

Ineinkade Ruffin

Senior Thesis

Professor Xia Zhang

An Angel's Elevation

An Angel's Elevation is a captivating animated short film currently in production, delving into the transformative journey of Zion, an angel-in-training on the planet Gadreel. As she strives to ascend to the esteemed role of Archangel and protector for humanity on Earth, Zion grapples with her deep-seated fears of heights and struggles to trust others. Yet, fortified by her unwavering faith in the Most High, she embarks on a courageous quest to conquer her inner demons and rise to her full potential. Accompanying Zion on her path are two pivotal characters: Eli, a revered trainer and esteemed leader at the Seraphim Academy, where angels undergo rigorous training to assume their roles as Archangels; and Zephyrine, also known as "Zee," who's Zion's close friend and fellow classmate at the academy.

The trailer created a glimpse into the rich themes of Afro-futurism, drawing inspiration from the profound traditions of the Cherubim and Seraphim movement. Complementing the animated teaser are striking posters showcasing the characters and their designs. In my interpretation, these celestial beings possess human-like skin tones but are distinguished by subtle, otherworldly features such as three or four fingers, solid form feet, and eyes devoid of pupils—a unique portrayal of angelic forms. Within this celestial realm, diverse levels of power and abilities are imbued in each character, discernible through the markings adorning their bodies. However, not everyone encountered in this tale is of angelic origin, adding depth and intrigue to the narrative.

What I have noticed in the film and television industry is how the appearance of African Americans are honored and celebrated over recent years. Many of people are embracing and encouraging the diverse African culture. Now many are taking advantage of this and mixing the culture with technology to enforce a new genre called Afro-Futurism. This term came from Mark

Dery and his essay, *Black to the Future*, in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. In the takes the concern of society’s problems and place them into context of the 20TH Century techno culture. Making African Americans the foundation to advance technology that leads to an enhanced future. Films like *Black Panther* heavily expressed it through the design of the environments and the clothing of the characters. What stood out to me in the film was the choice



Figure 1: *Black Panther* (2019)

of costumes the characters had worn. The elegant patterns with rich colors, and how the tones reflect in light and shadow. You may also notice how with the film they are all worshipping their god, Bast. Like the characters in the animation, but a different religion.

My characters are angels based on the Christian religion. The inspiration in their physical appearance comes from the royal themes of afro-futurism. Another inspiration in their appearance is from the Cherubim and Seraphim Movement and the practice of praying to God



Figure 2: *Celestial Church of Christ Members*

that take place through the story. This is a religion that originated in Nigeria and is still practiced to this day. The religion that I follow as is known by people in Nigeria as “White Garment Church” or “Aladura”. The term aladura translates to Owner of Prayers in the English language. This is a movement where prayers and faith are heavily practiced.

We all have white gowns which is garment and for women a

Cap comes with it to cover our head and hair, along with belts to tie around our waist and shoes are removed for services. Every Sunday service, every vigil, or special conference, people wear these garments. This was how I imagined the clothing the angels would wear because



Figure 3: Concept work for *An Angel's Elevation*

the garments symbolize our spiritual armor, protecting us from physical and spiritual attacks.

When creating the teaser for *An Angel's Elevation*, I deliberately opted to withhold significant details while portraying Zion's internal struggles. This withholding of information is a crucial aspect of my storytelling, as it allows for suspense to build. Utilizing techniques such as photographing successive drawings or positions of puppets and models to simulate movement are the fundamentals of animation. Animated sequences possess a unique ability to convey a wealth of hidden meaning within a short span, making them ideal for captivating audiences. Crafting animated trailers involves a meticulous process encompassing tasks such as writing, sketching, and rendering. Unfortunately, the intricacies of this process often go unnoticed and unappreciated in today's landscape. I feel that the concept designs in video games and anime have a lot of depth to their making and personality to the world we crave to live in. These efforts are essential



Figure 4: Concept work for *The Avengers (Cartoon Series)*

in crafting compelling narratives and engaging viewers effectively.



Figure 5: *The Boondocks* (2005 - 2014)

The artistic approach employed in this piece is characterized by its simplicity and the use of flat colors. However, it's the careful addition of highlights and shadows that imbues the scenes and characters with a sense of depth and dimensionality. This invaluable technique was inspired by the renowned animator and producer, Carl Jones, whose work transcends traditional boundaries. Notably, his celebrated series, "The Boondocks," which aired during nighttime slots, depicted the dynamic interplay between a grandfather assuming guardianship of his grandsons and their misadventures in their new home of Woodcrest, colloquially known as the boondocks. Jones' signature style, defined by clean yet evocative lines, served as a visual homage to rap culture and American history, capturing viewers' attention with each frame. Drawing inspiration from his techniques, I strive to infuse my own work with a similarly rich and engaging aesthetic.

I grew up loving animated films that were released in theaters and the shows that came on



Figure 6: *The Incredibles* (2004)

every Saturday morning. Films had me glued to the screen, like *The Incredibles*, *Teen Titans*, *The Avengers*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Justice League*. The stories they told using physical and mental strength allowed me to view family, friends, and others around me as superheroes. We may not

have wings on our backs or go to the gym 24/7 to stay in shape, but the talents we carry are what makes us special. At times we may not recognize it, but others around us do and try to discourage us and become villains in our lives. When you have the right people around you as support, the sky is no longer the limit, but a checkpoint for your race. I know that because I was ridiculed many times for my drawings at an early age. My works were vandalized in elementary school by other kids that didn't like me. To add to my stress, I was bullied for my appearance and name, the parts that made me who I am.

Those kids saw that their efforts weren't working and changed their routes to steal my work. This caused me to become extremely protective of the art I made, to the point I didn't want anyone to hold it or to leave the work unattended. This hurt me too when it was time for displaying and advertising approached, I was afraid of people claiming they had done my work. My experience as a student in the DAAP Program, I learned that I had to take steps to break that fear. I want people to learn that they will have to get out of their comfort zone to get what they want. There is a saying that goes like this: "The magic that you are looking for is in the work you are avoiding". This translates to us facing our fears to reach the other side.

A cornerstone that has unlocked numerous doors in my life is the Holy Bible. For me and countless others, its wisdom holds the key to many of life's perplexities. The Bible serves as a profound guidebook, offering teachings on how to lead a serene and harmonious existence. It provides counsel and solace, gently leading us through the labyrinth of fears and anxieties that beset us all. In Isaiah 41:10, we find a poignant reminder of the divine presence amidst our struggles: "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen

thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."(KJV)
This verse serves as a steadfast reassurance that the Lord walks beside us in the silence, ready to fortify us in moments of weakness.

In contemporary society, fear is often misconstrued as a symbol of frailty, leading individuals to mask their uncertainties with false confidence. Yet, in my view, acknowledging our vulnerabilities is the first step towards genuine strength. It is precisely this authenticity that I sought to capture in Zion's voice within my trailer—a palpable sense of doubt and apprehension as she grapples with her fear of heights, reaching out to God for the courage to ascend as an Archangel.

The depiction of women's appearance in the media has undergone transformation across eras. Initially, there was emphasis on tall, skinny figures, followed by a trend toward skinny yet voluptuous bodies, and later, curvy hourglass shapes gained prominence. While the media still exhibits imperfections, there has been a gradual shift toward inclusivity. However, representation often overlooks portraying women as strong and active individuals, highlighting muscularity and physical strength. Personally, I envision people akin to superheroes, who hone their bodies through rigorous training to maximize their strength. Typically, the portrayal of muscularity is geared towards men, symbolizing protection and defense. Yet, having strong women in this domain



Figure 7: Body types (Bright Side)

enriches their mental fortitude and sets higher standards. Their presence demonstrates capability on par with, if not surpassing, men's abilities.

The trials faced by various ethnicities have led to shifting personal and mental expectations. Failure to meet certain standards may result in being labeled as "unstable" or "inferior". Our imperfections are intrinsic to our humanity; perfection is an unattainable ideal. However, there



Figure 8: An Angel's Elevation

exists a notion of perfection embodied by angels, unseen yet palpably present.

They observe and safeguard us, possibly grappling with their own

imperfections akin to humans. Zion's journey resonates powerfully as an

exploration of angels confronting their

fears, seeking divine intervention in moments of desperation while maintaining unwavering faith. This perspective offers a unique insight into the struggles and growth of angels as they navigate existence.

Life resembles an intricate tapestry, intricately woven with countless challenges, each representing a unique struggle demanding our attention. Much like courageous sailors navigating treacherous waters, individuals confront adversities that sculpt the very trajectory of their lives. Whether contending with personal setbacks, societal expectations, or unforeseen barriers, the journey to conquer life's trials is nothing short of a daunting odyssey. These tribulations act as crucibles, as William Shakespeare so aptly described, "testing the mettle of our resilience,

determination, and enduring spirit.” Yet, within the crucible of adversity lies the transformative power that shapes our character and steels our resolve to confront life head-on. In our unwavering pursuit of triumph over these hurdles, we uncover the profound truth embedded in struggle—the epicenter not only tempers our essence but also ignites the flame of resilience, propelling us forward on the tumultuous voyage of life.

Bibliography:

Bird, Brad, director. *The Incredibles*. Pixar Animation Studio, 2004.

“Cherubim and Seraphim Society.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., www.britannica.com/topic/Cherubim-and-Seraphim-society. Accessed 16 Apr. 2024.

Coogler, Ryan, director. *Black Panther*. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2018.

Dery, Mark. “Black to the Future.” www.uvic.ca/victoria-colloquium/assets/docs/Black%20to%20the%20Future.pdf.

“How the ‘Perfect’ Female Body Has Changed over the Past 100 Years.” *Bright Side - Inspiration. Creativity. Wonder.*, Bright Side, 13 Apr. 2022, brightside.me/articles/how-the-perfect-female-body-has-changed-over-the-past-100-years-806440/.

Holy Bible: King James Version. Christian Art Publishers, 2020.

Huston, Jeff. “Incredibles 2 Concept Art Galleries Show Stages of Development (Images).” *I Can’t Unsee That Movie: Film News and Reviews by Jeff Huston*, 20 Apr. 2018, icantunseethatmovie.com/2018/04/20/incredibles-2-concept-art-galleries-show-stages-of-development-images/.

Jones, Carl. “The Boondocks.” *IMDb*, IMDb.com, 6 Nov. 2005, www.imdb.com/title/tt0373732.

O'Dowd, Sally. "Shakespeare's Lesson in Resilience." *Medium*, Medium, 8 Feb. 2016, medium.com/@sallyodowd/personal-branding-and-resilience-from-shakespeare-9cf9226897de.

"The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes." *IMDb*, IMDb.com, 22 Sept. 2010, www.imdb.com/title/tt1626038/.