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In the Sand a Line is Drawn
A Reflection on Animation Studies

There are at least three problems that arise when any topic of interest (heterogeneous and globally dispersed as it must necessarily be at the outset) transforms itself, in an (equally necessary) institutional/territorial gesture, into a defined field of study - and I have seen all these problems materialise at least once before in my lifetime, during the rise of Cultural Studies. How might these problems affect the burgeoning area of Animation Studies?

1. As Paul Wells rightly remarks in his contribution to this issue of *Animation Studies*, 'Battlefields for the Undead: Stepping Out of the Graveyard', all previous attempts to describe, map, appreciate, criticise or theorise the area are briskly banished into an obscure pre-history, or handily erased altogether. This is the *tabula rasa* mode of a field's active self-definition: nothing that came before really matters; nobody ever before attempted anything like we are doing; we are beginning from scratch. As John Cale once sang: Antarctica Starts Here.

2. An academic field - and this is not a whinge against the academy *per se* – tends quickly to erect a certain kind of canon: not so much the greatest works (although that implicit judgement or valorisation tends to come quietly attached) as those that most readily generate high-level commentary gathered around about half a dozen rubrics (aesthetics, technology, industry, modernity, cultural zeitgeist, etc). This canon in animation studies at present would uncontroversially include: anime, Svankmajer, the Quay brothers, Pixar, Dreamworks … with some flashbacks to pioneers including Chuck Jones, Winsor McCay, etc.

3. Once professional space has been (hard) won for a particular type, form or mode of cinema (whether documentary, experimental, national or animated), the open-ended will to *network* that type/form/mode with all other types/forms/modes tends to take a strictly back seat in the conference, publication and pedagogical agenda of the field. Thus the connections between narrative and non-narrative, between crystalline short-film and epic feature-length forms, between animated and live-action, and much else, fall away from investigation.

Note that I omit from my list a commonplace lament whenever a self-proclaimed new field gets going: the creation of a specialist, sometimes difficult and laborious theoretical and/or technical language – a *jargon*. Actually, I welcome the new jargon of animation studies, such as it comes to us through, for instance, the two *Illusion of Life* anthologies edited by Alan Cholodenko; this is indeed the healthiest sign of life in the area and, to my mind, the approach that holds the most fertile promise for the work of the future. But a new language, in and of itself, does not necessarily solve or even address the three institutional/historical problems outlined above.

Let me flashback to the 1950s: not a personal testimony (for my birth date scrapes in at the decade's very end), but a fragment of imaginative cultural restoration – as all truly historical work (on cinema or anything else) must be. In fact, I will need to take liberty, in this sketch, to roam by association ahead a little to the '60s and '70s; genealogies are never clean and neat.

Long before our contemporary moment (but still, today, in it) the French film magazine *Positif* featured critics of a Surrealist persuasion such as Robert Benayoun (and later Petr Král) eulogising popular American and experimental Eastern European animation alike; in the '70s, a

dazzling little dossier of this writing will appear, translated into English, in the American publication *Surrealism and its Popular Accomplices* (which I encountered – fatal thrill – at the age of 20). Chris Marker in *Letter from Siberia* (1957), like (a little later) Orson Welles in *The Trial* (1963), inserts an animated sequence into an otherwise live-action work – that's three and a half decades before Tarantino did it in *Kill Bill* (2003 & 2004). Another member of the loose Left Bank group of filmmakers in France, Alain Resnais, alludes frequently to cartoons and comics in his work, including the splendid short essay about the Bibliothèque nationale, *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956). That film – like Walerian Borowczyk's haunting, uncanny animations (pre-Svankmajer, pre-Quays) – pops up everywhere in the very catholic/eclectic programs of voracious cine-clubs or film societies in the '50s – even in country towns and church halls (it is a lost network, and a fairly lost history as well, today). In the UK, from the early '50s, critic, theorist and art school teacher Raymond Durgnat never ceases drawing the lateral connections between all the forms of 'graphism' in cinema, whether drawn, staged, photographed, or somehow evoked or alluded to …

Does this (I could list much more) add up to the same kind of energetic combustion we see today in the newly-baptized animation studies field? Probably not; it was all too piecemeal and dispersed, and gained no significant institutional traction (even if it did result in some of the earliest and finest survey books in the field, such as Benayoun's 1961 *Le Dessin animé après Walt Disney*). But the point is not to pre-emptively assert that 'it's all been done before' (because it hasn't); rather, we need the imaginative and creative reach, as well as the intellectual and critical generosity, to mine these scattered but powerful moments of prior animation-appreciation, which occurred all over the world (I have mentioned only a few Anglo-European instances). Precisely with Walter Benjamin's powerful goal (as articulated in his famous essay 'On the Concept of History') in mind: to give back, to each of the significant but rapidly disappearing instants of the cultural past, its unrealised future. Or, as we might put it today in relation to animation study, the 'field' or 'discipline' they never enjoyed in their time.

Where is animation study going? The military-style talk of a unified intellectual-pedagogic field boldly going forth in one determined direction is usually grotesque (and we could tote up plenty of examples of this nervous territorial excess from the histories of both Cinema Studies and Cultural Studies). No topic or orientation should be off-limits. The problem – as the tendencies listed at the outset attempt to suggest – is in the narrowing of interests, the casual exclusions of bodies of work, the oppressive 'critical mass' of certain topics and references (aka 'academic fashion').

For example, I would like to see far more attention paid to the relation of animation (in all its techniques and forms) to avant-garde cinema – an extremely rich history, as well a rich span of present-day activities. Within the Australian context, I have nothing against the acclaim and attention paid to the meticulous character-based narratives of *Harvie Krumpet* (Adam Elliot, 2003), *The Mysterious Geographic Explorations of Jasper Morello* (Anthony Lucas, 2005) or *Happy Feet* (George Miller, Warren Coleman & Judy Morris, 2006). But I am personally more excited by the possibilities of studying the ongoing avant-garde experiments in animation by Marcus Bergner (*The Surface*, 2007), Van Sowerwine (*Clara*, 2004), Neil Taylor (*Roll Film*, 1994), Pia Borg (*Footnote*, 2003), Philip Brophy (the installation *Vox*, 2007), or Sally Golding & Joel Stern collaborating as Abject Leader for their expanded cinema performances – again, to name only a few.

Is a theory of animation the veritable centrepiece of a theory of film itself? Certainly, the ideas of Brophy, Cholodenko and others concerning the 'animatic apparatus', or Thomas Elsaesser's notion that contemporary cinema in the digital age tends ever more (as Durgnat intuited) towards the surface manipulation of the graphic image on a computer screen, or most recently the stress on the constitutive artifice of the cinematic medium in Daniel Frampton's boldly argued *Filmosophy*, take us inevitably toward a primal cinematic unit: the frame or (as the French like to call it) the photogram. Film theory, in its conventional and classic forms (deriving from Bazin, Kracauer, Arnheim, etc) tends to begin at basic levels several removes from the individual celluloid frame, such as the photographic index, the theatrical scene, the performing body, and so on. But let us not forget that some of the most visionary narrative filmmakers, from Orson Welles to Tsui Hark, and not forgetting George Miller (channelling and updating Eisenstein's montage theories in his *Mad Max* films), have been compelled to work at the intricate level of single frames for their most explosive effects. Nor should we forget that one of the founding texts of semiotic film theory in the early 1970s, Thierry Kuntzel's 'Le Défilement', is very precisely a study of the erotically uncanny frame-to-frame transformations in a classic animated film, Peter Foldes' *Appetite of a Bird* (1964).

A theory of the frame as the most basic unit of cinema is able to reach – in the Benjaminian spirit of recovering the unrealised past – in many directions. Isidore Isou's extraordinarily prescient 1952 Lettrist manifesto, 'Aesthetics of Cinema', was already calling for a post-photographic understanding of the film medium, based (in the manner of the entire Lettrist system or approach) on the isolating and breaking-down (or 'chiselling') of frame-units. Since, in works like Isou's experimental classic *Treatise on Slime and Eternity* (1951), this involved drawing and scratching on the celluloid strip (before Brakhage – who was deeply impressed and influenced by Isou – and others made this a familiar aesthetic gesture), we are already knee-deep in both the theory and practice of the photogram. Most recently, in a powerful revisitation and reconsideration of the legacy of film semiotics, Kuntzel's close compatriot Raymond Bellour (in his 2008 Gauss Seminars in Criticism delivered at Princeton) refines his close analysis from the level of the shot to the unit of the frame – taking, as his supreme example of the second-by-second 'mapping of emotion' in cinema, the animated credits sequence of flapping avian wings (against a bed of no less artificial synthesised noises) in Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). And, in the prodigious contemporary Austrian avant-garde, Peter Tscherkassky's masterpieces *Outer Space* (1999) and *Dream Work* (2001), produced by a meticulous 'light pencil' process trained on frames from Sidney J. Furie's horror film *The Entity* (1983), reveals the secret but powerful link between narrative cinema's regimes of 'body horror' and the medium's potential for total sensorial dissolution.

And thus the associative network spreads: from narration to abstraction, from features to shorts, from the frame-unit to the whole filmic form, across the most distant genres and joining the least likely auteurs … There is nowhere in this sand to draw a clear or solid institutional/territorial line – unless it's the sand painting which (in an allegory of cinema and its perpetual movement-images) gets unfussily blown apart and away in the final frames of Bertolucci's *Little Buddha* (1993). Animation studies has to – appropriately enough – situate itself in the flux of that movement, the perpetual transformation of ideas and sensations. It will be – as it has always been – a merry dance.   ✎

References

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