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frames per second magazine



The Best of SIGGRAPH

The state of the art of computer animation

Animation Education

It's time to get schooled

Also:

Animation on Sony's PSP

Tadeusz Wilkosz and the Bear

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The Best of the Fests

Emru Townsend makes the case for festival coverage

As I write this, I'm in that bizarre psychological space that I sometimes get into: part of my brain is still in the unreality that was five days at SIGGRAPH, and another part is in the unreality that will be five days at the Ottawa International Animation Festival.

Festivals and conferences, as you might gather, are strange beasts. Everyone has a different take on them, but the people I typically hang out with at these things are of a like mind: we make sure to mix work and play. "Work" varies from person to person, of course; in my case, that means catching all the competition screenings (which is much more work than it sounds like—watching several hours' worth of film with all your critical and aesthetic antennae tuned is tiring enough, but doing it over several days can be a feat); trying to chase down directors and animators for impromptu interviews; keeping an ear to the ground for signs of current and future trends in the art and business; and of course, networking, networking,

networking. "Play" means lunches and dinners with new or old friends, events like the SIGGRAPH reception or the Ottawa animator's picnic, and the parties that peter out late at night (or early in the morning, as the case may be). You'll notice that "play" involves a lot of socializing; as it happens, these are the best places to get to know the people you exchanged business cards with earlier. You also tend to get—and give—more honest opinions when everyone's relaxed.

Every so often, someone asks: why write reviews of festivals? Every year is a bit different, with a festival's vibe determined by the industry, the people who attend, the particular companies that show up, even the weather. Unlike, say, a movie review, you can't go right out and experience it for yourself; you have to wait until the next year and hope to catch a similar feeling.

I have to admit, I ask myself the same question occasionally, especially after I've just tried to cram almost 100 waking hours into anywhere from 500 to 2000 words.

Then I read something like Janeann Dill's report on this year's SIGGRAPH, and I remember why I like reading festival reviews. I've been curious about full-dome animation since I was first introduced to the concept a few years ago, but I've never had a chance to experience it. I planned to go to the Dome Animation Theater at SIGGRAPH this year—it was part of this year's Computer Animation Festival—but there was always something else going on, and the next thing I knew, I missed it. Janeann's description gave me most vivid mental image of dome animation, and what it must be like to literally lie back and watch the images fill every corner of your visual perception.

When your imagination gets opened up like that, it's hard to complain about festival reviews.

Do you like to read about festivals? If you're not sure, have a look at this issue's Festival Watch, or see some of the Festival Watch articles on the [website](#). And make sure to [let me know what you think](#). ■

EDITORIAL

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Open House

Class is in session, and **Armen Boudjikianian** asks five questions of five teachers

As it's back to school season, many animation enthusiasts are wondering if animation or visual effects is the right career choice for them. As these two fields are part of the visual arts and filmmaking, so it goes that studying animation or visual effects is an arduous process. Many professional animators, whether working in the industry or independently, will say that their work is unique in that it requires the synthesis of many other fields in the arts. In addition to this, animation and visual effects are tediously made frame-by-frame and are nowadays bonded to the fast ever-growing computer technology.

With all this information, it can be hard for beginners to know what their priority should be. So to help clarify the learning process of these two fields, I asked five questions to five professors (four in animation and one in visual effects) from different schools around North America. So whether you want to

start your career in animation or effects, thinking of having a career change, or just interested in how it's done, read on and this just might be your first class.

Marco Valgresy's responses are translated from French by Armen Boudjikianian.

Armen Boudjikianian: *Before we begin, could you briefly tell us about your experience and where you currently teach?*

Marco Valgresy: The strongest point of my background is my training in traditional animation. I had the possibility to be taught by the great professionals of the European studios. Professors who had worked for Spielberg in England, Disney France, France Animation and Lac Gaumont. [...] Thanks to them, a number of us [students] learned to observe and grasp important visual information to treat them into [animated] images.

With this background, I am able today to work with known schools in Quebec, notably the Grasset Institute, which will offer a program in 3D animation starting this fall.

Sean Ivory: I am an adjunct professor at Columbus College of Art and Design. I taught Introduction to Computer Animation [in the] past semester. [The students] were sophomores who for the most part had traditional animation and video production [training]. I also have been a visual effects designer at Mills James Productions for the past eight years and was a post-production supervisor/editor/ animator at Milepost for the eight years prior to that.

John Canemaker: I am an independent animator, animation historian and director of the Animation Studies program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. I began teaching animation at NYU in 1980 and have directed the Animation program since 1988. I was acting chair of the NYU Undergraduate Film and Television department from 2001 to 2002.

Jean Théberge: I currently teach at Concordia University in the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema in Montreal. My experience as a teacher goes back to 1997 when I was hired in the Film Animation program to teach a Technical Aspects course. I presently teach two courses: one is creative and the other is technical. To my pleasure, the Film Animation program at Concordia is part of the Fine Arts department.

My background is as a visual artist, and filmmaker in film animation, and I believe my practice reflects my interests in [the] arts in general [and] in contemporary arts.

The following questions are essentially technical. I'll try to expand a little further.

Joe Raasch: I've been working as a composer since 1999 at The Post Group, GVFX, Hybride Technologies and I've been at C.O.R.E. Digital Pictures since 2003. I've been teaching at Seneca College's Visual Effects Program since 2002, and made the coordinator in 2003. I've worked on movies like The Santa Clause 2, Spy Kids 3-D, Resident Evil: Apocalypse and the upcoming movies

"Desire is always the driving force behind a student or a professional putting in the time, effort and experimentation."

—Sean Ivory

Saw II, Lucky Number Seven, and Silent Hill.

In your opinion what does it take for a student to become a good animator? Will it differ from medium to medium?

MV: In any medium of animation, one needs to do lots of observation. Besides this, timing plays an important role. But timing will often change with the style since it all depends what you want to do with your animation and why [...]. But most importantly, lots of observation.

SI: The most important tool a student can have as they get started in any aspect of animation would be Desire. I have witnessed a lot of talented artists who were not willing to put in the time and effort that are a direct result of Desire. I have also seen a lot of shortcomings overcome by a person's Desire to accomplish [his/her] vision. Animation has been made a much faster and easier process due to new technology but it still takes a great deal of time, effort and experimentation in order

for it to be done properly. Desire is always the driving force behind a student or a professional putting in the time, effort and experimentation.

JC: The student must have a gift for communication, for getting ideas across primarily visually as well as verbally; a sense of timing and of drama and comedy; the ability to caricature forms, designs, movement.

JT: First, I should state that I make a difference between being an animator and being a filmmaker: film animation, or frame-by-frame filmmaking, is an art practice where the animator and the filmmaker can be two different persons. In a way, it is the difference between the craft person and the artist.

Considering the question, I enumerate the following qualities: desire, curiosity, open mind, and yes, talent, not necessarily defined through ability. These are essential qualities to become a filmmaker, as it should be in any art field. Subsequently, patience and an understanding for both the

technique and the practice come into the portrait.

In your opinion, what does it take for a student to become a good visual effects artist?

JR: There are a few essential traits that someone needs [in order] to be a visual effects artist:

A developed and educated eye. The ability to look at one's own work with a degree of objectivity, and to be able to tell what needs improving.

To live in uncertainty. This can be a "feast or famine" type of industry, with most students getting contract work to start. This isn't an industry known for stability.

A good attitude. No one wants to work with a jerk.

Does a first-year student who wishes to pursue his/her studies in CGI or stop-motion need to know academic drawing?

MV: A person who works in a bar cannot say that he is not interested in alcohol [...] The same goes for animation. Even in CG animation, you are obliged to have an interest in traditional animation and in the people who have developed the [necessary] skills. That is what brought us to the computer today, which allows us to achieve the same effects [as our predecessors].

SI: While basic drawing skills are an invaluable tool for all aspects of animation; there are many aspects of CG animation [where] you can often work around [...] drawing. The main area where traditional drawing is [beneficial for beginning] a CG project is the storyboarding process. The storyboard is where you can really get your vision and ideas to begin to take shape. [It] provides a fantastic reference [...] and gives you the ability to enhance your concept a great deal early on in the process.

JC: It is useful for students to practice traditional drawing from live models, either formally in a classroom or spontaneously at public settings. I recently asked my friend Pete Docter, the director of Pixar's *Monsters, Inc.*, his opinion on why drawing and draftsmanship are important to computer animators as well as hand-drawn animators.

Here is his reply:

"There are two ways drawing helps you, even if you're working in stop-motion or 3D computer animation. First, drawing helps you take in visual information. Good animation is based on keen observation of human behavior, movement, and life in general. The only way to get this stuff to stick in your head is to consciously observe it—to really see it, not just rest your eyes on it. The best way I know to wake up your brain and really observe is to draw.

"Even in CG animation, you are obliged to have an interest in traditional animation and in the people who have developed the [necessary] skills."

—Marco Valgresy

“Composition, colour theory, perspective... All of that applies no matter what medium you're using.”

—Joe Raasch

“Second, drawing strengthens your animation, especially your poses. It allows you to know what you need to bend, or lengthen, or exaggerate—basically, what you need to cheat. Remember, we’re caricaturing here in animation. The best animators at Pixar are also solid draftsmen, which I think is no coincidence.”

Pete closes with this admission: “Frankly, I think we have a ways to go yet in capturing that great sense of caricatured movement those guys did at Disney and Warner Bros. in the 40s and 50s. At Pixar we’re always analyzing that stuff, trying to get closer to the bold, direct punch of a good drawing. There’s something more free about drawing—it’s a more direct connection with the artist’s gut feeling. You’re not limited by the restrictions of the computer model or software.”

JT: Let’s reformulate what this question partly infers: Will you lose your time learning academic drawing?

An advanced drawing education helps to understand shape, volume, space and dimension, four concepts that are important in creating an

animated film. Not only do you become a more complete artist, but you also train your brain, your eye and your hand, and you build up your general knowledge. *Of course* you will learn through it, even if your objective is stop-motion animation. And an advance drawing practice is often said to be essential to those who aim towards 3D software modeling.

Okay, you may not need it in your “factory-like” colouring job for a television series. (By the way, not bad a job for a student.)

JR: Not necessarily. There are lots of disciplines in visual effects that require strong technical skills. For these positions, academic drawing isn’t as helpful as say, a programming degree. But, if you want to be involved in the “creative” side, then understanding all the traditional concepts is very helpful: Composition, colour theory, perspective... All of that applies no matter what medium you’re using.

Do you find that the bases of industry demands to animators are the same as those of an academic animation program today? (This could mean: do you think tools such

as Flash and motion capture can be taught in animation schools or would they hinder the curriculum/ learning curve of students?)

MV: I’ll say that to the larger extent, no. Simply because there’s no time to give a complete training in all [the tools] that could be possibly used in the companies. For example, for compositing with Maya, Shake is used. And for 3ds Max, it’s Combustion. But [it’s hard to find] training for these programs, even though they are used by the companies [...] Specific [training] also lacks in animation and modeling. Today, we often see polygonal modeling because of video games. But we don’t just have polygons. In engineering and architecture, [people] will often use NURBS [non-uniform rational B-splines]. But we tend to ignore the demands of those fields, because their markets are not the biggest. Eighteen to twenty-five-year-olds are proposed to sit down in front of the computer to do gaming [...] It’s a choice. But surely there are young people out there who want to do something else [...] So schools [have to] give training which will permit students to see the bigger picture [...] [The schools] that follow the demands of the industry are in fact following specific demands and not general demands. That’s not well thought-out. If ten schools offer Flash courses, everybody learns Flash, but

only two people get jobs once they finish school because the [training] is too narrow and not broad enough.

SI: Most schools today have to provide their students with a diverse background of experiences in the animation field because there is so much convergence of technology and animation styles that students need to be familiar with a wide array of processes. [The] industry can often be difficult to get [into] so you need to have a variety of skills that can provide you with a greater scope of opportunity.

JC: They can be taught [tools used in the industry such as Flash and motion capture] but only as part of the overall curriculum. At NYU Tisch School of the Arts Animation program, we teach seventeen different courses in both traditional and computer animation. These courses range from life drawing, action analysis, and storyboarding to 3D CGI using Maya software and 2D digital workshops.

JT: This kind of question always bring me towards the following one: How much time do I wish to put in learning software [...], and how much time do I wish to put in my art education and practice? Which one should come before the other? Which one is more transcendent than the other? And what experience do we have at 19

or 20, or even 23, to tell which one demands more than the other?

The industry is somewhat looking to fill in specific jobs. What you could expect is doing the same thing over and over again. An academic program will cover many levels of knowledge where ideas, thought process, imagination and research are just other assets in a job curriculum.

You should choose the training and the education you wish to receive, and then select carefully the institution you think will be the more appropriate for your goal. If you wish to be a technician, and select a fine-arts education, you may not receive what you were waiting for. Or, maybe could you do both: technical education followed by a fine-arts education (or vice versa)? That could be a pretty good (although expensive in time and money) combination.

JR: I would say that yes, the schools do fairly well at training [students]. The students we've recently hired at the studio I work at have performed as expected. Keep in mind that

we're asking them to do junior tasks, though.

Do you believe that there are benefits for animation students to learn the traditional filmmaking tools (16mm/35mm film cameras, animation stand, optical printer, etc.)? If so, what are they?

MV: It is a very good idea. 3D students who lack a base in filmmaking—usage of cameras—will often not understand how to use cameras in 3ds Max and Maya for staging and composition. Even a little background in photography—how to frame properly—is very important.

SI: There is an underlying benefit to learning any art form in its traditional manner. As an old-time editor I see the sloppiness and laziness that a lot of young editors develop because they are not familiar with some of the old functions of editing which can help them today. The same goes with traditional animation techniques.

Understanding how an animation is put together using cameras and animation stands and optical printers gives the artist a deeper understanding of what animation really is and how powerful it can be. There are obstacles that will present themselves in the traditional process that may not exist using new technology, but the problem solving part is one of the more rewarding and beneficial aspects of becoming a unique animator.

JC: If these tools are available to the student, it would be well to offer instruction in their use. The traditional crafts of shooting, cutting and special effects may have been replaced by the computer; but, similar to life drawing, there is a special, personal fulfillment that comes through the experience of earlier methods. Some students enjoy the hands-on learning process involving the feel and smell of film; [its] slower pace of learning [and] the limited aesthetic choices it [makes] available (as opposed to the hundreds of possibilities available via computer). It forces the filmmaker to make definitive decisions regarding the narrative, and communication in general.

JT: I stand happily in the “absolutely” side, and as long as it is possible. As a teacher, I find it interesting for at least three factors: pedagogy,

technique, and creative process, and the three are interrelated in the learning process. The thinking process involved in making an analog and digital production is different. The preparation is different in many aspects because of the nature of each medium. And the result can be very different because of the technical stages involved in the creative process. I believe that being able to teach both analog and digital technique, and use them both, is a blessing, although it does not make our teaching task easier.

Film (celluloid) is a support, and it is as valuable as the digital one, [...]. When you make an art piece, it is not the “coolest” media that makes it significant; it is what you do with it.

Personally, the film as an object/support is a fascination [...]. It is part of the creative process, even if it won't necessarily be shown in the final art piece. It is a question of sensitivity, for me and for what I want to share with the viewer. Besides, it is an artistic challenge to use film today as so many art works were accomplished using this support.

JR: No education is ever really a waste. There's value in learning anything. Traditional tools have a lot to offer, if anything, an appreciation of the tools we have now. But, I'm not sure that I'd tell someone to spend three years and tens of thousands of dollars to learn [the traditional tools]

“The thinking process involved in making an analog and digital production is different. The preparation is different in many aspects because of the nature of each medium.”

—Jean Théberge

“We encourage our students to make finished films. Not only is the learning process important to their development, but the demo film is an important passport to employment opportunities after graduation.”

—John Canemaker

if they want to work in front of a computer.

What benefits can a finishing student gain from an author film and what benefits can he/she gain from a demo reel of his/her strengths?

MV: An author film will show the capacities [of a student] in directing, if he/she is capable of doing the best in all the stages of a production of a demo. A demo does not have to be just assembled [pieces]. It could also be a film with a story. Making an author film also means that the student will put his/her own essence [in a film]. Producers are interested in different styles. Today, everybody is running after the latest thing that will shake the market. So, I do advise students to orient themselves towards author filmmaking.

A demo reel is also interesting because it demonstrates the capacities of someone in animation, modeling, lighting, etc... But these are specific points in a production

pipeline. You have to also show how you manage the whole.

An author film gives a broader margin. Since it is a personal piece, it allows you to leave some criticism behind. Whereas when you make a demo reel, you will be presenting animation, texturing and lighting scenes. Here, you will be criticized to the maximum, simply because companies demand a certain standard. One should not forget however, that it is not simple to make a living with author films. You need a public that is interested in your work. A demo reel that responds to the demands of the industry is necessary because it permits you to keep one foot grounded in reality. So before deceiving yourself, it's always better to keep one foot in the industry and the other in your private domain, where you are able to work on your own projects. That will allow you to, since you are attached to the industry, meet someone who will be interested in your work and who will help you develop it. That's how it works.

SI: Demo reels are the most important tools for employment. A resume will not show what you can do. Demo reels say so much about a person's work, vision, professionalism and even sense of humour and style. A great reel will get you into more interviews than a great résumé. Look at other people's reels, plan your reels, and do not send out a reel that is not professional, it will kill your reputation.

JC: At NYU Tisch School of the Arts we encourage our students to make finished films. Not only is the learning process important to their development, but the demo film is an important passport to employment opportunities after graduation. We believe in “doing” at NYU Tisch. As the old Chinese saying goes: “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.”

JT: That brings us back to the difference I made between the filmmaker and the animator. Personally, I expect more than another demo reel from my students. And I am certain that the people in the industry appreciate when they see more than just another demo reel. As a teacher, filmmaker and artist, I value ideas, discussions on ideas and aesthetic, construction of a critical point of view of the world and in the making of an art piece.

Then we research and solve the technical details. In the making we will see if the technique is significant to the content of the art piece in construction.

Any art form is closely related to its technique. At times, the technique comes forth through the artwork, contributing aesthetically to its significance. It is important when the artist realizes what lies beneath the technique he/she employs. Now, can we talk about art?

JR: The advantages of having a demo reel is that you can demonstrate specific skills without having to get your character there with a long setup. It's likely that you're not going to be involved with a lot of the creative aspects of the show at first; you're going to just have to do what your supervisors want.

The disadvantage of having a finished film is that you may not be nearly as funny or clever as you think you are, so it might be painful to watch your movie. An advantage is that finishing a film shows that you have the willpower to finish what you start.

We would like to thank all the teachers who put in the time to answer questions.

Flipping Pages

René Walling on learning animation through books

Many animators recall how they started their first animation in their youthful days creating flipbooks using their school manuals. Another way to learn animation with books is by reading books on how to do it. From photocopied documents created by instructors for their classes to manuals written by animation legends, there are countless books out there that can show you how to animate.

Many books on the history of animation will also include some information on techniques and methods. Others focus on the methods, equipment, and techniques used to animate and may or may not feature examples from released films. This article will cover some of the better ones in the latter category.

The Illusion of Life

Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston
Disney Editions, 1995
ISBN 0786860707
576 pages

The book on classic Disney animation, this once long out-of-print book gives us a history lesson and explains how Disney's realistic animation is achieved. Rather than just show how it's done, the authors show how these animation principles were

first discovered and how they evolved at the Disney studios. Unlike most histories, which concentrate on the finished films, this book talks about how Disney's animation process evolved over the years. Lavishly illustrated, filled to the brim with sketches and artwork, this book provides some great lessons in animating, and is a history of the studio by two animators who were there and who were intimate with many of the people and events discussed in it. A great way to be introduced to animating, the book gives enough knowledge for someone to start flipping drawings, but the detailed mechanics of creating animation (shooting, editing, etc.) are only glanced at, as the focus is mostly on the animating process itself.

Animation: From Script to Screen

Shamus Culhane
St. Martin's Griffin, 1990
ISBN 0312021623 (hardcover),
0312050526 (paperback)
336 pages

Not only was legendary animator Shamus Culhane well versed in all aspects of animation, he was also fascinated by the creative process. His book, a combination of personal reminiscences, overview of

the industry, lessons, and exercises does not go into small nitty-gritty technical details; rather, it is a guide on what makes great animation and what to expect when working in the field. The most important lesson in this book may be that animators have to keep the big picture in mind, and by this Culhane means your whole life and your creativity, not just your animation. A must-read.

The Animation Book

Kit Laybourne
Three Rivers Press, 1998
ISBN 0517533898 (hardcover),
0517886022 (paperback)
448 pages

First published in the late '70s, *The Animation Book* was the book for a generation of students to learn animation with. Revised almost twenty years later, it now includes extensive coverage of computer animation. Both editions are divided into four parts covering the fundamentals (basics skills and creativity), animation techniques, animation equipment and resources to learn more. The book gives a good overview of several animation techniques. One nice touch is that 3D animation does not overwhelm the

book in the later edition. If you can only get one of the books mentioned here, this would probably be it.

The Animator's Workbook

Tony White
Watson-Guptill Publications, 1988
ISBN 0823002284 (hardcover),
0823002292 (paperback)
160 pages

Another book that has helped countless students along, this one is worthy of note since many of the more subtle effects used in character animation are explained and illustrated in detail. In fact, the bulk of the book is dedicated to this topic and other, more technical topics such as camera operation are ignored. One interesting feature is that the same simple figure is used throughout the book to illustrate many of the principles, clearly demonstrating that good animation does not depend on the design of a character. Each section ends with one or more assignments for the student, making this a good book for the beginner who is starting out, anyone who wants to improve their character animation, or an instructor to use as a course manual.

feature story»

Digital Animation Bible

George Avgerakis

McGraw-Hill/TAB Electronics, 2003

ISBN 0071414940

330 pages

Also available as an electronic book

Providing an overview of computer animation and the related industry, this book is roughly divided into two parts. The first is mostly concerned with letting you know what is needed to be a computer animator in the industry. The second part provides explanations of various 3D computer animation principles, from modeling to rendering, using three major software packages on the market today (3ds Max, Maya and LightWave). With a practical, no nonsense approach, the

author focuses on getting results rather than getting lost in details. This book is a good way to find out if computer animation is for you, before you spend the big bucks on a computer (rather than an animation stand), and a great guide if you do decide to head that way.

The Encyclopedia of Animation Techniques

Richard Taylor

Butterworth-Heinemann, 1996

ISBN 0240514882 (hardcover),

0785818057 (paperback)

176 pages

Probably this book's greatest strength is that it covers just about every animation technique under the sun. It is also its

greatest weakness, since talking about everything from cameraless animation to 3D computer animation leaves little room to explore each topic in depth. The book does provide a great overview of many different animation techniques and all sections are lavishly illustrated, both with frames of films using the technique under discussion and with diagrams explaining basic setups for using it. A must for anyone who wants to explore techniques rarely covered in other books. Some previous knowledge of animation or film is required to fully take advantage of the information in this book.

There are many other books well worth reading, like *ILM: The Art of Special Effects*, Edward Muybridge's *The Human*

Figure in Motion and *Animals in Motion*, Zoran Perisic's *The Animation Stand*, Richard Williams' *The Animator's Survival Kit*, and Peter Lord and Brian Sibley's *Creating 3D Animation*, to name a few. Even a book on the history of animation is liable to yield some useful information on how a particular scene or effect was shot, so don't overlook a book just because it is not aimed at student animators. Of course, the greatest collection of books on animation will not help you if you only read them, so start animating! ■

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Growing Pains

One of Canada's premier animation institutions is evolving. **Mark Mayerson** notes the rough patches

While Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, continues to be one of the leading animation schools in Canada, the nature of the program there has undergone a change. In the past, the program was three years long and granted students a diploma. Starting two years ago, the program expanded to four years and now grants Bachelor of Applied Arts (BAA) degrees.

One reason for this change was to bring Sheridan up to the same level as animation schools in the US. CalArts, the School of Visual Arts, Ringling College, and the Rhode Island School of Design are just some of the US schools offering Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees in animation.

The animation program at Sheridan is the first program there to grant degrees and as a result is falling under different provincial regulations. This is leading to some complications.

In the past, animation instructors were hired based on professional experience. An instructor's level of education was not the basis for determining eligibility. However, now that the program will grant bachelor's degrees, the province mandates that instructors hold at least a master's degree. Instructors without master's degrees may still teach the studio portions of the courses, but they are not qualified to lecture and can no longer be hired for

full-time positions. An instructor holding a master's degree must oversee each course in the program.

One problem is that there is no university in Canada that grants a master's degree in animation. As a result, the school has been forced to recruit outside Canada. This puts Canadian instructors at a disadvantage. In fact, graduates of the Sheridan program who have worked professionally for decades on well-known projects are not eligible for positions. By contrast, someone with a master's degree in animation who has never worked professionally is.

There are definite advantages to students in gaining a bachelor's degree. As animation is an international industry, degree-holding artists will likely find it easier to cross national borders. And with the economics and technology of animation changing rapidly, degree-holding students will also find it easier to return to school for further education at some future date.

However, the benefits of a degree are offset by the limited pool of instructors that the province deems qualified. While there has been some discussion at the college about upgrading the credentials of existing faculty, nothing concrete has been done to date.

Because the program now grants degrees, the province mandates that the courses offered have to be broadened beyond just animation. These courses are referred to as "breadth courses" and include Composition and Rhetoric as well as Art in a Social and Cultural Context, among others. The problem isn't the courses, but how the province decides how many the students have to take.

Rather than declare that students need a specific number of breadth courses, the province mandates that the hours spent in them must be a percentage of the hours spent in animation courses. With the original animation course load plus the breadth courses, students were spending 28 hours a week in the classroom, where students in regular university programs were in the classroom closer to 18 hours a week. In order to get the student course load down to a reasonable number of hours, the program has found itself in the odd position of having to cut hours spent on art.

While broadening students' knowledge is always a positive thing, the provincial regulations have actually handicapped the program. It's clearly a case of unintended consequences, but it is a drawback.

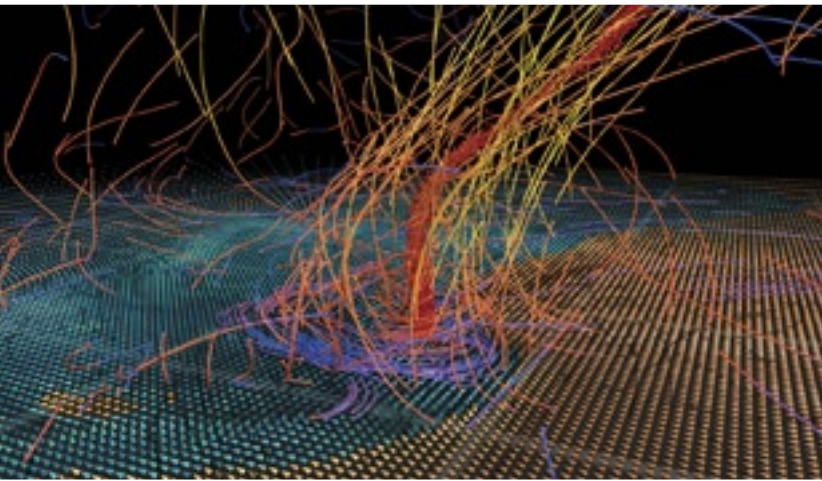
Finally, the province mandates that students graduating with a BAA degree must spend fourteen weeks (the length

of a semester) in an industry co-op placement. Currently, there are more than 100 students in each year of the Sheridan program. The first students will graduate in 2007 and are entering the third year of the four-year program. The college will attempt to place these students in the industry in the summer of 2006.

It will be a challenge to find such a large number of co-op positions in Ontario's animation industry. The business expands and contracts on an irregular basis, depending on the amount of work available. There have been occasions when experienced people have been unemployed due to a shortage of projects. It will be difficult to find co-op positions for students during such a period.

If the province insists that the co-op positions offer payment, the industry may be reluctant to take on students due to the cost. If the co-op positions aren't salaried, students who depend on summer employment to help pay their education costs will be under greater financial pressure.

The BAA program is only two years old and definitely suffering from growing pains. The challenge will be to solve these problems while maintaining the level of animation education that Sheridan is known for. ■



Immersed in Domes, Falling Bodies and Stereo Vision: Where's the Gravity?

The many expressions of the animated state of the art exhilarate and frustrate [Janeann Dill](#)

I think SIGGRAPH 2005 was meant to prepare our bodies for space travel and, doubly, for the loss of earth's natural environment by redefining "nature." Simple-looking earphones that simulate a virtual loss of gravity while one is simultaneously walking on a ground of gravity; chromosomal mapping of strangers in relationship to a simple protoplasmic device, which pictures that individual's movement on a 40-foot screen; [haptic](#) video; and cyber-fashionable skirts. These skirts sense when another smart skirt is approaching and feed information about the other to its wearer. "First

impression" certainly takes on new meaning.

It is interesting that the more immersed the collective "we" become in *representing* three-dimensional space, the less involved we become with being *in* it.

The old adage of the more you know, the more you know how much you don't know has advanced a parallel adage of contemporary importance: the more you sense, the more you sense how much you don't sense. At what intersection in our development as humanity did we need to sense ourselves as bodies—intellectually, emotionally, and physically—through a device?

Contrary to what you think posing this question might lead the reader to preconceive, I am neither cynical towards nor opposed to raising the technological ceiling to yet far greater heights, in concert with George Lucas' impetus to do so as referenced in his keynote address at SIGGRAPH.

Paraphrasing film director Akira Kurosawa, Lucas framed "the secret" of artistic innovation as being "a quest for immaculate reality." One finds it philosophically stirring to go up against such a quest but especially daunting when its guardians are, arguably, two of the most established film directors

in Eastern and Western histories of filmmaking. That said, let us awaken to the process of an artistic quest *per se*, to its language of form and content, and to the innovations evidenced (or not) in the juried films screened in SIGGRAPH's Computer Animation Festival.

The Full-Dome Animation Theater was presented by Ed Angel, director of the Arts Technology Center of the College of Fine Arts at the University of New Mexico (UNM); David Beining, director of the Lodestar Astronomy Center, a University of New Mexico project; and Hue Walker, multimedia development specialist for the Arts Technology

Above: Some of the different faces of the Computer Animation Festival: the scientific visualization *F3 Tornado Within a Simulated Supercell Thunderstorm*; the cheery (and violent) *Piñata*; the atmospheric and dramatic 9.

Center, artist and animator. There are a few of us who will remember the childhood experience of lying on our backs in the grass and looking up—at the tree limbs hanging over us, the clouds passing by, or the stars shimmering like jewels in the night sky. It is conceivable that this particular point of view afforded to children of our cultural past will not be readily available to children of our cultural future, given global urbanization bringing with it street lights, buildings, and concrete grounds. Generations are already posed toward lateral points of view to gaze into technological bodies of monitors, televisions and black boxes yet to be invented—a diminished sense of “looking up” is not an altogether inconceivable notion. The dome project rescues and enhances that perspective. The immersive environment of reclining in relationship to the thirty-foot, nine-meter-diameter digital dome to experience computer animation on a round film screen demonstrates technology at the point of ubiquity. It seems familiar when viewing global atmospheres and weather conditions, or the planets and stars of scientific visualization that are

usually assigned to planetarium exhibitions. It is neither foreign when viewing underwater, oceanic environments familiar to anyone who has gone swimming. In these instances, there are no viewer expectations to experience gravity. We can look at cartoon characters that are underwater and not expect them to represent weight, right? For the character-based computer animator, this can translate to creative freedom. The early filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein exalted this freedom of elasticity and absence of gravity as prominent characteristics in the early cartoons of Walt Disney (see *Eisenstein on Disney*, edited by Jay Leda) and, today, there are the obvious examples in *The Incredibles* and *Finding Nemo*, around which entire films focused these two inherent characteristics of cartoon.

At the other end of the animation spectrum, the creative potential for artistic innovation with dome projection cannot be overlooked. The work of artist and animator Hue Walker is a visual delight for the eyes as well as for the mind. Calling upon images that hold an energetic affinity with a cosmos

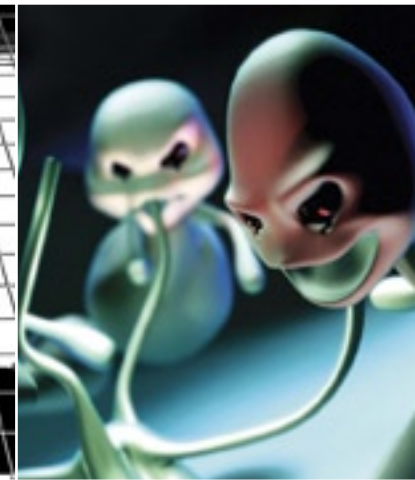
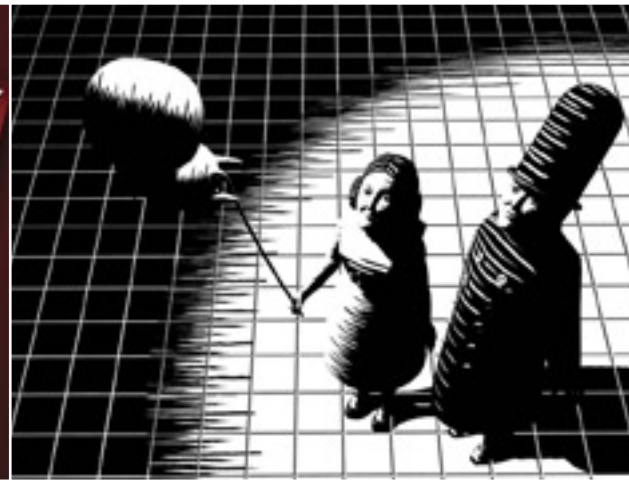
somewhere between contemporary New Mexico and medieval Ireland, Hue Walker’s unbounded facility to work as an auteur and as a collaborator is indicated throughout this program of films. A film conceptualized around the [golden ratio](#), Walker’s *Derivation of Chaos* displayed moments of lyrical movement that simply are best expressed in animation than in any other kinetic medium: language, sign, metaphor, geometry, form, space, time, and color were as fully immersive of themselves and each other as they were of the dome and ourselves as viewers in three and four dimensions. Another of Hue Walker’s works was in collaboration with Los Angeles artist Gronk, entitled *Gronk’s BrainFlame*. This 14-minute animation was part of Gronk’s artist’s residency at UNM’s Arts Technology Center, *Cultural Practice/Virtual Style: Creating an Arts Environment in High Performance Computing*, a program funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Creating still images that he and Walker storyboarded to create the animation, Gronk is no stranger to the heroic scale and scope of 55-foot visuals. This summer, Gronk completed the scenic design for Director Peter Sellars’ opera about the life and death of Federico García Lorca, *Ainadamar (The Fountain of Tears)*, for the Santa Fe

Opera. Gronk’s interest in computer animation seems a natural evolution of his interest in multimedia as one of the young artists who founded the Los Angeles collective Asco in the 1970s. His piece with Walker was his first foray in animation.

Interestingly, for each of the pieces in the dome project, titles were read consistently on one side of the dome. The opening scene for each film was equally oriented to one side. This likely has to do with six-channel projection: six computers feeding an MPEG movie to each projector, a seventh audio channel and an eighth to sync the sound with picture. Limited orientation to one direction of a hemisphere created a visual and conceptual horizon line and was, to my thinking, counterintuitive to the immersive qualities of the environment. The artifact of “looking towards” limited the experience of “looking into.” This is particularly significant when the lifting or falling of moving images in space-time above the viewer creates the sensation of zero gravity—nicely choreographed in Hue Walker’s *Derivation of Chaos*—and is delightfully reminiscent of the sensation intrinsic to the childhood experience of “looking up.”

Viewing scientific visualizations on a hemisphere can be equally as exciting, especially when they are the dynamic animation of Donna Cox and Robert Patterson from the Supercomputer Center at the

At the other end of the animation spectrum, the creative potential for artistic innovation with dome projection cannot be overlooked.



University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Cox and Patterson have successfully bridged the walk between art and science—I simply did not care that I was seeing an *F3 Tornado Within a Simulated Supercell Thunderstorm*. Having experienced this animation in stereo video prior to the experience of it as a dome projection only furthered its strength as a work of artistic merit. Clearly the mature work of an artist who understands optically stimulated color in relationship to the spectator's experience, it was gratifying to note the rigour with which Cox approached her goal to marry art, science, and technology, while paying attention to the details, such as finely-tuned digital projection.

SIGGRAPH, in general, seemed appropriately balanced in its exhibition of the young inquisitiveness of technology-based

frontiers and the intuitive use of technology to create works of visual art. That the “art” papers/panels/sessions were so well attended the doors closed soon after opening—a hopeful sign that, at last, technology is no longer the content. The content is the content and the technology is the medium.

The Computer Animation Festival screened works of individual artists as well as scientific visualizations, animated commercials, and excerpts from special-effects feature films. The independent short films varied in intent and content. There was the gag of *Piñata*, a rather violent little film by Mike Hollands of an animated donkey piñata depicted as adorable and frightened who had the crap beaten out of him by adorable little children with the assistance of their father. The audience found this film to be

quite funny. This author found the audience to be quite disturbed.

9, a beautiful and poignant film by Shane Acker, received top honours as Best of Show by the jury (on which our esteemed editor [sat](#)). While viewing the film, I couldn't help but think of Tim Burton and Henry Selick's *Nightmare Before Christmas* and, somewhat, the Brothers Quay, both in imagery and sensitivity. In fact, these influences alongside John Lasseter and his Pixar productions were spread throughout the shorts, probably largely due to the large number of films screened that were student films, and secondly, because these animation artists are of the age to have seen these works as children so that these figures now replace the Disney film as early influences. Beautiful in *9* was the choreography of a kind of mime-movement of its character, who faced a Gollum-like

skeleton portrayed as a stalking force of death. In contrast to *Nightmare*, this film is of sombre industrial colours and reads as a futuristic dismissal of warring skeletons, textures and mechanical structures—a fabricated rebirth of wandering into a circle of light—the hero's journey. Its universal theme both grounds the story and differentiates it from its predecessors. It was only after returning home that I read Tim Burton had picked up the film to develop a feature. How much of the feature version will remain Acker's will be interesting to note after he is absorbed into the machinery of bigger budget Hollywood. That said, what might or might not happen in the evolution of *9* as a feature can not diminish the beauty and admirable animation of Acker's ten-minute version.

To briefly highlight a few more films:

Above: The bizarre elasticity of *City Paradise*; the geek-chic gag film *Cubic Tragedy*; the stark *Le Régulateur*; the dreamy *Helium*.

festival watch»

Helium by Adam Janeczek and Florian Durand: An elegant film of choreography and subtle colour changes reminiscent of the sequence of dancing fairies in *Fantasia*, perhaps due to the classical-style music but also due to the graceful timing of these Casper-like friendly pods. I found its reference to breath particularly inviting as a metaphor for animation as life-giving.

Cubic Tragedy by Ming-Yuan Chuan: Smart humour and particular to women who know their x and y axes, culminating in Picasso's *Weeping Woman* painting. It was encouraging to see this woman's point of view within a male-dominated program and discipline.

City Paradise by Gaelle Denis: This five-minute piece holds great potential for its filmmaker. While the storyline is at times distracted and prone to wander off-centre, the surrealist, comic-book imagery and content lends a weighty quality to the film. With content located somewhere between Magritte, *Blade Runner* and *Commedia dell'Arte*, it might otherwise be dismissed as a fashion statement largely due to its slickness. The characters move awkwardly—not uniquely, awkwardly—and this holds the film back. The theme of a young woman's coming of age removes it from being simply eye-candy and turns its potential toward the fringes,

toward important work such as Susan Pitt's *Asparagus*.

Le Régulateur by Philippe Grammaticopoulos: Simple, unique, smart and well done; in the historical lineage of George Gross' and Hector Hoppin's 1934 film, *Joie de vivre*.

Moscow Souvenir by Luke Bailey: A painterly film of gentle beauty. The voice of Yuri Norstein comes to mind: "Rather than live-action cinema, I more often think of animation as being comparable to theatre—space confined to a distanced scenic box, selected sounds coming out of silence, and an envelope of darkness that creates a magical mood [...] the suggestive nuance of gesture and language and artificial effects for controlled purposes." (See Norstein's "Behind the Image Visible on the Screen," *Kino*. Latvia, April 1985.)

To conclude with two films by artists of widely differing self-consciousness:

Self-Defense by Chris Harding and *Fallen Art* by Tomek Baginski could not be further apart stylistically, cinematographically, technologically, aesthetically and geographically. Yet, they share a choice of subject matter: war.

Self-Defense is a digital descendant of UPA in its two-dimensional flatter-than-flat style of limited animation, colour and voice-over instructional narration,



to point, in particular, to *Jaywalker*, the 1957 animation directed by BoBe Cannon and colour-keyed by Jules Engel. Dressing contemporary political commentary in satire, Harding brilliantly sets the story of George deciding that he must learn to protect himself after being brutally attacked in an alley. A narrator walks him through five practical lessons of self-defense

"for the citizen on the go—or nation-state on the rampage." With this film Harding asks, "What would happen if individuals behaved as nations behave?" and answers, "We'd all be in jail." Harding's direct style of storytelling as satirical point of view is likely rooted in his early career as a syndicated newspaper cartoonist and illustrator. The cartoon flair of this Flash and Photoshop animation

Right: Learn *Self-Defense* and *Fallen Art* offer two takes on the same subject.

broadcasts well beyond its surface structure the formula for war as Harding's on-screen thesis:

WRONG + WRONG = WRONG
WRONG + WRONG + GOD = RIGHT

While the complexities of such formulas do not go unnoticed by this author, the intent of this film is not dissimilar to John Hubley's in his 1946 *Brotherhood of Man*. Thankfully, Chris Harding will not find himself at the behest of McCarthy's Committee on Un-American Affairs as did Hubley for making art.

Fallen Art is a dynamic, cinematic jewel, superbly animated in 3D by Polish director Tomek Baginski. It, too, is about war: whether as fantasy or reality is unclear to me. Baginski stated in his artist's talk that the research for his film's military uniforms focused on the Vietnam War. I found this statement utterly incongruous to his readily available research from the Holocaust at his fingertips—not to mention that the storyline of his film is a general demanding soldiers be thrown to their death from a high platform so that he might experiment with “animating” them. As an original staff member for Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation Historical Cataloguing Department to digitally archive Holocaust survivors' testimony, I posed the following

question: How much, if any, had he been influenced, or, conversely, had pushed away his history of the Holocaust? I was especially interested after hearing him say that his research had been focused on an American war. It might be that he needed the aesthetic and/or political distance in order to pursue the film. None of this kind of thinking was the case for Baginski. His response to the question was a combination of a slightly knee-jerk irritation at having it posed and a shockingly candid response that it never occurred to him to look at the Holocaust as a source of research because he is “simply a creative artist” trying to make a film. As a university faculty in art and animation I simply could not let this go by unquestioned so I asked to speak to him afterward via e-mail. (I wrote. He has not responded.) For the purposes of this article we are left with the truth he spoke from the podium rather than with a discussion of the complexities of research, art, and manifestation of an idea as a film. In an effort to give the level of Tomek Baginski's self-consciousness as an artist greater depth than he seemed to give it, perhaps we were speaking to each other through language barriers. Otherwise, it is an enormous stretch to consider such a poignant film as *Fallen Art* simply an exercise in the masturbation of an empty artistic ego. ■

We'll Always Have Tokyo

At SIGGRAPH this year, I finally learned the joys of text messaging on my cell phone. It started innocently, when someone fired off a quick message and I tentatively responded. By the end of the week my thumb was flying over the keyboard faster than the eye could follow.

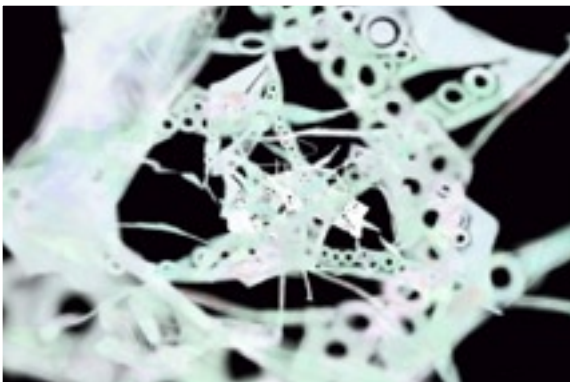
It was also at SIGGRAPH that I learned the perils of text messaging. In Yusuke Koyanagi's *Tokyo City*, about a dozen urbanites walk down the street, constantly texting to unseen recipients. Simply drawn, the humour is in their reactions to a series of escalating distractions. From obnoxious smokers to traffic accidents to flaming debris, the response is the same: absently step around the offending event, then excitedly text about it.

At every SIGGRAPH I've been to, there has been a separate selection of shorts presented by some Japanese digital arts organization or another. *Tokyo City* was part of 90 minutes' worth of work from last year's [Japan Media Arts Festival](#), which were folded in among the Animation Theater screenings. It didn't take long for me to decide that these programs are must-see events; while they explore the same themes as the Computer Animation Festival shorts (life, love, art, humour, and the selling of products)

one can say the approaches are particularly Japanese, culturally or aesthetically.

Another example of this is *Cherry-Clouds*, from the duo known as akane-maru, in which a young boy attempts to express his feelings for a girl in his class. He writes a love letter, then tries to screw up his courage to give it to her one day after school—and the entire time, the beating of his heart is represented by a group of taiko drummers, increasing their exertions as the boy gets more anxious. The multiple-payoff ending is worth more than a few guffaws.

Advertisements and other forms of corporate branding were also alive and well. Hiroyuki Nakao's *Trainsurfer* spots for MTV Japan feature a man “surfing” on top of a speeding train; in different episodes, he encounters various nemeses, allies and, on one occasion, the Beastie Boys. Using a stylized digital montage technique, the pace of the shorts matches the speed of the trains as our hero battles an octet of female ninjas and dodges various low-hanging objects. In a trio of ads for Shiseido's Uno line of hair-styling, cosmetic and anti-perspirant products, we watch from far overhead as people paint giant, good-looking manga-style men on the ground, then interact with the images and animate them by redrawing. The images affect the people that in turn affect the images, while illustrating the particular product being hyped—



all set to frisky pop music. Like the Gap commercials of the late 1990s, these ads hit the sweet spot where captivating imagery, head-bopping music, and a visual narrative come together in a way that both entertains and keeps the product in the audience's mind.

But my favourites of the Japanese CGI shorts have always been the ones that push the boundaries of the digital aesthetic. Hitoshi Akayama's *Dice*, which was also featured in the Electronic Theater, starts with a stark landscape and a single die rolling along, emitting a tone as its faces roll across the ground. It encounters other dice, sometimes passing over them or around them, sometimes combining with them in a geometric dance. Utterly mesmerizing, *Dice* works because it uses the very things animators have tried to avoid in CGI—angular, geometric shapes and regular, mechanical motion.

Going in the other direction were Takahiro Hayakawa's *Kashikokimono*, and Isao Nishigori's

SAI (Part 1) video for the group Acidman. *Kashikokimono* looks like a series of wild watercolour and ink drawings on slightly absorbent paper, shifting and swirling like some mescaline dream. *SAI (Part 1)* is less abstract, but explodes with colour while displaying a look reminiscent of hand-carved woodblocks. In both cases, the final images and movement would be impossible (or far more difficult) without the use of digital tools, but it's the analog appearance that gives the films life. By skilfully blending the best aspects of the two worlds, both directors have created films that are pure expressions of their artistic abilities; in a sense, the computer is both vital and unimportant.

Is this sentiment unique to Japan? Probably not. But, at least this year, the results are unlike anything else. The tagline for the Japan Media Arts Festival screening was "Japanese Animation: As Cool as It Gets!" It's hard to disagree. ■ *Emru Townsend*

My favourites of the Japanese CGI shorts have always been the ones that push the boundaries of the digital aesthetic.

Right: *Kashikokimono* saves the viewer the trouble of scoring psychedelic drugs; *Tokyo City* warns against the perils of cell-phone technology; love meets percussion in *Cherry-Clouds*; more trippiness in *SAI (Part 1)*.



Wilkosz and the Bear

Jason Vanderhill traces the career of the Polish animator who has charmed the children of the world

I never forgot the opening lyrics to the theme song: "I'm a bear called Jeremy, I can do most anything..." Jeremy was not your ordinary animated bear; he wanted to sing and perform in the circus and travel the world and beyond! And he did. I distinctly remembered the cruel circus master, the rolling ocean waves, a hot pursuit across the Wild West, and a magical transforming suitcase from this enchanting stop-motion animated series. But I admit, I couldn't remember everything. I could not remember the names of Jeremy's close friends, and I never

could get beyond the opening lines of the theme song.

So a few years ago, I began to search for my long lost friend. I started with the Internet, putting Google to the test, searching here and there for tidbits of information about the little bear called Jeremy. I soon learned that Jeremy was also named Barnaby in the UK, but that he was even better known as Colargol to the rest of the world. I also learned that a good number of others were also wondering what had happened to Jeremy, all of them eager to see and hear from their

childhood friend again. Eventually, my quest led me to Tadeusz Wilkosz.

Tadeusz Wilkosz was born in Kraków, Poland in 1934. After formally studying film and animation, he went on to direct at least 30 children's films. As well, he has artistically managed over 100 productions, and just last year he produced a 70-minute feature film mixing live action with stop-motion animation. He is probably best known for *Colargol*, which was based on the French children's recordings of the same name. I recently sought out Mr. Wilkosz to

ask him about his life and work as a traditional animator in Poland.

This interview with Tadeusz Wilkosz was conducted via email with questions and answers sent back and forth in English. The text has been edited slightly from its original form with wording occasionally changed for clarity and translation purposes.

Origins in Animation

Jason Vanderhill: What first sparked your interest in animation?

Above: Tadeusz Wilkosz and his most famous creation, Colargol.

Tadeusz Wilkosz: After graduating from high school in 1951, I went on to study film graphics in Prague, Czechoslovakia. At that time, Polish universities were not able to offer such fields of study, and Czech animation was world-renowned. Animation was still just beginning in Poland, and I can't say that any of the Polish animators of the day really inspired me. My first steps in animation were primarily self-taught, as I set out to make a film for my master's degree. Motivated by my literary imagination, manual skills, and artistic abilities, I decided to pursue a career in animation and puppet films.

You began your career at the Puppet Film Studio in Tuszyn, Poland where you produced your first animated film. Could you speak for a moment about this film?

After completing my training at the Czech Cartoon Studios in 1957, I trained for one year as an animator's assistant. In 1959, I made my debut with a film called *Mysie figle* (*Mouse Pranks*). I wore many hats for this film. I was the scriptwriter, the character designer, the set designer, the director, and the animator. In this film, several dozen coloured mice fought with a black cat. The film featured a lot of

movement, various visual gags, and a clear moral.

Your first film to receive an award was *Nie drażnic lwa* (*Don't Tease a Lion*), awarded in Kraków in 1960. From the start, your work has been geared towards a very young audience. Would you say this is true?

Yes and no. I would say that *Don't Tease a Lion*, like many of my subsequent works, was addressed to both children and adults. In those days, cartoons were screened before regular feature films, much like the way movie trailers are shown today. I have always wanted my films to appeal to all ages, and so I have tried to speak to both young and old alike.

Appealing to a very young audience can be tricky, especially when film festival jurors are generally much more mature. How do you prepare your stories for this young age group?

Of course, there is always a discrepancy between what jurors like to see and what children want to see. But quite simply, I believe that I know what a film for children should look like. The characters should be instantly appealing and identifiable, these characters should be placed in an orderly image of the world, evil



should be tamed and ridiculed, and there should be a clear-cut message to the story.

Your next film is a good example of this. *Dick i jego kot* is based on the legend of Dick Whittington. You won an award for this film. Can you tell us more about the award and its impact? Did this award give you the opportunity to visit America?

The award was given in 1966 in New York. It was a Blue Ribbon Award given at the International Short Film Festival for the best educational film

for children. At the time, it did not bring me much exposure, and I did not get the chance to travel to the United States as a result. During the 1960s, America was politically very far away from Poland, and I did not have the opportunity to travel as far as my film work did. In fact, I was only told in secret by a film critic that this film had been chosen for the award. But in spite of the barriers of the day, my collaborations with French, Austrian, and German productions did allow me to see many countries in Europe at a time

Above: That bear sure could get around. From France to Poland to Mexico!

“My designs were sent to France and all of them were approved except for one... Colargol!”

when it was really very difficult to travel outside of Poland.

Colargol

This brings us to the next chapter in your filmography, featuring the little singing bear named Colargol. Also known as Barnaby the Bear in the UK and Jeremy the Bear in Canada, this animated puppet was destined to travel, and the series reached a wide audience of children around the world. With investment from Albert Barillé in Paris, the French animation production company Procidis subcontracted SeMaFor Studios in Łódź to produce the popular TV series based on the successful series of children's recordings.

Animating a French-Polish co-production in the late 1960s and early 1970s must have been a challenge. Can you tell us how work on the series began?

In 1966, Albert Barillé brought his initial storyboard for the first film to the SeMaFor Studios in Łódź. It contained two dialogue scenes and three songs. It was a real challenge for us because quite frankly we did not have enough literary material, and the producer wanted to combine cel-drawn cartoon birds with a traditional puppet film. We had only a couple of days to come up with a solution with the producer

waiting in Warsaw. In one weekend, I invented the missing scenes, and I came up with the general staging for the first film. My concepts were approved by the producer, and so I started to design the puppets and the environment.

My designs were sent to France and all of them were approved except for one... Colargol! I continued to present new versions of the main character for the next few months. At last, the 30th version was approved! We succeeded in recording the songs, music and dialogue for the first episode when I was in Paris in November/December of 1966. Back in Poland I started to prepare the puppets, the set and the necessary drawings. Things appeared to be moving along nicely, but just before we started shooting the film, everything nearly came to a complete halt! There had been a clash at the studio over finances that threatened the entire project. Fortunately, the conflict was resolved, and *Colargol* continued. Mr. Barillé was able to arrange additional financing and we were able to start filming.

When did filming for the series take place, and what was involved in creating one of the thirteen-minute Colargol episodes?

After the first episode of *Colargol* was completed in 1967, production for the series continued from the end of 1968

until 1974 with only short breaks. As artistic supervisor, it was my job to write screenplays and supervise storyboards. I designed sets, puppets, scripts and props. I also supervised a team writing scripts and making puppets. I oversaw the production team during the shooting, editing, and recording of the French version of the series. Generally speaking, I was responsible for all artistic and organizational matters at the studio.

The production team typically consisted of around a dozen people: directors, animators, camera operators, sound technicians and an editing team. The complete production of one episode took about five months from start to finish, and about eleven to twelve films were made annually. Normally, I had one month to prepare the screenplay and set designs for a single episode. Filming for one episode took about three months. We always prepared six or seven episodes at any one time, and as a result there were usually six animation stages at work in three different halls. Designs for each of the puppets were rendered on 20×30 cm cards, and drawings of each set were rendered at 30×40 cm. Combined with working sketches for the 53 episodes, I once found out that if I laid out all these cards in a row, the total length of all the cards would be two kilometers!

We had to complete screenplays, storyboards and prepare music plans for each episode. Mr. Barillé wrote the final dialogue, and Procidis organised a pre-synchronic recording and soundtrack in Paris. Victor Villien, the author of the

lyrics, would occasionally update some of the songs. All of the films were realized according to the pre-recorded French dialogue and music. The Polish-language version was only made after the film was completed. The same could be said of the English, Dutch, German, and Norwegian versions.

What was the most challenging scene to produce throughout the filming of Colargol?

In episode 2, there was a scene in which Colargol was flying along with cartoon birds in order to meet the King of the Birds. This was really one of the most difficult scenes to realize. Collective scenes with puppets flying in space were very complex. Next to this, another most difficult scene was in the Wild West series, where four horse-riding bandits, in hot pursuit of an



escaping train, were shooting their guns while chasing Colargol and our friends.

It is worth mentioning that not everyone was delighted with the production, and not everything went smoothly both inside and outside the studio. Production of the series threatened the interests of older film directors who had different plans. Certain "comrades" used to use slogans like, "We will not lackey capitalists," in opposition to the series. People from Film Polski, who were our representatives, were of the opinion that the producer paid employees too little. The rank-and-file workers complained that they had too much work. From time to time they held meetings and said that I was a bad man, that films were too difficult, and that they exceeded cost limits. I somehow overcame all these obstacles, and when success was achieved, everyone was eager to clamour for rewards and recognition.

We received the Grand Prix award in Paris in 1971 for "Poranek misia" ("Morning of the Little Bear"), the first episode of *Colargol*. It was awarded in Paris right when the series was in full production.

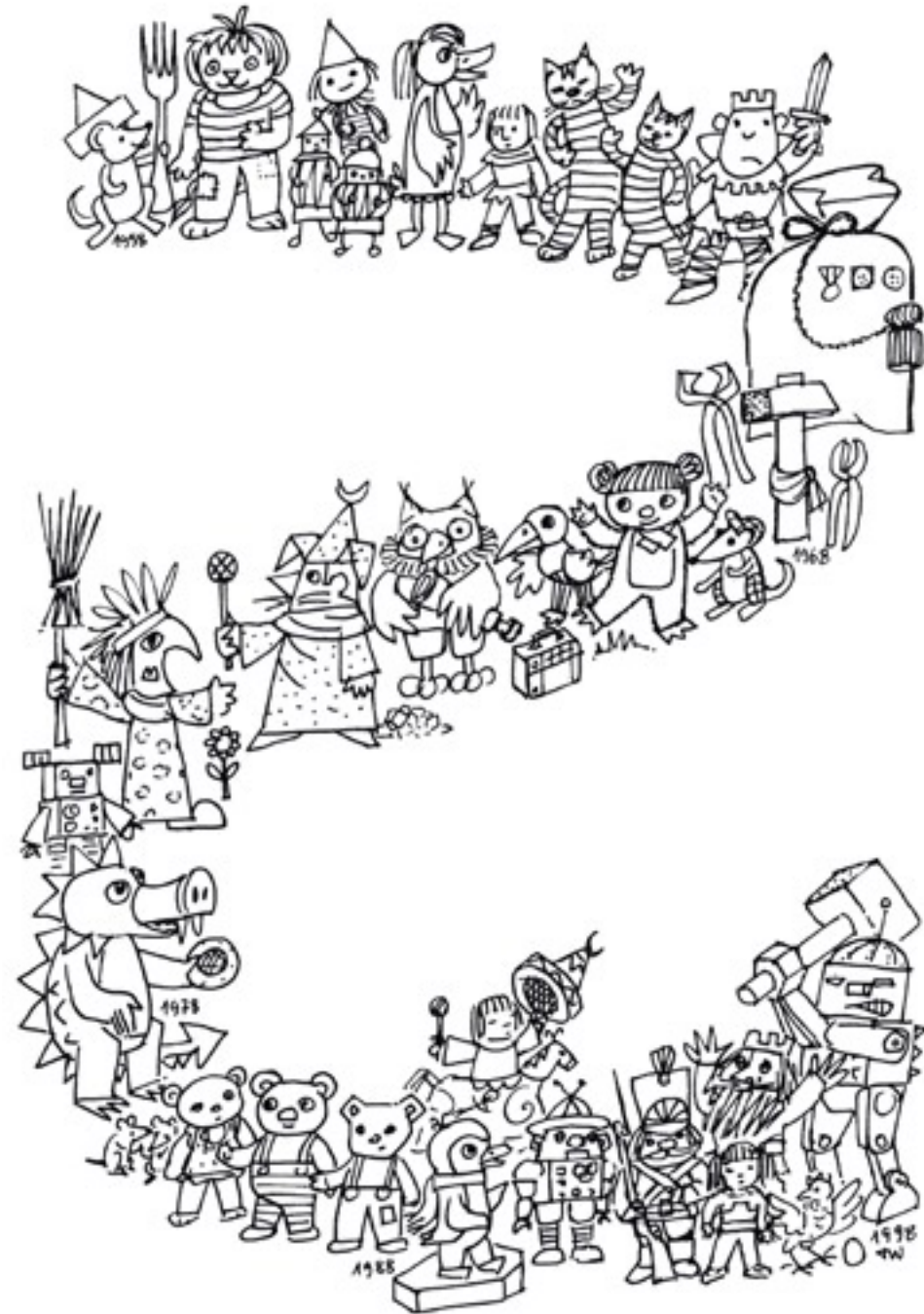
As the promotion and distribution of *Colargol* was handled by Procidis in Paris, I assume it was Procidis who had the series translated into other languages. Do you know why

Colargol became known as Barnaby in the UK, and Jeremy in Canada?

Unfortunately I do not know much about *Colargol*'s career beyond the Polish or French-speaking audience. I don't know exactly why *Colargol* was known as Jeremy or Barnaby in English. However, I did hear something from Ms. Olga Pouchine, who I met in Paris when we recorded the songs, music and dialogue. She mentioned that *Colargol* is the patented name of a Swiss cold medicine, so perhaps that offers some explanation.

Was there a falling out between Procidis and SeMaFor? When SeMaFor collapsed in 1999, all of their production rights were transferred to the Polish National Filmotheque. What happened with the rights to the program in French, English, and Norwegian? Is there any chance *Colargol* could be seen again outside of Poland?

Rights to the foreign language versions were held by Procidis, which it lost in a lawsuit against Victor Villien (the voice of Raven12 up to episode 33) and the inheritors of other authors of the original radio drama. I am guessing now that the victors of the suit hold the legal rights but Procidis holds the animation production masters. As I know, Victor Villien had high



Right: A timeline of the many characters Wilkosz has animated over the decades.

financial requirements and was not to willing to compromise. As the series was aired on television in the past, copies must exist somewhere, but to bring a program back to television would take considerable effort. I doubt whether it could happen today.

As a co-author of the screenplays, artistic manager, director, and set designer, I unfortunately do not have any rights or benefits from the series. Only recently have I received small royalties for the set design of *Colargol* from video sales here in Poland. At such occasions I am also told when and where any episodes have aired.

As the designer/creator of the puppets, do you still own any of the original puppets used for Colargol? Where is the original Colargol puppet?

About 120 *Colargol* characters were used for the production of the entire series. Most of the original *Colargol* puppets are now displayed at my permanent exhibit in the Museum of Cinematography in Łódź. I sometimes copy puppets in original material for museums and collectors.

Was Colargol an overall commercial success?

In Poland, *Colargol* was one of the most popular characters on television. Generally speaking, girls liked it more than boys. Critically, however, the series was not always favoured by the media. I once saw a notice posted by a TV "censor" advising

not to air the series, perhaps because they did not want to pay royalties for the music. Polish Television aired *Colargol* 21 times, and from 1976 to 1979, I made three feature films out of the later episodes. These were *Colargol in the Wild West*, *Colargol Conquers Outer Space*, and *Colargol and the Magic Suitcase*. These films were seen by about 1.7 million viewers and they are still reissued on VHS and even DVD here in Poland. As a result, many people have been able to enjoy the program.

A few years ago, we held a TV panel discussion about animated films on Polish Television. One of the viewers who was in his thirties phoned us and said that when he was a child, watching the adventures and troubles of *Colargol* had helped him to overcome his own sadness in life. That *Colargol* had so inspired him was a great compliment to me.

A Parade of Puppets

Following Colargol, you continued to produce animated films. In total, how many films have you produced, and how many productions have you assisted?

After the *Colargol* series, my team and I realized a series for Austrian and German Television (ZDF) called *Die Kuschelbären* (*Three Bears*), and then for Polish TV, a 26-episode series called *Maly pingwin Pik-Pok* (*Pik-Pok Little Penguin*) made from 1989 to 1992. Altogether I made 134 films, and I have directed about 30 films.

Have you formally taught animation anywhere along the way?

To realize *Colargol* I had to train my assistants in animation, and when they became directors I had to teach the next team, and so on. The same could be said for the decorators, set designers, etc. I had to upgrade their knowledge and teach them from the very start.

How has stop-motion animation changed over the years?

Classic animation has not changed much. New materials (latex, silicon) enable new means of expression. Computer recording of control images accelerates control of the movement; however, I am not a fan of computer animation, because an animator and a puppet are separated by a machine.

Your latest film, Tajemnica kwiatu paproci (The Secret of the Fern Flower) is a 70-minute feature film mixing live action and puppet animation. Were you both the writer and director of the story?

Yes, the screenplay for the story is original. I am the main co-scriptwriter, set designer and director.

The film follows four puppets living in a kindergarten who are kidnapped by two men posing as security guards. While escaping from the hands of their kidnappers, they get lost in a forest. Two of the puppet heroes are immediately captured by the ruthless boss of an illegal garbage dump in the woods, while the

other two puppets must try to save them. Along the way, they encounter a magic fern flower with supernatural power.

What age group was this film prepared for, and how has it been received?

The film was addressed to five- to ten-year-old children. They react to the film spontaneously. It does not mean that the film is faultless, and I apologize for that.

The film has screened at the Polish Film Festival in America in Chicago, at the Polish Film Festival in London, England, and at the Cairo Film Festival for Children, where you were honoured with a special tribute for your lifetime achievement as a director. You have also been invited to direct a children's play in Cairo this year. This must certainly be an honour, and I congratulate you again for this. Your animation has certainly made a positive emotional impression in the hearts of many children around the globe, and this is a noble accomplishment. Thank you again for taking the time to answer all of these questions, and best wishes for the future!

Thank you kindly. I send you my best regards from Kraków. ■



We Are Family

Two very different Japanese clans illustrate Emru Townsend's admiration of Ghibli's less famous partner

My Neighbors the Yamadas

Directed by Isao Takahata
Studio Ghibli/Walt Disney Home Entertainment

Original Japanese release in 1999

104 minutes

Pom Poko

Directed by Isao Takahata
Studio Ghibli/Walt Disney Home Entertainment

Original Japanese release in 1994

119 minutes

A point that often gets lost when discussing Disney's ventures into anime distribution is that they didn't make their 1996 deal with Hayao Miyazaki—they made it with Tokuma Shoten, which, at the time, counted the Ghibli studio as a subsidiary. But Miyazaki is the superstar, both at home and abroad, so many think of the man and the studio as interchangeable. Even the anime specialty magazine *Newtype USA* got it wrong, referring to Ghibli as “the house that Miyazaki built” in a press release earlier this year.

Let's set the record straight: Miyazaki co-founded Ghibli with longtime collaborator [Isao Takahata](#)—“longtime” meaning that when they first worked on a project together, men had yet to walk on the moon. Takahata has been less prolific than Miyazaki as a director,

directing only four animated films since the studio's beginnings. Each one of them is more overtly Japanese than Miyazaki's, less fantastic, and more grounded in the modern era—but they make for fine additions to the Ghibli filmography. At the same time, those qualities make them the antithesis of Western animated films, so it's understandable why Disney, in releasing the two most recent of his animated features, has done so with less of a splash than the Miyazaki films.

Of the two, *Pom Poko* is the one I least expected to ever see on these shores. It's the most Japanese of the two, right down to the original title. That would be *Heisei Gassen Tanuki Ponpoko*, roughly translated as “Ponpoko, the Tanuki War of the Heisei Era”—a play on the Japan's emperor-centric calendar system, with a dash of onomatopoeia (“ponpoko” is the sound of beating hands against flesh, such as the tummy or—well, you'll find out) and a nod to the film's main characters: [tanuki](#).

Although *Pom Poko* calls them raccoons and they look a lot like raccoons, tanuki are actually a species of dog. Like kitsune, or foxes, legend has it that they have shape-shifting powers. Unlike foxes, tanuki are native to Japan. Those two changes—the title and the protagonists' species—are the only significant alterations to this film, easily one of the most genuinely



structured and more episodic than any other Ghibli film, as Takashi and Matsuko Yamada try to survive life with their kids Noboru and Nonoko, as well as Takashi's mother Shige. (And their dog Pochi. But all he does is look surly.) The look is also unique among the Ghibli films. The looseness of Hisaichi Ishii's drawing style wouldn't work for the lengthy running time, but Takahata's typical near-realist style would not be suitable either, so the style is somewhere in between. The characters' models are more consistent, but rendered with a sketchy line to keep the feeling of a quick drawing.

Left: The tanuki practice their transformation powers; the Yamadas enjoy a quiet moment at home.

(It should also be noted that this is the first Ghibli film to utterly immerse itself in digital animation, using digital ink and paint and sketchily-rendered 3D CGI.)

Though generally organized around a theme, the gags in *Yamadas* come in different shapes and sizes. Some are short, snappy pieces, like when Takashi and Matsuko fight for control of the television with the calm, physical intensity of martial arts masters. Then there are the longer segments, like when the bickering family realize they've accidentally left Nonoko sleeping on a bench at the department store. As the four fight traffic to get back, their imaginations start to run wild and they argue with each other, getting

leads the first strikes against the humans, he personally and pitilessly kills two construction workers. This is where the second plot comes in: the tug-of-war between the militant Gonta and the more accommodating Shokichi. Most of the tanuki prefer to use their power of transformation (a process the males can take to extreme lengths using their generous tanuki testes—remember what I said about the “ponpoko” sound?) to wage a psychological war, but Gonta, having seen his childhood home devastated, favours nothing less than the maiming and murdering of any human who sets foot in their forest.

If you've ever studied the histories of revolutionary groups, you can see various parallels in *Pom Poko*—not just in the clash of principles, but in the conflicts between principle and reality. Gonta and his hardliners hate humans with

a passion, but love the fried chicken and pizza they make and follow the local development's progress by watching the nightly news on television. Shokichi admits that he doesn't actually hate humans, but he's clear-eyed enough to see that letting them build unchecked will destroy them. It's this tension that leads to not one, but two all-out attacks, using tactics favoured by both camps. And it's Takahata's sure hand that allows the scenes to switch from cartoon violence and gags to terrible carnage without seeming contradictory. Ultimately, *Pom Poko* retains its playful spirit, but there's an undeniable sadness at the movie's conclusion.

My Neighbors the Yamadas has nowhere near the scale of *Pom Poko*, focusing as it does on a Japanese family of five. Based on a four-panel comic strip in *Asahi Shimbun*, *Yamadas* is far less

charming, funny, playful, melancholy and tragic movies I've seen in a long time.

Pom Poko's plot is, at its core, an ecological one. As housing demands surge in Tokyo, humans push into the forests and old farmland, eventually encroaching on the homes of the freewheeling, life-loving tanuki. When two tanuki clans start warring for increasingly scarce resources, the clan elders manage to unite everyone to start a war against the human invaders.

The idea of critters fighting to save their forest might raise *Ferngully* alarm bells, but the war in *Pom Poko* is simultaneously more and less goofy. The tanuki are good-natured and easily distracted by nature; planning sessions can go awry just by mentioning food. But at the same time, the stakes of life and death are stated in no uncertain terms. When the militant Gonta

testier with each delay. There's never any real sense of menace or fear, as we see Nonoko wake up, realize what's happened, utterly ignore the safety lessons taught in school and take control of the situation. Absent any threat, there's nothing left for the viewer to do but laugh at the Yamadas' reactions to the crisis, and maybe wince a little as we recognize the petty and immature things we may have done ourselves.

In less assured hands, there would probably be the temptation to make the Yamadas a dysfunctional family, mining mutual dislike for laughs. And it might seem like

that, since in any given segment, anyone can be vain, selfish, stupid, or spiteful. But by the same token, anyone can be sympathetic. Takashi can seem overbearingly patriarchal and foolish at times and Shige can seem like a snappish harridan, but toward the end of the movie he finds himself freezing up in a crisis situation, leaving her to talk their way out of a potential late-night altercation with some roughnecks. It's in this crunch that Shige reveals her gentler side; appealing to the bullies' sense of decency, her voice softens more than at any other point in the film. Afterward,

however, Takashi finds himself alone, pondering his failure to act.

And this is crucial: the Yamadas are capable of self-reflection, and acknowledge their flaws. At heart, *My Neighbors the Yamadas* is about five human beings who live the maxim that familiarity breeds contempt, but ultimately they are a family, happy to belong to one another. That it's expressed with lightly diluted acid instead of syrup doesn't diminish the strength of their bond.

Takahata may not be as famous as his longtime associate, but these two movies will prove to the newcomer that the two are a perfect match. Unlike Miyazaki, his strongest themes are not war, respect for nature, or the ecology. They are the bonds of family and what it means to be Japanese. Like Miyazaki, Takahata likes to explore what it means to be human—even if he needs tanuki to show us how.

DVD Features: *My Neighbors the Yamadas* and *Pom Poko*: 1.85:1 aspect ratio; English and Japanese language tracks; English subtitles; Region 1.

DVD Extras: *My Neighbors the Yamadas*: "Behind the Microphone" interviews with English voice talent; complete storyboards; Japanese theatrical trailers. *Pom Poko*: Complete storyboards; Japanese theatrical trailers and television commercials. ■

Singing Pixar's Praises

Toy Story 10th Anniversary Edition

Directed by John Lasseter
 Pixar Animation Studios/Walt Disney Home Video
 Originally released in 1995
 81 minutes

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of *Toy Story*, Disney has just released the film as a two-disc DVD set. When I got the DVD package in my hands, I stared at the cover for the longest time. Has it really been ten years since we were first introduced to Sheriff Woody, Buzz Lightyear and, for many, Pixar? Doesn't it feel like it was so much longer ago? I suppose this feeling is both a testament to the filmmakers, for creating characters so familiar that they feel as if they've always been around, and a mark of our increasingly computer-animated times.

Toy Story is being celebrated on two fronts: for its immense (and deserved) popularity among audiences and for its incredible influence in the world of entertainment. Since its release those ten long years ago, the animation landscape has decidedly changed. Here's the capsulated version: Computer animation is no longer the exception, it's now the norm. Hand drawn animation (at least from American studios)

Below: Buzz shows a skeptical Woody the light.



is now something of the redheaded stepchild of the film industry. Animation has seen a new emergence in attention and prestige, such as the addition of an [Academy Award category for best animated feature](#). Pixar went from being a virtual unknown to perhaps the most popular and influential studio in Hollywood, certainly eclipsing all others in the public's mind as *the* studio for animation. The popularity for animation has crossed media with television seeing a large influx of new animated programs. While this may not all have been started by *Toy Story*, the movie about two characters who hang out with a talking potato can inarguably be seen as a major catalyst for this change.

The movie, which took its story from a premise we've all imagined—what if our toys could come alive?—is a sweet, funny and layered film that immediately captured the attention and fascination of the public. While they may have initially been drawn in by the novelty of computer animation, they came back because it was a compelling story that was engagingly and creatively told.

To say that this DVD release is a celebration of the film would be an understatement. It is loaded with (genuinely) engaging extras, the kind that don't simply rehash talking points but draw you into the creation, execution and distribution of a cinematic milestone. If you've ever wondered what Pixar is really like in their approach to animation, you can discover that, and so much more, here.

Among the extras are:

- Interviews and commentaries from a number of key participants in the creation of the film including John Lasseter, Andrew Stanton, Pete Docter, Bill Reeves, Ralph Eggleston, Ralph Guggenheim and Bonnie Arnold
- Design galleries and story sessions
- Features on the film, its impact and of course the technicalities of how it was created.

There are also several deleted scenes, some fully animated and others in various states of production. These, along with literally hours of other animation tests, storyboards, pitch reels, production materials, and cast interviews provide a fascinating look at how this classic came together. As stated earlier, the pieces in this set are deep and informative, for both fans of the movie and of the art of animation in general.

For me, some of the key extras explore the oft-forgotten man in this production, Randy Newman. Much has already been made of the contributions of Pixar's creative team and the pitch-perfect voice casting (including the tender and brash Tom Hanks and Tim Allen, respectively) but far too often the contributions of composer Randy Newman have been ignored. Mr. Newman was an integral and key part of the success of this film. His score is playful yet tinged with longing and fear, and he uses this to subtly portray some of the movie's central themes—fear of loss, fear of growing up, fear of being forgotten. He also provides some perfect vocal renditions of his work. Mr. Newman has a unique voice—it's playful and

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sharp with just a tinge of worldliness, all characteristics that fit the songs in the film perfectly. So perfectly that even though none of the characters sing, the songs are key to the action and the performance of them memorable.

All too often a movie is released on DVD and then you get the Collectors Edition, the Special Edition, the Director's Edition, Anniversary Edition, and so on. Ninety percent of these movies don't deserve this treatment. *Toy Story* does. This is a movie that should be watched, studied, deconstructed and appreciated (especially in these times within the animation industry) for the important contribution and change it brought to filmmaking, animated and otherwise. This DVD set will allow you to do all of that, and perhaps most importantly, have fun while you're at it.

DVD Features: 1.77:1 aspect ratio; English, French and Spanish language tracks; Region 1.

DVD Extras: *Legacy of Toy Story*, *The Making of Toy Story* and *Designing Toy Story* featurettes; *Designing Color* and sound design documentary shorts; filmmaker audio commentaries; director and story team round table; deleted scenes; early animation tests; Design Gallery slide show; storyboard pitch;

story reel; production materials; publicity materials; "You've Got a Friend in Me" music video; song demos. ■ *Noell Wolfgram Evans*

The Incredible Longing

The Place Promised in Our Early Days

Directed by Makoto Shinkai
CoMix Wave/ADV Films
Original Japanese release in 2004
90 minutes

Adolescence is a time of life when almost anything seems possible. There are times during everyone's youth when we have that aching sense that our lives stand on the cusp of something great, something stupendous, maybe even something apocalyptic, if only we could find the key to make it happen. This incredible longing to do something magnificent lies at the heart of Makoto Shinkai's stunning film, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*.

Shinkai is already known to the animation community in Japan and the West as the creator of the anime short *Voices of a Distant Star*, which he created completely on his own desktop Mac. After winning several major awards for that short he collaborated with CoMix Wave

to do his first theatrical film, *Beyond the Clouds. The Place Promised in Our Early Days* premiered in Japan last fall and has just been released in North America on DVD.

The film is set in an alternative present day where Japan has been divided and occupied since the end of World War II, with the Soviets controlling the northern island of Hokkaido (here referred to by its older name of Ezo) while the US controls the rest of Japan. At some point in the '60s or '70s the "Union" (as it is referred to in the film) stopped all travel and communications between the island and the rest of Japan, an event called "the separation," that divided families and friends caught on opposite sides. After that the Union builds a mysterious column that towers tens of miles into the sky. Against this backdrop is the story of three middle-school friends in the northernmost prefecture of Aomori, where the tower is a familiar object in the distance. Two boys, Hiroki Fujisawa and Takuya Shirakawa, are working to build a homemade jet plane. Their dream is to fly their jet, the *Bela Cielo*, across the strait into Ezo and uncover the secret of the tower. The third friend is Sayuri Sawatari, a girl who has strange dreams and premonitions of the future. Both boys have crushes on her, and when they reveal to her their secret plans to fly the jet to Ezo,

she asks to come along. They make a promise to her—the promise of the title—that they will fly her to the tower.

At this point the story jumps ahead three years. Sayuri disappeared after that summer without saying anything. Discouraged by this, the boys never complete or fly their plane, and then go separate ways. Takuya has taken his innate scientific talent and gone to work with a government research group trying to develop a way of tapping into alternate universes using advanced quantum physics. They have discovered that the Union's tower is a giant alternate universe generator designed as a weapon. Meanwhile, Hiroki has fled to Tokyo to attend high school and lives by himself. He is depressed and plagued by dreams of Sayuri, who appears to be lost in a universe where she is the only living thing. As events unfold, the boys discover independently that Sayuri fell into a coma at the end of that summer, but somehow her dreaming is connected to the tower. The government has been keeping her hidden in a hospital, fearing that her dreams may be the only thing stopping the tower from obliterating Japan. With war about to break out between the Union and the US-occupied Japan over the tower and Ezo, Hiroki and Takuya return to Aomori to finish the plane. Hiroki then makes a

desperate flight through the war zone with the sleeping Sayuki in the hopes that, by finally fulfilling their promise, they may somehow create the alternate reality of their hoped-for dreams.

The first thing everyone notices about Shinkai's work is the jaw-dropping beauty of the artwork; every scene practically glows from an inner light. This is an animation where almost every frame could stand alone as a still image. In interviews, Shinkai talks about the power of scenery and the spiritual meaning it has for him. These gorgeous images add to the sense of longing in the film. The story, however, has some problems. For all the complex movement of characters and hidden backstories, the story never quite completely comes together and has some

inconsistencies. Even though the boys are receiving help from a small-time military contractor (with an ulterior motive for seeing the plane completed), you still have to suspend a *lot* of disbelief to accept that two teenagers could build a working high-altitude jet, much less be able to fly it expertly the first time they try. Still, the power of the story is not in its logic, but in its ability to evoke emotions. The ache of nostalgia and the longing for a world where things go right and all promises are kept practically overwhelms the viewer.

Part of the credit for this sense of wistful loss goes to the musical score by Tenmon. Although it only consists of a few themes worked over and over throughout the film, it fits perfectly with the mood. The simple, sad violin piece "Sayuri's Theme" grabs the viewer's heart and defines the whole

Right: In *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*, the mysterious Union tower is as familiar in the background as the clouds in the sky.



sense of the story in the same the way that “Ashokan Farewell” defined Ken Burns’ documentary *The Civil War*.

The Place Promised in Our Early Days has already won numerous animation awards in Japan (in fact, the three-minute preview created in 2002 won an award) and some critics there are already hailing Shinkai as “the next Miyazaki.” For his beautiful artwork that’s true, but he still has a ways to go to equal the master in his storytelling abilities. Still, at only 32 years old, Shinkai has time to grow and we can look forward to much more from him. For now, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* has to rank in the top tier of anyone’s list of high-quality anime, and I’m already buying copies to give out as presents.

DVD Features: Anamorphic widescreen; English and Japanese language tracks; English subtitles; Region 1.

DVD Extras: Video interviews with the Japanese cast; video interview with Makoto Shinkai; Japanese trailers. ■ *Marc Hairston*

Island Living

Fafner Vol. 1: Arcadian Project

Directed by Nobuyoshi Habara
Xebec/Geneon Entertainment
Original Japanese broadcast in 2004
100 minutes

In the world of *Fafner*, Japan was pretty much destroyed about thirty years ago thanks to a war with the horribly destructive alien race known as Festum.

Descending, godlike, onto planet Earth and towering in the heavens above like titans, Festum are vicious giants, swathed in gold. There is very little that humankind can do to fight against these extraterrestrial demons. However, Tatsumiya Island has found a way to keep their land mass exempt from the aliens’ path as well as keep from the prying eyes of international militaries on the lookout for Festum. And just how do the inhabitants of Tatsumiya Island maintain their peaceful paradise? They hide.

The island itself uses a camouflage that hides the entire island from the outside world. The technological advancements of this island are one thing; however, the islanders’ motives for having the technology are another. In a move to keep the as yet unharmed populace free from military conflict, those of Tatsumiya Island have hid themselves from the public eye. But as Festum’s invasion spreads to the island’s region, it becomes abundantly clear that select residents of this island must take up arms. These people must now balance the safety of their entire island against their exposure to a war-torn world.

Fafner is a science fiction and action series that offers a huge cast of characters and one ominous threat, hoping that somewhere down the line things will even out. At the forefront are a variety of humanoid mecha and fighter jets, piloted by the island’s teenage population. The conflict between those of the hidden island and Festum must remain a secret battle as well as a public challenge.

Fafner is a science fiction and action series that offers a huge cast of characters and one ominous threat, hoping that somewhere down the line things will even out.

To defeat Festum, everyone on the island who was previously unaware of the invaders (much less of the war-torn world outside), must know of the dire situation. Likewise, to keep the island’s peace self-contained, isolation from external nations is essential. It is this slightly paradoxical train of events that carries the anime *Fafner*, through and through.

Anime fans looking for a futuristic fantasy title, whose reluctant heroes have a spark of jealousy here and there, and anime fans looking for an up-to-date mecha romp will find *Fafner* a rather enjoyable program. *Fafner*, the actual mecha, is viewed in the anime as a saviour of sorts, and as the ultimate—and only—weapon capable of saving those of the disenfranchised island community from invading forces.

The unassuming Kazuki Makabe is the chosen pilot of the mecha, despite his not knowing of *Fafner* (or the destruction of the outside world) until just a few days prior to his first piloting experience. Like most reluctant heroes, Kazuki has his own reservations about whether or not the war he is fighting is just.

The storyline to *Fafner* is very confident—aliens invade Earth and teenagers have to save their home island—but does not place too much trust

in the audience regarding their prior knowledge of the genre. And there are a few general story aspects that force me to question whether or not *Fafner* is an anime series capable of becoming more than your typical kid-hero adventure. This includes a lack of background information on the war, the unnecessarily large cast of characters (most of which are just begging for screen time), and of course, the general predictability of genre titles.

The largest setback for *Fafner* lies in the fact that when watching this anime from the beginning, it is more as if you are listening to a conversation starting in the very middle. You feel that you’re missing a good deal of the exposition of the general story, but as the show progresses, you still have a good sense of where the story is going. This isn’t a problem if you can watch an anime with little or no serious consideration for its completeness; but this does present a dilemma for those wishing for a more comprehensive and innovative storyline.

Not only is the audience left in the dark about the history or purpose of Tatsumiya Island, but the actual characters of the anime seem apathetic to the circumstance as well. One would think that learning about the destruction of their home country and being tossed headfirst

into a war against aliens would be discomfoting... but not to these ignorant kids.

Nevertheless, the aspects of *Fafner* that set it apart from other science fiction mecha stories include both the series' conventional and creative framework. The music is dark and brooding, but is still very rhythmic. It gives you the sense and emotion that these characters are battling against their fate, trying to reverse the inevitable. The animation quality is far above par, despite the rather ugly character designs. The smooth, digital animation used for most of the mechanical designs makes things appear very slick.

It is possible for one to argue successfully that the cast for *Fafner* is needlessly large due to the audience being forced to recognize not just a dozen high-school students, but their parents and guardians as well. But even in saying such, there are a few character personalities that stand out from the rest. Such as one girl, Sakura Kaname, a teen whose father died as a fighter-jet pilot against Festum. Sakura's resolve to fight is weighed by actual, unrealistic expectations of success. More so than other characters of this anime, she has fallen into the line of duty by choice, and not by accident.

Fafner thus far is a brightly animated sci-fi chronicle about the difficulty of maintaining peace, however much of a sham peace it may be. If the series detours from its meandering tale of public security and more towards character-specific tales of maturity—even if just a little bit—then

chances are that *Fafner* will evolve from a good program into a great one.

DVD Features: 1.33:1 aspect ratio; English and Japanese language tracks; English subtitles.; Region 1

DVD Extras: Textless opening and ending; line-art gallery. ■ *Aaron H. Bynum*

Itty Bitty Screening Space

Appleseed

Directed by Shinji Aramaki

Digital Frontier/Geneon

Entertainment

Originally released theatrically in 2004
105 minutes

Samurai Champloo Vol. 1

Directed by Shinichiro Watanabe

Manglobe/Geneon Entertainment

Originally broadcast in 2003

50 minutes

PlayStation Portable

Sony Computer Entertainment

In the 21st-century media landscape, it's all about the hi-def. We want bigger TVs, more detail, higher resolution, and more speaker channels. A 27" stereo TV? Please. The baseline for fans of the moving image is six speakers and a screen so big and detailed you can see the paintbrush strokes in Bugs Bunny's cel paint. Right?

Wrong. The fact is, when the medium's convenient and the sound and image are clear, most people will watch anything on anything. Which is why the notion of watching video on Sony's PlayStation

Portable (PSP) was appealing from the get-go. Its wide 11-cm LCD screen is large for a handheld game, but the device itself is reasonably compact and lightweight. That also goes for its official movie medium, Sony's proprietary UMD (Universal Media Disc), a two-inch magneto-optical disc that you pop into the drive on the PSP's underside.

The first movie released in the Americas on the tiny new format was *Spider-Man 2* (a Sony title, naturally), but several companies have reached into their animation catalogue for UMD releases. Among the first handful of those were two Geneon titles, *Appleseed* and *Samurai Champloo*; perfect test subjects to see if watching animation on the PSP is a viable concept.

First things first: the PSP's screen is remarkably bright, colourful, and sharp. There's no mistaking it for a 56" high-definition television, but there's also no eyestrain involved trying to follow the action. I only had problems with *Appleseed*, when fine lines were set against colours that didn't contrast as much.

Talk to enough computer geeks and animators, and you'll find they often come back to the same rule: pare things down to the essentials. A UMD disc holds 1.8 gigabytes of information, less than 20% the capacity of a store-bought DVD. That means a lot gets thrown out: at 480×272, the PSP's display packs about 40% of the pixel information as you'd find on a DVD image, and it uses a more compact algorithm for encoding video. The

UMDs I watched both had only stereo sound, unlike the multiple track options found on DVDs; UMD audio is also compressed using Sony's ATRAC format.

Some of the features we expect of DVDs, like chapter stops, multiple audio tracks and subtitles, are still available. But a lot of extras were missing from both UMDs. The *Samurai Champloo* DVD had only a teaser trailer and a music video as extras, so their absence on the UMD is hardly a loss. (It should be mentioned that the UMD has two episodes; the DVD had four.) *Appleseed* is particularly sparse, lacking the DVD's commentaries, music cues, and staff profiles. And of course, nothing on the extra *Appleseed* DVD made the UMD cut.

So DVDs are still the premium medium. But if you want to watch your cartoons on the go, the the PSP/UMD combination is a pretty good one. ■ *Emru Townsend*

Armen Boudjikianian is a digital and traditional animator residing in Montreal. He has a BFA in Film Animation from Concordia University. He lives his life frame-by-frame, currently in “pose-to-pose” mode. He hopes that one day, it will be “straight ahead.”

Aaron H. Bynum is a freelance writer and full-time college student in English Studies. He spends most of his time writing all sorts of literature, keeping a very close eye on both Eastern and Western animation industries, reading philosophy, sleeping in, and writing some more.

Janeann Dill is an artist, filmmaker, scholar and Jules Engel biographer. She is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the New College at the University of Alabama where she teaches an interdisciplinary seminar in Creativity.

Noell Wolfgram Evans is a freelance writer living in Columbus, Ohio. Winner of the 2002 Thurber Treat Award, he enjoys a number of things, mainly laughing with his family.

Marc Hairston is a professional space physicist at the University of Texas at Dallas and a lifelong animation fan. He has co-taught several literature courses at UT

Dallas that include anime and manga in their required texts. He is a regular speaker at the Schoolgirls and Mobilesuits workshops at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and is currently co-editing the book *Masters of Anime*.

Mark Mayerson is a 29-year veteran of the animation industry and teaches part time at Sheridan College. He is currently enrolled at York University, working toward a master’s degree in film history and criticism.

Jason Vanderhill is a longtime fan of stop-motion animation, and *Colargol/Jeremy the Bear* was his very first favourite television program.

Emru Townsend is animation’s Renaissance man. He sees the connections between Japanese and American animation, stop-motion and CGI, the art and the industry, the fiercely independent and the relentlessly commercial. He has been preaching his Unified Animation Theory worldview since 1989, and is the founding editor of *fps*.

A longtime animation fan, **René Walling** was the driving force behind *fps* for a number of years during Emru Townsend’s hiatus. He is very happy to be back in the passenger seat.

Where to Get It

How to find the titles mentioned in this issue

Animation: From Script to Screen	Amazon.com
The Animation Book	Amazon.com
The Animator’s Workbook	Amazon.com
Appleseed (UMD)	Amazon.com
Digital Animation Bible	Amazon.com
Eisenstein on Disney	Amazon.com
The Encyclopedia of Animation Techniques	Amazon.com
Fafner Vol. 1: Arcadian Project	Amazon.com
Fallen Art	fallen-art.com
The Illusion of Life	Amazon.com
Lupin the 3rd: Farewell to Nostradamus	Amazon.com
My Neighbors the Yamadas	Amazon.com
The Place Promised in Our Early Days	Amazon.com
PlayStation Portable	Amazon.com
Pom Poko	Amazon.com
Samurai Champloo (UMD)	Amazon.com
SIGGRAPH 2005 Video Review	ACM e-store
Toy Story 10th Anniversary Edition	Amazon.com