

## **Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007**

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### **Battlefields for the Undead Stepping Out of the Graveyard**


I will be forever grateful to be asked to deliver the keynote address at the ‘Animated Dialogues’ Conference in Melbourne in June 2007. My survey of the field of Animation Studies in the current period – ‘Battlefields for the Undead: Re-assessing Animation Studies and other Romantic Interludes’ – inevitably enabled me to get a few things off my chest, and posit some ideas and thoughts pertinent to the Conference outlook and agenda. I was able to acknowledge, for example, that to be back in Australia discussing animation was also to be celebrating one of the first conferences dedicated to ‘Animation Studies’ that took place in Sydney in 1987, and which led to Alan Cholodenko’s collection of essays, ‘The Illusion of Life’, some of which, to use a ‘Cholodenko-ism’, ‘for me’, offered great insight, and others went straight over my head. His current collection – ‘The Illusion of Life II’, with its polemical and challenging address of animation literature, taking the field to task for the ways it has absented much post-modern and post-structuralist thought from its evolving canon, concentrated too much on the concept of ‘the auteur’, and privileged a view of animation as a ‘language’ rather than a philosophic trope, at the very least signals how far the field has come; moreover, with its use of the work of critical theorists and thinkers from other disciplines, significantly progresses further debates about defining animation, and resists the notion, often posited by Suzanne Buchan, editor of the ‘new’ and extremely valuable ‘Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal’, that we are at a ‘starting point’ in animation study.

In the grand scheme of things, of course, this view might well be true, and some might argue that I am merely challenging it, because my own small contributions to the field may be hurtling to the remainder stores, never to be embraced again unless aesthetically improved by the addition of a ‘sale’ sticker. Not so, actually. For me, this ‘starting point’ theory ignores a plethora of writing about animation that precedes the notion of ‘animation study’; the profound contribution of animation historians – often dismissed as mere ‘describers’ of the form, and not its interrogators; those writers who have sought to theorise the form in some way; and of course, the written and recorded work of animators themselves. There are some other issues, at stake, too, not least of which is the idea that somehow ‘Animation Studies’ has created its own ghetto, and that it does not reach out significantly to other disciplines, perhaps, most notably Film and Media Studies. Cholodenko’s work, to cite but one example, is evidence that this is not so. Although, arguably, it was perhaps necessary for writers of the calibre of Bendazzi, Crafton, Klein, Langer, Pilling, Furniss, and more recently, Robinson, Leslie, and Gehman and Reinke, to determine animation as a separate and progressive form, because ‘film’ would inevitably ‘lose its object’, and the reclamation and definition of animation as a form in its own right was a necessary pre-requisite for other disciplines ‘to come to the party’.

Academic cultures are rife with bizarre schisms and points of dogma and debate, of course, which ultimately mean ‘not a jot’ in the ‘real world’. It is this ‘real world’, that also significantly problematises animation, though, as the age old discussion about the apparent gap between theory and practice supposedly grows wider – theorists clinging to French philosophers, ‘new’ media gurus, and art cultures, while practitioners study software manuals, work to impossible deadlines, and tour the burgeoning list of animation festivals worldwide. Yes, I know these are clichés, but like all clichés there are some grains of truth to discern, and assumptions to dispute.

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My own mantra has been doing the rounds for some time now – ‘no theory without practice; no practice without theory; no progress without history’ – and I genuinely believe this, but as is often the case in many fields, the definitions of a form are often intrinsically bound up with the personalities who pronounce them. My own background is informed by production in the broadcast and theatre industries, and an attempt, at least, to write passionately and hopefully intelligently about animation, so, ‘for me’, there is *only* the elision of theory and practice, and the desire to ‘historicise’ in an increasingly de-historicised, if not de-politicised world. This is one of the reasons why I have always suggested animation is a modernist form, with a proven distinctive language, imbued with an ideologically and metaphysically charged agenda, and remained interested in historiography and technological determinism. In my view, it is no surprise, therefore, that the documentary enterprise turns increasingly to animation; comedy – so honed and precise in animation – remains its ‘radical’ model of expression; and that ‘artists’ wish to use it as a form; though, it must be said, while often denying this, for fear of in some ways being soiled by the association with ‘the cartoon’.

Hmm, this remains a tricky one. Animation *is* an art, a stance, a record of psychological and emotional memory, a technique, a concept, I could go on, but it seems to me unproductive to potentially re-invoke the high culture / popular culture divide, in order to privilege a view of ‘artist animation’ or ‘the manipulated moving image’ or ‘extended cinema’, over the ‘frame-by-frame’, ‘the cartoonal’, animation in visual effects (surely, the highest degree of ‘the manipulated moving image’) or conventional storytelling in ‘new traditionalist’ CGI, or 3D stop motion animation. This partly seeks to create a hierarchy in which, once more, particular kinds of critical theory can meet animation as high art, in a self-fulfilling sense of its own importance. I, for one, would find this difficult to accept. The animation community has traditionally been an inclusive one. If it is to grow it needs to maintain this sense of embracing all perspectives and resist the hierarchies that so undermine not merely academic fields of study, but working lives. Strange that we should be at ‘a starting point’, when so many funereal metaphors – David Clark’s animation as ‘undead’ cinema and (the much missed) Dick Arnall’s ‘Death to Animation’ polemic, to name but two – are played out to define animation. Animation should and does imbue things with life; for theorists, practitioners, historians, artists, and anyone, however, ‘categorised’, who feels its energy and insight, the intrinsic humanity revealed at the heart of its illusionism, is actually its shared language, and should continue to prompt engaging work – both in practice and criticism – for the foreseeable future. 

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