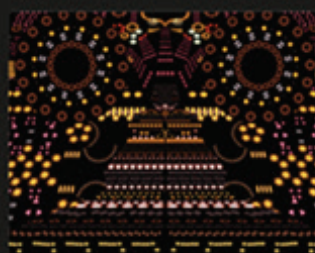


EXPERIMENTAL ANIMATION

FROM ANALOGUE TO DIGITAL

Edited by Miriam Harris, Lilly Husbands
and Paul Taberham



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GREGORY BENNETT

New Zealand

Please give us a brief summary of your work, including, if possible, a description of your creative process (e.g., how your creative ideas first appear and take shape).

I have worked exclusively with 3D animation software since 2003, primarily with Autodesk Maya. My work is created and built up using a generic 3D male figure, which is animated using an array of looped movement cycles. This figure is duplicated and multiplied, often forming a range of movement clusters.

These can suggest choreographic forms, performance, ritual or simply randomised crowd behaviour.

These figures are staged within environments which rotate or pan past the viewer, situated in a kind of metaphysical 'no-space' reminiscent of a video game environment. These can be read as a series of psychological spaces, as representations of hermetic digital colonies – depictions that fluctuate between the utopian and dystopian – or as a staging ground for figures enacting some enigmatic ceremonial.

Figures, objects and 'natural' phenomena move in synchronous and asynchronous time: Loops, cycles, intervals and durations are both moving forward and concurrently held in a kind of dynamic stasis. The distortions of one-point perspective are rejected – perspectival space is flattened out to orthographic projection, recalling the representational systems employed in Japanese art and architectural drawings.

I take a meta-creational approach which might at times appear to mimic the appearance of a living system, but is in fact dependent on a range of virtual processes and simulations. This provides a staging ground for a variety of both passive and active interactions between the figures and their often unstable geographic and architectural settings.

As mentioned, my primary tool is the 3D animation, modelling, simulation and rendering software Autodesk Maya, a high-end 3D computer graphics software developed for and used extensively in the film and games industries.

Starting with the looped actions of the generic male figure as a base, animation is built up adopting a modular approach. Multiple units of cyclic animated and sometimes motion-captured bodily movements are developed, generating a database of elements that can be combined and recombined in manifold ways.

I adopted 3D animation software as my creative primary tool in 2003 when it became technically possible (and affordable) to run relatively advanced 3D animation software on a personal computer.

It was then that I started to work directly into the 3D software itself – eschewing any preparatory conceptual processes such as storyboarding, or previsualisation typically employed in industry animation and visual effects pipelines. Instead I embraced the medium for its own intrinsic qualities. 3D had a reputation as a labour-intensive and time-consuming process (often in the service of creating photo-realistically rendered outputs). My aim was to be able to harness the software for more rapid generation of work, embracing generic and the pre-set in the various tool settings, minimising render times and preserving a creative spontaneity in the making process while acknowledging the medium itself rather than effacing the base digital aesthetic behind the lure of the photoreal. Creative ideas emerge through and out of this process of direct engagement with the 3D medium.

How would you define your animation practice in terms of its relation to fine art traditions, experimental animation or the (historical) avant-garde? Its relation to commercial industry?

My animation work is very much embedded in fine art and experimental approaches to practice. In terms of presentational modes, my work is staged in a range of non- or extra-cinematic ways including screen, projection and installation-based works in art galleries, as projection or projection-mapped pieces on large scale public screens or architectural façades, or as online work.

When I first encountered 3D animated work in the mid-1980s I was very interested and excited in the possibilities this new medium offered for the artist in co-opting an industrial production tool for experimental exploration and creation, particularly its ability to create a fully realised and navigable 3D ‘world’, and its as-yet unrealised potential as an expressive artistic tool beyond the commercial and aesthetic imperatives of mainstream entertainment. To paraphrase 3D artists Claudia Hart and Rachel Clarke: Creating content which embraces the traditions of avant-garde and the legacy of art history rather than commercially-driven aesthetics of Hollywood feature films and first-person shooter video games.

As an artist I also choose to engage directly with the medium itself, rather than employing technical specialists to realise my concepts, or employ a typical industry pipeline process with distributed specialist roles (e.g., modelling,

rigging, animating, rendering etc.). Finding unique ‘ways in’ to the software, and distinctive working methods I felt would be important to the creative discovery process within a new and developing medium, and also to help create outputs distinguishable from a media environment already saturated with commercially produced synthetic 3D imagery.

Who/what are your strongest influences?

I would describe my influences in both form and content as a somewhat diverse spectrum from fine artists to animators to Hollywood filmmakers. I have an enduring fascination and love of pre-cinematic era of moving image representation nineteenth century optical toys: The various Phenakistoscopes, Zoetropes, Praxinoscopes etc., and the photographic experiments of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey. In their employment of the loop, and the abstraction of human movement, and metamorphic transformations, they strongly connect in my mind to the extraordinary movie choreography of 1930s Hollywood director and choreographer Busby Berkeley, another key influence in his use of de-individualised (mostly) female figures to create vast and complex fantasias of movement ‘ornaments’, composed with a virtuosic eye for the cinematic camera. The contemporary artist Michal Rovner also had a profound effect on me when I encountered the video works in her installation in 2002 in the Israeli Pavilion at the 50th Venice Biennale. In particular the formal ways in which she used moving figures in various configurations: As crowds, small groups, or rows and lines, the figure itself reduced to an absolute de-individualised essence, but retaining an uncanny sense of life. The sculptural psychological spaces created by Louise Bourgeois are also greatly influential, as well as the isometric landscapes and environments in the drawings of Paul Noble. I would also have to name check a number of the great auteurs of animation: Jan Švankmajer, the Brothers Quay, Yuri Norstein, Len Lye, Norman McLaren and Robert Breer. Apart from their achievements in creating distinctive and visionary bodies of work within animation they also are great role models for auteurist practice outside the mainstream.

Why animation?

For me animation has always had a kind of fundamental magic appeal – the ability to create the illusion of life with even just a small sequence of still images is endlessly appealing to me. This appeal also is tied to the absolute control you have in creating an autonomous world.

Is material or media a particularly important component of your practice?

Currently digital 3D animation software is absolutely central to my practice.

How does it operate in your work?

It is core to my creative engagement with animation and my fascination with, to quote 3D artists Claudia Hart and Rachel Clarke again, the ‘artificial “xyz”

space, the non-referenced, non-indexical synthetic image/object, ... [and] ... the specific qualities of the virtual camera that records it'.

What is your work's relation to experimental form and technique?

Is there something you want to articulate with your work that can't be expressed through conventional narrative means?

Although my work formally deals in figurative rather abstract imagery, it does reject conventional moving image narrative structure and filmic grammar in cinematography and editing, and notions of character development and narrative advancement. It has more in common with sculptural practice and installation in the way its components are literally 'sculpted' in 3D, and arranged and presented in an integrated and continuous, albeit virtual, space. In terms of my approach to narrative, and of the loop and the database as an underlying narrative mechanism, I acknowledge the resonance of Lev Manovich's characterisation of the loop in new media production as an 'engine' which puts narrative in motion. Loops retrieved from the 'database' are a 'multitude of separate but co-existing temporalities' (Manovich, 2001): Units which do not so much replace each other in an ordered flow, but rather are already-activated elements which are composed in one of any possible sequential chains. This allows me to explore and question notions of narrative progression and temporal integrity, with the loop allowing for the concurrent arrest and advance of time, a place where there is motion but not necessarily progression.

How do you see your work operating culturally? Politically?

I would say that any cultural and political content within my work operates in an implicit rather than explicit fashion. On one level it presents open-ended imagery which can be read as utopian and/or dystopian visions, but which personally is also informed by my own psychological reservoirs. In some ways these works are a response to, and inverse of, Busby Berkeley's all-female utopian fantasies, where a potentially infinitely duplicated male figure is subject to the repetition compulsion of the loop, endlessly enacting and performing within structures of what philosopher Siegfried Kracauer coined as the 'mass ornament'.

Reference

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.