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THE FUTURE OF ILLUSION: *FLUX*

On a cold January morning in 2003 I join other worshippers to celebrate the annual rebirth ritual of that canonical form, the animated short subject: seven minutes of magic, plus or minus 4 minutes, plus or minus the magic. The congregants, mostly independent animators and their invited guests (mostly other animators), belong to an embattled minion, resisting its own extinction at the hands of the Hollywood leviathan--by voting in the Academy Awards Pre-Pre Screening. The program consists of 10 films picked at earlier screenings in Los Angeles, winnowed down from the many which meet the Academy's arcane qualifications.

Just as Freud argued that all humans need religion to overcome their multifaceted fears, we who struggle with this art seek guidance and deliverance in these turbulent times: America, the S.U.V. of nations, casting off its innocent exceptionalism; Saddam's effigy pulled off its plinth just as Czech and Polish animation would have imagined it; Marx (and the planned economies which unwittingly produced so many of those Existentialist animations) long discredited since the Wall fell; Disney's "traditional" cartoon studio closed in favor of CGI. Even Mark Langer's "The End of Animation History" essay genially argues that animation's special status has been rendered illusory by the new digital lingua franca. "Is nothing sacred?" I murmur sotto voce as I take my seat during the offertory.

HOSANNAH, HOSANNAH

The program is mostly lame, but one film's flabbergasting graphic audacity and looney nerve make it stand out; it quickens the pulse and causes a pounding in the temples; I laugh, am amazed and must constrain the impulse to shout "amen" and stomp my feet at the end. Nobody else even applauds: we're in church. The film is Chris Hinton's "Flux." This kind of epiphanal reaction has occurred in the past when I first beheld "Frank Film," "Tale of Tales," Mulloy's "Cowboys." "Flux" didn't survive the competition for nomination but has gathered its share of festival booty, so my admiration isn't mere, perverted contrarianism.

So, how and why did it push my button?

The story is no great shakes, told a billion times: the great circle of life. Maybe Hinton knew his audience would be totally lost unless he hung his visuals on predictable, universal, dare I say “sweet”, rites of passage. Big theme episodes (Birth, Nest-Building, Love, Pain, Happiness, Courtship, Death) are stitched together with that Western Canadian penchant for cornball zaniness (there’s even the gag about sawing off the tree limb you’re sitting on).

IN-BETWEEN THE SHEETS

Hinton’s success, the source of my astonishment, lies in his reinvention of drawing. Calling it a technique would be churlishly clinical. “Explodity”**** is more like it. The characters barely stay on the screen as the viewer is forced to assemble the bits of line and smudges of color that dance and flit about in a maelstrom of randomness. Hinton is thumbing his nose at the cardinal rule of sequence drawing, continuity.

Every beginner, even the poor slob who traced those backgrounds for Gertie, knows how the vagaries of the pencil’s twitch, the most nuanced hesitancy of wrist action, is revealed as random, linear wiggle in the pencil test. The wiggle was elevated to an a signature in the hands of R.O. Blechman, as filtered through the animation of Tissa David and Ed Smith. Then it became bowdlerized by numerous imitators, commercialized by the producers of Dr. Katz, and now available, codified if you will, for any After Effects painter of vector shapes. It signifies hesitance, authenticity, spontaneity, energy (take-your-pick).

Hinton begins with a different premise: Flux is not just literal change, but chaos, graphic discontinuity, a visually delicious catastrophe, which the viewer must organize. Robert Breer’s collage “Blazes” (1953) did much the same by treating each frame as a discreet unit, assaulting the eye, taunting viewers to impose their own perceptual glue to wrest order and meaning out of the flickering stream of data.

The line not only wiggles, it changes dimension, character, energy and function virtually every time we shift to the next phase, as often as 8 times a second, now brushed, now quilled. now smeared. And instead of containing a consistent color shape these lines refuse to participate in the illusion of layered space. Colors seems to be applied more or less at random, splashing out of their boundaries, laughing at the sad cartoon conventions of stroke and fill.

Hinton’s original drawings on paper are digitally isolated and composited over a uniformly flat background to retain the evidential trace of their rough genesis

while freeing them from paper's texture: a happy union of primitive draughting energy and digital organization.

TIME MATTERS

During the blazing four minutes we may be tempted to retreat into a reverie on two competing notions of time: as a continuous river, or as discreet packets which are fused into an apparent continuum. Oliver Sacks, while describing the impact Marey-Muybridge intermittency had on Victorian models of time, updates the issue with recent clinical studies of neurologically impaired patients whose vision consists of freeze frames.* He postulates that this might be closer to nature, that we just learn to speed up this flow in order to cope.

Animators also tend to be congenitally focused on the elemental particles of time's synthetic construction: not only can they be "re-mapped" to affect tempo, direction and consecutive order, they now can be organized via a diverse array of tools. The cinematic apparatus may still provide a metaphoric interface but the computer runs in "real" time which it so cleverly and swiftly breaks down to the 6th decimal. A strobe light's variable flicker illuminates Gregory Barsamian's kinetic sculpture to "stop" it, to construct a synthetic performance of actuality.** Even the lowly, primordial flipbook is, under our thumb, an intimate, intuitive, haptic time-machine.

But "Flux" is clearly a cartoon world: the shapes flung onto the screen represent people and events, comic gags, architecture, emotional states. Perspective is flat; scale is irrational; anatomy is plastic, momentarily swollen to emphasize an active irritant: a screaming facial grimace fills the screen then just as suddenly gives way to the next narrative nugget. Props appear and disappear as needed: the house pops on as an extension of a door, attached to a hand; a dug grave, looking like a pocket, is raked shut in one swath. Figure-ground conventions are disregarded as every drawn object assumes the vitality of character, tumbling playfully to its own gravitational twitch. We are inhabiting the mind of very inventive child, perhaps borderline psychotic, who would no doubt delight Cohl and his fellow Incoherents.***

The sound design by Lance Neveu complements the turmoil by tossing up a delectable gumbo of Harry Partch, banjo twangs and Swedish mumbling played backwards. At least that's what I'm hearing.

In the midst of this all this mayhem we witness events which are so funny, so personal, so naughty, yet displayed out of the periphery of the mind's eye. The daughter comes of age as she blows out candles on her birthday cake (which causes her breasts to sprout), just as her doofus suitor makes his appearance driving a putt-putt, part of the myth of North American courtship. His finger taps a pink blob attached a network of ganglia and we hear a "honk." The action is repeated later and by then we've come to associate it with the thrill of teenage sexuality.

Another moment of emotional release occurs after the parents are buried and the young couple, back in the sheltering home, breath a collective, world-weary sigh of relief. They kiss, thereby setting into motion a mini-Rube Goldberg organism of slurpy procreation complete with sperm, egg and umbilical cord which becomes the rope of the swing which returns us to the opening episode.

Both episodes are comic, elusive, indirectly ribald, wise, raw yet entertaining, with a lightness, sorely missed from, perhaps even inevitably excluded, from the mass market which insists on confusing adult animation with potty-mouthed, adolescent obsession.

WHAT IF

So what if "Flux" and its siblings never make it to the Oscars? What if the Animated Short Subject gets shunted off to the technical awards banquet, retired as a kind of curiosity, or treated solely as a portfolio presentation for the feature industry, or banished to the ghetto of academic animation festivals narrowly focused on craft, theory or hollow visual stimulation?

By way of jaunty optimism, consider GG's catechism:

1. Animation is synthetic performance.
2. It gains strength by contrast and discontinuity.
2. It can happen anywhere: cinema, stage, sidewalk, local bar, church, bedroom, internet, backyard, gallery, even a documentary film festival.
3. It can dance with wild abandon, or curl up in a fetal ball of self-absorption, but it should never stop thinking.

DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN

I doze off, slumped in the pew. Suddenly my brain suddenly snaps on as I hear a familiar banjo twang. It turns out a full year has passed and I'm now at the 2004 Academy Pre-Pre Screening watching last year's Oscar hopefuls, and ("oh my God!") here's Hinton again; this year's new film is called "Nibbles." He has

reduced the chaos somewhat, relied more on satirical repetitions (obsessive, hysterical, oral-gratification piggery blended with the macho-hunter-gatherer myth), and has pulled off a hilarious follow-up. At least this time I'm not the only one laughing.
(Nominated, 1994)

George Griffin
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* New York Review of Books. Vol. 51 Number 1, January 15, 2004.
or www.nybooks.com/articles/16882

** www.gregorybarsamian.com

*** Imagine the hagiographical diptych: Cohl and McCay, the Frenchman and the American (uh oh, those pesky national character stereotypes). Both are successful print cartoonists who claim to have invented sequence drawing, but they represent fundamentally different schools. Winsor wants to bring to life an actual Brontosaurus by skillful use of perspective, scale, weight and a naturalistic temporal performance: an illustration of the real world. Emile, by contrast, regresses to a primitive stick-figure sketchiness in his debut. "Fantasmagorie" is a world reduced to a nightmare of improbable anarchy. WinsorWorld follows the continuities of conventional perception, while EmileWorld is diagrammatic, abstract, hallucinatory.

Trawling the tortuous threads of animation DNA reveals Winsor in the pictorial elegance of post-Silly Symphony Disney all the way to Nemo, and virtually all CGI, which is intent on its own photo-realist perfectionism (Lusitania as model for Titanic), while Emile figures in the grotesque cartoon madness of Fleischer, Avery, and the unsettling experiments of McLaren, Vester, et al. One creates a seamlessly continuous illusion, while the other thwarts our "natural" sense of time by strategies of discontinuity.

****Title of a pamphlet by the by the Russian Futurist poet, Kruchenykh.

