

FURNITURE OF MY MIND

From “El Hotel Electrico,” by the Catalan trickfilm-meister Segundo de Chomon, to “Roof Sex,” by the New York stop-motion-meister PES, 100 years later, there is a tortuous lineage from gag cartoons to introspective meditations on the relationship between humans and their intimate environments. This archeological mash-up of styles and periods poses variations on the dilemma of “modern man” at war with himself and the synthetic world he has created for his own leisured pleasure.

Program:

Renaissance, Valerian Borowczyk. 1963, 8:47.
Moving Day, Walt Disney. 1936, 9:00
Set in Motion, Jane Aaron. 1987, 5:00.
El Hotel Electrico, Segundo de Chomon. 1908. 9:30
Roof Sex, PES 1:00
Furniture Love, Bill Plympton. 1990, :30.
Picnic with Weissmann, Jan Svankmajer. 1968, 11:00.
Furniture Poetry, Paul Bush. 1999, 5:00.
Utopia Parkway, Joanna Priestly. 1997, 4:30.
Construction Manual. Alan D. Joseph, 3:00
The Chair. George Dunning. 1967, 4:00.
Luxo Jr. John Lasseter. 1986, 2:00.
Frank Film. Frank and Caroline Mouris. 1973, 9:00.

Duration: approx. 72 mins.

In “Walden” (1854) Thoreau said, “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” And, with a bit more wit, “I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and threw them out the window in disgust.” Our quintessential hippie philosopher here dusts off the Socratic maxim “the unexamined life is not worth living” and weaves in his own anti-materialist ethos of creative poverty.

Furniture is the stuff with which we fill up our living and working spaces. It’s the functional, material culture, integral components for our “machine for living,” yet often taken for granted, neglected, inert, invisible. The furnished room can display complex indications of status and taste, or it can be generic, sterile, institutional. In that peculiar zone of animation where reality is always synthetic and provisional, these things can come to life as ironic, comic, ornery, adversarial, even malign actors. The films in this program interpret furniture both literally (chairs, Ikea shelving) and symbolically, like Alexander Pope’s “loads of learned lumber in his head” (language, advertising). There is often a tension between our expectations and what is actually happening in the frame and on the soundtrack.

Starting with Walerian Borowczyk’s metaphorical parlor game, “Renaissance,” is no accident. My generation of animators may have come out of a cartoon childhood but as

adults in the '60s the grim psychological realities of Eastern European animation, particularly from Poland, made a huge impression. Borowczyk's background in poster design strongly influenced his cut-out animation in "Les Jeux des Anges" and the "Kabal" films, but here he inverts the tidy accumulation of Victorian materialism with real objects captured by stop-motion. "Hommage à Hy Hirsch" refers to the legendary experimental animator from San Francisco living in Paris who helped Borowczyk escape Poland and gave him a place to stay and work. "Renaissance" perhaps refers to his newfound creative life in the West, but drenched with a mordant Middle European skepticism. In addition to being every American animator's Oedipal parent, Walt Disney was also an incurable optimist, glossing the nastiest realities with seductive diversion. In "Moving Day," a classic Depression-Era "Mickey" cartoon, which still reverberates in our own melt-down economy, an eviction is about to take place, and the ever-menacing Sheriff Pete threatens to seize "yer foinitcher." Donald does his inimitable dance with plunger attached to his butt, then Goofy, in his first starring role, performs a rubbery-limbed set-piece with upright piano on a loading ramp. The brilliant comic choreography of Fred Spencer, Al Eugster and Art Babbitt propels this cast of innocent, inventive survivors to their well-deserved deliverance. We witness the evolution of animated character from the generic pacing in a circle panic of silent-era Fleischer to the Goof's reflective personality of pragmatic nuttiness, a trait developed in countless "How To" cartoons, updated as recently as the 2007 "How to Hookup your Home Theater."

Continuing the dubious yet inevitable national character scheme we now turn to the delightful world of PES, nickname of Adam Pesapane. Instead of an ominous surrealism, we have a joyous playpen. PES brilliantly re-invents the relationships between everyday objects. They retain their autonomy while converging into an organically delirious alternative reality. Using cumbersome, overstuffed easy chairs (one of which he has suggested may have been the site of his own conception) PES shows the carnal side of an "Up on the Roof" romance: in broad daylight, a breathless, awkward, moaning "quickie." Another chapter in the same book, one of his original "Plymptoons" made for MTV, before Bill became an introspective art-house auteur, involves a *folie à quatre* who at least seem to be aware that their naughty pursuit of illicit pleasure has a limit.

Real people interacting with real furniture in real space and in unreal time is the chief concern of three films which seem to be from different planets: Chomon's pioneering entertainments were called "trickfilms" rather than animation because they were essentially live-action interlarded with playful stop/motion effects and sequences. Yet today even the hand-cranked live scenes of stagey spectacles, jammed with over-acting, funny-dressed folks, retain an artificial flavor no less exotic than the skittering wardrobes and stuffy sofas that shuffle around them.

Before moving into authoring children's books and producing for Sesame Street, Jane Aaron created a suite of fresh, simple, yet sophisticated stop-motion films that bypassed narrative and heavy symbolism for something close to pure play. "Set in Motion," like "Drawn to Light," has no urgent agenda beyond the request that we reconsider our quotidian environment in a new light—as objects possessing a life of their own. An ironing board, a baby's crib, a young couple's waltzing embrace form a kind of

democratic tableau vivant accompanied by Donald Fagen's infectiously unobtrusive music.

Jan Svankmajer has rewritten the book on stop-motion so radically that his name has become an adjective. "Picknick mit Weissmann," an early experiment shrouded in Teutonic mystery, produced by the perhaps non-existent A.J. Puluj, presents an autumnal backyard furnished incongruously with domestic furniture. Ominous occurrences with phonographs and drawers, interspersed with rapid accumulations of leafy piles (or pyres) suggest that this will not be a pleasant outing.

Although Paul Bush is best known for scratching the surface (e.g. "The Albatross," 1998) he often approaches film as a wry epistemologist. "Furniture Poetry" represents this other side of Bush, as an alchemist of subjective consciousness. His domestic objects (the opening table reminiscent of Borowczyk's) may be pixilated but they are stripped of all their narrative potential and reduced to a binary existence of either on or off. He tickles a proposition by Wittgenstein, similar to the question of the sound of a tree falling in a forest, and re-imagines the existence of his stuff between their visual time frames—a tart antidote to continuity.

Joseph Cornell's boxes, precious niches of American surrealism, evoking a lost European culture he never experienced, are re-imagined in Joanna Priestly's "Utopian Parkway". The title refers both to Cornell's home in Queens and to the impossibility of his nowhere world. The high priestess of personal animation, Priestly combines her signature card sequences of bio-morphism, sexual anxiety and exotic porcelain fauna with real environments, photographed through glass bottles and nestled in specimen boxes. Far from merely imitating Cornell she pays homage as well to Morandi and Arp in this witty send-up of the Victorian fascination for collecting bibelots.

Alan D. Joseph's "Construction Manual" is so exactly what it is that it becomes a kind of hymn to our pathetically sexed-up world of brand-identity and disposability, yet rendered without a whiff of condescension. Compared to Joseph's step-by-step manual George Dunning's "The Chair" for a delightful blast of ironic, Anglophone mumbo-jumbo. The eponymous chair makes a late appearance acting as a kind of "McGuffin", while all hell breaks loose around it. First, a load of verbiage piles itself into shaky, drunken architecture. Then loosely painted, flickery figures slide about in limbo. Dunning is just warming up, experimenting with the pleasures of language and rotoscoping, which would re-emerge later in "The Yellow Submarine's" Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds sequence.

When MoMA honored Pixar with a full-fledged 20th anniversary show of films and art in 2005, the most memorable attractions were the hand-drawn character designs which revealed that behind all the splines and vectors lurked the DNA of the comic pencil, scratching to find the perfect arc of comic hyperbole. Side by side were wire-frame models, perhaps by Alvy Ray Smith, and rough pastel sketches by John Lasseter. "Luxo, Jr." wasn't just a cute short film, it was a hunch that the computer could be used to create empathic characters designed to look exactly, hyper-photographically, like real

things: toys or furniture. The quotidian lamp has since become part of the Pixar logo, as recognizable as a silhouette of mouse ears.

“Frank Film” is the most unlikely and, for me, the best animated film to win an Oscar. Does it matter? Yes. Because it demonstrated, in 1974, that the animation industry, so often burdened by a lazy tilt toward professional craft, could still recognize genius. Here was a young artist who had hoarded a trove of advertising images, precisely cut, cataloged into an eccentric taxonomy of form and stored as lumber in his hyper-active mind, to be issued as art when the opportunity arose. Animation, as he explains on the track, became the trigger that allowed him to jettison conventional graphic rules. These cascading, multilayered images are our stuff, our irresistible culture of narcissistic materialism, offered as a perfect storm of aspiration and memory. The uninflected first person, autobiographical voice, threaded with Godardian reflexivity, is further layered with incantatory accumulations of witty puns (mixed by the late sound guru Tony Schwartz). Twenty-five years later, Frank and Caroline Mouris released a clever sequel, “Frankly Caroline” and more are promised, but the original remains a steamroller.

(NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS) -William Carlos Williams