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Actors in Sin City's Animated Fantasy

Avatars, Aliens, or Cinematic Dead-ends?

The ontological existence of animated-film characters depends on the whim and inspiration of their creators, which entails two major components. Firstly, the animator will explicitly appear in the cartoon and interfere within the animation, such as Emile Cohl's or the Fleischer Brothers' hands. Or else, in Tex Avery cartoons, references to the script are repeatedly intruding into the film, as meant interruptions or narrative punctuations in the drama. Secondly, the relation animator / character (who could then be spelt: char – actor) can be staged with distance, or even denied: so cartoon characters “pretend” to own their existences, self, will power, free will. For example, still in Avery cartoons, the repetitive asides to the public have a double impact: they first focus upon the pragmatic distance that is usually and implicitly established between the actors and their audience. Second: the same distance, together with the awareness to play a part, underlines a prefilmic existence of the character: Averian creatures give the illusion they are actors, both questioning and enhancing the essence of cinema, that is to say: “the illusion of life”.

Such virtual and fantasized power of self-determination, offered to some cartoon characters as a reflection on the parts of live actors, is these days put to the test in recent features. The connections or interactions character / animator find their equivalent, or their balance, in the creative relation that a director will establish both with his actors and the medium. (One may think of Buster Keaton's, Avery's, Woody Allen's reflexive films within the films¹) Indeed, at a time when animation and live-action are more than ever two aesthetic components in one single art form, that is cinema, what happens to actors and the parts they play within digital environments? While there are numerous recent examples to draw on, this paper will leave aside the oft-discussed *Avatar*, and Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*. Rather it will focus on *Sin City*, *300*, *The Spirit*, as they all stem from another strongly connoted art form, which is graphic novels; and more, they are one way or another related to the same Frank Miller.

At this stage, three more elements have to be taken into account. To begin with, Walter Benjamin's (1931) statement, that: “eventually the quality of photography is always issuing from the close connection between the photographer and his technique”², can easily apply to animation as well. Indeed Aardman's Peter Lord suggested his understanding of animating at a recent festival, while describing craftsmanship in animation: an animator will have a character move; a good animator will get a character to live; a great animator will enhance a character's thoughts. The point here is not to question the intrinsic artistic quality of X or Y. It is rather to put inspiration and creation in perspective with technology. As an example, the relative shortcomings of Ang Lee's bouncing green giant in *The Hulk* (2003), or of Tom Hank's digitally frozen face in *The Polar Express* (2005) vividly witness the dramatic evolution in motion and performance caption, as well as in special effects, over the past few years.

Second: the issue of part versus persona will entail questioning the impact of live actors on the films they play in. For example, in *The Assassination of Jesse James* (2007), one can still question what / who one is actually aware of watching on the screen. To what extent does the audience

¹ Buster Keaton: *Sherlock Junior*; Avery: *Northwest Hounded Police*; Woody Allen: *Purple Rose of Cairo*.

² My translation : “Et pourtant, ce qui juge en définitive de la photographie, c'est toujours la relation du photographe à sa technique.” (“Petite histoire de la photographie”, 1931, p.309, in Walter Benjamin, *Œuvres II*, Folio essais, Gallimard 2000).

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actually look at the famous outlaw? Do not they place Brad Pitt, and his pre-filmic existence as a renowned star “be-fore” his interpretation of Jesse James? What they are watching is a famous actor playing a part, and it is up to each of them to focus or not on, to be aware of, to be ‘fooled’ by the fictitious character (who himself existed in a past real pre-filmic time).

Third: pushed to its utmost limits, the manifold interaction live actor / persona / animation character opens up in Tim Burton’s string of films with actors Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter. As he also directs animation features, Burton essentially embodies this extreme hybridity. His favorite actors actually function as one of his creative threads. Indeed, one can easily recognize Depp and Bonham Carter respectively as Victor Van Dort and Corpse Bride (as they give their voices to the puppets) in *Corpse Bride* (2005) (though traits of Bonham Carter can be seen in the Bride, the female character was already budding in Sally, created after actress Lisa Marie, in Burton’s 1993 animated *The Nightmare Before Christmas*). Burton displays his animated representation of live actors alive, yet keeping a safe distance between the puppets and their models: he does not directly confront them with the virtual surroundings, sets, nor partners. Prior to *Alice in Wonderland*, Burton’s actors are not required to comply with the dramatic and spectacular metamorphosis CG animation would entail.

Such metamorphosis actually is at the heart of the matter. How can actors adapt to what Paul Wells (2008) calls the “post digital contemporary feature cinema”³, that is: the cross section of traditional live action theatrical performance and computer processing?

Such is the issue with films as *The Spirit*, *300*, and mainly *Sin City*. All the more so as these features are directly issued from graphic novels, consequently adding one layer of genre specificity, or maybe a merger. The term “issued”, and not “adapted”, is chosen on purpose; director Robert Rodriguez considers *Sin City* more like a “translation” than an “adaptation”⁴, which justifies the absence of screenwriting in the credits. Frank Miller is mentioned as the creator of the graphic novels, and indeed the panels and frames of the original books have been extensively used as the storyboard prior to shooting the film. More over, the latter is also self-referring. The cover of the book *Booze, Broads, and Bullets*, can be seen periodically throughout the movie. Its most notable appearance is on the cover of the matchbook that Hartigan picks up to locate Nancy; it is also seen in the background of the strip club in the very next scene as Hartigan first enters.

Sin City was one of several films around the world to be shot on a completely “digital backlot” (that is to say: with all the acting shot in front of a green screen, and the backgrounds added during post-production). Only three hand-built sets were used: Kadie’s bar, Shellie’s flat, and the hospital corridor in the epilogue.

As the directors move away from the hyper-real representations that characterize other special effect films, they still benefit from a side effect of such an aesthetic and technological choice. It enables them to offer a very stylized vision of violence. The latter indeed is excessive; it is deliberately omnipresent. And yet violence can be watched, because of the very same excess of it, and because of the denial of any hyper-real component. For example, blood may splash over the screen, yet it is white, which prevents any over-identification process from the part of the public. (On the very few scenes when Rodriguez temporarily wishes to suggest more pathos towards positive or humane characters, then their scratches or slight injuries will be tainted red.) In the philosophical perspective of the Right of Nature, according to Walter Benjamin (1921), “violence

³ Paul Wells, conference given at Utrecht’s HAFF, November 2008.

⁴ Ref. : <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0401792/trivia>

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is part of Nature, to some extent a raw material the use of which – when not diverted to serve unfair goals – is quite acceptable”⁵. So in *Sin City*, violence may well be thrown at the faces of spectators and remain bearable, but not because it would serve the Right within the diegesis, which it actually does not. Rather, because excess and iconographic stylization creates the sufficient distance which shrouds violence into an aesthetic halo.

In the film, live actors, some of them with the status of stars, are confronted by a double challenge: be true to the graphic pre-existence of their characters, and resist the impact of digital processing upon their personae, not to say their ego. Although several of the actors already looked similar to their characters, some of them underwent make-up and prosthetics to more strongly resemble their Frank Miller-drawn likenesses, including Bruce Willis, Mickey Rourke, Benicio Del Toro, and Nick Stahl. Actually, Benicio Del Toro was not meant to wear make-up, but he had Robert Rodriguez change his mind⁶. One may wonder whether Clive Owen’s embodying of Dwight is level with his partners’ performance in the film; yet the actor is hardly wearing any make-up, so this may explain that! The hybridity of their appearances, and consequently the ambiguity in their personalities, are enhanced as early as in the credits sequence: their names appear next to the graphic novel characters’ faces, and not together with pictures of what they actually look like in the film.

The point here is to question what the actors project of themselves into the diegesis, within the pragmatic connections their images will establish – or not – with the audience. Do characters still exist with the full fictional psychology and identity the graphic novel author has imagined? Or else, do actors still impose their live envelope beyond the masks of make-up and digital editing? In *Sin City*, one can actually witness a merger including drawings, animation, and live action – if it is not a collapse of the distinctive three elements. Gilles Deleuze writes: “The cinema can, with impunity, bring us close to things or take us away from them and revolve around them, it suppresses both the anchoring of the subject and the horizon of the world. [...] It is not the same as other arts, which aim rather at something unreal through the world, but makes the world itself something unreal or a tale [récit].”(1983, p.59)⁷ Miller and Rodriguez’s aesthetic choice reinforces such phenomenon, as well as it plays with it, in their own way questioning the existence of the actor within a diegesis, as Tex Avery did years before. If cinema actually turns the world into some unreal thing, and sometimes mirrors its own existence while displaying its own tricks, then *Sin City* over emphasizes the process through the medium of various digital devices, and black and white seldom enhanced by selected patches of bright colours.

And yet one is still watching live actors. In such an environment, they embody, they in-carnate, they display their human flesh through the digital screen, so that they literally animate – that is: give life to – graphic characters. *Sin City* can then be called a “cinemato-graphic-novel”, as it both claims its drawn origin and digs deep into the codes of filmic representation. If the movie is so efficient in telling a story, this is indirectly due to the persistence, the resilience of the live actor within the hybrid creature on film (something that, so far, very few genuine digital characters have managed to achieve). Jacques Rancière, describing James Stewart in Antony Mann’s *The Man from Laramie*, writes: “This hero, in a hardly heroic posture, firstly behaves as the man in charge of the drama. He may scarcely speaks, his whole body instead is like a narrative voice that

⁵ My translation : Walter Benjamin, “Critique de la violence”, 1921, in *Œuvres 1*, 1972, Paris, Gallimard, Folio essais, 2000, p.211 : “La violence est un produit naturel, en quelque sorte un matériau brut dont l’utilisation, sauf détournement abusif en faveur de fins injustes, ne pose aucun problème.”

⁶ Ref. : <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0401792/trivia>

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1 The Movement Image*, London, Continuum, 2005, p.59 (Editions de Minuit, 1983, p.84).

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gives the story its texture” (2001, p.113)⁸. Characters in *Sin City* rarely express themselves, or when they do so, they mostly speak to themselves – and consequently of course to the audience, in the traditional pragmatic use of the voice over. Their comments on their acts and feelings lead the public along onto the story as they punctuate the diegesis. But mainly, *Sin City* characters take the audience with them into a body choreography (or a “character-graphy”), that the digital settings make even more conspicuous. The narrative impact of the original novel perpetuates throughout the film: the drawings themselves are repeatedly inspired by very wide angle-shots, extreme low or high angle-shots from a close distance, as if the graphic novel from the start had been designed for the screen. The harsh and raw use of black and white, together with the audacities of make-up, remove the actors from reality into some in-between fictional turmoil, in which they are both the tools of an animated graphic story and the subjects of a live performance. In this perspective, the “actorial” positions of Del Toro, Rourke, Willis and others demonstrate the interwoven interactions of reality and its representation in animation. They exemplify Paul Wells’ view that, “animation legitimised the social and political ambivalence of narratives by simultaneously approximating some of the conditions of real existence whilst distancing itself from them by recourse to the unique aspects of its own vocabulary”⁹ (1998, p.21). Very acutely, the live actors in *Sin City* actually embody such ambivalence. And simultaneously, the film claims the specificity of cinema at large: images refer to the real, and at the same time question the essence of reality, which may well include questioning their own iconographic reality.

The question is: how does such a successful aesthetic option apply to other features? Making the *300* book (2006), Frank Miller is responsible for story and drawings, and has left colouring to Lynn Varley. As with *Sin City*, their book IS the storyboard to the film directed by Zack Snyder. The whole film is in hues of brown and sepia, which is the most obvious iconographic variation from *Sin City*. Indeed, the former bears strong similarities with the latter: it is dark, with patches of bright red, whether as details in the picture or as the colour of the font on the poster. The narrative thread is enhanced by a voice over, a recurrent component both in *Sin City* and *The Spirit*.

There remain differences of course: as it is a 21st century peplum, *300* rather looks back at such films as *Gladiator* as a filiation. The film was less successful than *Sin City*: this may be partly due to less distance and humour both in the discourse and the direction of actors. Indeed, people get some basic machist or sexist connotations that the historical context will not explain alone. More, the use of the digital backlot is no longer assessed nor claimed as it was in *Sin City*. Yet, it is so prominent that it reduces the physical and semantic spaces the actors may evolve in. The gate the soldiers fight for is narrow indeed! CG images, whether background or special effects, miss the oneiric (or nightmarish) dimension they conveyed in *Sin City*. However, in *300*, going one more step further away from hyper-realism, some shots near the appearance of a painting: for example, at the end of the battle (103rd minute), the camera zooms back up from Leonidas’s corpse in the middle of his dead soldiers. Computer generated effects play with the complexion of their skin and the colour’s range, so as to, together with the layout of the bodies, enhance the aesthetic gap with reality. The picture no longer has the granularity of a photograph. The viewers are given the suggestion of a work of drawing and colouring: the reverse process of rotoscoping,

⁸ My translation. Jacques Rancière, *La Fable cinématographique*, 2001, Paris, Le Seuil, p.113: “Ce héros si peu héroïque dans sa posture a d’abord la constance de celui qui a en charge l’action du film. Et s’il parle avec parcimonie, c’est qu’il fait de tout son corps l’équivalent d’une voix narrative qui donne au récit sa chair”.


⁹ Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*. London, Routledge, 1998, p.21.

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that aims at distorting a real-life shot into an animated trope. Zack Snyder uses his medium as a director, a painter, and an animator; the result is blurred, as the aesthetic may be pushed close to its limits.

Moreover, contrary to *Sin City*, apart from Scott Glenn and Aaron Eckhart, *300* does not display any major stars to give more texture to the presence and resilience of the characters. An attempted CG fresco celebrating mythological heroes, the film is close to a video game turned into an epic, in which actors fade into pseudo animated creatures, and spectacular images dilute any attempt at creating emotion.

What about *The Spirit*, that is released two years later? In 2008, technology can no longer be held solely responsible for any shortcoming (this topic could itself form a larger paper but is not considered further here as it is of less importance to the overall argument). In a nutshell, Frank Miller fails as a director where he has previously succeeded as a scriptwriter. As in *Sin City*, there are stars galore in the cast: Samuel Jackson, Eva Mendes, Paz Vega, Scarlett Johansson, to mention only a few of them. And yet, the graphic and aesthetic originality of *Sin City*, here, fails to carry the audience away into what eventually is but a slack story, lacking humour and punchy dialogue. Indeed, the original Will Eisner graphic novel was in black and white, and its violence and pathos were balanced at times with some distance in its discourse; however it does not sustain the strain of an adaptation to the iconographic environment which made *Sin City* into a success. Eisner's eponymous main character bears strong similarities with a typically imagined super hero, and is a match to his contemporaries. The Spirit may belong to stories that range from comedy to noir, he keeps strongly connoted to the narrative stereotypes of the 1940's and 50's. So, when transposed into the New York / Central City of 2000, he has nothing in common with the desperate suicidal losers who prevail in *Sin City*. The film's supporting parts, their overdone behaviours, their bland extravagances simply mirror both the heavily didactic dialogues and voice over, and the thinness of the main character, who, by the way, quite significantly conceals his shallow personality behind a mask! Stars in *Sin City* impose their parts as plausible avatars haunting the diegesis. Those in *The Spirit* remain alien to a would-be double celebration of graphic novels and Miller's cinematographic skills.

Would it mean *Sin City*'s iconographic option is a dead-end? Some people may foresee the end of animation in the collapsing borders between animated and live footage, witnessing the disappearance of a dinosaur genre, the collateral casualty of the major impact of digital effects. Rather, as is the case in *Sin City*, both actor and character originate from a drawn creature, and they fade, mix into one hybrid digital entity. Not only are we facing intertextual labyrinths, but we are also facing representation mazes in the midst of fictional nightmares, some odd 21st century freak-show. Hybridity is then the result of interconnected inventive storytelling resources. The part played by the bodies and personalities of the actors/char-actors in the process of film making, their skills, their abilities to trigger and inhabit drama, express pathos, and eventually convey meaning to their public are hanging over unfathomable possibilities. In that, they repeat and pay tribute to their elders, either gothic and horror films in the 1920's, or films noirs of the 1940's¹⁰. Deep into cinematic experimentation, in *Sin City*, as a one-off celebration of the medium, one should rather consider live action and animation together asserting the revival and perpetuation of the cinema of the origin. 

¹⁰ Just to mention a few examples, *Sin City* displays shots which recall Robertson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1920) and Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), or Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) and Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946).

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