Independent Animation and Memory Reconstruction

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Like a poem, short animation can give us small moments of intense reflection,

crystallized jewels representing past events. It can also provide an independent artist the possibility of expressing personal recollections, fragments that might seem mundane, obscure, ephemeral or vague to the passing glance. But through the carefully detailed rendition of one's own imagings, that singular small moment can contain a universe. In those instances we not only see the magic of film, but the magic of our own humanity.

Personal storytelling

As with other image making techniques, animation often attempts to represent the past. It enables its creators to re frame events, putting personal emphasis on more important aspects, condensing less critical moments, and even doing away with elements that have either been forgotten or carry little weight in one's mind. Being a medium of time, animation can not only capture remembered moments, but also bring them to life through temporal, aural and spatial movements. This allows the creators to relive the memory, in both the creation -- research, storyboarding, drawing, puppet and set creation, animating-- and in the viewing. In particular independent animators turn to their own past experiences or cultures for inspiration.

One moving example of this is the trilogy by Australian animator, Adam Benjamin Elliot. He created three short claymation films called *Brother*, *Cousin* and *Uncle*. Each film recounted stories he remembers about his relatives and the result is both melancholic and humorous. When I interviewed Chicago animator Chris Sullivan, he said animations allow us to recount memories in an emotionally safe place. The content can be just as heart wrenching but somehow easier to let in, like a puppet show. With animation it isn't the same as seeing the event for real, not even the same as seeing an actor act it out. It becomes a different type of representation, like a Kathe Kolliwitz drawing or a Delacroix painting.[1] For example, at the end of *Cousin*, we watch the silhouette of a lone mutated figure as the author recounts the last time he believes he saw his cousin. The sadness of this moment is both palpable and bottomlessly tragic. The framing of the last shot of a lone black figure mundanely collecting trolleys becomes larger, and we

are able to experience the memory in much deeper manner, as if it were also our own. In these moments, animation can have an emotional depth and a power to communicate something as personal as a memory and make it universal and timeless. Elliot's uncle says, *"* Life can only be understood backwards, but we have to live it forwards.*"*[2]

Sullivan, who is featured in the book *Unsung Heroes of Animation* and a Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is currently finishing his feature length animation, *Consuming Spirits*. In this tale three people in a small industrial city uncover their unlikely roles in each others' lives, constructed by dysfunctional family practices and social service intervention. Sullivan readily admits that he uses components of his own life for this film, almost like a tarot card reading. He said it ends up being about your own life whether you want it to or not. For example, in *Consuming Spirits*, a woman is hit by a car and needs to amputate her leg. He didn't realize as he developed that character that he had actually used his own mother's situation of having a lame leg. Some things are direct, though, for example the father figure in the film has his father's name and does some very direct things such as sing "Danny Boy" at an event, which his father also did in real life.[3] Pulling from his own complex past, Sullivan is able to selectively combine and appropriate moments from his own life, giving them a new context in which we, as an audience, can relate. In an interview with Richard Beecroft, Sullivan wrote "the present is undependable, ethereal, and in a way out of ones control. The past even a painful one is solid, and definable...I think our pasts create a lexicon of individual symbolic things and people that each person has as their own. It is an individual mythology. One of the challenges in *Consuming Spirits* is whether I can make the audience able to deeply see the individual mythologies of the individual characters, and feel a kind of empathy, instead of an observational distance."[4] Sullivan also poignantly said that for him "Animations are closer to the ethereal quality that memories have, they kind of crumble in your hands..."[5]

This type of real life appropriation is quite common in independent animation.

Another recently successful personal animation was John Canemaker's recent Academy Award winning film from 2004 , *Moon and the Son: an Imagined Conversation*, which was based upon Canemaker's difficult relationship with his father. In another film, *A Room Nearby,* by Paul & Sandra Fierlinger, they illustrated five different people's recollections about their loneliness and how they benefited from the experience. Paul Fierlinger also created *Drawn From Memory*, which recounts his life as the lively son of Jan Fierlinger, Czechoslovakian career politician.

Some animators use less story driven narratives and focus on evoking more abstracted memories of objects and places. For example, in *Ikuma Siku* directed by Glen Gear, Canada, 2004, he creates an imaginary tale whose roots stem from actual family history. Here Gear combines Inuk folklore with his own memories resulting in a magical realism, through a mix of animation and treated video. Karen Yasinksy, a stop motion animator, often uses objects either taken from or resembling 70's decor. She writes "...the models and sets all have to do with vague atmospheric memories (shag carpets and beanbag chairs and certain patterns...) like old pop songs bring back."[6] She has also worked with recreating past experiences, for example with *Drop that Baby Again*, 1998, which was based upon a true story. When viewing her animations, I was immediately transported to my own childhood years, not by the story, but through remembering the patterns, colors, and textures, pure 70's nostalgia.

Storytelling Structure
Often storytelling is used to bring together disjointed events, to place emphasis or create meaning into a consistent, although often somewhat abstract, narrative. Because independent animations are often short, they can still retain the ability to communicate while playing with abstraction, montage, and fragmentation. They don't necessary need to tie all of the pieces together. They can evoke rather than explain since audiences are often capable of accepting a certain level of confusion for short periods of time (the acceptance is longer or shorter depending on the type of audience). The longer a film gets, the more

room there is for audiences to become confused and get lost and, therefore, the greater need for structure. This is not to suggest that animated shorts are not choreographed. Because of the tight time frame and great amount of work required, they are typically very tightly planned out. But the artists have the possibility to bring their audiences into a dream without the need to explain why they are there. For example, watching Brothers Quay animations, they operate on a much more visual and associative level, carefully constructing meaning into moments rather than to the narrative storytelling, more like poems than novels. The freedom of the short animation narrative structure lends itself very well to memory recollection. Audiences are prepared to loose themselves in ephemeral, vague memories and shorts are the perfect place to explore this terrain. As animator Suzie Tempelton stated, "Short films allow small, forgotten moments to come to the forefront rather than the heroic journey of so many features. The short form encourages the expansion of the minute rather than the condensation of the huge".[7]

While the premise of *Consuming Spirits* is laden with heavy content, Sullivan's comments on the narrative structure are also quite pertinent. He says he follows a linear narrative structure to represent the inherent physical linearity to how we live. We have to sleep, get up, eat, and so on. But he works this physicality into the content of his film. In *Consuming Spirits*, he shows "people doing simple things, depicting "a linear narrative that is real profane existence."[8] But there are pockets of timelessness inside of this structure, moments of reflection, where things slow down. He feels that different people are allowed different moments to revel in memory. In the day to day grind we don't have space to go to this place of remembering. What fascinates him are stories about profound illness that wakes something up in people. In these situations they have a moment of pause, a minute to open their eyes. He constructs his film to include these, whereas many short animations only contain these charged moments. For example *Slippages*, the latest work by Kathy Smith, Chair of the Division of Animation and Digital Arts, at the School of Cinema-Television USC. *Slippages*, "deals with three -dimensional time and consciousness beyond death and how our

experience of a place, time or memory exists forever with us throughout eternity once we have experienced it..."[9] *Slippages* is about the memories of two elderly people, who the artist said were her parents in a lecture I attended in Florence in the Summer of 2006. *Slippages* will be less of a narrative and more of an experience as we see looped moments from their lives with the narrative randomly changed, and then will move into the three-dimensional world. If this sounds difficult to imagine, that is because it is, and exactly why complex visual projects like this are well-suited for animation. Smith is very interested not just in memories themselves but in memories and their relationship to our perception of time and space. For *Slippages* she references the three dimensions of time theory discussed by 20th century theorists J.B. Priestley, P.D. Ouspensky, J.W. Dunne, and J.G. Bennett. She says, "These theories inspire me most, as they explore the potential for conscious existence beyond the physical now. Underlying this is also the sense of time shifts that I often experience in the Australian landscape. It is as if you exist in a place whose dreaming state or virtual self is often revealed to us through the ancient environment."[10] In *Slippages* Smith believes an integral part of the film is depicting the " perceptual experience of real-time using immersive space and depth." What better medium than animation to bring to life this multi layered topic, to illustrate to us what this might feel like, move like, sound like, look like?

Place

One magical aspect of animation is its freedom to bring us anywhere- Mars, Germany in 1781, to the witches house deep in the woods. There really are no limitations, only our imagination. What you can dream, you can create. As an animator I imagine that other animators create not just fantastical places like castles on the moon, but also places like gramma's at the holidays. While I believe that for most animators, the story is more important than their ability to inhabit these places again, I do think this is a special aspect of animation (and of the arts in general). I especially have this sense when viewing the nostalgic work by the Brothers Quay. They submerge us in dark moments, secret places, hidden glances. Their special lens techniques and use of mirrors create the

appearance of peeking into forbidden enclosures, as though we are children peering out of a closet or from under a bed. Their use of miniatures (dolls or small objects like pins) further accentuates this feeling of a mysterious, private space. When describing the *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, they say the film became "an entirely hermetic universe literally suspended out of time in a black void...". [11] Acknowledging an autobiographical quality of their work, in an interview with Michael Atkinson for *Film Comment*, they said they had relatives which included a cabinetmaker, a tailor and another who was very good at carpentry.[12] One can, surprisingly or not, see all of these influences in their work. Beyond their fascination with various objects perhaps related to their childhood, however, is a strong nostalgia seen in their film choice (black and white), their sound, their titles, and the overall dusty quality of their work. I was surprised when I learned that not only were they not living in Eastern Europe, but they were American (now living in the UK). I believe that nostalgia runs rampant in animation, especially in stop motion. This could be partially due to the influence of Eastern European animation and puppetry, such as seen in the work of Jan Svankmajer. But I also believe it has to do with the tableaus, the miniature objects, the act of animating objects amongst other aspects.

An animator with a different approach to nostalgia and the use of objects is Portland based Rose Bond, who has recently found an interesting way to house cultural memories. Since creating her earlier hand drawn animations, for example an epic trilogy based upon Irish legends, she has broadened her approach to include public installations. Utilizing the structure of a building, she creates animations and images specifically about her chosen location. She projects her animations out of the windows of the building, which then results in the animating the building itself, bringing to life memories contained inside. "She presents sounds, images and movements in new ways that trigger feeling and thought. Her current installations exist at the juncture of history, architecture, and public art. It is cinema situated in a neighborhood and referencing the specific experience and story of those who live and lived in it."[13] For example, in *Illumination #1,* she explores identity through animating specific gestures, story

fragments, and names. She attempts "to evoke the past, the peoples, and the accretions of memory held and reflected in the second story windows of the historic Portland Seamen's Bethel Building."[14] The piece depicts 120 years in 12 minutes, drawing from six epochs specific to the site. Placing her animations and photographs inside, the building becomes a type of memory vessel, with the walls, spilling out their story and speaking to us through the animations and the cracks and crevices of the structure. By using contemporary techniques, Bond renews our connection to these buildings, bringing to life the old adage "if these walls could talk."

Construction

Alongside the obvious fabrication of animation as a storytelling device, lies the very nature of the creation of animation itself. Constructed frame by frame, the medium of animation, like film, relies on our ability to remember the frame prior, and in this act of remembrance, find a connection to the next image, and then the next. The very act of comprehending the animated form is therefore one of visual remembrance, of connecting separate images into one continuous narrative, one long string of visual memories. Film also makes use of this visual memory technique, but what makes animation special is that its construction is inherently tied to this fabrication. Film can also be used to fabricate connections between disjointed memories, but the transparency of the re-creation in animation, since we can see these images are rendered and not real, becomes even more clear, placing more emphasis on the art of remembrance. Perhaps this fabrication only becomes important to the animator as they create and imagine their work and it only becomes knowingly visible to the audience when the creator wishes to break the spell.

Objects

Further considering the ability of animation to bring life to places, like in Bond's work, stop motion animation holds additional capability- that of re-animating objects. From dead insects, such as in the Ladislas Starevich's *the Cameraman's Revenge*, to the old dolls in the Brothers Quay films, again and

again we see found or older objects appear in stop motion stories. The animation and reappropriation of these objects combined with the historical aura they contain adds another layer of memory to the work. I would argue that by animating these objects and giving them a life of their own, we can feel and project our memories more deeply onto of these objects. Because of the object's own inherent history, their objecthood takes on a power much stronger than anticipated, which is one reason I believe the Brothers Quay or Svankmajer films have such resonance for so many people- they are able to relive memories through animated objects, which themselves seem to have their own memories.

Jan Svankmajer has created many stop motion animations and feature films, most of which combine puppets and stop motion, such as *Alice* and *Faust*. He makes extensive use of found objects and in an interview with Petr Král, he states his preference for objects which have their own "interior life". He believes in "the conversation of certain contents in objects that have been touched by beings in a state of heightened sensibility."[15] In another interview, he says he collects things that had a profound effect on him, and that this "relates partly to my introverted childhood, partly from my belief that places, rooms and objects have their own passive lives which they have soaked up, as it were, from the situations they have been in and from the people who made, touched, and lived with them." [16] In another interview he even goes so far as to say that he believes objects are more alive than people, and that their memories exceed the memories of people. "Objects conceal within themselves the events they have witnessed...People were touching the objects and things in certain situations in life, while experiencing various tensions or moods and they have deposited their own feelings and emotions in them through their touch. The more an object has been touched, the richer its content...In my opinion, this should be the purpose of any animation: to let objects speak for themselves...The first things man created were indeed alive and it was possible to converse with them."[17] For the Brothers Quay, "the machines and objects... act as much if not more than the puppets... [to] perpetuate other narratives, other secret liberties."

As a stop motion animator, one has an intense concentration that is both a result of and a requirement for focusing on the process. All forms of animation are detailed, but with stop motion in particular, one has a very close physical relationship to objects and environments. Typically one works in the dark, with a few small lights and focuses on one certain moment and object for hours, sometimes days. It seems inevitable that one develops a relationship with the object, especially when that object either has a history relating to the filmmaker or a secret history unknown to the filmmaker. The filmmaker is able to make a memory as well as reliving memories during the time animating.

Conclusion

In John Canemaker's Academy Award speech for his own animated documentary, he said he felt that "as technology is more available to a wider selection of artists you are going to see more personal stories." Whether or not this will occur, there certainly seems to be and to have been a consistent amount of animation based on personal recollections. From personally inspired narratives to nostalgic environments and memory objects, the wealth of creative reenactments provide both animators and audiences with many touchingly human memories.

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