

# ‘Sunny Side Up’: A Lockdown Stop Motion Animation and the Psychology Behind the Film

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## Abstract

*This paper describes and analyses ‘Sunny Side Up’, a short stop motion animated film created by one of the authors of this paper during the social distancing and lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. The film was inspired by an unparalleled era where the time to contemplate was abundant. It features the internal dialogue of the protagonist as he cooks in his kitchen. The investigation focuses on the ‘monkey mind’—a metaphor for the unsettled mind used in Buddhist writings. The creator and the protagonist of the film both experience this state of mind at the time of the conception of the film. This takes the form of a psychological analysis of the restless mind, which clearly was the creator’s and subsequently the film’s protagonist state of mind at the time of the conception of the film.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, film, mental health, lockdown, psychological analysis, restless mind, stop motion animation

## The pandemic and the creative mind

As the coronavirus pandemic swept across the globe, businesses were forced to remain shut, countries closed their borders, and people were required to stay home to slow the spread of the outbreak. It was during this unprecedented time that the idea for ‘Sunny Side Up’—the short stop motion animated film that this paper analyses—came to life. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle said, ‘Man is by nature a social animal’;<sup>3</sup> undeniably, the consequences of the compulsory social distancing were particularly significant to the human state of mind.

Art and creative expression are known to alleviate negative feelings, which was precisely the motivating force behind this three-minute animated film. Created with the meticulous art of stop motion animation, the film utilises a handmade, miniature,

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1905).

theatre-like set and one character, a plasticine puppet with a movable metallic bone-like internal structure known as armature. Stop motion is an animation technique that physically manipulates an object so that it appears to move on its own. ‘As a craft, the act of animating in stop motion requires a person to literally place a puppet in their hands and bring it to life, frame by frame’.<sup>4</sup> The animator moves the puppet in small increments between individually photographed frames, creating the illusion of movement when the series of frames is played as a continuous sequence. ‘Sunny Side Up’ consists of more than 4,000 such individual photographs. This technique requires intense concentration as a small mistake can force the animator to reshoot a whole scene and that could mean scrapping days of work. A full day’s work typically harvest a few seconds of animation. Many animators compare the technique with meditation—there is no room for thoughts other than those for the task at hand. Consequently, the animator is required to be entirely present, unknowingly practicing mindfulness, to avoid making mistakes. Constructing the set and puppet and creating the animation are not the only challenges an artist faces when embarking on such a project. Before any manual labour, a story and a script are vital.<sup>5</sup>

### **The film: ‘Sunny Side Up’**

‘Sunny Side Up’, was set in a kitchen—what had become a focal point in most homes during lockdowns. The kitchen was kept minimal and designed to look like a theatrical prop to emphasise its transformation into the ‘centre stage’ of the household. To accentuate the notion of the stage as the main performance room of the house even further, the kitchen was elevated to resemble a catwalk, accessible by wide steps. This is where the film starts, with the character contemplating while sitting on the steps, before standing up and moving to the stage to begin his cooking ‘performance’. No backdrop was designed to represent windows or other parts of the house; similarly, the set was not meant to realistically look like a part of a house. The absence of a backdrop also facilitated the notion of the theatrical stage.

From documenting human history to expressing collective emotions, artists have always been a channel for expressing universal sentiments. Artists record and preserve our human history. They can express our common humanity. And during the lockdowns, our common experience was facing our own minds. And auspicious-

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<sup>4</sup> Ken A Priebe, ‘The Advanced Art of Stop-Motion Animation’ (2011) Course Technology Cengage Learning: xvii.

<sup>5</sup> See the script for ‘Sunny Side Up’ in Appendix I

ly there was excessive activity and lots to observe, especially for people who found themselves living on their own. The script for 'Sunny Side Up' was inspired by just that, the observation of the human mind, or according to a metaphor used to describe the unsettled mind in Buddhist writings, the 'monkey mind'. The script was inspired by Sarah Kane's play 'Crave'— although there are four characters (named A, B, C, and M), critics like Peter Morris said the play consisted of 'just Sarah Kane doing herself in different voices'.<sup>6</sup> This suggests there was only one character in the play experiencing the 'monkey mind' a term that refers to the human mind being unsettled, restless, or confused.<sup>7</sup> Just like in 'Crave', the conversation in 'Sunny Side Up' takes the form of self-talk. Self-talk can be described as an ongoing dialogue within our minds, which can quickly bring up emotions like fear, doubt, self-criticism, anger, and anxiety, depending on what is going on with our lives at the given moment. The term aims to resemble how monkeys swing from branch to branch. In the field of psychology, monkey mind is sometimes used to describe the restless, agitated, and the ceaselessly active nature of the human mind. It is generally used as a metaphor to describe the way our thoughts can jump from one idea to another until reined in by focusing. Other than the negative affective states that can be fuelled by the phenomenon, monkey brain leads to an inability to focus or stay in the present moment, which in turn results in the negative affective states.

### **Enter the restless/monkey mind**

From a psychological perspective, the monkey mind can be attributed to various factors, such as overstimulation. In today's world and societal structure, stimulation and information transmission is constant, challenging the human mind in processing and filtering out irrelevant stimuli. This can lead to the mind jumping from one thought to another trying to address all the stimuli. Another situation where the monkey mind becomes more pronounced is during periods of anxiety and stress, where the mind races to find solutions or to anticipate potential threats. Attention and focus are probably the most interesting factors when it comes to the monkey mind. The human brain is designed to pay attention to novel stimuli and potential threats in the environment, a function that has helped us avoid danger and surprises in the days be-

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Morris, 'The Brand of Kane' (2000) 4 *Arete* 142–150.

<sup>7</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999).

fore the industrial revolution.<sup>8</sup> Today, the demand on our attention from the environment is constant—anyone can be reached via smartphones and social media, making it challenging to maintain focus on a single task. Even so, the normative cognitive process of the mind is to be working constantly to process, analyse, and synthesize information, and problem solve.<sup>9</sup> It is in the nature of our brain to be restless. It is when the restless mind comes to a point where it has nothing to solve or analyse, that is it has nothing to attend to, that problems arise.<sup>10</sup> This is the time when the ‘inner critic’ kicks in.

The ‘inner critic’ is a term used to describe the internal voice or self-talk that often judges, criticises, and undermines an individual’s self-worth and abilities. The inner critic can be related to the monkey mind as it often fuels the negative thoughts and ruminations that contribute to the negative affective states of the mind. Both the inner critic and the monkey mind can hinder an individual’s ability to focus, to be present, and to make rational decisions. The inner critic can exacerbate the effects of the monkey mind, as it tends to amplify self-doubt, insecurities, and fear of failure; as a result, it can prevent us from pursuing our goals and dreams and expressing our creativity.

The inner critic appears to be activated in the absence of goal-oriented tasks. In times of relative inactivity, the mind finds an opportunity for introspection with the aim of self-improvement; in the absence of clear goals for self-improvement, the mind will seek to identify or create a problem by magnifying even minor issues. Work in the field of neuroscience and neuropsychology has identified a network of interconnected brain regions that are active when the mind is at rest or not engaged on a specific task. These interconnected brain regions are collectively called the Default Mode Network (DMN).<sup>11</sup> The DMN is thought to be involved in a variety of internally focused mental processes, such as daydreaming, mind-wandering, self-referential thinking, and

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph LeDoux, ‘The Emotional Brain, Fear, and the Amygdala’ (2003) 23 *Cellular and Molecular Neurobiology* 727–738; Wolfram Schultz, ‘Behavioral Theories and the Neurophysiology of Reward’ (2006) 57 *Annual Review of Psychology* 87–115.

<sup>9</sup> Marcus E Raichle, ‘The Brain’s Default Mode Network’ (2015) 38 *Annual review of neuroscience* 433–447.

<sup>10</sup> John D Eastwood, Alexandra Frischen, Mark J. Fenske & Daniel Smilek, ‘The Unengaged Mind: Defining Boredom in Terms of Attention’ (2012) 7 *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 482–495.

<sup>11</sup> Marcus E Raichle, Ann Mary MacLeod, Abraham Z. Snyder & William J. Powers, ‘A Default Mode of Brain Function’ (2001) 98 *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 676–682.

rumination.<sup>12</sup> It was first identified in the late 1990s by neuroscientists who observed consistent patterns of brain activity during the ‘resting state’ using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).<sup>13</sup>

Research in this area has shown that when a person is engaged in a cognitively demanding task, the activity of the DMN typically decreases. This is known as task-negative activity, as it contrasts with the task-positive networks that are active during goal-directed tasks (see Raichle for a review of the literature).<sup>14</sup> The DMN has been linked to various cognitive and emotional processes, including creativity, self-awareness, and introspection. However, excessive activity within the DMN has been associated with rumination, anxiety, depression, and attention-related difficulties, which may explain the monkey mind phenomenon.

The effects of the monkey mind and the resulting inner critic are a universal experience. Differences tend to appear on the frequency and intensity of the monkey mind. Additionally, the experience is affected by environmental factors. In the absence of social interaction—including productive, recreational, and creative activity—our mind engages the DMN, activating the monkey mind with all its consequences. For example, the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the phenomenon of lockdowns led to prolonged periods of isolation for much of the world’s population; people had to stay away from their workplaces, activities, friends, and family. There is now an abundance of research on the mental health consequences of the pandemic that were a direct result of the enforced distancing policies.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nathan R Spreng, Raymond A Mar & Alice SN Kim, ‘The Common Neural Basis of Autobiographical Memory, Propection, Navigation, Theory of Mind, and the Default Mode: A Quantitative Meta-Analysis’ (2009) 21 *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 489–510.

<sup>13</sup> Raichle (n 6).

<sup>14</sup> Raichle (n 6).

<sup>15</sup> Tarani Chandola, Meena Kumari, Cara L Booker & Michaela Benzeval, ‘The Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 and Lockdown-Related Stressors among Adults in the UK’ (2022) 52(14) *Psychological Medicine* 2997–3006; Demetris Hadjicharalambous, Stavros Parlalis & Koulla Erotocritou, ‘The Psychological Impact of Covid-19 Lockdown Measures on Cypriots’ Mental Health and Quality of Life’ (2020) 4 *JIS Journal of Interdisciplinary Sciences* 15–28; Manuel Serrano-Alarcón, Alexander Kentikelenis, Martin Mckee & David Stuckler, ‘Impact of COVID-19 Lockdowns on Mental Health: Evidence from a Quasi-Natural Experiment in England and Scotland’ (2022) 31 *Health Economics* 284–296; Julia Schmidtke, Clemens Hetschko, Ronnie Schöb & Gesine Stephan, ‘The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health and Subjective Well-Being of Workers: An Event Study Based on High-Frequency Panel Data’ (2021) SSRN Electronic Journal, DOI:10.2139/ssrn.3905073.

The people that were able to handle the lockdowns better were the ones that were able to stay productive and creative at home while in isolation.<sup>16</sup> Those who during the lockdowns did not have much to do, that is, their lockdown environments did not allow them to be productive or creative, were the ones who suffered the greatest.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, those living with family and other loved ones, provided the relationships were healthy, fared better than those in complete social isolation simply because their social interactions kept them busy and helped avoid too much introspection.

### **Reflecting on restlessness in film**

The animation was one of the authors' ways of dealing with the monkey mind, with the complexity of stop motion animation keeping him occupied and focused, which probably saved him from prolonged mental distress. Being able to focus on a task, creative or otherwise, keeps our mind from entering DMN. There are of course a multitude of ways to manage the monkey mind and its consequences besides creative actions. One can learn to master mindfulness, meditation, and other forms of focused attention training that have been shown to modulate DMN activity.<sup>18</sup> By reducing the activity of the DMN, these practices can help individuals maintain a calm and focused mind.

Mindfulness is the awareness and acceptance of the present moment without judgment,<sup>19</sup> which can help us focus on our actual objectives and sensations while silencing the inner critic. Mindfulness can also help us cultivate a sense of gratitude, compassion, and curiosity, which can neutralise the negative effects of the monkey mind.<sup>20</sup> Meditation, breathing exercises, writing, walking, being creative, or simply

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<sup>16</sup> Changwon Son, Sudeep Hegde, Alec Smith, Xiaomei Wang & Farzan Sasangohar, 'Effects of COVID-19 on College Students' Mental Health in the United States: Interview Survey Study' (2020) 22 *Journal of Medical Internet Research* e21279.

<sup>17</sup> Matthias Pierce, Holly Hope, Tamsin Ford, Stephani Hatch, Matthew Hotopf, Ann John, Evangelos Kontopantelis, Roger Webb, Simon Wessely, Sally McManus & Kathryn M Abel, 'Mental Health before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Longitudinal Probability Sample Survey of the UK Population' (2020) 7 *The Lancet Psychiatry* 883–892.

<sup>18</sup> Yi Yuan Tang, Britta K Hölzel and Michael I Posner, 'The Neuroscience of Mindfulness Meditation' (2015) 16 *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*: 213–225.

<sup>19</sup> John Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (New York, NY: Delacorte, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> John Kabat-Zinn, 'Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future' (2003) 10 *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*: 144–156.; Kristin D Neff and Christopher K Germer, 'A Pilot Study and Randomized Controlled Trial of the Mindful Self-compassion Program' (2013) 69 *Journal of clinical psychology* 28–44.

paying attention to our senses and our environment are a few ways that we can be mindful.

For a more target-oriented method to deal with the monkey mind, cognitive behavioural therapy can help individuals become more aware of their thoughts, learn to focus on the present moment, and develop strategies to manage negative thinking processes.<sup>21</sup> The inner critic can also be mitigated by developing self-compassion, which entails treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and forgiveness.<sup>22</sup>

In conclusion, the film narrates an unprecedented situation that many people found themselves in during the lockdowns, engaging in activities that they would not usually do in an attempt to escape from their monkey mind. In a way, the lockdowns provided an opportunity for many of us to rediscover creativity and creative ways to take control of our minds, to reign in the monkey mind. The silver lining in this experience that was unprecedented for our generation was the rediscovery of the artist inside of us and the true purpose of creativity that goes beyond documenting human history, expressing collective emotions, and communicating ideas. At its core, creativity is a medium for peace of mind, silencing the inner critic, self-compassion, self-awareness, and ultimately, better mental health.

‘Sunny Side Up’ made its debut at the 8th International Conference on Typography and Visual Communication (ICTVC) in Thessaloniki, Greece in July 2022. Since then, it has been selected and featured in various short animation and film festivals. More specifically it was selected from over 2,000 multilingual submissions originating in hundreds of qualifying locations worldwide to participate in New York City’s ‘21 islands international Short Film Fest’ featuring 51 films where it won the ‘Audience Award’. It was also featured at the Music and Cinema International Festival of Marseille, France, the International Short Film Festival of Cyprus (ISFFC), and the Animattikon Project (an international animation festival in Pafos, Cyprus), all taking place in 2023.

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<sup>21</sup> Judith S Beck, *Cognitive Behavior Therapy: Basics and beyond (3rd Ed.)* (The Guilford Press 2021); Aaron T Beck, ‘Cognition, Affect, and Psychopathology’ (1971) 24 *Archives of General Psychiatry*: 495–500.

<sup>22</sup> Kristin D Neff, ‘Self-Compassion: An Alternative Conceptualization of a Healthy Attitude Toward One-self’ (2003) 2 *Self and Identity* 85–101.

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## Appendix I

### *Sunny Side Up: Script*

I feel dead. Yesterday made sense. Today doesn't. It's an illusion. It's a matrix. I don't exist. You don't exist. This is not real. There is a pattern. A relentless repetition. There's a theme. A theme as old as I am. How old am I? Was it the chicken first or the egg? I keep coming back to the beginning. It's a vicious cycle. I have to break the pattern.

I feel alive. Today is a good day. I feel connected. We are all one. You make me happy. I want to have what you have. I want to be you. I crave what I'm trained to want. I don't really know what I want. I don't know who I am. People like me make me sick.

I am laughing. It's a good feeling. I'm at peace. My mind is treating me well today.

It's a good teammate. I love it. It's kind of sad actually. It's pathetic. I am pathetic.

I make me sick. I feel sick. It might be serious. I might be dying. Nature is beautiful. Trees are wonderful. I love all animals. I like eating their meat. I'm in love with plastics. I can't save the planet. I am dying. I am dying and I have nothing. I have nothing to lose. Life is meaningless. Same shit different day. The end.

Scan QR code to watch 'Sunny Side Up'

