

Mary Slowik



Simultaneous Narration and Ethical Positioning in Three Short Animated Films

Cartoons, short animations, animated films, the majority of cgi effects, all originate in the forward rush of single images flipped so quickly one after the other that the eyes are fooled into perceiving motion where none exists. On a micro level, animation is inherently narrative, a series of nano-events unfolding sequentially, frame by frame, at roughly twenty-four frames per second¹ to create, if only for a moment, an illusion of a whole. Animation is also an art of extravagant metamorphosis. Line-drawn characters squash, stretch, twist around themselves; rooms turn into windows turn into trees; the letter “A” becomes a hat; superman leaps over buildings. For all of the relentless forward motion and wild narration, animation paradoxically also has the capacity to stop and hold stories still, if only for the long take of Wile E. Coyote, looking directly at us between the time he steps off the cliff and the time gravity takes hold, and he plunges downward. In that glance is held animation’s capacity to fool the eye, to fool a gravity-fearing mind, and to hold in suspension a number of narrative strands running through the cartoon simultaneously: the snares Wile E. Coyote has invented for the Road Runner have once again backfired on him; Wile E. recognizes his failure and shares this recognition with his audience, also given, from time to time, to similar failure; Wile E. has also lost to an animator who can foil gravity itself.

The purpose of this study is to investigate on two fronts the aesthetic and ethical components of animation’s extravagant and complex artifice: first, as they engage the

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viewer while the animation unfolds, the ethics of the told, to extend James Phelan's useful term to visual as well as literary narrative; second, as animation's artifice reveals an overarching but intrinsic rhetorical and ethical organization—taken as a whole, Phelan's ethics of the telling (*Experiencing Fiction* 11–12). I will particularly showcase animation's deft use of frame narrative for these purposes, that is, narrative that houses multiple stories that we respond to both progressively and simultaneously.

Animation is an art of the sleight of hand, or perhaps more accurately, the sleight of eye. One image folds almost instantly into the next and then the next, tricking the eye into seeing motion. Yet, to some extent, the eye tricks the animation as well. While changing frame by frame, micro-moment by micro-moment, each image is nonetheless held by the eye as a shadow, a shape it won't let go of even as the image morphs into its next iteration. The eye's persistence of vision² is, I maintain, geometric and spatial and distinctly narrative. It allows us to take in many storylines at the same time while seeing structure and shapes, which constitute larger areas of aesthetic and ethical reference. A good animated film delights and disturbs all within the blink of an eye. And we even see beyond the blink as well to unexpected layers of ethical complication.

While narratologists have considered the gaps in visual narratives—the spaces between frames in comic books, for instance, and the stacking and popping of embedded narrative in digital media³—there are no studies, to my knowledge, that relate the multiple storylines presented simultaneously within animations to their aesthetic and ethical effect upon an audience.⁴ Not all animations, of course, accomplish the feats I describe here, but I have chosen three short animated films that pair three different types of narrative progression and ethical judgment with three distinct visual techniques peculiar to animation. The first film is a hand-drawn, split-screen animation that organizes the story as causal sequences of events that recount an historical occurrence—in other words, the telling of something that happened—to use and simplify Phelan's basic definition of narrative (*Experiencing Fiction* 7, 16).⁵ The second film is a digital animation that, through accelerated speed, reveals the make-up of its subject by unearthing and then animating the layers of its organization. In this case, I am extending to animated film Phelan's definition of lyricality in narrative, that is, a meditative focus on what something is (153). The third film is an animated painting/drawing that is closest to character narration, that is, a narrative told by a participant in the story (Phelan, *Living to Tell about It* 214), in this instance, narrated retrospectively as an act of memory.

All three are auteur animations,⁶ short films that resist Disney hyper-realism.⁷ They are particularly useful subjects for this study because they tell many stories at the same time in unapologetically obvious and extravagant ways. They do not need a “meanwhile, back at the ranch” transition to indicate what is happening concurrently at two locations, nor do they need complex transitions to indicate two or more storylines unfolding simultaneously in the past. They can activate transparent windows, both literal and figurative, that allow a viewer to see through one layer of action into another layer of action without necessarily interrupting the movement of those layers.

Transparency is a particularly apt term here, because while glass plates laid one on top of another have been used in animations to give the illusion of three-dimensional

foreground and background space, techniques of layering and compositing images make it possible for the layers themselves to become separate self-contained stories in their own right. As such, transparency refers to the viewer's experience of several distinct and discrete narrative threads organized as a polyphonic spatial whole. My point is that there is a spatial organization that gives a constancy to the action so that its multiple levels are revealed and the viewer experiences both progression and stasis, the immediacy of inner frame activity and the structures of outer frame organization intersecting each other.⁸

While emphasizing visual organization can help keep the various meanings of boundary between frames, between stories, and between layers of rhetorical organization separate, insisting on them at all times can distort our understanding of the viewer's experience, which, to my mind, is integrated, made up of individual components that, taken together, are ultimately greater than their parts. It is this integrity that is also my concern in this essay because animations at their best are not just visual extravaganzas, so much eye candy that take us in without room for sophisticated narrative engagement. Animations have a distinctive poetics that is complex and is especially suited for creating ethical complications, which fold nicely into the narrative hyperbole characteristic of the form. Short animations, the subject of this study, are by and large predicament- rather than character-driven.⁹ They are performative, with characters who frequently do not change from beginning to end. The predicaments that bedevil the characters remain basically the same. What changes is our growing recognition of the nature of the predicament itself in all of its multiple narrative and ethical layers. Animations offer us a peculiar satisfaction when we see played out before our eyes with beguiling visual charm what we knew was going to happen all along even though the situation more often than not results in the destruction of the characters. We cringe but laugh with glee all at the same time. At its best the laugh involves a recognition of foreshadowed events and of complex layers of narrative storytelling; the cringe frequently involves a disturbing ethical recognition. Animations, in other words, offer an aesthetic satisfaction when we recognize their narrative structures. Animations also offer an uncomfortable affective and ethical experience when we see these structures in action inevitably crushing the heroes of the story.

In the first of my three examples, Paul Driessen's *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg* (2000), two narrative and visual layers are held side by side in a split screen animation that makes full use of the squiggly, shaking line, the adept use of color, the skewed perspective, and the comic cartoon iconography that together re-tell the story of the sinking of the Titanic as a dark tragedy with disturbing ethical implications beyond the negligence of those immediately responsible. *Itsu* (2006), by the Pliex Collective, my second example, uses cleanly rendered digital graphics and a manic acceleration in tempo to mix multiple story lines of increasing violence and perversity at the heart of a company boardroom during a marketing presentation. The ethical effects stretch well beyond the boardroom table to implicate society at large and ultimately the animation itself. Finally, in an animation that emphasizes its media specificity rather than its framing on screen or its shifts in tempo, Caroline Leaf's *The Street* (1976) uses the fluid animated movement of paint on glass to enact the multiple story lines held both immediately and retrospectively in a single, extended act of memory. At issue is

how the lingering death of a grandmother is be understood by all the groups of people who come in contact with her. I will examine each film separately, teasing out concurrent storylines, locating visual frames, and probing the ethical and affective responses elicited by story and frame.

In the 8 minute and 49 second film *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg*, Paul Driessen splits the film down the middle. A little boy's fantasies take place in the right side of the split; the adult's stern world of routine and discipline takes place in the left frame of the split. Both are rendered in the squiggly, fine line work of a political cartoon set into animated motion. The events on both sides of the split screen parallel each other, but go in wildly different narrative directions. The film follows three days in the boy's life. On the right side of the screen, we see the boy's fantasies of escape, rendered as parodies of popular genre fiction. Gangsters abduct a child and hold him for ransom, cannibals make off with a child and tie him in front of a fire, etc. On the left side of the screen, we see the repressive adult routines that provoke these fantasies. Events on the adult side of the screen continually interrupt the adventure stories and prevent the fantasy rescues—the schoolbus arrives, the school bell rings, recess begins, and the boy has to start a new fantasy story every time (Figures 1 and 2).

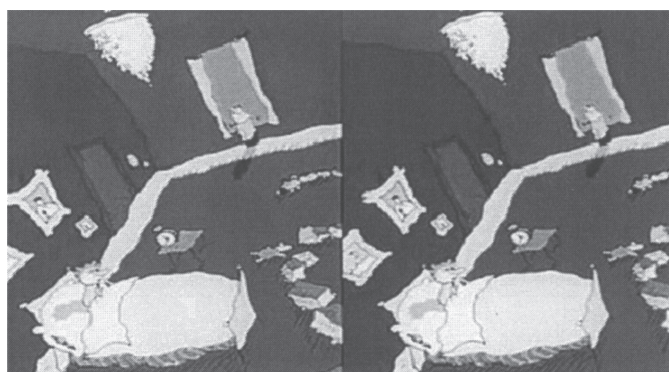


Figure 1. Opening scene. The beginning of the boy's day.

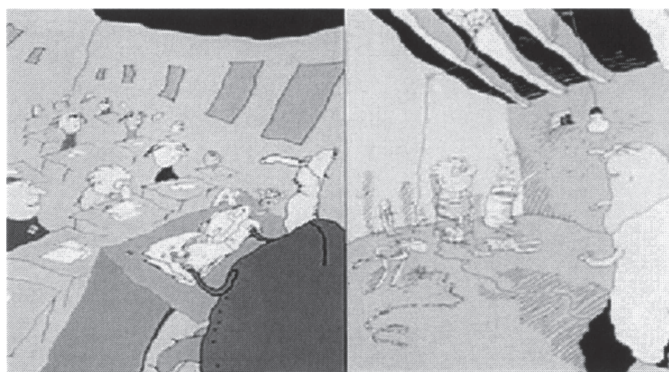


Figure 2. In the classroom.

The comic tenor of the film changes, however, with the introduction of another story. On the second day of the boy's life, the characters on both sides of the screen board a luxury ocean liner, visually too huge for their comprehension, but suspiciously looking like the Titanic (Figure 3). Now, the narrative tension is not only a horizontal, side-to-side conflict between the split screens, but extends out of the proscenium arch to include us, the audience, sitting in front of the screens. We know the story of the Titanic and its tragic end. The irony intensifies when bits of ice and the iceberg's shadow appear in the foreground of both screens. Only the boy sees the shadows and the ice and recognizes the danger because, ever since he boarded the ship, his fantasies have involved shipwreck and desert island abandonment (Figure 4). His stories have now become omens.

The little boy tries to warn the captain of the ship, but the captain will not listen and motions for the little boy to go away. At this point, there are five narratives running simultaneously: on one side of the split screen, the narrative of the boy trying to warn the captain and the multiple mini-narratives constituting the boy's fantasy life; on the other side of the split screen, the narrative of the adults enjoying life on a luxury liner. On both sides of the split there is the narrative of the approaching iceberg, and finally, there is the larger narrative frame of the story of the Titanic, which the audience brings as an overall organization for the whole.

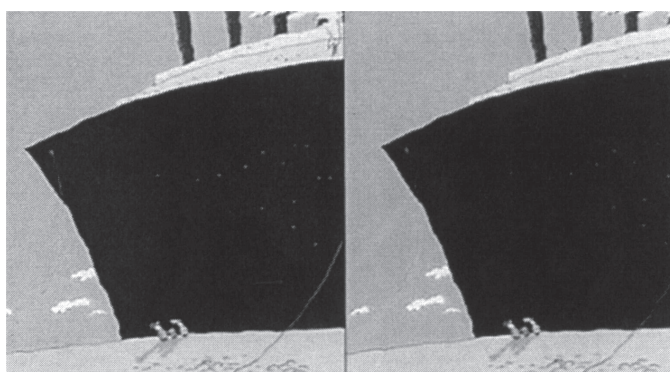


Figure 3. The Titanic.

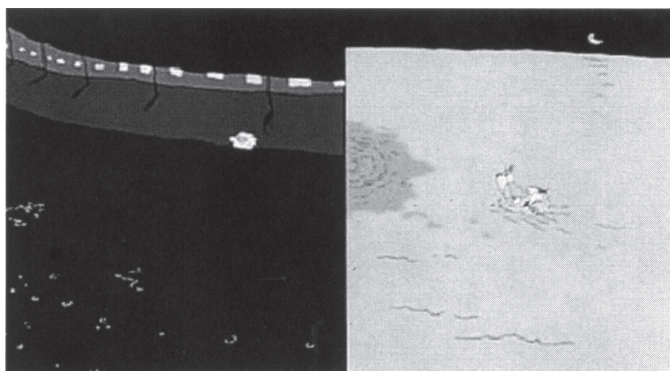


Figure 4. Left: Bits of iceberg. Right: The boy's iceberg fantasy.

At this juncture, the film resembles a doomed travel story, a dark cartoon tragedy. Its anticipated ending completes the gangster and cannibal stories begun earlier and extends their narrative influence across both screens to suggest an ending that will affect both boy and adults together. The crash, when it happens, twists the story in new directions. It is rapid, occurring almost immediately after the captain turns away from the boy who is trying to warn him. There are no visual details. The screens simply go blank in a moment of prolonged white out, as if the medium and its narrative were so joined that the story has power even over the pencil and paper of the animator himself. Cartoon pathos reigns without hope of cartoon regeneration. Apparently, there is no escaping fate, whether it is caused by social repression, adult stupidity, natural accident, or even narrative and aesthetic dependence on a particular story line carried out to its conclusion.

There is an epilogue, however, in which, after the prolonged moment of white-out, the split screen appears and re-establishes a simultaneous temporality, on the left the time after the iceberg has sunk the ship, the iceberg in the distance behind a stretch of quiet ocean, the ship disappeared; on the right the boy's imagination while he is still alive. In a repeat of the film's opening scene, we see the boy get out of bed as he does every morning, but he is now in the ship underwater. He sees the butler frozen in icicles at the window. He tries to imagine an escape, but the reality of the situation means that he is unable to make the imaginative leap. No fantasy rescue stories can begin. He takes a long look, goes back to bed, and his entire side of the screen freezes in place. There is a long take of doubled iceberg and empty water (Figures 5 and 6), and then the film credits begin.

We could interpret this closing scene as the last chapter in the life and death of the boy, who begins in passive acquiescence to his adult superiors, gains critical knowledge of the world, attempts to take responsibility for his adult superiors, fails, and finally realizes the futility of his actions, the futility of life itself. In his final moments, he gets back into bed and accepts his fate, end of *bildungsroman*.

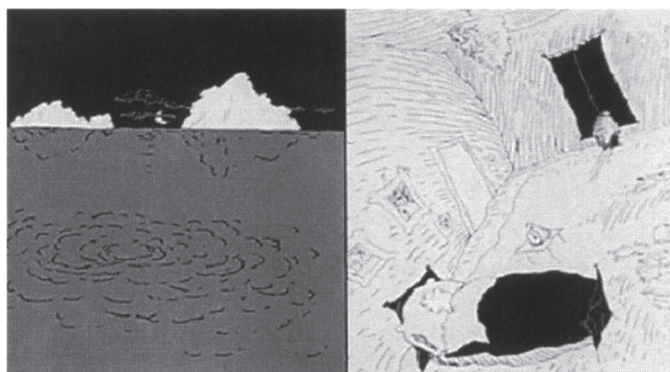


Figure 5. The Epilogue.

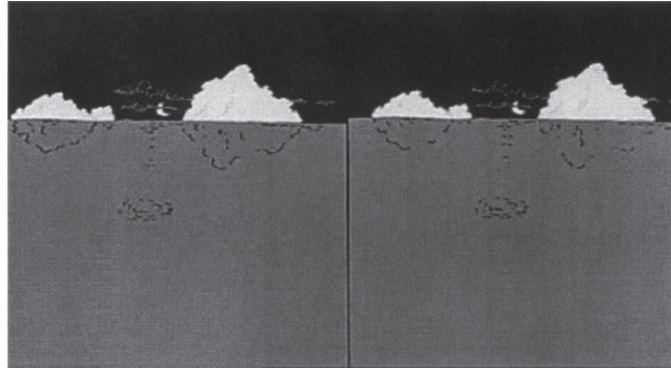


Figure 6. Closing Scene.

There is another narrative frame, however: the film's sixth story, which establishes its deepest narrative and ethical perspective and involves a visual joke. The animator shares the extravagance of the boy's fantasies. The line drawings in their squiggly continuous motion, their use of distorted perspective and comic exaggerations are equal to the extravagance of the mobster, cannibal, and desert island tales of the boy's own creation. The composition, punctuated by blocks of color strategically placed across both screens and organized in broad diagonal movements on a tipped picture plane so we look down into it, allows us to view the film as an abstractly composed whole. Not only is the animator sympathetic to the boy's imagination, he shares the boy's imagination. He is drawing a wild fantasy even as he records a wild fantasy. Furthermore, the iceberg, as glimpsed by the boy, has had a comic-book frowning face (Figure 4). It is the same comic-book iceberg, minus the face but with the same mischievous menace, looking directly out at us across the empty water in the film's final moments (Figure 6). The iceberg, in other words, is ultimately the creature of the animator and if only the adults had listened to the extravagant animator's imagination as shared by the little boy, they would have been saved.

But the real power of this ending, to my mind, resides in both the structural satisfactions and the ethical repugnance the story generates. The ending is aesthetically satisfying because it is a revenge tragedy—the bad guys get what they deserve. And the moral superiority they think they enjoy is flipped midway in the tale so that the animation evokes the upside down morality and the power reversals endemic to cartoon storytelling.¹⁰ The superior guys now become inferior; the inferior kid becomes superior in knowledge and sense of responsibility; a ship that floats above water is now "floating" in ice below water; a rich world of servants and bountifully loaded tables is replaced by the stark lines of the ice and the flat surface of water; etc. Yet, these aesthetic and narrative balances remind us thematically of our powerlessness before fate, the inadequacy of our attempts to warn those who have power, the ease with which little boys are ignored, and how all-encompassing narrative judgment can be in the hands of a condemned cartoonist.

There would be something too self-serving on the animator's part in this conclusion, however, if it were not for how broadly the story is drawn, how wild and improbable and satiric the characters are. We can take the cartoonist seriously because he knows the medium through which an inherently absurd world can be represented and he is able to use the medium with the grim humor that this world deserves. Such a world does not enervate this cartoonist's energy. Though we might not agree with his philosophic stance, we can be profoundly humbled by the tale and take the image of an iceberg alongside a frozen bedroom as a challenge to our own smugness, dullness, and unimaginative sense of entitlement. The iceberg in its stillness, immortality, and stony wholeness is indeed a monument, encasing the dead in front of it and providing a warning to those who come after. For all of its frenetic activity, the split screen suggests how simultaneously layered and monumentalized this history is, commemorating the dead and using their story to challenge the living.¹¹

As in *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg*, the Pliex Collective's animation, *Itsu*, takes place in enclosed spaces with marked boundaries, its many mini-narratives visually occurring in tandem. There is a wild quotation of genre narrative, particularly pornographic and gothic, and in the middle of the story *Itsu* also introduces larger narrative frames which flip character relations, upend internal power structures, and reveal a common enemy. *Itsu* ends as abruptly as *The Boy* with a similar epilogue spotlighting the animator's self-reflexiveness. The extravagant artifice of the story makes the narrative as a whole aesthetically satisfying but ethically troubling at the same time. Unlike the split screen, however, which in *The Boy* separates the child's predicament from the adult's predicament and then develops various mirrorings and mergings across the two worlds, *Itsu*, in a very short 3 minutes and 40 seconds, uses techniques of narrative and visual acceleration that more thoroughly allow one story to permeate the other with more damning ethical implications. If in *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg*, the adults are simply stupid and obtuse, the adults in *Itsu* wholeheartedly endorse and then participate in the repugnant acts of violence they perpetuate. No one emerges innocent.

There are initially three separate narrative strands in *Itsu*: 1) the trajectory of a marketing power point presentation going into animated overdrive, graphs literally climbing upward and charts expanding before our very eyes in wild representation of a pork company's amazing success; 2) the erotic and then violent relationships between the boardroom members as, intoxicated with the good news, they turn into pigs themselves, clambering upon each other on the conference room table, enacting the successful breeding and reproduction efficiencies that the statistics represent; 3) the instructional part of the conference presentation, featuring animated schematics of factory architecture and pig production machines, all depicted through graphics used in market reports and industrial training films (Figures 7, 8, and 9).

These sequential events are layered over each other with increasingly accelerated speed, so we glimpse one event happening in tandem with another, the simple outlines allowing us to literally see one figure through another. All are contained in a fourth larger narrative frame, which gives the mayhem a human center briefly located in the conference presenter himself. Still at the whiteboard, the presenter in panic sees and understands what is going on—the boardroom members are turning into pigs.



Figure 7

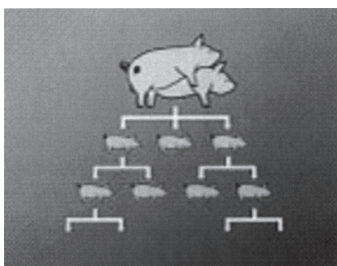


Figure 8



Figure 9

His perspective is futile, however, because the corporate machines—hamburger and statistical—have gone wild and are beyond human control.

The stories of people, pigs, and statistics are caught in expanding, interlaced loops much as in Walt Disney's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* Mickey's mops replicate themselves and the water splashes in an all consuming, robotic flood. In both stories, the narrative worlds are in mechanistic overdrive, where human agency has no power. Just as the story in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* requires a magical intervention, so too the boardroom requires a hero who displaces narratives of mechanistic doom with a narrative of instant salvation. And such a hero does appear in *Itsu* in a fifth narrative frame. He is a boardroom member who suddenly replaces the presenter. Handsome, square-jawed, he has been sitting at the conference table all along but has not participated in any of the antics, though earlier we have seen him artificially clapping during the presentation. Now, however, he seems to share the presenter's knowledge and, bloody knife in hand, he seems to have power, even the power to chop the boardroom members into pieces and feed them into the sausage machine, which is what is happening when he appears on the scene. It is possible he may even have been orchestrating the events from the very beginning in an effort to sabotage the company and save the pigs. As market report narrative turned into revenge narrative turned into fairy tale, this fifth level of narration allows the wicked boardroom members to receive their comeuppance, duly sliced and diced. With their disappearance, the evil curse has been lifted. The story escapes the boardroom setting and the hero exits the scene in silhouette walking into the sunset, a small pet pig on a leash at his side (Figures 10, 11, and 12).

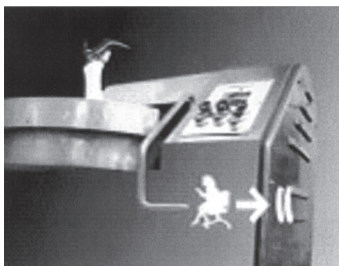


Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

The animation, however, ultimately belongs to a sixth and largest frame of narrative reference, which underscores and complicates its troubling ethical implications. Just before the hero walks into the sunset, we see his face on the cover of *Financial Star Magazine*, reproducing itself endlessly off the printing presses. He is now CEO of the successful company, Pigs as Pets. This turn of events might bode well for the pigs but bodes less well for the narrative status of the entire film. It is possible that the flip morality that now makes the pigs victorious, the marketing machine's violence turned back on itself, the boardroom's power destroyed, the radical shift from violence to kindness—this flip morality is a flip performance of another sort. The entire film could be the hero's own presentation, as if for all its powers to expose, the animation ultimately cannot escape its own marketing framework.

Itsu satirizes its own lurid spectacle with a stylization and pacing that allow us to register bloody detail without turning away in repulsion or holding it in perverse curiosity. The film's aesthetic merits hold our attention in uneasy fascination. We revel in revenge tragedy but register the violence needed for its enactment; we are glad that pigs are saved but could never endorse human dismemberment in its place.

The resolution of narrative tension on all fronts is so swift and magical, the frenetic pace twisted so suddenly into a slow motion sentimental ending, that to my mind, the image of boardroom members copulating on a boardroom table, intercut with glimpses of charts wavering ever upward and images of chopping machine prototypes, is more powerful than a pig factory sunset. The layering of narrative gives the boardroom table the same kind of monumental status as Driessen's iceberg. The simple geometric outlines visually organizing the whole and the quick cuts from one narrative to the next (almost frame by frame you will discover if you watch the movie in slow motion) create a transparent present tense where statistics and the violence they represent overwhelm human intention and ethical judgment. The larger issue is: can violence used against itself actually destroy its own foundations? The effects of narrative acceleration, exaggeration, and layering establish a narrative and ethical entrapment beyond the powers of a *deus ex machina* hero and also beyond the possibilities of violence that this happy ending requires. There is no escape from capitalism. "Pigs as sausage, pigs as pets, what's the difference?"¹² The film's last moments are a joke on happy endings. I might laugh at the cleverness of the narrative reversal, but it is a laughter that at the same time acknowledges the scale of the entrapment that no magic could ever undo, particularly at the hands of a hero who stuffs people into sausage machines and ultimately is applauded by the *Financial Times*. The story's absurd ending keeps deflecting my attention back to the cartoon mania released in the prim, supposedly amoral boardroom. Think of that the next time you get on a plane, pick up a *Wall Street Journal*, and together with all the other early morning business travelers peruse the *Journal's* graphs and charts. What narcotic effect might be rudely interrupted if you suddenly remember an animation that refused to leave the lines and rectangles comfortably in place on the page? How narratively charged might these abstractions be? And what ethical judgments might be contained therein, condemning us all?

Caroline Leaf's *The Street*, a slightly longer film of 10 minutes and 12 seconds, demonstrates a different kind of layered animation. Ink and paint constitute the fabric

of *The Street* and are also the substance of its narrative. Paint's gestural qualities float in and out of the pen-and-ink outlines which indicate the characters of the story and what they are thinking; paint in circular motions mimics the circular motion of the stirring, kneading, and washing that is the domestic substrate of the piece; the paint blossoms into patterns that quickly come and go and suggest the extravagant diversions of the imagination and the capacity of memory to move from one place to another quickly, without transition. Subtle color washes establish space, particularly the space not fully noticed, the space to either side of the focusing eyes.

Closer to literary narrative than *Itsu* and *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg*, *The Street* is based on the short story "The Street" by Mordecai Richler and on the collection of Richler short stories in which it appears, also named *The Street*. While the film by means of voiceover quotes directly from the short story, its spirit is closer to Richler's book as a whole, an appreciative look at the Montreal street where Richler grew up. Richler's short story is about the exploitation of a mother by her husband and his family as she cares for his dying, widowed mother within their home. The grandmother's dying is taking an inordinately long period of time; the mother is exhausted. And in the final cruel turn in the Richler story, we learn that the semi-comatose grandmother, herself, has been using her daughter-in-law by refusing to die for seven years, so that she can spend the rest of eternity with her husband, who was married for seven years to his first wife and is obliged to spend those first years of eternity with her.

In her animation, Leaf de-emphasizes the sardonic subject matter of Richler's story in favor of the more naïve perspective of a child in the household who, without the adult entanglements, is coming to grips with the experience of death for the first time. Much of the film is seen through his eyes, that is, close to the ground, with attention paid to small physical details and to the perspectives a child is particularly privy to—those of other children who live on the street, the random remarks of family members, the incoherent mutterings of the grandmother herself, the rituals of the Jewish community to which they belong. Although the film is decidedly different from the Richler story in tone, it, nonetheless, creates a loving panorama of street and family life of a particular place and time much as all the Richler's stories do, when taken together.

More than Richler, Leaf is also interested in the motions of memory itself, particularly in its visceral nature and in its capacity to cross retrospective temporal and spatial boundaries. Both qualities are particularly suited to animation. In the film, there is the re-telling of the events as they happen. There is also the exaggerated immediate experiencing of events from a child's point of view mixed with a more balanced but equally immediate view of an unidentified adult narrator, both portrayed visually. There is also the voiceover narrator, who is the child now grown up and recalling the events of the film. He recognizes the ethical dilemmas the grandmother's dying presents the child and points to the birth and maturing of the child's conscience. Finally, there is the animator, who moves fluidly across visual and narrative boundaries to evoke a complex temporality layering and binding things together—there is remembered time, ongoing present tense time and what I call mid-time, that is, imprecisely remembered, abstractly visualized, but intensely experienced time.

The Street is the story of the death of a grandmother in a Jewish household as witnessed by at least five different people or groups of people. There are two central perspectives that encompass the others: one is of a child in the household, roughly eight years old, viscerally experiencing the grandmother's dying moment by moment; the other perspective is of the child now a grown man, recalling the event with the equally visceral eyes of memory. There is direct narration, the camera low to the ground, looking upward, like the child. There is indirect narration provided by the remembering narrator, maintained by voiceover and camera positions unavailable to the child. We also hear the editorial comments of three other groups layered over the events spanning the years that it takes the grandmother to die. The lives of her family members, the play of street children, and the rituals of the Jewish community together constitute distinct but interconnected narratives interlacing the story of the grandmother's death. A cross-section of any few moments of the film reveals many of these perspectives with their inherent narratives simultaneously held by the position of the camera, the nature of the paint and ink, and the presence of the voiceover (Figures 13, 14, and 15).

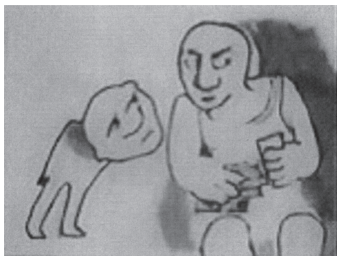


Figure 13



Figure 14

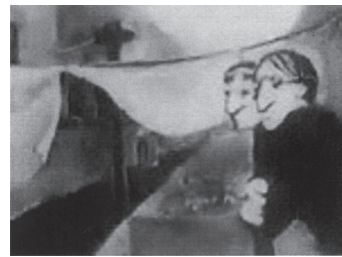


Figure 15

Near the opening of the film, for instance, the children playing in the street speculate about what death is like. A bully's claims to superior knowledge about death are rendered by the elongation of his face momentarily filling the foreground of the screen and then subsiding back into the neck in the background, the exaggerated shift in scale capturing the way a large boy can tower over a little boy and literally be "in your face." But the motion is abstract and comic, the exaggeration part of a vibrant memory the narrator enjoys even as he retells it. The fluidity of paint captured briefly by outlines of faces and necks and then released in indistinct washes into the foregrounds and backgrounds and spaces between them suggests that history and memory is always ongoing, beyond any particular life or particular memory as if life, itself, were a present tense stream of events we continuously blend into and jump out of.

A similar confluence of perspectives informs the father leaning over and telling the boy to be quiet in the middle of the film (Figure 13), and the boy's sister's description of the ways grandmothers can haunt little boys. (Figures 16 and 17). There is the exaggerated drawing of the head stretching and then receding in the case of the father's angry command for silence (Figure 13) and the evocative shadow that remains in palimpsest even when the figure moves on (Figures 16 and 17) in the case of the

sister's mischievous threat. Both exaggerated drawings dissolve into or develop out of scenes viewed straight-on and from the side at a height that excludes the boy's participation. The presentation is matter-of-fact and controlled by an implied author disclosing important information, not fully understood by the child and not fully appreciated by the retrospective narrator at this point in the story's unfolding. After the command for silence, we soon hear the father's sigh and discouraged comment as he looks out the window (Figure 14), and prior to the sister's remark we take in the semi-private conversation of the rabbi and Dr. Katzman on a fire escape overlooking the street (Figure 15). During the rabbi/Katzman scene, the film "melts" into its most overarching frame of reference—their conversation provides an opportunity for both the voice-over retrospective narrator and the animator to join forces in a lovely, fluid visual summary of story and place (Figure 18). More on this later.

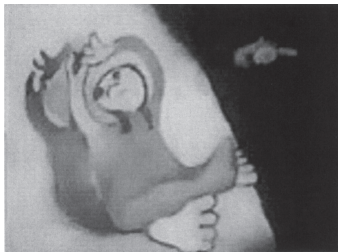


Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

There are two emerging narrative frames that hold all the others in place and give them a distinctive ethical dimension. One is that in the middle of the story we learn that the child actually wants his grandmother to die so he can have her room. After this revelation the child's point of view is freighted with a sense of suspense and emerging guilt, but given the retrospective narrator's distance, the film is also now the story of the birth of a child's conscience and the beginning of his growing up.

The other emerging narrative involves the film's largest narrative frame, the central question posed at the outset: "God in heaven," the boy's mother sighs at the opening, "what's she holding on for?" The question is particularly significant since the film is purportedly about the summer the family could not leave the city, the summer the grandmother "was supposed to die . . . any day now" and the only thing they could do was to "stay at home and wait for it to happen." As the story unfolds we discover that two years later they are still waiting and waiting even beyond that.

The animator answers that question in a way that stills the film's continuous movement and gives it its largest ethical dimension. At the center of the film the story stops, and in the long quiet take I have mentioned earlier, the father looks out and down, shrugs and ironically comments, "I was born lucky, and that's it" (Figure 14). This is one possible response to the grandmother's dying. It seems compatible with the relentless forward movement of the animation, the stream of time willy-nilly pulling everyone and everything along with it. A person is fated at birth and there is not much that can be done about it.

But the animation is not only continuously rolling forward, it is also visually very beautiful and holds in balance the many perspectives and lives I have suggested thus far. In an odd way that replicates the narrative reversals in *Itsu* and *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg*, the opening predicament in *The Street* in the end is flipped so that the silent grandmother at last has her own say about her dying. We hardly see the grandmother throughout the film though she has been orchestrating all the lives around her and prolonging the household's agony. The reason she delays her death is part of an animator's joke because it has been present there before our eyes all along.

At the end of the film Dr. Katzman, the grandmother's physician, and the rabbi presiding at her wake are on the back fire escape, taking a smoking break (Figure 15). "I know exactly how you feel," Dr. Katzman says to the rabbi. "There's been a death in the family. Your heart is broken. Yet, it's a splendid summer day. A day made for love and laughter. And that must seem very cruel to you."

And the rabbi responds, "It's remarkable. She held out so long. It's amazing. The mysteries of the human heart. Astonishing."

During this dialogue, the camera visually summarizes the most stunning moments of the animation as it takes in the beauty of the street, the sky, and the tenement houses in a long, slow, upward sweep. Suddenly, we see the beauty that the grandmother has been experiencing and loving all along even in her semi-comatose dream state, the beauty she is reluctant to leave. The animation with its ability to move fluidly in and out of the perspective of many people is enacting the grandmother's own perspective as well, revealing the place she loves, and, true to the animator's joke, eliciting in us, the audience, the possibilities of the same love and the same evocation of mystery. The painted illustration of Katzman's and the rabbi's assessment of the story elaborated without irony and suggesting the grandmother's love of this world rather than her stubborn anticipation of the next marks Leaf's broadest departure from Richler's short story but also highlights animation's visual power to enact the motions of intimate and private memory and make them complex, universal, and convincing.¹³

There is, however, the comic coda, which reinforces the need to re-remember. After the funeral, the boy's older sister points out that now he can have the grandmother's room. The boy refuses, recognizing now the magnitude of his grandmother's death but also understanding that his relationship with his grandmother will not simply end. His sister makes spooky noises as the film fades to black and indeed we suspect that grandmothers do not stay peacefully dead. They always continue to haunt and require remembering and re-remembering. The animation, itself, is a response to such obligations but it is also a visual gift that memory bestows.

Preparing this essay has made me realize how incessantly temporal animations are. To isolate particular stills from the films to illustrate my argument has been difficult and to some extent wrong-headed, at least from the viewer's perspective, though not at all, I realize, from the perspective of an animator, whose life is spent parsing each micro-moment of a story into single non-moving units—in other words, into stills. And it is this seeming contradiction that is at the heart of animation's ethical and aesthetic challenge. It is also at the heart of its pleasure. Our eyes do not see double, and yet in *The Boy Who Saw the Iceberg* we take in a two-eyed story. The extent to which our eyes go in different directions, straining our narrative comprehen-

sion, actually helps us at first laugh at and then gradually take very seriously the wild imaginings of a little boy faced with oppressive and then stupid adults. But we are not totally immersed in double-visioned mayhem because the two screens at times mirror each other identically, and no matter what their movement, they are held together by cross-screen shapes, patterns, colors, and their overall design and composition—a synthetic component that becomes increasingly charged narratively and ethically as the film unrolls from beginning to end. And when we gaze at a doubled image of an iceberg looking like a monument at the end, the film invites us to look back at what we have seen, reconsider it as a whole to be parsed and teased and troubled over, not with the speed and grace of its initial telling, but with a growing involvement with its many rhetorical layers.

Itsu presents a different though related challenge: our eyes do not flexibly register speed and yet, in *Itsu* we rush in almost incomprehensible acceleration through the visuals of many corporate instructional sessions superimposed upon each other—machine design, statistical graphics, marketing logos each shove their own narrative, one into the other, ultimately to be subsumed by a metanarrative of boardroom chaos, that story subsumed by another metanarrative of corporate genesis and corporate dissolution. Though the speed is head-over-heels, the effect of layering and transparency between layers is to isolate the components of a corporation and intercut its rounds of purposeful activity with the perverse glee of gothic and pornographic narrative cliché. Through such lyrical rather than sequential plot organization, the animation reveals, though does not mitigate, the evil of its subject matter. The animation's irony confuses the story's best intentions—the lovely, pig-in-the-sunset “still” at the end is undone by the motion which precedes it. If we feel guilty at the end of *The Boy* for having spurned those whose extravagant imagination might warn us of impending disaster, *Itsu* makes us feel guilty for laughing at pratfalls and cartoony violence, not in themselves, but insofar as they participate in the power of quick and simple visual designs to mask and comfortably detach us from the pain and horror they represent. Granted, guilt may be too strong a word. I do not mean to generalize my own “flesh-and-blood response” to these animations nor make them overly dolorous. I am simply trying here to highlight the audience “take away” from the films—both the delight and the disturbance which inevitably lead to reconsideration of the animations' layers of narrative engagement and ethical implication.

Finally, *The Street* asks our eyes to tolerate blurriness, whether of objects seen separately or of figures melting one into another in motion. Here the synthetic component does not challenge or nearly override the narrative component as with *Itsu* and *The Boy*, but rather the synthetic permeates and shapes the narrative intention of the piece, that is, to remember an event with the visceral immediacy of memory and yet with memory's detachment and access to emerging meanings and narrative fluency. Even so, the movements of paint, pen, and ink photographed frame by frame delineate the multiple relationships making up the ethical import of the story—the relationship of the boy/narrator to his grandmother and to his household, the relationship of the emerging characters of the story to the boy and to each other, the relationship between implied author who sees more than the boy can see and the audience following the story as it unfolds, and in the largest frame of reference, the

relationship between the author/ animator and ourselves, questioning the meaning of one grandmother's delayed death and the meaning of death itself. Although the animation is breathtaking in its beauty and craftsmanship, it invites us over and over to pull back from the visceral response of immediate experience and the pleasures of memory, to listen hard to the "set" pieces—the wry moments of commentary by the boy's father, the teasing of his roguish sister—joined, as they are, to touching "stilled" visual moments in the story's continuous forward motion.

In isolating particular animated techniques with their penchant for simultaneous and framed presentation and in investigating the narrative progression and aesthetic and ethical judgments such techniques make possible, I hopefully have shown that persistence of vision goes far beyond a physical trick the eyes play on us. Perhaps persistence of vision is the most apt metaphor for the lapses and reversals, the paradoxical perception and apperception, the viewing and then subsequent re-viewings that make animated narrative so delightful and bedeviling, so ethically satisfying and challenging, so worthy of further narratological study, particularly of the many mixed and altered uses of these techniques with their concomitant narrative and ethical complexities.

Endnotes

1. There are usually 24 to 30 frames per second in animated films.
2. According to Paul Wells in *Understanding Animation* (12), the first description of persistence of vision appeared in the writing of Peter Mark Roget in 1825. The theory was later developed by Norman McClaren in the 1970s to define animation's most fundamental attribute.
3. Central to morphing is the animorph, described by Norman Klein in *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation in the Culture of Quick Change* as "the lapse or hesitation where the shift between morphing states is not quite stable. . . . For a few frames, the object . . . does not look like what it was, or what it will be" (22). The in-betweens are the subject of many animations and of much current literary criticism as well. (See the essays of Brian McHale, Marie Laure Ryan, and William Nelles in Brian Richardson's edited collection, *Narrative Dynamics* [2002].) What happens between frames in animation is akin to what happens between panels in comic books. Eric Berlatsky traces the way particular comics persistently leap out of their panels with complex narrative effects in an insightful article in *Narrative*. The transitions between frames are also the subject of current studies in embedded narrative which focus frequently on what prompts one story to flip into another story. Marie-Laure Ryan, for instance, develops a system of popping and stacking, based on the configuration of windows on the computer screen. These studies emphasize the temporal organization of narratives, and indeed animation is profoundly, urgently, obsessively temporal in these ways, as is a good deal of current digitally produced media. By virtue of digital organization, narrative time seems infinitely manipulable, and the creation of alternate worlds and alternate temporal spaces intruding one into another is a central premise of many films, particularly those self-consciously examining their own modes of production. This disruption of time is the subject of Garrett Stewart's provocative and insightful book, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (2007).
4. There are few studies of the narrative organization of animations at the macro level and the effect of that organization on the viewer. In his indispensable book, *Understanding Animation* (1998), Paul Wells describes animation's central narrative strategies and devices. The layered nature of storytelling in animations and its progressive and structural effects on the viewer, however, is not

his subject. The relatively new field of comic studies has provided useful insights into organizational structures in sequential art. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) is a central text on technique and practice although the final chapter, "Putting It All Together," I find more confusing than informative. McCloud's *Making Comics* (2006) describes devices and their effect on the micro, panel-to-panel, page-to-page level but provides less information on a particular comic's larger, all-encompassing organization and the impact of that totality on the reader. Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* (2007) is a theoretical study that probes the way sequential art communicates complex visual information to the audience. His chapters on "The Spatio-Topical System" and "The Sequence" focus on the ways comics "move" across a page. Thierry ultimately uses the metaphor of braiding to describe a comic's largest organization. I find embedding as a term and metaphor more useful, however, because it suggests the way the reader/viewer prioritizes individual strands of the narrative, some of which may be braided into the whole, some superimposed on the whole, some constituting the whole itself.

5. I am hesitant to fully use Phelan's definition of narrativity—"somebody telling somebody else that on some occasion and for some purpose something happened"—not because I am questioning its sense of rhetorical relationships between author, narrator, and audience and its delineation of rhetorical response to an audience's engagement with event sequences and to concomitant actions of observing and judging, but because identifying a narrator of a film, particularly an animated film, as a verbal "somebody" requires explanation beyond the scope of this essay.
6. An auteur animation refers to an animation made under the direction of a single animator, small group of animators or small studio, which exhibits an identifiable signature style. The term defines animation as its own art form, distinct though not always separate from the cartoon, with a complex history and with a "number of models of film production" (Wells, *Animation* 74). Chapter 5 of Wells's *Animation*, "The Animation Auteur," outlines both the importance and the pitfalls of the term in precise and useful ways. In *Understanding Animation*, Wells divides animations into: 1) orthodox animations, that is, cel animations including the cartoon; 2) developmental animations, that is, "accessible narrative based films, made in other forms (i.e. clay, puppets, collage etc.); and 3) experimental animation which is "non-objective, non-linear or abstract" (8).
7. Wells in *Understanding Animation* defines hyper-realism as the set of conventions developed by the Disney Studios whereby "the design, context, and action within the hyper-realist animated film approximates with, and corresponds to the design, context and action within the live-action film's representation of reality." Characters are subject to the conventional physical laws of the real world. Sound represents the sound a person, object, or place would make at the appropriate volume in a real-life context (25). Norman Klein traces the development of Disney conventions to the birth of "full animation" in the late 1930s where animations moved from two-dimensional to three-dimensional representation with attention paid to depth of field, complexity of lighting and movement, the layering of cels to background, and the use of the multiplane camera (*Seven Minutes* 146).
8. "Boundary" and "frame" are problematic terms in this discussion because they indicate a visual geometry—squares and rectangles, spirals and diagonals that establish the edges of the picture plane and define the space within it. Boundary also refers to the nature of the narrative itself, particularly the extent to which the trajectory of an unfolding character or episode is limited or contained. And finally, boundary refers to the intersection of various narrative registers as my Wile E. Coyote example demonstrates. There is the story Wile E. thinks he's in, the story the audience thinks they are in, and the story the animator is playing with. These are roughly equivalent to distinctions between stories told by narrator, implied author/animator, and the relationship of these narrative registers to the audience, who is sensitive to both progression and symmetry. James Phelan in *Mapping the Ethical Turn* provides a useful summary of the ethical positions a narrative can establish for its audience through the relationships between characters, narrator, implied author, and the reader ("Seth's Choice" 95–96). These generally correspond to the categories I establish here. Eric Berlatsky provides a broader conception of the frame in narrative and

visual arts in “Lost in the Gutter: Within and Between Frames in Narrative and Narrative Theory.” He divides the definitions of the frame into liminal frames, those establishing the physical boundaries of a work whether literal picture frames or paratextual elements, such as the book cover, dedications, blurbs, etc., and illocutionary frames, those that involve the nature of the narrator or in other ways provide cognitive influences upon our reading of the work (166).

9. In *Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon*, Norman Klein locates animation's origins in vaudeville, folktale, masque, and the gag where character function is more important than character motivation (35–52). In *The Vatican to Vegas*, he extends his analysis of function based narrative to special effects movies and elaborates on their relationship to animation: “Animation, even in its preindustrial forms, tends toward stories about the reification of the apparatus itself, the special-effect leviathan beyond the individual. . . . [Such stories] tend to be more *elemental*. . . . The dramatic story exaggerates the internal dialectic of character. . . . The elemental story emphasizes the conflict around the apparatus itself—much more about power, spectacle, and presence” (279; emphasis original). Klein uses the chase cartoon and chase film to illustrate audience/cartoon “interactivity”: “There is almost no room for dramatic development between characters, except as stock pantomime, what I call dramatic shorthand: a quick ‘Hello, what’s my conflict?’ and on to the chase” (277). Early in his analysis, Klein links the flatness of character to the nature of “flat” two-dimensional drawings, the basis of early animated motion. To my mind, the short animated auteur film, as distinct from the full-length animated movie, still participates strongly in this ethos. I use the term “predicament driven” to provide a broader ethical dimension to Klein’s analysis and to help tease out progressions in narrative presentation and audience reception. Klein’s extended analysis of scripted space, however, more firmly than my analysis establishes fundamental differences between visual and verbal narratives particularly in relation to their rhetorical effect on viewers.
10. I am indebted to Norman Klein for coining the term “the world upside down” in describing narrative and ethical structures in the cartoon. His analysis of the relationship between medieval and eighteenth-century satiric narratives and the cartoon form in *Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon* is central to an understanding of animated narrative form (68–74).
11. The sense of time stopped and monumentalized is also established by the ballad instrumental score that provides the background for the otherwise silent film. A ballad retells a story of seemingly timeless importance and, with its repetitions and refrains, stylizes and generalizes the story beyond any specific historical iteration.
12. Comment by James Phelan.
13. To some extent, Caroline Leaf has claimed for herself *The Street*’s broadest perspective, which I here have attributed to the grandmother: “*The Street* was actually one street away from where I was living,” she says in an insightful interview with Paul Wells. “I enjoyed the fact that I could do research by just looking around me. . . . I like making movement itself, and for example, in the last panoramic shift in the film, I just wanted to show what it was like for me to look out from my window across the space” (*Animation* 107). Here, there is a near fusion of character perspective and the presence of the implied author. Caroline Leaf’s comments reinforce my own position. The final view of the street not only illustrates the rabbi’s views but enacts them as intrinsic to the film’s entire visual design.

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