

Someone must pump fuel. Someone will not be harmed. This will be done now.

*This is an altered version of a text commissioned for the catalogue of the exhibition Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg: Here, Agnes Jamieson Gallery, Mar 31 – April 30, 2016*

Dziga Vertov's film *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) begins with a prologue, during part of which is seen the interior of an empty movie theatre. A montage sets the scene: curtained screen; rows of seats; lighting sconce; velvet rope across an entrance; projector. It is a world without motion. Finally, the projectionist enters, to remind that this is a film, and not a sequence of still photographs.

That empty theatre is a world of things, but not a world for things. In one sense, it is scenery patiently awaiting the entrance of actors. Yet something strange happens when the actors – actually 'the audience' – enter the theatre: the chairs open themselves up. It is a gesture of invitation, and it is a welcome extended to the audience outside of the film as well. Here are things that want to accommodate us, work with us, and improve us. They welcome us back after our long estrangement from their useful and solid presence, back from that time when they were but commodities.

From today's vantage point, these chairs might be considered frightening. A message from the realm of the inhuman is rarely a good thing. What else are they capable of? The seats open like jaws - are they going to swallow those people?

Disingenuous questions to be sure, since we know Vertov's chairs move by virtue of stop motion animation. Claiming consciousness for the seats is like ascribing life to a player piano or a puppet. That is the worldview of children. Think of the stuffed bear in Don Freeman's book *Corduroy* (1968), wandering around a department store at night. He doesn't move in the presence of the child who buys him, but to her he is a living friend. Do children see in things signs of alien life that we miss, or do they give life to things? Either way, to paraphrase the central question of Scott Bukatman's *The Poetics of Slumberland*: where does that life come from?

So, just who picked up the bill and who made who? When kids get a bit older and more independent, they start to encounter the principle of the dystopian. Exit Herbie, enter Megatron and the T-800. This is not only an issue of humans coping with a world of things that seem alive, but also of children navigating a material culture conditioned by the values and aspirations of other humans, namely adults. If Pinocchio wants to be a *real* boy, he has to stop misbehaving. As Bukatman notes, in that point, the film gets it all wrong.

The poorly functioning, sometimes misbehaving object is a motif in the work of Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg, and it drives the narrative of their stop

motion animation film, *The Way Things Are* (2013). It presents an urban setting – actually a composite of parts of Brooklyn where Hanson and Sonnenberg once lived, shopped, socialized and worked – rendered in miniature, carved out of green and blue-hued polystyrene in the manner of many of their life-scale sculptures.

It is night and, as with *Man With a Movie Camera*, a few motionless shots set the scene. The first gives a view, centred on a water tower and a dead piece of automata in the form of a stopped clock, across some rooftops. The next shot looks down into the street. The windows of the buildings are lit, as are a few streetlights. Shoved up against the buildings are dumpsters, pallets, barrels and some old windows in frames. The final establishing shot is at street level, framing a mailbox, garbage can, stop sign, hydrant and a bicycle leaning against a lamppost.

The factory tools may wait for the city's inhabitants to rise in the morning sequences of *Man With A Movie Camera*, but the weird theatre chairs at least suggest that something more could happen. Such as that stock narrative wherein a secret world of things comes to life while humans sleep or are otherwise absent or inattentive. That story type is closely associated with cartoons, perhaps because it is an allegory of the elemental purpose of animation, which is simply to make the inanimate move. There are examples ranging from Disney's *The Clock Store* (1931) and Warner's *Goofy Groceries* (1941), to Pixar's *Toy Story* trilogy (1995, 1999, 2010). In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai points out that such narratives are a twist on the fantasy that one day we will engineer a world of things that will do everything for us. It is also the structuring device of Hanson and Sonnenberg's film, though events play out somewhat differently there.

Returning to roof level, the camera itself breaks the stillness, tracking to centre the frame upon a pair of lawn chairs. As with Vertov's film, a stop motion animated chair signals that there is something strange and vital about this world of things. In this case, however, the chair flops over for no good reason. It is as if the invisible finger of God gave it a flick. If it was alive... it has surely expired now?

The viewer is thus warned to question the relationship between cause and effect in the subsequent chain of events in the narrative. A wind blows through the streets, causing the gates of a chain link fence to rattle and paper to scatter. A garage door opens, and a Zamboni emerges. A stop sign bashes in a mailbox, causing the box to crumple under the force of its blows. Lampposts toss around the bike, some garbage cans, and a dumpster. We catch a glimpse of graffiti inside the garage that reads "NO RULES". Falling from a rooftop, a barrel commits suicide. The Zamboni crashes into the spilled dumpster. Throughout, we hear the sound of metal on metal. Yeah, but remember that chair?

One lamppost urinates on the sidewalk, leaving a yellow puddle. Finally, we see the only other warm colour in the film, the flickering red lights of a workshop. It is a classic device for the animator, director or studio executive to appear as a character, or to be referred to as an off-screen presence, in cartoons. Scott Bukatman, Norman

M Klein and Donald Crafton all have written histories of animation rich with examples of this, such as the Fleischer *Out of the Inkwell* (1918-1929) cartoons, or *The Big Snooze* (1946), in which Elmer Fudd tears up his Warner Bros. contract. Often, a struggle results: in *Duck Amuck* (1953), Daffy has a hard time keeping up with the scenery being whipped out from under him. In the case of *The Way Things Are* though, the inhabitants of the workshop might be too scared to come out and walk in the midst of what they have wrought. That or they don't care.

The narrative returns to the rooftop, to start again. Maybe the animators knew that once they created the first loop, this machine world could keep on running without them. Wasn't God a watchmaker?

As Bukatman's point regarding Pinocchio suggests, what is most antisocial about these objects – their uncooperativeness, their aggression, their flaunting of the task of telling a story, their refusal to do anything for an identifiable reason – might in some perverse way be what is most redeeming, even human, about them. Maybe Hanson and Sonnenberg's tools are ones we could work with after all, if only we watch where we sit. We could produce a comedy: of all the machines that come to life in *Maximum Overdrive* (1986), the one the viewer can likely empathize with most is the ATM that calls Stephen King an asshole. Surely a sense of humor is among the most human of all qualities?

If that's all we've got, though, we might be taking too dim a view of humanity. It is hard to valorize the antisocial when at one end of its continuum is the sociopathic, as with the killer tire that stars in Quentin Dupieux's live action horror film *Rubber* (2010). If we are going to survive the shifting landscape that has resulted from the breath of machines, we've got to come together. If we forget that, we have the movies to remind us.

Indeed, the rationale for montage, and for *Man With a Movie Camera*, is to bring together that which is separated by time and space. Vertov's claim is that the fragments of montage are connected in ways we could not see without cut and paste techniques. The camera eye is a perfect eye, substituted for our fallible one. Actually it might be more accurate to say that the camera trains us to see like a camera: as Annette Michelson notes, Vertov was structuring his film as a montage even in the scouting and planning stages, well before taking his first shot.

Following this principle, montage, and the related aesthetic of collage – a term that could be interpreted to imply that the constituent bits are not as worked over and processed into a whole as they are in montage – has helped us reorganize almost all aspects of life. From the urban planning theories of Rowe and Koetter's *Collage City* (1978), to the assemblage sculpture of Jimmie Durham. From the locker door of the archetypal teenager, to the playlists of Spotify users. From Black Flag posters to aggregating news sites like the Drudge Report. The myth of Canada is that it is a mosaic: people have come together as in a collage.

This last example begs a question. When things come together, what is the nature of the place where they meet? In *The Way Things Are*, Hanson and Sonnenberg have brought aspects of their own work together, as many of their older sculptures appear in the film as characters, including *Fences* (2004), *Scoreboard* (2004), *Zamboni* (2005), *Bully* (2004), and the street signs of *No Rules Union* (2006). It is a retrospective in miniature, and in that sense brings to mind Marcel Duchamp's multiple retrospectives in suitcases, issued as *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-41).

Setting aside the fact that these miniature artworks might then have to be considered to be replicants, fighting it out in a world where there may not be any originals left, what the framed photo collages Hanson and Sonnenberg made from the stop motion animation film's stills remind us of is that the film itself is also a collage. From the glued bits of polystyrene, to the composite of sites in Brooklyn, to the gathered works of the retrospective, to the structure of animation itself, which is a montage of streaming still images.

Like the polystyrene set of the film, the series of photo collages constitute spaces, cobbled together piece by piece. They are assembled and experienced over time. They superficially recall David Hockney's famous 'joiners'. Hockney similarly employs photo collage to break down the window of the picture plane into a textured and materialized surface. Yet his goal, invested as it is in the example of Cubism, is the inverse of Hanson and Sonnenberg's. Hockney reconstitutes some sense of an original experience of moving through a real space: shuffling part way around a desk, or a desert highway, or people at a table playing Scrabble. Hanson and Sonnenberg do not reconstitute a sense of moving through their set as much as a sense of watching a thickened and scrambled version of their animated film.

Many of these collages bear only a tenuous relationship to the layout of the set. They produce strong push and pull effects, by virtue of the way close-ups are mashed up with distant views, including blurred elements out of the camera's depth of field. The collage fragments are less shards of a cohesive space opening up to us, and more panels that spatially plot out a minimal narrative that we can navigate in an eccentric way. A Zamboni appears in one of the collages, but within that collage, it is only shown in a single fragment. That fragment might be thought of as a close-up panel, or perhaps a cutaway to a character about to enter the scene. What this suggests is that the collages are a highly materialized reworking of the principles of animated film, or are on a continuum with it: in that case, our perusal of them is more related to the way one looks at contemporary comics, with their intensely stylized page layouts, than the way one experiences joiners.

Turning to the second series of collages, entitled *Here*, the same dynamics are at work, with an added emphasis on the question of where here is, exactly. Produced after Hanson and Sonnenberg moved from Brooklyn to Minden, Ontario, they suggest a fish out of water comedy: a *Northern Exposure* with things. We see the familiar urban lampposts, only now stuck in the woods somewhere. The façade of what seems to be the artist's Brooklyn studio is likewise plopped down in the bush.

But what has been torn from its context and dropped into what? After all, isn't the situation of the lampposts equally that of the stylized trees of the Minden landscape? The trees suddenly find themselves stranded on little planetoids, like the baobabs that grow on the lonely asteroid that is the home of *The Little Prince* (1943). As Daffy can attest, sometimes the ground is swapped right out from under you. Maybe it's the lampposts that are wondering where the hell all these trees came from, rather than the other way around.

Somewhere, a capricious god laughs.

At the end of *Maximum Overdrive*, we learn the cause of the revolt of the machines against humans: not a god, but a UFO. It is a ridiculous reason that flaunts its arbitrary nature. It's the kind of reason a computer might come up with after parsing data related to plot devices. Why make rules for the world of the film at all then? But, on second thought, are we ever going to get a satisfying justification for a lawnmower's motivation? Or what about that of a violent stop sign? Does identifying the animator's hand as the reason for the movement of things in a stop motion film really guarantee that those movements are any more motivated, or more imbued with life? What made the animator's hand move?

In *Shadow of a Mouse*, Donald Crafton makes the case that the performance of life by an animated character is not simply the echo of the animator's moving and working hands. But it is also not simply the product of the machinery and processes of animation, nor is it simply a projection of the audience, or what Crafton calls 'belief'. It is a dynamic product of all of these factors, further inflected by such things as the evolving conventions of animation, or our changing conceptions of what it means to be alive. When we watch Betty Boop, we don't see what audiences in the 1930's saw.

Thus, the question of the lawnmower's motivation is not so straightforward. Crafton offers an argument as to why, no matter how advanced the animation industry may become, its products will always have to play out in an unpredictable and ever-changing present context that it cannot fully control. If we accept Crafton's argument, then we must conceive of Betty Boop - or a player piano, murderous lawnmower, or suicidal barrel - as a performer, and further understand that every single screening of the same film, every loop of a repeating story, is a new performance.

Let's take a last scan of the collage laid before us. *Maximum Overdrive*, *Man With a Movie Camera*, and *The Way Things Are* all remind us, in their own ways, and with their own implications, that there may be no rules but we need to shore up some contingent arrangements all the more for that. A fight might break out, and someone might lose a bit of blood. At least we can agree that the rule is there are no rules. That's something to start with, no? Such as the arrangement I made to meet Chris and Hendrika at their studio in preparation for this text. Or the continued arrangements they are making in establishing their relatively new life in Minden.

In animation, there are arrangements that are connected to circumstances far beyond the world laid out on the animator's tabletop. Such contingencies, including those of personas and of worlds, which may hold together for brief flashes or for what might as well be an eternity, are in all cases subject to rearrangement and reconstitution, moment by moment. This is what we can learn from things. Remember Vertov's camera with its perfect eye? *I've seen things you people wouldn't believe*. We have the tools to come to terms with our arrangement: with the fallibility of our sight, which is that of our body, and with the uncertainty of the limits of what lies in our purview and control. It is humbling, especially if one is caught up in the seeming magic of the animator's ability to make things dance, but that is a worthy trade-off in order to receive perhaps the only lesson things can teach us about being human.

Trevor Mahovsky

Notes:

The title of this essay is part of a message from the machines, transmitted by honking a horn in morse code, to the humans holed up in the Dixie Boy truck stop in *Maximum Overdrive*.

*I've seen things you people wouldn't believe* is the first line of the replicant Roy Batty's "Tears in rain" speech in *Blade Runner* (1982).

Works cited:

Bukatman, Scott. *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Crafton, Donald. *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Klein, Norman M. *7 Minutes: the Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*. London and New York: Verso, 1993.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Michelson, Annette, "From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov's The Man With a Movie Camera", *The Essential Cinema: Essays on Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives* edited by P. Adams Sitney. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1975.