



fps

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The Animated Documentary

What happens when the real meets the unreal?

Also:

Three new Ghibli DVDs

Ray Harryhausen

Planet Simpson

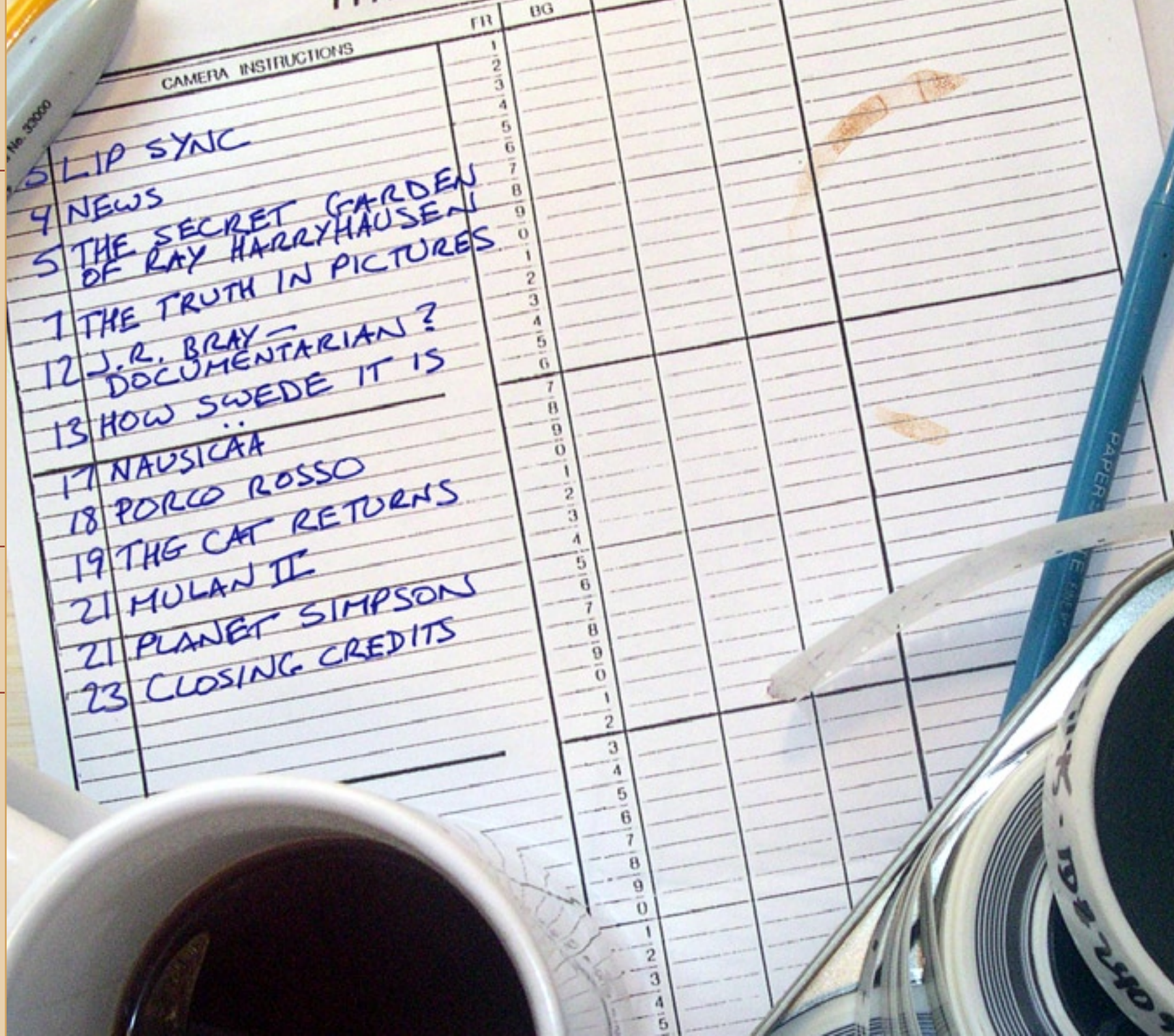
EDITORIAL

Editor Emru Townsend**Copyeditor** Tamu Townsend**Contributors** Armen Boudjikianian,
Noell Wolfgram Evans, Erik Goulet,
George Griffin, Marc Hairston,
Victoria Meng, Sheila Sofian,
Gunnar Strøm, René Walling, Ceri
Young**Layout** Emru Townsend**Cover Image** Still from *Drawn From
Memory*, by Paul Fierlinger**Table of Contents Image** Emru
Townsend

SPECIAL THANKS

Line Bjerring, Ken Clark, Dave
"Grue" DeBry, Marc Elias, Gerd
Gockell, Paul Fierlinger, Jennifer
Sachs, Vicky Vrinotis

CONTACT US

Phone (514) 696-2153**Fax** (514) 696-2497**E-Mail** editor@fpsmagazine.com**Web** www.fpsmagazine.com**Ad Sales** tamu@fpsmagazine.com

Here We Go Again

Emru Townsend looks back on the early days of *fps*

I've always had trouble with subtitles.

Not the ones at the bottom of the frame in untranslated movies. I mean the ones that expand on main titles, like *XXX: State of the Union* and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. When I was first putting together *fps* in 1991, it took me all of ten minutes to come up with the name. It was the subtitle that plagued me for days. I eventually settled on "The magazine of animation on film and video," but I originally wanted to call it "The irregular animation magazine," as a nod to its predecessor, *Quark*. I'd started *Quark* two years earlier as a fanzine devoted to the things that interested me: science fiction, comics, fantasy and animation. "Irregular" had two meanings: the obvious one was that it didn't come out on any fixed schedule (owing to the unpredictable finances of a film animation student with a part-time job), but the other was just as important—the idea of looking at things from unexpected angles.

Quark finished its run after four issues largely because animation had pretty much taken over as the subject of the magazine.

After a few months of gestation, it was reinvented as *fps*—a 22-page, photocopied fanzine that appeared on a handful of Montreal store shelves that November. (Incidentally, there is one other linking thread between *Quark* and *fps*: the back-cover drawing of *fps* #1 is actually the front-cover drawing from *Quark* #4.)

As you might expect, I've been thinking a lot about how things have changed since that November. To pick just three things: Disney, ever the bellwether of American feature animation, was ascendant, with the *Beauty and the Beast*-*Aladdin*-*Lion King* hat trick just getting started. The four American broadcast networks had Saturday-morning cartoon blocks. There were three regular touring animation festivals.

Now, Disney's feature projects have been in a state of decline. Only two of the six American broadcast networks have Saturday-morning cartoon blocks. There is now only one regular, touring animation festival.

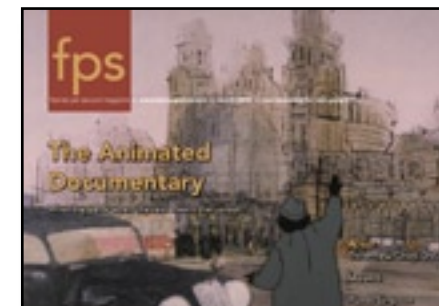
In sum, are these developments good or bad? It's hard to say, as each comes with a "but" attached. There are now more feature

animated films being released in the Americas by more companies. Almost every industrialized nation has a dedicated 24-hour cartoon channel. A variety of short animated films are available on specialty channels, on DVD, and on the Web.

One thing has remained the same, though: there's still a need for a magazine that looks at the world of animation as one continuum, and that approaches animation analytically yet accessibly.

A little over a year ago I met a longtime reader of *fps* while at a convention. He said to me, "I used to love reading *fps* because every issue made me think differently about animation." It was enormously gratifying because, of course, that was the point. And that reaction is something I don't want to change.

As we return to the magazine format, I've made it my goal to keep generating that reaction. Originally, I did it by working with a team of fantastic writers and artists, prodding them a little and setting them free to explore the ideas they couldn't elsewhere. It was a lot of hard work, but also a lot of fun. We're recreating that approach now, and I expect we'll be recreating that sense of discovery in our readers as well. If you're an old *fps* reader, welcome home. If you're new to the fold, by all means come on in. You're in for an exciting time. ■



Right: The three faces of *fps*, from top to bottom: The first issue (November, 1991); the relaunched website (February 22, 2003); the issue you're reading (February 22, 2005).

Compiled by Emru Townsend

Big Screen

It's not strictly an animation news item, but we still feel compelled to mention that Disney plans to produce a live-action adaptation of *Kiki's Delivery Service*. We also feel compelled to mention that any outrage on behalf of Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli be tempered: the movie (or, as Disney hopes, movies) is based on the original series of *Majo no Takkyubin* books by Eiko Kadono, most likely in a bid to capture some of that Harry Potter magic. Finally, we also feel compelled to mention that we are somewhat uneasy with the whole idea and would really like for Disney to bring back their traditional animation studio, please.

Disney has also optioned Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson's book *Peter and the Starcatchers*, a sort of *Peter Pan* prequel. They're planning to make it an entirely CGI film, likely to give the studio something to do between Pixar knock-offs.

Small Screen

On February 9, a new series based on *A Journey to the West* started airing nationwide in China, retelling the story of the monk Xuanzang, the mischievous Monkey King, Friar Sand and Eight-Commandment Pig as they travel to India on a quest for Buddhist scriptures.

Does this sound at all familiar? It should: *A Journey to the West* is the

basis for a little series you may have heard of called *Dragonball*.

Snap! Snap! The production company of *Will & Grace*'s Sean Hayes has optioned the *Pooch Café* comic strip to develop as an animated series for television.

Mainframe Entertainment, the studio that made its name with *ReBoot*, has a new CGI project on the table: a direct-to-DVD feature-length movie set in the MechWarrior universe. This isn't the first time the MechWarrior robots have been animated. In 1995, the Saturday morning series *Battletech* also featured feudal giant-robot smackdowns.

While Walt Disney Studio chairman Dick Cook was reminding Wall Street analysts that the Disney studios were planning to make their own *Toy Story* sequels, he slipped in another little tidbit: that the controversial *Song of the South*, which was never released on video in North America and hasn't been released since 1986, will probably be coming to DVD in 2006 for its sixtieth anniversary. Cook suggested that the DVD would receive a treatment similar to the Walt Disney Treasures series, which would put the subject matter into historical context... something animation fans have been suggesting since, oh, 1986.

This has to stop. Warner Bros. is planning to "re-imagine" the Looney

Tunes stable of characters for a new series called *Loonatics*, set in 2772. It's set to air on the WB this fall. The characters are all darker, edgier versions of the characters we already know, and the action-comedy series will have them all sporting unique powers.

Ouch. Okay, now my head hurts. If Warner is so desperate to find ways to connect with 21st century kids, why not come up with a new show instead of trying to bolt anime hipness to Golden Age cartoon characters? *Baby Looney Tunes* was bad enough. Warner, please, we're begging you. Stop. I assure you, this is hurting us more than it hurts you.

Obituaries

Dan Lee, a lead animator at Pixar, died of lung cancer on January 15 at the age of 35. Born in *fps*'s home town of Montreal, Quebec and raised in Scarborough, Ontario, he was credited by *Finding Nemo* director Andrew Stanton with "single-handedly" designing the titular clownfish.

John Vernon, the TV and film actor whose career spanned nearly fifty years, died February 1 after complications from heart surgery. He was 72. Although he is probably best known as the authoritarian Dean Wormer in *Animal House*, the Montreal native had made a career out of playing scheming criminals, mostly thanks to his distinctive voice. In the mid-1960s that vocal

talent led him to play Sub-Mariner and Iron Man in various Marvel animated series, but he didn't make an animated role truly his own until he defined crime boss Rupert Thorne in *Batman: The Animated Series*. Thanks to *Batman*'s gritty film-noir setting and its mature storytelling, Vernon made full use of his dramatic training and created a villain as coolly threatening as any of the *Batman* regulars.

When the great Ossie Davis was found dead (most likely of heart failure) on February 4 at the age of 87, he was still doing more in a year than most of us do in five. Born in Cogdell, Georgia, Davis worked steadily on stage and screen as performer, writer and director for over fifty years, often combining his civil rights activism with his work. His connections to animation were brief: he was the voice of Yar in Disney's *Dinosaur*, and narrated Michael Sporn's urban retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Red Shoes*.

News Briefs in Haiku

SpongeBob friends with gays!
Toons asked how they swing. Popeye:
"I yam what I yam."

In *Robot Chicken*
Toys fight, stomp and kill. Seth Green—
You have too much fun!

It's called *Shiden*
Is it still Japanese when
Made to air worldwide?



The Secret Garden of Ray Harryhausen

Erik Goulet chats with the master of stop-motion animation

Above: Seamus Caballero (left), Ray Harryhausen (centre), and Mark Walsh (right) work on *The Tortoise and the Hare*, fifty years in the making.

This compilation of the early work of Ray Harryhausen is an absolute gem for all the fans out there. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science went through the painstaking process of restoring the films, which were in varying conditions because of their age, and did an amazing job.

While computer animation and other styles are attracting most young animators, stop-motion remains in a class apart. I've always felt that the skill required

for puppet animators was, by far, more demanding than any other style. In *Ray Harryhausen: The Early Years Collection*, you get to see a young animator experimenting with visual effects and sharpening his animation skill for the bright future that lies ahead of him. It is the energy and enthusiasm infused in his work that impresses and captivates us.

Ray Harryhausen is a master of stop-motion puppet animation. Although few people draw attention

to puppet animation, most people are familiar with the likes of the Hydra or the skeleton fight scene from *Jason and the Argonauts*, the chest-beating baboon or the dancing statue of Kali from the *Sinbad* adventures. Harryhausen was the mastermind behind the effects that brought the larger-than-life characters to the silver screen that our protagonists had to fight to save the day. If we go back even earlier, some of you will remember the Ymir, the beast from

20 Million Miles to Earth or even the alien saucer from *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*. The body of his work has been heavily documented in books, magazines and many television interviews. But what happened during the early years of his life?

Very few people remember the fairy tales Mr. Harryhausen animated. Even though most of his films can be found on video and DVD, this part of his career didn't exist until recently in any format other than 16mm film. The period from 1935 to 1952 was a time when the young animator was looking for his calling.

Erik Goulet: How did you get interested in stop-motion?

Ray Harryhausen: It was *King Kong*, at 13, that got me interested in stop-motion animation. The moves of *King Kong* weren't of a man in a suit, it was animation in all its glory. Remember, those were the '30s; there was no book describing the technique, I had to research and try on my own.

King Kong got me hooked on dinosaurs, but I got into fairy tales when I came out of the Army. After the war, the schools adopted the 16mm film format. I went around and asked different people in the educational system what they were looking for or what they would like to see; that's why I started doing the fairy tales... and the schools used my films to show the association of words with action. My films were perfect for that. That's why I used a

narrator and simple face expressions for the characters.

During the period of fairy tales and Mother Goose, your characters were made by the entire Harryhausen family.

I had to do everything: it was a family effort where my dad, who was a machinist, would make the armature, my mother would dress up the character and I was taking care of making the hands, arms and faces of the characters.

I notice the hands of the characters were already made of latex at that time.

Yes, I used cut-out sponge rubber, I made the sculpting in clay, cast it in plaster and then poured the sponge rubber in it. The sponge rubber was a bit poor and that's why my characters didn't last very long.

You worked at some point at the George Pal Puppetoon studio for two years before the war, did your time there influence you in some way for making the fairy tales?

At the Pal studio, the characters were stylized and cubistic. They were cut on a band saw. Twenty-five pairs of legs made out of wood composed one second of animation; they were simply replaced in front of the camera. This was very quick for shooting, but wasn't leaving much leeway to change something during the shoot.

The characters in your movies had multiple heads that you replaced for the different expressions. Did you ever use replacement animation later in other live-action movies in which you did the effects?

For my characters, I used a couple of heads, but I didn't want to do all the [vowels]. The heads of the characters were changed through eight frames dissolved. If you do it that quickly, the background doesn't change.

I didn't use replacements later on during live-action film because I used single-jointed figures like Willis O'Brien did way back in 1915 and 1925.

The Completion of The Tortoise and The Hare

One of the gems on the DVD is *The Tortoise and the Hare*. The film was started way back in 1952, but was never finished. Harryhausen accepted work on another film and never went back to revisit the unfinished story until two Los Angeles animators, Mark Caballero and Seamus Walsh, approached him in 2000 to finish it. All the ingredients were in place to close this chapter. "After 50 years, I had lost interest in completing it until Mark and Seamus approached me. I saw their work and accepted their offer to work with them as a director... I wrote a new script—pulled out the characters. It took two years to finish because they did this in their spare time.

What excited Harryhausen the most about the compilation?

"What I like is that finally the films shows the progression of the work, from the Mother Goose short stories, which are all now brought together, and all the fairy tales are put in order, from *Red Riding Hood* to *The Tortoise and the Hare*."

The DVD set is sure to provide considerable enjoyment, with all the other

features found from the earlier films, special features on the *Tortoise and the Hare*, along with interviews and more fun extras, like Harryhausen's 80th birthday tribute from many animators in the field. This collection can share a lot with young students and point out what it takes to make it as a stop-motion animator. Says Harryhausen, "What will they get out of it? It is up to them, some will absorb

it and others will enjoy it for what it is. Remember that, as an animator, you need patience, knowledge of acting and other artistic skills... and concentration, that's why I always worked alone—because it required a lot of concentration. As I always said, some are born to dance, some are born to sing; I was born to animate." ■



Before the fantasy of *Sinbad*, Ray Harryhausen explored the magic of fairy tales.

The Truth in Pictures

Sheila Sofian explores the multifaceted world of documentary animation

The audience reacts to animated documentary in a much different way than traditional live-action documentary. I believe that the use of iconographic images impact the viewer in a way in which live-action cannot. The images are personal and “friendly.” We are willing to receive animated images without putting up any barriers, opening ourselves up for a powerful and potentially emotional experience. The simplicity of the images relieves some of the harshness of the topic being described.

My own definition of documentary animation is any animated film that deals with non-fiction material. It can utilize documentary audio interviews, or it can be an interpretation or re-creation of factual events. This encompasses a broad range of styles. Some films will use documentary interviews, and then take them out of context to create new meaning. Other examples of documentary animations are portraits of people, narrated by one person describing their own experiences. Still others are reenactments of events, historical or personal, illustrated with animation. As in all forms of filmmaking, the process is subjective.

Perhaps the very first animation consisting of non-fiction material was Winsor McCay's *The Sinking of the*

Lusitania, created in 1915. This visually stunning film illustrates a German submarine's sinking of a British luxury cruise ship with over 2,000 passengers. This event led to the United States' entry into World War I. The animation depicts the dramatic attack made upon the cruise ship. Because it was a silent era film, text was used to dramatize the event further. McCay animated ordinary people running for their lives, and a mother trying to save her child. This had a powerful, emotional impact. By showing the cruise ship sinking on an extremely personal level, the audience was much more emotionally affected than if they had seen the event illustrated in photographs and interviews. Winsor McCay had no actual footage of the *Lusitania*. He was able to use animation to recreate an incident, and tell the story in a dramatic way. Audiences were affected emotionally by the powerful animation.

More recent animated documentaries include the work of John and Faith Hubley. A husband and wife animation team of the 1950s and 1960s, they recorded audio of their two sons playing and created playful animation to illustrate their colorful stories in *Moonbird* (1959). In *Windy Day* (1967) and *Cockaboody* (1973), they recorded the voices of their daughters, and animated the world through their eyes. They successfully



Like many of his films, Paul Fierlinger's *Drawn From Memory* comes from personal experience.

cover story»

created images that brought the viewer into their children's fantasy world. The audience was able to picture themselves as these boys and girls, and to revert back to childhood through the playful animation and the intimate soundtrack.

Paul and Sandra Fierlinger have created a body of work in animation documentary. In their film, *Drawn From Memory* (1991), Paul Fierlinger narrates his experience as a son of a Czech diplomat during World War II. The narrative is autobiographical, described by the filmmaker. Using beautiful, loose drawn animation, he illustrates his memories in an extremely personal manner. Paul and Sandra Fierlinger have continued to make animated documentaries in subjects ranging from alcoholism, dogs, and portraits of ordinary people. Their work allows audiences to hear and see Paul Fierlinger's memories and experiences drawn from his own hand.

Animation director Paul Vester interviewed several people who believed they were abducted by aliens for his film, *Abductees* (1995). Several animators contributed to the film, resulting in a range of styles and techniques. Each person's testimony is accompanied by personal, stylistic animation, creating a powerful and haunting experience. This type of film could not have been made without a recreation of events. There was no footage of people being abducted. The personal experiences of each person were interpreted by animators. Each story has its own mood and texture. The audience experiences their stories filtered by artistic renderings that give shape and perspective to the speaker's words. Whether or not these experiences actually took place is left up to interpretation. The use of animation not only helps to describe the experience of the abductee, it gives the story a personal touch—as though



the experience were filtered by memory and distinctive to each person's recollections. The film also incorporates the abductee's own drawings.

Although not strictly documentary animation, animators in Eastern Europe have a tradition of producing surreal films that are political in nature and open to interpretation. This was a result of filmmakers wanting to make films critical of the Soviet Union government and avoid censorship at the same time. As a result, extremely creative and challenging narrative structures were invented. Another example of the use of metaphor to communicate a political message is Jirí Trnka's *The Hand* (1965), from Czechoslovakia. This short puppet animation is

about resistance to a totalitarian regime. An artist (in the form of a puppet) encounters a live-action hand. The hand desires the artist to make a monument of itself. The artist refuses. The hand first tries to persuade the artist, and then force him. Eventually the hand causes his death, and organizes the artists' state funeral. After Trnka died in 1969, the film was banned and not seen again for twenty years.

In the animated film *Pro and Con* (1992), Joanne Priestly and Joan Gratz collaborate to tell the story of a prison guard and an inmate. Joan Gratz uses beautiful clay-on-glass animation to illustrate the story of a prison inmate, while Joanna Priestly uses such techniques including 2D puppets, drawings, object and cel animation and clay painting

Left: *The Sinking of the Lusitania* is probably the first non-fiction animated film.

Above: The absurd atmosphere of Jennifer Sachs's *The Velvet Tigress* belies its dark source material: a murder trial.





Left: *A Conversation With Haris* has provoked surprising reactions.

an intensity to the documentary interview. In these examples, the filmmakers are finding new ways to communicate material that in the past would have been relegated to “talking heads,” interviews of people, or edited with stock footage.

My film *Survivors* is an animated documentary about domestic violence. I interviewed women who were survivors of violent relationships, professionals who counsel them, as well as a man who counsels abusive men. The interviews are illustrated using surreal, expressionistic drawn animation. The audience reaction has been interesting.

One observation that people have mentioned several times is if they had seen the film as a live-action documentary, they would have judged the person speaking based on their appearance. However, they were unable to make such a judgement when viewing *Survivors*, since the viewer never saw the actual person who was speaking. They told me that this allowed them to empathize with the person who was interviewed in a way they would not have been able to if it had been a live action film.

Some people have found this “forced empathy” problematic. My recent film, *A Conversation with Haris*, has been controversial for this very reason. Some people have reacted negatively, describing the film as “propaganda.” I believe

that part of the reason people have reacted this way is due to the subject matter animation has dealt with historically. Most people associate “cartoons” as a medium for children or as propaganda. It is difficult for audiences to get used to the idea of animation as documentary. It is a new way of thinking, and if you have not been exposed to non-fiction animation, it can be difficult to adjust to.

A Conversation with Haris deals with a politically volatile subject: war. I interviewed an eleven-year-old Bosnian boy about the war in Bosnia. During the interview he describes how his grandmother was killed, and he voices his opinions on the war. Some people found the use of a child’s voice manipulative. International audiences have responded in a variety of ways, often coloured by their own opinions on the Bosnian war. I believe that it is difficult for people to empathize with a character in a film when the viewer’s perspective conflicts with that of the film’s subject. When I made *A Conversation with Haris*, I did not realize the deep-seated feelings I would be dealing with when touching on this topic.

Although I do not believe that animation is unique in its manipulative nature, I do understand that a non-traditional use of a medium is sometimes difficult to embrace. Animation is more transparent in its construction.

commentary on the bizarre public spectacle surrounding the trial, using innovative combinations of newspaper articles, audiences and jury members.

Animation has also been used in mainstream live-action documentary cinema. Filmmakers such as Errol Morris and Robert Evans have integrated visual effects to create a dreamlike, surreal mood. Errol Morris combines interviews with manipulated live-action shots utilizing time-lapse photography and animation in *Fog of War* and *Fast, Cheap and Out of Control*. Robert Evans’s *The Kid Stays in the Picture* digitally composites still photography with different backgrounds. Both of these films are able to engage the audience and create a mood that brings

to describe a correction officer’s experience. The different animation techniques create a separation between the two interviews, their tone, and the manner in which the viewer interprets their stories.

Another example is Jen Sachs’s *The Velvet Tigress* (2001), a stylized account of the murder trial of Winnie Ruth Judd in the 1930s. The film explores not only the details of the murder trial, but also the manner in which the press covered the trial. She juxtaposed newspaper imagery with graphics, pointing out the circus-like atmosphere surrounding the trial. The film is informative and engaging, captivating the viewer with the use of elegant designs and personal voice-over narration. The use of animation allows

cover story»

The audience understands that the image is created entirely from the artist's hand. Unlike live-action, there is no pretence to represent a "true" replica of events onscreen. emotional experience. The simplicity of the images relieves some of the harshness of the topic being described. ■

Keeping It Real

At first, the idea of an animated documentary seems contradictory. How can a medium built on fabrication relate a narrative that must be grounded in reality? Chris Landreth's *Ryan*, which has helped to bring the concept of documentary animation to the fore, provides part of the answer: it speaks truths (some subjective) about its subjects and its director through unreal, animated actions and characters.

While *Ryan* has helped more people to recognize animation as a viable means of creating documentaries, we've shown that it's merely the latest expression of a tradition that dates back to the early days of animated film. Here are how others have contributed to that tradition.

Before Wallace and Gromit came along, Aardman had had some success with a series of shorts under the *Conversation Pieces* and *Lip Synch* titles. *Late Edition* (1983) exemplifies the technique: using recordings of real people and

locations as the basis, Aardman co-founders Peter Lord and David Sproxton used stop-motion animation to recreate the feel of the people and places being recorded, if not the exact appearance or sequence of events. Later films took more liberties with the source material. In the case of *War Story* (1989), veteran Bill Perry narrates some of his adventures (some purely domestic) in London during the blitz—but the visuals extend the words to their comical conclusion. *Creature Comforts* (1989) went even further and recast all the voices as coming from zoo animals discussing the ways in which they deal with life in captivity and likely pushing past the grey area of documentary animation. *Emru Townsend*

Hotaru no Haka (*Grave of the Fireflies*, Isao Takahata, 1987) straddles the line between fiction and non-fiction. Akiyuki Nosaka wrote the semi-autobiographical book on which the movie was based, in which he and his younger sister (or rather, their characters, Seita and Setsuko), survivors of a firebombing attack in wartime Kobe, Japan, find themselves living alone in the countryside. The pair ultimately die from malnutrition, which is no surprise to the audience as the film is told in flashback by the ghosts of the two children.

Wrenching, horrifying and at times heartbreakingly joyful,

Grave of the Fireflies presents a conundrum: the story is not an accurate replay of events (while Nosaka's sister did die under his care, he clearly survived), but it's grounded in the reality that he and his sister experienced. When the audience sees Seita make the irrational, impulsive and stubborn decisions that only a child would make, as well as the consequences of those decisions, they know that the narrative is informed by Nosaka's memories of those days. *Emru Townsend*

Australian Dennis Tupicoff questions the notion of an objective documentary in *His Mother's Voice* (1997). In 1995, a mother recounts how she learned that her son had been shot and rushed to the scene,

then learned that the paramedics were unable to save him. Tupicoff presents the exact same audio track twice, each time in a distinct animation style—and each time from a different perspective. Because of the different presentations, the viewer experiences the same story and the same grief in two different ways. It's a discomfiting lesson in the subtleties of media manipulation. *Emru Townsend*

Muratti and Sarotti: The History of German Animation 1920-1960 (Gerd Gockell, 1999) treats the rise of the "absolute" (abstract, experimental) film in the midst of the commercial and political ferment of Weimar; the emigration of artists like Oskar Fischinger, Hans Richter, Berthold Bartosch and Peter

Below: *Ryan* is the latest in a long line of animated documentaries.





the film came out in 1960. They so impressed Stanley Kubrick that he asked Colin Low and animators Wally Gentleman and Sid Goldsmith to work for him on *2001: A Space Odyssey*. *René Walling*

Dan McLaughlin's *Shapes of Movement: a Short History of Gymnastics* (2003) provides an amusing account of gymnastics as practiced from antiquity to the present day. The animation is, in a word, flighty.

In a mere five and a half minutes, the film whirls through various incarnations of gymnastics including exercise, combat, entertainment, sport, and art. From its opening images of a man somersaulting over a twirling frame of aqua blue, the film whimsically unspools over space and time as though it, too, is a gravity-defying gymnast. Over a matter-of-fact narration and prim piano music track, McLaughlin whimsically animates collages of Egyptian hieroglyphs, Greek urns, Renaissance etchings, classical paintings, and archival photographs, occasionally tossing in anarchic sound or optical effects to liven up the encyclopaedic tone of the voiceover. The documentary lives up to the promise of its title and delivers an informative and visually provocative illumination of an interesting subject. *Victoria Meng*

The Extra Life of an Animator (2004) documents veteran animator Dan

McLaughlin's first career in film: as a Hollywood child extra. The ten-minute short is packed with unexpected, funny, and resonant anecdotes. An example: as the camera zooms out from a picture of Irene Dunne holding an adorable baby, McLaughlin states, "This was my first, last, and only major Hollywood role, because I peed on Irene Dunne, and you don't do that to a major star in this town and expect to get ahead." Later, over a clip from a Carole Lombard picture, McLaughlin muses, "I can't remember what I was sick with in this film. I was sick a lot in movies. I know in *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* I had syphilis." For cineastes, McLaughlin provides an unusual way to review studio-era classics including *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Babes on Broadway*. By allowing brief clips of celebrities to pass without comment, but freezing on long shots, incidental cutaways, and crowd scenes, McLaughlin subtly underscores Hollywood's consistently lush artificiality. An animated red arrow points McLaughlin out in each freeze frame, and viewers bear witness to a strange kind of public personal history as we see McLaughlin grow from an infant to an almost-teenager over the course of more than a half-dozen films. *Victoria Meng*

Left: Gerd Gockell's *Muratti and Sarotti* is visually and thematically astonishing.

Sachs to escape Nazi persecution; the "inner emigration" of those who stayed behind (like Oskar's brother, Hans) and continued to work; the ambivalent role of animation in the divided, postwar Germany (controlled by advertising or the Communist Party); and an epilogue suggesting a return to the experimental: *Film as Film*.

I was fascinated by the depth and twists in this history: Walter Ruttmann, the master of abstract modernism, ended up doing Reifentahl-influenced paeans to industrial might; Joseph Goebbels wanted to make an Aryan *Snow White*; Herbert Seggelke drew the delightful *Strich Punkt Ballet* on 35mm film, synchronized to jazz, as Allied bombs were falling outside his Berlin window in 1943.

Evidently made completely frame by frame using collage, cartooning and puppetry, as if

discovered in a gloomy archive of film cans and drawings, *Muratti and Sarotti* (named for popular cigarette and chocolate advertisements) provides a rich context for clips of rarely seen animation. Even the "live" interviewees are animated snapshots. The overall mood is that of a séance, where forgotten ghosts are revived: an apt metaphor for a form-giving culture at war with itself and others in the last century. *George Griffin*

Universe, by Colin Low and Roman Kroitor, one of many science documentaries produced by the National Film Board of Canada, is an overview of astronomy, covering mostly our solar system and galaxy. While the live-action sequences are nothing but ordinary, the animated sequences have not lost any of their impact today and were considered a landmark in special effects when

J.R. Bray—Documentarian?

Noell Wolfgram Evans makes the case for the animation pioneer as one of the first documentary animation producers

John Randolph Bray (1879-1978) is inarguably one of the founding fathers of animation. Much could be said about the talent he discovered, the patents he held, the breakthroughs he oversaw, his business acumen or the characters he brought to the screen. What isn't often discussed is the influence he had in non-fiction animation, particularly training and educational films.

By definition, the line between the educational and documentary film is a thin one, if it is even there at all. Educational shorts as a whole are an interesting type of film; their purpose is obviously to teach, but one could argue that is the purpose of a documentary film is as well.

The task of defining documentary animated film is a slippery one. There are many pieces of work that could be considered documentary even though they don't fit neatly into a dictionary definition of the term. J.R. Bray produced a number of films that fall into that grey area: films that taught, defined and showed things through an unfiltered lens.

Already a successful animation producer, Bray started using animation as a teaching tool, in full force, during World War I. When the war began, the US Government put out a call to filmmakers for training materials. Bray took some of

his animators to West Point and created a short training piece. The government was so impressed that they awarded him a large production contract.

At the time, Bray had a successful and high-profile contract with Paramount Studios, so it's unclear whether he decided to make the move into non-fiction films as a business decision, as an artistic endeavour or whether there were other factors influencing the studios' slant in this direction. What is clear is that he made a number of non-fiction films at this time that were very successful and well-received.

Bray was not the only animation producer making non-fiction films at this time, but his studio was one of, if not the most successful at it. What made the Bray pictures stand out was their technical prowess. This was due in large part to the invention of one of the studio employees, Max Fleischer. Fleischer (with his brothers) had created a process known as rotoscoping. Essentially they would make a live-action film and then back project it onto a drawing board where an animator would hand copy the image a frame at a time. The result was an incredibly life-like representation in pen and ink. It was the perfect solution for trying to show exactly how a gun was put together or how to use an army radio.

This reliance on the rotoscope process helped to take these films to the next level of animation, one where exact realism is nearly achieved—a trait that is needed in training films, and something reflected in most documentaries as well. This is because the rotoscope process and the subject matter it was used on essentially took any free artistic interpretation out of the films, leaving them to be strictly a representation of their subjects.

As the war ended and many of the enlisted men who had seen these films returned to their businesses, Bray started to receive an influx of orders for training and educational films from all manner of industries.

In the ensuing years the focus of the Bray Studio continued its shift. Non-fiction films were no longer just another branch of the business, they were becoming the business. To accommodate this shift, more technically grounded draftsmen were brought into the studio, an educational director was assigned and a branch office was even opened in Detroit to handle the immense amount of work from what was fast becoming the studio's largest client: the automotive industry.

To further expand their work in this market, in 1923 the Brayco Projector, a consumer-grade film projector, was introduced. Ostensibly usable for any

16mm produced film, Bray hoped that it would catch on in schools and other such places where they would use it to showcase the educational film output of the studio. It could be said that purpose was eventually reached when the projector was purchased outright by the Encyclopedia Britannica. Again it's seen that Bray took one of the primary tenets of the documentary film—to teach—and discovered a way to popularize it and make its information immediately accessible.

Bray continued down the non-fiction path, even dabbling in live-action documentary filmmaking. He was never able to reach his same successes, though, and eventually faded into the film industry.

Over time his work may have been overshadowed by many of the people he brought into the business, but his influence has been continually felt for the past 80 years. One of the chief beneficiaries of the experience of his studio is, of course, the non-fiction film market. While the work that the Bray Studio created was not technically labelled "documentary," after discovering its purpose, content and audience receptivity, one would be hard pressed to admit that the films they created did not at least meet documentary goals. ■



documentary filmmaking in Europe in the 1920s (Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter, Dziga Vertov) and in the UK in the 1930s (John Grierson, Len Lye, Norman McLaren). This close connection continued at the National Film Board of Canada after World War II and through to this day. Even Hollywood's Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences accepted the animated documentary as documentary proper by giving the Oscar to McLaren (*Neighbours*, 1952) and Saul Bass (*Why Man Creates*, 1968). The direct cinema/cinema vérité movements and the total dominance of TV documentaries closely based on journalism have dominated the documentary tradition since the 1960s. But postmodernist thinking combined with more individual/personal artistic filmmaking have brought the artistic elements of the European documentaries of the 1920s and 1930s back. And this scene has also opened up for the modern animated documentary.

At the NFB the filmmakers never stopped making animated documentaries, and a similar tradition has been kept alive in the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden and Norway. I believe a major reason for this is the social democratic political thinking that lies behind both the ideology of the NFB and the film politics in Scandinavia. The film industry deserves state funding because the films play a vital role in our

The term "animated documentary" can still upset a truth-seeking purist. But over the last few years our understanding of what a documentary is has expanded from the narrow direct cinema/cinema vérité definition of the 1970s and the 1980s. A more inclusive definition with room for both classic documentaries like the European city symphonies of the 1920s and the personal film essays of the 1990s and the 2000s is now gaining support.

There was a close connection between animation and

Above: *When Life Departs* looks at what happens after we shuffle off the mortal coil.

How Swede It Is

...and Danish and Norwegian. **Gunnar Strøm** takes a tour of Scandinavian documentary animation

democracy. In Scandinavia, our minor national languages (8 million people speak Swedish, 5 million speak Danish, and only 4 million speak Norwegian) make it almost impossible for a national film industry to balance economically without extensive state funding. Such a close connection between politics and art can of course be questioned. For the animated documentaries I discuss here, I believe this connection has been essential.

National Film Bodies

As in Canada, there are strong national film bodies in all the Scandinavian countries. Filmens Hus (The House of Film) was established in Stockholm in the 1970s, and similar institutions can be found in Denmark and Norway. Ten years ago, Norway followed Denmark and Sweden by opening a prestigious national film school in Lillehammer. And the total film industry and art scene are administered through national film institutes in all three countries. Statens Filmcentral (the old name of the national production and distribution company for shorts and documentaries) read as National Film Board of Norway/Denmark respectively, illustrating the relationship and common thinking behind the film boards in Canada and Scandinavia.

Because of the strong state funding, shorts and documentaries were almost completely independent of distribution income concerns. In many ways, the situation was similar to the system in Eastern Europe, but without the political censorship. In the 1970s, artist unions

grew strong as part of the economic rise and the general radicalization of the population. More money was put into the arts, and the artists themselves got control of the distribution of the production money through their unions. The result was a huge increase in short and documentary film production. And if we look at the shorts and documentaries made in Scandinavia in the 1970s, we find a general left-wing political attitude typical of the art and culture scene of the time.

Animated History

A very typical animation exponent of the radical seventies is the Dane, Jannik Hastrup. He is still producing films and his latest feature about the famous cut-out character *Cirkeline* premiered during the Fredrikstad Animation festival last November. At the same festival, Hastrup, Ivo Caprino, Per Åhlin and Priit Pärn were honoured as the four masters of Nordic and Baltic animation. Hastrup started in animation in the late 1950s. In the 1970s, he was a very radical leftist and his two film series *Historiebogen* (*The History Book*, 1972-1974) and *Trællene* (*The Thralls*, 1977-80) are clearly inspired by his radical political ideas. That the series were quite successful and got excellent reviews tells quite a bit about the political atmosphere they were produced and screened in. There are nine 20-minute long episodes in *The History Book*. In *The Thralls*, the nine episodes are 45 minutes each.

One of Hastrup's collaborators on *The History Book* was Per Tønnes Nielsen.

With Anders Sørensen, he formed the company Tegnedrengene in the early 1980s. With their charming wit they have made three animated history projects that have reached wide international distribution. *Eventyret om den vidunderlige kartoffel* (*The Tale of the Wonderful Potato*, 1985) is a wonderful story about how the potato came to Europe. Based on facts but told with a lot of artistic freedom, the film is a very amusing and still informative documentary. It slowly grew to major success in schools around Scandinavia.

That success made Tegnedrengene popular with the film authorities at the national film boards. Money was granted for new projects. The very ambitious *Eventyret om den vidunderlige musikken* (*The Wonderful Tale of Music*) premiered in 1991. In the film they tell the period history of art and music backward by combining music examples with animation based on visual art from the same periods. This half-hour film was quickly followed by two new half-hours called nothing less than *Verdens historien 1-2* (*World History 1-2*, 1993). The same formula was used, and the medium of animation was used for effective storytelling, underlining the essence of the historic development and expanding the boundaries of realism.

Historical Portraits

A well-known animated portrait that fully explores the freedom of the animation medium is Bob Godfrey's Oscar-winning *Great* (1975), on the life and career of British engineer Isambard Kingdom

Brunel. The Swedish animators Per and Gisela Ekholm made a really fascinating portrait of the French author Alfred Jarry in a similar style in 1987. *Alfred Jarry Superfreak* is written by highly acclaimed Norwegian author Axel Jensen and his script is a mixture of Jarry's life in Paris and characters and episodes from his writings. *Ubu Roi* and Doctor Faustroll, pataphysics, sex and absinthe-drinking form the background for a race from Paris across Russia and back between a train and five bike-riders. In the spirit of Jarry, Jensen and the Ekholms have managed to make an animated documentary that in all its crazy and surrealistic moments portrays the great French author in a "realistic" way.

In 1982, Swedish Television made an animated documentary on another giant in world culture: Charles "Buddy" Bolden. While the Alfred Jarry film used animation to illustrate the surrealism and pataphysics of Alfred Jarry, the animation in *Buddy Bolden Blues* is used to compensate for the problem that very little about Bolden, "the first man of jazz," is documented in writings, photographs or recordings. The filmmaker Claes-Göran Lillieborg and his colleagues built a complete model of the Storyville district in 1900 New Orleans, combining model shots with authentic photographs, and cel and cut-out animation to recreate the atmosphere of the very early days of jazz. The film moves slowly forward and is quite dependent on an informative but still poetic voice-over. Even though it looks completely different, its pace reminds me a bit of the still-photography-animation *City of Gold* (NFB, 1956),



the importance of the use of condoms to prevent AIDS and other sexual diseases is clearly illustrated. The last film, *Sådan—får man altså born* (*So That's How*, 1989) is directed toward very small children and answers their questions about where they come from.

Because the animated drawings provide distance from the touchy subject compared to similar live-action productions, the animated cartoon is the perfect medium to address difficult issues. The Norwegian cartoon *Trøbbel* (*Trouble*, 1987) by Else Myklebust and Anna Tystad Aronsen makes this even clearer. This film, aimed at pre-school kids, addresses the serious subject of sexual child abuse. Told in a tender but direct way, Myklebust and Aronsen manage to clearly illustrate and inform about this very touchy issue without scaring the small children away with “nasty” illustrations.

Animated Interviews

Karsten Killerich of the leading Danish cartoon studio A-Film has made a wonderful film about children's relationships to cancer and death in the short *Når livet går sin vej* (*When Life Departs*, 1996). For the film he interviewed small children about their thoughts and experiences around death. He also asked them to draw their experiences. With these drawings and a well-edited soundtrack he

Left: *When Life Departs* isn't all harps and halos.

Sex

Another cultural obligation in the Scandinavian social democracies has been sex education. Even though Scandinavia has been famous for its sexual liberation, the majority of Scandinavian teachers are just as shy as everybody else. Many have no doubt slept badly the night before “that special chapter” was to be on the class agenda. In the late 1980s these teachers were helped tremendously by the sex-trilogy of animated cartoons Liller Møller made with the producer Svend Johansen. Both Liller and Johansen had been involved in the

history films of Tegnereengene. Now they used a similar joyful attitude toward the serious subject of sex. As the Danish children's film veteran Ulrich Breuning wrote in 1994: “Liller Møller tells with simple but very charming drawings combined with a genuine understanding for the language of the youngsters about the mysteries of sexual behaviour.”

The first film *Sex—en brugsanvisning for unge* (*Sex—A Guide for Young*, 1987) is a serious and at the same time entertaining step-by-step introduction to the secrets of sexual relationships. In *Ska' jeg på nu* (*Safe for Life* 1989)

chronicling the Gold Rush in Dawson City in the summer 1897. *Buddy Bolden Blues* was made by the music department in Swedish Television and must have been hugely demanding demanding project economically and artistically that never could have made its money back. The TV station even produced a documentary about “the making of the film *Buddy Bolden Blues*.” This tells a bit about the “cultural responsibility” Scandinavian public service TV channels are supposed to have.

illustrated the complicated issue of death in a most inventive and fascinating way.

Many animated documentaries have been made within this concept. Since John and Faith Hubley recorded their kids playing and visualized their games in *Moonbird* (1959), *Windy Day* (1968) and *Cockaboody* (1972), this formula has been used by animators worldwide. Peter Lord and David Sproxton of Aardman Animations got their international breakthrough through their series of *Conversation Pieces* (1978–1983).

The first Scandinavian film to use this concept is the clay animation *Semesterhemmet* (*Vacation House*, 1981) by the Swede Birgitta Jansson. With her tape recorder she recorded everyday activities and conversations at a vacation home for elderly people. The plasticine puppets are very charming and striking models of the authentic old people. And this is revealed to the audience in the last scene of the film where the pensioners see the film themselves and we can compare the plasticine models to their real counterparts. A touching film that gave Jansson a major prize in Annecy in 1981.

A major trend in recent Scandinavian documentary filmmaking has been a more personal approach by the filmmakers. Over the last few years many have made documentaries about themselves, their search for

unknown relatives, even about their own bodies. Norwegian animator Kajsa Næss interviewed her friends and family about what they think about her. Combined with a personal voice-over, this gives her film *Filmen om meg* (*The Film About Me*, 2002) an ironic but still fascinating portrait of the filmmaker.

The most successful animated documentary to come out of Scandinavia in recent years is *Silence* (1998) by Sylvie Bringas and Orly Yadin. Among the many prizes it has won is the Grand Prix at the Nordic-Baltic Animation Festival in Oslo in 1999. In this film the main character tells her story through a voice-over narrated by the actual person behind the story. Tara is a little Jewish girl who escaped the concentration camps during World War II and grew up with her relatives in Sweden after the war. Her family concealed her background, her childhood was full of conflicts, and only now, more than fifty years later, is she able to tell her story.

The Year Along the Abandoned Road

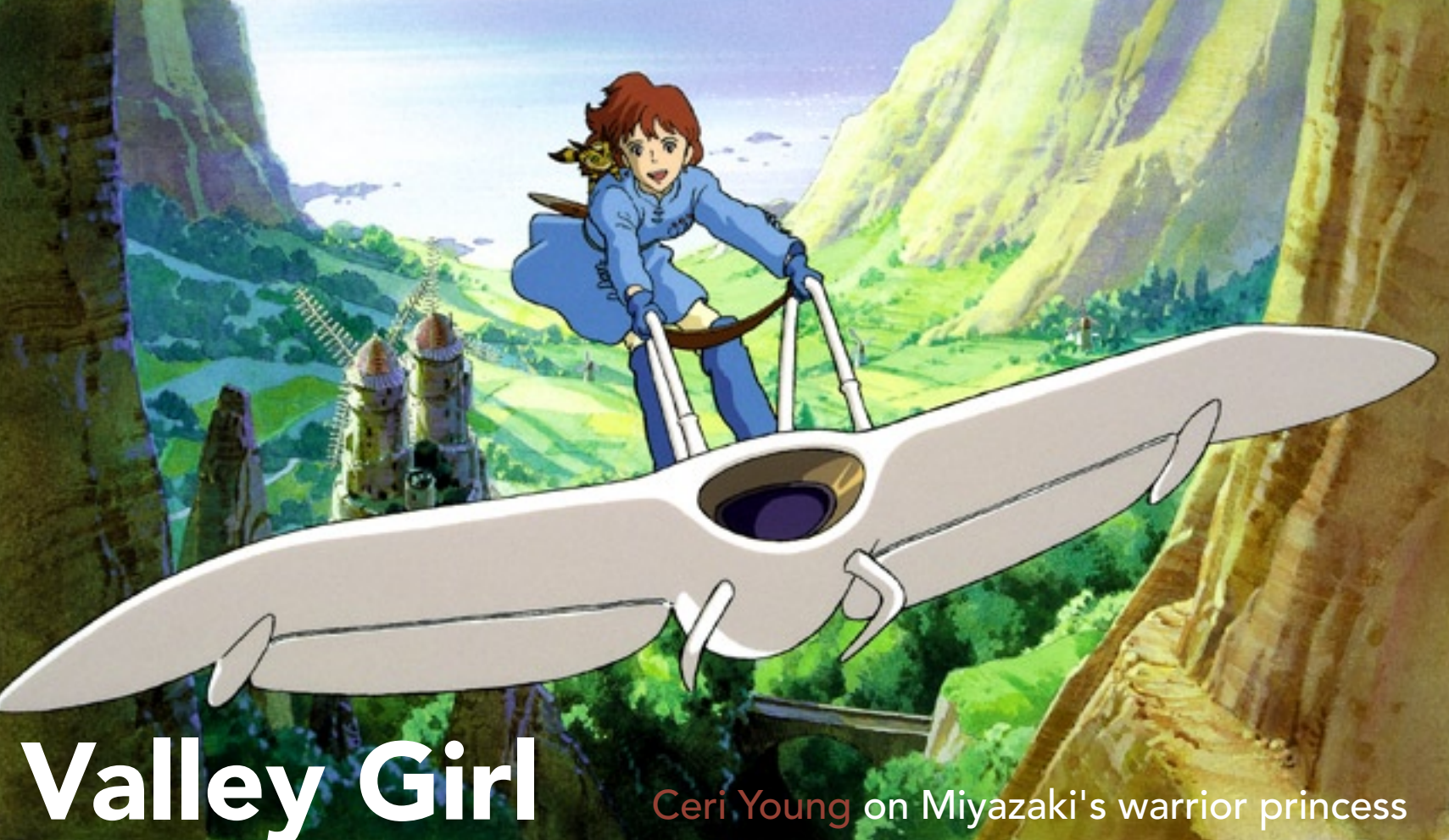
One of the most neglected and unknown masterpieces of modern animation is a documentary of a very different kind. Over the years, the Norwegian cinematographer and animator Morten Skallerud has specialized in single frame special effects cinematography. Among

his best known and extensively used shots are some fabulous re-animated northern lights (aurora borealis) that were used in the title sequence of the Lillehammer Olympics in 1994. But Skallerud has also made several short films based on his inventive single-frame cinematography. His work can sometimes recall Norman McLaren's ballet films and the animation Don McWilliams uses in his documentaries.

Morten Skallerud's masterpiece is the twelve-minute *Året gjennom Børfjord* (*A Year Along the Abandoned Road*, 1991). It was recently awarded "Best Norwegian Short Film Ever," in a national poll among filmmakers and short-film enthusiasts and is the only Norwegian film shot in 70mm Panavision. The film is shot at an abandoned fishing village on a small island on the coast of Northern Norway, consisting of one continuous tracking shot along the road that goes through the village. It begins in the morning in January and follows the seasons until the summer when the camera has reached the centre of the village and all the summer guests are partying at the quay. As the autumn approaches the camera tracks on toward the other end of the village and ends by the last house in the evening in December.

The film won a major prize in Zagreb in 1992, the year few people were in Zagreb because of

the Serbo-Croatian War. The Zagreb prize excluded the film from the competition programme in Annecy, and in other festivals it fell between categories. The producer worked hard to get it nominated for an Oscar, but it fell outside both the animation and documentary short categories. Because it is so different, it doesn't fit easily into thematic retrospective programmes either. Hopefully new attention given to animated documentaries as such will bring Skallerud's film out to a wider audience. (An IMAX film based on the same concept, centering around an old railway line, is touring IMAX theatres around the world at the moment. But the real stuff is the original 70mm production.) I also hope that the other films I have presented in this essay will gain more attention. Most of them have hardly been seen outside Scandinavia, and many of them have been forgotten by their domestic audiences. The films deserve better than that. ■



Valley Girl

Ceri Young on Miyazaki's warrior princess

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind

Directed by Hayao Miyazaki

Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2005

Originally released in 1984

117 minutes

It is a thousand years since the Seven Days of Fire, when humanity almost destroyed itself and poisoned the entire Earth. Now, only small communities survive, living outside of toxic jungles where giant insects nest, including the protectors of the forest, the

Ohmu. In the Valley of the Wind, Princess Nausicaä and her people have learned to live in a sort of peace with the forest. When an outside airship lands in the valley, bringing poisonous spores with it and an army behind it, Nausicaä's world changes, and she's forced into a struggle against two warring nations to save both her own valley, and the jungle her enemies can only see as an evil.

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind is written and directed by

Hayao Miyazaki, and is one of his earliest films. Miyazaki is the director behind the films *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*. *Nausicaä* is an ambitious film, one which must do several things. Apart from telling the central story, Miyazaki must introduce a world that has little to nothing in common with our own. Though Miyazaki's films always have a fantastic twist, this is the farthest departure he's made from our reality. It also portrays a very dark

reality. No matter how happy the ending, Nausicaä's world is doomed. Also, the film must create sympathy between the viewers and the insect guardians of the toxic jungle. Put simply, these creatures are terrifying and ugly. Giant dragonfly and beetle-like creatures with misshapen bodies and multiple eyes are the good guys.

Amazingly, the film succeeds on all counts. The film spends its first half hour introducing the world, letting the audience see and understand how it works and why. We see the insects through the eyes of Nausicaä, for whom they are not ugly, but beautiful and worth saving. And though we know the world is doomed, there is happiness in the valley in living in harmony with the world as best they can.

The animation of the film stands the test of time. While one might expect a film made more than two decades ago to show signs of wear, this shows almost none. Not only that, but in them one can see the roots of Miyazaki's later works. The opening scenes in which Nausicaä wanders through the toxic forest are beautiful for both their design and use of light, elements that are echoed in the forest scenes from *Princess Mononoke*. The scenes of Nausicaä swooping through the clouds on her glider are awe-inspiring as well, creating a sense of easy flight and movement that is extended in the later *Castle in the Sky*.

The film itself is a gem, but a flawed one, particularly when

compared to Miyazaki's later works. This shows in the plot and characterization: they lack the deft touch of Miyazaki's later films. One of the hallmarks of his style in recent years has been the lack of clear "good guys" and "bad guys"—the films let the viewers work it out for themselves. There are very few unsympathetic characters in *Princess Mononoke* or *Spirited Away*. In *Nausicaä*, the dividing lines are clear. Nausicaä herself is good, the almost-perfect princess, absolutely caring and loving of all living things, while the invading armies are uncaring, short-sighted and war-loving. This is not to say that the characters are two-dimensional parodies of themselves. The people in the movie have a depth that makes them real. Nausicaä is capable of violence in defence of her people and the jungle, and we find Kushana, who leads the invading army, has her own reasons for hating the insects and wanting them dead. However, in films such as *Princess Mononoke*, the dividing lines between a "good" character and a "bad" character are blurred, whereas in *Nausicaä* the division is always clear.

The soundtrack of the film also has not aged well. As it was made in the early 1980s, the film uses the synthesized sounds typical of the decade. It's also not very well applied, jumping in abruptly whenever an action sequence starts. It's hard to say whether it would have jarred as much in its original theatre release, but

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind

DVD Features 1.85:1 aspect ratio; English and Japanese language tracks; Region 1

DVD Extras *Behind the Microphone* and *The Birth Story of Studio Ghibli* featurettes; complete storyboards; original Japanese trailers

twenty years after the fact it certainly does.

Overall, the storytelling and world are superb. Not only is the film itself good, but it's fascinating to see how Miyazaki has developed as a storyteller. Miyazaki's characteristic work—his animation style, character design, and themes of environmental protection—is all here, but in less-refined forms.

Naturally, it's must-see for admirers of Miyazaki's work. ■

Melancholy Miyazaki

Porco Rosso

Directed by Hayao Miyazaki

Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2005

Originally released in 1992

93 minutes

Of all the Miyazaki films, *Porco Rosso* stands alone for several reasons. First, all of his other films centre on young children or teenagers, particularly young girls. But *Porco* is the only film where the main character is an adult, specifically a middle-aged man (albeit a man with a pig's face) which is about as far as you can get from the character of a young girl. Second, it is the most personal of Miyazaki's films. For years, he has caricatured himself as a pig and it is obvious that he strongly identifies with the cynical and melancholy Porco. And last, because this is his most personal film, he indulges in his love of flying and flight imagery. There are more flying



scenes in *Porco* than in all his other films combined.

Porco Rosso is set in the Adriatic during the early 1930s and tells the story of Marco Pagot, an Italian World War I ace. Disgusted with himself and humanity after the end of the war, he has somehow cursed himself so that he is no longer human, but instead has the head of a pig. Thus he now goes by the nickname "Porco Rosso," Italian for "crimson pig." He works as a pilot and bounty hunter, chasing down the air pirates who roam the Adriatic attacking ships. His one tie to the past is Gina, a restaurant owner and entertainer, whom he has known since before the war, and who has been widowed by three of Porco's pilot friends. Gina is obviously in love with Porco, but he feels he isn't good enough for her and refuses to consider the possibility of a romance. The air pirates hire hotshot

American pilot Donald Curtis to challenge Porco and, after a dogfight, Porco's plane does crash, but more because of engine trouble than Curtis's attacks. Porco takes the wrecked plane to Milan where his friend Grandpa Piccolo can repair it. There he meets Fio, Piccolo's seventeen-year-old granddaughter who is also an aircraft designer who redoes the plane. But Porco is a wanted man in Italy (having deserted the Italian Air Force) so once the plane is fixed, he flees back to the Adriatic with Fio accompanying him (he still owes her family money). Once back, Porco is confronted by the air pirates and Curtis, but Fio convinces them to settle it with a one-on-one air duel. Porco starts out the film as the cynical loner who has left all his youthful dreams behind, but Fio begins to remind him of the idealism and honour he used to believe in. She forces him into the role of the white knight.

When I first heard that Michael Keaton was going to play Porco, I was a bit concerned. But he does a wonderful job of capturing the world-weary depth and Bogart-like character of Porco. Susan Egan, on the other hand, was the obvious perfect choice for Gina. Her voice fits the character exactly and when you hear her singing in French you can see why all the men in the movie melt in her presence. Cary Elwes' performance as Donald Curtis is a bit of a mixed bag. While his acting is good, he sometimes overplays the

southern accent too much making him sound silly and too cartoonish. Curtis is the story's antagonist and he's extremely vain, but he's not a fool and he should not sound like one. On the other hand, Brad Garrett's character of the boss of the Mamma Aiuto air pirates gang is a fool, and he does a great job playing him as a Bluto-like cartoon character. Kimberly Williams-Paisley is good as Fio, but occasionally some of her lines come across as bit too strained. And last, David Ogden Stiers is wonderfully witty as Grandpa Piccolo doing a strange Italian voice that I never would have recognized as him.

Of the three new Ghibli releases distributed by Walt Disney Home Entertainment, this one is the lightest on the extras. It has the standard *Behind the Microphone* short with interviews of the English language actors. There is

a very short (only three minutes long) interview with Ghibli producer Toshio Suzuki talking about Miyazaki and *Porco Rosso* that was made back in 1992 when the film was first released in Japan. I would have thought Ghibli would have had some sort of "making of" show from back then they

could have used here. Like the other Ghibli films released on DVD here (and in Japan) this is a two-disc set with the second disc containing the entire film in storyboard form with the choice of the English or Japanese audio track. This lets hardcore animation fans watch Miyazaki's deceptively simple pencil sketches tell the story. And real animation fans will be able to recognize Miyazaki's homage to the Fleischer Brothers cartoons. When Porco and his friend Ferrari are in the Italian movie theater, the cartoon playing is a slapstick comedy with rubberband-limbed and big-eyed characters straight out of the old 1930s shorts. And

the real devoted Miyazaki fans should also check out the prototype of Gina that Miyazaki created ten years earlier. In 1981 he co-created a television series called *Metitantei Houmuzu* (*Sherlock Hound*), writing and directing the first six episodes. The stories recast the Sherlock Holmes characters as anthropomorphic dogs going through light comic adventures in 1910 London. In the episode "The White Cliffs of Dover," (available in the US on the DVD *Sherlock Hound*, Vol. 2) we learn that Hound's housekeeper, Mrs. Hudson, is a widow whose husband was an airmail pilot and that she stole the hearts of all the other pilots. The illustrations used to show her earlier life match exactly the style of the old photographs of Marco, Gina, and the other pilots in *Porco*.

When I first saw *Porco Rosso* ten years ago in Japanese, I'll admit I wasn't very impressed. I liked the initial set up and the concept of the "self-cursed pig," but I was disappointed by the ending where Porco and Curtis are reduced to a stupid fistfight in the water. It was an ending I felt was just too silly to be taken seriously. After all, this is Miyazaki, the master who gave us grand epics like *Nausicaä*, not dumb slapstick like *Popeye*. Now that I'm a bit further into my own middle age, Porco and his actions make a bit more sense to me. I still think the fight is silly, but now I think that's deliberate. I think Miyazaki is telling

us middle-aged guys that there are still things worth fighting for, and we do have to fight for them, even if we look very silly doing it. ■ *Marc Hairston*

The Cat Came Back

The Cat Returns

Directed by Hiroyuki Morita

Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2005

Originally released in 2002

75 minutes

Of all the Studio Ghibli films Disney has released in the US (*Kiki's Delivery Service*, *Princess Mononoke*, *Spirited Away*, *Castle in the Sky*, *Nausicaä*—finally!—and *Porco Rosso*) *The Cat Returns* is something of a stepchild. It is a Ghibli film that is *not* directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Conceived as a project to train and showcase the young and upcoming talent at Studio Ghibli, specifically first-time director Hiroyuki Morita, *Cat* was released theatrically in Japan in the summer of 2002. Okay, I'll admit it: it's not right up there with Miyazaki's films with all their nuances and depth, but there is still some real Ghibli magic here. It may be Ghibli Lite, but that beats 99% of everything else out there.

The story comes from a manga by Aoi Hiragi, the woman who wrote the original manga for *Whisper of the Heart*, the basis for the 1995 Ghibli film of the same name. *The Cat Returns* takes the stray cat Moon/Muta and the

carved cat figurine Baron from the first story and anthropomorphizes them into a new fantasy where they help Haru, a klutzy seventeen-year-old Japanese schoolgirl. Haru saved a cat from being hit by a truck only to discover that this cat could talk when it thanked her. In fact, this was the Prince of the magical kingdom of cats, so the King of the cats decides to thank Haru by having her taken to the kingdom to marry the Prince. Never mind that Haru is human; this is a magical world, they can convert her into a cat whether she wants to be one or not. After several whimsical adventures, Baron, Muta, and their raven friend, Toto, (calling themselves "The Cat Bureau") manage to rescue Haru, help the Prince marry his true love, and get everyone back home safely. While not a particularly original storyline, the settings and the characters more than make up the difference. There are wonderfully imaginative touches

throughout the movie: Baron's dollhouse-sized home with Haru squeezed inside so she can have tea from a thimble-sized teacup, the mad dash of a pack of cats through night-time Tokyo as they kidnap Haru, the cat entertainers at the wedding dinner, and (my personal favourite) the Secret Service cats who guard the King. When Haru, the Baron and Muta finally re-enter our world, they accidentally return in midair about 10,000 feet over Tokyo, but fortunately Toto arrives with a flock of ravens to help out. The wonderful image of Haru walking down from the sky to her school's rooftop on this "bridge of birds" is a direct allusion to the Asian folktale of the weaver maiden in the heavens and the cowherd on the ground who are allowed to cross the Milky Way once a year on a "bridge of birds" to be together. Thankfully, Disney decided to leave the delightful closing song, "Like the Breeze" by Ayano Tsuji, intact rather than replace

it with an English-language pop song (though it would have been nice if they'd provided a translation in the subtitles).

Releasing Studio Ghibli's films to the US is one thing, but the real trick is getting the right voice actors for the roles.

In this respect, Disney has had a mixed track record. While they have been good at getting name talent for the Ghibli films, not all of them have been well cast. While I personally like almost all of them, it seems there are always one or two characters whose voices just don't click for me. But for *The Cat Returns* they finally got it right. There is not a single clunker in the lot and several are brilliant. Start with Anne Hathaway (*Princess Diaries*) as Haru. Her reading of Haru as a sweet, but initially uncertain girl who grows up a bit during her adventures is dead-on perfect. She made Haru come across as a sympathetic character without sounding whiny or cartoony. Cary Elwes (*The Princess Bride*) was just as perfect as the Baron. (With that accent, how could he miss?) Peter Boyle (*Everybody Loves Raymond*) did a wonderful job as a crotchety Muta. And I remember thinking "I really like Toto, I wonder who's playing him?" when I first saw the dubbed version. When Elliot Gould's name appeared in the final credits I thought, "Of course!" Tim Curry (*Rocky Horror Picture Show*) gets to camp it up as the "aging hippie King" to use Curry's own description. Last, I have to mention René Auberjonois as

the King's advisor. I've loved his work as a voice actor all the way back to *The Last Unicorn* and *The Little Mermaid*. For such a small role he still manages to get off one of the funniest lines in the whole film.

Animation fans will be happy that

Disney has continued the two-disc format they started with the Japanese Region 2 DVD releases and followed with the US DVD releases of *Spirited Away*, *Kiki's Delivery Service*, and *Castle in the Sky*. The second disc contains the entire movie in storyboard format with a choice of the English or Japanese audio track. In addition there is the standard *Behind the Microphone* Disney short (nine minutes long) with

interviews of most of the voice actors talking about their characters. But the real treat for Ghibli fans is the thirty-five minute short, *The Making of The Cat Returns*. Produced by Studio Ghibli presumably for Japanese television (and narrated in English here), this short tells the story of how the film was created. This was the first time I had heard that *Cat* started as a twenty-minute short for a theme park, then turned into a direct-to-video project to help train the next generation of directors and animators at Ghibli. Hiroyuki Morita, a rising animator at Ghibli, was given the assignment of storyboarding this forty-five minute video, but instead came up with a 525-page storyboard. Miyazaki and Toshio Suzuki (Ghibli's executive producer) were so

The Cat Returns

DVD Features 1.85:1 aspect ratio; English, French and Japanese language tracks; Region 1

DVD Extras *Behind the Microphone* and *The Making of the Cat Returns* featurettes; complete storyboards; original Japanese trailers



impressed they decided to go ahead and make it a theatrical release.

I was lucky enough to get to see the new English dub of *The Cat Returns* in a theatre when the Dallas KidsFilm Festival showed it last month. I knew that anime fans would love the movie, but I wanted to see how regular parents and children would react. I wanted to see if the Ghibli magic would work for folks who knew nothing about the studio or this film. I decided I was in the right place when the Totoro logo flashed on the screen and only a couple of us in the audience of over two hundred clapped or cheered. But within minutes we were all lost in the world of Haru and the cats. Near the end, right when Baron leapt onto Toto as he streaked past and flew away, a five year-old boy in front of us shrieked at the top of his lungs, "Yippee!!!!" The whole theatre broke up in laughter.

You just don't get these moments of pure joy in movie theatres very often. It was truly a Ghibli magic moment. ■ *Marc Hairston*

China Syndrome

Mulan II

Directed by Darrell Rooney
Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2005
79 minutes

I have no particular disdain for sequels. In fact they can be pretty entertaining—that is, when they are

treated during their creation in an independent manner. Far too often this is not the case, which is why we end up with movies like *Mulan II*.

Recently released as a direct-to-video feature, this film provides a continuation of the ancient story of the courageous Chinese heroine Mulan. *Mulan II* is not a terrible movie, it just doesn't provide any fulfillment. It's like one of those foot-long Pixie-Sticks you buy at the fair, ok to ingest, it offers straightforward and mild amusement until you reach the end when you start to get that weird feeling in your head, you get angry at wasting a whole afternoon and you suddenly realize you've lost your pants.

Sequel journeyman director Darrell Rooney (whose directing credits include *Lady and the Tramp 2* and *The Lion King 2*) and Lynne Sutherland (who's done work on everything from *The Naked Gun* to *BeBe's Kids*) directed *Mulan II*. The film was written by Roger S.H. Schulman who unfortunately draws more on his scripts for *Jungle Book 2* and *ALF* than on his *Shrek* sensibility.

The animation is solid, nothing spectacular, but definitely better than many of the other direct-to-

video features that permeate the video shelves. The film as a whole is a nice, safe, mild entertainment. It's just one that feels created and not in a "labor of love" kind of way but as more of a sterilized corporate offering.

On the plus side, the film does very well in regards to the voice cast. While the original *Mulan* featured many of the same voice actors who appear in this sequel, those actors were overshadowed by the presence of Eddie Murphy as sidekick Mushu. The Murphy persona, which worked so well in *Shrek*, just didn't

play out on the same level in *Mulan* as it had no strong counterbalance (à la Mike Meyers).

Thankfully, in the sequel Murphy has been replaced by Mark Moseley (suprisingly not the only time that has been said, as Moseley picked up voiceover duties for Donkey in the *Shrek 2* video game). Even though Moseley tries his best Murphy impression, it doesn't come off as too overbearing, which allows the other voice actors, including Harvey Fierstein, June Foray, Michelle Kwan, Lucy Liu and Ming Na, more room to play. The results are more balanced performances than those in the original film, unfortunately

that can only carry them so far. It would be great to see this cast work together on a film with a stronger script that gave them more to work with.

Not good, not terrible, *Mulan II* simply just is. The movie shuffles forward from one plot point to the next, executing each moment with precision instead of heart. ■ *Noell Wolfgram Evans*

Homer's Odyssey



Planet Simpson: How A Cartoon Masterpiece Defined a Generation
By Chris Turner
Da Capo Press, 2004
450 pages

When one philosophizes about a cartoon show, even a show as smart and popular as *The Simpsons*, one can run into some problems. For starters, there are specialists out there in contemporary media who simply cannot accept that a cartoon show can aptly document their culture. As Chris Turner reports early in his book, one such case occurred in 2003 when a journalist criticized the popularity of the show by writing, "Have we lost so many vestiges of mass culture that a TV show—a cartoon!—has to be the glue that holds postmodern society together?"

Perhaps a person who would make such a declaration requires what is generally accepted as a

Mulan II
DVD Features 1.78:1 aspect ratio; English, Spanish and French language tracks; Region 1
DVD Extras Deleted scenes; "Mushu's Guess Who" game; Atomic Kitten animated music video; *The World of Mulan* featurette, a tour of China's history and culture; *Voices of Mulan* featurette, spotlighting the voice cast

higher form of art—books, music, a particular film or an ideology—to represent the society he or she lives in. With *Planet Simpson*, Turner demonstrates that the cultural content of *The Simpsons* legitimizes the show for being an instigator of serious discussions on today's important issues. The book argues that in almost every *Simpsons* episode, behind the cartoony references that generate the laughs, there lie in fact debates on aspects of Western culture.

The other big problem with the analytical approach to cartoons is that it is often not appreciated by cartoon fans and not practiced enough by the mainstream media (which could explain the first part of this argument). How could this be, when there are so many websites about *The Simpsons* and other cartoon shows? From my experience, for every serious cartoon fan, there is one that firmly believes that there is no point in analyzing what stereotype a cartoon villain or comic-relief character could be based on, since that might take away from the appreciation of the magic and draftsmanship of that particular cartoon. While at first glance there is some benefit to this type of thinking, it is ultimately flawed and *Planet Simpson* can be used to help point out that flaw.

While some find it hard to argue that one can enjoy entertaining theatrical or televised animation but at the same time remain wary

of the stereotypes and convenient plot twists it uses, it is much easier to do so with a *Simpsons* episode. Throughout *The Simpsons*, the characterization and story-developing techniques are so transparent that they are already a type of pre-packaged critique of what they are representing—we, the audience do not need to be supra-cultured to decode them (unless it's an obviously obscure side joke: "Your mother bought us tickets for a student movie by some Swedish meatball.") The majority of *Simpsons* viewers will agree that the show's take on most issues is as humorous as it is critical.

One of the first things Turner does is cover the genesis of the show. The book does an excellent job of documenting the underground roots of *The Simpsons* and situating the nature of its humor in a family tree of satirical and cartoon predecessors. In each subsequent chapter, however, Turner encourages his readers to go beyond the visual or dialogue-based gags, and see the ideologies that are fuelling these jokes: Homer's surreal and alarming "consumerism," Lisa's "activism," or Mr. Burns's "capitalism," among others.

Image-as-concept (and image-pushed-to-counter-concept absurdity) is the stuff of independent and experimental animation—whether the concept is one of the everyday paradigms

mentioned above or a more artistic or esoteric one symbolized in an experimental film. This is held in common with the underground-comics roots of the *The Simpsons*, even though the show itself has long abandoned them to become a prime-time TV hit.

In the hilarious "Homer's Enemy" episode, the one-time Frank Grimes character—an intelligent, hard-working loser—tells off Homer, his essential antithesis: "I'm saying you're what's wrong with America, Simpson. You coast through life, you do as little as possible, and you leech off of decent, hardworking people like me."

According to Turner this is a key scene where the writers of the show are not just saying "We want you to laugh," they are deliberately stressing that they "also want you to think."

This "we also want you to think" mentality does not need to stop with *The Simpsons*. It can be applied to almost any cartoon. Sometimes writers and directors are deliberate about it, such as the Pixar team with *The Incredibles*, their recent socially relevant film that deals with superpower, and in other cases, the reflection about the subject matter is much more buried in the entertainment. Turner's book could provide almost anyone with plenty of pop-culture decoding techniques.

This leads me to my final remark about this book, that for all its

critical reflection on contemporary culture including music, the Internet, globalization, politics, television and journalism, it is still primarily oriented to the *Simpsons* generation. This book will be enjoyed most thoroughly by someone who has followed the show for at least two or three seasons. It is written in a scholarly manner, but it is also sprinkled with many juicy details and sidenotes about the show's characters and its overt and hidden gags, oriented to the DVD-commentary-addicted fan looking for some further insight.

Planet Simpson will only give the gist of the sixteen-seasons (and still going) show to the curious newcomer. In order to get better acquainted with the Simpson family and their town of Springfield, watching and re-watching classic *Simpsons* episodes is necessary (roughly, seasons two to eight). Today's episodes are still strong in terms of satire, but if you want to *discover* the characters of Homer, Bart, Marge, Lisa, Ned Flanders, Mr. Burns and Stuart—as so many fans had the pleasure of doing—you need to go to the older episodes.

Planet Simpson can act as a pop-culture reference book to someone who has not experienced the spirit of the show; but its biggest achievement is its provision of intellectual insight to the fans of a cartoon show. ■ *Armen Boudjikianian*

closing credits»

Armen Boudjikian is a digital and traditional animator residing in Montreal. He has a BFA in Film Animation from Concordia University. He lives his life frame-by-frame currently in "pose-to-pose" mode. He hopes that one day, it will be "straight ahead."

Noell Wolfram Evans is a freelance writer living in Columbus, Ohio. Winner of the 2002 Thurber Treat Award, he enjoys a number of things, mainly laughing with his family.

Erik Goulet has been active in the film industry for the past 12 years. He is currently a software product specialist at Softimage, and teaches puppet animation at Concordia University. In his spare time, he continues to produce puppet-based animated shorts.

George Griffin is an independent animator living in New York City.

Marc Hairston is a professional space physicist at the University of Texas at Dallas and a lifelong animation fan. He has co-taught several literature courses at UT Dallas that include anime and manga in their required texts. He is a regular speaker at the Schoolgirls and Mobilesuits workshops at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and is currently co-editing the book, *Masters of Anime*.

Victoria Meng is a doctoral student in the Critical Studies department of the School of Theater, Film and

Television at UCLA. She has also produced experimental animated shorts.

A Guggenheim Fellowship recipient, **Sheila Sofian** holds a BFA in Film/Video from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MFA in Experimental Animation from the California Institute of the Arts. Her award-winning films have been shown at numerous international and domestic film festivals. She is currently Chair of the Animation Program at College of the Canyons in Santa Clarita, California.

Gunnar Strøm, a former secretary general and vice president of ASIFA, is an associate professor at Volda University College in Norway. He has written books and articles on animation, documentaries and music videos. He has programmed for and been on juries at film festivals worldwide.

Emru Townsend sees the connections between anime and American animation, stop-motion and CGI, art and the industry, the fiercely independent and the relentlessly commercial. He has been preaching his Unified Animation Theory since 1989, and is the founding editor of *fps*.

A longtime animation fan, **René Walling** was the driving force behind *fps* for a number of years during Emru Townsend's hiatus. He is very happy to be back in the passenger seat.



Next Issue:

Defining Anime

Are any of these "pure" anime? Does it matter?