstrokes in this color palette would be damaged. If I wanted to make more complex color corrections without destroying brushstrokes, I needed to utilize another application to solve this technical issue.

Adobe Photoshop has a tool called Selective Color. This function allowed me to adjust colors in a certain portion of a picture selectively. I could choose a color that I wanted to change. If I clicked on the button of Reds, I would be able to select a variety of other colors (Figure 10). Once a color was chosen, all areas of this specific color would be affected. A color change depended on whether I slid cyan, magenta, yellow, or black.

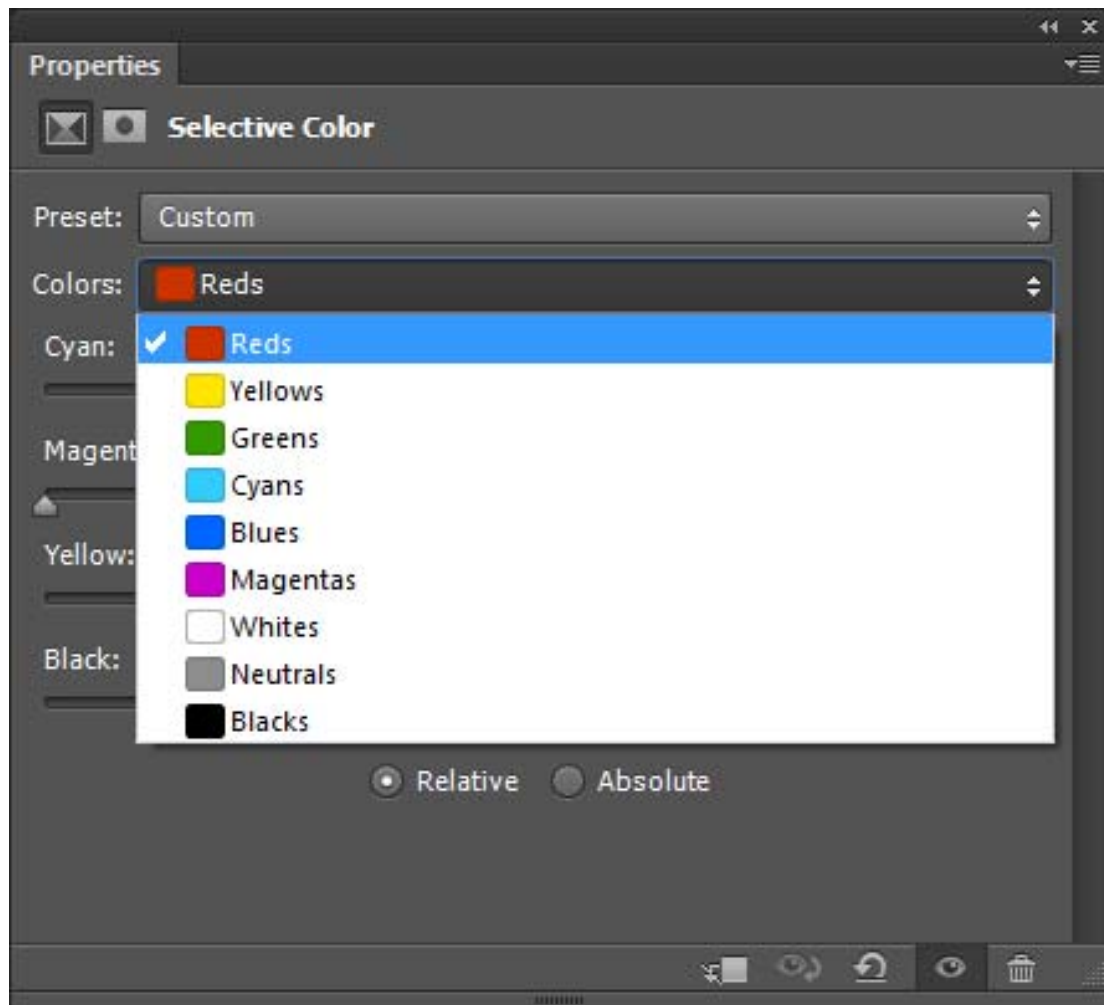


Figure 10. A variety of other colors in Selective Color in Adobe Photoshop

For example, in the first courtyard scene (Figure 11), the color of the ground was warm. In order to make the color become cold, I grabbed the slider of cyan and pushed it all the way up. Then, the original warm tone was given cyan. In the final courtyard scene (Figure 12), the color of the ground became cold. The appropriate parameter settings of CMYK helped me achieve various attractive color effects. Also, brushstrokes would not be affected. This technique is convenient and simple. Different programs have different



strengths. I need to combine a variety of tools to solve different technical problems, which is very important in animation study.

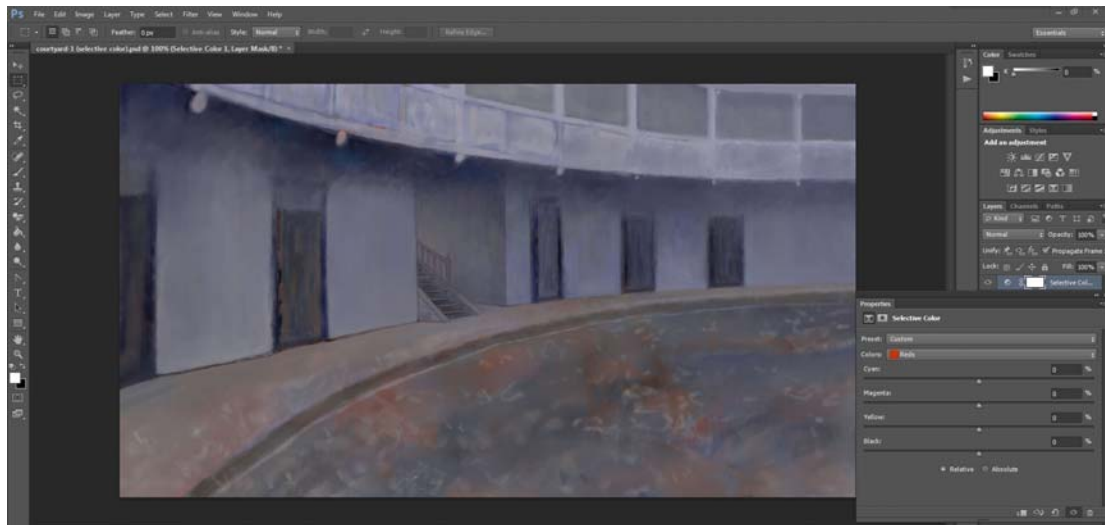


Figure 11. The first courtyard scene in Adobe Photoshop

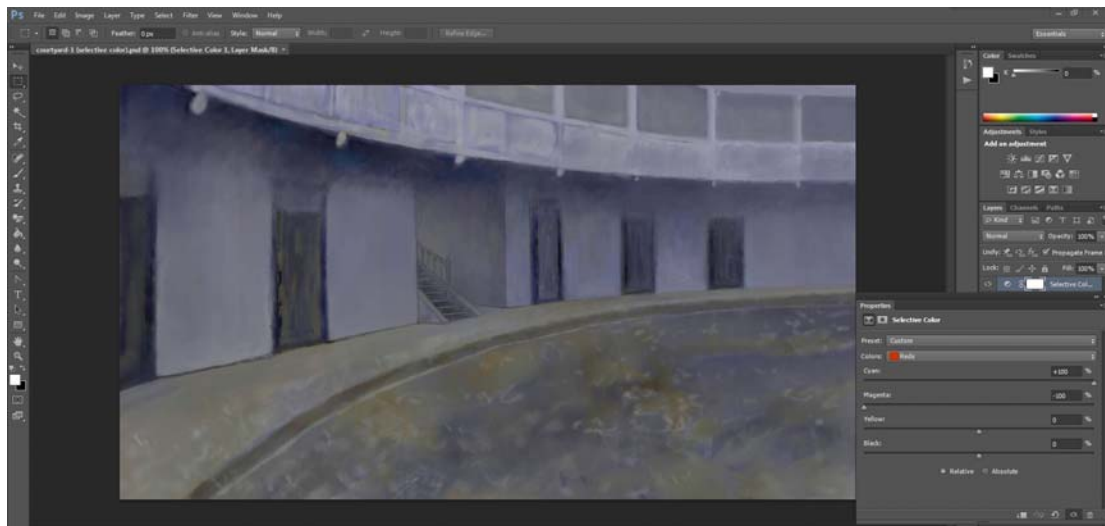


Figure 12. The final courtyard scene in Adobe Photoshop



## Creating and Exporting a Movie File

After completing the color adjustments in Adobe Photoshop, I imported the still images into Adobe Flash, a powerful animation application. On the timeline, these still pictures were given vitality. Normally, at first, I would export the film as a SWF file. SWF stands for Small Web Format. Because the size of SWF file was usually very small, I did not need to spend much time waiting for the export of the movie. Thus, I could immediately preview the rough version of the animation, which was very convenient for me to quickly check the film and find issues. By this means, I could efficiently solve problems and improve the movie again and again before I did the final composition in Adobe Premiere.

But, I had a technical issue. Because Flash is a vector animation program, it mainly supports vector graphics. In other words, if I imported too many high-resolution pixel-based bitmaps of the characters and the scenes, the film would get stuck. Once it got stuck, the project file would be easily collapsed and forcibly exited. Hence, I should not export a SWF file of vector animation. In order to achieve a fluent movie, I should export a pixel-based video file. Although Flash itself allowed me to export a movie as a pixel-based video file, the size of the file was too big. I needed to find a method to solve this technical problem.

The latest version of Flash is combined with Adobe Media Encoder. After creating a big video file in the latest version of Flash, Media Encoder was automatically opened. In Media Encoder, I could export this big file as a small and fluent MOV file. Also, in order to avoid crashing the big Flash file, I broke it up into several small Flash files. Therefore, I needed to export several small MOV files in Media Encoder and import them into Adobe Premiere. Finally, I successfully exported a complete and fluent MOV file out of Premiere.

## CONCLUSION

I am very satisfied with my thesis project *"Illusory" Birds*. The animation is very good. The drawing styles have very strong expressive force, revealing different spaces and the characters' emotions. The color styles have very forceful visual impact, showing different atmospheres. The sounds are complex and powerful, promoting the development of the plot effectively. The concept I deal with and the way I realize the idea are very interesting. The above-mentioned factors make *"Illusory" Birds* successful.

*"Illusory" Birds* is an experimental animation. As far as I am concerned, it does relate to my career goal because my goal is to be an experimental animation artist. In the future, I will continue to research experimental audio-visual language and form my own thoughts and animation styles. From my perspective, creative spirit is very important. The success of *"Illusory" Birds* inspires me to create new excellent experimental animation works.

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