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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 to the right and down again. The rhythmic sound of a tram passing in the distance suggests an open, off-screen space. Slightly visible in the lower left a movement commences: slowly, ponderously, a rotating form rises like a behemoth from its fixings, a thick, oily screw which doggedly emerges from its invisible existence below the visible surface. Eerie, restrained and cyclical music accompanies this unfamiliar and compelling vision; a squeaking violin implores the screw to strain higher, higher, revealing the spiralled ridges of its cylindrical form. Then, in the foreground, two smaller screws begin to twirl upwards to complete an industrial *pas de trois*, a visual fugue, the smaller screws more urgent, in a hurry to free themselves from their wooden prison. They spiral upwards faster than the rotating column in the background, jerkily, as a new

sound weaves itself into the background violin, high-pitched, nervous, yet endearing. Hesitating at the last moment before disengaging themselves, they fall on their sides and roll off-screen, one trailing a curled wisp of old twine, the other gathering sticky dust, as they venture off to—where?

This brief description is of a scene from the Quay Brothers' *Street of Crocodiles* (1986). There may be a few incidental films in each of our personal cinema experiences in which the essence of poetic cinema seems to coalesce in a particular instant, a scene or a secondary gesture. They are fleeting yet remarkable instants of film which transcend lived experience and enter interior realms of the metaphysical. There is a discrepancy between the exterior world and the subjective "documentation" of what is intimately trapped in our own imaginations. This essay explores the experience of such cinematic moments that transpose similar visions on screen.

During work on a recently completed formal and aesthetic analysis of the films of the Quays, my thoughts became increasingly entangled in philosophical and phenomenological debates on cinema. Most of the approaches I used were not reliant on established, *a priori* or prescriptive theories of cinema. They were much more related to the *experience* of watching the Quays' films, if you like, through a phenomenological filter. This has meant taking a cue from Jean-Paul Sartre's understanding of phenomenology as "allowing one to delineate carefully one's own affective, emotional, and imaginative life, not in a set of static objective studies such as one finds in psychology, but understood in the manner in which it is meaningfully lived."² The cinema is a place we recurrently slip into, to allow ourselves that most pleasurable experience of being moved, intellectually, affectively and emotionally, by what unfolds on screen.

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 elaborates a world which it is the critic’s job to flesh out or respond to. But what is this cinematic world?³

What Dudley Andrew considers “exciting and dangerous” is exactly what attracts and is daunting at the same time: to describe an experience of the “world” of *Street of Crocodiles* and of other Quay films through a framework that takes into account the “lived” experience of the films. I hope to posit some suggestions towards understanding the phenomena we experience when watching their films, and how this understanding relates to our lived experience of reality. The experience of scale, for instance, or of how we understand the “worlds” we see in animation—the intrinsic differences between the often exaggerated “worlds” of 2D films and the puppet animation “world” that the Quays’ films invoke. By formulating a few indicative questions and approaches for these and other works, the essay explores a concept of animated “worlds” that may open new avenues of enquiry specific to spectatorship for the “worlds” other techniques and technologies evoke, such as 2D and computer animation.

In an added section of the enlarged edition of his philosophical enquiry into the ontology of film, *The World Viewed* (1979), Stanley Cavell responds to Alexander Sesonske’s criticism (included in this response) brought against his text which is worth quoting here at length:

[Cavell:] [T]here is one whole region of film which seems to satisfy my concerns with understanding the special powers of film but which explicitly has nothing to do with projections of the real world—the region of animated cartoons. If this region of film counters my insistence upon the projection of reality as essential to the medium of the movies, then it counters it completely. Here is what Sesonske says about cartoons (he is thinking specifically of Disney’s work, which is fair enough: if any cartoons are obviously to be thought of as movies, even to the point of containing stars, these are the first candidates):

[Sesonske:] [N]either these lively creatures nor their actions ever existed until they were projected on screen. Their projected world exists only *now*, at the moment of projection—and when we ask if there is any feature in which it differs from reality, the answer is, ‘Yes, every feature.’ Neither space nor time nor the laws of nature are the same. There is *a* world we experience here, but not *the* world—a world I know and see but to which I am nevertheless not present, yet not a world past. For there is no past time at which these events either did occur or purport to have occurred. Surely not the time the drawings were made, or the frames photographed; for the world I know and see had not yet sprung into existence then. It exists only now, when I see it; yet I cannot go to where its creatures are, for there is no access to its space from ours except through vision.⁴

[Cavell:] Each of these remarks is the negation or parody of something I claim for the experience of movies. But of course they do not prove my claims are false except on the assumption that cartoons are movies, and that, therefore, what I said about movies, if it is true, ought to apply to cartoons in the way it applies to movies. But on my assumption (which I should no doubt have made explicit) that cartoons are not movies, these remarks about their conditions of existence constitute some explanation about *why* they are not.⁵

Sesonske’s rebuttal on how animation differs from reality is especially interesting. He is of course referring to drawn animation, as Cavell notes above. Disney’s works have often been described as fictional hyperrealism and as exhibiting a style of animation which comes closest to a depiction of reality (shadows, anthropomorphism, scale and perspective). Sesonske continues, however, by saying that “[t]here is a world we experience here, but not *the* world.” Cavell describes cartoons as a “region” of film that completely counters his insistence on the projection of reality as essential to the medium of movies. In other words, Cavell seems to consider cartoons

(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 animation. If animation has nothing to do with projections of the real world, then what is it projecting, and how do we understand it? There are, as well, different realities that have to be taken into account. Cavell's perception of reality is different from mine and from that of any other spectator in the cinema. There is consensus within philosophical schools on different definitions of reality, but, in our discussion, we will seek a more precise definition of what Cavell means by "a region," and what Sesonske means by "a world." We will consider how the Quays' puppet films present "real" spaces (sets) and figures in the cinematic illusion, not drawn ones. The idea of an animated "realm" created by the technique demands a different approach towards understanding the spectator's experience of their cinematic worlds.

I am not expecting to solve the complex "problem" that animation presents as a unique form of cinematic illusion. Rather, the point is to reflect upon why these films are meaningful and have enriched my life and informed my own imagination of other "worlds" and as they have, in different ways, for many others. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is also concerned

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 Quays' and other films in terms of how they relate to our own experiences of realities, including overlaps between our physical world and the "world" the film presents.

In drawn animation, the moving figures and sense of space they "inhabit" can only be experienced in projection—the artwork itself is planar. Although they offer ample spatial cues that can mimic our lived experience of space, and techniques like the Multiplane camera and planar focus shifts can actually introduce 3D space and perspective to graphic animation, the worlds that conventional 2D animation represents do not have a corollary in our lived experience.

We do understand them through spatial and cultural clues and can imagine what the referents represent through the suggestions made by the images. This of course does not necessarily hold for abstract film or some kinds of non-narrative film, which are not concerned with a coherent representation or interpretation of reality. For instance, cel, drawn or rotoscoped animation tend to use principles of composition, scale and perspective which at least suggest an analogy with the world we live in. Even if a house is drawn with only a vague outline (*Flux*, Chris Hinton, Canada, 2003), or, as in *Fudget's Budget* (Bob Cannon, USA, 1954), that uses structural graphic elements inspired by bookkeeping grids and stock graphs to a point of abstraction that challenges our perception, enough is there for us, after some conceptual and visual acrobatics, to reconstruct the referent.

Of course, one could say the same about a live action film: the moment of shooting is unique. Yet the actors, settings and the physical world in which they carry out actions are extant, tangible and constitute a part of the real world. Let us return to the screws described at the outset. Puppet animation elicits a different set of questions as it is a complex hybrid form in this respect. The sets and puppets exist, and although they may appear to have anthropomorphic proportions on screen, they are constructed on a smaller scale. Yet although the events we see on screen *did not* occur, the objects *do* exist. Puppet animation thus represents a different “world” for the spectator, something between “*a* world,” created with the animation technique, and “*the* world,” in its use of real objects and not representational drawings. Vivian Sobchack mentions Yuri Lotman in this context: “For Lotman, the development of cinematic technology is the active intentional realization of perceptive and expressive choice-making within the context of a world.”⁷ “A world” as different from “*the* world” is a distinction of ultimate relevance in a

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 consciously aware viewer provided by the [Neo-]Formalist approaches; and the psychoanalytic model.⁸ Contemporary discourses in spectatorship are homing in on the “consciously aware” viewer, and this is the one that especially interests me. Without the contextual knowledge of what informs the Quays’ films the viewer is usually puzzled or baffled.⁹ This is not to say that only an informed audience can enjoy the films, or that these other models cannot apply. It does mean that there is an additional level of pleasure available to spectators who can engage imaginatively with the films’ aesthetic and stylistic complexities.

In *Cinema and Spectatorship*, Judith Mayne reflects on the changing status of spectatorship within cinematic theory. She notes a shift from innocent consumption to what she terms “critical spectatorship.”¹⁰ Mayne’s study is of mainstream narrative, yet a number of the issues she raises are pertinent to queries about animation spectatorship as well. In her opinion, spectatorship is at once the most valuable area of film studies and the one that has been most misunderstood, largely because of the obsessive preoccupation with dualistic categories of critique versus celebration, or “critical versus ‘complacent’ spectatorship.”¹¹ Over the ten years since Mayne’s book was published, the spectator has become central in new theories of cognition, emotion and empathy. The spectator’s emotional response to film initiated a major discourse in cinema studies that began in the late eighties, encouraged notably by Murray Smith, David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, Torben Grodal, Carl Plantinga, Gregory Currie, Christine

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 particular technique 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 eponymous 1971 film.¹⁴ Point of view is itself a fascinating issue in animation film, and one could easily expand on Branigan’s example of Pinocchio’s subjectivity. He continues with a discussion of another Disney film:

In *Bambi* (Walt Disney, 1942), Bambi twists his head to look at some opossums hanging from their tails upside down on a branch. The next animated drawing is rotated 180 degrees so that we see the animals from Bambi’s inverted viewpoint, hanging “straight up” and so apparently defying gravity.¹⁵

This quotation raises pertinent issues on the nature of animation spectatorship. It is interesting, for instance, that Branigan discusses inverted point-of-view by stating that the next drawing has been rotated. This is a profilmic event and technically speaking, out of economy, it is possible

(and likely) that instead of re-drawing the opossums hanging on the branch the animators simply rotated the initial drawings and shot them upside down for this scene. That they are “apparently defying gravity” refers to the fact that these are drawings of opossums, yet despite this illusory effect Branigan’s reference remains the reality of what a real opossum cannot do, namely, defy gravity. Branigan’s remarks are also indicative of the emphasis on technique that many texts on animation engage with.

That Bambi “exists,” twists his head and looks, is the result of the cinematic animation of a series of developmental drawings. Puppets have a different materiality and occupy real space, yet our query here concerns the evident acceptance of an animated figure’s movement and ability to look. Bambi talks and moves, ergo Bambi “is”—what is the signified? We can develop this further by considering the implications of Branigan’s idea for object animation. If we recall the screws mentioned at the beginning of this essay, they also apparently defy gravity, by unscrewing themselves upwards from the floorboard and “rolling” themselves off-camera. They are not an artist’s rendering, they “exist” as tangible objects in the physical world. Taking Branigan’s cue, would we then talk about these screws as having points-of-view? And since they don’t have eyes, in terms of the consciously aware viewer, what does this imply about how we take their “cues” and attribute to them attitude and intention?

I would suggest there is a permanent doubling of point of view in *Street of Crocodiles* and other puppet animation films. That of the camera (character, omniscient author, etc.) is always also that of the director—but in a directly active sense, since, in the Quays’ films that are mostly made by the two of them, the person animating determines not only formal parameters but also controls the profilmic inter-frame adjustments that result in the illusion of movement, character and “acting.” Regardless of how much control a director will try to have over his or her actors’

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-view we are constantly aware of the animator’s creation of the “world” we see.

Grodal investigates what he calls “a systematic relation between the embodied mental processes and configurations activated in a given type of visual fiction and the emotional ‘tone’ and ‘modal qualities’ of the experienced affects, emotions and feelings in the viewer.”¹⁶ This recalls what Stam *et al.* call a “consciously aware viewer” and is a direct link to phenomenological concepts of experience. Grodal:

Imagination, consisting of hypothetical simulations of possible relations and processes, is a central aspect of everyday life; the difference between art and everyday imagination is not one of kind but one of degree, of direct ‘interestedness’ and of ‘art understood as superior know-how.’¹⁷

Appreciation of the Quays’ films requires the “superior know-how” Grodal mentions. This chimes with the expanded knowledge that Kristin Thompson and Noel Burch attribute to spectators in some of their studies.¹⁸ Because we can experience the film’s “world” in the cinema, the affects and associations that the film elicits carry over and are incorporated into our daily experience.

Over the years I have had many engaging discussions about animation and audience with budding and established scholars from multiple disciplines. Summarised, one of the reasons why

animation tends to be misunderstood or ignored by the academic community is that viewers are overtaxed by the sheer amount of visual information on screen, and that they perhaps tend to focus on the less demanding aspects of humour or narrative. Grodal supports this, assuming that “laughter, like other types of automatic response, is a reaction to overload, an ‘escape-button alternative’ to voluntary reactions.”¹⁹ He also suggests that *peripeteia*, sudden change or reversal, causes comic reaction. 2D animation’s graphic potential to visualise sudden changes that would be impossible in live-action film is rampant, for instance, in the chase and slapstick films of the twenties and thirties, exemplified by Felix the Cat shorts or the Fleischer Brothers’ surreal grotesques. Thus another relevant example Grodal invokes is the parodic grotesque, that “underlines the patterned and thereby the mechanical elements of the features they exaggerate and deform, for instance by upscaling certain features or by simplifying certain schemata of thoughts and actions.”²⁰ This is a feature of many Hollywood cartoons of the forties and fifties, a zenith perhaps being Tex Avery’s surreal and absurd distortion of body parts and his characters’ actions.

But discussions with other colleagues led me to amend this conclusion with a suggestion that 2D animation can also present a simplicity of form that is far less demanding than a live-action film. Puppet animation, on the other hand, can offer the excess of information that live-action cinema provides, and it can provoke the spectator to engage with the imaginative cinematic realms it creates that include material, three-dimensional elements from the lived world. The Quays’ films draw on a plethora of references combined in what is often described as alchemy into a “world” that we can experience, respond to emotionally and interpret. In a film like *Street of Crocodiles*, its “world” bears relation to our own through spatial cues, anthropomorphism and an array of aesthetic references to fine art, literature, architecture and

music. The spectator must not only find the cues that relate to his or her own experience of the world and of the experienced worlds of live-action cinema. He or she must also actively engage in developing new hypotheses that relate all of this to developing comprehension of and engagement with the animated “world.” Neoformalism and new areas of spectatorship studies are useful here to posit the spectator as actively involved in developing hypotheses and understanding cues within a film “world.”

Animation Spectatorship

What, then, is going on inside the mature viewer when s/he watches animation? Is the experience the same as for other forms—say, when watching fiction film or documentary? Is the system of the cinematic apparatus unchanging for all forms of cinema experience? I do not think so. The animation film is utterly unique in its representation of graphic and plastic universes and impossible spaces and in its “ability” to transcend physical laws which govern our experience. It is therefore crucial to our understanding of animation spectatorship to develop and describe our understanding of this particular set of conditions, which in turn can assist an approach to individual films. Although the “worlds” that animation depicts contain cultural referents, they can be represented in contexts that do not mirror our understanding or experience of the world we live in. Animation spectatorship therefore presents a set of intricate complexities that need to be formulated in order to scrutinise what is happening in the viewer when they watch an animation film.

In the final chapter of *Understanding Animation*, Paul Wells contemplates the animation audience and states the need for further research in this field of enquiry:

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 and strangeness of the film's "world" than into the paradigm Wells sets out. Disney's films (or Nick Park's, for that matter) do not want to draw attention to the "otherness" of the world they create, though there are a number of notable exceptions such as Hayao Miyazaki, George Dunning or Mamoru Oshii. Conventional narrative animation wants to engage the audience in familiar rituals and conventions of human behaviour that live-action film also deploys. Disney's films are attractive to audiences because what they see acted out is familiar from their own everyday "worlds," but the characters acting out these events are mainly anthropomorphised, idealised animals and objects. This brings us to an interesting concept of omnipotence.

Wells quotes an article from Michael O'Pray that reviews concepts of the experience of omnipotence while watching Disney films. O'Pray's commendable text interweaves Freud's definition of the omnipotence of thought, Eisenstein's cryptic unfinished concept of plasmaticness and English aesthete Adrian Stokes' synthesis of Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theories and the synchronised ballet-like movement of Disney's *Silly Symphonies*. Although these concepts diverge from that of the consciously aware viewer, in order to illuminate the concerns of

these authors, the full version of O'Pray's quotation as it appeared in the essay to which Wells refers is worth repeating:

The central concern here seems to be the idea of a certain pleasure achieved by animation (not all of course) wherein we identify with its virtuosity. Stokes and Eisenstein speak respectively of a 'patness' and an 'absolute perfection' (one, we should remember, that frightened Eisenstein). They stress the force of this virtuosity. It is not simply a characteristic of the animation but somehow is an integral part of how it affects us. In this virtuosity where form and content reach a perfection, there is the deepest pleasure because we are confronted with a control and importantly, the very fantasy of that control in the animated figures. In other words, in the plasmatic element—the sheer virtuosity of the lines, say, in Disney, or for that matter, in the animation films of Robert Breer or Len Lye—we have an objectification of our own desire for omnipotence. Our desire to will something without in fact acting upon it is acted out in animation itself through the virtuoso use of forms.³⁰

Studies of object animation need different approaches from those of 2D “orthodox” animation, because it presents physical space and materials that occupy this space instead of a mimetic, drawn rendering of the same. Objects and the materials from which they are constructed are tangible and have an intrinsic set of references to our lived experience which is not the case in the fully graphic fantasy of 2D animation. In *Street of Crocodiles* “form and content” achieve virtuosity through the choreography of objects, and the use of materials that lend themselves to the musically driven trajectory of the objects and figures in the film.

The concept of omnipotence is what links the pleasure of 2D animation with that of puppet animation, particularly in terms of space and the uncanny, as I have described in more detail elsewhere.³¹ As Grodal puts it: “According to psychoanalytic theory, man [sic] is torn between id and superego, between principles of pleasure and principles of reality.”³² In these terms, the pleasure in watching 2D animation that has a graphic representational relation to reality, and is not reality itself, thus relates it more to a pleasure principle than to a reality

principle. Object animation enables both the pleasure principle (an element of the omnipotence O'Pray mentions) and the reality principle, because the images are photographic representations of physically extant objects and spaces.

Omnipotence is twofold—not simply an affect of the spectator, but also, because they are so artificial, an awareness that the animator created these images. An often-used simile suggests the animator is like God—completely responsible for all the images the spectator sees, and more importantly, responsible for the impossible “bringing to life” of inanimate forms. This confirms a desire for control, grandeur, a God-like ability to be able ultimately to control life. This may be an unconscious release from disavowal of the spectator’s own helplessness. But identification is both with the objects and figures and with the animator who has made the film.

Understanding the Object

There is no “object” in drawn animation—the image is an artistic rendering, an interpretation of something that exists in the lived world or in the artist’s imagination. But in puppet animation, the representation does have a direct relation to objects. Yet these objects are artificially constructed, thus the representation of a puppet, although identical with the object represented, has a different quality than objects that are not manipulated or constructed. A human being is essentially the same—an actor’s appearance can be altered by make-up, costume, lighting and framing. The puppets in the Quays’ *The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer* (1984) have anthropomorphic appearances, yet the head of the child puppet is a *bricolage* of a porcelain doll’s head out of which sheaves of a book protrude like hair. Although it may appear “alive,” it is not, and although its gestures and actions may represent those of a human being, the puppet itself is inanimate and a construction of the artist’s making. Grodal makes a succinct point about this:

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 animation is clarification of the *status* of the animated object and how we relate to it. We see a moving image, but we know that the objects we see appear “alive” through pure artifice. Jean Mitry concedes that “[o]ne might say that any object presented in moving images gains a meaning (a collection of significations) it does not have ‘in reality,’ that is, as a real presence.”³⁴ We also know that in contrast to live-action figures they do not “exist” except as inanimate objects beyond their animation on screen. Is the spectator constantly aware of this fact, or is there a process of denial, wish-fulfilment or sublimation that allows us to perceive animated objects as living? Do we invest them with a living state outside our experience of them in the cinema? For instance in *Street of Crocodiles* the main protagonist moves through and explores a labyrinthine architectural space. The film’s experimental narrative is partially based on point-of-view structures of the puppet and relies to some degree on the Kuleshov effect, which I would suggest is heavily relied upon in puppet animation.³⁵

The anthropomorphic figures in *Street of Crocodiles* (or almost any other puppet animation film) are invested by the animator with human-like qualities. Grodal investigates how we understand what he calls “humanness,” a term that sometimes appears in quotation marks and sometimes not, a concept perhaps as riddled with meaning as that of “worlds.” He does remark that divining the essence of humanness is deeply philosophical. Grodal suggests that “[m]assive viewer-interest indicates that the phenomenon of ‘humanness’ has very strong cognitive and

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 What can we say about the referent when it is a puppet? What is its "world"? And how does the spectator understand this world when it is not one in which he or she can make direct experience? What is its "history"? How is the character defined?

Every fictional film likewise relies on some substratum of spectator understanding of the type of world that becomes the subject of the film. We bring our own sense of boxing to *Rocky* and of the strictures of bourgeois life to any Douglas Sirk film. But the fictional film, at least in most of its genres, quickly transfers our interest to the world of the image, calling on, but not playing to, our knowledge of the referent.⁴⁰

Again, Andrew is not concerned with what the images are representing, and he makes no detailed description of whether a scene must contain an actor, a particular set of spatial orientations or

action of some sort. Significant is what he says about how the film relies on the spectator's understanding of a *type* of world.

Puppet animation does represent an image of spatial and object relations that are possible to experience in two contexts. The object can be both haptically experienced in cinema and physically accessed in the “real” world. Although the movements of the puppet are limited to the screening experience, the spaces and sets that the puppets are filmed in, and are not animated, do retain a direct relation to our own lived experience. We can understand that this space exists outside the cinematic experience, albeit in miniature. A cinematic image of living beings that are represented and understood by the spectator as participants in the tangible world we experience in our daily lives is perceived by using sets of codes and previous experience. A still or single-frame image can still be contextualised as a moment isolated from a continuum of living and moving through the world, whether cinematic or “real.” There is a direct relation between the still image and its living and moving counterpart. This is not the case for the puppet.

I asked the Quays whether they found that the alienating effect afforded by using familiar inanimate objects and materials helped audiences understand the “world” of the puppets:

It's a greater leap, potentially. If you create the density of the world that you're out to create, the audience will make that leap and be won by the fiction. It's like the difference between if it senses that the puppet is just a little ragamuffin and thinks “Aha, you use little bits of mop for the hair,” then you've lost. It's as if, right away, the fiction—the orders of power—abduct so powerfully, into beyond. And even then, if I go in close up, I think you wouldn't know if you looked at one of our puppets—you really believe that it's come from some other realm, that it hasn't been made.⁴¹

The heavy saturation of visual and aural reference to fine arts, literature, poetry, dance, architecture, graphics and sculpture throughout their films also means that an objective evaluation, say, of spatial composition is difficult to describe in simple terms. The referents in the

world of their puppet animation—the “world” of the inanimate object made animate—are also found in the world of the fairy tale. Fairy tales are integrated into Robert Walser’s writings, a literary source for a number of the Quays’ films, and Bruno Schulz’s *The Street of Crocodiles* has a fairy tale-like grotesqueness. Walter Benjamin has considered the relationship between fairy tales and the matter children use to create their own “worlds” that evokes the “worlds” of the Quays’ films:

Children are fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, carpentry, tailoring or whatever. In these waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together materials of widely differing kinds in a new volatile relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the larger one. The fairy-tale [sic] is such a waste product—perhaps the most powerful to be found in the spiritual life of humanity: a waste product that emerges from the growth and decay of the saga. With the stuff of fairy-tales the child may be as sovereign and uninhibited as with rags and building blocks. Out of fairy-tale motifs the child constructs its world, or at least it forms a bond with these elements.⁴²

The way the Quays visualise fairy tale elements in their films is in a sense a collecting of the “detritus” of which Benjamin speaks and rearranging it in such a way that they produce their own “world” out of the materials they find. Bringing “materials of widely differing kinds” is a feature of their set and puppet constructions, and we will see that the “volatile relationship” they create with these new constructions is part of the appeal their films have for spectators.

We could try to allocate *Street of Crocodiles* to a particular genre: but the anachronistic, eclectic iconography of its “world” and its labyrinthine narrative structure, hermetic locations and lack of a genre-supporting ideology hinders an easy or exclusive classification. If anything it belongs to a hybrid category of poetic-experimental film and is postmodernist. As *auteurs* in a

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 cloth 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 “world” of the Quays’ films.

Postscript: “A Well-made Language”

I have suggested elsewhere that one of the “problems” the study of animation is faced with and needs to resolve is one of language—to move beyond the inarticulate “mmm...” that is often the response to what we see on screen.⁴³ First and foremost, we need to determine what the questions are that need to be asked—in this instance, I have tried to formulate some oblique queries around animation spectatorship. “Since filmology is a science, it must be and must want to be one. And if a science is not, in the famous words of Condillac, simply a ‘well-made language,’ then it clearly requires one as its precondition.”⁴⁴ Etienne Souriau wrote this in 1951. More than half a century later, animation critics and scholars are beginning to develop and define a “well-made language” that can be specifically used in critical and theoretical writings on animation film. Before, the recourse was often to adumbrate filmological definitions for live-action film with subjective neologisms and skirted the real challenge—to develop a set of queries and approaches that are clearly set out in a language that is specific to the animated form. Choosing animation film as an academic and critical endeavour means developing approaches that pose essential

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

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.

³ Dudley Andrew, “The Neglected Tradition of Phenomenology in Film Theory” (*Wide Angle* 2.2, 1978, 44-49), 47.

⁴ Alexander Sesonske, cited in Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (enlarged edition, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), 167-68.

⁵ Cavell, 167-68.

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (*Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945), trans. 1958, Routledge and Kegan Paul (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 291.

⁷ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 249.

⁸ Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 1992), 146-47.

⁹ For an expansive description of Neoformalism, see Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (*Sightlines*) (London: Routledge, 1993) 3-4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

- 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*. Approaches to Semiotics 66 (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 80.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 106-107.
- ¹⁶ Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 3.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ¹⁸ Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* [1969], (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981); Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, 1988.
- ¹⁹ Grodal, 188.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 202.
- ²¹ Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 223.
- ²² Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde" in Thomas Elsaesser and Tom Barker, eds., *Early Cinema: Space—Frame—Narrative* (London: BFI Publishing 1990), 57.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 58-59.
- ²⁴ See Elsaesser (1990) and Andrew Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- ²⁵ Joanna Bouldin, "Bodacious Bodies and the Voluptuous Gaze: A Phenomenology of Animation Spectatorship" (*Animation Journal* 8.2, 2000), 56-67; Vivian Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of QuickTime" (*Millennium Film Journal* 34, 1999); Laura Marks, "The Quays' *Institute Benjamenta*: An Olfactory View" (*Afterimage*, September/October 1997), 11-13.
- ²⁶ Wells, 224.
- ²⁷ Carl Plantinga, "Notes on Spectator Emotion and Ideological Film Criticism" (Allan and Smith), 389.
- ²⁸ Wells, 225.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.
- ³⁰ Michael O'Pray, "Eisenstein and Stokes on Disney" in Jayne Pilling, ed., *A Reader in Animation Studies* (London: John Libbey, 1997), 200.
- ³¹ Suzanne Buchan, "Uncanny Space, Narrative Place: The Architectural Imagination of Animation" in Adam Budak, ed., *What is Architecture? / Text Anthology (Co To Jest Architektura? / Antologia tekstow)*, (Krakow: Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery, RAM, Goethe Institut, 2002), 373 ff.
- ³² Grodal, 5.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 89.
- ³⁴ Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, trans. Christopher King (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 45.
- ³⁵ Grodal points out that this is a means to manipulate by montage and argues there are finer nuances in facial expressions that inform our understanding of a subject actant (89 ff.).
- ³⁶ Grodal, 106.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 158.
- ³⁸ Andrew, 44.
- ³⁹ An ongoing series of short animation films, *Stille Nacht I, II, IV and V* were commissioned by music groups as pop promos. *Stille Nacht III*. "Tales From the Vienna Woods" (*Ich bin im Tod erblüht*) was used to pitch the first feature film project to potential funders. See <http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/directors/tbrothers/filmography.htm> for a complete filmography.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.
- ⁴¹ Interview with the Quay Brothers, 1992.
- ⁴² Walter Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," in *Selected Writings* [translation of *Alte vergessene Kinderbücher*, GS III] (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 16-17.
- ⁴³ Closing lecture, Animated "worlds" Conference, Farnham, England, 2003.

⁴⁴ Etienne Souriau, “Die Struktur des filmischen Universums und das Vokabular der Filmologie,” trans. Frank Kessler (*Montage/av*, 6/2, 1997), [original title “La structure de l’univers filmique et le vocabulaire de la filmologie” (*Revue internationale de Filmologie* 2. 7-8, 1951)], 141. Translation by the author.