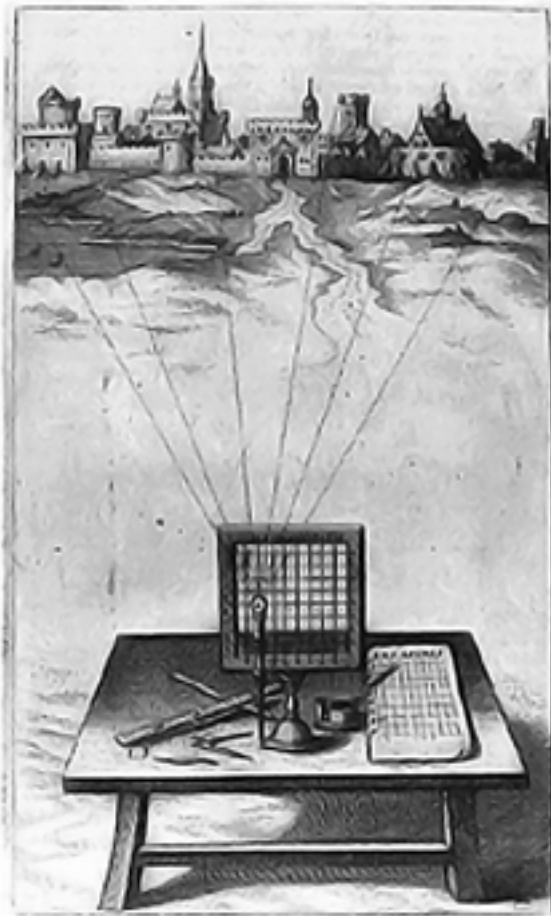


Animation Studies



Volume 1
2006

Animation Studies

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Animation Studies is published by the Society for Animation Studies,
c/o Dr. Maureen Furniss (President), Department of Film and Video,
California Institute of the Arts, 24700 McBean Parkway
Valencia, CA 91355 USA.

This journal publishes proceedings of the Society for Animation Studies' conferences. For more information on the Society, visit <http://www.animationstudies.org>.
Submission guidelines are available online at <http://journal.animationstudies.org>.

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Cover illustration courtesy Marina Estela Graça

ISSN 1930-1928

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

Contents

- iii **Letter from the Editor**
by Nichola Dobson
- 1 **Cinematic Motion by Hand**
by Marina Estela Graça
- 8 **What is (not) so French in Les
Triplettes de Belleville**
by Pierre Floquet
- 14 **Submission Guidelines &
Creative Commons**

Letter from the Editor

Welcome everyone to the first edition of *Animation Studies*. The last six months have seen some big changes in the Society for Animation Studies and a very hot conference in San Antonio! As a somewhat inactive member for the last six years I am pleased to be involved at such an exciting time.

This journal is intended to provide another publication space for works in the field of animation studies, but more specifically for our many excellent conference papers.

One of the many advantages of the online journal is the ability to add papers throughout the year when they are ready, rather than everyone working to one deadline. With that in mind we welcome submissions throughout the year (see the guidelines for dates) and are keen to build a useful archive of past conference papers. We can also feature papers of varying lengths and include images and hopefully animation too.

We have now closed this year's volume with two excellent papers, one from Dresden in 2005 and one from the 2006 conference held in San Antonio. I hope you will enjoy reading them and remember you can interact with the author by leaving comments at the end of the paper on the website.

I would like to end by thanking the editorial board who have worked tirelessly to review the submitted papers as well as thanking those who submitted papers to us. I encourage you all to continue with those submissions.

I would especially like to thank our president Maureen Furniss for all of her support and wisdom, and our wonderful webmaster Timo Linsenmaier without whom none of this would be online!

Nichola Dobson

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

Marina Estela Graça

Cinematic Motion by Hand

“[...] my philosophy of the simple, handmade movie”
NORMAN McLAREN, 1948

Introduction

The general goal of my research is to find out what is questioned whenever an animated film is made by an author who chooses to have maximum control over the device automatisms. I am trying to understand in what ways that specific kind of film relates with Cinema and the History of Art as a whole and, more specifically, how its filmic discourse is built within cinematic codes, workings and machinery.

This paper, in particular, aims to establish that each time an author makes a film by suspending both automatic ‘motion’ and image recording functions—that which is often known as “cameraless” film—a process is initiated that simultaneously questions not only Cinema, within both expression and technology, but also the ontological position this same technology occupies in current media.

The illusion of motion constitutes the most important defining aspect of cinema. Usually the process of producing such an illusion begins by starting the automatic film recording process of moving visible objects at a ratio of 24, 25 or 30 frames per second. Within animation techniques, the recording process is reduced to a single frame each time the camera is turned on-off, as though using a photographic camera. In both process the images will be automatically photographed and put into a sequence by the camera. However, there is one known situation in which the animator suspends all cinematic recording automatisms and produces the sequence of images by marking directly onto the film stock.

When setting up an animation film project and composing the impression of motion, the author appeals directly to the psycho-physiological motion perception mechanisms and world experience of the viewer. He or she is on a quest for what can be perceived and how, the same way a composer creates for a specific music instrument by exploring its expression potentials. By referring to psycho-physiological motion perception mechanisms, I don’t just mean sight as (in terms of modern research in Neurology) the perception of movement resulting from a complex combination of multiple neural circuitries in the viewer’s brain that process sensory information through the functioning of “mirror neurons” (Ramachandran 2000) and “blindsight” (Ramachandran 2004, p.31). These mechanisms are located in the early stage of visual processing and don’t depend on high-order cognition (i.e. they don’t depend on thoughtful decisions about what is seen).

I am aware that this thesis might not be easily accepted by most film academics as they prefer to assess cinematic communication as a cultural practice in which all elements are socially constructed. I do not defend this principle. My belief is that whenever an author uses his or her hand to directly produce not only the images that compose the film but also the impression of movement—an impression of a specific kind of movement and not just random motion—we can only watch on the screen, he or she is not building a filmic discourse on conventional signs alone. My hypothesis is that the handmade animation film author creates film discourse directly from his

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

or her experience of the world (technology and communication standards included) while composing an experience for the viewer. The film seems to be made through a process of questioning and appropriation.

Pondering the written reflections of Norman McLaren, Len Lye and Pierre Hébert, I am convinced that their filmmaking is a process that aims to create communication forms for nameless feelings and experiences that emerge on the fringes of conscience. As I explained before, McLaren did this by propounding muscular memory to control the formal differences between successive images (McLaren 1976-1978), along with the paucity of means for a greater proximity between the author and the film (McLaren 1948); Len Lye by proclaiming the physiological development of a consciousness of movement which could be discovered «through the brain in blood, organs, tissues and nerves» (Lye, Riding 1935)”; Pierre Hébert by creating his film in the collision of languages and technologies, through the pressure of a precise time and space, before an audience (Hébert, 1984). According to each one of these authors, movement should never be understood as a formal, external aspect, of a mechanical character, but as an expression of the physical existence itself, projected externally and seen as a manifestation of life (Graça 2004).

In this paper, I will first outline and question the essence of cinematic visual recording technology. Second, I will consider its emergence, evolution and implications within History, using Vilém Flusser’s thesis about photography. Finally, I will examine the creative attitude underneath the making of a film based on illusions of specific movement made through the suspension of all automatic recording. I will conclude with a brief comment about the potential relevance of such experiments within contemporary image production.

Expression within cinematic technology standards and automatisms

Animated films rely on the same technological inventions upon which stands the entire cinema industry. Up to the present time, in essence, this meant the photographic recording of visible objects. Today it also means the use of specific software applications based on algorithms that embed optical and rendering workings of photography.

In McLaren’s, Lye’s, or even Hébert’s and others’ work, we often find that the film develops directly from the hand gesture of its author through the omission of that stage in which images are recorded using a camera. This implies that in such films the recording photographic foundation technologies of cinema suddenly have been elapsed. This is completely against what we have been told by conventional film theories as they declare that film is an indexical art form in essence and that this is what precisely differentiates film from other communication forms. As stated by French film theorist André Bazin, a photographic image is an index, more specifically, a trace left behind by the referent itself. Thus, film images connect with reality in a way that does not exist for other methods of depiction such as painting (Bazin 1971). Similarly, Siegfried Kracauer argued that “Film . . . is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates toward it” (1960, p.28). Someone might declare, then, that McLaren’s *Blinkity Blank* (1955) or Lye’s *Free Radicals* (1958, revised 1979) are not film, but until now nobody dared to.

Film scholars seem to disregard that photographed pictures are graphical constructs that can be – and are – used to deceive. We only have to consider how many different meanings can be achieved by merely choosing lenses, illumination, and film sensibility not to mention the more

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

obvious photomontage and all sorts of other special visual effects. Above all, we have to realize that a set of photographs doesn't constitute a film nor does what we see when we look directly at a piece of film stock – a linear sequence of still images looking similar.

A film is what we see on a screen: the regular, sequential, and rapid display of still images plus something: the effect of apparent motion that only happens inside the viewer's mind. How and when it happens and, above all, in what ways – both technically and expressively – it can be achieved, are the essential questions that lead the creative animation filmmaker's work.

While doing their films, authors like Len Lye or Norman McLaren seem to have developed some sort of experimental epistemology (a study of how the brain represents knowledge and belief) and in doing so, they have not only developed new assumptions – as shapers of sensibility and thought – but they also have established new possibilities within technological functioning and image production as well. They have questioned, affronted, and improved the concepts behind cinematic technological evolution towards new, unexpected ontological possibilities.

The evolution of the cinematic device

In the physical world, motion is essentially perceived as the changing of form or position of something within a three-dimensional space over time. However, the understanding and representation of time, space, and movement has constantly changed throughout human evolution. As Vilém Flusser explains, in prehistoric times environment variation was experienced through physical exploration and the images produced were referential maps that enabled their addressees to orient themselves within it. Their producers had been able to encrypt their environment in a manner that enabled others to decipher it. According to Flusser, “Prehistoric images are subjective world pictures that are stored in memories. Once there, they are codified intersubjectively. Then they can be retrieved from memory. Thus, the designing subject is himself embedded in an intersubjective tradition: to a large extent, his code is preset. [...] There is a consciousness for which time circulates in space, to order space. And there is a behavior that works to obey the structures of time and space seen in the image” (pp.126-7). Both consciousness and behavior are magical because time and space are experienced as a function of the images.

Flusser argues that “[l]inear writing (especially the alphabet) was invented to replace magical consciousness and magical behavior with enlightened consciousness and historical action” (p.127). During historic times, texts describe images within progressive linear chains of causality and thus the environment can be causally explained and progressively manipulated. These images are not of the kind that dominated before the invention of writing as “historical images are manifestations by means of which the imagination defends itself against the linear conception of the world that wants to explain it away” (p.127), imagination being understood as “the ability to step back from the environment and to create an image of it” (p.129).

With the invention of letterpress printing, around 1450, texts get literally out of hand. By almost the same time (1435), during Italian Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti publishes the first scientific study of linear perspective that will improve the production of seemingly exact (virtual) representations of the natural world. The production of such images became, therefore, the result of a complex calculation and coding process and, consequently, the images – as Art – are expelled from everyday life. Simultaneously, Science and Art became two separated entities. During the late Renaissance, society started to introduce strict boundaries between the two, as it considered them to be different cultures, different ways of relating to the world. European society definitively instituted these differences by the end of the 18th century, as universities started to be organized into faculties of science and academies of fine-arts.

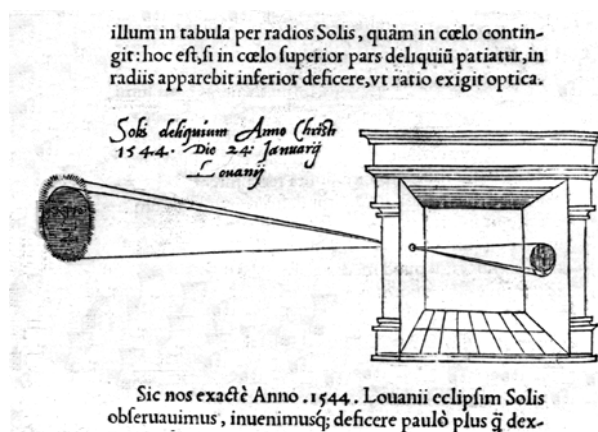


Fig. 1 – Example of 'Camera Obscura' being used to watch a sun eclipse, Louvain, 1544.

physical reality. However, Flusser strongly argues that each photographed picture is already the result of a calculation process and, in its very essence, is not the expression of a physical direct human experience of time and space but rather a visualization, that is “the power to concretize an image from [computed] possibilities” (p.129).

Technological objects never stand alone. They are always part of a row constituted by earlier and later instances of related objects. It is known that the photographic camera evolved from the *camera obscura* and from Leon Battista Alberti's grid, among other devices, two examples of drawing machines that were used to calculate visualizations since Renaissance. Their principles of rendering are built into the photographic camera's technical scheme: photography was invented to automate and fixate linear perspective mathematical representations. Images made through the application of linear perspective rules are computed possibilities, as the Baroque painters and architects have widely demonstrated by manipulating our perception and making us experience 'virtual realities'. Flusser states that “[p]hotographs are only the first of [...] posthistorical images” (p.129) but my opinion is that we can establish an evolutionary direct line between linear perspective and photography. We can also ascertain a strong conceptual familiarity between 'perspective' images and CGI images.

Additionally, with the invention of photography, images became mechanically producible, reproducible and distributable, as text was already. From that point on, image makers were required to work together with technicians. Today, within the digital production of images, the presence of technicians is even more evident, to the point that it is considered normal to join a technical school in order to learn how to produce an image.

From this brief overview, I want to retain two premises. The first is that photography does not correspond to a neutral process of 'copying' physical reality but, instead, is a process of building virtual representations according a set of precise mathematical rules. The second is that the production of contemporary images—posthistorical images—depends on collaboration with a hierarchy of highly specialized technicians able to identify and operate different aspects of the technical object functional scheme used in the process. This establishes a secondary and derived position for the artist.

Photography was invented at the beginning of 19th century as an automatic drawing machine and aimed to bring pictures back into daily use, to bring perceptions and behavior depending on them back to experience.

It seems that it did so not only because photos are easier to make than paintings, but also because we can identify some sort of point-to-point rule of correspondence between them and

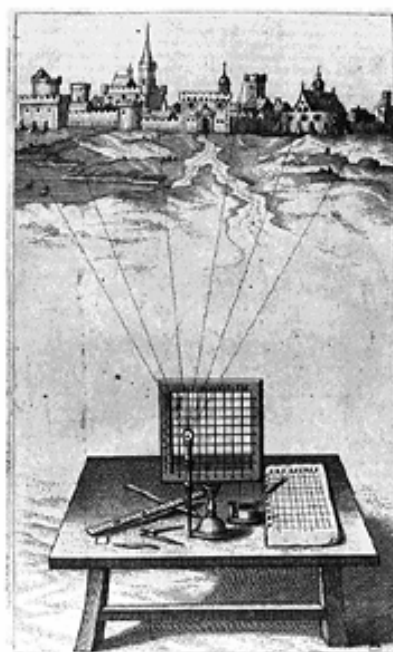


Fig. 2 – L. B. Alberti's grid.

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006



Incorporating and questioning technology instead of the human factor entering into the apparatus

Len Lye arrived at an original conception of the mind and its significance within the process of creation: his theories of the 'old brain'. Above all, he developed a unique way of comprehending movement, which he applied in his direct film technique by scratching directly on the celluloid through the sudden ("spastic"?) movements of his body.

I consider Lye's short film, *Free Radicals*, a masterpiece. Starting with black 35mm film leader and using all sorts of blades and needles, Lye pierced marks through the emulsion, revealing the clear acetate below. Accompanied by African rhythms, the scratches are perceived as three-dimensional forms that twist and transform. They are meaningless scribbles – insignificant – but they succeed to awaken motion in our viewer's body (in what part of my body do I feel that?). Concerning Len Lye, Pierre Hébert will recognize his resolve to break with standard images made by western mass culture: to escape from Griffith style, Lye will assert about his jump cut experiments. Lye was looking for deeper realities, as Hébert suggests. He also argues that, if Lye followed unknown and irregular technical paths, it was to get away from western realism. Technical invention has never been an objective by itself. Hébert is convinced that, through spontaneous doodling, Lye was looking forward to escape western rationalism all together (Hébert 1983, pp.10-12).

By 1986, Pierre Hébert invented an unusual kind of performance (live scratched animation), which took him to perform in many countries in Europe and North America. In those performances, he improvises live cinematic dialogs with musicians such as Fred Frith, Robert Marcel Lepage, Jean Derome, René Lussier, and Bob Ostertag, whom he met in 1989. Since then, Hébert has collaborated with Ostertag on many Living Cinema projects, the most recent being *Portrait of Buddha* in which computers are used to process live animated images and sound in front of an audience.

Speaking at the Images Festival, Hébert explained why his work in film had evolved to this point: "What I like in scratching on film is its deep anachronical character. It's a technique where there is a sort of historical short circuit. When you decide to disregard the photochemical technology of film you take a very naive stance, saying 'well, this is supposed to bear an image, so I will scratch an image on it, using a gesture that is as old as humanity.' I understood that there was in this a critical or remote stance, and it could be quite provocative, a statement about the historicity of technology" (Hébert in Gehman 2001). It was Pierre Hébert's writings that first brought my attention to this aspect of handmade films. His work and thought pushed me further in order to better understand the philosophical dimension of this specific attitude within film creation.

We only have a few writings from Norman McLaren. Most of all, they are explanations and guidelines about his animation techniques, made having in mind those who were curious about the 'secrets' beneath his work. Instead of stressing, with respect to the elaboration of films, the logical priority of industrial standards, McLaren suggested to focus on the absolute priority of handling personally the technical mechanisms within the process of film construction itself:

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006



Fig. 3 – Bob Ostertag and Pierre Hébert during a performance.

“To sum up, the conception and execution of most of my work for the National Film Board has probably depended on four things:

(1) Attempting to keep at a minimum the technical mechanism standing between my conception and the finished work.

(2) Handling personally the mechanisms that do remain, in as intimate a way as a painter his painting, or a violinist his violin.

(3) Making the very limitations of these mechanisms, when brought in touch with the theme, the growing point for visual ideas.

(4) Making sure of a chance for improvising at the moment of shooting or drawing” (1948).

It seems clear to me that he was struggling to bring technology within the reach of human experience, to the distance of his hand. The alternative would have been to become part of the production line as a *functionary* of the technical scheme within the apparatus: that is, behaving according to its *function*.

As we know, there’s no author in a production process controlled by machines, as the creative essence of the process is only to be found at the process of concretization of the technical tool itself and not in that which it is able to produce. Therefore, we only have users in a process defined by the qualities and limits imposed by the technical object’s functional scheme. In these circumstances, the creative skills of the user would only develop by optimizing the epistemological model it integrates, i.e. the perception of order and the ways in which that order is imposed upon reality by documents and the technical workings that holds them. By overwhelming the cinematic technical workings with the gesture of the hand, ‘cameraless’ authors exposed its technical scheme to contingency, thus opening the production process to new unpredictable expressive and communicative possibilities. This corresponds to a renewed way of comprehending technology by, simultaneously, revealing the human reality it contains and physiologically incorporating it. Within these circumstances, the film is made directly through the body of the animator but throughout the appropriation of representation and transformation routines of its own era. Film becomes the expression of this relation itself. The essential purpose of making this specific kind of animation seems to come from the necessity of connecting the human self and its technological creation: to gather the world catching our self at the core of the function and performance of the technological devices created to alter the relationship between each human being and his or her life context. To get closer with what makes us as we are today.

This process recovers an experienced – and thus differentiated – time-space at the core of the industrial film technological set, through the poetic manipulation (which is also a probing attitude) of the filmic technological workings themselves. Through that gesture it seems possible to re-install a “prehistoric image” creation attitude within a context clearly defined by the massive production of “posthistorical images”, those who subsume a calculated vision built upon scientific texts and data. These experiences stand for a new concept that we will have to take into consideration in order to comprehend – both with our minds and with our bodies – not only contemporary film production made through digital technologies but all available fast developing technologies.



Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

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Images courtesy The Len Lye Foundation and Pierre Hébert

Edited by Nichola Dobson

Pierre Floquet

What is (not) so French in *Les Triplettes de Belleville*

In an article on text theory, Roland Barthes wrote: “Every text is intertext; it holds other texts within, at various levels, in irregularly recognizable shapes: those of the preceding culture as well as those of the surrounding culture; every text is new with interwoven past quotations”¹. A text, a film, or an animated film is built and framed with a mosaic of quotations that work together into an original feature. It absorbs, transforms, and makes its own textform.

These quotations may be considered as references, whether they be textual, filmic, and/or cultural. However, references may limit their meanings to comments within, and aside of, a discourse, whereas intertext implies that such elements are integrated into the diegesis. A reference is intertext when it actually takes part in the plot, and conveys a meaning of its own. As we shall see, *Les Triplettes de Belleville* abides by such a narrative approach. As a Frenchman, I am aware that many elements in the film cannot be appreciated and assessed similarly by those unfamiliar with French culture. This paper offers non-French audience clues to the intertext of the film, including universal themes that reach across cultures.

Director Sylvain Chomet himself, mentioning the diegetic time of his story (the 1950s), specified: “I was a kid at that time, so of course I am nostalgic of my childhood - but who would not be?! [...] However, it would be wrong to believe things were better off in those days; I would rather say the contrary.”²

Many critics in France and abroad have enhanced the nostalgia in *Les Triplettes de Belleville*. To me, this is the case in point: how can one be nostalgic of a period that is not considered regrettable? So, what is there beneath such apparent nostalgia? Nostalgia of good old France does not systematically appeal to foreigners; so why has *Les Triplettes de Belleville* been so successful abroad? First, I will develop and explore some of the clichés that feature in the film, and mainly speak to the French. Then, we shall see how, while crossing the Atlantic Ocean, plot, characters, and audience are given distance, whether it be geographic or humoristic. Such distance enables a different insight into the meaning of the film.

The French Perspective

Les Triplettes de Belleville is filled with clichés reflecting a French perspective. One such cliché is that Americans are obese. Chomet seems to have this stereotype in mind, as he repeats in *Les Triplettes de Belleville* the same description of fat Americans as the caricature of tourists in Paris found in his first, celebrated short *La vieille dame et les pigeons* (The Old Lady and the Pigeons, 1998). In this film, the typically cliché-esque tourists are featured in both the opening and ending sequences, as punctuations of a story that just happens to take place in Paris. Their debatable manners work as a reflexive counterpart to the eccentric neurotic behaviours of both the policeman and the old lady. They are ridiculed, each one of them, either tourist or citizen, in their own ways, and beyond the scope of their apparent differences — so obese Americans in Chomet’s films are not necessarily illustrative, they are factual components among others of a parodic world.

¹ Roland Barthes. 1973. “Texte (théorie du).” *Encyclopaedia universalis*. “Tout texte est un intertexte; d’autres textes sont présents en lui, à des niveaux variables, sous des formes plus ou moins reconnaissables: les textes de la culture antérieure et ceux de la culture environnante; tout texte est un tissu nouveau de citations révolues.” (My translation)

² The interview with Chomet was accessed at this website: <http://cinema.tiscali.fr/ficheart.aspx?keys=AR016890&file=http&type=art>

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

If the tone of the film sounds anti-American, it is less Chomet's own ideas than his will to mock the point of view of 'Mr. Average Frenchman'. Basic anti-American prejudice goes on with "Hollyfood" and a voluptuous overweight Statue of Liberty holding a hamburger, which relates to "mal bouffe"³, something like "ill grub". (In France, McDonald's is the evil symbol of "mal bouffe"). Bill Plympton, in a bonus section of the DVD, discusses release plans for the United States, arguing that US viewers should be allowed to laugh at themselves and that they can handle jokes about (fat) Americans. (Remember the image of the man with Mickey Mouse and a "sucker"!) The best comedy is rooted in the truth, and, as we shall see, the French are targets as well.

Of course obesity is not specific to US citizens. Apart from the fact that today 12% of French people are overweight, at the time of the story, Albert Dubout (1905 – 1976) was very famous for his caricatures of huge wives choking their tiny husbands under their fat and authority. The early sequence of *Les Triplettes de Belleville*, displaying a mock red-carpet ceremonial, is a direct tribute to these famous ill-matched French couples. Repeating Dubout's caricatures, Chomet obviously celebrates his art, and reactivates the acid criticism aimed at the bourgeoisie. Still, at that time, as in the past centuries, working class people could not afford to become obese. On the contrary, being fat was a sign of good health and wealth!

There are many other references in the film that function as elements of cultural intertext that a non-French viewer may easily catch, from Chaplin and Tati's films to Winsor McCay and Fleischer cartoons; from Glenn Gould and Django Reinhardt to Fred Astaire. Also included is Josephine Baker, a black American entertainer who emigrated to France in the 1920s to escape racism, and became famous before WWII with her songs and semi-nude shows in cabarets.

However, there are other references that are perhaps less conspicuous to foreigners, such as the 1960's clock on TV, the "Parisien Enchaîné" (a humorous reference to two existing papers, *Le Parisien* and *Le Canard Enchaîné*), and the hint to *Vache qui rit* cheese. The high bridge that pushes Mme Souza's house into a tilt is typical of railway constructions in France during the first half of the 20th century. If you commute by train from Orly airport to Paris, you will actually travel past similar sites.

A more exclusive reference is found in the receptionist at the French Mafia Wine Center, who bears some verisimilitude with José Bové⁴, a left wing anti-globalisation activist. With a beret, moustache and taste for red wine, the French mafia Godfather is a reminder of one famous character by Gotlib, a French cartoon artist of the late XXth century: Super Dupont (a possible translation: Super Smith), some unlikely son of Superman and Mr. Average Frenchman, who would appear in *Les Triplettes de Belleville* in his drunkard version. Isn't the mafia's motto "In vino veritas", acknowledging the fact that the French adore nothing but wine?! The hit-men, here again, are the monstrous genetic clones of Men in Black, Inspector Cluzot, and J.M. Folon's flying men.

In the thrilling car-chase, which reminds us of Bullit's (1968) sequence in the streets of San Francisco, the hit-men drive customized 2CVs⁵. The old popular car is yet another cliché in France, as much as it has turned into a myth. Choosing such a car for the chase sequence stands as a distorted allusion to the ever more speedy, improbable car-chases that fill the screens today. In

³ "Bouffe" is slang for food, and in a large quantity. It connotes a lack of refinement, and is the opposite of gourmet food. "Bouffer" is slang for "to eat"; it also means "to puff", "swollen". So "bouffe" is easily related to obesity. "Mal" means both "bad" and "evil".

⁴ Many thanks to Floriane Place-Verghnes for her clear-sightedness. Please refer to her paper: "Douce France? Les triplettes de Belleville, de Sylvain Chomet", in: Pierre Floquet (Ed.). 2007. *CinémaAnimationS*, Paris: Corlet.

⁵ "2CV" means "two horse power", and corresponds to the actual power of the car engine.

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

France and Europe, the 2CV has the same level of fame as the Model T Ford in the United States, though it probably had a lesser impact on car industry. A very slow, thin bodywork, soft top vehicle, it was designed at the outbreak of WW II and put into production in the late 1940s, and was meant to be able to safely carry a basket of eggs across a freshly ploughed field. It quickly became a very popular car, and then a student car in the 1960s onward.

The 2CV reached filmic fame in yellow paint with James Bond in *For Your Eyes Only* (1981). Though it appeared in many other films, most notable was George Lucas' *American Graffiti*, in 1973, as Curt's symbol of non-conformism, and more recently in *Indecent Proposal* (1992). Today the 2CV is turning into a collector's item. Huge rallies regularly occur in Europe, and people turn up with modified, customized 2CVs. The long bonnet model is a favourite, and a joke as its engine is only 400cc! Of course, Chomet's using them in a car-chase is comic absurdity turned surrealistic.

The *Tour de France* is the last cliché to be considered here. This major sport event stands as a symbol of deep France summer vacation entertainment. Over 100 years old, it embodies what the "français moyens", or French working class, may be. In the film, these individuals are the first to be celebrated and acutely parodied, far before the fat Americans. The cycling and *Tour de France* related sequences are peak periods of the filmic time spent poking fun at typical aspects of the French working class.

I believe that the *Tour de France* has become more popular in the United States thanks to men like Lance Armstrong, and many race images are widely familiar. The mountain legs are moments of many legendary struggles among riding stars. At an early stage in the film, one can see a poster of Fausto Coppi, an Italian champion. Some of the most famous cyclists at the time of the story were Raymond Poulidor (mentioned as Poupou in a mock De Gaulle speech in the film), who always finished second to Jacques Anquetil (a five-time winner). The yellow jersey, the leader of the race, shown in the film is the caricature of Anquetil. Chomet introduces such revered moments in the history of the *Tour de France*, reactivates its codified dramaturgy (such as the long wait before the pack rides past in a few seconds), and draws some scenes that directly appeal to the French collective memory.

The racers are always preceded by the "caravane", and its wake of promotion and entertainment motorized ventures. In the film, "Roberte Rivette", the accordionist who plays her instrument atop a truck while following the cyclists, represents Yvette Horner, a once highly popular artist who not so long ago still played her accordion to large crowds in France. She always has been caricatured with her broad ever-lasting smile that shows big teeth. Horner recently described her own experiences as very similar to those of "Roberte Rivette" in *Les Triplettes de Belleville*: she continued playing her accordion along the *Tour de France* route with a big smile as insects ceaselessly were caught in her teeth. The race is followed by the "voiture-balais", literally the "broom car", depicted in the film as a vintage Citroen van, and a major element in the kidnapping of Champion.

Whether actively practicing, or simply relishing watching races, the French love cycling; and maybe Americans love to watch them loving it? The point is, the parody can be enjoyed differently. The yellow jersey, the mafia Godfather, and Roberte Rivette are cliché-esque characters who reflect Chomet's appeal toward the French working class of that time, but non-French spectators may perceive them as exotic and nicely "Old-World".

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

In any case, they remain secondary characters, and to some extent belong to the setting. As such they are mere foils to the main characters. When we first meet Champion, he is a podgy little boy. As time goes by, he turns into a tall, skinny, stooping man with a huge nose, and balloon-like thigh and calf muscles. He is fed like one would feed an animal. When kidnapped, whinnying and horse grunting sounds are part of the sound track. During the sequence in the boat hold, he actually has the appearance of a racing horse in his box. Chomet seems to make the young cyclist aloof, even from us. He is utterly self-absorbed and never unbends to offer thanks for his grandmother's aid or even to acknowledge their attempt to escape. But would a racing horse express thanks? Is he still human? A young orphan turned into a cycling monster, he only rides his bike, lost in the effort.

Bruno develops from a tiny puppy to overweight hound with a complacent and accepting nature. He is the character with whom the audience is meant to empathize. We are panting with him in eager anticipation as he waits for Champion to eat the required amount of dinner, so he can slurp up the rest. And when he collapses lovingly on Champion, we smile a sigh of relief. Bruno is gloriously canine. He dreams of the things that are important to him; he sees the world as smells and images.

Characters in the film are grotesque and ugly, a very unusual feature for heroes and even villains—quite the opposite of the animations of Pixar and Disney. Madame Souza shares similar features to the dog and has a shorter leg. The gangsters are rectangular and their boss is very short. The Triplettes look like witches, yet obviously, their “ugliness” is just a matter of appearance. The Triplettes themselves are but the barely surviving shadows of their former glory, a trio of benevolent vaudeville artists, paradoxically stuck between the Three Fates and Macbeth's witches. In any case, they bear some immaterial connection with the world beyond — beyond the ocean, they are Mme Souza's guide into the surrealist universe of Belleville.

Madame Souza recognizes that something is missing from Champion's life. His parents are, clearly, gone. All he has left is a picture of them on a bicycle. Emotion is tangible, but remains as discreet as Mme Souza apparently is. As she is Portuguese, one may easily imagine she works somewhere as a cleaning lady in someone else's home, as many female Portuguese immigrants did and still do in France. As she tenderly and silently pieces together what Champion needs to be happy, she and he discover a new life (a way out?) as participants in the Tour de France. Chomet invests feelings in Madame Souza through her expression — the simple dark circles of her eyes set behind thick lenses and the line of her mouth, which modulates between forthright resolve and a gentle satisfaction.

Universal Themes

Chomet sketches the human figure with loving detail of its imperfections, drawing together networks of strange and interesting looking faces before bringing them to life. Chomet's portrait of the human race is bleak but forgiving, framed simultaneously with compassion and cynicism. There is a dark and disquieting grace in the way the story goes. So, beyond clichés and parody, it tells us of the power of one person's love and concern for another. If, quoting Tex Avery, “in a cartoon you can do anything,”⁶ *Les Triplettes de Belleville* tells us about unconditional love.

Such considerations reach well beyond any narrow-minded nationalist perspective. Indeed, there, Chomet is talking about universal conditions. Or “showing”, I should say, as indeed there is hardly any talking in the film. More generally, drawings are telling the story, movements

⁶ *Big Heel Watba*, 1944.

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

expressing both drama and pathos. *Les Triplettes de Belleville* creates a unique world, filled with images and sights we have never quite seen before. By eliminating speech as a means of storytelling, Chomet heightens the surrealistic tone of what is being shown on screen. He reinvents a 'sign-language' that knows no linguistic barrier. (Mme Souza's eye movements are one telling example.)

Yet, *Les Triplettes de Belleville* is by no means silent. In fact, sound is a critical element of the film, whether it is in the approach of a train, the croaking of frogs, or the barking of a dog. Though meaningful dialogue is minimal, onomatopoeias, sound-effects, and noise in general add to the notion of universality that emerges from the film, so much so that international versions need not be dubbed. One sequence actually highlights this feeling, conveyed by the whole film: when Mme Souza and the Triplettes meet by the fire, the hand clapping rhythm accompanied with the wheel originated sounds is the key to their relationship. The sound may well be primal, tribal, yet it enables them to communicate and understand each other; sound is universal.

Names may also convey a similar, and humorous, meaning. The meaning may be more obscure; still, it plays with the same connotation, wittily applied to two cultures that suddenly become one. The barmaid's name, for example, deserves closer analysis. She is called Fanny Roberts. Though "Fanny" may simply be a name in France, it means more in Shakespeare's language, with subtle variations depending on which side of the Atlantic one stands! Similarly, "Robert" is a name in English, as it is in French. It also is French slang for breasts, something like "boobs". Thus, in two words, Chomet ironically teaches us that triviality is cosmopolitan.

The notion of universality extends to the context in which the action plays out. Champion and Mme Souza's sea crossing is not innocent. Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* and the tempest turn it into some mystic, if not initiatory, crusade. It takes them away from the France we (all) know through its grotesque caricature, into some hysterical megalopolis of nightmarish shapes and dimensions. This no-where can in fact be perceived as anyone's any-where - some urban, and dangerous, everyman's land.

Chomet plays with false clues and pseudo references. *Belleville* is actually both a working class suburb of Paris, and a Canadian town somewhere between Montréal and Toronto. In the film, following Mme Souza and Bruno, we cross the ocean, so we must be in North America. As we follow the ship, she enters a river inhabited by whales, recalling the St Lawrence, and see buildings could be Montréal's. Moreover, Bruno steals a sausage from a beggar with a thick French Canadian accent. But we also get the Statue of Liberty, suggesting that they are in New York. Its gothic architecture may also merge the cityscape into some even more generic location. However, this urban kaleidoscope could still be in France, or at least in Europe, if we consider the style of wall sockets for the vacuum cleaner and the road-signs. Going home onboard their improbable wheeling raft, our heroes cross a bridge that recalls at the same time New York and San Francisco. However, they do not cruise away: they vanish into the night.


Thus, we are no longer tackling clichés to be spotted and laughed at, we are invited into one surrealistic universe that may mean and appeal to any of us. In their journey, apparently from one town to another and back (but are they really two different places?), the main characters experience an initiation, a quest into the inner meaning and values of human relationships.

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

As Mme Souza and Champion depart, their opening to humanity is certainly wider. Yet, they disappear into the darkness onboard their shaky raft; their journey with the Triplettes- Three Fates may also symbolically suggest their awakening to and acceptance of death. The following sequence shows lonely old Champion deep into his memories: obviously Mme Souza has died, and the Triplettes are no longer in sight.

Thus the mood of the film is decidedly rather grim. Its surrealistic dimension is not only conveyed by the plot and setting, but also by the subtext. The audience is not witnessing a tragedy, yet they are preserved from any closing comic twist or any light-hearted conclusion. Chomet does not indulge himself in suggesting the relief of a conventional Hollywood-typed happy end. Emotion is ripe, and connotes what may be perceived as a very existential questioning of the meaning of life. Chomet will not offer any clear answer; stepping away from nostalgia into the awareness of life and of its hardships, he sustains his film with disillusioned utopia.

During the 1950s, Charles Trénet used to sing *Douce France (Sweet Gentle France)*, and render an optimistic picture of what Chomet describes as finally rather bleak. Cultural references are multiple and intertext underlies the whole film; yet, its meaning goes beyond the sclerotic frame of cultural ghettos. This is not the time, nor the place to pity oneself over some sick nostalgia. Chomet's diegetic no-where, somewhat surrealistic and Bunuelian, works out as a cultural crossroad and it expresses a rather universal idea.

Two illustrations of it: first, the scene of the grandmother at the start, giving the boy a bike and then hiding behind the door to see if he likes it, is touching, honest and vividly real. Second, the final sequence mirrors the opening one: Champion, grown old, looks away from the screen of his own story; he turns around, looking behind and symbolically back into the past for Mme Souza and his memories. His eyes are sad, tender, and weary, and remind us of Mme Souza's as she would look upon him when a child orphan. What drives her throughout the story is the loving tenderness between an old lady and her grandson. Gone laughter, action, and surrealistic neo-urban settings! At the very end of the film, we are not left with nostalgia; we are filled with that lasting uneasy feeling, and a very commonly humane one, of loneliness and of love beyond the boundaries of death. 

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Edited by Nichola Dobson

Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

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Animation Studies – Vol.1, 2006

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