

Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007

Miriam Harris

How Michaela Pavlatova both incorporates and rebels against the Czech animation tradition

Introduction

The Internet's potential for global shrinkage, electronic travel, and animated transmission is a technological development that would have left citizens of previous centuries stupefied by such wondrous demonstrations of magic. Typing in the address for the Czech animator Michaela Pavlatova's website transports one as if by sorcery to Prague, and a realm of moving words and images with a distinctly unique and deliciously demented perspective. Her site embodies an attitude that seems rather different from the outlook of artists and animators in the English-speaking West, and while difficult to pinpoint exactly, consists of a mixture of irony, black humor, a delighting in the absurd and the erotic, yet also a very moving focus upon the intricate nuances of domestic life and relationships.

Such an irreverent and soulful blend certainly contains a strong universal appeal, and Pavlatova has received numerous awards and accolades at international film festivals. In 1992, she was nominated for an Oscar for her animation *Words, Words, Words* (1991), and in 2006 she received the equivalent of a Czech Oscar for her most recent animation, *Carnival of Animals* (2006). Her particular vision can be seen as both drawing on, and departing from, features that have come to be associated with the Czech animation tradition. This tradition in the context of animation history has acquired such an aura of significance and weight that the term seems to be inscribed in capital letters. Yet Pavlatova is a vital contemporary player on the international animation scene, and a sure sign that the Czech animation tradition is fluid, rather than a practice immortalized in stone. She acknowledges her artistic inheritance, but also plays with expectations, allowing for the injection of new aesthetic and conceptual considerations. Over the course of this paper, I will explore some examples that reflect this duality, and consider how Pavlatova incorporates a uniquely female perspective that differs from that of many of her male artistic elders and peers.

Denotation and Connotation

Relationships between men and women are fertile subjects that frequently appear in Pavlatova's animations, and she intertwines dexterously nuanced character animation, utilizing a variety of visual styles, with symbols and words that are laden with associations. Consequently, in endeavoring to translate these coded layers, the semiotic theories of Roland Barthes, and his discussion of denotational and connotational images in the essay 'Rhetoric of the Image,' can offer a valuable decoding device. In my quest to shed light upon the uniquely female perspective that differentiates Pavlatova's vision from that of many male animators, I have found that certain feminist theories, such as Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema,' which explores the notion of the spectator's gaze and the viewing of women in film, help locate the subjective position within Pavlatova's animations. However, Pavlatova has proven to be a subject who defies ready theorization, and this is probably one of the reasons why I like her work so much. At the very moment when a viewer thinks that the themes or structure of an animation have become clearly apparent, Pavlatova pursues an unexpected branch in the road. For instance, in a series of Flash animations that can be viewed on her website about a neurotic heroine called 'Laila,' we witness Laila agonizing over whether an unnamed partner is cheating on her; she

Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007

consoles herself with the thought that ‘He told me they are just friends.’ The tone is one of intimacy and we empathize with the vulnerable heroine. As a female viewer, I experience a sense of solidarity with this young woman who has been so viciously betrayed by the callous world of men. One is therefore thoroughly unprepared for the camera pan to the left that exposes the identity of her unfaithful partner: a cat who is energetically having intercourse with another feline companion.

I believe that there is currently only a small cluster of female animators from English-speaking countries who have introduced the kind of anarchic, black twists to their narratives that one often encounters in the work of Pavlatova. Part of the reason for this phenomenon could be that the Western acculturation of women requires an observation of polite rules of etiquette in order to be ‘ladylike’ and therefore attractive to men. The edgy, gutsy humor of Matt Groening, Bill Plympton, Phil Mulloy and Mike Judge is able to accommodate nudity, farting, burping, sexual innuendo (and in the case of the independent animators Plympton and Mulloy, explicit sexual depictions), violence, and leaking orifices, with nary the lifting of an eyebrow, but I believe that the audience response might involve a greater sense of discomfort if one of these creators was a female. Pavlatova herself has commented that she could have pushed the sexual content of *Carnival of Animals* further, and created less controversy, if she was a male animator. In a 2006 interview she observed that: ‘I think that if a man had made this movie it would be more daring and more direct’ (Halkova 2006). Pavlatova has therefore employed strategies that involve a certain veiling of her content, such as symbolism, allegory, and irony, in order to temper the directness of her message, but such techniques also increase the outlandish humour and delicious nuttiness within the animation.

Surprising twists in a narrative’s trajectory constitute part of the pleasure derived from Pavlatova’s animated films; her technique of partial veiling, so that a viewer interacts not only with the surface of the narrative but also experiences the reverberation of rich layers of meaning, adds further to the viewer’s enjoyment. In his classic essay ‘Rhetoric of the Image,’ Barthes analyses an advertisement for Italian pasta, and observes that words in conjunction with images help anchor their signification, whereas images on their own can trigger a stream of signifieds. In his analysis of the advertisement, he writes that ‘the distinction between the literal message and the symbolic message is operational; we never encounter (at least in advertising) a literal image in a pure state’ (1977, p. 42). Consequently, there is the presented, or ‘denoted’ scene, a photograph of a string shopping bag with fresh produce, but also a variety of connotative signs whose reading depends on ‘the different kinds of knowledge – practical, national, cultural, aesthetic – invested in the image’ (Barthes 1977, p. 46), so that a viewer’s awareness of the tomato and pepper as vital ingredients within Italian cooking, will have their notion of the image’s ‘Italianness’ augmented. Barthes adds that ‘the denotation of the drawing is less pure than that of the photograph, for there is no drawing without style’ (1977, p. 43).

Barthes’ observations are extremely helpful in understanding why Pavlatova’s imagery is so resonant, creating a rich stream of associations for the viewer. In *Carnival of Animals* (2006), for instance, an early sequence deals with the onset of puberty: a group of nervous young girls are noticing changes in their bodies such as budding breasts, armpit hair that requires shaving, as well as a newfound interest in the unkempt boys who slouch past them. The characters in this sequence are drawn with a style that recalls the ‘Art Brut’ and deliberately ‘childlike’ work of artists such as Jean Dubuffet and the cartoonist William Steig, and thereby accentuates the sense of childhood’s raw and awkward progression into adulthood. A viewer who has knowledge about experimental animation and the principles underlying animated movement will find that the next

Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007

sequence carries a host of connotations, because Pavlatova plunges into a whirlwind of diamond-like vagina motifs and sausage-shaped penis symbols that speed to and fro across the screen, chasing each other, like an abstract animation by Len Lye. It is a side-splittingly outrageous animation joke, and she has even applied the classic animation principle of ‘squash and stretch’ to the bouncing penises. For the rest of the film, Pavlatova plays with the audience by introducing unexpected scenarios, a range of drawing styles, images that are the literal embodiment of linguistic phrases, and sexual innuendo in the most unlikely locations, such as an ejaculating fountain. The viewer is taken on a journey that defies traditional notions of political correctness, yet the romp is saved from sleaziness due to the myriad associations evoked. The overall message, to my mind, is the enjoyment of a variety of sexual scenarios as well as the animator’s sheer playfulness. Pavlatova says that it is ‘about getting joy from life’ and ‘it is something sparkling, but which doesn’t stay very long, like a small bottle of champagne.’

A Feminine Language

Contemporary female animators from the English-speaking world with the courage to skate close to the edge of ‘good taste’ include the British animator Joanna Quinn, the American animator Suzan Pitt, and Martha Colburn, an American who draws and paints over stretches of old films, including porn, to create new animated narratives that trigger both unease and laughter. Colburn’s recent animation *Destiny Manifesto* (2006), which rhythmically juxtaposed old painted images of Cowboys and Indians with scenes from the war in Iraq to a haunting, vaudeville-like piano soundtrack, is a masterpiece, and a biting condemnation of US policy. A gentler tone however emerges in Pavlatova’s work, through her ability to evoke an extraordinary range of emotions in her drawn characters, from rage to embarrassment to acute vulnerability. Pavlatova and Colburn belong to a generation of female animators who face battles in relation to sexuality and gender that are less overt than the issues that dominated feminist discourse of the 1970s and ‘80s, which included the need for a specifically female language, and the dismantling of the hegemonic stranglehold wrought by patriarchy.

The twenty-first century has witnessed works by the above female animators that continue to push boundaries in terms of what is an acceptable feminine creative version. Joanna Quinn’s recent animation *Dreams and Desires: Family Ties* (2006) depicted a drunken mess of a wedding, with her beautiful pencil drawings acquiring the vertiginous shifts and rolls of a hand-held video camera, and her subject matter paralleling the rollicking randomness of such a camera, with glimpses of inebriated casual sex, female belching, a toppled crucifix and religious minister, and a damaged zip revealing extensive naked flesh. Quinn’s subject matter is more the province of a bawdy, Rabelaisian thwarting of sacred codes, than the assertion of a female erotic gaze, which was a major concern in her 1987 animation *Girls Night Out*. In that film, Quinn enjoyably subverted the traditional male gaze of cinema outlined by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, so that a hunky male stripper is voyeuristically relished from the perspective of a group of women, and then later toppled off his cocky perch when one of the women removes his G-string. However, Quinn’s and Pavlatova’s post-millennium animations, while having feminist sympathies, contain too many surprises, ambiguities and revelations that border on the politically incorrect, to easily discuss their work in the context of feminist theory. Pavlatova’s twists tease us by allowing the completely unexpected to burst upon the familiar, so that insinuations of bestiality, for example, suddenly appear within a moment of domestic angst, and in *Taily Tales* (2001) there is even a bored cat called Norbert who relieves the tedium of his week by spending a day exuberantly fellating his tail.

Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007



Fig. 1 - Michaela Pavlatova: *Taily Tales*, 2001

It could be said that our Western notions of political correctness have somewhat bypassed the former Soviet bloc, but it is now eighteen years since the 'Velvet Revolution' restored democratic rule in Czechoslovakia, and all but two of Pavlatova's films have been created without Soviet censors breathing down her neck. She has also lived for several years in San Francisco, been a visiting professor at Harvard University, and a worldly knowledge of international art practices informs her work. I would posit that the rich legacy of Czech animation is nevertheless an important influence in the particular

sensibility that infuses her work and differentiates it from her Western peers, and I want to apply some scrutiny now to the characteristics of this tradition, and Pavlatova's layering of her animations with a variety of semiotic codes.

The Czech Animation Tradition

If one examines the work of Jiri Trnka and Jan Svankmajer, two of the great Czech animation auteurs, features from their oeuvre arise that may be compared and contrasted with those of Pavlatova. Both Trnka and Svankmajer have worked principally with three dimensional puppets or objects, whereas Pavlatova has animated different styles of drawing, or interfused drawing with live action, such as in her film about her grandmother, *O Babice* (2000), and she has also directed the live-action feature film, *Faithless Games* (2003). Svankmajer firmly identifies as a Surrealist artist, while Pavlatova has declared in the autobiographical documentary *This Could Be Me* (1996) that 'I like the world of ordinary things. Reality can be more interesting than fiction. Reality and relationships with my parents, with my brother, with my friends, with my grandma, and relations between the man and the woman.' In an animated drawing of her face, she proclaims in a saucy, breathy voice: 'I like to watch people,' and continues 'I like to observe their faces, to create the stories hidden behind the words.' This confession that she enjoys voyeuristic pleasure reveals an artistic stance that can be related to Svankmajer's interests, but Pavlatova's delight in 'hidden stories' and the use of images possessing a wide sphere of connotation, operates within the realm of human interactions and domesticity.

Svankmajer, like Pavlatova, possesses the ability to push the subject matter of his films to the very edge. Absurdity therefore resounds in each of his films, and in animations such as *Food* (1992), where diners eat their clothes and body parts, there is the type of insane black humour and totally unpredictable narrative trajectory that one relishes in Pavlatova. Sexual symbolism and fetishism crop up in both Svankmajer's *Conspirators of Pleasure* (1996) and Pavlatova's *Carnival of Animals*. As Marina Warner wrote in a recent article in *The Guardian*, although there are no explicit sexual references in *Conspirators of Pleasure*, a conspirator 'treats himself to an orgy of stimuli secretly in his garage, where he massages himself with his fabricated utensils' such as 'brushes, bristles, nails, feathers, velvet, fur and rubber fingertips,' resulting in 'one of the most suggestive and filthiest experiences you will ever have the good fortune to see – or rather to feel' (Warner 2007). While *Carnival of Animals* features some outlandish scenarios from a

Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007

conventional perspective – long-beaked birds tweaking the nipples of women while old men masturbate, a phallus-shaped fountain that ejaculates liquid at the climax of a sequence (see fig. 2) – Pavlatova however, does not regularly couch her animations in the type of extreme situations that often crop up in Svankmajer, nor do her narratives typically resemble dreamlike fragments.



Fig. 2 - Michaela Pavlatova: *Carnival of Animals*, 2006

There is always a contrapuntal lightness that balances the darker themes within her animations, and a focus on human interaction. In this area she can be compared to Trnka, with his attention to character and nuance, and tender emotions co-exist with darker sentiments in her sequences. Compared to both Trnka and Svankmajer, Pavlatova's interests are much more domestic and personal, and she is fascinated with the emotional motivations behind daily dramas and small, seemingly banal details.

In tracing the influences upon Pavlatova and Czech animation, it is worth considering the legacy of decades of Soviet rule and censorship. Although she only made two animations under Communism, it is interesting to explore to what extent Pavlatova has absorbed the legacy of Czech animation under the Soviets, and in what ways she departs from this tradition. Chris Robinson writes that Estonian animation 'can be characterized by its strange combination of the rational and absurd' (2006, vii). Paul Wells, in *Understanding Animation*, also regards the presence of the absurd as a defining feature of Eastern European animation, and he links it with the works of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. Wells writes that the absurdists brought 'a philosophic dimension to the visual pun,' and that their outlook sprang from the belief that human beings were depersonalized by modern society and subjected to mind-numbing systems of oppression that crippled human potential. Only the spirit of black humor could allow people to live amidst such bleak conditions, because it recognized 'the absurdity of ever-repeating patterns of behavior, and, inappropriate notions of order and routine as they are determined by hierarchical power structures in society' (Wells 1998, p. 134).

Black humor certainly is a strong feature within Pavlatova's animations, and whereas Eastern European animators under Communist rule used it to vent against insane governmental systems, in Pavlatova's work, black humor expresses the insanity of various relationships, whether they are familial or romantic. She collapses the decorum that surrounds social niceties, revealing the dark urges within us all, and the truth to Freud's insight that tendentious humor reveals repressed drives that are considered taboo. In *Uncles and Aunts* (1992), for example, animated sepia photographs with written captions depict family get-togethers, and Vladimir, who has been

Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007

poking his tongue out at the plump Auntie Marushka, finds that she eventually pins his tongue to the floor with her heavy boot. Grandpa meanwhile turns up in a wheelchair and is greeted with a birthday cake blazing with candles. Both he and the chair are accidentally incinerated; the family stands around and pragmatically roasts sausages over the flames.

The German film *The Lives of Others* (2006) explores the lives of a group of artists in the former East Germany, and the debilitating constraints imposed by the system and the Stasi secret police. Czech artists under Soviet rule also faced a severe curtailing of expression, forcing the writer Milan Kundera and filmmaker Milos Forman into exile, and the work of writers such as Ivan Klima to be banned for years. Wells notes that such strictures propelled Central and East European animators towards allegory and metaphor as vehicles for expression, because protest could be hidden beneath symbolic layers and thereby dodge the censors. Puppets, distanced from the human form and therefore supposedly innocuous, served as mouthpieces for dissent, as exemplified in the classic stop-motion *The Hand* by Jiri Trnka. Jan Svankmajer's fascination with the contents of the repressed embraced absurd juxtapositions of childhood motifs, sexuality, death, and grotesque horror, that also spoke of the traumatization of the individual due to external forces, and thus can be read as the effects of both political and personal oppression.

There are no longer any Soviet censors scrutinizing the moral fabric of Czech animation, and these days there is comparative artistic and political freedom. Nevertheless, Pavlatova's animations still bear the imprint of the legacy of the past, although it is the sphere of personal relationships rather than the Communist State that now possesses the power to inflict various agonies, and in her films, characters rebel against the injustices of lost love, disappointment and betrayal by using the full repertoire of the Czech animation legacy: black humor, absurdity, and the use of allegory and images with highly symbolic, connotational capacities. In her 1995 animation *Repete*, men and women are stuck in a perpetual rut of behavioural problems that cause a great deal of frustration and misery; a young woman rejects her partner and he immediately pulls a noose over his head, an elderly woman brings her husband a plate of food at his desk and he barely notices her.

Pavlatova literalizes the relentless repetition of patterns by repeating the various vignettes of dysfunctional interaction to a rhythmic percussive beat, so that sound carries a symbolic resonance. The potential bleakness of such scenes is relieved by some very funny, black moments: in Pavlatova's world, animals also experience relationship difficulties, and two worms passionately kiss and then one slaps the other. The climax of the film depicts all the protagonists in the animation crossing over into each other's vignettes, and because they have all been represented with a variety of visual signatures, a vivid stylistic *mélange* occurs, and the characters are symbolically depicted as being from different worlds, but still connected. They finally realize the destructiveness of their behaviour and try to alter their patterns. But there is no redemptive happy ending in *Repete*; rather, some of the couples are able to make positive changes, while for others the new patterns become just as problematic as the old ones.

The Presence of Words

Pavlatova's animations *Words, Words, Words* (1991) and *Carnival of Animals* (2006) both exemplify the power of the visual pun that Wells associates with the Eastern European animation tradition. They also display numerous instances where abstract concepts are concretized; a feature of Svankmajer and especially Saul Steinberg, a Jewish Romanian artist, whose beautifully absurd cartoons exploring life in America adorned the pages of *The New Yorker* magazine for decades. Steinberg consistently played with the fact that words and images are both signs, which

Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007

according to the father of semiotics, C.S. Peirce, are presences standing in for absences. Words are concepts and images, and Steinberg exposed their multidimensional nature in drawings, for instance, where the word 'Here' is depicted as a sculptural object standing some distance from 'There.' The linguistic playfulness within Steinberg's work is present both in *Words, Words, Words* and *Carnival of Animals*. For example, in the latter film the 'animalistic' power of the libidinal drive in Pavlatova's animation is rather startlingly concretized by the fact that humans and animals literally joyfully frolic and fornicate together to the music by Saint-Saens. In another sequence an orgiastic circle of rabbits embodies the vernacular phrase 'bonking like bunnies.'

Indeed, the interchangeability of words and images can be identified as a consistent feature in East European animation during the years of Soviet rule. In Jan Lenica's 1964 animation *A*, the letter 'A' relentlessly brutalizes a man until he expels it from the room, only to have the letter 'B' appear. In Miroslav Kijowicz's 1966 film *Klatki* or 'Cages', letters represent freedom of thought rather than oppression: letters appear to form the names of philosophers such as Heidegger and Sartre. In the Czech animator Bretislav Pojar's 1981 film, *E*, the letter 'E' acquires such a civic monumentality, that a man who instead sees the letter 'B' is pronounced a lunatic.


Such strategies helped foil the Soviet censors, but they also explore the very nature of representation and communication, and cultural constructs. In *Words, Words, Words*, the English saying 'to go in one ear and come out the other', which Pavlatova says has an equivalency in Czech, is conveyed by a liquid substance that a woman releases by speaking into the ear of an elderly man, and it reappears on the other side of his head, without his reacting.

The substance's blue coloration creates a variety of watery connotations in English, such as 'a stream of words' or 'a torrent of abuse.' *Words, Words, Words* is indeed chock-full with examples of a visual 'language' that require the audience's interaction and interpretation, and the film itself is a poignant and hilarious study of the human need to interact. Pavlatova's masterful linework, her delight in a playful absurdity, and her predilection for conceptual complexity rather than trite answers, may be compared with the approach of Steinberg, Steig, and the Estonian animator Priit Parn, and when I suggested this, she said she felt honoured to be included in such company, and that teachers had shown the work of these artists to her class at university.

Conclusion

Pavlatova might in fact consider my comparison of her animations with certain traits evident in the Eastern European animation tradition under Communism to be a load of melodramatic hogwash, an interpretation by an Antipodean outsider, and this is fine, as her films lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Certainly, there is a warmth and sunniness, coupled with her sense of irony and black humor, that is quite different from stereotypical Eastern European angst. In addition, Pavlatova creates female characters that are not just passive playthings for men, or confined to traditional household tasks as in several of Svankmajer's films, but individuals with needs who strive and suffer valiantly. In one of her early animations for instance, *Crossword* (1989), a domestic farce unfolds with a woman asserting her sexual needs, only to despair when her husband busies himself with a crossword puzzle. In *Carnival of Animals*, a powerful and poignant sequence depicts a woman in a business jacket and skirt who is clearly older than the nubile age celebrated by women's magazines and Britney Spears' fandoms. This woman stands confidently in a spotlight while her stockings and clothes slowly glide up and down her body, and are removed. It is a sensual and moving celebration of female sexuality.

Animation Studies – Animated Dialogues, 2007

I find it heartening that in our contemporary culture of reality shows and various quick-fix narratives devoid of subtlety, the richness of Eastern European animation with its allegorical and symbolic levels, its philosophical reflection upon the human condition, and its sheer poetry and lunacy, has not been lost but continues to unfold in the work of animators like Pavlatova. She has turned her gaze to the nuances of relationships, sex, and the experience of being female, a perspective that serves to refreshingly expand upon the vista explored by Trnka and Svankmajer. Czech animation has found a worthy successor to ensure that its vibrant tradition continues. 

References

- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image Music Text*. London: Fontana Press.
- Freud, S. (1976). *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. London: Penguin Books.
- Halkova, J. (2006). 'Michaela Pavlatova: an Oscar-nominated Czech animator, Interview with Michaela Pavlatova', *Czechs Today*, [Online] 26 April. Available at: <http://www.radio.cz/en/article/78278>
- Mulvey, L. (1992). 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' In Screen (ed) *The Sexual Subject*. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 22-35.
- Pavlatova, M., *Flash animations*. Available at: <http://www.michaelapavlatova.com/laila/> & <http://www.volny.cz/aamica/tailytales/>
- Robinson, C. (2006). *Estonian Animation: Between Genius and Utter Illiteracy*. Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing.
- Silverman, K. (1984). *The Subject of Semiotics*. Oxford University Press.
- Warner, M. (2007). 'Dream works.' *The Guardian*, [internet] Saturday 16 June. Available at: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,2103939,00.html>
- Wells, P. (1998). *Understanding Animation*. London: Routledge.

© Miriam Harris

Edited by Nichola Dobson