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Scanning Animafest: the 24th Animafest

Animafest’s 24th iteration in Zagreb, Croatia brought two innovations. The Animafest Scanner Symposium and the third outdoor screening at the Zagreb Museum of Contemporary Art (MSU), both noted by Daniel Šuljić, the Festival director, in his introduction to the festival’s dense and detailed catalogue. The amount of quality animation and the array of technique on display in the specialist showcases, the student and competition programs overwhelmed. So many sweets, so many bitter pills, so much technical innovation in search and in service of the human condition.

Animafest was founded in 1972 and showcased short animations every two years up to 2004. For the first time in 2005 the festival focused solely on a feature film competition and has continued this practice in the alternate year to the festival’s short film version.
In his opening presentation to the Scanner Symposium the current artistic director for the International Animation Film Festival in Annecy, Marcel Jean noted that the festival exhibition of animation was forever changed in 2010 when Patrick Jean’s Pixels, and Blu’s outdoor animations garnered masses of hits on Youtube after selection but before their festival screenings. This was not the sort of “piracy” that squeezed the window of industry feature film exhibition, but nevertheless re-shaped the role of discovery and introduction which animation festivals like Zagreb and Annecy in France had developed internationally. Now the brief shifts even more to presenting animations in context, in relation to general animation histories.

Situating new work in relation to an evolving archeology is a challenge, given the digital’s explosion of technique the blurring of the boundaries between categories, such as documentary, animation and photography and the consequent hybrid forms of narrative that are brought to the table. These developments get played out through the power structures already in place within the academy and the general art apparati, in the short term at least.

Despite such shifts there was a general belief that most animation activity was known, accessible and could be surveilled for new developments in the future. My presentation of Neil Taylor’s circa 1980s unknown experimental animation practice at Scanner provided an immediate exception to this rule. Taylor’s decades-long aesthetic investigation of the animated line and the film strip, sculpturally framed, provides an aesthetic trace of that hands-on technical education system now defunct, brought to its knees in ‘80s Victoria through Joan Kirner’s Labor government’s egalitarian move to scrap technical education in Secondary Schools.

There is more to present to a European audience on Australian 70s and 80s experimental animation in Michael Lee’s early work and Lynsey Martin’s graphic foregrounding of the screen and the film frame. The point to be made here is that, internationally at the margins of the margin, the unknown still lies dormant and waiting. In fact in the explosion of hybridity, Lee’s Mystical Rose (1976) predicts the form.
The assault of technique on animation has taken many forms. Jean noted the 1915 controversy over whether Max Fleischer’s rotoscoping breakthrough should be considered animation and the more recent developments of 3D/CGI as well as the reaction to Tango winning the grand prize at Annecy in 1981. Was it animation? This question was later answered by its winning of the Oscar for best animated film in 1983.

Technological “progress” will throw up more such challenges. There is the rise of animated documentary through Persepolis (2007) and Waltz with Bashir (2008). Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis’s creator state in a PEN interview in New York that she went for her documentary’s simple 2D style rather than CGI because, ironically, continued technical innovation promptly dates such technologically charged features, much like the representation of telephone technology in mainstream cinema.

With such “loosening” hybridity it becomes easier to frame Jerry Lewis as a constructed cartoon character or to position Tim Burton as an animator, who brings the craft’s approach and aesthetics to his feature films. Burton’s Vincent (1982) was invited as part of Zagreb’s best of puppet film retrospective, part of the featured retrospective in puppet animation from Croatia, France and a program of international works. Disney, however, was not in a position to give the green light on this.

Animafest productively framed puppet animation historically this year. As the catalogue states; with the increase in puppet animation “despite all the possibilities offered by the CGI and/or graphics tablets with astonishing simulations of the real material, some authors have decided to get their hands dirty.” (Animafest, 2014, p.183) Three eventual international programs, which included Harvey Krumpet (Adam Elliot, 2003) were the result of asking 45 successful puppeteers for their 10 favourites: “films loved and appreciated by their fellow artists”. (Animafest, 2014, p.183) I particularly valued revisiting the subversive aspects and detailed craftsmanship of Jiri Trnka’s The Hand (1965) on the big screen and the surrealism of the Canadian Madame Tutti Putti (2007). The way the eye movement adds life to the puppet’s whole body in this film supersedes any “uncanny valley” experience. At times I believed I was watching real actors dressed up as puppets.

I also appreciated finally viewing Yuri Norstein’s early work, the pristine colours and movement on the big screen and the avant-garde aesthetics of 25th The First Day (1968). On remembering the festival it is interesting how some of the shorter works left an impression. The Caketrope of Burton’s Team by Alexandre Dubosc, a mixture of 2D and 3D, produced some of the same visual effects as Taylor’s experiments and Georges Schwizgebel’s thirty five second 1/3/10 was more like an unexpected tweet or a diary entry than a film.
London’s Royal College of Art received the prize of Best Animation School, under the stewardship of Joan Ashworth, who runs the MA graduate program at the RCA. Its consequent two programs often showcased its alumni’s less exhibited works. The spread of styles was again impressive and included our own Pia Borg’s *Palimpsest* (2008), exploring those landscapes and techniques that the Quay’s have brought to centre stage. Borg’s triptych collaboration with Anna Benner and Gemma Burditt, *Through the Hawthorn* (2014) was also on show in competition, having won the Grand Prix at Stuttgart. Its triptych structure successfully enabled the voices and positions of the psychiatrist, the schizophrenic boy and his mother to speak loosely in unison and in opposition. The RCA program itself presented such experimentation. Joe King’s *Mobius Strip* (1992), in its architecture and repetitions enlists the kind of conceptual strategies available in Moulce Blackout’s *Walk In* (1969), for example, and Guy Sherwin’s self-reflexive British cinema.

In competition, Tomek Ducki’s lush *Baths* (2013) documented the rituals of two elderly swimmers in the pool (or is it really one swimmer), re-enactments of past glories, using an architectural structure that I first saw implemented in Tony Hill’s 16mm experimental film *Downside Up* (1984). It is a precise exploration of the experience of old age, identity and memory in both content and form.
South Korean Yumi Joung’s *Love Games* (2013), built on a simple list of gestures and interactions between a man and a woman, won the main competition prize. Drawn as simple black and white line drawn characters reminiscent of the kind of imagery found in a hearing impaired signing dictionary, these pointed “anecdotes” would have worked just as effectively as a minimalist performance in a city square. Joung sets up situations reminiscent of early Marina Abramović and Neša Paripović’s collaborations, with an existential kick in their end points.

Croatian-Australian computer graphics pioneer Tomislav Mikulić’s Scanner presentation introduced John Whitne Senior’s 1958 vector graphic machine, with its hundreds of gears and with 70 plates with white dots on a black background to build, with colour filters, Whitney’s pioneer kaleidoscope-like animations, and mapped the use of the oscilloscope to the later more sophisticated screen-saver vector graphics. Whitney’s machinery physically demonstrated what was to come, a shift from sequential to a visual field of layered narratives, and the importance of structure inherent in the technologies used, in Whitney’s computing machine visibly present, but within the digital embedded within the electronic pathways of the micro-chip.

With an eye to the future, and taking the current fascination with 3D printing a step forward into movement (nee-animation), Mikulić presented images of a rudimentary remotely controlled shape-shifting machine, that brought to mind the structure of Alexander Alexeieff and Claire Parker 1930s pin-screen, so critical in developing the toolbox in rudimentary digital painting programs. Given the discussions on the importance of manipulating light in defining and containing the hybridisation of moving image practice within an animation framework, what would such a 3D physical presence do to our views of what animation is? Our definitions are now shape shifting themselves in response to technology, theorising captured and contained inside the repetitions and echoes of a mandelbrot set of technical utopias as we move into a mediated network of objects, a further interactive phase of technological change. In theory, will we need to enlist Felix the Cat’s morphing skills to get out of such a *Jam?*

In his presentation at Scanner Paul Wells argued for practice-led research in the academy through the documentar form, to document practice and the development of technique. He demonstrated this through his draft documentar *Mackinnon & Saunders: A Model Studio*. His editorship of the new journal *Animation Practice, Process & Production*, presenting, analysing and advancing how animation is created and shown, is motivated from a similar position.

Zagreb enabled the discussion and turbulence of such ideas to take hold of the imagination, given the influx of writers on animation drawn by Scanner here to add to the network of animators and festival directors all present: a mobile circus, a large portion of which moved straight from Animafest to Annecy as this festival ended.

Animafest Zagreb
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Festival website: [http://www.animafest.hr/en](http://www.animafest.hr/en)
References

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