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Research Title / Question

How can stylised 3D animation visualise emotional desensitisation in contemporary everyday life?

Draft Introduction

My Final Major Project examines emotional desensitisation in contemporary everyday life. The project focuses on the way people continue their normal routines while serious events such as violence, crisis, suffering and social collapse happen around them. This project investigates how people can become so used to disturbing images, public problems and online content that they no longer react to them with urgency or emotion.

The project will take the form of a short, stylised 3D animated film following a young person through an ordinary day. The film begins with the character lying in bed, illuminated only by the light of a phone screen. They scroll through a fast stream of political speeches, news headlines, memes, advertisements, celebrity updates, violence, protests and disasters. By placing these different forms of content next to each other, the film reflects how digital media can flatten the emotional difference between crisis, entertainment and everyday information.

The protagonist starts his morning routine: he brushes his teeth, puts on his headphones and leaves the flat. At first, the city looks normal; people are going to work, and daily life continues as usual. However, as he walks through the city, unsettling events are happening around him. Someone is crying on the pavement. A fight breaks out near a bus stop. A homeless person is ignored. Emergency vehicles pass by. Some people record what is happening rather than intervening. The protagonist notices these events but does not react and continues to walk as if this has become part of normal life.

As the film progresses, the environment becomes increasingly unstable. Buildings start to fragment, billboards glitch, lights flicker, streets become damaged and public screens distort. These changes symbolise a wider social and emotional breakdown. The world around the character is visibly falling apart, but daily life continues. People still walk, scroll, commute, consume and ignore what is happening around them.

The main research problem is how 3D animation can represent emotional numbness without relying only on dialogue or literal explanation. Through character animation, environment design, sound, colour, repetition and visual metaphor, this project explores how animation can communicate detachment, overstimulation and emotional exhaustion. The character is not presented as evil or uncaring, but as someone who has been exposed to so much crisis that they no longer know how to respond.

A key contrast in the film may show the character reacting more strongly to a small personal inconvenience, such as running out of toothpaste or noticing that their

backpack is damaged, than to the larger destruction around them. This moment would suggest that the character still feels emotion, but that wider social problems have become too constant, distant or normalised to fully process.

The film ends by returning to the bedroom from the opening. The phone vibrates, the character begins scrolling again, and the same mixture of crisis, entertainment, advertising and violence reappears on the screen. This circular conclusion indicates that emotional desensitisation is an ongoing cycle shaped by media, repetition and habit rather than a single isolated event.

Key Words Searched

Emotional desensitisation

Media saturation

Doomscrolling

Digital media and suffering

Compassion fatigue

Spectatorship

Animation and trauma

Animated documentary

Stylised 3D animation

Visual metaphor in animation

Everyday crisis

Social collapse

Media violence

Overstimulation

Numbness and contemporary life

Environmental storytelling

War, media and representation

Animation and memory

Animation and social issues

Draft Literature Review

Media, pain, spectatorship, animation and representational literature will serve as the basis for this investigation. The literature review will examine how people react emotionally to repeated images of violence and crises, and how animation can portray experiences that are psychological, emotional or symbolic rather than only realistic.

According to Chouliaraki (2008), media does not neutrally reflect pain; it frames it through certain pictures, storylines and techniques of communication. These frames shape the viewers' experience of pity, responsibility, distance or indifference. This is related to Sontag (2003), who questioned whether mass images of violence and sadness raise consciousness or lose their emotional power over time. Moeller (1999) takes this theory further with the concept of compassion fatigue, where continual media coverage of suffering can lead to viewers becoming desensitised to the point of experiencing less empathy.

Desensitisation, however, is not presented as an inevitable or simple consequence of repeated exposure. Sontag (2003) and Moeller (1999) suggest that repetition can become emotionally exhausting. Yet Chouliaraki (2008) and Boltanski (1999) argue that representations of suffering can nevertheless generate empathy, moral awareness or responsibility, depending on the way they are presented. This indicates that audience reaction is shaped by the context, representation and position supplied to the spectator.

This discussion is also connected to media saturation and digital culture. Shifman (2013) describes internet memes as digital content that spreads quickly online in different versions and becomes a shared cultural experience. This supports the idea that, in modern digital society, serious news, entertainment, advertising, memes and violent imagery can exist within the same continuous media stream, making crisis part of ordinary online consumption.

Animation theory is also important to this project. Wells (1998) and Grobler (2021) state that animation can communicate through exaggeration, transformation, symbolism and metaphor. This makes animation effective for representing internal or abstract emotional states. Furniss (1998) describes animation using aesthetic characteristics, including form, style, abstraction, technology and audience perception. This supports the premise that animation produces meaning through visual creation rather than the simple replication of reality. Animated documentary and trauma studies, including Kraemer's (2015) writing on *Waltz with Bashir*, show how animation can represent memory, violence and trauma through fragmented and subjective imagery.

At the same time, animated representations of suffering raise ethical questions. Because animation is stylised, suffering can risk becoming aestheticized or emotionally distanced. In general, the evidence indicates that visual media might raise awareness but can also lead to emotional exhaustion. It also indicates that animation can

communicate emotional and psychological states, but must do so with caution, so as not to aestheticize or reduce suffering.

Research Methods Outline

This thesis will use a practice-based research methodology. The written research and the animated film will develop alongside each other, with the practical work acting to test and explore the research question.

The first method will be contextual research. Academic texts on media, suffering, spectatorship, emotional desensitisation and animation will be studied. This will help explain how audiences may be affected by repeated exposure to crisis, and how animation can be used to represent emotional and psychological states.

The second method will be visual and film analysis. Animated films, short films, music videos and cinematic sequences will be analysed, particularly works that use visual metaphor, repetition, urban environments, screens, distortion or emotional detachment. This will help identify approaches that may be useful for the practical film, such as slow character movement, contrast between sound and image, glitch effects, symbolic environments and a cyclical narrative structure.

The third method will be practical experimentation in 3D animation. Different approaches to character animation, environment design, lighting, camera movement, sound and editing will be tested. These experiments will help determine how the character's emotional numbness can be shown visually. For example, a very still character performance may be tested against a chaotic background, or environmental destruction may increase gradually throughout the film.

The fourth method will be reflection and evaluation. Creative decisions will be documented through notes, screenshots, test renders and written reflection. The project will evaluate whether each visual choice supports the research question. Feedback from tutors and peers will also be used to improve the clarity of both the film and the written thesis.

The project has some limitations. The final film will be short, so it cannot explore every aspect of emotional desensitisation in detail. The project will also focus on a symbolic and stylised interpretation rather than a literal documentary representation. The aim is not to prove a psychological theory, but to use animation as a creative research method to explore how emotional numbness can be represented visually.

General Outline of Each Chapter

Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the topic, the research question and aims of the project. It will explain why emotional desensitisation is relevant for today's digital culture and why 3D animation is an appropriate medium to investigate it. The framework of the thesis will also be introduced as well as the concept of the short film.

Chapter 2: Media Saturation and Emotional Numbness

This chapter looks at the ways in which the media portrays catastrophe, violence and suffering and the possible effects of repeated exposure to such images on emotional response. It will explore concepts such as mediated suffering, spectatorship, compassion fatigue and doomscrolling. This chapter will help clarify the emotional numbness the film is trying to convey.

Chapter 3: Animation as Visual Metaphor

This chapter will examine how animation can represent internal emotional states through stylisation, symbolism, repetition and visual distortion. It will look at examples of animated films or sequences that communicate trauma, anxiety, detachment or numbness. This chapter will help identify visual techniques that can be used in my own film.

Chapter 4: Practice-Based Film Development

This chapter will explain the creative development of the Final Major Project. It will discuss the story, character, environment, visual style, sound and animation choices. It will also reflect on practical tests and design decisions, such as using a still character performance against a chaotic background to show emotional numbness.

Chapter 5: Evaluation and Conclusion

In this chapter the completed video will be assessed on how successfully it answers the research question. It will reflect on what worked, the challenges of the project and what could be improved. The conclusion will summarise the visualisation of emotional desensitisation in a symbolic and cinematic form via 3D animation.

Draft Chapter: Media Saturation, Suffering and Emotional Numbness

Contemporary life is shaped by constant exposure to information. Through phones, social media, public screens and news platforms, people are repeatedly shown images of violence, suffering, political conflict, celebrity culture, advertising and entertainment. These different types of content often appear beside each other without clear separation. A video of war may be followed by a meme, an advertisement, a celebrity update or a

personal message. This creates an environment where serious events can become part of the same endless stream as ordinary or meaningless content (Shifman, 2013).

This project is interested in how this constant exposure can create emotional desensitisation. Desensitisation does not necessarily mean that a person does not care. It can also mean that they are emotionally exhausted, overstimulated or unsure how to respond. When crisis becomes constant, it can begin to feel normal. The repeated presence of disturbing images may reduce the viewer's sense of urgency, especially when those images are consumed through a screen and quickly replaced by other content (Sontag, 2003; Moeller, 1999).

Chouliaraki's writing on the mediation of suffering is useful here because it explains how media shapes the viewer's relationship to distant pain. Media images can create sympathy, but they can also create distance. The observer witnesses pain yet may not be directly involved (Chouliaraki, 2008). This concept is examined in the opening phone scene of the film. The character alternates between political speeches, parodies, disasters, violence and commercials. The images are disturbing, yet the act of scrolling makes them temporary and easily replaceable. However, the character's expression remains emotionless, implying that the information is no longer completely processed.

Sontag's work on images of suffering also supports this idea. She questions whether seeing horrific pictures repeatedly always leads to awareness, or whether it can also lead to exhaustion (Sontag, 2003). For this project, this is significant because the character is surrounded by signals of crisis but continues his daily routine. He sees someone crying, a fight at a bus stop and people ignoring a homeless person, but he keeps walking. The aim is not to present him as cruel, but as someone whose emotional response has become blocked.

The film also looks at the role of public and digital spaces in this numbness. The city in the film appears normal at first, then begins to fall apart. Billboards glitch; buildings fragment and public screens distort. These visual changes represent a wider breakdown that people have learned to ignore. The environment becomes a metaphor for emotional and social collapse. Daily life continues, but the world around the character is visibly damaged.

This chapter is connected to the practical film because it explains why the plot is constructed through repetition and contrast. The character performs ordinary actions: waking up, brushing his teeth, putting on headphones, walking, scrolling and walking back home. The surroundings become increasingly unpleasant, yet the rituals remain. The film's meaning comes from the contrast between ordinary behaviour and abnormal surroundings.

A key moment in the film could be that the protagonist reacts more strongly to a minor personal inconvenience than to the larger destruction around him. For example, he may

become upset when he runs out of toothpaste or when his backpack is damaged, while still ignoring violence and collapse around him. This moment suggests that the character still has emotions, but that large public crises have become too overwhelming or normalised to process. His emotional response has not disappeared; it has become displaced.

By focusing on media saturation and emotional numbness, this chapter helps frame the main research question of the thesis. The issue is not only what people see, but how they learn to live with seeing too much. The practical film will use 3D animation to make this condition visible through character performance, environmental breakdown, sound, repetition and visual metaphor.

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