

ANIMATION WORLD

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Innovative Animation

From **Monsters Inc.**
to the Avant-Garde

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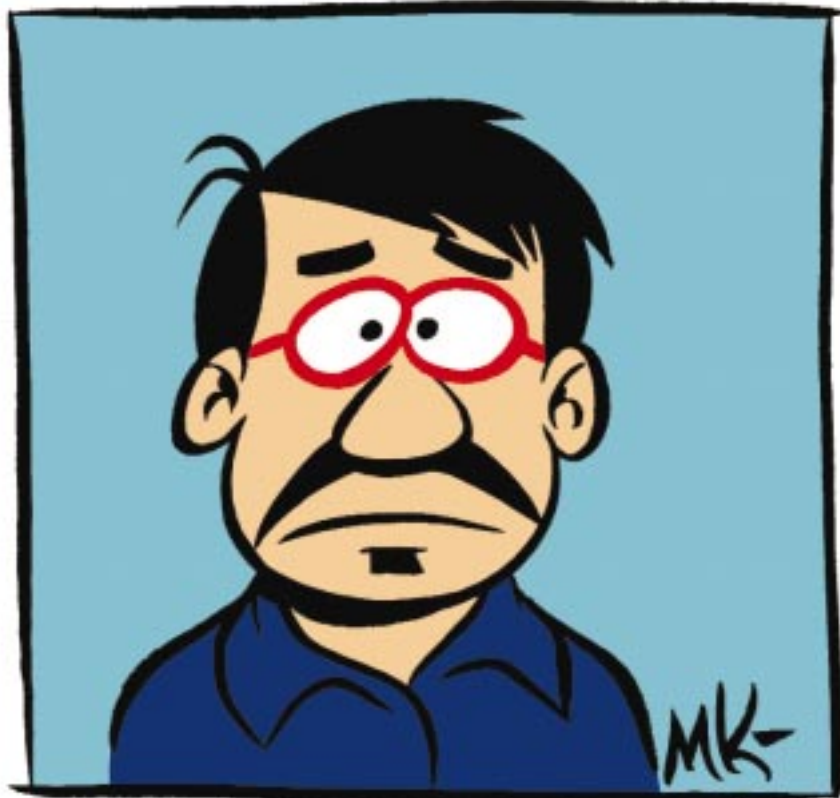
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Nine And A Half Questions...

Mike Kazaleh

by Will Ryan



Mike Kazaleh in cartoon form.

Mike Kazaleh has earned a name for himself not only as a respected animation artist (director, animator, layout artist, etc.) but as a creator, writer, artist, packager and publisher of comic books as well.

I interviewed Mike on my telephone, which sits on my desk just a few short miles away from Mike's telephone, which sits on his own desk, which is, coincidentally, just a few short miles away from my desk.



Will Ryan: Mike, how did you get started in animation?

Mike Kazaleh: I'm from Detroit, so I used to go out and visit these little animation shops. They were usually two-man operations that already had their two men, because they were the owners. One day, one of these shops gave a quote for an animation job to an ad agency. It was a job they really didn't want to do, so they purposely gave a high quote — \$20,000 — the kind of money that would make a Midwestern ad man cringe. They were turned

down, but they tipped me off to the possible job. So I did it for considerably less than \$20,000, and I was in business.

WR: When you were checking out these places in Detroit, was Jam Handy long gone?

MK: No, they were still around. They were known then for making cheesy live-action educational films. It wasn't until Leslie's book (*The Fleischer Story* by Leslie Cabarga, originally published in 1976) that I found out that they had made cartoons.

WR: So you never visited there, right?

MK: Actually I did. I went down there to Grand Boulevard and met Jam.

WR: You mean Jam Handy was a real guy? I just thought it was an odd corporate name.

MK: No, this guy's real name was Jamison Handy. He owned the place.

WR: What was it like?

MK: It was a nice building, mostly empty. They were leasing a section of the building to a UHF station that was making a religious TV show, you know, one of those shows where you send in money. The only clue that they'd done cartoons was a flat planning table for camera moves. Jam offered to sell it to me for \$1200.

WR: Did you buy it?

ML: I'm still thinking it over.

WR: Well, while you've been

thinking it over, you've certainly been on the move.

ML: That's true. I've animated for studios in Detroit, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and a few other places.

WR: Including Florida. How did that come about?

ML: Ken Mitchrni was starting up a studio there. I was doing a lot of freelance work, and Florida seemed as good a place as any.

WR: Kinda like California, but with alligators.

ML: We did a lot of things at that studio, including a TV special, which was completed in early February of '96. It was probably the last animated TV special to be done entirely in the U. S.

WR: Who else worked on it?

ML: Art Leonardi, Frank Andrina, Gerard Baldwin. I did about half of it. The camera work was done in L. A. by Ted Bemiller and Sons using Playhouse's camera.

WR: You designed a book cover that's on just about every animator's shelf.

ML: I did?

WR: I'm referring to the Beck/Friedwald reference book, *Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies*.

ML: Oh, yeah. Warner Bros. had somebody redraw the thing.

WR: One place where that kind of "collaboration" doesn't happen is in your own comic books. How

many have you done by now?

ML: A couple dozen of my own. Counting books for other publishers, about a hundred.

WR: I assume writing and drawing your own books is more satisfying than some of the work-for-hires.

ML: Yeah, but it doesn't necessarily pay as well. Let me tell you about a studio, which shall remain nameless.

WR: Good. We strive for discretion around here.

ML: Well, this studio, which I won't name —

WR: Good.

ML: — had an excellent staff of cartoonists who really knew the studio's characters and, if left on their own, could produce the kind of comic books that these funny animal characters were known for throughout the world. However, the studio brought in as supervisors guys who'd only worked on superhero-type books. They had no feel for funny animals. So I'll never forget one day, one of these writers that was brought in to supervise us cartoonists at this studio which I shall not name —

WR: Good.

ML: — actually said to us, "We're going to do Mickey Mouse like Floyd Gottfredson did, only we're going to do it *right* this time!"

WR: Say, are you implying — ?

ML: I'm implying nothing. The

nameless studio shall remain nameless.

WR: Good!



Mike Kazaleh is the creator of many comic books, including those starring Captain Jack. He has also illustrated comic books featuring the likes of Mighty Mouse, Roger Rabbit, Ren and Stimpy, Cow and Chicken, Donald Duck and other loony luminaries.

Will Ryan is the creator of the Annie Award-winning animated series Elmo Aardvark: Outer Space Detective! He is currently writing a book on animation pioneer Pat Powers.

Note: Readers may contact any Animation World Magazine contributor by sending an e-mail to editor@awn.com.

Monsters, Inc.:

The Secret Behind Why Pixar Is So Good

by Karl Cohen

Monsters, Inc. from Pixar/Disney is the first feature directed by Pete Docter. To find out the story behind the production *Animation World Magazine* was invited to interview the director, co-director and two supervisors. After talking with the animation and technical supervisors it seemed this article would be about their amazing new technology that advances the art of animation. When a co-director was interviewed the focus shifted to how the success of a Pixar feature comes in part from having great stories and traditional cinematography and editing. How was his view going to fit in with the first two interviews? Finally, when we spoke with Pete Docter, the film's director, it became clear that the important story was how the studio shepherded him through the process



Monsters, Inc. director Peter Docter (!) and executive producer John Lasseter combine forces.



All in a day's work: Top Kid Scarer James P. Sullivan (center right) — "Sulley" to his friends — and his Scare Assistant, Mike Wazowski (center left) show up for work at Monsters, Inc. All *Monsters, Inc.* images © Disney/Pixar. All rights reserved

of developing and directing his first animated feature. They brought together people with different talents who could work together as a team. The film was created through the sharing and cooperation (!) of all these elements, rather than by having a strong dictatorial director.

Although Docter is given credit for creating the original idea for *Monsters, Inc.*, one of the first things he says is, "It is misleading to say the film was my idea because there are so many other people involved. It was a group effort." At first he developed ideas with story artist Jeff Pidgeon and production designer Harley Jessup. Andrew Stanton (Oscar nomination for *Toy Story*) wrote the first script and became the film's executive producer. As they developed their ideas they would

take them to John Lasseter (director of *Toy Story*, 1995; *A Bug's Life*, 1998; and *Toy Story 2*, 1999) who would advise them on how to make the script stronger. Docter explains, "John is so amazing, his input was invaluable throughout the whole process. He's already done three films and he has a great mind... he has a terrific grasp about how an audience views a film."

Co-director Lee Unkrich continues, "One of the great things about working at Pixar is that you can assemble a great talent pool and just be a bunch of guys hashing this stuff out. John (Lasseter) is as quick to get in the trenches with us as anybody. In the end everybody contributes and they don't keep tabs of what each person contributed as the end product is what counts. It is



A love story?

Pete's film and John was there to guide him as he hadn't directed a film before. Pete is an amazing animator, but since this was his first feature John was there to help."

As the script progressed more people became involved, but the story development process remained essentially the same for five years. Docter says, "We would take it to a point where we were comfortable with it and we would pitch it to those guys and they would punch holes in it in a friendly way. We'd make it stronger and then when we were all comfortable with it, we would take it down to Disney and present it to Tom Schumacher (president of Walt Disney Feature Animation) and Peter Schneider and they would knock holes in it. We would go back and fix it again and the whole process repeats and repeats for 5 years, and now we are done. You build up thick skin as you tend to take it fairly personally. Nobody means it personally as you're talking about the film, but you really invest a lot of yourself. It's a tough process."

According to Unkrich one of the great things about their rela-

tionship with Disney (Disney and Pixar have a 50% partnership) is Disney didn't work on the project on a daily basis so when they were consulted they offered fresh criticism. "We sometimes are too close to our material and we can't see some of the problems. Tom Schumacher is very good at stepping in and giving very good broad stroke notes about things that are and are not working. Another great thing about Disney is that they never tell us how to solve a problem. They just point things out and have trusted us to come up with creative solutions."

The biggest challenge throughout the production was the story according to Docter. "I think that will always be the case. At Pixar we place a great deal of emphasis on story and the characters. You can have some really stunning imagery and technical innovation, but after about 5 minutes the audience is bored and they want something more interesting — story. You're asking people to commit an hour and a half of their life and it better be something worthwhile."

Docter oversaw every facet

of the production. One area he found "rather exciting and somewhat nerve-racking" was voice recording sessions. He had gone to a couple of recording sessions on *Toy Story*, to observe Lasseter working with actors. "What I learned is that my job is to set up as much of the situation as I can, give them all the information that they need and then stand back and watch them go."

It turns out there is a lot of improvisation on Pixar soundtracks. Also, the script changed from time to time so one week he would tell John Goodman "so Sullivan is a janitor now" and the next month "now he's the best scarer on the floor." Luckily, Goodman "was very patient with us. He rolls with the punches."

He was also delighted to work with Billy Crystal whom he describes as an amazing actor; very clever and really funny on and off screen. "He is like having a team of writers along." He was glad Crystal was recorded in a soundproof studio as Docter



Using his improvisational skills, actor John Goodman created the voice of James P. Sullivan (Sulley).



Billy Crystal brought his great comedic talents to the vocal role of Mike Wazowski.

would have ruined a lot of takes with his laughter had he not been in the control room. Crystal is the voice of Mike, Sulley's best friend. Mike is the little one-eyed round green monster that you've probably seen by now.

It is common in the industry to make video tapes of the recording sessions so animators can study how voice actors move when they say their lines. Animators didn't use as much of this type of reference material on *Monsters, Inc.* as the film's characters are so unusual. The one person they did watch a lot was Mary Gibbs, the girl who did the voice of Boo, the little girl who enters the world of the monsters. She is the only human in the film. Boo was the character they were most concerned with at the beginning of the project as her success on the screen depended on how well they captured the movements of a real three-year old child.



Mary Gibbs lends her voice to the abstracted human character Boo.

Boo is not a photo-realistic child. She is an abstracted human like Al in *Toy Story 2* or Geri in *Geri's Game* (an Oscar winning short produced by Pixar and directed by Jan Pinkava, 1998). She was designed to fit into the world created for this film. Docter didn't want her to stand out from the other characters.

Docter is a fan of the strong modern looking 2D animation of the 1950s. He is glad that the title sequence is a nod to that look. It



Team *Monsters, Inc.* (l-r): Billy Crystal, executive producer John Lasseter, composer Randy Newman, director Peter Docter, John Goodman and producer Darla K. Anderson.

was designed by Geefwee Boedoe and definitely recalls the work of Saul Bass.

Work at Pixar often began about 8 in the morning for Docter and he usually went home around 8 or 9 at night. At home he would spend time with his kids, eat, and then spend about 1 or 2 hours answering his e-mail. He usually had his weekends free as the producers at Pixar "are getting better and better about that so people don't kill themselves." He is looking forward to a vacation before going back to begin development of his ideas for future features.

As he looks back over his 5 years of work on the film he says, "I wouldn't say this film went very smoothly, but in the end I'm very pleased with what we have."

Pixar's Use Of Co-Directors

Since live-action features normally have one director, people are surprised that Pixar had three on *Monsters, Inc.* Lee Unkrich explains that the company adopted that system after John Lasseter directed the first *Toy Story*. He says

Lasseter found out the hard way that a computer generated feature requires too much work for one person. At Pixar they choose co-directors who can bring different strengths to each film.

Lee Unkrich came to Pixar with a background in live-action editing and cinematography. He oversaw the editing, staging and cinematography of the new film, the same role he had on *Toy Story 2* (1999). He says, "In designing the cinematography of this film, I held true to the philosophy that I've used on all of the other Pixar films. Even though we are doing animation I only do things with the camera that you can do in a live-action film. Although we have the liberty to do anything we want with our camera, it is better to keep everything more restrained. People are comfortable seeing a world that they are used to seeing when they go out to see a movie." He avoids tricky shots, rapid fire editing and other things that might be appropriate to rock videos.

Unkrich explains that



**Mike and Sulley prepare to battle a fearsome opponent:
a two year-old human girl named Boo.**

because the film is about monsters it starts out dark and creepy. That is what most people will expect. Then the mood changes and people will discover it is a raucous comedy. There are scary parts "as most people enjoy being a little scared, but this is a family film and we don't want to turn anybody off with it." All Pixar films have dark moments and this film follows in that tradition.

"Much of my time was spent in the editing room with Jim Stewart and the other editors," says Unkrich. "We spent a lot of time hashing things out and restructuring the movie to get the rhythm of performances working nicely." He spent time working with layout supervisor Ewan Johnson and his team designing the shots of the film. Also, "as story problems would come up I'd jump in to help."

The other co-director was David Silverman, one of the original directors of *The Simpsons*. Silverman worked on the story and wrote a lot gags. He helped develop the personalities of the characters and added a great deal to the film's humor. He helped make the characters entertaining and believable and added a

delightful sense of irreverence to the script. Unkrich believes that Silverman's great sense of humor indeed helped to make *Monsters, Inc.* a very funny film. Now Silverman has moved back to Los Angeles to direct *The Simpsons* first feature.

Silverman will be missed for many reasons including his musical abilities. He was in the company Dixieland band. Other regulars are senior animator Bud Luckey, Pete Docter and the lead character designer Ricky Nierva.

What's New In Computer Animation At Pixar?

Since *Toy Story* was completed there has been a trend toward greater visual complexity in each of their films. Tom Porter, supervising technical director on *Monsters, Inc.* — and winner of two Oscars — says *Toy Story* was made with 1/50th the computing power available today.

When Porter joined the *Monsters, Inc.* team he began by making a list of the technology they had to develop to get the film completed. One of the big problems was making hair move realistically. Sulley, a star of the film, is an 8 foot tall horned monster with

a 700 pound body covered in blue-green hair. Having animators animate his hair by hand would have been an impossible task. Developing hair simulation software that can control hair movement was the answer.

They also developed simulation technology to move clothing independently of body motion. The big problem for Porter's staff the first year of pre-production was to develop these programs. "We spent a lot of time up front making sure we could get the simulation working. In the end it worked fine."

Another problem was creating the visual feel of atmosphere in large spaces. *Monsters, Inc.* was going to take place in an enormous factory and in vast outdoor spaces. They knew they had to suggest wind blowing, smoke, snow and other atmospheric effects. Porter said that historically computer graphics has presented a rather clean or crystal clear view of the world.

If you have seen the ads for the film on TV you may have noticed a line of monsters marching toward the camera. In that factory sequence they become easier to see and their colors become richer and brighter as they move toward the camera. This naturalistic effect suggests some of the subtle attention to detail Pixar's team has achieved.

Lighting on this film was also a lot more sophisticated than it was in *Toy Story*. Lighting a hard plastic surface is a lot simpler than lighting fur and clothing. Therefore, they got involved with the principles of back lighting, rim lighting and other problems that they hadn't experienced in their previous films.

A typical day for Porter



Check out this fur! New simulation software was developed to create the realistic movement of Sulley's blue rug of a coat.

found him going over shader reviews, lighting reviews, keeping track of the big issues and running render checks to examine individual frames for problems that can develop. He oversaw approximately 100 people in the departments of lighting, shading, modeling and shots. The shots department was established for this project to implement the hair and clothing simulation.

Pixar also has a new laser recording system that was used to transfer digital images to 35mm film. It offers a wider range of colors. Despite the use of this state of the art system to create the finest 35mm prints possible, Porter prefers seeing the film digitally. It will be shown this way in some larger markets. He says, "Digital projection looks terrific! It's rock solid. It's so much better than

watching film going through a projector. Film has a slight jumpiness to it and grain; it looks a little different. Digital looks exactly as it does on the monitors here when we are doing the lighting reviews, the effects reviews and everything else. That is what the director wants to see."

Taking Advantage Of New Technical Innovations

According to Glenn McQueen, supervising animator, the increase in computing power allows "you to get more visual complexity on the screen. More stuff, more atmosphere, more characters, more clothing, more everything." This can make scenes more complicated to animate and keeping track of all that detail can become a problem.

McQueen is a big fan of their new simulation software. It allowed the animators to spend more time on the performance of their characters. "That's where I



Lighting and atmosphere in animated films were elevated to new levels by the creators of *Monsters, Inc.*

want to see our animators spending their time. It was a terrific improvement." In *Toy Story 2* Al's shirt and pants had to be moved by hand. "I hate animating things like that. You have to spend a lot of time on it and if it is done correctly no one will ever look at it. It doesn't help the film develop the story or provide entertainment. Having a computer do that grunt work is a great improvement."

Strangely, they preferred to animate one hair element by hand. The only human in the film is the little girl who invades the world of the monsters. She has a ponytail. It was easy to animate by hand as the movements were similar to animating the antenna on ants, "something we all have had a lot of practice doing" thanks to *A Bug's Life*.

The studio created a "tentacle package" in case they were going to animate a character with lots of arms or legs. At one time Sully had 8 tentacles. McQueen said 8 tentacles would have been very difficult to animate within the production schedule planned for the film. "It said monster loud and clear, but I gave a sigh of relief when the director and art directors decided to go with a two legged character. It made getting the film done on time more realistic."

The tentacle package was used on minor characters. Since there is little scientific evidence about what monsters look like, some of Pixar's creatures have multiple eyes, arms and legs. Many of them are extras designed to be built quickly and then moved by the new system. "They don't talk, but are great background characters as they have strong silhouettes. They are quick and easy to pose."

One monster that stood



In the case of Sulley, two legs are better than eight in the eyes of the animators.

out from the others moves like a crab. A zoologist was consulted about crab locomotion systems since it is quite different than the walk cycles most animators are used to drawing. McQueen said that none of the monsters were based on recognizable animals. Why should they be familiar looking when there are so many "tantalizing ideas" of what the characters could be.

A typical day for McQueen and his staff of approximately 50 animators began at 8 or 8:30 with 1 1/2 to 2 hours of dailies. At these sessions they critique work currently in production. Everyone is free to participate in these discussions. Another purpose of the dailies is to make sure everyone is animating the same character the same way. Pixar does have lead animators who concentrate on getting great performances out of a character (John Kahrs on Sulley, Andrew Gordon on Mike and Tasha Wedeen and Dave DeVan on Boo), but there are scenes that were animated by others.

After dailies McQueen's day included meeting with individual animators, going over production schedules and working with the technical departments. The model and prop departments were building new props and characters right up to the end of the show. The model department had to test their work constantly to make sure it functions properly before it is turned over to the animators.

To keep the staff of Pixar up-to-date when new proprietary software is developed, they hold classes at Pixar University (good old PU). The school also teaches the basics for new staff members and offers other classes when people are not working on a production. McQueen says, "It behooves us to make sure everyone is as flexible as possible."

Glenn McQueen has started work on "John's next film" as animation supervisor. Lee Unkrich will be a co-director of that feature. Unkrich hinted that it is about something Lasseter has a passion for, just as his love for toys resulted

in *Toy Story*. He didn't elaborate, but he did say, "You can look forward to another great film."

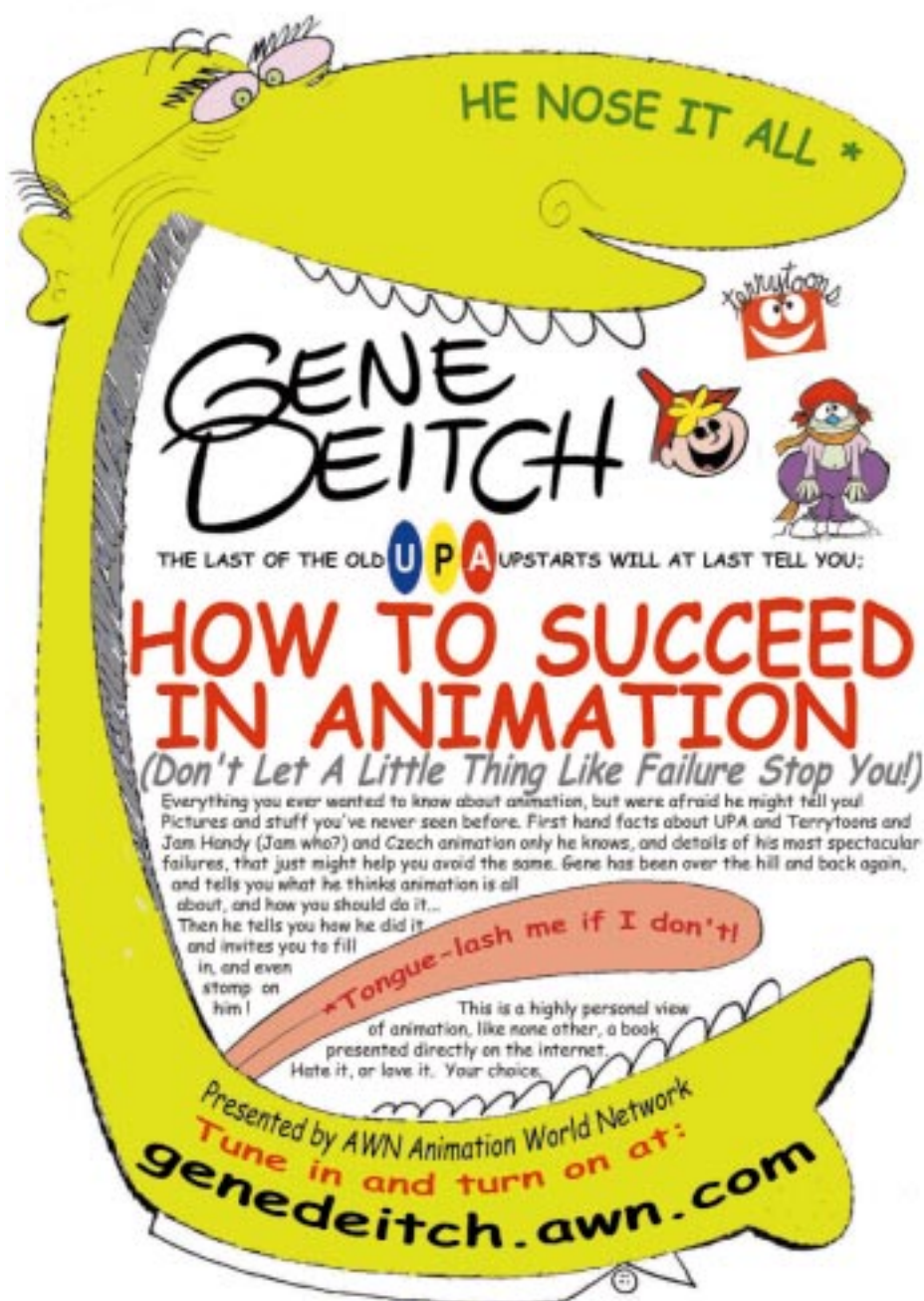
Pixar's next release in summer of 2003 will be *Finding Nemo*. Andrew Stanton is the director. Also in development is an untitled project being directed by Brad Bird. Bird directed the critically acclaimed *Iron Giant* for

Warner Bros., a remarkable film with a strong message of peace. However you look at it Pixar's winning streak doesn't look like it is going to end soon. Lucky us!

Karl Cohen is President of ASIFA-San Francisco. His first book, *Forbidden Animation: Censored Cartoons and Blacklisted*

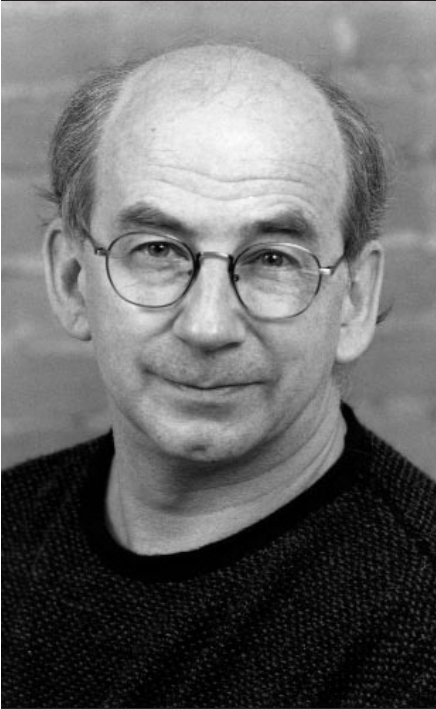
Animators, is published by McFarland Publishers. He also teaches animation history at San Francisco State University

Note: Readers may contact any *Animation World Magazine* contributor by sending an e-mail to editor@awn.com.



Pierre Hébert and Animation in The Age of Digital Reproduction

by Chris J. Robinson



Pierre Hébert.

Walter Benjamin wrote his seminal article, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, as a response to the technological innovations such as cinema and photography that permitted, through reproduction, mass access to previously sacred or unique works of art. One of the interesting questions Benjamin asked was just how this reproduction would change the process of creating and reacting to art. Owing to digital technology, we are at a stage, where we must perhaps return to Benjamin if only to consider the effect of this new technology on art.

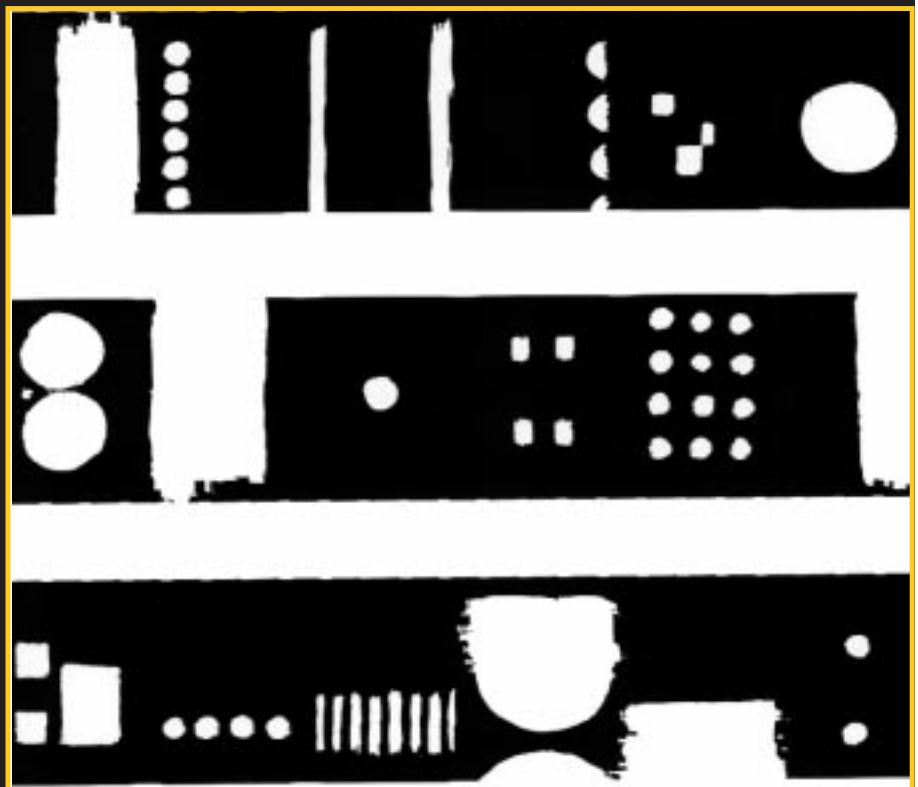
In a 2000 article for the

Holland Animation Film Festival, Canadian animator, Pierre Hébert argued that animation, in its fervent desire to protect and promote itself, has instead become an inward-looking practice: "It has let itself drift into an embittered, corporatist and willful isolation, valuing good craftsmanship and good animation and slightly losing sight of the philosophical position that underlies the act of animating." Similarly, where animation once had a meaningful, but undefined relationship with cinema and especially experimental film, this is no longer the case today despite the obvious, but unspoken influ-

ence of animation on almost every fiber of cinema. In the rush to protect and promote itself, Hébert suggests that 'auteur' animation has isolated itself from other plastic arts.

Animation, and specifically independent or 'auteur' animation, which is often the feeding ground for any and all new trends in commercial animation, is at a dead end. Stylistic and narrative innovations certainly continue, but all within the same abiding walls; walls that have been pushed as far as they will bend.

In recent years, Hébert has put his words into action. While



Op Hop. Director: Pierre Hébert; Producer: National Film Board of Canada. © NFB.

his interest in alternative methods of creating and presenting animation goes back to the early 1980s, his recent performance piece, *Between Science and Garbage*, is suggesting radical new possibilities for viewing, creating and defining animation. As it stands at the moment, Pierre Hébert appears to be the most visible voice capable of leading animation out of its almost forty year period of isolationism.

Much to the chagrin of me, myself and I, outside of the animation festival crowd, very few people even know whom Pierre Hébert (let alone, Svankmajer, Pärn and The Quays) is; so let's go back to Hébert's beginnings as an artist.

The Abstract Years

As a child, Hébert was always interested in drawing and painting. For years he wondered where the desire came from. Neither of his parents was artistically orientated. His father worked in the steel industry as an office worker, then an accountant and later as a dossier builder to help land contracts. It was only recently that Hébert found the seeds of his creativity. While courting his grandmother, Hébert's grandfather used to send her a painted postcard every week. "I saw the about 50 postcards. It showed that he had talent. So I have this small seed."

Not surprisingly when Hébert wanted to attend a Fine Arts school, his parents frowned upon it and insisted he was better off enrolling in University. Hébert studied anthropology and archeology, but visual arts remained foremost in his mind. Then came Norman McLaren who indirectly planted the next artistic seed in



Between Dog and Wolf. Director: Pierre Hébert; Producer: René Jodoin. © NFB.

Hébert's mind. "I had friends at school who had started to wash out 8mm films and draw on it and the idea of that came from McLaren. I saw it and thought it was cool." Hébert began making his own cameraless films and was excited by both the process and result. Meantime, a producer at the National Film Board of Canada was putting on screenings of experimental films at museums and other venues. Increasingly Hébert began to see the connection with animation.

Meantime, Hébert was calling up McLaren and asking for advice about creating scratched soundtracks. McLaren would give Hébert film leader with which to practice. Hébert later brought the results for McLaren's feedback. Obviously impressed with this new talent, McLaren referred Hébert to producers Wolf Koenig and Bob Verrall, who had just started a student program and were looking

for students to hire. Hébert was hired. Consequently, Hébert and the NFB began what would be a thirty-five year relationship.

Initially Hébert did not find the NFB very compelling. While he was given encouragement to do his own thing, he also worked on sequences for documentaries and other service orientated work for various government ministries. One of the most interesting projects he directed was a film called *Population Explosion*. This warning against overpopulation was not much, but it did feature an original soundtrack by jazz legend, Ornette Coleman. Hébert spent most of his evenings and weekends at the NFB working on his own films. Two of these "spare time" films were *Op Hop* (1966) and *Opus 3* (1966). These almost violent abstract films use geometrical shapes — which randomly flicker and float across the screen — to explore theories of optics

and perception. Hébert's first "official" NFB film *Around Perception* (1968), was a continuation of the theories explored in the first two films.

From the start, Hébert's work was oddly enough — given that he is deeply rooted in the work of McLaren and Rene Jodoin — an anomaly. While McLaren undoubtedly influenced many of the young animators of this period (e.g. Ryan Larkin, Francine Desbiens), he had virtually no influence on the direction of the Board. During the 1960s, the NFB concentrated on "cel" animation and assembly line structures. Fortunately, the creation of a French animation division led to the hiring of former McLaren colleague, Rene Jodoin, who from the beginning insisted on reawakening the McLaren heritage. It was within this new environment that Hébert began making his own films.

Personal Politics

In the 1970s, clearly influenced by the increasing political climate of his era, Hébert began to combine his artistic innovation with political commentary. Following a cinematic attack on the commercialization of Christmas called *Pere Noel, Pere Noel*, Hébert made *Between Dog and Wolf* (1978). Hébert mixed a variety of techniques (including cut-out and scratch animation) into a multi-level narrative that merged Brecht dialogue with somber images of people waiting at a bus station. Alas, the animator's output began to appear reductive and didactic during this phase — not to mention that its formal complexity distanced the work from those whom Hébert claimed it was speaking to and for.

After taking a sabbatical from the Film Board in 1979, Hébert returned to the NFB rejuvenated and with a clearer sense

of his artistic direction. *Souvenirs du Guerre* (1982) marks a turning point in Hébert's early career as he moves away from both abstract formal and political concerns to more personalized, tangible politics.

Motivated by the birth of his son, Etienne, and the war in Afghanistan, Hébert wonders how his child will survive in a harsh violent world where children are little more than "leaves on a tree." Hébert uses scratch, cut-out animation and live-action images to create an unstable and ominous world always on the brink of violence and destruction. While the rigidity of Hébert's earlier films occasionally rear their ugly heads (the link between family-labour-war is a little too simple), in general, Hébert's vision is more flexible and constructive. Hébert understands that war and politics are a complex infrastructure involving labor, the family and the individual. As he shows us, we are participants in our own destruction, but do we have the power or ability to participate in our salvation?

As early as 1984, Hébert was involved in multimedia performances. Usually they involved a projected film accompanied by improvised sounds. The challenge for Hébert was how to create a way of improvising the images. Eventually he started experimenting with film loops in the projector. In 1985, Hébert began to extend this improvisational style to his films. *Le Metro* (1985), for example, was collaboration between Hébert and musicians Robert Lepage and René Lussier. Each artist improvised his impressions of the dehumanizing effects of the urban subway's underground world.

Increasingly encouraged by his improvised results, Hébert made a film version of his collabo-



Souvenirs de guerre. Director: Pierre Hébert; Producer: Robert Forget. © NFB.



Le Metro. Director: Pierre Hébert; Producer: Robert Forget. © NFB.

rative performances called *Lettre D'Amour*. *Lettre D'Amour* evolved out of a series of small workshops that Hébert and his wife and writer, Sylvie Massicotte, were involved in. Subjects were chosen out of a hat. One subject that seemed to offer infinite possibilities was a love letter and the variety of emotions and thoughts confronting a person as they await its

arrival. Hébert and Massicotte expanded the performances to include dance (Louise Bedard) and music (Robert Marcel Lepage). *Lettre D'Amour* is a film of one of those performances.

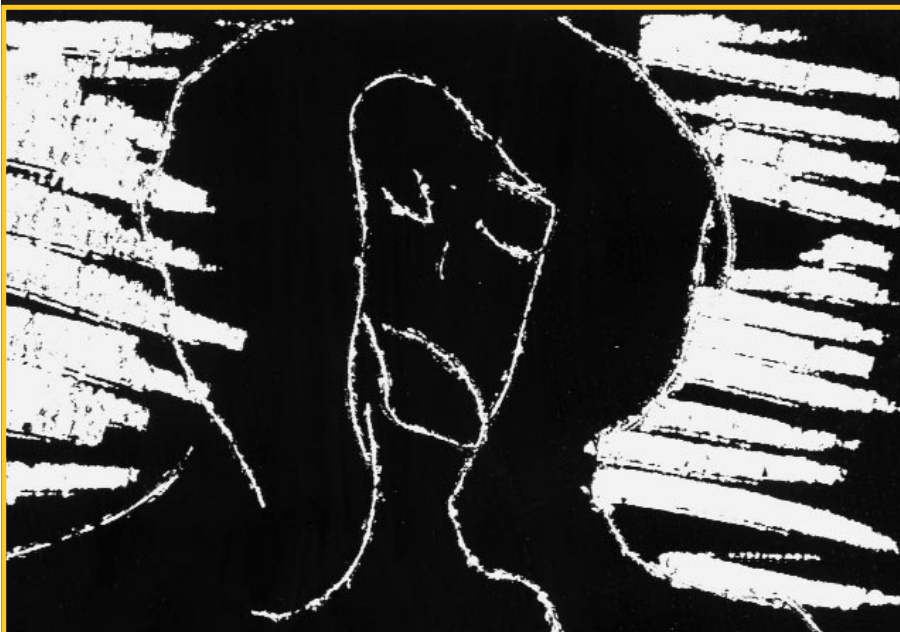
Akin to a jazz performance, each performer has his/her turn to riff on the subject. The result however is interesting but flawed. *Lettre D'Amour* fails to capture the

spontaneity, tension and freedom of the performance setting. The dance, in particular, is reduced to a poorly flickering image on a TV screen, adding nothing to the piece. Let's just say that *Lettre* is an interesting experiment and a step in Hébert's progression toward performance animation.

In 1996, Hébert completed his first feature film, *La Plante Humaine* (*The Human Plant*). The film, which combines scratch animation and live-action, follows the rather uneventful life of a retired librarian named Michel. His days are spent walking his dog, reading about Leonardo Da Vinci, reading a book of traditional African stories, and watching television (specifically newscasts). He acquires a variety of knowledge about the world but he does not do anything with it (he's essentially a couch potato).

Interestingly, Hébert plays off his old activist days as we expect a critique of the Gulf War, television or this inactive protagonist. However, Hébert does not succumb to these easy targets of attack. Michel and his life are merely observed and we, like Michel, are left to figure out our own solutions.

What hope is there if we can no longer actively participate in, let alone change, the direction of our vast world? The answer, for Hébert, is modest. In the final scene, Michel leaves his house and goes to the library where he shares his stories with a group of children. By talking to each other, Hébert seems to suggest that sharing our knowledge and experiences offer hope for the present and future. However, Hébert again throws a loop into what we're seeing because Michel has now become a well-dressed pro-



La Lettre D'Amour. Director: Pierre Hébert; Producer: Robert Forget. © NFB.

fessorial live-action character. The live-action character, it seems, is merely a projection of Michel's imagination. If this is a part of his imagination, has he even left the house or does he remain planted in the seeds of his imagination?

In having Michel dream in live-action, Hébert reverses our tendency to see live-action images as genuine or authentic. In doing so he reminds us (à la Walter Benjamin) that all images are constructed from a particular point of view.

Time for a Change

After thirty-five years, Hébert left the National Film Board of Canada in 1999 to concentrate on his independent artistic career and specifically performance art. During 1999 and 2000, Hébert traveled to a variety of International Festivals (Switzerland, Canada, Holland) to present a series of scratch animation performances (usually accompanied by a musician). Over the past year, he began working with noted musician Bob Ostertag on a new type of performance that would be created and performed using digital technology. The result is *Between Science and Garbage*, an hour-long multimedia performance about the disposability of culture.

What Hébert and Ostertag are creating is, within the context of independent animation, radical. Ostertag has collected a variety of music samples on a Mac PowerBook. Using a program called Max, Ostertag is able to do virtually anything he wants to the sounds. Meantime, Hébert has a digital video camera hooked up to a small homemade animation stand. The camera is connected to Hébert's PowerBook. Hébert also



La Plante Humaine. Director: Pierre Hébert; Producer: Freddy Denaës, Yves Leduc. © NFB.

What Hébert and Ostertag are creating is, within the context of independent animation, radical.

has about fifty images stored along with a handful of QuickTime movies (taken primarily from news footage). Hébert can alter the sequence, pace, texture and color of these images. Hébert's performance will consist of a combination of these archived images with about 80% improvised live animation (ranging from cut-out, object, paint on glass, chalk on board, and basic drawn animation). The title of the performance refers at once to the disposability of the technology (the computer could crash during the screenings) and the content (which changes with each performance).

In artistic terms, this is by no means revolutionary. Hollywood has made digital features, and music has long collaborated with film in a performance context. Yet within the world of independent animation, Hébert's work is radical.

The process of creation is no longer hidden from the viewer in a different time and space. The animator performs, not for a "mechanical contrivance," but an audience. While you could suggest a return to sacred art because of the uniqueness of each performance, we should remember that each performance is also disposable. There is nothing to prevent Hébert from having his computer crash and losing all his images. So while each work is unique, there's this sort of casual attitude that shrugs if it's lost. The collaborative aspect of the performance enhances the ability to create something new. Music is no longer subservient to the animation.

One of the more interesting aspects of Hébert's work is the liberation of time. 24 frames per second has for the most part

remained the defining slice of time for many animators. Now 24 frames is merely an option among many: "When I first encountered the parameter controls in the first versions of the Max software, for example, the control button of the speed of the loop in buffer-1, it was like a mental landslide because all my animator skill had been up to that point locked to a fixed value, that is 24 frames per second." Suddenly Hébert discovered that the program (which was designed for music) could measure in 1000th of a second. "I could set the different parallel flows of events happening in the computer at independent values in 1000th of seconds, also independent of the frame rate it would be sliced into by the video projector. The elimination of 24 frames as a measure of time provides an opportunity for animators to fundamentally change the way they construct their work.

Economically, the performance also has many advantages. The digital technology means that

the work is mobile and compact. After the initial cost of the computer and essential gadgets, there is no need to strike prints, no shipping dynamics to negotiate, and no projectionist to shout at.

"It was like a mental landslide because all my animator skill had been up to that point locked to a fixed value, that is 24 frames per second."

This is not to say that animators should all rush out and pick up laptops. This is not an either/or situation or a criticism of existing animations. Instead Hébert's work is merely opening a door to new possibilities in animation. "I just feel like trying to assess in a radical and experimental way

what is already widely happening in the audiovisual media as a whole. And also trying to understand that historically and find a ground to help define new conditions of artistic creation when dealing with technology." At the very least it means that those animators who've often cringed while watching their film, often wishing they could go back and change this or that, will perhaps soon be in a position where they can do just that.

Don't miss an AWN exclusive!

View an extract of Between Science and Garbage, a multimedia performance by Pierre Hébert and Bob Ostertag as performed in Montreal on October 19, 2001. Just go to http://mag.awn.com/index.php3?type=pageone&article_no=843

Chris Robinson is the artistic director of the Ottawa International Animation Festival and founder and director of SAFO, the Ottawa International Student Animation Festival. He is editor of the ASIFA News. Robinson has curated film programs and served on festival juries throughout the world. He writes a monthly column ("The Animation Pimp") for Animation World Network and has written numerous articles on animation. His iconoclastic tendencies have led him to be called the "John Woo of diplomacy" and most recently, "the enfant terrible of animation" by Take One magazine. He is currently working on a book about something.

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An AWN exclusive! View an extract of *Between Science and Garbage*, a multimedia performance by Pierre Hébert and Bob Ostertag as performed in Montreal on October 19, 2001. Courtesy of Pierre Hébert.

The Spectacular Hi-Fi/Low-Fi Sounds and Images of Studio FilmTecknarna

by Chris J. Robinson

Formed in 1981 by Jonas Odell, Stig Berqvist and Lars Ohlson, the Swedish animation studio, FilmTecknarna has developed into one of the most respected and innovative animation companies in the world. FilmTecknarna have merged a low and high end mixed media aesthetic to produce a visually exciting body of work that includes award-winning commercials for a variety of clients (Madonna's *Music* video, Boddington's Cream Ale, MTV, Cartoon Network) along with a unique body of personal films (*Revolver*, *Exit*) that have received wide acclaim from international film festivals.



Exit's more classic looking animation.



From FilmTecknarna's first film, the internationally acclaimed *Exit*.

While FilmTecknarna has no consistent graphic style, there is a distinctive humour and rhythm to their work. "The studio," says Odell, "is made up of individuals with distinctly different approaches, but I do think there are things you recognize from film to film." Diverse films such as *The Man*

Who Thought With His Hat, *Dawning*, *Exit*, *Revolver* and *Otto*, all feature a unique combination of surrealism, social commentary and black comedy. Many of the films are situated in suburban working class environments. Within these seemingly average spaces we find a darker and often humorous world.

The Short Films

The studio's first film, *The Man Who Thought With His Hat*, was, like most Swedish animated films, adapted from a children's story. "We thought that was what you had to make," says Odell. "We found a children's book that we liked and bought the rights (the

author didn't want any money, but insisted that we draw characters with five fingers on each hand). The producer at the film institute was actually looking for someone to adapt this author's work to film. I still like the story, but the film definitely isn't 'us.'"

Although *The Man Who Thought With His Hat* certainly contains a number of elements usually found in a children's story, the film is a decidedly adult tale that examines class and power while suggesting that social attitudes are inherited not natural. The film follows an oppressive President who does his decision making with a hat. The society he has created is one of conformity



An Orwellian nightmare from *Exit*.



One of the many styles of FilmTecknarna is revealed in *Revolver*.
All images courtesy of FilmTecknarna, unless otherwise noted.

and repression. One day, the wind blows the hat away and the President loses his ability to think. After a rather bizarre interlude between the hat and some animals, a small boy returns the hat to the President, but teaches him how to think without it.

Their second film *Dawning* was closer to the studio's tastes. The protagonist is a 'cute' teddy bear who awakens early one day and wanders through the city streets. Along the way, he encounters a variety of people going about their daily routine. The unassuming narrative then takes a dramatic twist as it turns out that the teddy is wandering through a film set.

One of the studio's first films to receive international acclaim, and arguably their best work to date, is *Exit*. This was the first film written by the studio and it had two starting points. One was a nightmare that Berqvist had about a bizarre amusement park/departement store. The second was a story told by *Dawning* writer, Joakim Pirinen. "Joakim told us about the trip he made to Berlin," says Odell. "When you enter East Berlin you had to exchange a cer-

tain sum of money into East German marks but you weren't allowed to bring them out of the country." Law abiding as he was, he desperately tried to spend the money on what there was to buy (i.e. cheap souvenirs and nylon socks). This developed into a satire on the entertainment industry and the desperate race to have a 'good time.'

Exit opens with Ike and his three friends riding the train to town to visit a mammoth amusement park/shopping mall facility that bears a striking resemblance to the White House. Once inside, the quartet is greeted with a visual assault of neon signs (including a fabulous and ominous opening shot of a 'Get Happy' sign directly above a 'No Exit' sign) offering the allure of sex, violence and immediate pleasures. But what begins as a paradise turns into a nightmarish Orwellian consumer hell of violence and excess.

One of the subtle achievements of *Exit* is its deceptively simple design, which is more aligned with classical animation (like *Dawning* and *The Man Who Thought With His Hat*) than with the more expressionist design of

Revolver, *Otto* and *Body Parts*. Initially, one laments the lack of stylish graphic design until you understand the consciously alluring effect of the 'cartoony' nature of *Exit*.

Following *Pesce Pesce*, a bizarre stop-motion piece about fish, FilmTecknarna made *Alice In Plasmaland*, a series of 21 short clay animated segments that fuse surrealism, Lewis Carroll and cut and paste hip hop with well known 20th century dialogue. The segments include an old white redneck rapping Martin Luther King's famous words, "I have a dream" before turning into a 'sexy' black woman; King Kong pulling his female victim apart to the words, "Loves me, loves me not;" a sexual relocation of George Bush's famous line, "Read my lips;" and a disturbing piece with Santa Claus masturbating to a peep show booth within which two young children open presents. While many of the segments border on the absurd, *Alice* re-contextualizes well-known dialogue with images that subvert the original meanings by re-locating them in an ugly but perhaps more honest environment.

Alice was commissioned for SVT broadcasting company in Sweden and marked the first time FilmTecknarna worked with clay animation but also the first time Odell worked with fellow Swedish animator, Magnus Carlsson (director of Radiohead's *Paranoid Android* video): "Neither of us had done any claymation so we decided that would be a fun thing to try. We made a couple of episodes as a pilot and showed it to the head of the youth department at the SVT broadcasting company in Sweden who like it and commissioned 26 episodes. During this period we spent a lot of time in bars in Stockholm, and most of the ideas were written down on napkins. We shared a common interest in music and decided to use sampled lines of dialogue in the same way it was used in music at that time."



A housewife kneads a fish in *Revolver*.

FilmTecknarna's most famous production is *Revolver*, a dazzling black and white film with a bold graphic style and a striking minimalist score. The film won awards around the world and to this day continues to be included in "best of" animation programmes. Says Odell: "We had long wanted to do something in black and white but somehow one or two colours always sneaked in and before we knew it we were always back to full colour. We had long wanted to do some-

thing using loops, this is usually done to save time and money in animation, but we noticed that looping a movement always added new qualities to it, either it suddenly turned out very comical or annoying or even frightening, and this was something we wanted to use. Animation from the silent era, especially the Fleischers and Victor Bergdahl, were a major inspiration with their extensive use of cycles. We wanted to structure the film in the same way as a piece of music; to start with a couple of themes and let them develop and merge into new themes. Of course this way of working made it impossible to obtain any funding for the film so we had to finance it mostly from our commercial productions, and strangely enough it turned out to be the film that got us the most new commercial jobs, so I guess it was well spent money even from a strictly commercial point of view."

Revolver is comprised of a series of disparate repeated images that flow to the rhythm of a nightmare. The theme of domesticity, however fragmented and vague, seems to be the defining thread of *Revolver*. A housewife kneads a fish; a *literally* two-faced father fishes with his son. While the son gazes elsewhere, the father's face turns inside out before quickly reverting back to 'normal' when the son looks back at him. In this one clever image, the film conveys the complexity of parent/child relationships. To the children, parents are a sign of order, normalcy, maturity, but this scene conveys the fragility of such notions, instead presenting the parent as a deceptive, multi-faceted being. Later we see a wedding in a revolving church that cynically links marriage to that

of the temporary nature of a revolving restaurant. This image is followed by a bickering couple who exchange lips (notably the revolving church is in the background) so they can yell at each other. In the end, *Revolver*, like a dream, can be read in a variety of ways or merely savoured for its formal aural and graphic beauty.

Following *Revolver*, FilmTecknarna made another compilation film, this time exploring in their usual absurdist way, fifteen parts of the body. Similar in pace and tone to *Alice*, *Body Parts* was made "in a kind of 2D technique," says Odell, "with flat cutout, animated-like puppets, improvised and held together by the soundtrack." While there is a prevailing sense of alienation and loneliness, it's hard to take a film that shows a man playing *Ode to Joy* with his armpits too seriously. Other surreal highlights include a man who uncovers a lover and child when he pulls out his nose hair; A man pulls out his brain while cleaning his ears, and a couple who find love in their common gastrointestinal disorders.

FilmTecknarna returned to the Swedish suburbs for *Otto*, the story of a young boy who, lying in bed, imagines what exciting adventures his siblings might be doing. Filled with bold, bright, UPA-influenced colours and design, *Otto* is a striking contrast to the stark black and white imagery of *Revolver*. "The script for *Otto* was written even before we had started work on *Revolver*," says Odell, "but we didn't quite now what to do with it design wise to begin with. The experience of working within a very limited style on *Revolver* made it possible for us to approach design and the use of colours in a new

and freer way.” While *Otto* was never picked up as a series (it was intended as a pilot), much of design has found its way on FilmTecknarna animated series for Oxygen, *Mom’s Online*.



Santa is about to see a few too many *Body Parts*...

One of the distinguishing marks of FilmTecknarna and especially Jonas Odell’s work is the soundtrack. Using a clever amalgam of cut and paste dialogue, electronica, hip-hop and reggae, music plays a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining the mood of the work and in orchestrating the direction of many of their improvised films. Odell has created most of the soundtracks, most notably *Alice in Plasmaland*, *Body Parts*, *Revolver* and *Otto*. “I used to play in bands and I enjoy doing

the music myself, it might not be the world’s greatest music but making it yourself does make it a part of the overall vision. Besides I am the cheapest composer we ever worked with.”

Selling Out and Still Being Cool

Although, FilmTecknarna was created to make ‘personal’ films, commercial projects have been a necessary part of their survival. Owing to the festival success of their short films (especially *Revolver*) FilmTecknarna has been hired to make a wide array of commercials in Sweden and abroad. “The situation in Sweden has been kind of special. When we started out there was no commercial television in Sweden. When it arrived in the 1980s there was a big boom in commercials production, but not a lot of people with specialized skills in fields like SFX and motion graphics. We soon got a reputation as problem solvers and were called in to work on all kinds of things. We suddenly were model makers, we did on-location effects, television graphics, visual effects, puppeteering, etc. I have even done sound editing on other

projects. So the directors at the studio today have a basic knowledge of the possibilities of most conceivable animation techniques, and are able to choose from them when they design a new project.” The success of their recent commercial exploits owes a lot to the studio’s remarkable diversity and innovation.

In the past couple of years alone, FilmTecknarna has produced a number of spots including some real gems for *Music Is My Anti-Drug*, MTV (a very clean/minimalist design), the MTV European Music Awards, Boddingtons Cream Ale (one of the funniest and lowdest commercials of recent memory), retro shorts for the Cartoon Network’s *Cartoon Shorties* program and a nifty animated segment for Madonna’s *Music* video.

FilmTecknarna landed the Madonna segment largely because of their previous collaborations with the video’s director, Jonas Akerlund. “The basic brief,” says Odell, “was to make something that looked like an animated *Madonna* TV series circa 1970s so we tried to keep CG effects and



An animated Madonna from the music video, *Music*.

A ‘70s style limo ride with Madonna and her crew from the music video, *Music*.



An ultra-hip Atom Ant was FilmTecknarna's reinterpretation of the classic Hanna-Barbera character.
© Cartoon Network.

3D stuff at a minimum and only do things that could have been done on an animation stand."

Of the *Cartoon Shorties*, one of the highlights is *Atom Ant*. Created for the Cartoon Network's 'shorties' series, *Atom Ant* is one of a series of reinterpretations of old Hanna-Barbera characters. Using a Cold War/atomic 'look,' Odell works with, similar to *Body Parts*, a cut-out style using samples from the original soundtrack. Aside from *Atom Ant*, FilmTecknarna also created re-interpretations of *Wally Gator*, *Jabberjaw* and *Josie and The Pussycats*. The *Josie* spot is particularly interesting because it uses a variety of techniques (cel, cut-out, CGI with live-action explosions!) as we follow the theme

song and the girl's style through a series of metamorphoses based on music stylings over the last thirty years (disco, punk, country, electronica, heavy metal). When discussing FilmTecknarna, Cartoon Network director, Mike Ouweleen, gushes with enthusiasm: "We stumbled upon their reel three years ago and they began doing a piece called *Things To Do*. They just 'got it' from the beginning. Their design and textures are absolutely brilliant."

Music Is My Anti-Drug was part of a series done by various animators all featuring a young person and their particular anti-drug. Wanting to give the spot a dance music style, the studio looked at rave posters and flyers and out of that developed two styles: "a stylized flat drawing for the main character and the metallic shiny basic 3D style for the characters surrounding him." Rendering the 3D city several times in different techniques and then compositing it together created the imposing backgrounds.

The spot for the 2000 MTV European Music Awards mixes rotoscope with a retro futuristic style as it plays with the idea of the year 2000 as a symbol of the future. The opening sequence opens with a line of text saying,

"Stockholm in the year 2000," and follows a 'hip' young couple through their futuristic leisurely life (that oddly enough looks nothing like Stockholm in the year 2000!). "We did several ideas when we pitched to get the project, one featured a herring called Sven sporting porn star style sideburns. They liked the ideas but added another element to the brief: the stage was to be designed in the style of Ken Adam (the art director for several 1960s' Bond movies as well as for Kubrick's *2001*). The characters were shot as live-action and then hand rotoscoped. The backgrounds were built as 3D models in the computer and rendered as line images to fit the style."

Finding the Balance

A new challenge facing the suddenly in-demand studio is balance. The success of their commercial work has meant that there is little time for personal projects. In fact, the studio has not made an independent film since *Revolver* (*Otto*, while technically an independent film, was targeted as a TV series). "We were used to being able to use the time in between commercials to work on our own films," says Odell, "but that time doesn't exist anymore. It took us awhile to understand that and to



Rotoscope mixes with retro-futurism in a spot created for the 2000 MTV European Music Awards.



A futuristic couple strolls through the world created by FilmTecknarna for the 2000 MTV European Music Awards spot.

devise new ways of planning the studio's work so we actually will be able to do both. We have now stated as a policy to create independent films regularly." In fact, Odell is currently half way through a new "slightly autobiographical" short called *Family and Friends*. Jonas Dahlbeck (who became a studio partner in 1994 along with Magnus Carlsson) and Boris Nawratil have also started on a couple of projects.

While the animation industry heads into a drought, FilmTeckarna seems flexible enough to withstand it. "We have been lucky," says Odell, "to get almost all of our films theatrically distributed in Sweden and that's not really a

normal thing when it comes to short films." At the same time, any studio that can create inventive and exceptional animation using either the latest digital technology or a simple fax machine is probably going to turn out just fine.

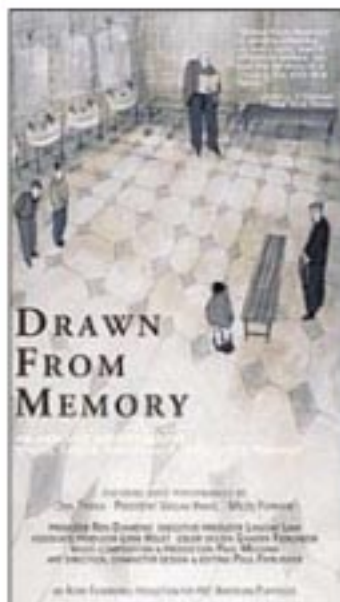
Don't miss the QuickTime movie clips of FilmTeckarna's work online at http://mag.awn.com/index.php3?type=pageone&article_no=841.

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Far Beyond The Traditional Cel: Innovative Techniques

by Joan Kim



Pandorama. © Nina Paley.

Innovate! Take a chance. Take a risk. Do something just to see what it looks like. Nina Paley, Michèle Cournoyer, Stephen X. Arthur, Kirsten Winter, Mikk Rand and Richard Reeves have done all of the above. Take a look at the descriptions from the artists themselves on the variety of materials and technical methods they incorporate into achieving the look and

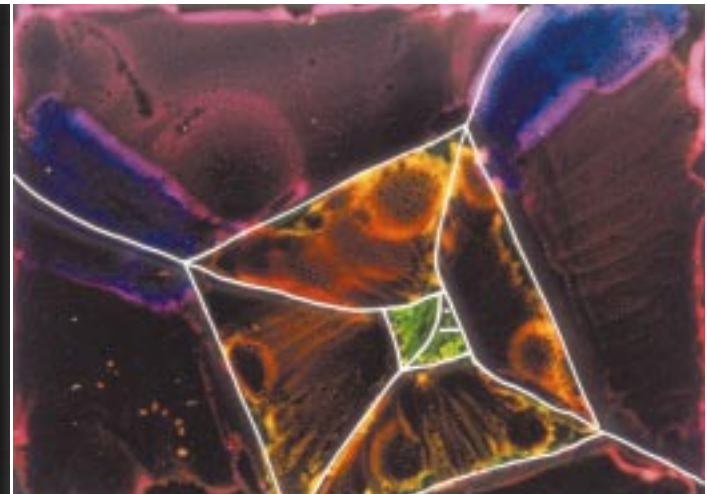
feel that they want. From traditional to more unorthodox techniques, these artists give us some insight into their creative process.

Nina Paley, Director/Animator

Nina Paley is probably best known for her alternative comic strip, *Nina's Adventures*, which began in 1988. She went on to create her film *Pandorama*, which

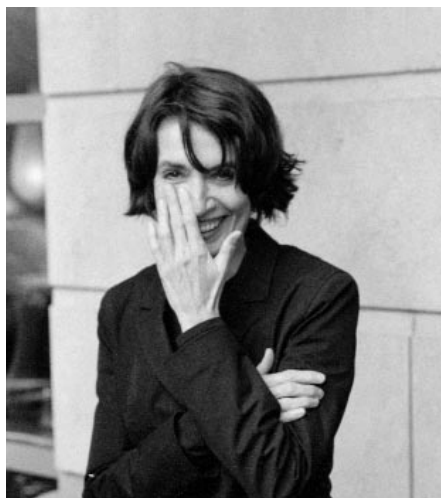
was presented in IMAX theatres. Working as the producer for this project she was able to raise donations in the form of film stock, processing and services, and got *Xlargo* in Paris, France as a large-format distributor.

"I've used clay models; clay on glass on an Oxberry animation stand; 2D digital animation; drawing, scratching, painting and rub-



More shots from the colorful Pandorama. © Nina Paley.

ber-stamping directly on film; and drawing on paper with an animation table. Over the past 4 years I've used Super-8, 16mm, 35mm and 70mm film. I've used Flash, normally a Web animation program, for my film *Fetch!* I designed the movie at 24fps, and had the whole thing rendered to 35mm film on Monaco Labs' film recorder. I used a crude 'mini-rotoscope' system for parts of *Pandorama* and *Cancer*. I passed bits of 35mm slug with images I liked (usually people dancing) through a little backlit rig with brads as registration pins. Over this I layered clear leader. One frame at a time, I traced a few lines of movement with black Rapidograph. Later I added color to the other side of the film. "I love trying new techniques. I'm strictly limited by budget constraints, which is a drag, but it also drives me to find creative production methods. If I had to make my films the 'correct' way, they'd never get done!"



Michèle Cournoyer, *Le Chapeau*'s director.

Michèle Cournoyer, Director/ Animator

"I was using an electronic pen and a painter program on a Macintosh computer to paint images for *The Hat/Le Chapeau*.

My producer and I found that these virtual images were too aesthetic. We realized that a film on such a visceral topic as incest needed a primitive approach. Steering clear of technical complexities gave me a more intimate relationship with the characters I was depicting.



Le Chapeau has stunned audiences the world over. Producers: Thérèse Descary, Pierre Hébert. © NFB.

"With my experience as a painter, I decided to go back to using India ink on paper, with an effect similar to Japanese brush paintings. The stark black lines on white evoke the nakedness of the dancer and the broken child inside her. Like the man who violated her innocent childhood, I attacked the white paper with urgent strokes, mistreating the brushes, splashing stains on the paper, stains on her soul.

"I worked without a storyboard, ignoring the rules of classical animation, without compromise or censure, in direct communication with my demons and angels."

Stephen X. Arthur, Director

Stephen X. Arthur is an experimental animation director. While one of his specialties is work-

ing in digital photo-based hybrid media, after reading the below points you will see that he is combining many techniques and methods in his films, which are showcased here on AWN. A Vancouver-based commercial production house also represents Stephen.

"(1) In *The Recess*, facial emotions were animated with the digital 2D warping of photographs. Faces also appear to turn sideways in pseudo-3D.

"(2) In *Transfigured*, a causal chain of matching actions lets us enter a seamless world constructed of oil paintings from a retrospective of an artist's 50 years of work. Events were choreographed in movement phrases with synchronized sounds to help follow the transformations. Digital animation of scanned images was recorded to 35mm by plunking the monitor under an Oxberry animation camera.

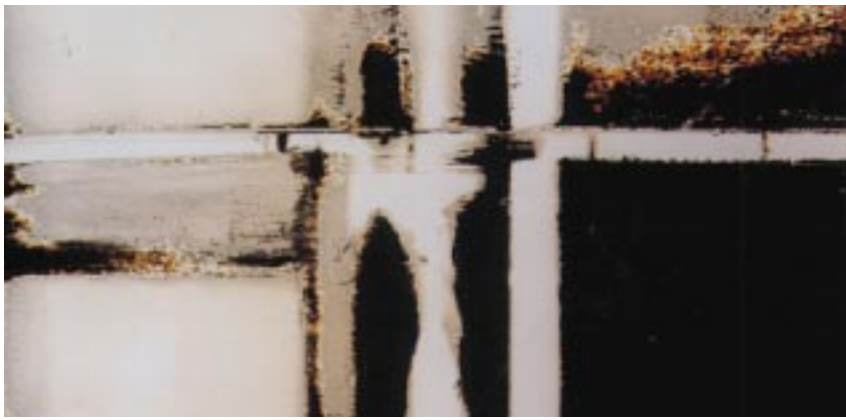
"(3) For *Vision Point*, camera and environment were ani-



Transfigured.
© National Film Board of Canada.



Vision Point. © Stephen X. Arthur.



Smash. © Kirsten Winter.

mated together as 'point-of-view animation' or 'landscape pixilation' of still photographs in Adobe After Effects. A combination of travelling 'time-lapse' shots, extreme telephoto to cropping and stabilization on a background point creates a surprising separation of foreground and background and makes the landscape dance.

"(4) A neural network trained on sequential image pairs was set free to create its own animation by feeding each output frame back as input. Experiments show promise for generating "prototypical" imagery from existing material.

"(5) Straight-ahead hand-painted digital animation, seeing only the last frame, not thinking ahead, doodling directly into the computer — this yielded spontaneous, organic animation with the feeling of closed-eye visions and hypnagogic reveries.

"(6) I am currently combining techniques (staged in 3ds max) as a faux commercial spot to demonstrate applied art."

Kirsten Winter, Director/Animator

"Clocks combines portraits of Elena Kats-Chernin through long time exposure photos of a TV-Monitor (High-8 shots taken of Elena in different situations and of

different surroundings), then a cel was placed on to the photo prints. The cels were then painted on top with oil-colours. After three frames the photo print was changed, but the painted cel remained consistent, frame by frame. So, the movement is very fluent and scenes that I didn't shoot on High-8 could be easily added by painting (like links in-between scenes). The photos that look out of focus and softened fit perfectly with the painting, so you often can't tell what is photography and what is oil painting.



Just in Time. © Kirsten Winter.

"Smash depicts life before and after an accident. Footage was taken using VHS-Video, High-8 and DV, then it was put onto a computer using Adobe Premiere to achieve a consistent look. Cels were placed on the computer monitor and painted frame by frame with oil colours on the cel, the 'Premiere treated' PICT image underneath. Then shot frame by frame with my 35mm animation

camera. I combined this footage with oil-painted landscapes.

"Just in Time captures travel by train all over the U.S.A. The DV footage was then treated with Adobe After Effects to create effects like 'breathing' bridges and special transitions where I worked with travelling mattes a lot. Then it was combined with scratched footage and BI-PACK shots. To eliminate the video-look it took several generations with my small and slow G3 Mac — so I had to compress the footage a few times. The quality of each single frame was 'kind of disgusting.' And it became more obvious when I combined it with scratched footage that had a sharper, more in focus look. So I used a very strong red colour as a link and my style of editing helped a lot. I created a film that doesn't look like it was blown up from DV, but had all the advantages of creating effects that a computer offers. When you screen it on a large screen with the ratio 1:1.85, the film looks very grainy, and no one believed that it was shot on video. I created the grainy look without effects (I had 'tons' of effects but no 'rain' or 'film-look' effect). The grainy look was just a result of compressing the footage several times and using a combination of other effects.

"Escape has just been completed and will be screened in competition at the WFF Montreal in August/September. Escape was mainly done with 3D animation that I created without the use of a computer!"

Mikk Rand, Animator/Director/Producer (Never Artist)

"I don't know if there is anything very unusual about what we use in generating our animation

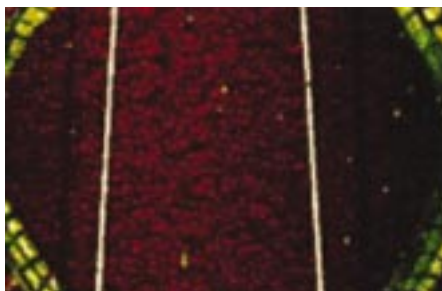
or not. We use whatever materials there are. All the materials that man can use are what we use. If it fits with our idea and imagination of what we like and want to see in our filmmaking it works: photos, puppets, drawings, stills, scanning cloth, metal and timber. Integrating them and filming them together just to get the same sense of a moving picture that was in the idea that we had in the beginning. Even using live-action works exceptionally well. I have used hand-held cameras shooting frame by frame, turning the camera's motor ahead, understanding that it will give a very rambling picture illustrating the neurotic feeling that I want to produce. I have animated the snow, sand and soil — you might call it earth painting in the visual sense. And always assisting us is computer animation software. We use several different programs to compose and mix the different techniques. Because mixing is everything! A variety of techniques can be used, as long as I can get exactly and precisely the emotion that I think this technique will produce for the audience during the screening of the film. So, there really are no special or unusual techniques other than just having some material and being technically eclectic at a high level to maintain continuity."

**Richard Reeves, Director/
Scratch Animation Instructor**

"All of my animation films are produced without the use of a camera. Images are created by drawing, painting and scratching directly onto raw motion picture film stock. To compliment these visuals, music and sounds are also scratched or applied directly on to the audio stripe of the optical sound area along the edge of the



*The Mosquito and The Horse from Mikk Rand of Estonia.
© 2001 Mikk Rand/Multi Film Ltd.*



Richard Reeves' *Linear Dreams*.
© Richard Reeves.

film. Some of the visuals are created using tools such as an air-brush with coloured inks or magic markers. Also, sandpaper, steel-wool and exacto blades are used for etching into the emulsion, along with bleach to act as a developer and a cork with a pin stuck into it which creates fine dots of light when hammered into the emulsion.

"As many as four different types of film stock are used and mixed, each with a different aesthetic value. These are....

Clear film: for the application of inks

Black film: for etching into; this turns clear then colours may be added

Colour opaque film: similar to black film only upon scratching lightly the scratches turn green, with a little more pressure it turns yellow, and if etched directly through becomes clear

Orange mask film: to create a handmade negative, it requires being printed at the lab to become a positive and the colours are then reversed.

"To compliment the persistence of vision, I like to add some echo effects to the handmade soundtracks, as this becomes a persistence of sound.

"As no camera or musical instruments are used, the projector itself becomes the musical

instrument and picture generator for which the sounds have been composed."

To see these artists' work in motion visit this article online to see numerous QuickTime clips at: http://mag.awn.com/index.php3?type=pageone&article_no=844

Joan Kim received her B.A. in English Literature from UCLA and is currently freelancing in Los Angeles completing writing and graphics related projects.

Previously as a graphics consultant she produced several company reports and manuals and continues to pursue an education in computer graphics.

Note: Readers may contact any Animation World Magazine contributor by sending an e-mail to editor@awn.com.





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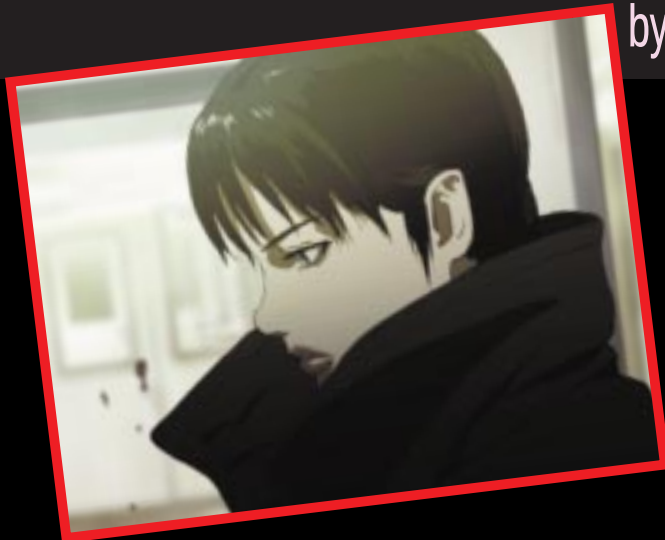
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BLOOD

THE LAST VAMPIRE

Anime's First Digital Feature

by Fred Patten



The mysterious
Saya.

All images courtesy of Manga
Entertainment/
Production I.G.

Theatrical anime has been trying to achieve theatrical distribution in America since 1989. Limited to film festivals and sporadic art theater tours during most of the 1990s, 2001 may be the year that theatrical anime has reached its goal — or at least qualified itself as an entry to be taken seriously at the starting line. 2001 has seen nationwide releases of anime features as diverse as *Akira*, *Blood: The Last Vampire*, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, *Jin-Roh*, *Pokemon 3*, *Spriggn* and *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust*; with *Metropolis* and *Escaflowne: A Girl in Gaea* due in early 2002. Most of these still appear in art theaters rather than a general citywide release; but in more than just a single theater, with play dates of a

couple of weeks rather than just a couple of days, and getting serious reviews in the local press.

Blood: The Last Vampire is one of the most unusual, innovative and exciting of this roster. It is

Japan's first fully digital-imaged animation combined with CGI, presenting richly detailed animated characters against backgrounds of photographic reality. The unusually short 48-minute running time makes it arguably a featurette rather than a feature, but this has not kept reviewers from treating it as a regular movie. Reactions from its Los Angeles release:

"Director Hiroyuki Kitakubo (*Roujin Z*) has created a rare animated spook show that is genuinely chilling, not just gross or campy. ... The realistically textured designs have been subtly heightened and distorted, in a hangover palette of grays and browns." David Chute, *LA Weekly*, August 24-30.

"...stylistically, it's a huge break from the past, incorporating digital effects (and a more realistic look) to a greater extent than any of its predecessors, and merging the 2-D characters in near-seamless fashion. ... if you expect quantity (or closure) for your \$8 ticket, you may feel shorted. The quality, however, is unlikely to be disputed. *Blood* is, if nothing else, a visual stunner ..." Luke Y. Thompson, *New Times Los Angeles*, August 16-22.



One of the vampire monsters that Saya must destroy.

That complaint about the lack of closure indicates what is possibly *Blood's* most imaginative and daring gamble: a story that is deliberately frustratingly confusing and incomplete. The setting is an American military base in Japan in 1966, just gearing up to support



the American military action in Viet Nam. The audience's point of view is with a civilian nurse, who suddenly finds herself swept up in a running firefight between vampiric, human hunting monsters, and a team of government agents (?) with a mysterious superhuman young girl (vampire?). At the conclusion the action moves on, leaving the nurse (and the audience) facing a massive government cover-up, wondering if they will ever learn the truth.

Innovation at Production I.G.

Production of *Blood* began around early 1999 at Tokyo's Production I.G. studio. Founded in December 1987 by Mitsuhiro Ishikawa, the studio has produced animation for TV programs, direct to video releases, theatrical features and video games. Writer-director Mamoru Oshii, one of the major names in Japanese animation, has been associated with Production I.G. since he directed the *Patlabor* OAV series and two theatrical features in 1988-89 and 1993. Oshii and Production I.G. really became noticed by the public in 1995, with the release of the CGI-intensive, Oshii-directed theatrical feature *Ghost in the Shell*.

In 1998 Ishikawa asked Oshii if he could recruit some fresh talent for the studio. Oshii began a study group called "Oshii Jyuku"

(Team Oshii), gathering promising young animation writers, artists and filmmakers into a series of informal tutorial sessions to discuss how to go about creating a professional animation project. After several weeks of covering the basics, Oshii asked the members to come up with their own project plans, which the whole group would analyze together. In the *Making of Blood: The Last Vampire* documentary, scriptwriter Kenji Kamiyama said, "Mr. Oshii's study group was intended to give us young directors the practical know-how to implement a project plan. It was difficult because I had to create a plan every week. ... I used all of my free time between my day job but I always had to pull an all-nighter before the due date."

It was about a year before the first elements of *Blood* began to appear. Junichi Fujisaki submit-

ted a project, which included a young woman in a schoolgirl's uniform angrily brandishing a sword. The group felt that Fujisaki's story was weak but they liked that image. Then Kenji Kamiyama proposed a plot titled "The Last Vampire." The group liked its basic concept,

and felt that Fujisaki's strong female character, Saya, would be just right as its lead. At this point Ishikawa began to look for a new production for the studio, so Oshii proposed that he, Fujisaki and Kamiyama develop this production plan into a serious proposal.

Several Facets of Blood

The "Blood Project" that Team Oshii came up with was more ambitious than just one movie. Oshii personally (with a film credit of "Cooperative Planning") constructed a thriller plot of a modern vampire story. Humanity is being secretly preyed upon by shapeshifting monsters called "chiropterans" (literally "bat people"). This is being kept from the public by a top secret international agency of vampire hunters (or maybe a series of government agencies in each country) who

Saya in fierce action.





The final film's Saya definitely has her roots in Fujisaki's first sketch.

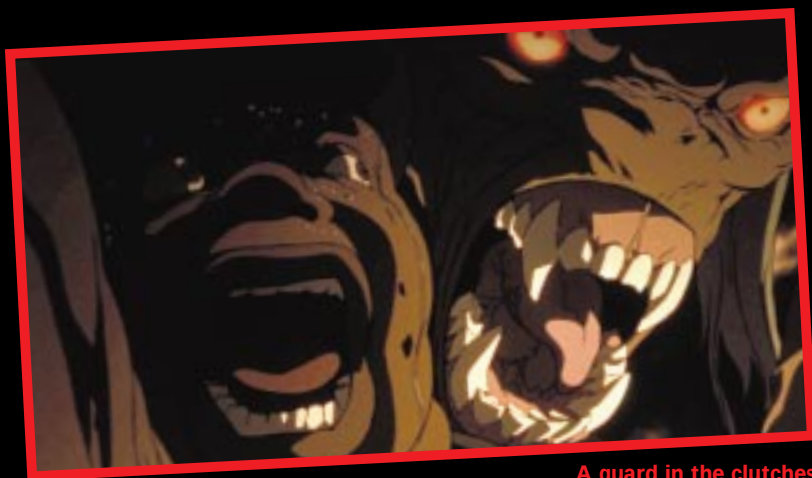
must hunt down the chiropterans without the public becoming aware of them. Aiding the vampire hunters is a sullen young woman named Saya armed with an ancient samurai sword. Saya's true nature and personal history are never clarified, but she obviously has superhuman strength and is spoken of in awe by the government vampire hunters as "the last of the Originals" who has been personally fighting the chiropterans all around the world for over a hundred years.

The Blood Project was divided into three parts, each semi-independent and each revealing important details of the story. Oshii wrote a complete

fantasy horror novel, *Blood: The Last Vampire — The Night of the Beasts*, set three years after the events in the movie. Despite Oshii's previous directorial work for the studio, Ishikawa asked Hiroyuki Kitakubo to direct the *Blood* movie while Fujisaki and Kamiyama finished its screenplay. Kitakubo had previously directed a different *Ghost in the Shell* for I.G. — the animation for the Playstation video game as distinct from the movie — as well as the theatrical feature *Roujin Z* and the OAV *Black Magic M-66* for other studios. The third part was a Playstation 2 video game, *Blood: The Last Vampire — Tokyo Battle*, set in 2000 (then two years in the

future). Animation for this game was designed and directed by Satoru Nakamura, another of the Team Oshii study group. There were further *Blood* spinoffs; a comic book adaptation of the movie and a novelization of the video game plot. But they were incidental to the basic story, which was told through the movie, Oshii's novel and the video game. They were all released in Japan between October and December 2000, with the movie released in mid-November.

In a written interview for this article, Mr. Kitakubo says, "I was asked by Mr. Ishikawa to think about creating the movie [once the Blood Project was agreed



A guard in the clutches of an evil chiropteran.

upon] so it took only a few months for the project to start. The master plan was to have as many different ways to exploit this project as possible. I was only personally involved in part of the plan, as I was only involved in creating the movie. All these different elements to the one big project were overseen by various people who had their assignment and had the freedom to express their own view of how *Blood* should be portrayed. It was one of the rules to this project; nobody would interfere with the other person's project."

One of Kitakubo's key decisions was to pick popular artist and sci-fi movie designer Katsuya Terada as *Blood*'s character designer. Terada, who has drawn many cartoon characters for video games, was intrigued by the challenge of designing characters of an unusual degree of reality to be animated; including two Afro-Americans, a soldier and a Man-In-Black secret agent. Terada also drew the cover art and graphics for Oshii's *Blood* novel.

A New Boundary

Both Kitakubo and Ishikawa wanted the movie to push Production I.G. to new limits in digital imaging technology. When

asked if the unusually short running time was an artistic decision to reinforce the enigmatic stretching of the story between the three parts, Kitakubo said, "To be honest, the reason we made it 48 minutes long was because of our software and hardware limitations. Anything that was longer would have made the film of a lesser quality. We wanted to create a new style of animation appealing to a larger audience." The digital imaging developed by Production I.G. did not break new ground; it is essentially the same procedures that Disney has been using for its features since *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*. But this was new ground for Japan, and it puts Production I.G. at the forefront of the Japanese industry's advance from the old hand-drawn cel process to animation "in the computer." The *Making of Blood: The Last Vampire* 35-minute documentary (included with the movie on the video and DVD releases) shows the studio's digital technicians and equipment in some detail.

The results have been appreciated in reviews like those cited at the beginning of this article. *Blood* is also racking up an impressive list of honors. In addition to four awards in Japan (from

the Media Art Festival of the Agency of Cultural Affairs, the 55th Mainichi Film Competition, the Takasaki Film Festival and the Animation Kobe Festival), *Blood: The Last Vampire* was voted Best Feature Film at the 2001 World Animation Celebration in Hollywood in August. And it is one of four nominees for ASIFA-Hollywood's 29th annual Annie Awards in the category of Outstanding Achievement in an Animated Feature Film, where it is being measured against Disney's *The Emperor's New Groove*, Warner Bros.' *Osmosis Jones* and PDI/DreamWorks' *Shrek* for the award in November. Heady company for an anime feature!

What is the future for the *Blood* Project? In America fans of the movie are still awaiting news on whether the novels or the video game will be published in this country. In Japan there have been a couple more novels, but the project is essentially finished. Mr. Kitakubo concluded his inter-



For now, we must be satisfied with *Blood* on VHS and DVD.

view with, "As far as I can say, this project has been completed and each one of us have gone on to new interests. We are not at this moment working on anything related to *Blood*. Production I.G. owns the project in its entirety. Team Oshii still remains within the whole I.G. structure. There probably will be new projects born from Team Oshii in the future, but at this time nothing I can say that's concrete."

Blood: The Last Vampire is avail-

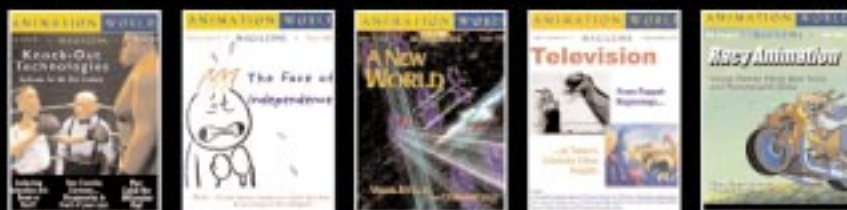
able on DVD and VHS from Manga Entertainment Ltd. They are priced at \$24.95 and \$19.95 respectively.

**BLOOD: THE
LAST VAMPIRE
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EXCITING...**

Fred Patten has written on anime for fan and professional magazines since the late 1970s.

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SPEAKING FOR ZIMSELF:

A Conversation With Jhonen Vasquez

by Martin “Dr. Toon” Goodman



Zimself: A self portrait.

Earth has been invaded by a hostile alien but don't lose any sleep; the invader in question is Zim, the most hapless would-be conqueror in the universe. Although Zim is supremely confident that the world will fall at his tiny green feet, neither he nor his malfunctioning robot GIR can get through a typical day without inflicting disasters of galactic proportions upon themselves.

Invader Zim is one of Nickelodeon's hottest new series and it originates from the wickedly fertile mind of writer/artist Jhonen Vasquez, best known for his comic book series Johnny the Homicidal Maniac and SQUEE! (rightfully the world's most phobic little boy). Jhonen recently spoke with me about Zim, his ideas and inspirations, and the ups

and downs of producing his first animated series.

Dr. Toon: Let's start out with how *Invader Zim* came to Nickelodeon. Mary Harrington contacted you after checking out *SQUEE!* What did Ms. Harrington tell you she liked about the *SQUEE!* series?

Jhonen Vasquez: I think she saw a certain amount of “kid relatability,” mainly in the way I handled the kids and the way Squee's behavior was an overall mood. I don't think anyone would ever want to make *SQUEE!* into a kids' show — I don't think anyone would be that insane — but I think she liked the way I handled the characters and the way there was actual character as opposed to just sick humor. Something in that made her take a chance on coming to me and asking me to come up with the idea for a show. I'm not certain whether it was with the intention of converting *SQUEE!* into a series — I like to think it wasn't.

Dr. T: I understand that you came up with the idea for *Invader Zim* for Harrington on the spot.

JV: Pretty much, yeah. At the time, when I was asked if I had any ideas for a show I had been working on *SQUEE!* and had done seven *Johnnys* [*the Homicidal Manic*]. I was about to finish up *SQUEE!* and figured, “Yeah, it's time to do something different.” That night after I had the initial conversation where I had said, “Sure, I'll try to think up something,” I just sat there in bed — didn't sleep, just sat there thinking — and came up with the basic idea for the show; Zim being the outcast alien who just doesn't see himself as anything but the great-



The books that started it all: *SQUEE!* and *Johnny the Homicidal Manic*.
© Slave Labor Graphics.

est creature ever to exist. Zim, Dib and Gaz pretty much came full-formed and the rest of the show just built around it. The whole idea came that one night, in just about an hour or so.

Dr.T: I notice that in *SQUEE!* there are a few stories featuring malevolent but totally incompetent aliens. Was that sort of the jumping-off point for you?

JV: Oh, yeah, I love that! I love the idea of anything that's considered to be a superior being — they've got all this amazing technology — and yet ultimately they're still just idiots! They're just guys piloting this gigantic spaceship. You get the idea that they stole it rather than built it themselves. They haven't evolved beyond being driven by their personalities. That's what Zim is. He's got this incredible arsenal at his hand and the only thing that's stopping him from destroying the Earth is the fact that he's a moron! Anyone else in that

position, there would be no show because Earth would be destroyed in the first episode! It's more fun working with Zim as an idiot.

Dr. T: In one of the *SQUEE!* stories — the one in which his teddy bear Shmee is explaining his purpose to Squee — it looks like you've drawn an early prototype of Zim. Was that drawing the basis for your character design? He doesn't look like the other aliens in your stories.

JV: Zim? He's just really simple. Almost as simple as that classic idea of what an alien looks like. I don't think Zim is based on any other character. He's essentially sort of stripped down to what my other characters are but without any of the detail. He's so basic he's almost the building block for every other character in the show. There's a certain level of the sinister in his face that I like to pull off, it's kind of common in a lot of the work that I do now.

Dr. T: How about that panel where Shmee is explaining to Squee all the things there are to be afraid of, and one of them is aliens. That alien kind of looks like Zim.

JV: Probably was a Zim. At the time I was coming up with conceptual stuff for Zim, and stuff that I didn't use or just seemed a little off, I like throwing it in the back of the books. You'll see Zim prototypes in posters on Squee's wall, or here and there. People have written to me saying, "Hey, is that Zim?" in the fan mail and it's kind of cool that people pay that much attention. It's kind of weird looking at those books because I did them so long ago, and it's cool to see the early stages of what I'm working on now. Yeah, you probably are picking up on some Zim prototypes in there.



An early Zim? A panel from *Squee's Wonderful Big Giant Book of Unspeakable Horrors*. Squee™ and © 2001 Jhonen Vasquez. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

Dr. T: You've said that any person that's writing a character is either basing it on themselves or someone that they think is a completely different person from themselves. So, where does Zim stand in relation to you?

JV: I think that Zim is just the part of me that refuses to listen to anybody. It's the only reason I get anywhere! People always telling you

**"I think that Zim
is just the part of me that
refuses to listen to anybody."**

this and that, you've got to be careful of this and that — you know, like, "Learn a trade so that you'll have something to fall back on!" The only thing I enjoy is drawing, making up these horrible little stories. And Zim, the thing that keeps him going, that keeps him so relentless, is the fact that he's oblivious. It's his only strength. In his case, it's absurd. If he realized what an idiot he was he would break down crying. But he doesn't! Everything he does is pure genius! He's unstoppable, and that makes him terrifying really, because there is no greater enemy than an idiot who doesn't understand that he is an idiot.

Dr. T: Ignorance of what other people feel, hurting their feelings, and open contempt for those who are different, seem to be major crimes in your books. Zim really takes those concepts to the limit. I mean, he sees all humanity as worthless except for slavery.

JV: Pretty much. I thought the fun thing about doing a kids' show like that is, you've got all these people rooting for someone who is trying to destroy the audience. The only person who's trying to save the Earth (Zim's arch rival Dib) has as much contempt for his fellow human beings as the person he's trying to stop. Because of his intelligence, he's kind of looked down on by most of the other kids. He's a freak. It's fun that the "alien" is on both sides; Dib is as much an alien to his own people as Zim is. I've always loved the idea of ambigui-

ty between good and evil. What's great is, even though I'm thinking of that stuff on my own and no one's going to pick up on it, they're going to enjoy the show. But I've actually gotten kids who have been talking about that! "Who's the bad guy here?" they say. "I don't care. They're both funny!" And that's really cool.

Dr. T: That's true. Dib is an ass-hole too. He's got nothing on his mind but Zim as the subject of an alien autopsy.

JV: Well, Dib has gotten to the point where he's not really a bad person, he's just frustrated. He lacks the patience to explain anything to anyone anymore. He's so used to people not believing him that he goes right into screaming at them. He immediately assumes that they're going to be morons and aren't going to believe him — and normally they don't.

Dr. T: If Zim — in spite of himself and GIR — somehow managed to subjugate the entire Earth, what would he do with it?

JV: He'd like to think that he would be so appreciated by his people that he'll be put in charge, but really, the Irken Armada usually just demeans an entire planet to something stupid like a parking structure planet or maybe a giant

food court planet. I don't think people think about the fact that the plan is to destroy all human beings; not enslave them so much as to just wipe them all out. Which would be a great episode, ahh! Could you see that? But, I don't think we could actually wipe out the human race on a kids' network.

Dr. T: I guess you'd have to do it off screen.

JV: Yeah, and you know what we'd get? "Uh? Can we hear the human race say they're OK off screen? Just so we know that they didn't die?"

Dr. T: According to you, when you write your books you give yourself only a general storyline to work with, and the actual details don't come out until you sit down and start to work. Did that make writing for a TV series difficult for you?

JV: It made it, I think, more interesting. I kind of was prepared for it. I still have a little bit of looseness in the way I work, but that's mainly when we get to the recording — you know, adding bits and pieces here and there — but the overall structure is definitely much more refined than when I did comics. The comics were more a stream-of-consciousness sort of thing; it's how I felt natural with the characters speaking. I figured I didn't want them to feel like they were being scripted: as soon as I thought of it, they would say it. The show is a little different. It's definitely trying to tell a story

**"If he realized what an idiot he was
he would break down crying."**



The Zim family. © Nickelodeon.

in the amount of time you've got. I never really knew how long a comic series of mine was going to last; I would just say, "OK, that story's not done yet, I'll have another issue." But with a cartoon series that's a little tougher, because I have eleven minutes and I have to tell the story right then and there. I think it's fun working in a way that I haven't before, but yeah, I don't go as loosely as I used to do on the comics.

Dr.T: In a past interview you were quoted as saying that you saw all your characters as animated

shorts, animated features or live-action feature-length films. Some of the film direction "asides" you put into your panels kind of proves that. Do you think, Jhonen, that you were always moving toward the eventual involvement with an animated series?

JV: I always thought that I would be doing — in my dreams — movies or something like that. I never thought I would be having an animated series, just like I never thought of actually having a comic book. It's just that every time the opportunity has presented itself I can't pass it up, because it's another

step closer to constructing a reality out of these ideas in my head. You know, the fun of seeing these things move around and, well, it sounds so cliché, come to life. Ultimately it comes down to how cool that is. I grew up loving stuff like this and now I'm making it. And it's still fun. Well, most of this is rather exhausting and hideous, but when I sit down and watch a finished episode, it's worth it, because I don't watch it as something that I made, I watch it as something that I would have enjoyed whether or not I made it and that's the cool part of it.

Dr. T: Congratulations on a new season of *Invader Zim*.

JV: Thank you very much. A few more nightmares for the kids!

Dr.T: You're a former film student and a movie buff that enjoys horror films. I was reviewing the first season of *Zim* and saw things like organs, weird alien skin diseases, mechanical parts springing out of organic bodies and I was wondering if you were a big fan of David Cronenberg.

JV: Oh my God! That man is one of the people I truly thank for existing. His attitude toward organic existence is so disturbing. It's brilliant. The transmogrification of the human body and all those themes, I've always been into that, always been fascinated by it. When I look back at myself growing up as a little kid I see early signs of me being amazed with certain concepts like those, and he just hits them right on the head every time.

Dr. T: It really comes across nicely in *Zim*.

JV: It's not so conscious. There is a future episode (of *Zim*) which is inspired by his take on *The Fly* called *Bolognius Maximus* where Dib is slowly becoming bologna! It's a stupid-sounding story, but it's fun because it's handled at the same level of that moment when Brundle finds out he's been fused with a fly. It's like, "Oh my God, I'm becoming..." But it's bologna! It's horrifying, and the music in the episode is horrifying, and the angles make it even more horrifying — and that just makes it funnier! And the fact that David Cronenberg has a hand in that — in a kids' show! Very few people point out that he's an inspiration to me. Kurt Vonnegut is another one of them but with a different take. They never handle science-fiction like it's "just" a science-fiction story. There's so much respect and intelligence behind it that I think it helps even a cartoon show. Even though it is silly or funny, there's a level of awareness behind who's making the show that I think it's kind of fun when people pick up on it. If they don't, if they just see freakish, weird stuff, well, that's OK, because that's what it is.

Dr. T: When the series began, Jhonen, some of the things you had to adjust to were having to do more on the management rather than creative end and having other people bring their styles to your characters. Have you been able to find ways to become more creatively involved with the show this season and put more of your personal stamp on it?

JV: Even from the very beginning I despised all the managerial kind of stuff; can't stand it. I'd rather be sitting there in my room drawing. I'd rather be turning out the char-

acter designs. I still do a bunch of character designs, and I do a lot of background work. That first season, even though there was a lot of managerial stuff, it was also compounded with several other full-time jobs in character work. I'm head writer. I'm involved in storyboards and actually going and revising storyboards, and again, doing an obscene amount of character designs. Now all I'm trying to do is keep the amount of creative involvement I have had all this time, but ease off on the managerial side, because now there are people that have shown themselves to be people I can trust to take things over for me. Ultimately I'd like to be able to focus on the writing — as head writer — and deal with the overall direction. I do all the voice direction too, and I'd like to stay there. But approving every little background, every design, that's the stuff where I could definitely free a lot of time up and get back to what makes it fun. Which sort of, at this very moment, it is not. It's not as often as I'd like, the amount of actual enjoyment when I'm just sitting there drawing or giggling like a lunatic over some new idea.

"Most of this is rather exhausting and hideous, but when I sit down and watch a finished episode, it's worth it."

Dr. T: Will you eventually be directing episodes yourself?

JV: I don't know. I already do a

whole lot in terms of governing what the episode is going to be like; the way the characters act — that's me, overseeing so much of that. Now the storyboard guys are getting so great that they do all this stuff without me telling them how to do it, but it's still so much fun when I sit down with the script and the board guys. I act out key scenes and I'm telling them, "In this moment, he moves exactly like this!" just to accent that joke. In a way, I am a huge voice in what you actually end up seeing in the episode. Steve Ressel is the animation director and he does a great job of translating all of that. I do so much on the show that I don't know if I need to take on another task.

Dr. T: Steve Ressel has a terrific background in adult animation. He directed on *Duckman*, *God, the Devil, and Bob*, and one of my old favorites, *Stressed Eric*. What has Steve been able to bring to your material?

JV: Well, the coolest thing about Steve is — a lot of people want to come in on this sort of thing, and they come in from other shows. Some of them are more talented than others, some of them just amazingly talented, but they always want to have a lot more of a voice in my project and what I'm doing. Coming from comics where it's just all me, well, I understand that it's necessary to work with other people but it's also necessary for the show to come as much from my head as possible. Steve does a beautiful job of translating what's in my head into animation. That's the most important thing to me. He treats it so seriously. I say, "I want it to look like a movie; like you're looking at a

scene from a movie, not like a flat shot from the Sunday funnies" — he knows what a dramatic shot is and he knows what a dramatic scene is. I need that for this show because even though it's supposed to be funny, like I always say, the more dramatically it's handled, the funnier it is because it brings a level of absurdity to the joke.

Dr. T: How did you hook up with your writing team?

JV: Currently, we've got three writers. Myself, Rob (Hummel) and Eric (Trueheart). Rob I've known for years; he's a friend of mine and a writer. I'd worked with him on writing scripts on our own, for ourselves. It seemed like a perfect fit to bring him on because he knows what I go for. He knows what I like and what I don't like. He censors himself when he knows there's something I'm going to take out anyhow; he's that much in tune with what I'm going for. And Eric? Actually, we found him when we were going through hundreds of thousands of billions of scripts when we were looking for another writer. It was just a case of us seeing his work. He had done some Internet shorts and his stuff was funny! He had never worked in animation before and had never worked in anything like television before — and that, I love. I love the fact that a lot of these guys have never worked on any other kind of cartoon, and I can see that they're not pulling from anything else. They're not being inspired by any other show they've worked on, and there's not another definite style coming into it. It's all new to me.

Dr. T: That's as original as you can get.



Ah, school days. © Nickelodeon.

"I would have to shoot myself several times in the face to achieve a certain level of brain damage to agree to it again."

JV: Yeah, that's really important to me. Some of the most important people on the show, this is our first job. It's all people who haven't been encrusted with years and years of working on other things — you know, the ones who "know the ropes" and know what you "can't" do — they're not afraid to try it. Which is the coolest fucking thing about these people.

Dr. T: As a comic book artist

of some renown yourself, talk about some of the artists working on the show. Who — or what — has really impressed you?

JV: The character designer, Aaron Alexovitch — who we found right out of school. He was going to Cal Arts, or some nightmare place, and he took the chance to work on the show. He was going to school so that he could break into some kind of animation business,

**"I always hated Scooby Doo....
It was like staring at feces for
half an hour. Euuh!"**

and he was given the opportunity to work on *Zim*. He took it, and he worked out. Originally he was going to be a clean-up artist and he's made his way up to head character designer now. I can completely trust in what he's going to do. His style is close enough to mine to where he can actually improve upon the look of the show at this point. That's what it's all about, getting better and better. The color crew is great; those people really pick up on how interesting the color schemes are. They are phenomenal in what they do, and in the amount of time they do it. They get a look out of the show that just makes it stand out. It's a dark but colorful look, like I love. They can reproduce it by this point without me telling them anything; they just do it. It's getting to that point where I can leave the building and not lose my mind over what hideous things are happening to my show. It's cool because these people, they love working on the show. Aside from all the nightmarish hours they put into it, you can tell that they actually enjoy it now, as opposed to just having a job.

Dr. T: Would you try this again, Jhonen? Do you see yourself working on a future animated series?

JV: I would have to shoot myself several times in the face to achieve a certain level of brain damage to agree to it again. Which I was planning on doing, but not to get back into animation. I was just going to shoot myself because I

could use the rest! I don't want to get stuck working on children's animation, I don't think. Well, maybe I don't think of it as "stuck," but there are so many other ideas I want to work on that are limited by what I can do on a kids' show. I don't want to just have fun with a creepy kids' show, I want to work on something genuinely creepy. I definitely have to, because I have so many ideas I have to get out of my head before I'm dead — which could be any time now.

Dr.T: Did you watch cartoons as a kid? What kind of animation did you watch?

JV: The usual garbage you just can't help but like when you're little, like *He-Man*. I remember when watching *He-Man* I thought, "Wow, this is garbage!" because they had, you know, five drawings that they used every episode. Stuff that I really, really loved, I didn't find myself being amazed by. It was more just enjoying it in a sort of cartoon haze, a "sitting there, eating your cereal, watching cartoons" kind of level. There wasn't really any appreciation for how amazing the stuff was until I saw stuff like *Akira*. I always hated *Scooby Doo*. I couldn't stand how brown everything was! It was like staring at feces for half an hour. Euuh! I think there's a good thing about the fact that I didn't take a lot of this with me, love for these cartoons I saw while growing up, because I don't put a lot of that into what I do now. I don't derive

a lot of inspiration from growing up with this stuff. There's a lot of stuff out there that looks like new episodes of a really old show to me. One or two shows, that's OK, but there are a lot of shows on the American side of things that are so retro, so tired-looking to me. It would be cool to see something done on this side that breaks away from that. There's been a cool response to (*Invader Zim*) just on that level alone, in that people dig the different look of it.

Dr. T: Jhonen, you give a great interview. Is there anything you have never said in an interview that you want to say now? Let it rip!

JV: Daily, I drink about a garbage bag of baby's blood. How's that?

Dr. T: Uh...please don't let Squee hear about it!

Jhonen Vasquez, 26, currently resides in Los Angeles where he plots future horrors from the dark sanctuary of his drawing table. His comic books have been nominated for several Eisner Awards, are produced by Slave Labor Graphics and are kept continually in print to the delight of fans old and new. Jhonen actually prefers Pillsbury crescent rolls to baby's blood, but you won't find him eating Scooby Snacks anytime soon.

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

Comes to America

by Fred Patten



Urban is aiming to make *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust* the first anime feature to reach America's general science-fiction/horror fantasy theatrical audiences.
© Hideyuki Kikuchi/Asahi Sonorama/Vampire Hunter D Production Committee.

The question has arisen recently as to whether the American motion picture industry is ready for Japanese theatrical animation, which is not presold through children's TV. For most of the 1990s (starting with *Akira* in December 1989), Japanese animated features for adolescent and adult audiences have toured America only on the fine-art theatrical circuit. They have played usually in only one theater at a time, for a half-week or a week before moving on to the next city. The only exception was

Troma's 1993 small general release of the family film, *My Neighbor Totoro*. It was not successful enough to justify the costs of making dozens of 35mm prints and taking out full-page newspaper advertising.

But a lot can change in a few years. Anime is better known to the general public than it was just five years ago. Animation in general has become more acceptable for adults, thanks to movies and TV programs like *Toy Story*, *Chicken Run*, *King of the Hill* and *South Park*. Theatrical children's

features based on the mega-popular Japanese TV cartoons *Pokémon* and *Digimon* have been notoriously profitable despite poor critical reviews. Is it time to experiment again with a theatrical release of a Japanese animated feature for general audiences rather than for young children?

Urban Vision Entertainment, an L.A.-based anime-specialty company, hopes so as it releases *Vampire Hunter D*, a stylish fantasy thriller in the tradition of Britain's 1950s-'60s Hammer horror movies teaming Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing.

The Modest First Film

Vampire Hunter D has a respectable if somewhat confusing history, thanks to a 1985 anime movie of the same name. That was an adaptation of a 1983 horror-adventure novel by Hideyuki Kikuchi. Kikuchi has fashioned himself into one of Japan's leading horrormeisters during the past two decades, churning out paperback novels in the tradition of Occidental horror writers like Robert E. Howard, Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft and Stephen King. Many Japanese live-action and animated horror movies of the 1980s and '90s have been based on Kikuchi's novels. The author is known for, every couple of months, hosting all-



Scenes from the first animated feature of *Vampire Hunter D* 1985.
© Hideyuki Kikuchi/Asahi Sonorama/Vampire Hunter D Production Committee.

night seminars for horror fans at a bar near his Tokyo home.

The 1980s were a decade of transition for Japanese animation, and the first *Vampire Hunter D* was notable in several respects. It was one of Japan's earliest animated releases aimed blatantly at the older teen/adult market rather than for children or families. It was one of anime's first treatments of European horror mythology rather than boys'-adventure science-fiction or traditional Oriental horror-fantasy. Although *Vampire Hunter D* did have a theatrical release (in December 1985 and early 1986), it was intended primarily for Japan's emerging home-video market which was already demanding more dramatic action and adventure (i.e., more violence and gore) than was permissible in family-oriented animation. Animation allowed *Vampire Hunter D* to present frightening monsters and breathtaking fantastic action that would have looked embarrassingly laughable in a low-budget live-action film. *Vampire Hunter D* was a hit with horror-movie fans in Japan in the late 1980s. It was also

popular with horror and anime fans as one of the earliest anime releases in America, on the fine-art theatrical circuit and home video in 1992 and on The Sci-Fi Channel in 1993.



Yoshiaki Kawajiri, director of *Wicked City*, *Lensman* and the new *Vampire Hunter D*. Photo courtesy of Urban Vision Entertainment.

But it was a limited-budget production. Its technical quality compared favorably with videos of TV animation and direct-to-video releases, but not with most animated theatrical movies. Ironically, one of the animated features that it suffered next to was another horror thriller based on a novel by Kikuchi, *Wicked City*, produced at the new Madhouse studio by director Yoshiaki Kawajiri, released in April 1987. Kawajiri's directorial

debut had been *Lensman*, a *Star Wars*-imitation space opera based on an American 1930s sci-fi novel, three years earlier. *Wicked City*, a Stephen King-type modern urban horror fantasy, was his second theatrical feature. It set Kawajiri's reputation as a major directorial *auteur* of sophisticated animated suspense. His productions for the next decade were dominated by adult thrillers set in a high-tech future or in a Japanese historical landscape haunted by mythological monsters. At this same time, Kikuchi's reputation as a horror writer was also growing, and his original *Vampire Hunter D* novel was followed by several sequels. Fan demand for another movie, "done right" (Kikuchi had complained about the cheapness of the first movie), started developing.

A New Ultra-Cool Version

Plans for a new *Vampire Hunter D* by Madhouse and Kawajiri had just started in 1997 when a new partner appeared. Mataichiro Yamamoto had been a Japanese animation producer since the early 1980s, working



In the year 12,090 AD, the Earth has fallen into the clutches of ruthless vampires, and humans are enslaved by a corrupted feudal system. © Hideyuki Kikuchi/Asahi Sonorama/Vampire Hunter D Production Committee.

with both established major studios (he was a co-producer in 1983 for Tokyo Movie Shinsha's *Golgo 13*, one of the earliest animated theatrical features to combine traditional cel animation with computer graphics) and his own Filmlink International company (which also produces live-action movies). In July 1996, Yamamoto started Urban Vision Entertainment in America to become directly involved with the growing American demand for anime. One of Urban Vision's first video releases was a Madhouse production.

Yamamoto also wanted to pick up the American rights to both *Vampire Hunter D* and Madhouse's *Wicked City* (previously released in America by Streamline Pictures).

During their negotiations, Madhouse mentioned that it was starting a new *Vampire Hunter D* movie that would be ready in three or four years. Yamamoto wanted to do more than reserve the American video license for it; he wanted to get involved in its production. Also, Urban Vision (UV) had started small as an anime

video distributor only, but Yamamoto hoped that in a few more years — coincidentally, by the time the new *Vampire Hunter D* would be finished — UV would be ready to expand into American theatrical distribution.

The new *Vampire Hunter D* bears the same title as the 1985 feature, but it is based upon the third novel (of twelve, so far; none yet published in English) in Kikuchi's series, *D: Demon Deathchase* (1985). The setting is a Gothic medieval fantasy world of 12,090 A.D., long after nuclear and biochemical war destroyed civilization. Human survivors were forced to contend with mutant-spawned monsters that resembled the supernatural beasts of legends. At first the monsters gained the upper hand; blood-drinkers who established themselves as a new feudal aristocracy modeled upon Dracula and similar vampire literature, preying on human peasants and serfs. After thousands of years, the vampires are becoming feeble and decadent, and the humans are rising up against their domination. "D" is a stereotypical mysterious Lone Rider, a taciturn knight-errant/ronin who rides into a community embroiled in civil war and offers to help the humans fight their vampire lords, despite showing clear signs of being a human-vampire crossbreed himself.

In the new movie, "D" is summoned by a prominent family in one of the rising but still isolated human cities. Their daughter has been kidnapped by one of the most powerful remaining vampires, who has fled with her beyond the borders of their authority. They offer ten million dollars for her return, or proof of a clean death in case she has been



The mysterious vampire hunter called "D" carries many of his own secrets. © Hideyuki Kikuchi/Asahi Sonorama/Vampire Hunter D Production Committee.

converted into a vampire. But they are not relying on "D" alone; they have also called in a team of ruthless anti-monster bounty hunters. The movie becomes a running three-way chase across the countryside, through both human and monster towns. There are clear signs almost immediately that the daughter Charlotte has eloped voluntarily with the handsome, charismatic vampire. The vampire and monster mercenaries in his hire, try to kill both "D" and the team of bounty hunters. The five bounty hunters (a combination of Rambo-style commandos, ninja assassins and a beautiful but cynical *femme fatale*) are out to kill the vampire, and some of them would not mind killing the girl and claiming the "clean death" than taking the trouble to capture her alive. They also set traps to kill "D" or at least take him out of the competition. "D" remains stony-faced, but he obviously wonders if he is really on the right side if the vampire and Charlotte are genuine lovers and are voluntarily going into exile to leave humans in peace. But is this a trick of the vampire, with Charlotte as an innocent dupe?

First Rate Execution

The movie has some clever dialogue, but it relies so heavily on its visual impact that it would not matter much if it were shown as a silent film. The suspenseful direction by Kawajiri (who also wrote the screenplay) is backed up by beautiful graphics. Most of the chase takes place by day, through bright forest settings filled with trees and flowers. The vampires' sumptuous palaces and court costumes are rococo marvels of filigree and lace and sparkling gold trim (no cobwebs or emaciated corpses here). The main character



Vampire Hunter D was produced at Tokyo's Madhouse studio, but Urban Vision arranged for the post-production work to be done in California. © Hideyuki Kikuchi/Asahi Sonorama/Vampire Hunter D Production Committee.



What a useful parasite! © Hideyuki Kikuchi/Asahi Sonorama/Vampire Hunter D Production Committee.



The new Vampire Hunter D bears the same title as the 1985 feature, but is based upon the third novel of twelve in Kikuchi's series *D: Demon Deathchase* (1985). © Hideyuki Kikuchi/Asahi Sonorama/Vampire Hunter D Production Committee.

designs are by noted international fantasy artist Yoshitaka Amano, whose recent American projects have included the art for *1001 Nights*, an animated fine-art film commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra with original music by David Neuman, and the full-color illustrations for fantasy author Neil Gaiman's deluxe book *Sandman: The Dream Hunters*. Amano's art style was faithfully matched for the rest of the characters and costumes by animation director Yutaka Minowa. Although the character animation is not up to the highest Disney standards, Kawajiri's tight direction of facial expressions and body language conveys a convincing "illusion of life" despite a limited fluidity of motion.

While the animation of *Vampire Hunter D* was in production at Tokyo's Madhouse studio, Urban Vision arranged for the post-production work in California. The English sound track was recorded in Los Angeles in 1999 before the Japanese dialogue was completed. The sound effects and other post-production work were directed during 2000 by Kawajiri in Marin County at Marco Co., whose husband-&-wife owners, Marco & Terry D'Ambrosio, composed the score. The film's final print master was made at George Lucas' nearby Skywalker Ranch facility.

Urban Vision has also been working on publicity and distribution all this time. A 2 1/2-minute theatrical trailer was finished in 1998 and has been shown often at American anime fan conventions; it is also downloadable on Urban Vision's Website. UV has made a work-in-progress print available for international film exhibitions since mid-2000. It has

played to enthusiastic audiences at the FANT-ASIA Asian Film Festival in Montreal, Canada in July, 2000; at Japanime: The Best of Japanese Animation, the major film event at the Sydney 2000 Olympics Arts Festival in Sydney, Australia in August, 2000; and at the New York Anime Film Festival in October, 2000. A sold-out Halloween screening at UCLA's Anime A-Go-Go film program in October-November 2000 was blurbed as: "Regency meets Transylvania in this visual knockout of a movie with exquisitely gothic atmospherics, creepy special effects, tense action, and von Helsing fashioned as a foppish, half-vampire, half-human outcast called 'D'."

A Japanese general theatrical release has always been assured, but Urban Vision has arranged for an American release that far exceeds the traditional anime art-theater crawl of one theater in a couple of cities at a time. Its goal is still modest for an American general release: five or more theaters per city in twenty cities at a time. If Urban Vision can achieve this, *Vampire Hunter D* may become the first anime feature to reach America's general science-fiction/horror fantasy theatrical audiences.

You can see the *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust* trailer at http://mag.awn.com/index.php3?type=pageone&article_no=679

Visit the *Vampire Hunter D* Website at <http://www.vampirehunterD-bloodlust.com/> to get the latest theatre listings near you!

[Thanks for information on Hideyuki Kikuchi and his *Vampire*

Hunter D novels to the *Vampire Hunter D Archives* Website (<http://www.altvampyres.net/vhd/>) maintained by Cathy Krusberg, an American fan who can be reached at ckberg@ix.netcom.com.]

Fred Patten has written on anime for fan and professional magazines since the late 1970s.

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...North the from ramblings idiotic drunken, provocative, Monthly



Illustration by Andreas Hykade.
Courtesy of Chris Robinson.

Pimp Animation The Proposal Modest A: One Part

Robinson Chris by

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Illustration by
Andreas
Hykade.
Courtesy
of Chris
Robinson.

Monthly provocative, drunken, idiotic ramblings from the North...

by Chris Robinson

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Producing Animation: Storyboarding

by Catherine Winder and Zahra Dowlatabadi

- Preparing A Shipment
- Flow Chart of Pre-Production Steps: Television and Direct-to-Video

Here is an excerpt describing one of the most critical stages to every animated project: Storyboarding.

The Purpose

It is every filmmaker's goal to come up with an innovative way of telling his or her story. In animation, it all begins with the storyboard. After all, it is the first time the words are taken from the script and translated into images. The storyboard artist's job is to draw panels that illustrate scenes depicting the characters, their action and their environment. At this stage of the game, there is a full range of possibilities open to the director since they are starting with a blank slate.

By allotting adequate time for storyboarding, the producer gives the director and the artists the opportunity to nail down the story and improve it as much as possible. The more time spent on fixing script problems in this stage, the better. In fact, in an ideal world, production does not start until the majority — if not all — of the boarding is completed and approved. Since the storyboarding phase is the last comparatively inexpensive portion of production, it is one of the best places to allocate resources to avoid potential problems down the line. If, for example, the story is not entertaining or is predictable, this is the time to delve into it. In such cases, production should be halted, if possible, or slowed down so that writing issues can be addressed before spending further monies. Unfortunately, we have worked on

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producing animation

CATHERINE WINDER
ZAHRA DOWLATABADI



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<http://www.producinganimation.com>.

In *Producing Animation's* Chapter 8, we cover all the specifics as to how a project gets off the ground and fully prepared for production. The topics covered include:

- The Role of the Producer During

the Pre-Production Phase

- Design and Art Direction
- The Voice Track
- Storyboarding
- Animation Timing
- Songs
- Title Sequence

too many shows where the deadline to start production and/or the lack of funds has forced this phase to be rushed. The result is that story points left unresolved at this point haunt the entire production. To quote a veteran storyboard artist, "Somehow there is never enough time to do it right, but there is always time to do it over."

Getting Started

Before the director can hand out an assignment to the storyboard artist, the following items have to be in order:

- The script
- The voice track (if available)
- Character models
- Location designs
- Prop designs
- Office space and supplies (if the artist works in-house)
- Page and panel setups
- Sample completed storyboard panels illustrating the show's style and complexity level (if applicable)

Initially, the director divides the script into sequences. Each sequence is further broken down into scenes that become the individual units which go through the production pipeline and are then assembled to make the final project. The location where the action takes place and the time of day are typically the factors that the director uses to delineate a sequence. On a primetime 22-minute show, for example, it is common to have three artists working for six weeks (or 18 staff-weeks) on a storyboard. Due to time and money limitations, once the artist gets guidance from the director, they focus their efforts on making the story work. For the most part, however, there aren't many departures from the script. On these types of shows, storyboard artists in essence take on the role of edi-

tors and cinematographers. They work on how the show should be cut by the way they depict the scene, asking such questions as, 'Is it in a single master shot? Or are there many cuts?' They also create the template for the look of the film through how they choose to set up camera angles and how the characters are framed and composed within the scene.

Feature Storyboarding

The primary goal for the feature storyboard artist on the other hand is to tell the story. In long format, the script often plays second fiddle to the storyboard. Instead of the script being closely followed, it provides a frame of reference that the artist can use and improve upon. On a 75- to 80-minute project, the storyboarding staff has approximately a year to complete their task. Often when there is only a treatment or a description of a particular event, the storyboard artist is given the material in order to explore a theme and come up with possible paths to be followed by the script. As the feature storyboards evolve, the script is revised to match the latest set of boards. (In Chapter 5, "The Development Process," we further discuss the relationship between feature storyboarding and the script.)

Another distinction between feature and television storyboarding is that on features, there is usually a department supervisor. This person functions as a liaison between the director and the artists. The department supervisor also manages the workflow through his or her department with the aid of an APM. In this department, the story goes through many variations; it is the role of the story APM to keep track

of the creative notes and update production personnel on script changes. They meet with their crew on a weekly basis to discuss the overall status of the script and talk about the work in progress.

When a sequence is ready for storyboarding, the department supervisor assigns or casts it to the appropriate artist (that is depending on the project, someone who works well with drawing action adventure or has a knack for timing and illustrating comedy). Another approach is to have a group of artists work together on the same sequence. The artists are each assigned a story beat to work out. After artists finish their sections, they are pitched to the group for comments. Their panels are either approved for viewing by the director or sent back for revisions.

On the Same Page

Because the storyboarding procedure is the cornerstone of any production, it is vital to establish a few ground rules. It should be noted that before starting storyboarding, the size of the panels must be standardized. The ratio used for television and direct-to-video projects is approximately 1.33:1 (soon to be changed to 1.78:1 when the digital format begins to take over). For direct-to-video projects that are intended for limited theatrical release and for feature films, the standard ratio is 1.85:1. For projects that opt to use the cinemascope format, the ratio is 2.35:1.

For both television and direct-to-video projects, sample storyboard pages should be created so that all artists use the same setup. It is common to have three panels per page and allocate space underneath each panel for

dialogue and action. On series and direct-to-video productions, it is advisable to distribute an approved storyboard section to the artists. This is used as a tool to ensure consistency of style for the show and to standardize the amount of detail expected on each panel. The model storyboard also has other benefits. One important advantage is for the artist to be able to gauge their assignment in correlation with its due date. Too often, there is an immediate conflict between artists and the production staff when the time needed by an artist to finish the job and the allotted time schedule don't correspond. The sample storyboard enables everyone to see the final goal and have realistic expectations of the show's requirements.

Catherine Winder has worked as both an executive producer in television and feature animation. Her background in development, as well as production with studios from around the world has given her a rare global expertise in the field of animation. In her present position as vice president production for Fox Feature Animation, she is overseeing production of the studio's 2D traditional and 3D CGI animated movies. She has co-written Producing Animation with

nationally acclaimed animation studios and talent. Dowlatabadi is the founder of an organization entitled Animation Team, which assists studios with production staffing needs ranging from qualified line producers to experienced production assistants. She also has co-written a book entitled Producing Animation with Catherine Winder for Focal Press.

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Zahra Dowlatabadi. Zahra Dowlatabadi, an award-winning producer, started her animation career in 1986. Since then, Dowlatabadi has worked in almost every major studio in Los Angeles along with many inter-

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Glenn Vilppu's drawing techniques manual and video tapes, used worldwide as course material for animation students.



The Premise: *Get It Right!*

by Gene Deitch



Gene at work in 1976. Image courtesy of Gene Deitch.

Flash is fun, but I can never forget what John Hubley taught me, all those years ago at UPA in Hollywood: "First and foremost, your movie should be *about something!*"

Even an animated film cannot escape the laws of dramatic structure. Hub recommended a book by author, Lajos Egri, titled *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. It was published in 1946 by Simon & Schuster, just as I was starting out in the animation profession. Fortunately, the book is still available on the Internet as I write this, and very cheaply, so no excuses for not buying and learning from it. I'll attempt to distill its main point for you.

More clearly than any other book I've read about dramatic writing or screenplay writing, it explains *premise* — which is the core of "*about something.*" *Premise* is largely misunderstood and misused. It is the supposition and line of action upon which every successful dramatic story must be based. It can be stated in just a few words, and found in every play by Shakespeare or any other great writer...even in cartoons.

When I had the task of adapting children's picture books for Weston Woods — the task of translating a book into an animation film, I first had to find the *premise*, what I called, "the core of

meaning." Once I had this, I knew exactly what could and what could *not* be in the film adaptation. Whether he or she knew it or not, the author's original story, if truly strong, will have this *premise*. The *premise* tells us what the story, at base, is about, and where it's heading. According to Egri it must consist of three parts: *character/conflict/conclusion*. If you distill your story idea to this essential *premise*, you will know exactly how it will end, and how you will get to that ending. Note that the *premise* need not be always true. It may be questionable, but it is what you the author want to dramatically state. A good story must prove its *premise*.

Here are some sample *premises* that Egri presents:

- "Blind trust/leads to/destruction." (*King Lear*)
- "Jealousy/destroys/the object of its love" (*Othello*)
- "Poverty/encourages/crime." (*Dead End*)
- "Great Love/defies/even death" (*Romeo and Juliet*)
- "Ruthless ambition/leads to/its own destruction." (*MacBeth*)

OK, that's all heavy stuff, but the same principles apply to our little cartoons:

- "Craftiness/digs/its own grave." (every *Road Runner* cartoon)
- "Bravado/leads to/humiliation" (Bluto in every *Popeye* cartoon)

Tom & Jerry cartoons had a sort of *premise*, "A clever mite/out-smarts/a larger and dumber opponent," but they were mainly just situations, with a series of attack and revenge gags, and thus were rarely true stories. It was just "David" (Jerry Mouse), usually out-smarting "Goliath" (Tom Cat), and ending when the 6 minutes were up.

You will rarely form a *prem-*

ise before you write a story. Story ideas can come to you in a hundred different ways. But as your idea is fleshed out, it may seem to be wandering in several directions at once. Somewhere along the line you have to stop and figure out where you're heading. You must find your premise, so you'll know how your story must end. If you want your story to ring true, you have to *believe* your premise. It doesn't have to be the only truth there is, but a possible — a *likely* truth that you can put your heart into. Even a comic film should have something to say. There has to be that *core of meaning* that a strong premise provides. If you can't boil your story down to these three parts: then the story is flawed, or you simply don't know what it is really about.

Your premise doesn't have to glare out like a neon sign. You

should have enough incident, visual effect and action to dazzle your audience, but *you* will know it's there, and it will be your sure-footed guide to a strong production.

Want to hear more of Gene's wisdom on story and a thousand other topics? Then read *How To Succeed In Animation* (*Don't Let A Little Thing Like Failure Stop You!*) exclusively on AWN at <http://genedeitch.awn.com>

Gene Deitch is one of the last surviving members of the original Hollywood UPA studio of 1946, the instigator of the CBS-Terrytoon "renaissance" of 1956-1958, Animation Department Chief of the Detroit Jam Handy Organization, 1949-1951, Creative Chief of UPA-New York, 1951-1954,

Director at John Hubley's Storyboard, Inc. New York, 1955, Creative Director of CBS-Terrytoons, 1956-1958, President of Gene Deitch Associates, Inc. New York, 1958-1960, Creative Director for Rembrandt Films, 1960-1968, star director for Weston Woods Studios, Inc., Weston, Connecticut, 1968-1993, and has worked for over 40 years with the Prague animation studio, "Bratri v Triku."

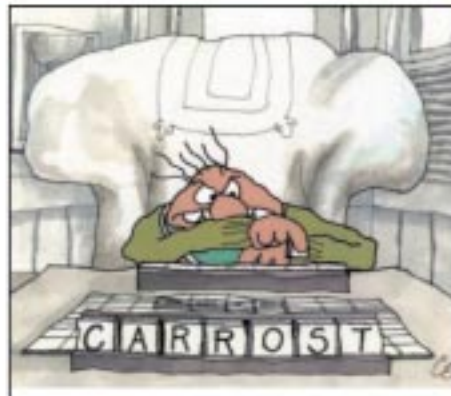
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Sketching on Location: The Silhouette - Positive and Negative Space

by Glenn Vilppu

This is the ninth in a new series of bi-monthly articles about sketching on location. The articles are based on my *Sketching on Location Manual*. The manual was developed as a series of lessons that I use on my guided sketching tours of Europe and as material in my regular drawing classes. As such the lessons can be part of a regular course or used by individual students as a practical learning guide. In the last chapter we worked on "The Quick Sketch." If you have not seen the previous lessons starting in the June 2000 issue of *Animation World Magazine*, it is recommended that you do. The lessons are progressive and expand on basic ideas. It is suggested that you start from the beginning for a better understanding of my approach. If you really want to start at the beginning open with the lessons based on the *Vilppu Drawing Manual*.

Moving On...

In the last lesson we discussed the quick sketch. The main purpose was capturing the moment of both individual figures and groups of figures focusing on a logical step by step approach of first capturing a gesture and then describing the volume and shape of the subject.

Our ability to recognize someone from a block away (when all we can actually see is



All drawings in this article are by and © Glenn Vilppu.

the silhouette) is an example of the power of shape in communication. Positive and negative shapes are just complimentary parts of a silhouette. We call the space around something "negative space," but in terms of drawing on a flat surface, nothing is really negative. In the drawing above, the fence was drawn by the tones behind it. Learning to see a simple contour is a fundamental element of drawing. Chapter one and two essentially were directed at learning to see the contour of forms. The ability to see three-dimensional shapes two dimensionally is done by not only looking at the shape of the object's contour, but also by seeing the space around it as form. The emptiness between things many times is as important as the things themselves.

The watercolor sketch on the above left was painted directly

with minimal preliminary drawing, and totally with both positive and negative shapes in mind.

On the right, in the watercolor of the boys on the rock, the wave behind the boys is an example of both a positive and negative shape. I used the white of the paper to silhouette the boys and then used the dark of the water behind it to draw its contours.

With practice you can develop facility in using the negative and positive shapes in your drawings; however, first, you need to spend time analyzing the shapes themselves.

Look at the simple contours of these figures on the top left of the following page. The difficulty in drawing them was making the shapes clear. The natural tendency is to understate and average things out. I have found out that if I purposely try to exaggerate, I will



actually get closer to what the subject really is. The key to seeing shapes is to compare one shape to another. Avoid ambiguous statements. If something is almost straight, make it straight; if one shape is slightly larger than another, make it clearly larger.

Even though the simple figures on this page have very little detail, you still get a clear idea of the figure. A slouching woman in a chair, an unusual hairdo, a man with a goatee and a girl with a ball cap are each individual and distinct. In the simple watercolor to the left, the subtle gesture of my wife on the beach, as well as the glare of the sun reflecting off of the water, are both clear shapes without detail.

The drawing on the bottom left was done completely with shape in mind, and the addition of tone was used to give a difference between shapes and textures such as foliage. The tone in the foreground not only becomes a shape as we discussed in an earlier chapter, but it also is a simple means for giving depth.

The drawing of the palm trees on the next page uses shapes and negative space a little differently. First, notice how I have simplified the shapes as the trees recede into the background. The shapes of the shadows are used both as positive and negative space. In the tree in the foreground I have used the shadow to outline the leaves in front. Now notice how I let the atmosphere come between the first and second tree so that we have a clear silhouette of the shadow side of the first tree. I could have drawn the leaves in the light of the second tree clearly, instead of leaving them white; yet I have drawn the shadow in a similar way as in the first. In



the third background tree, the light and dark are simple shapes, both being positive in this context.

In the drawing below, the contours of the figures were added to a very loose drawing, thus giving them more shape. The drawing itself was done in the same way as we discussed in earlier chapters, registering one point to the next.

Look at the examples on the following page and notice how I have used shape.



Glenn Vilppu first wrote for *Animation World Magazine* in the June 1997 issue, "Never Underestimate the Power of Life Drawing." His drawing manuals and video tapes may be purchased in the Animation World Store.



Glenn Vilppu teaches figure drawing at the American Animation Institute, the Masters program of the UCLA Animation Dept., Walt Disney Feature Animation and Warner Bros. Feature Animation, and has been sent to teach artists at Disney TV studios in Japan, Canada and the Philippines. Vilppu has also worked in the animation industry for 18 years as a layout, storyboard and presentation artist. His drawing manual and video tapes are being used worldwide as course materials for animation students.

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911 — An Emergency Call

Pamela Kleibrink Thompson

The events of September 11th were life changing — a vivid reminder that we all have limited time here on the planet.

When faced with mortality, people focus on what's important and search for commitment. It's no surprise that in the days following September 11th there was a substantial increase in the number of people who got married. Many others re-examined their lives, their goals and their dreams.

What are your dreams? It's time to commit to them and work to make them come true. Start today. Take baby steps. But don't neglect your dreams. Work on your dreams part time, at night, or on the weekend. Share them, ask for help, and offer to help others with their dreams. If you commit yourself to doing what you love and love doing what you do, you will discover a new sense of purpose and meaning in your life.

When faced with a life changing event, we all want to take action. What kind of action can we take? Act on your dreams and practice random acts of kindness and see what happens. Each person can make a huge difference even with small actions.

Think about what you can contribute to the world. What kinds of stories do you want to tell? What kinds of images do you want to create? What are your dreams? What brings you joy? Pursue your dream and pursue happiness.

How important is the pursuit of happiness? The people who founded the United States thought it vital. The Declaration of Independence written in 1776 states that people are endowed with certain unalienable Rights — that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Seeking happiness is right up there with life and liberty.

**What are
your dreams?
It's time to
commit to them
and work to
make them
come true.**

When you are happy in your life and work, you can accomplish great things. You are more creative and hard work isn't difficult because you love doing it. You would do it even if you weren't paid for it. Find work you love, then treasure it and nourish it.

The events of September 11th are a call to arms and hands and hearts. Use those arms to embrace one another, those hands to reach out and help, those hearts to love each other. Many arms were bared to donate blood. This act brought into focus a fact about all humans on the earth; no matter what we may



Pamela Kleibrink Thompson

look like on the outside, we are all very much alike in the inside — all over the world. There are only four blood types. Although each person is unique, we all share many similarities. It is up to each of us to appreciate the similarities, and celebrate the differences.

A very wise 5 year-old recently said to me, "It's easy to make friends. You just walk up to them, introduce yourself and say hello." When did we forget what we knew when we were 5 years old? Do something beautiful, loving and tender. Tell those you love, you love them. Show those you love, you love them. Introduce yourself with a smile to that stranger next door. Three days after the attack, we came into the street with candles to light the dark. We walked up to strangers and walked away with friends.

An attack on America was an attack on the world because so

many people from all over the world live here. The United States is the great melting pot, with a long tradition of welcoming people from all over the world. Most Americans have ancestors who came from other countries. What makes America strong and great is that it is built with the efforts and ideas of people from many countries. In Los Angeles where I live, there are over 140 languages spoken every day.

September 11th changed us and united us. It reminded us

that we have many things in common and we have limited time on Earth. We need to use it wisely. Many more changes will happen. Remember you are a member of the human race and become the best human being you can become. Live your life as a good citizen of the world, arm yourself with kindness, lend a hand to those who need help and follow the dreams in your heart. Work hard at what you love and you will help make the world a better place.

Pamela Kleibrink Thompson is a career coach/mentor for hire/recruiter and management consultant. She is a frequent speaker at colleges and universities.

Note: Readers may contact any Animation World Magazine contributor by sending an e-mail to editor@awn.com.

Bonus HTML Features

Every on-line (HTML) issue of *Animation World Magazine* contains additional features not found in the download or print Acrobat version, such as QuickTime movies, links to Animation World Network sites, extended articles and special sections. Don't miss the following highlight that is showcased exclusively in this month's *Animation World Magazine* HTML version:

Pierre Hébert and Animation in The Age of Digital Reproduction

As technology evolves, is independent animation being left behind? These and other concerns are currently being addressed by Pierre Hébert. In an AWN exclusive see an example of Hébert's groundbreaking work only online at: http://mag.awn.com/index.php3?ltype=pageone&article_no=843

The Spectacular Hi-Fi/Low-Fi Sounds and Images of Studio FilmTeckarna

Armed with diverse styles and techniques, a knowledge and love of music, smart, subversive wit and a desire to innovate — one never knows what to expect from Sweden's Studio FilmTeckarna. See some of their visually and aurally riveting work now online at: http://mag.awn.com/index.php3?ltype=pageone&article_no=841

Far Beyond The Traditional Cel: Innovative Techniques

Joan Kim interviews Nina Paley, Michèle Cournoyer, Stephen X. Arthur, Kirsten Winter, Mikk Rand and Richard Reeves about their filmmaking techniques and learns that there is more than one way to make a picture move frame by frame. Online this article features several QuickTime movie clips! http://mag.awn.com/index.php3?ltype=pageone&article_no=844

Vampire Hunter D Comes to America

Fred Patten takes us inside the latest super-cool anime feature, *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust*, now being shown in select U.S. theatres. Want to see the film's trailer? Then visit online now: http://mag.awn.com/index.php3?ltype=pageone&article_no=679

The Premise: Get It Right!

No story - no movie. Gene Deitch explains the importance of premise. Read his entire book his book, *How To Succeed In Animation* (Don't Let A Little Thing Like Failure Stop You!), at: <http://genedeitch.awn.com>. An AWN exclusive!

The SIGGRAPH 2001 Computer Animation Festival: A Digital Odyssey

John Edgar Park discusses the best films of Siggraph's Electronic Theater. Includes QuickTime movie clips! http://mag.awn.com/index.php3?ltype=search&sval=SIGGRAPH&article_no=725

The best animated show you can't see (well at least 50% of the country can't) is *X-Chromosome*, which airs on the Oxygen network.

Oxygen Media is the women's cable TV and Internet network founded by Geraldine Laybourne, Oprah Winfrey, and TV producers Marcey Carsey, Tom Werner and Caryn Mandabach.

The best animated show you can't see...

X-Chromosome is an animated anthology series which features six rotating regular segments: *Avenue Amy*, Oxygen's answer to *Sex In The City*, chronicling the adventures of Amy Sohn, a real-life sex columnist constantly on the prowl for material; *Bitchy Bitch*, based on Roberta Gregory's alternative comic book; *Corky Q's Chick Flicks*, in which clay animator Corky Quackenbush lampoons movies primarily marketed to female audiences; *Drawn From Life*, Paul and Sandra Fierlinger's portraiture of real women's stories; *Fat Girl* which centers on Kate Bloom, a warm-hearted, funny, intelligent, fat woman living in ultra-thin Los Angeles; and *Hey Monie*, about the life of a single African-American professional in big city America.

There are also slots for one-shot productions — like *The Adventures Of Harry Follicle* (by Chris Bonner and Sarah Berezski) about a pubic hair that goes from body to body looking for a warm place to live.

The *X-Chromosome* shorts are very clever — always teetering on the brink of bad taste, but earning solid laughs from outrageous

TV Review: *X-Chromosome*

by Jerry Beck



Hey Monie introduces the first network animated series based on an African-American woman and her friends. © Oxygen Media. All rights reserved.



A fresh form of portraiture, the *Drawn from Life* series communicates that the ordinary can be extraordinary. © Oxygen Media. All rights reserved.



Bitchy Bits, another successful series featured on Oxygen based on the award-winning comic-book series *Naughty Bits* by cartoonist Roberta Gregory. © Oxygen Media. All rights reserved.

situations derived from real life or zany fantasy. And though the show is based on and aimed at women, I've found (as a man) that the comedy herein is quite universal.

The X-Chromosome shorts are very clever — always teetering on the brink of bad taste...

The range of animation styles works very well together — from cel to clay, from Flash to pencil sketch. It has the air of an international festival, and yet totally accessible and entertaining. It's classy, without pandering to the base cartoon antics that some producers think adult animation must stoop to.

The range of animation styles works very well together...

The real highlight of the series is *Corky Q's Chick Flicks*. Quackenbush is a favorite from his MAD TV sketches, and *Spike & Mike Sick & Twisted Festivals*, and he doesn't disappoint here with his movie spoofs. For example, *Bitanic* (a spoof of *Titanic*) adds an *Ellen*-type stand-up comic to the deck of the doomed ocean-liner. Young Rose finds her true self and true love — and gives new meaning to the term "going down with the ship." *Dirty River-Dancing* (a spoof of *Dirty Dancing*) places the innocent Jennifer Grey character into the hands of river-dancing IRA terrorists. Other parodies in this series include *Pretty Woman II*:

Runaway Hooker Bride and *Castaway: A Woody Allen Film*. Quackenbush has really improved over the years and this is his best work to date. The models, the sets, the animation and most importantly, the writing, is top notch.

It's a shame all this great work is only available on a cable channel not available in most cities, though clips from *X-Chromosome* animation can be seen on their Website — and a few shorts have been entered in film festivals.

Anthology series of any type, live or animated, have always been a hard sell to the public. But MTV's *Liquid Television*

begat *Beavis and Butt-head* and *Aeon Flux*, so while Oxygen is still fishing for a breakout signature show, I suspect they'll catch it on *X-Chromosome*.

Jerry Beck is an animation producer and cartoon historian who is simultaneously developing a show with MTV Animation and writing a book for Harry N. Abrams Publishers. He also has a cool Website at www.cartoon-research.com.

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Avenue Amy, like the character, is intelligent, self-aware, analytical and a big hit on X-Chromosome.
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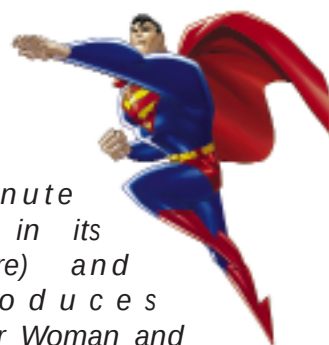
Corky is back with his outrageous lampoons of "chick flicks."

Judging from the first three-part story arc of *Justice League*, this isn't your father's *Superfriends*.

Cartoon Network's new super-hero adventure series is a natural follow-up to the previous Kids WB! Bruce Timm - Paul Dini -

DC superhero universe by bringing together a great set of diverse characters, establishing their strong personalities and character back story, and placing them into various apocalyptic adventures.

The stories emphasize teamwork — but only as the last



90-minute movie in its premiere) and introduces Wonder Woman and J'Onn J'Onzz, The Martian Manhunter, as "new" characters. The heroes come together slowly as they face a *War Of The Worlds*-like alien invasion. By the third act, they split into teams to fight their foe on different fronts. All contribute their unique abilities to combat the menace.

One thing I've loved about the previous *Batman/Superman Adventures*, and this series as well, is the correct choices Timm and crew make when deciding which parts of the DC mythos to include, exclude or embellish. I find all their decisions to be well thought out.

For example, Timm's take on The Flash is to make him the most human, always ready with a one-liner and very eager for action. Not the Barry Allen Flash of my youth, but the happy-go-lucky Wally West (previously Kid Flash in the 1960s comics) — and a perfectly pleasing personality in con-

TV Review:

Justice League Is Finally Here

by Jerry Beck



Today's Justice League. *Justice League* and all related characters are trademarks of DC Comics © 2001. ™ & © Warner Bros. and ™ & © 2001 Cartoon Network. An AOL Time Warner Co.

Alan Burnett produced series *Batman: The Animated Adventures*, *Batman Beyond* and *Superman*. This time out, creator/producer Bruce Timm takes the reins himself, with a select group of *Batman/Superman* colleagues, and has expanded the

recourse against an unstoppable enemy. These superheroes are outsiders who would clearly prefer to work alone. Cool.

"Secret Origins" is the first adventure (3 half-hours, presented as a





trast to the sober moods of Batman and J'Onn J'Onzz. The Green Lantern here is also a later incarnation. This Lantern is John Stewart; a rigid black military type, who has no time for nonsense.

My favorite character is becoming Hawkgirl, though we don't see her very much in the first adventure. In the comic books, it was Hawkman who was an original member of the JLA (as well as the 1940s Justice Society of America), so when I heard that Hawkman was written out and Hawkgirl placed in his stead, I realized that it was to increase the female presence. But her character design, strong personality and voice (Maria Canals) are really winning me over. I love watching this character fly through the air, pounding the villains with her electrified space mace (or whatever that weapon is).

The characters all appear to



be loners brought together by a threat too big for any one of them to handle alone. But the story P.O.V. (at least in the first adventure) plays out like an extended *Batman: The Animated Series* episode with a lot of special guest stars. Nothing wrong with that, as Timm's Batman (voiced by Kevin Conroy since 1992) is perhaps the most satisfying incarnation of the character since the original Bob Kane-Bill Finger strips of the late 1930s.

The concept of these heroes getting together, then splitting into teams has been faithfully brought up to date as this was the original *modus operandi* of the Forties era Justice Society.

The Right Stuff-esque opening titles are very strong and the show is presented in letterbox format giving it an adult feel, elevating it from the other cartoon shows on Saturday morning.

There are a lot of characters here and a lot to like. Martian Manhunter is one very cool dude (he and Green Lantern would make a great "green team" spin-off). The anime-inspired design of the first adventure's alien creatures was different and quite effective.

I can nit-pick only a few things. Superman's voice (George Newbern) didn't feel quite right. He sounded a bit too young — a little too "right out of Smallville" — to support those massive shoulders. What happened to actor Tim Daly of the 1997 series? *Justice League of America* comics regular Snapper Carr has some kind of smallish "Jimmy Olsen" role here, which seems like a waste. And Korean production studio Koko Enterprise Co. Ltd. appeared to have a hard time drawing Superman's chest emblem in various shots.



But those are small things. I'm more grateful that Cartoon Network is keeping Timm and his great team together at Warner Bros. Animation to continue making the best superhero series I've ever seen. As a longtime comics buff, I really enjoyed *Justice League*. I'm really looking forward to the upcoming episodes featuring such characters as Gorilla Grodd, Metamorpho and Solomon Grundy. It should be a blast.

Jerry Beck is an animation producer and cartoon historian who is simultaneously developing a show with MTV Animation and writing a book for Harry N. Abrams Publishers. He also has a cool Website at www.cartoonresearch.com.

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TV Review: Butt-Ugly Martians

by Jerry Beck



The Butt-Ugly Martians. © Mike Young Productions.

I knew this was a dirty assignment when I took it on. Reviewing TV animation isn't as easy as it sounds. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. This week I lose. Big time.

Butt-Ugly Martians is one butt-ugly piece of work.

This is one of those shows you know, just from the title, is going to stink or surprise. No surprise here. It stinks. I've just watched the wretched first episode, and I'm sitting here with the press kit. I'd rather review the press kit — it looks more entertaining. But it's my job to watch these shows so you don't have to, so I'm obligated to recount the horror that is *Butt-Ugly Martians* Episode #1: "That's No Puddle, That's Angela." (What is it with these things labeled "Episode #1" — are they cursed?)

Before I go into the particulars, I suppose I have to set up the

series premise. The problems begin here. The show is about a trio of friendly Martians, originally sent to destroy the earth (in the year 2053), but instead they discover how cool it is to hang out with three stereo-typical future American Earth-Kids who mainly watch TV, eat burgers and race hover-boards. These kids seem to live in some desolate location, which looks like a cross between Death Valley and Afghanistan.

This show is way over-developed. The paragraph above doesn't begin to cover it all. First off, the three kids are the now-traditional PC white boy (the average kid), black boy (the smart kid) and white girl (the smarter kid). The Martians have a robot dog named "Dog" (an idea that was original and funny when George Of The Jungle named his great ape, "Ape" — "Dog" is just lame), and are regularly pursued by a local "alien

hunter" named Muldoon (voiced by Robert Stack). They are monitored by their Martian superiors on the red planet, so they must periodically stage fake invasion reports (à la *Wag The Dog*) to keep further Martians from landing, and prevent them from leaving.

Meanwhile a variety of space villains routinely invade the Earth (apparently one each week), and when this happens the Martians utilize an ability to morph into super-rangers — an ability they call "BKN" (is this an in-joke about Bohbot Kids Network?), but they never explain what the letters B.K.N. stand for.

And get this, the Martians even have "funny" names! Our three heroes are called, respectively: Do-Wah Diddy, B. Bop-A-Luna and 2-T-Fru-T (that one voiced by Rob Paulsen). Well, hardy-har-har. These sound like names that a 50 year-old kids programming exec, who has never watched kids programming in 40 years, might come up with over the weekend. A weekend of hard drinking.

The Martians have a signature line, said when they go into battle: "Let's Get Ugly!" And ugly it gets.

Which brings us to the visuals — the absolute worst part of the show. This is Computer Animation 101. The characters move like puppets... No wait, that's an insult to puppets. *Thunderbirds* had more acting and emotional range and they were string marionettes! I understand the limitations of time and budget in kids TV programming, but this show looks dirt cheap. The character design and character animation are sub-par even for this kind of series.

This particular episode has the Martians juggling the Alien Hunter (Muldoon), a space Villain

and a ray gizmo, which turns the girl, Angela, into a puddle of liquid. At the climax of the episode, the Martians rescue the kids along with Muldoon who has been captured by said generic Space Villain. The alien hunter normally believes that all space creatures are hostile — but after the Butt-Uglies save him, he realizes they are friendly. Happy ending, right?

Not exactly. The Martians decide to spray Muldoon (*Men In Black*-style) with something that makes him forget the whole adventure (if only I could forget). But why would they do that? Why make him forget? (Why do I care?) They had proved themselves to Muldoon. He would have been one less problem for them to deal with on a weekly basis. This is typical of the bad writing, and clearly done to keep the show from straying far from the basic premise.

Another annoying thing is that, according to the press kit, Do-Wah Diddy is supposed to be the stupid alien, cracking dumb jokes all the time. Bad jokes. So bad, they added a rim-shot in post-production SFX, to underline his “funny” lines.

The entire show needs an overhaul in post-production, pre-production and development. As I understand it, this was originally developed as a 2D series. Its existence as a cheap CGI production is a classic example of Hollywood jumping on a new hot trend without any consideration of its audience or producing a quality product.

What more can I say? *Butt-Ugly Martians* is aimed at children 4 to 8 years of age and is a Mike Young Production. I feel Mike Young — and kids 4 to 8 — can do better. Much better.

The show premiered on the

U.K.'s ITV in February, 2001 and has begun debuting elsewhere around the world. Nickelodeon will premiere the show in early 2002 in the U.S. and Universal Studios has just entered into a broad arrangement with the U.K.'s Just Group, Hong Kong production partner DCDC and Mike Young Productions to promote the property.

Jerry Beck is an animation producer and cartoon historian who is simultaneously developing a show with MTV Animation and writing a book for Harry N. Abrams Publishers. He also has a cool Website at www.cartoonresearch.com.

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The SIGGRAPH 2001 Computer Animation Festival: *A Digital Odyssey*

by John Edgar Park

As technical barriers come down, filmmakers and animators are using computer animation as a true production studio in a box. No longer struggling to obscure a film's CG origins, artists are putting the medium and its many strengths front and center. The Computer Animation Festival at this year's Siggraph, held at the Los Angeles Convention Center from August 12 – 17 showcased many beautiful examples of CG filmmaking at its finest.

During the Electronic Theater, Siggraph's best-of-the-best screening, audiences were treated to 47 pieces carefully chosen by an expert jury from the record-breaking 678 submissions. Perhaps to punctuate how far visual effects have come from the good old days of B-movie sci-fi, the show opened with an unintentionally comical Flash Gordon episode titled *The Planet of Peril*. The audience roared with delight as Flash used his wits, charm and physical prowess to escape the certain doom of badly composited "giant" iguanas (who frankly looked bored) and the crab-fisted, stop-motion horror known as Sharkman. Feeling the audience's pain, Flash's curvaceous love-interest provided the perfect segue:

"Quick, we must get out of here."

"How?" said Flash.

"The secret door!" she exclaimed.

The secret door opened and, alas, the Electronic Theater began.

The show encompassed CG shorts ranging from scientific explanation to special effects, comic gags to dramatic storytelling. As studios continue to use CGI as a supplement to live-action filmmaking – such as the spectacular effects seen in *Pearl Harbor* and *How The Grinch Stole Christmas* – independent filmmakers and students are embracing the medium for its unique qualities. There were fact-based animations like *Rule Based Dynamic Simulation for Wave of Death*, the wave sequence from *Cast Away* and *Body Story*, a realistic ride through the microscopic workings of the human body. A surprisingly comic reaction was elicited by the presentation of *Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project*, a pre-visualization of the US\$2.2billion construction and engineering project. Must have been the dry voice-over guy. However, the pieces that stood out were those that used CG animation unapologetically for its unique artistic strengths. The development of signature CG

styles – much like Jeremy Engleman has in his still "paintings" – is exciting.

"As we enter the new century, we see that computer graphics has evolved and matured," said Sande Scoredos, Sony Pictures Imageworks and Siggraph 2001 Computer Animation Festival Chair. "We have advanced the technology to a state where anything is achievable and advancement is subtle. Computer graphics is now viewed as another tool in the larger sense of moviemaking for visual storytelling, entertainment and explanation. The work selected this year takes us on a remarkable journey showcasing the talent and brilliance of current and future trends in art and science, and blends it with the very best imagery depicting comedy, drama, action, adventure, fantasy, science-fiction and science fact. The technical and aesthetic perfection that artists reach today is evident throughout the show. Advancements in perfecting photo-realism, radiosity, motion-capture, and how-to explanations of advanced rendering techniques and seamless integration of computer graphic elements into live-action scenes, are just a few of the highlights in an extremely engaging and entertaining festival."

The Films

Where is Frank? Dir. Angela Jedek (5:08)

This is a classic tale of mind-ing the consequences of your actions. In it a tough looking group of cowboys is waiting around for a train (presumably to rob it?), doing tough cowboy business. Squinting. Sneering. Laughing. Waiting. One grizzled looking guy gets so bothered by a buzzing fly that he shoots it. Only, the ricocheting bullet manages to hit a plank loose, setting into motion a Goldberg-esque demolition of the train station.

Stylistically, the hand drawn India ink textures and unsmoothed polygons create an effect that is unique and fitting. The color palette, traditional camera work and celebration of the polygonal form are somehow more evocative of the Old West than any faded sepia photograph.

Jedek, a student of Germany's Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg, used Maya 3.0 and Photoshop 4.0.



A sneering cowboy from Angela Jedek's *Where is Frank?* Courtesy of Angela Jedek and Siggraph 2001.

Anjyu Dir. Yasuo Ohba (1:59)

Not intended to emulate any one thing in nature, this piece is evocative of watching dancing cilia, joyful fibers or a scrub brush on ecstasy. This procedural animation is pure mathematics as art, a meditative journey into soft, flowing calmness. Derived from complex algorithms, which were then manipulated with a custom pro-

gram to control the color and appearance of the "characters," this piece is accompanied only by a gentle piano line.



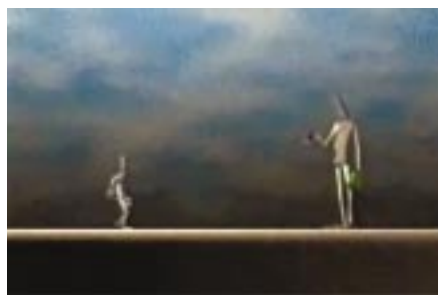
A fascinatingly complex shot from Yasuo Ohba's *Anjyu*. Courtesy of Yasuo Ohba and Siggraph 2001.

Ohba is a researcher and graphics programmer for Japan's Namco.

Values Dir. Van Phan (4:32)
Winner Best Animated Short

A loving piece about a father-son relationship – a less sentimental *Cat's in the Hat* by Harry Chapin. Using primitive shapes to avoid facial expressions and lip sync, this touching film portrays a father who puts education above playtime and a son who obediently, but disappointedly, follows. Once grown up, a proud college graduate, the son nearly makes the same blind choice when faced with a joyful child's desire to play ball. Able to see the balance missing in his own upbringing, he chooses to give the child the attention he desires.

Phan's decisions to keep his character designs simple, yet ele-



Values was this year's big winner. © 2001 Van Phan. Distributed by SND Films.

gant and to lock down his camera give *Values* visual power. All emotion is conveyed through acting, lighting, staging and form. The keyframe animation is superb. Phan used Maya 3.0.



Visual music is presented in *Pipe Dream*. © 2001 Animusic. All rights reserved.

Pipe Dream Dir. Animusic (3:27)

This is an immensely enjoyable piece that could only come to us through the alchemy of procedural animation techniques. Contained entirely within a room filled with musical instruments and many twisting pipes, the camera shows a ball shoot from a pipe, land on a xylophone key (producing a musical note) and then bounce into a funnel-like receiving pipe. As hundreds of balls fly, strike and return a music composition is played, building in complexity and number of instruments to include ultimately a full drum kit, chimes, keyboards and more. It is a pure joy to watch! Seeing a pattern of balls flying through the air toward their targets makes you join in the fun by trying to read the "score" and anticipate the music before it is made.

Animusic designed their own proprietary software called MIDImotion to control the animation by inputting MIDI music scores as controllers for animation channels.

Horses on Mars Dir. Eric Anderson (6:56)

The story of a 3.5 micron

tall microbe and his journey 100 million miles from home. Exploring the theory that microbial life can exist in deep space and travel from planet to planet via volcanic or asteroid-assisted propulsion, this USC student film gives a personal look at one lost soul, searching for meaning and a way home. The existential ponderings of our hero microbe and news of the evolution of his friends ("Hi. Val27 became a horse. I became a Ukrainian. How are you?" reads one "postcard" from afar) fill his imagination with visions of returning home one day as a magnificent flying beast. Fate never allows him to complete his journey, but his last hope is that one day they will all meet again as horses on Mars.

The use of CGI to bring microscopic objects to life in a realistic solar system is excellent and it

couldn't be convincingly done in any other medium. Beautiful lighting and rendering lend a sense of scale to the story.



Horses on Mars is a unique, if microscopic, perspective on our Universe. © 2001 Eric Anderson.

Anderson used Maya 2.5, RenderMan Artist Tools, Composer and Premier.

The Siggraph 2001 Computer Animation Festival was a great tribute to the achievements in CG artistry, research and technique of the last year, and an immensely enjoyable experience.

Go on line to see QuickTime clips from John Park's best of the

Electronic Theatre:
http://mag.awn.com/index.php3?type=search&sval=SIGGRAPH&article_no=725

John Edgar Park is a 3D animator, instructor and writer based in Los Angeles. He received his B.A. in Drama from the University of Virginia.

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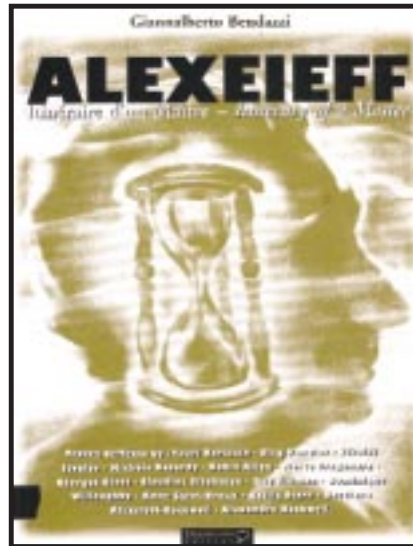
Alexeieff: Itinerary of a Master

Book Review by Wendy Jackson Hall

One of the most prized purchases from this year's trip to Annecy is the new book entirely about animator and artist Alexandre Alexeieff, whose work was the subject of a retrospective and exhibition at the 2001 festival. Edited by Italian animation historian Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Alexeieff: Itinerary of a Master* is even denser than the author's fact-packed animation history volume, *Cartoons: 100 Years of Cinema Animation*, because it devotes over 300 pages to the work of one animator.

Considered one of the "masters" of experimental animation, Alexeieff began making animated films at age 30, when he invented the pinscreen, a board with thousands of tiny holes in it, each one with a metal pin inside. When a light is shone on the screen at an angle, the protruding pins cast shadows of varying length onto the board, which when viewed from a distance (and photographed) create varying shades of gray. By making subtle movements of the pins in between photographing frames, he was able to create animated films resembling the etching techniques he had mastered earlier in his career.

Published in French and English by Dreamland, a European publisher specializing in comics and animation, *Alexeieff: Itinerary of a Master* is a compendium of 15 essays by Ben-



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dazzi's colleagues: animator Yuri Norstein, composer Michele Reverdy, filmmakers Dominique Willoughby and Claudine Eizykman, scholars Robin Allan, Guy Fihman, Marco Fragonara, Nikolai Izvolov, Oleg Kovalov, Georges Nivat, Anne Saint-Dreux and Cecile Starr, as well as Alexeieff's daughter, Svetlana Alexeieff-Rockwell and grandson, Alexandre Rockwell.

Bendazzi's introduction seems to have been written by him in English, and reads much like a conversation with a non-native speaker. I wonder if it would be more coherent if he had written the book in his native Italian and had it translated by a professional. The following essays vary greatly in style, from fawning praise to intellectual analysis, often overlapping in subject matter. It

doesn't seem like Bendazzi "assigned" the topics to the writers, and as such the book lacks overall coherence. I found the most interesting reading to be those chapters that offered facts, anecdotes and quotes from the artist rather than just pure analysis.

For me, the primary value of the book lies in its 200-plus crisp illustrations in color and black-and-white; reproduced etchings, beautiful still frames from films, photographs of the artist, his studios and equipment, friends and family. Many of the images are quite large — half-page or filling two-page spreads — offering an incredible amount of detail.

Many of Alexeieff's book illustrations for novels by Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Poe and Pushkin are reproduced in the book. The meaning of these illustrations are explored in Nivat's essay, while Fragonara's goes into great detail about the techniques he used, such as xylography, etching and aquatinting. The toxic chemicals he used for these methods caused him severe illness early in life, as recalled by his daughter in her chapter of personal memoirs. Svetlana Alexeieff-Rockwell's essay also details the emergence of Claire Parker into her family's life, first as a protégé and later as "the other woman" who became Alexeieff's wife and creative partner.

It was around the time that "talkies" or sync sound films were becoming mainstream that he decided to illustrate music through films, rather than literature through books. Izvolov's essay explores Alexeieff's identity as a mystic and prolific inventor, noting that his idea for the pinscreen actually struck him during a crisis where he felt that his inspiration had deserted him after years of

book illustration. He notes that later, Alexeieff and Parker invented a technique called "totalization," which was a way of creating "illusory solids" with long exposures of moving lights on pendulums, that looked very much like the images produced on an oscilloscope. The technique was used to great effect in commercials, which took most of the couple's creative energy following their return to France after WWII. In fact it is their commercial work that places them in the context of their animation contemporaries John and James Whitney, Mary Ellen Bute and Norman McLaren who were experimenting with similar animation concepts.

Saint-Dreux's essay looks at Alexeieff and Parker's commercial work, revealing that Alexeieff saw little difference between his artistic and commercial endeavors. He said, "The important thing in life is to create. That's the only thing that interests me. If L'Oreal wants to sell a bar of soap, I don't think about the product but the invention I could achieve."

Willoughby's chapter, "Cinematic Synthesis," compares the pinscreen technique to the pointillist painting style perfected by Seurat. It is described in Eizykman's essay as "engraving the film screen," a concept that Alexeieff shared with other filmmakers such as Berthold Bartosch, who subtitled his 1929 film, *The Idea: animated engraving*, and Herman Warm, the set designer for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, who said "the screen must become an engraving." It is revealed in other chapters that Alexeieff was also influenced by the films of Emile Cohl, Fernand Leger and Man Ray.

Robin Allan compares Alexeieff's first pinscreen film, *Night on Bald Mountain* (1933), with the

same sequence in Disney's *Fantasia*, made seven years afterward. Although Allan says there is no "direct evidence" that Disney artists [or Disney himself] saw Alexeieff's animated version of the Mussorgsky musical composition, he provides a convincing argument that Disney was influenced by European artists, and that being inspired by Alexeieff is a distinct possibility.

Composer Michele Reverdy's essay contains enlightening reflections on film's relationship with music, comparing meanings of form, rhythm and counterpoint in musical, visual and temporal composition.

Russian animator Yuri Norstein, whose work has a similar aesthetic and narrative style to Alexeieff's, includes in his essay an illustration detail comparing an ox character from his film *Tale of Tales* to Alexeieff's *Three Moods*, both made in 1979. That the two share cultural mythologies is common of artists from Russia. Although he spent most of his life in France, Alexeieff's identity as a Russian native plays strongly in his work. But describing Alexeieff's identity solely as an individual is the grave oversight of many of the essays in this book.

In her essay, Cecile Starr writes, "The tendency has been...to give all credit (or blame) to one participant in the filmmaking process and neglect the contribution of the team." This has certainly happened with Alexeieff and Parker, as evidenced even in the very title of this book. For instance, Bendazzi writes in his introduction "her true country was Alexandre Alexeieff" and describes their relationship almost as one of worship. Starr, who was friends with "Claire and Alosa" provides

insight into the life of "the other half," from her origins as a wealthy American art student to her role as Alexeieff's patron, wife and creative partner. The two are described as "an inseparable team" in a letter written to Starr by Norman McLaren (published in the book), who invited them to make *En Passant* (1944) at the National Film Board of Canada. Later, Jacques Drouin (who created the cover illustration for this book) made films with the small pinscreen they left there, and became like the son they never had, says Starr, noting the sacrifices Parker made for their art, including not having children. Alexeieff once said that without Claire, he never would have made films. He couldn't live without her either, and took his own life a year after Claire died in 1981.

Alexeieff's legacy continues in the work of his grandson, Alexandre Rockwell, an independent filmmaker who created films such as *Lenz* and *Four Rooms*. His memoir at the end of the book reveals the influence his grandfather had on him. He writes: "I can safely say there has been no greater influence in my life, and in that I know I am not alone."

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