Amanda Third & Dirk de Bruyn

An Animated Dialogue: Moving Into the Local

The *Animated Dialogues 2007* conference was first conceptualised as an event that would bring together scholars working in the field of animation studies in the Australasian region. This first *Animated Dialogues* conference focused on the areas of texts, industries and audiences as a way of bringing people together who frequently work in quite disparate geographical and intellectual contexts. The conference's aims were twofold: firstly, to consolidate the sense of an intellectual community working in animation studies in the region and, secondly, to provide a space to begin the work of documenting the rich and diverse histories, practices and critiques of animation in Australasia. Implicit in the conference's agenda was the desire to foreground issues pertaining to the future development of the discipline of animation studies locally. That is, the conference was envisaged as an opportunity to take stock of the work that is under way, as well as to identify existing gaps and potential areas of interrogation, with an eye to expanding the discipline in ways that build upon the backbone of rigorous research currently being undertaken.

The conference was a truly collaborative event, receiving funding from relevant schools and departments at Monash University (Victoria), Murdoch University (Western Australia), RMIT (Victoria), and Deakin University (Victoria). Two days of the conference were hosted at Monash University's Berwick campus - an outer suburban Melbourne campus with a strong animation education profile – with the third day held at the Victorian College of the Arts in the inner city. The conference was attended by delegates from Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan and Japan that hailed from a variety of academic, pedagogic, production and exhibition backgrounds, including full and part-time university researchers, a cohort of postgraduate and Honours students (notably, Andi Sparks' Queensland contingent who made the trip *en masse*), artists such as Lisa Roberts and Michael Roseth, and professional animators such as Antoinette Starkiewicz. Their work addressed a wide array of topics, ranging from the deeply theoretical to the production-inspired. We hope to have reflected some of the diversity of this work in the articles presented within this collection.

The conference was planned to coincide with Melbourne's premier animation event, the Melbourne International Animation Festival held from the 19-24 June, 2007. The brainchild of Director, Malcolm Turner, MIAF was established in 2001 and, since then, has grown in size and scope into an international event that commands both recognition and respect as one of the world's largest and most vibrant animation festivals (see www.miaf.com.au). When the conference committee first approached Turner to propose an academic conference to be run in tandem with the festival, he and his team were highly supportive and offered to promote the conference alongside the festival in order to encourage animation practitioners and fans to attend and engage. It is our hope that an academic conference drawing on both local and international expertise will be a feature of future festival programs in the region.

Part of the strategy of holding the conference in proximity to the animation festival was to compel a focus on the dynamic intersections between theory and practice. Whilst many animation scholars and practitioners in the Australasian region insist upon the importance of constructive dialogue and exchange between on the one hand, theoretical arenas and on the other, artistic and commercial practices, nonetheless the perception of a schism often prevails – much to the detriment of the discipline as a whole. This is exemplified, for instance, by the claim that critics need to have practical animation experience in order that their comments have currency and

move beyond 'mere navel gazing'. Conversely, production-based animation research is only now beginning to gain credibility within the academy in the face of, for example, all too often deeply entrenched ideas about the illegitimacy of production-based research projects (frequently, we might add, fuelled by the misguided perception that practitioners are reluctant to engage in the historical and cultural analysis of their own work).

However, increasingly – to appropriate the mantra Paul Wells' uses in the commentary that opens this special issue – the call for 'no theory without practice; no practice without theory; no progress without history' is taking centre stage in animation studies both in Australasia and internationally. In practice, locally, there is a growing insistence within the tertiary education sector that practitioners undertaking project-based research come to terms with contemporary theoretical developments in ways that enhance the cultural and critical relevance of animation texts without hindering the creative process (although admittedly, this balance is sometimes difficult to achieve). In addition, organizations such as ASPERA (Australian Screen Producers Education and Research Association) have lobbied, with some success, the previous and current Australian governments to have production-based research outputs count in the government's tertiary research funding calculations. Likewise, as Alan Cholodenko argues in his introduction to the recently released *The Illusion of Life II*, theoreticians are compelled to address the co-implication of 'global theorising' and 'piecemeal theorising'[1] in ways that we would claim bring questions about production practices and contexts into play more prominently within the emerging body of 'theoretical' scholarship.

The issues to be canvassed in the development of the discipline in the region are multiple. Whilst the discipline in Australasia needs to address the specificities of the 'local' (for example: identifying the kinds of institutional contexts that will best nurture animation studies; generating local animation archives that record the development of animation practices in the region; understanding the particularities of regional industrial contexts on animation production), it is also incumbent on us to keep 'global' issues firmly within our purview (for example: the impact on animation texts of global processes of cross-cultural exchange; the implications of the proliferation of handheld networked devices for the future of animation; the ramifications for animation of the global shift in the conditions of media production whereby the new media imperative that consumers become producers seems likely to become the dominant paradigm into the future).

This special issue opens with contributions from Paul Wells and Adrian Martin. Our brief to them was to outline their understanding of the key issues confronting the development of the discipline of animation studies, and the resulting essays can be read as complementary perspectives. Wells – whose intellectual work and dedication to the development of the discipline of animation studies will not have escaped the animation studies scholar – gave a stimulating and entertaining keynote address at the conference outlining the state-of-play in animation studies globally. His astute and encouraging interventions into discussions during the conference were, for many, a highlight. In his contribution to this issue, 'Battlefields for the Undead: Stepping Out of the Graveyard', he reiterates some of the central points from his keynote address, reinforcing our own sentiments about promoting and building upon the inclusive attitude pervasive in animation communities around the world (an attitude implicit in the Society for Animations Studies' facilitation and support of both the conference and the publication of this special issue –

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[1] Alan Cholodenko, 'Introduction' to *The Illusion of Life II* (Sydney: Power Publications, 2006) 44.

thank you[2]). Martin is a longstanding and internationally regarded Australian film critic who launched *The Illusion of Life II* at the conference.[3] In his essay, 'In the Sand a Line is Drawn: A Reflection on Animation Studies', he argues against the 'narrowing of interests' that so often accompanies 'newly-baptised' disciplines.

The first of the articles presented here that were generated by the conference, Alan Cholodenko's '(The) Death (of) the Animator', builds upon his important work of theorising animation and facilitating theoretical animation scholarship within the broader animation community through the publication of *The Illusion of Life I and II*. The theoretical concerns he outlines here 'commingle', to use Cholodenko's own term, with those issues identified by Wells. Engaging with Gunning's work on early cinema, Cholodenko argues for animation's historical place as 'the first attraction of cinema'. He describes animation as the 'uncanny spectre of cinema' that endures despite 'every effort by the "ghostbusting" analyst/theorists of cinema to master, exorcise, conjure away and eradicate this spectre.' Like Martin, albeit from a different perspective, Cholodenko advocates the opening up of animation studies and, in doing so, encourages an outward looking animation studies that is truly inter-disciplinary in its impulses. It may, for example, be fruitful to place his arguments about animation's historical niche next to the emergent observation about the centrality of the painterly in image production within new media debates.

Dirk De Bruyn offers a phenomenological reading of the traumatic effects engendered by Robert Breer's experimental animations. He enlists the direct impact of Gunning's cinema of attractions to support his claims. This essay contributes to the critique of the 'relation of animation (in all its techniques and forms) to avant-garde cinema' that Martin highlights as an area worth prioritising into the future. Indeed, such graphic and 'direct' work as Breer's merits a place within the animation studies 'canon' given its 'avant-garde', reflexive concern with the medium itself. This emphasis places it in contrast to those experimental animations that are still primarily concerned with entertainment and storytelling and often interwoven with a fascination with the personalities of the artists themselves.

The next two articles provide thematic readings of animation texts. In 'Saving the World from Banality: Post-9/11 Animated Superheroes', Amanda Third analyses Pixar's re-rendering of the traditional superhero figure in the 2004 feature length animation, *The Incredibles*. She argues that the film's focus on the banality of the everyday can be read as a coming-to-terms with the problematisation of the everyday induced by the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington in September, 2001. Mick Broderick tracks *anime's* pronounced preoccupation with the apocalyptic in 'Making Things New: Regeneration and Transcendence in *Anime*'. Focusing on *Spriggan* (1998) and *Appleseed* (2004), Broderick argues against reading these texts in terms of Western secular understandings of the apocalypse that focus on the moment of destruction. He proposes instead that '*anime* glimpses beyond the cataclysms of radical renovation' in ways that are both culturally specific – aligning with the Japanese spiritual understanding of heroic mythology – and cross-cultural, accounting for *anime's* increasingly globalised market.

In 'The Uncanny and the Robot in the *Astro Boy* Episode "Franken"', Katharine Buljan brings us to the concept of the uncanny which for both Cholodenko and Gunning is the order of all animation (and, indeed, film). Unpacking the uncanny via an analysis of its Freudian origins,

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[2] On this note, our special thanks go to Maureen Furniss, Nichola Dobson and Timo Linsenmaier for their collaboration and support.

[3] *The Illusion of Life II* documents Australia's second international conference on animation held in 1995. This collection is reviewed at the end of this special issue. For the published version of Martin's launch address, see Adrian Martin, 'Unleashing the Inanimate', *RealTime* 80 (August - September, 2007) at http://www.realtimearts.net/article/issue80/8640.

Buljan argues that although Franken is depicted as producing an uncanny effect for the human characters of the story, the film ultimately fails to construct Franken as uncanny for its audiences. A critical point Buljan makes is that, had the animation been made in more realistic 3D, then the uncanny effect imparted on the viewer would have been increased. This contention is worth placing alongside Matthew Butler and Lucie Joschko's research on the uncanny in 'Final *Fantasy* or *The Incredibles*: Ultra-Realistic Animation, Aesthetic Engagement and the Uncanny Valley'. Applying Mori's theory of the uncanny valley to the two films, they ask: 'How does a film such as *Final Fantasy*, clearly a technical triumph, suffer in comparison to the bright, burlesque qualities of *The Incredibles*? Shouldn't the realistic aesthetic of *Final Fantasy* allow us to at least engage with characters to a greater extent?' They find that computer generated animation does not necessarily produce the desired character identifications in the audience.

The theme of the primacy of the animated experience within the contemporary world that Cholodenko alludes to is taken up from a different perspective in Cordelia Brown's 'Flowerpot Men: The Nature and Perception of the Haptic Image in the Stop-motion Animated Productions of Brian Cosgrove and Richard Hall'. Brown investigates the haptic perceptions of the young, perhaps 'unformed', audiences of the Flowerpot Men. She finds that the animation in these children's programs invites a haptic viewing that parallels the tactile elements of children's experience of play.

> Andrew Buchanan and Peter Moyes hone in on the more technical aspects of animation practice. In 'Facial Expressions for Empathic Communication of Emotion in Animated Characters', Buchanan proposes that the insights of behavioural sciences research on spontaneous and deliberate facial expressions have much to offer animators, who have historically communicated emotion through more symbolic methods. Buchanan argues for a more conscious and planned integration of this knowledge within animation production. Peter Moyes' 'Behind the Flash Exterior: Scratching the Surface of Online Animated Narratives' adds weight to Butler and Joschko's argument about the uncanny. Moyes asserts that the simple graphics and limited movement of Flash animation can often communicate a greater complexity than more realist forms of animation.

Both Cathryn Vasseleu and Miriam Harris investigate aspects of Czech animation, making important contributions to the animation studies scholarship on national cinemas. In 'The Švankmajer Touch', Vasseleu uniquely adds to the growing body of work on Jan Švankmajer's work. She investigates Švankmajer's experimentations with tactility in his static artworks and poems from 1974-1983 through a period of enforced hiatus from film production. Miriam Harris focuses with impressive academic clarity on a lesser known Czech animator, Michaela Pavlatova, in order to situate her work in relation to the tradition of Czech animation in 'Checking out a Czech Animator: How Michaela Pavlatova both incorporates and rebels against the Czech animation tradition'.

Finally, Zhi-Ming Su contributes a report on workshopping animation in educational contexts in Taiwan entitled, 'Reaching Out to Touch: Animation and Aboriginal Children in Taiwan'. This report discusses the achievements of animation workshops run according to the Association International du Film d' Animation (ASIFA) model in fostering educational advancement for young people of Taiwanese indigenous communities in the central mountains and the east coast.

In addition to those areas of inquiry highlighted for potential development by our commentators for this issue, in the spirit of expanding the discipline in a holistic manner, conference discussions drew attention to the need for increased activity in the following areas: the creation and study of local and/or regional animation archives; the analysis of the impact of

regional, industrial contexts; the critique of the impact of globalisation on Australasian animated national cinemas; audience studies; and research on the impacts of technological developments not only pertaining to animation production but also to its distribution and consumption.

To create a formal space for the interrogation of animation practices in the Australasia region, the last day of the conference – held at the Victorian College of the Arts – was dedicated to a showcase of Australian animation and its critiques. If the experience of the conference can be understood as a gauge of the status of the discipline in Australia, what this day highlighted was that the dedicated analysis of Australian animation is in its embryonic stages. This is not to say that the quality of work being produced is inadequate but, rather, that the process of documenting Australian animation traditions is only now gathering momentum. In particular, this day highlighted a range of issues pertaining to the archive of Australian animation. Unfortunately, as is often the case with valuable cultural artefacts, much archival material still languishes in the garages and attics of prominent Australian animators or their families and, as such, is not readily available for exhibition or to students and critics of animation for analysis. Indeed, when Grant Stone decided he wanted to screen Alexander Stitt's groundbreaking 1981 Australian animation, *Grendel Grendel Grendel* – an experiment in 3D animation that required a dual projection system – it took him almost three months of dedicated searching (and a good deal of brazen 'cold calling') to locate a video copy. Following consultations with leading Australian film archives, it would appear that the original reels have been lost to the rubbish heap.

Substantial work has begun in the collection and analysis of Australian animation. Notably, Marian Quigley, a prime mover behind this inaugural *Animated Dialogues* conference, has undertaken critical work documenting and critiquing the work of a variety of Australian women animators. This work is collected in Quigley's wonderful book, *Women do Animate: Interviews with Ten Australian Women Animators* (2006).[4] Similarly, Dan Torre and Lienors Torre are currently undertaking a project the documenting the history of Australian animation. As part of this process, they are interviewing key Australian practitioners and producing a series of monographs, making this material available to scholars in a consolidated format for the first time. As part of the conference program, they curated an exhibition of the works of Alex Stitt and Arie Scheffer. This special issue concludes with a summary article on these exhibition/research outcomes that operates both as a trace of their contribution to the conference and, hopefully, gives this work more of an international audience. Notwithstanding this kind of collation and inquiry, there is still much to be done to document the diverse histories and practices of animation in the Australasian region. Further, the archive project confronting animation scholars in the region not only entails the production of archives but also the development of appropriate critical tools for the analysis of such collections.

Though present in some of the contributions to this special issue, industrial themes were surprisingly not prioritised by conference delegates on this occasion. Nonetheless, industrial contexts constitute an area demanding increased scholarly attention. Industrial perspectives on animation have historically been limited to the influence of multinational animation corporations such as Disney. Research could well be extended to encompass a broader range of industrial settings, including comprehensive studies of Studio Ghibli[5], Pixar and Aardman. The kind of analysis of Czech national animation cinemas provided in this issue by Vasseleu and Harris could

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[4] Marian Quigley, *Women do Animate: Interviews with Ten Australian Women Animators* (Melbourne: Insight Publications, 2006). Quigley's connections with women working in the industry led to the conference organisers inviting Australian animation artist, Antoinette Starkiewicz to present her work and lead an industry discussion at the conference.
[5] To our knowledge, analyses of Studio Ghibli's industrial regimes are yet to appear in English.

well be extended to other national cinemas such as that of Korea. The emergence of such national cinemas and in relation to processes of globalisation also warrants further analysis. There is certainly a need to document and analyse the studio settings and national industries shaping Australian animation's conditions of production.

Research with an industrial focus of particular relevance to Australasian animation production (and perhaps beyond) might include an analysis of financing strategies for production (especially for independent animators); the value of the promotion of work through festivals; DVD distribution; and the impact of animation works placed within compilation programs. In Australia, (independent) animators have traditionally experienced difficulties gaining funding because they fall through the cracks of schemes set up for either artists or filmmakers. This is perhaps one of the downsides of the enduring industrial regard of animation as inferior to film. Further, whilst there are exceptions, such as *Look Both Ways,* animators' careers don't usually follow the same trajectory as those of filmmakers whereby a filmmaker 'cuts his/her teeth' on a couple of short films before moving to feature length productions. A longitudinal study of the careers of animators would enable the industry to better plan for development.

Technological developments are occurring at an unprecedented rate, impacting on artistic practices, mechanisms of distribution, and the dynamics of consumption. We await comprehensive analyses of the impact of the seismic shift in short film reception and production triggered by the pervasive use of new technologies and the rise of Web 2.0 platforms such as youtube.com. The global proliferation of personality and technology driven animation festivals (as a sub-set of short film) and their marketing through DVD compilations can be argued to be part of a shift towards an industrial model akin to the one embraced by the music industry in the 1960s. The impact of a generation of techno and image manipulation savvy punters provides a fertile and receptive audience for such a new animation aesthetics and consumption. Such audiences are being cultivated by MIAF, for example. There is also a need to analyse and compare the multiplying delivery systems that technology continues to produce. It may be of benefit to analyse current changes in relation to those taking place a century ago with the emergence of new technologies such as photography, electricity and cinema. As was the case one hundred years ago, institutional and industrial models are changing to deliver a new set of parameters within which animation and animators must operate. Although festivals may focus on such issues in industry panels and show and tell sessions, there is a need to engage more critically with these areas of production and reception in the academic arena.

Both the conference organisers and the Advisory Board of this special issue understand animation studies as a hybrid scholarly discipline that operates at the nexus of a range of institutional, disciplinary and production-oriented boundaries. It is a discipline that unfolds, for example, at the intersections between theory and practice, art and technology, and the local and the global. Although, as Wells points out, animation has its own history, animation's critiques are also inspired by the theoretical apparatuses of cinema studies, cultural studies, political economy of the media, creative industries, and so on. However, it's not just that animation studies is informed by these traditions. Increasingly animation studies, positioned as it is at the intersections between disciplines, has a role to play in, as Cholodenko states, informing theoretical and critical developments in a range of other disciplines. It is demonstrably interdisciplinary in its reach.   ✍

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