From stillness to movement and back

Cartoon theory today

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Just as in recent months caricatures have thrust themselves forcefully into public awareness, in the reaction to Danish newspaper cartoons of Muslim religious icons, their moving cousins, animated cartoons, are likewise more present in the world than ever before.[*] Cartoons have infiltrated cinema and, more widely, public consciousness in a number of more or less visible ways. Animation is viewable in regular movie theatres in big blockbuster cartoons such as *Shrek* or *Monsters Inc.* or *The Polar Express*. Such films are aimed at children like the Disney feature-length films before them, but they also have a second adult-oriented life, a public presence in the city. For these are the cartoons, computer animations, that were first used as the demonstration films in electrical outlets showcasing the new generation of LCD and plasma television screens and home cinemas.

These particular cartoons were used not just because of their eye-catching cuteness, but also because of their remarkable vividness in modelling 3D, their supersaturated colours and their sharp syncing of motion and sound, so innate to cartoon worlds from the start, but intensified by digital processes. Only computerized animation – and, subsequently, the nature sublime of tropical forests and underwater – appears adequate to selling television's updated machineries of fantastic reverie. These new displays are touted for their ever higher definition lifelikeness, but their perfect output is the least realistic, most processed binary confection of contemporary digital animation. The situation is similar to that in the 1960s when Walt Disney helped promote, and therefore sell, colour television in the United States through the show *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*, broadcast by the NBC network because its parent company, RCA, manufactured colour television sets. Indeed it could be argued that blockbuster computer animations are more showcases for technical processes (as newly purchasable technologies) than thought-through entertainments. Springing up across commercial zones, animation's in-store multi-screen garishness is directly hitched to the new buyable worlds of seeing.

Feature-length cartoons such as *Spirited Away* (2001), *Howl's Moving Castle* (2005) and the *Wallace and Gromit* series – not just directed at children, though childlike in their sensibilities – find broad distribution in a variety of conventional and art-house cinemas. Many audiences and critics take these films to heart, but they remain foreign, essentially strange within the context of usual cinema output because of their lack of stars and their absence of hooks to the outside world of gossip, fashion and journalistic discussions of contemporary morality and how 'we' should live our lives.

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Such transgenerational animation films are frequently quaint and charming. Their sources are European fairytales, *Alice in Wonderland*, old black-and-white movies. These references contribute to a vague sense of pastness, which could be nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century. The setting in the past is contrasted again with technologies that are out of their time, machineries that stem from yet another epoch – or none at all – such as the bullet train in *Spirited Away*, blasting into the Neverland of the palace, Howl's steam-punk castle or Wallace and Gromit's Heath Robinsonesque contraptions. The animations render in plastic or drawn form marvellous worlds of magic melded with technology. These films reflect and rely on technology as a kind of benign but spirited magic. Their technologies are obstinate, but ultimately, like the gremlins in folk tales, obliging. These films combine traditional techniques – such as hand-drawn cell animation or clay modelling – with digital techniques. This eclectic melange of technical processes mirrors the films' more expansive sense of animation's possible forms, audiences, applications and meanings.

Counter-culture cartoons

Another type of contemporary animation, more firmly anchored in the adult world, is the animation-documentary, which combines cartoon, drawing, acting and documentary. *American Splendor* (2003), a biopic on the comic-strip writer Harvey Pekar, uses animation to reflect on the banality of everyday life – something rarely seen in Hollywood's usual output – and, while representing it, attain some sort of critical angle on it. Similar films include *De-Railroaded* (2005), about the mad 'outsider' singer Wild Man Fischer, and *Crumb* (1994), which focuses on the life and cartoons of R. Crumb. *De-Railroaded*, a low-budget digital video production by the Rubin Twinz, uses animation to get across subjective craziness, which is effectively the world of Fischer, and draws on the work of a comic strip artist who has illustrated Fischer's life. *Crumb*, like *American Splendor*, is about an author of comic strips, and animation provides a convenient way of rendering the source comic strips into filmic form. But more than this, the films insist on fusing documentary, acting, cartoon and comic strip, as part of a commentary on the flexibility of our worlds, the blurring of subjective and objective environments, the colouration of our contexts by our self-reflection.

This is exemplified in the segment 'Who is Harvey Pekar?' in *American Splendor*, which is precisely about the impossibility of pinning down an identity. The sequence opens with an entirely white screen. It mimics the blank page of the comic book. As the actor representing Pekar walks across the unmarked screen something like a pencil line appears and marks out the dimensions of a room. Next other lines and a telephone appear, and all are recognizably in Pekar illustrator R. Crumb's style. Film and comic combine in an animated sequence. The scene cuts suddenly to Pekar the actor on a real, filmed street. Stepping through a drawn window Pekar re-enters the drawn room, before the scene whites out, imitating once again the unmarked page. Documentary, fiction, comic strip and cartoon are shown as interchangeable modes of representation. This is a universe without stable boundaries between the true and the fictional, the subjective and the objective. The way animation is used in *American Splendor* is symptomatic of a much broader trend within movie-making, whereby animation, obviously or covertly, reconfigures contemporary filmic production. The animation documentary may have its roots in the counterculture, but its formal – technically based – components are manifest in the most mainstream products.

There is a sense in which *American Splendor* inhabits the mainstream of commercial US cinema. It is a film of a comic book, and films of comic books have long been a staple of Hollywood's production, though this particular example is atypical. Comic-book supermen have featured since the late 1920s. No sooner were these men of special powers, fetishized human beings, godlike creatures dominating the scene in

comic books than they were translated into animated shorts and live-action, if highly artificial, studio films. Taken seriously or not, film and television versions of Superman and Spider-Man strips conjured up a world in which superheroes averted disaster and combated evil. That the form has endured is testament to the fact that film and comic culture mesh well. The superhuman exploits of Spider-Man, Superman and the rest can be rendered easily in cel-animation, which is the translation into mobile form of the comic books' drawn panels. The studio film found ways of emulating comics' appearance for non-animated film, and the special effects available to cinema from its earliest days – slow-motion, time-lapse, film reversal, montage – simulate superheroic illusions.

The political connotations of superheroism – American heroes saving the world – are obvious. But there are times when this ferociousness appears less appropriate, when the hegemon is cowed, insecure or operating under a different ideological flag. At those moments, campness and irony, self-consciousness and handwringing enter into the frame. The types of comic books chosen for filming change too. *American Splendor* is an example of this. It claims to present the 'dumb average', ordinariness and banality, everyday frustrations at incompetence and failure. Harvey Pekar's world is all Clark Kent and Peter Parker trapped in their office routines before their transformation into superheroes. Such a world finds its best representation not in film of live actors pretending – that is reserved for Hollywood fantasies of distinctly non-average scenarios – but rather in animation, which comes to represent a moment of genuineness because of its links to the subjective reality of the protagonist, and its ability to explore ordinary worlds and experiences intimately.. Such a comic-book film allows for an opening up to the non-spectacular, reversing the usual drive of commercial comic culture. Documentary reinforces this quest for reflection and meta-commentary, as the real Harvey and his real wife comment in the course of the film on their fictionalized selves. Documentary is not used to open up a realm of the real versus the represented, but rather to suggest the multiplicity of stances towards the past in the present. In various ways, a film such as *American Splendor* makes graphic the parameters of much contemporary commercial film. This predominantly concerns the use of technology in its intermeshing with narrative and temporality. Animation's technological appropriations of reality reformulate – and legislate – the very basis and meaning of film.

Even comic-book films that do not represent superheroes exemplify a formal shift in film-making. The comic-book film is the essence of contemporary Hollywood, where new modes of storyboarding, derived from the technological processes central to contemporary commercial film, make for a peculiarly episodic type of cinema. Films are now organized around episodes, sections, skits, as are comic strips (which tend also to have short sequences) and cartoons, which are based on gags. With DVD technology the episodic nature of contemporary film seems underlined, as films are now clearly composed of divisible segments or 'chapters'. Much commercial film is now structured like a comic strip, and is also arguably reliant, gesturally, on caricature. (The stereotypes of Arabs in the controversial Danish cartoons are familiar from Disney's *Aladdin*, *Scooby Doo* and *Popeye*). If film owes much to the comic strip, it is also the case that much film, including live action, has become a type of animation. This too is a feature of the technical processes used in contemporary filmmaking. Unlike *American Splendor*, most films do not admit their animated mode, but rather use animation

– understood here as synonymous with computer processing – to compensate for the inadequacies of the real, as well as to generate special or even quite normal effects.

It is in this sense that animation has infiltrated itself unseen into the contemporary filmscape. Most importantly (and most invisibly) animation has found its way into regular 'realist' studio features. Action films, along with other genres, use computer animation as an essential part of their digital post-production. Film's original configuration (which consists in film frames animated into movement) is recapitulated in a new visual production field where computers freeze film in order to build it up again digitally and propel it into movement. With digital technology, much of film is based on animation in a practical and technical sense. Animation, digital or otherwise, allows an endless and absolute manipulation and revision of filmic material. Contemporary film becomes endlessly revisable, less and less reliant on the shot footage that comes to provide only a stimulus for the film. Commercial film is no longer in any meaningful sense a recording of the real transposed into fiction, yet anchored in reality.

Alongside its technical uses, the computerized animation of film has an ideological supplement. On the behest of a now-vicious, now-cowed US hegemon film-makers have the tools to revise and reshape the USA's image in sensitive times, when image control and damage limitation form the political orders of the day. The aerial attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 provide an apt marker for this, because these events had an impact on visual culture in a number of ways. Fiction film played a particular role. Cameras had caught the towers when they still existed, inscribed – intentionally or otherwise – in film footage. Editing eradicated them subsequently. The World Trade Center featured prominently in the marketing campaign for the film of *Spider-Man* made in 2001. In the film trailer, Spider-Man snared villains in a web spun between the two towers. This could not be used when the film was released the following year. Film's techniques, the special effects and new digital processes that make it so adaptable for cartoon superheroics and action movies, can efface historical, documentary reality. A panicked America has the tools to revise its image faced by a crisis of legitimacy. Digital processing allows for the instituting of an ideal reality. The illusion of reality is maintained, but tidied up, corrected, made acceptable and desirable for the contemporary moment. Where historical movement was, now there is the stillness of the digitized simulation, tweaked frame by frame.

Film stills and moving photographs

Film is composed of stills. It is stillness whirred into movement by the energy of the projector. In this illusioning a simulation of past historical activity is achieved. Movements caught on celluloid overcome their freezing into frames to be rendered smoothly mobile again. Some film-makers – for example, Vertov – have exploited this fundamental basis of film, arguing that to return film to its component stillness is to make it available for analysis. Exploiting the stillness of film opens up Walter Benjamin's 'optical unconscious' of photography, the camera vision's complete and indiscriminate recording of a whole field that can, after the event, be scrutinized for chunks of historical actuality. The computer processing of film is another type of freezing of the image, seizing each frame in order to manipulate its contours. A contrary movement now meets it.

Where the processes of digital post-production arrest the movement of film, else-where movement is introduced into the stillness of the photograph. This has occurred in feature films, as well as documentary, in the Bullet-Time or Time-Slice process. A moment is frozen as still cameras encircling an object simultaneously click. Transferred to a computer, these images are then viewed sequentially, rendering a still object animated. It appears as if the viewer moves around an object during a moment that is frozen in time. This process has been used as much in fiction film and documentary as

it has in computer games such as the *Max Payne* series, *Enter the Matrix* (2003) and *The Path of Neo* (2005). In gaming, it enables players to slow down the game-world, while allowing them to look and aim at normal speed. Frozen-time-effect technologies stretch out a single moment. This does not appear to be in order to gain further knowledge through an enforced period of reflection, as in Eisenstein's 'intellectual montage', with its dissection of time and combination of perspectives. Rather it is a stunt, and used for stunts. The photographic booty is seen from all sides, panoptically, but this pan-seeing, with its stretching of a moment in time, ejects the object from time. In gaming, it exposes it to the decision to shoot. In film, it interrupts narrative flow and excerpts a moment of the film into space rather than time. As effect, it is the synthetic creation of wonder, conveying the totally processed nature of the visual field. Perhaps it is even an effort to expunge the 'optical unconscious', by making the object fully exposed rather than discovered in its interstices.

Elsewhere, another spurious movement used in documentary film repeats and replaces the original configuration of the filmic image as a still whirred into movement. This involves animation of still photography. One technique is to excerpt a foreground figure from the photograph, disassociated from the background, and then, via some sort of computer trickery involving focus and simulated depth of field, to offer a fake parallax. Once this is achieved, the camera pans in across the field now rendered 'more lifelike'. This is akin to another type of animation of still photography, also pioneered in documentary film, called the Ken Burns Effect after the influential US documentary film-maker. This has been popularized and made available in image-processing packages, such as iPhoto and iMovie and Premiere, in which an automated function allows any photograph to be slow panned and swooped across as if it were a 3D realm.

In these computer techniques, movement is faked where stillness was. Animation is thrust on the past technically. But its vectors only generate the simulation of movement. Such effects misunderstand the extent to which the details caught in photographs are set in movement not by crude zooms across an homogeneously analysed field, in a technical synthesis of movement, but rather in their pinpointing in relation to an idea in the present that detonates them. Through this they are, in Walter Benjamin's phrase, 'blasted out of the continuum of history' and brought to life via intellectual reasoning. Today, a doubled and contradictory movement ensues when it comes to animation. Animation is introduced where stillness was, and stillness is introduced where the animated traces of life once were. To animate photography with the illusion of movement is not to analyse but to produce a pseudo-experience – as if giving you more knowledge. And in the same way, moving in an opposite direction, to freeze film into frames that can be digitally manipulated is also to make experience, the experience traced in celluloid, pseudo. Documentary – as the original film footage or as the still photograph explored technically – is no longer the archival trace of historical activity, but an activity that is about its own process of arrested or faked flurry.

Fiction films tidy up the archival record that they capture in the course of filming, but they make obvious the fact that they are constructed fancies for entertainment purposes. Documentary, by contrast, claims to be a true rendition of past actuality. But documentarists have broken with the stillness of that past. The animating techniques are developed to counter the numb stillness of the archive. It is as if we are not allowed to face the past in all its frozen closedness. These processes are on a par with the colouration of black-and-white movies or the desperate search for colour film in the historical archive, as if this were more realistic, more seeable than the duotone stuff. Perhaps it is akin to the use of music in early film. Adorno wrote of how in film music lends the cinematic vision a veneer of humanity, a semblance of liveliness, by masking the whir of the projector in the background, the proof that we exist under the sway of mechanization. Without it, we are blankly exposed to our counterparts, the two-dimensional shadows that cavort on screen, as Adorno and Eisler observed in their 1947 *Composing for the Films.*