

The Space Between Frames: animation, emptiness and hapless delusion.

Why is it that animators, conjurers of cartoons and comedy, fun cousin to grown-up live action, to all appearances carefree and chaotic, so often present as glum, inward, distracted ... bewildered —socially awkward to say the least. Is it the sad clown contradiction, the happy fat kid, the bluesman 'laughing just to keep from crying' ... or perhaps one on one, my conversation is underwhelming —I'm happy to cop that. Maybe it's financial woes said animator is harboring, and certainly amongst independent animators these traits are most apparent ... but I have a theory, and so ... please humour me.

Steve Hagen, in *Buddhism Plain and Simple* (1999) describes conscious experience as 'very much like a movie. It's just one moment—one still—after another. But because these seem to occur in rapid succession, we adopt the contradictory belief that there are particular, persistent things out there that nevertheless change' (p227). Well, that's animation isn't it?

As I (try desperately to) understand it, Buddhist thought proposes that this corporeality we so passionately invest in is illusory —no one thing, in and of itself, has fixedness, autonomy, persistence —us too (aargh!). Rather, we, and stuff, are all part of this interdependent tapestry/matrix/mashup —no one thing stands alone as an unchanging reliable identity— as we change moment to moment, the thing we call ourselves is made-up, constantly refreshed, an ego we hold to, comprised of memories that we desperately try to fix in space and time. A folly.

Is this illusory hokey-pokey not the animator's stock-in-trade? Like it or lump it, animators dwell in the space between frames —they inhabit the emptiness from which the appearance of life is wrought. Godhead of independent animation, Norman McLaren's famous definition speaks to this emphasis on the gap between, to animation as 'the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between the frames.'¹

¹ 'Animation is not the art of drawings that move but the art of movements that are drawn; what happens between each frame is much more important than what exists on each frame; animation is therefore the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between the frames.'

Alan Cholodenko (1991) suggests that 'What is at stake in animation and in the thinking if it are ... (matters) bearing upon the whole history of ideas, including the history of thinking what life and movement are.'²

Big ideas. Too much for the humble animator? Or perhaps god(liness) favours the meek... is it *mono no aware*³ we see in the animator's eyes? an affinity with *ma*⁴? Try scratching away at image after lifeless image, at incremental infinitesimal changes, only to find joy in the deelaayyyed gratification of playback, and even then: fleeting, in time, ungraspable ... the hours of primordial mud-wallowing for the momentary lotus; that's much time to consider, to make friends with, the melancholy of transience, the beauty of emptiness, the gaps in space and time.

And so that's my theory ... perhaps 'glum' is the wrong tag, perhaps thoughtful, reflective, wise? These correlations between the practice of animation, of animating, between animation at its most fundamental, and ancient conceptions of the stuff of us, and our reality, I find fascinating ...

Spare a thought next time you enjoy a 'toon —its ephemera is all that is left after hours spent in the underworld by mortals like you and I, grappling with the biggest of questions —animators battling spectres, tilting at windmills, working at the interface, the twilight 'twixt nothing and everything (or at least the appearance of such) —all for you and me, because goddamnit someone's got to do it ... to bring forth joy, the illusion of life, to stoke the fires of our hapless delusion.

² Alan Cholodenko, ed. 1991, *The Illusion of Life: Essays on Animation* (Sydney: Power Publications/Australian Film Commission), 44.

³ 'Mono no aware might be interpreted as 'the melancholy of transient beauty'... 'the beauty lies not in object itself, but in the whole experience, transformation, and span of time in which the object is present and changing ...'; Prusinki, 2002. *Wabi-Sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Aesthetics Through Japanese History*.

⁴ 'The meaning of the everyday Japanese term 'ma' ... has both spatial (a gap or space between things) and temporal (an interval) meanings as in the English word 'interstice'', Nakagawa 2013, Mamoru Oshii's Production of Multi-layered Space in 2D Anime; 'ma, an empty or formless beauty'; Prusinki 2002. *Wabi-Sabi, Mono no Aware, and Ma: Tracing Traditional Aesthetics Through Japanese History*.