Three Ways Of Avoiding Animation

By Richard O'Connor

The art of animation deserves no exceptional affection and I offer it none. Every lecture to undergraduates exhorting them to obsessively devote themselves to the form marks another little black check on the soul. In college I studied history -and loved it. I worked in theatre -and loved it. I'm writing this standing on a crowded subway -

red Star Trek shirts with matching tights. The first shoot date: rained out. The $1500 location fee to the Brooklyn Public Library who wouldn't even let us use the bathroom. The giant letters constantly blowing over. The drummer's agent insisting that he was about to "break big" and giving us an incredibly hard time (the line "Ever hear of 'Easy Reader'?" held no sway). The actor playing the cop with his "wide feet" insisting on special shoes. The real on-set rental cop and the corresponding kick back. And slop. Lots of slop.

Animation, on the other hand, is late night. Animators often dodder about until 6.00pm, then work until 1.00am. I gravitate towards animation because I'm a sissy. The pain is

we waited.

I was in London when Brian called to say we had landed the contract. I happened to buy a disco "Cookie Monster" LP[2] that day in what may have been a celebratory precognition.

The classic UPA look was used for inspiration, but we chose to avoid outright imitation.

The hard part of this production was already done as far as I was concerned. We had figured out the storyboard and the design, the rest is all process.

Since the sequence involved compositing our animation into a live action set and basing the animation on the live actor[3] , the scene was shot before the animator could begin. One of the great benefits (and sometime curse) of being in animation is that people don't really understand what you do. They know it's technical and they know it's creative. On a live set that gets respect. I've been on shoots where the live director will ask my opinion on shots that have nothing to do with animation, the cinematographer will ask about framing, if you think something should be firmly secured to the ground they will stop shooting for half an hour to build a rig. On The Stepford Wives, Frank Oz was exceedingly gracious. I had to get my own coffee, but he respected our opinions, incorporated and expanded on our ideas, and let us down easy when bits of our work couldn't be used.

After the shoot the footage was edited into a stand-

Storyboard for original version of Stepford Wives animation

Final frame (the high contrast of this image comes from the file format generated to output to film).

Traditional animation is all process, and the process is simple to understand. When the process if followed, regardless of one's talent or experience, what emerges on film will "work". Time is quantified, the smallest measurable piece is a frame. An animator takes this as the starting point. Film allows 24 glimpses of motion in a single second. A step, a bouncing ball, a rabbit outfoxing a duck -actions that exist in time for 1/60th of a minute are seen by the animator at 1/24th of a second. Each drawing represents frozen time, a fleeting picture that leads only to the next and the next and the next until the end.

There are two important elements to drawn animation. The drawings, and the drawings that aren't there. An image is created, the following image by necessity creates a "space" between the two. That space dictates the speed and character of the motion between the two drawings. A child animator will make infinitesimal variations on an arm reaching across a table, the experienced animator knows to use as few drawings as possible. Doug did the animation, everything's fine . Alexandra Reshanov, a first rate production artist, did the painting and compositing and special effects. I was on the phone a lot, especially to the lab in Los Angeles that scanned the original negative to disk and output our final file sequences to film. This whole process took about four months. Four fairly easy months. Around the twentieth of May I got a call from Leslie Converse, The Stepford Wives' co-producer, "We've been in previews, and everybody loves the cartoon. We're finally getting around to re-working the last reel and we have a few changes we'd like to make for continuity. I'll fax over the pages."

What was done in four fairly easyonCat was done in four f6(s) Tf1 0 0 1 72.024 561.67 Tr

Drug Control Policy.

As always we started with the storyboard. In most performing arts, animation - and even going back to the Attic Tragedy as described in Poetics - narrative is the primary element. There are cases when this is not true, but in television and in advertising it holds in nearly every instance. In work for hire the production company is usually given the script. In this case we were given a script that timed to two and a half minutes for a piece that was supposed to be sixty seconds. We cut the script as much as possible. Brian did a rough storyboard, which Doug made pretty for presentation and we edited the storyboard against our scratch reading of the script to get it close to length.

We cast an actor to photograph. The actor -this is important for photo collage -had training as a dancer. The actor's job on the shoot is to be a puppet, to be like a clay figdtohpou4sb2e4tdpdiurldgbrystthelhiDaartteraatrcobkyphotvovgrapdaaher]. DarTfe7r5smha2eldm)e3y(d)n3rdoTshen and can hold in small increments. This isn't essential in a cut-out shoot, but it makes things easier.

The shoot took a short day with a lot of sitting around. We captured the images with a