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Animation Spectatorship:
The Quay Brothers' Animated "Worlds"

To say the poetic image is independent of causality is to make a rather serious statement. But the causes cited by psychologists and psychoanalysts can never really explain the wholly unexpected nature of the new image, any more than they can explain the attraction it holds for a mind that is foreign to the process of its creation.[1]

Silent, sombre blackness fades up to an abstract composition of rough vertical and horizontal

rectangular forms that frame thick and mottled glass panes. The camera pans up, to the left, back

sound weaves itself into the background violin, high-pitched, nervous, yet endearing. Hesitating

Animated "Worlds"

The aesthetic representation of "worlds," imaginary or otherwise, through cinematography is thematised in philosophical, cognitive and psychoanalytic discourses with impact on almost all areas of the humanities. The concept of "worlds" was the glue that brought some of my musings together:

> What exists beyond the [film] text and what kind of description can be adequate
> to it? Here we encounter the exciting and dangerous term "world." A film
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(no mention of object animation) as not belonging to the domain of his conception of cinema, and he proposes that maybe we can't consider them as films at all.

But Cavell's concern is with "reality." His explanation of the "region" of cartoons and his reasoning as to why they do not belong to film is closely bound to his own philosophical conceptions of reality. If we think of the profilmic materials of cartoons, drawings that *represent* ideas, objects and characters through graphic composition, colour, tone and style, then the "reality" of these drawings is their material base—paper, cel or otherwise. What Cavell fails to point out is that the cinematic apparatus enables movement and the experience of these drawings as a "reality" particular to the "region" of animation. Taking a cue from Sesonske, I would like to address what the "special powers of film" could be in puppet an

with how the manner of experiences of our own bodies is different from our experience of

inanimate physical objects. He describes a situation that can be understood as analogous to

cinema. A man is in a room looking at a reflection of part of the room in a mirror canted at a 45-

degree angle:

> After a few minutes, provided he does not strengthen his initial anchorage by glancing away from the mirror, the reflected room miraculously calls up a subject capable of living in it. This virtual body ousts the real one to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is, and that instead of his real legs and arms, he feels he has the legs and arms he would need to walk and act in the reflected room: he inhabits the spectacle.... It is, then, a certain possession of the world by my body, a certain gearing of my body to the world.[6]

There are intuitions and experiences at play when we inhabit the Quays' "world" instead of a

mirror. A cinematic world allows us to experience spaces and haptically to possess material

objects that, in our physical world, are inanimate, but through the "special powers" of animation,

are endowed with a semblance of life. The "universe," "realm" or "world" particular to the

Quays' films is determined by their formal techniques and style applied to objects that occupy 3D

space. If we recall how Cavell seemed "stumped" by (but curious about) animation, we need

approaches that can help us get a better grasp of the images in the t--0.0p3 TD0i-53td 7.8(s so]ate)-i 3(--0.0mn)8

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experienceds soprojection—the artwork itself is pl

phenomenological investigation of the visual experience of object animation, what it represents

and how we perceive this world.

Spectatorship(s)

Robert Stam *et al.* mention three types of cinema spectator: one based on the empirical,

sociological model; the conscious

Noll Brinckmann and Noël Carroll. There has been a shift away from SLAB theories invoking a passive sadistic/masochistic spectator towards approaches that posit one who is actively involved in film reception.[12] Many of these theories are premised on a cultural understanding of what we see (Bordwell, Grodal, Carroll, Thompson). It also ties in with the "piecemeal" (Carroll) Neoformalist methods that the Wisconsin school initiated in the nineties. It is generally agreed that "[t]hese theories are designed to overcome the conceptual problem raised by the 'paradox of fiction,' namely the paradox of the spectator responding emotionally to what he [sic] knows does not exist."[13]

Animation is sometimes included in the heterogeneous corpus of indexed film titles serving as examples in cinema theory texts. Often the reference is to a particula13 Iz 0 jte in a discussion of non-animation film. For instance, throughout his 1984 study, Edward Branigan refers to a few animation films and their characters. Edwin S. Porter's *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906) is invoked in the context of dream states expressed using matte shots. Discussing the subjective tracking shot, he makes no distinction between the point of view of a 2D Pinocchio and the figure of Shaft from the epon2e2vs(as70.88 Tion8.4( )-1')4(i3 epon)-10.6(2)-1'8 Tion6 Twh320 T-14.4

movements, actors are much more the "possessors" of a point-of-view—but puppets' actions and gaze structures are entirely created and determined by the animator. This means that when a puppet looks off-screen or there is a match cut to what it is looking at, it calls attention to a much greater degree to the *intention* of the person animating the figure, as well as the actual action of *moving* the puppet. Their personality and intentions are what the conscious viewer tries to understand as expressed through the puppet. In other words, this kind of point-of-view is much more mediated than in live action, because whether we have an omniscient or subjective point-of-

animation tends to be misunderstood or ignored by the academic community is that viewers are

overtaxed by the sheer amount of visual inform

> The points raised as matters of definition and interpretation are essentially couched in the assumption of the audience as a specific kind of *subject*, which differs from the assumed subject of the live-action film because of the unique conditions created by animation. Equally, the discussion has largely been predicated on particular approaches to animation as a text, and as such does not engage with other types of address which may look, for example, at the cognitive effects of the animated film, and the specific role of the individual.[21]

Although he raises a crucial point about other types of address, Wells does not pursue this in detail, concentrating instead on an analysis of Disney films in terms of a broad audience. He does state that the specificity of the effect of animation needs further research, reminiscent of Cavell's "special powers of film." A number of queries arise. Just what is this "specificity"? How can we define the spectator's experience of watching animation? How does he or she understand the various levels of abstraction and the unreal images on screen? What can we say about point-of-view in animated cinema, about identification, emotion, or empathy? In a theory of animation spectatorship, experiential factors that diverge from accepted norms of "reality" should and must play an important role in determining perceptual and psychological phenomena of watching animation—I suggest this is the "specificity" Wells means. These, in turn, assist us in structuring an approach to understanding the viewing experience of the Quays' films that are unique in animated cinema.

I'd like to take a step back in time and posit some ideas about relationships between Early Cinema spectatorship and the unique conditions of animation Wells mentions. Tom Gunning describes the "cinema of attractions" as a cinema based on the quality of its ability to *show* something:

> From comedians smirking at the camera, to the constant bowing and gesturing of the conjurors in magic films, this is a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator.[22]

Animation film, in its visual presentation of imaginary worlds, retains a quality that locates it in a

permanent condition of being a kind of "ahistorical" cinema of attractions. Methods and

techniques used to create animation permanently rupture the "world" it creates because the

impossibility of what we see draws attention to the fact that it is an illusion:

> To summarise, the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention,
> inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle
> —a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself.
> The attraction to be displayed may also be of a cinematic nature, such as the
> early close-ups just described, or trick films in which a cinematic manipulation
> (slow motion, reverse motion, substitution, multiple exposure) provides the
> film's novelty. [...] The cinema of attractions displays little energy creating
> characters with psychological motivations or individual personality [...] its
> energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward
> towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative. [23]

In many ways animation film has not lost its "attractiveness," and the spectator's response to the

use of new technologies has striking similarities to those of early cinema.[24]

Inquiry into animation spectatorship is itself a relatively new area. Of the few authors that

do engage in spectatorship, predominantly sociological and psychoanalytic methods are used to

explain the experience of watching animation. The form is rarely addressed using critical

approaches around emotion or phenomenology. Reasons for this can be attributed to theories that

regard cinematic experience as primary, without making considerations for different techniques

or genres. These include semiotics, psychoanalysis, structuralism and socio-cultural approaches.

Another reason might be because animation creates its own visual culture and obeys a different

set of rules from non-animated cinema. This ranges from subversion of natural physical laws that

govern representations of live-action film to the appropriation of cultural codes and imagery that

partially informs the "worlds" and figures it can allow us to experience. Exceptions are Joanna

Bouldin, Vivian Sobchack's recent work, or Laura Marks' fascinating essay on the Quay

Brothers' *The Institute Benjamenta*.[25] It is also telling that Sobchack and Marks include the

Quays' work in their phenomenologically oriented writing.

The dominant approach to animation spectatorship has been from a socio-cultural

standpoint. North American studies on audience dominate and prefer to investigate ideologies

and the influence and effect of animation viewing on broadly defined groups of children,

teenagers or simply as "audience." This has been fruitful in determining, for instance, the effect

of violence in animation on school-age viewers, or the relationship between consumer habits and

television animation series created for children (especially by the numerous private channels in

the USA). The Quays' films are *auteur* animation films (as are those of many other animators)

and attain a complexity in narrative structure, visual abstraction and aesthetic and stylistic wealth

that need appropriate approaches that diverge from socio-historical ones and that posit the viewer

in a different sort of way than do these types of study.

In addressing Disney's hegemonic domination of audience, ideology within the context of

animation spectatorship has received considerable attention. Wells comments upon the state of

spectatorship studies:

> Critical reaction to the Disney canon has always been mixed, and largely
> constitutes *the* discourse about animation itself (see Peary and Peary, 1980: 49-
> 58, 90-92; Smoodin, 1994), but scant address has been given to the *actual*
> agendas of the viewing public who attend Disney films. One might presume
> that this is part of the overall neglect of animation, but also add that such work
> might suggest certain disparities between particular responses and the eagerness
> to promote a specific highly idealised model of innocent, ideologically sound,
> relentlessly optimistic, family entertainment, somehow safe from the vagaries
> and difficulties of the world. It has probably always been the case that the
> particular experience of watching Disney films has been much more complex,
> testing a range of psychological and emotional issues in spectators.[26]

Disney's films are pointedly and naively ideological and promote (and sometimes strangely

undermine) conservative values of American society. Carl Plantinga notes that "[s]pectator

emotions have a powerful rhetorical force because they involve thinking, belief, and

evaluation."[27] The emotional response to films that convey a particular ideology are triggered by

conflict and resolution:

> The Disney film is self-evidently operating on terms which the broad spectrum
> of audiences recognise *as* animation, i.e. cel-animation characterised by
> human/animal figures who play out plausible, if highly fanciful fictions. Other
> kinds of animation are, indeed, now reaching a wider audience, and further
> research will reveal how the reaction to what we have defined as orthodox
> animation differs from the response to developmental or experimental
> animation.[28]

Wells then interprets the results of his study by constructing a paradigm of dominant themes:

empathy and identification; fear and concern; treats and occasions, and codes of contentment.[29]

What we can divine from this set of themes is that the responses are to conventional narrative

fictions that adhere to genre conventions and highlight the pleasure aspect of viewing animation.

The question then arises: what kind of emotions does a film like *Street of Crocodiles*

elicit? The film is oriented towards a mature audience with complex anticipations of pleasure

and aesthetic experience. It strongly triggers intellectual, emotional and sensual engagement with

its visual surface and poetic structures, much more so than the kind of conflict and resolution that

more conventional narratives present. Because of the film's puzzling narrative, here is indeed a

hiatus in processes of belief and evaluation, and the spectator can give him- or herself over to the

pleasure invoked by the loosely structured, haptic images choreographed to music and underlaid

by unusual sound.

Unconventional films that do not align with themes related to the anthropomorphic qualities of the orthodox style and choice of narrative are fertile objects of study. A film like the Quays' *Rehearsals For Extinct Anatomies* (1987), with its elliptical, almost anti-narrative structure, alienated animated automata and sombre, highly aestheticised mood, offers little in the way of, say, contentment, and any pleasure it affords has more to do with the aesthetic and haptic surface of the film than with identification or narrative resolution. There is, however, a pleasurable sense of alienation that the film's macro lens-filmed vignettes of strangely sealed-off and repetitive movements and events affect. We may be drawn much more into the experience

When watching a visual representation of phenomena without any centring anthropomorphic actants, we often 'lose interest' owing to lack of emotional motivation or the cognitive analysis of the perceived, a fact which many makers of experimental films have discovered when presenting their films to a mass audience.[33]

Thus, one issue that is of central importance to understanding the experience of viewing

affective appeal."[36] This phenomenon is a distinguishing feature of puppet animation and

explains the immense popularity of animation film with audiences. Grodal also provides some

pertinent insights into the mental workings of animation audiences:

> Important for the mode of perception is an evaluation of whether the seen or heard has its source in, or represents, an exterior hypothetical or real world or an interior mental world (or belongs to intermediary positions), or whether the source is ambiguous. If the perceived is constructed as belonging to an exterior world it cues the mental stimulation of an enactive world; *whereas, if the perceived is constructed as belonging to a mental world, it cues a purely perceptual-cognitive, proximal experience*. Equally important is the relation to agents of fiction. The viewer may perceive the agents with the same emotional distance that typifies his relation to inanimate objects, but he may also make a cognitive and empathic identification with them [emphasis added]….[37]

Grodal's distinctions between types of worlds are suggestive of the different origins of the

profilmic materials for 2D (e.g. hypothetical) and puppet (e.g. real) animation posited earlier.

While viewing animation, the spectator executes shifts between hypothetical, real and interior

mental worlds.

In his discussion on representation, Andrew reflects on different theories of image

processing, how the spectator reads the images on screen and what kinds of relationships he or

she enters into with them during viewing:

> If every film is a presence of an absence, we are still obliged to differentiate the types of imaginary experience possible within various ratios of this relationship. A filmed image may be considered the presence of a referent which is absent in space (live TV coverage) or in time (home movies). It may also be taken to be an image which is non-existent or whose existence is not in question one way or the other.[38]

In Andrew's definition a 2D graphic animated image is a filmed image that would fall

into the category of "non-existent" or "not in question." This ties in to Cavell's "region" and is

one of the "special powers of film." Andrew does not differentiate between a sequence and an

image. This differentiation is crucial to animation film and recalls Sesonske's comments about not having access to these worlds, since the illusion of animation is non-existent without movement of the film through the projector. The drawing or painting does exist (as profilmic cel or drawing), but the movement of the images on screen is illusory, in other words, non-existent. Marketing strategies that create commercial products such as stuffed toys and figurines can introduce substantially real versions of 2D characters to our lived experience, but they are inanimate.

The Puppet's "world"

Watching any of the Quays' animation films means entering a dream world of visual and aural poetry. Whether the early collage-based artist's documentaries, the public-funded puppet animation masterpieces, the elusive *Stille Nacht* shorts or the Art Brut-inspired *In Absentia* (2001) the ambiguous, anachronistic "world" of their puppets has attracted a fiercely loyal following.[39]

cinematic form that itself is ultimately perhaps the most *auteurist* of all, the Quays continue to create films that express their own particular vision of "a world." Over the years, this "world," its construction, design, has continued to develop but remains as unmistakable as Stephen or Timothy Quay's own ornate, embellished and stylised handwriting. It is the world of their imaginations that, by giving a chiaroscuro cinematic life to a unique assemblage of fragments of Tuay'ss lnloth and metal, drawing on literary tropes, a word, a gesture, is transformed on the cinema screen into one we can understand but are often at a loss to describe—this is the "woru1,—o .f2.74 the

queries specific to the form that can, in some cases, rework theory that has been successfully developed for live action cinema. But it also means responding to Souriau's call to develop a language for animation studies that clarifies ongoing and increasingly detailed discourse around the form.

If we are going to continue developing the "well-made language," there are a number of questions we need to ask persistently when thinking about, for instance, animation spectatorship. Besides the stylistic elegance, what do these images affect in our perception that is different from when we watch films that show the actions and dialogues of living, sentient beings? How can a piece of metal be endowed with a gesture that moves us emotionally? In what kind of world can a screw "be"? Or for that matter, what entails the experiential difference between a screw animated on screen and one that we twirl in our fingers? If we get the questions right, the definitions, terminology and "answers" to these questions should follow.

Notes

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[1] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* [1958], trans. Maria Jolas, 1964 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xvii.
[2] Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5.
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[12] A much-debated term coined by Bordwell that refers to Saussure's semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism, and Barthes's textual theory.

[13] Malcolm Turvey, "Seeing Theory: On Perception and Emotional Response in Current Film Theory" in Richard Allan and Murray Smith, eds., *Film Theory and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 431.

[14] Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film.*

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