
RESPONSE TO MICHAEL SPORN FOR HIS SPLOG

6/7/11

Hi,

Here they are. If there's any you don't want to answer, don't. If there's anything you weren't to say, even though there's no question, feel free to say it. I just want to get some small idea of what's on your mind these days, and I'm not sure my questions will get to any of that.

Can you give us an idea of your beginnings? Where you went to school and why you went into animation.

I know that some of your first work with animation was studio driven. What moved you to get away from that commercially driven form and more toward the art form?

Your earlier films (HEAD, VIEWMASTER, even in a way FLYING FUR) seem to have a goal of exploring as well as exploiting the history and medium of animation & film as well as telling each surface story within the film. Yet, at some point, this theme appears to have left the more recent films (A LITTLE ROUTINE, KO KO, NEW FANGLED) wherein the narrative element comes more to the surface. Was there something that caused that change?

Does working with computer technology as opposed to the camera have any effect on the themes of your films?

What programs do you prefer working in to create your animation?

Any thoughts about 3d/cgi?

Your films have always had an affiliation with jazz. KO KO, YOU'RE OUTA HERE and others have been more direct about it than others, yet the attachment is there. How do you see the relation of jazz to animation?

(each section relates to one of the specific questions)

BEGINNINGS/EDUCATION

Drawing came first, as with every child, before writing, and with encouragement from my father, an architect, and mother, housewife/pianist. I drew and absorbed cartoons as a truant, instead of studying at school or at home. My parents forbade comic books because they thought they were limiting and vulgar so I had to sneak off to read them. Ditto TV. There was little help from schools, either; I couldn't deal with criticism from authority figures, especially art teachers. I was also captivated by photography and what was called hi-fi (building electronic components from a kit), machines that involved sound and image. I learned darkroom photography skills in the Army (drafted pre-Vietnam, after dropping out of college); designed posters, then learned silkscreen and

type setting in order to print them; finally graduated college in political science and came to NYC to “find myself.” So, basically, false starts, no real art schooling, learn-as-you-go.

When I came to NYC I first worked in government for Head Start but the city had a way of fracturing all the walls and boxes I had constructed throughout my life. I went to films constantly, hung around NYU film school where my friends were enrolled. When I showed my drawings to anyone I simply splayed them out on a table where people could just dig in and choose what they wanted to see. This made me a little impatient. I wanted to control HOW they looked at the drawings. That was the epiphany. I had already seen Breer, Brakhage and Vanderbeek, (also Godard) so I bought a used Bolex and tried to teach myself how to animate. Well, that didn't work.

THE STUDIO

I had to go to school. I was lucky to get a weekend job doing a storyboard for John Hubley, but the biggest break was an apprentice job at a studio producing animated commercials. I was hired to run the Xerox machine (a stat camera that transferred lines to cel), but I also painted cels, drew inbetweens and even drew my first flipbooks during lulls in production. This one year experience was enormously educational, a true gift, and if it were possible to replicate it today it would be worth more than a post graduate degree.

The work-flow at Focus Design, typical for the period, involved many specialists. It was well known for its use of designers like Rowland Wilson and Tomi Ungerer, but the real storyman was our director, Phil Kimmelman, created a pitch-perfect boards in a generic style that expertly framed the 30 second narrative. Bill Peckman, a virtuoso stylist, did layout and design, no matter how precise or loose the style. Bill and I were about the same age but, like all the staff, he had a lot of industry experience. We shared a passion for comics (and Bill now supplies much of the wonderful, vintage graphics for Michael's blog). The staff animators were Jack Schnerk, Dante Barbetta and Sal Faillace; assistants included Jerry Dvorak and Victor Barbetta. Agnes Cannata was the background artist. Judy Price headed the I&P department where the star inker was Ruth Manes. George Davis was the principal camera service. These characters are to this day etched in my memory, as vivid as the cartoons we produced.

I can recall watching a PT (on an upright Moviola naturally) with everyone gathered around when Jack (who was usually jovial) shouts, “What's happening to the nose? Looks like it's dripping!” This was a Tomi Ungerer wobbly-lined spot for Greyhound in which the driver's head grows a huge pickle-like nose with a bus inside. I had drawn a few random inbetweens that had produced a boiling line. Bill calmed him down by saying something like “It's OK Jack. It's just the new style.” Yellow Submarine had just come out (I had particularly loved Lucy in Sky). Most of the older artists at the studio were grouchy because it was a “designer's” film, not an “animator's” film. I was laid off when business slowed. The other memorable studio experience was a one month stint as an assistant on “Fritz the Cat” working under legendary animators Jim Tyer, Marty Taras, and Johnny Gentillela. I was fired by Ralph for not knowing how or wanting to clean up Tyer's amazing, scribbly extremes. My wife also speculates that my “cats per hour” speed was too slow.

Being in the union helped to get free-lance jobs as an assistant. Concurrently I was able to produce small graphic jobs on my home-made stand. Then I got a 15 second Sesame Street spot based on one of five boards I had submitted. By 1969, I had begun to make my own films. So by the early 70s I had developed a bifurcated view of the art: professional, slick, commercial, studio-produced work for hire on the one hand and experimental, personal work done independently, without a budget, as an amateur (i.e. for love). This almost dialectical split seemed to demand an existential choice and I became a kind of evangelist for fusing design and animation in one stroke, but in fact I kept a foot in both camps. So, in the end, the lessons learned at Focus helped me later to earn a living.

COMPARING THE EARLY WORK

One way to consider the films is to mark a transition from self-conscious, reflexive experiments to work that's narrative-driven, more accessible, more thematic, in a way more personal. You could say *New Fangled* is *about* advertising jargon, even though the linkage is obtuse, with double meanings and mysterious references. I was doing a lot of commercials at the time so it was a bit like biting the hand that fed me. Also, *A Little Routine*, with my daughter and I as characters, clearly embodies a big change in my personal life, dealing with emotional issues and sentiments in ways that would have been impossible during the "anti-cartoon" period of the 70s when I was quite focused on process and animation as a kind of language. Both *Flying Fur* (based on Scott Bradley's brilliant score for a Tom and Jerry) and *Ko-Ko* (Charlie Parker's famous tune) are driven by the music track, the former being a kind of spontaneous cartoon drawn in one month, the later an improvised abstraction performed with bits of torn paper and dried beans; both seem to me like two sides of the same coin. But I'm not so sure I understand the shifts underlying these changes. Even now they appear fluid, with reflexive elements popping up in the later work, documentary elements and stylistic discontinuities throughout. Probably being in therapy for most of my adult life has helped me understand the deeper implications of individual films, but not the overall arc of the work.

TECHNOLOGY

Changing from cameras and film to digital has affected the content of my work, but not profoundly. I don't try to poke behind the scenes for an anti-illusionist trope, like the "hand of the artist." Process concepts aren't nearly so compelling now that everything has been reduced to code. But there are still plenty of windows to let in all kinds of rough, angular, mysterious stuff through Dragon captures, compositing/manipulating live action, etc. I use Photoshop and After Effects. I started AE (v.2) while doing a package of Honda spots (it took Thessia Machado and me all night to render the file sequence for layoff to video) and have never missed sprockets. (I gave my beautiful little Forox to Frank Mouris.) More important than production are the opportunities for presentation: digital projection, installation, internet, etc. And, in a contrary take on progress, I think the so-called inevitable hegemony of digital animation has also created a growing creative backlash among young artists working in 16mm, making pro-cinematic machines and performances, combining animation with sculpture, even doing flipbooks and other kinds of physical/concrete animation.

Neither 3D nor CGI does much for me. Too much hoopla, not enough substance. I never liked puppet animation (except in the hands of surrealists) so Pixar's hyper-realism, with texture, lighting, acting strikes me as superficial, value-added cargo, while the content tends to channel the Disney formula. Call me a curmudgeon, but I thought the love story-in-a-nutshell in "Up" was a perfectly executed jewel using every manipulative, maudlin cliché in the book for a cheap emotional response.

JAZZ AND ANIMATION

(Great question. I'll try to condense and keep it brief)

Do animated film and jazz emerge contemporaneously from popular American forms, vaudeville entertainment and dance bands? Did they embody the driving energy of modernism, both sophisticated and a little raunchy? Were both "animated" above all by the infectious pulse of the city, teeming with a heterogeneous, mobile, immigrant culture. OK, I get carried away. I just happen to love most jazz because it is based on improvisation and rhythm. The former is the gesture of drawing: rough, immediate and perhaps not too perfect. The latter is the heartbeat, handclap, call and response, but also natural force like the ocean and unnatural force like a machine. Most animation is created by an aching methodical process, almost deadening it its technical demands. To transcend that, to give it life, you have to make it appear to be improvised, and if you get to that ecstatic point of creativity where nothing else matters, then it WILL be improvised, only not in clock-time, but your own time, animators' time. The most obvious examples are the direct animation of McLaren, Len Lye, Barbel Neubauer, but ideally it can extend to any decision made from instance to privileged instance.

Most of my films have been accompanied by some kind of printed object. Ko-Ko's counterpart was the flipbook, Barrelhouse Bop, which was a deliberate attempt to do a cartoon interpretation of the history of jazz with shifting styles and cadences.

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