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Chairy Tales: Object and Materiality in Animation

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Abstract: *This article addresses three issues of what I suggest here should be regarded as the shifting technological and matter-based apparatus of animation: first, the meanings and affect of objects and materials actually used in animated films; second, the visual dramaturgy made possible by objects and materials for animation screenwriters; and, third, the status of animation process materials as archival objects. The analysis looks at a number of animated films and specifically at their design form, material association, and narrative function to define what I will call the "scripted artefact", and an "Animated Object Cycle". This overview will also operate in a spirit of thinking about theories of practice and practices of theory in animation, and refer to both established theoretical perspectives as well as primary practice idioms.*

In 1957, Norman McLaren made a playful short entitled *A Chairy Tale* (1957), in which McLaren's concerted attempts to sit down are thwarted by the troublesome chair he tries to sit on. The chair, like many objects in animated films, takes on anthropomorphic qualities, and seemingly offers wilful resistance to McLaren by removing itself, darting away, and circling around him. The chair becomes a character in a micronarrative, a small dramatic conflict that nevertheless has intensity, emotional undercurrents and symbolic associations. This encounter between animator and the object is a central plank of three-dimensional materially based animation, drawing attention to the ways in which the object is created, manipulated, interpreted and dramatised. Animation, though more often lauded and understood for its drawn and computer-generated idioms, is full of such objects and materials—pieces of clay, Lego bricks, puppets, matches, toys, Christmas decorations, screws, etc.—all demanding a specific approach and use. This discussion, therefore, addresses three issues concerning this aspect of what, I would like to suggest here, should be regarded as the shifting technological and matter-based apparatus of animation: first, the meanings and affect of objects and materials actually used in animated films; second, the visual dramaturgy made possible by objects and materials for animation screenwriters; and third, the status, thereafter, of animation process materials as archival objects. This analysis will look at a number of animated films and at their design form, material association, and narrative function to define what I will call the "scripted artefact", and an "Animated Object Cycle". This overview will also operate in a spirit of thinking about theories of practice and practices of theory in animation, and refer to both established theoretical perspectives as well as primary practice idioms.

Inspiration and Influence

In all of my previous work, I have tried to root the terms of an analysis in a dichotomy between critical interventions and practice-based experience. On this occasion, the address of objects and materiality in animation was inspired by considering Tom Dixon's furniture design, Guy Tarrant's *Confiscation Cabinets* exhibition at the Museum of Childhood in London (9 November 2013 – 1 June 2014), the challenge of establishing an animation archive, and by writing and directing a documentary on the work of Mackinnon & Saunders, the studio responsible for making the puppets in Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2005) and *Frankenweenie* (2012), Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), and popular children's series like *Bob the Builder* (1998–), *Fireman Sam* (1987–) and *Toby's Travelling Circus* (2012–). Crucially, I wish to address the object at once in regard to its construction, function and use, and as an emblematic form with associations and reconfigurations. Most importantly, I want to recover the materiality of the object, since it plays such an intrinsic role in defining 3D stop-motion animation and its specific choreographies and meanings.

Though the theorisation of animation has been an ongoing project for a number of scholars over the last thirty years, this has largely been characterised by arguments for the conditions and specificity of animation as a form, and/or its interdisciplinary or crossdisciplinary interfaces with other theoretical paradigms, principally those associated with film, media and cultural studies (Cholodenko, *Illusion of Life* and *Illusion of Life II*; Klein, *Seven Minutes*; Wells, *Understanding Animation*; Wells and Hardstaff 2008; Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*; Gehmann and Reinke; Pilling, *A Reader* and *Animating the Unconscious*; Buchan, *Animated Worlds* and *Pervasive Animation*; Beckman). Arguably, though less acknowledged, there is also a literature dedicated to "theories of practice", concentrating on the craft, technique and applied skills of animation (Johnson and Thomas; Wells, *Fundamentals of Animation* and *Scriptwriting*; Selby; Wyatt). A less common approach, which I wish to adopt here, is the theorisation of the object in animation, through the presence and application of the object in other tangible practices, and related processes. Such is the nature of animation; it can be regarded as a specific art form in its own right, or simply as a tool in an applied production process. Here, then, I wish to reverse this paradigm, to think about related creative endeavours—design, curation and manufacture—as tools to think about animation, and how these in turn are instrumental in revealing animation's particularity as art.

The construction of Tom Dixon's furniture, for example, is underpinned by specific design strategies. Autodidact Dixon, former Head of Habitat, seeks to design objects with personality and character, exploring aesthetic ideas as well as utilitarian functionality. His "Bolide Chaise" (1988), for instance, is based on the lithe form and skeletal infrastructure of a cat, redefining the rocking chair as a frame that no longer moves back and forth but up and down like a spring. The curvaceous line of the chair recalls the stretching malleability of cat motion, while the buoyancy of the chair itself redetermines the nature of the comfort and movement experienced. Dixon's chair, though somewhat different from McLaren's traditional wooden upright (and indeed, Pablo Reinoso's organic extensions and enhancements of similar chairs), demonstrates some important factors that might be taken into account when thinking about the animated object. First and foremost, the nature of suggesting or attaining motion in a seemingly static object. Self-evidently, the very engine of animation is to

prescribe agency to objects, but this is often only achieved after considering the motion embodied in the object itself. Further, Dixon's consideration of the cat's anatomy and bone structure prompts a clear understanding of recognising the relationship between interior and exterior, and the ways in which internal mechanisms and organic forms prompt external outcomes and effects. Dixon's "Serpentine Sofa" (2003), based on a child's Matchbox Motorway construction kit, extends these ideas further, using a limited amount of pieces—an inside curve seat, an outside curve seat and a straight bench seat—in the determination of potentially endless variations of sofa construction, pertinent to both domestic spaces, and places like airport lounges and doctor's surgeries. Effectively, Dixon imposes rules on his objects, which define a specific logic in how the objects can be used, but which nevertheless still enable an extensive set of ways in which the objects can be combined into new forms. This more "rule-bound" model of object use that nevertheless permits the building of extended material forms echoes the idea of condensation in animation—namely the maximum of suggestion implied in the minimum of imagery. There is an implied interaction with the user/viewer in this configuration too, and a flexible aesthetic that enables a perpetuity of invention. Dixon's objects, whether they be the cockerel-shaped "Pre S-Chair" (1986) (like McLaren, Dixon likes chickens); the structural engineering of his "Pylon Chair" (1992), based on an X-ray of a scythe butterfly fish; the prize sow–shaped "Plump Chair" (2005), or the digitally designed, Chinese lantern seed–shaped "Etch Light" (2012), trace the relationship between the organic and the artificially created; the fixed and the fluid; and the augmentation of lived experience. These are all invaluable theoretical themes and considerations in addressing the animated object.



Figure 1: *Confiscation Cabinets*. By Guy Tarrant. Museum of Childhood, London (9 November 2013 – 1 June 2014). Image © V&A Museum of Childhood.

So, too, is artist and supply teacher Guy Tarrant's curation of the confiscated objects he found in his colleagues' desk drawers in 150 London state schools. By addressing these objects, and talking to both teachers and pupils about them, Tarrant evolved a model of social research that enabled him to evaluate the relationship between children and play, within a context of regulation and restraint. Again, this very model reminded me of the animator, defined often by his or her need to speak to a children's audience, employed in aspects of creative invention, yet working within particular limits when engaged with material objects in specific generic or technical paradigms. Inevitably, these confiscated objects included action figures, trading cards, yo-yos, paper aeroplanes, balls and make-up, but also, for example, a set of hastily drawn playing cards torn from the lined paper distributed at the start of a lesson for the purposes of essay writing! Another memento was a burnt tennis ball, previously covered in lighter fuel and lit, then tossed between boys wearing oven gloves. Not an Olympic sport yet, but a triumph of playground invention. Again, these objects are reminders of the way in which the animated object is essentially a transubstantiated object. Such objects serve to reconfigure materials, redetermine purpose and use, redefine space and context, and reposition ideas about work and play.

The inspiration of Dixon and Tarrant's projects and the ideas suggested by their engagement with objects were consolidated further by my own practice in writing and directing *Mackinnon & Saunders: A Model Studio* (Paul Wells, 2013), a critical evaluation of the work of an animation puppet-making company. The documentary was based on three core themes—to situate Mackinnon & Saunders' work within the broader tradition of stop-motion puppet animation; to acknowledge, represent and evidence their work in feature filmmaking, children's television production, and the production of independent "auteur" short films; and to reveal the actual working processes of the studio in making increasingly complex puppets. The historical aspect of the documentary was achieved by using pertinent quotations from major figures in stop-motion animation and puppetry—Jim Henson, Willis O'Brien, Ray Harryhausen, Jiří Trnka, Phil Tippett, Kihachirō Kawamoto and Frank Maugeri—as structuring devices for topics and ideas addressed as part of the overarching narrative. The feature film aspect was essentially covered by primary interviews with Ian Mackinnon, Peter Saunders and Tim Burton; the independent film aspect summarised through the films of the studio's signature director, Barry Purves; and the children's programming aspect addressed through archival materials drawn from the Animation Academy Collection about *Bob the Builder* and contemporary production recordings of the making of *Toby's Travelling Circus*. The final component—the working practices of the studio—was covered by primary interviews with Mackinnon & Saunders staff, and filming specific production processes in the making of a variety of puppets.

As Peter Saunders stresses at the beginning of the documentary, "we work with metal, foam latex, silicone, wood, and fibreglass. In short, we like getting our hands dirty." This defines the object in a different way. The puppet is a working amalgamation of primary materials and elements, and fundamentally, an object designed in a specific way to act and perform at the behest of the manipulations of the animator. In essence, the puppet is constructed in relation to the proposed character design, but this in itself is subject to a process of problem solving by which the puppet becomes fully functional, can be filmed without revealing the mechanism of the puppet, and can execute specific actions successfully.

This can sometimes be extremely difficult. Tim Burton's designs tend to privilege characters with thin legs, often with skeletal form, and unusual gaits. This provides challenges in relation to the balance of the figure, the hiding of joints in the armature, and the durability and tension of parts when constantly manipulated. Equally, the placement of devices by which mouths can be gradually moved can be problematic. As Barry Purves points out in the documentary, making Ratty smile in *The Wind in the Willows* (Mark Hall and Chris Taylor, 1983) by turning an Allen key in his back pocket is one thing, but then again, he can never smile when he is sitting down! With each new requirement comes a new modification in the construction of the object, and each new specification changes the nature of the manipulation and its outcomes. This then is the object as the rationalisation of materials, and thereafter, in this case, the puppet as a specific embodiment of a design process and character needs. Crucially, however, though the puppet is made for the particularity of performance, it has a status as an artefact beyond the film for which it is made. It may be presented and admired for its own sake in an exhibition, stored as a rarity, or understood as an archival holding.[1] These factors extend the terms and life of the animated object, and prompt the need for the object to once more be redefined and repositioned as a material form.

Theories and Practices

Alan Cholodenko has noted:

> [W]hile live action has a privileged relation with not only the adult human but the subject … cartoon animation has a privileged relation with not only the child but the nonhuman and the object. And this is to suggest that animation cannot be theorised without theorising the life of objects (the nonhuman can be included in this category) and vice versa. (31–2)

I have written elsewhere about the place of the animal in animation (*Animated Bestiary*), but here I wish to explore the "privileged relation" between the object and its use and application in animated film. In some ways this is problematic because objects have occupied a diminished place as the most conspicuous evidence of late industrial consumer culture. When viewed within an aesthetic and material framework like the examples cited in relation to Dixon, Tarrant, and Mckinnon & Saunders, this in some ways both dilutes and amplifies the ideological charge of the materials. On the one hand, the objects can be viewed as privileged examples of art and design defined purely by context, fitness-for-purpose and commerce; on the other, they are touchstones for nostalgically grounded worlds, imagined communities, and emotional memories. These perspectives are also rooted in differing views of the political economy of production and exhibition. Delineating the significance of the object as a symbolic artefact outside these parameters is contentious, and as Sherry Turkle has suggested,

> [T]he acknowledgement of the power of objects has not come easy. Behind the reticence to examine objects as centrepieces of emotional life was the sense that one was studying materialism, or fetishism, disparaged as perversion. Behind the reticence to examine objects as centrepieces of thought was the value placed, at least within Western tradition, on formal, propositional ways of knowing. (6)

The material and fetishistic power of objects in animation again possesses a certain duplicity. There is little doubt that animation in some ways overdetermines the object, but in a spirit that seeks to heighten its associative value rather than its capital value. Animators constantly stress the tactility and substance of puppets and objects as proof of a material reality beyond the virtual worlds of computer-generated imagery. These artefacts carry with them a significant aesthetic and emotive presence and affect that sometimes enables (ironically) an easy and effective transcendence of the conditions of production. It is equally clear, though, that for the audiences who so value seeing puppets in relief at exhibitions, outside the context of the film they are part of, there is almost a fetishistic fascination with photographing and touching the object as if it had some primal and unique significance. Touching for the most part is prohibited, of course, since the puppet for all its durability in production is somehow seen as fragile and breakable outside it. The puppet's place in a display or as part of a demonstration merely increases the puppet's status as an object of desire. To hold Wallace, or Mr. Fox, or Coraline in such situations has the sense of a special event, and the idea of being in the presence of a rare object. This is to translate the object then, from often one of many made for the rigours of production, and the industrial process, into an artefact defined by a special existence. This is either heightened when valued as a key component of a filmmaker's acknowledged work—the models in Ray Harryhausen's collection, for example—or not valued at all if placed in storage for often no known future purpose, or merely thrown in a skip at the end of a production.

I will return to these issues later in the discussion, but Turkle's key point that the object is only understood through "formal, propositional ways of knowing" is the very condition that the animation of objects has directly challenged. Indeed, this would probably only be a starting place, or an immediate reference point for the object before it undergoes the kind of transubstantiation described above, and before it takes on less tangible aesthetic and emotional terms. As Czech animator and artist, Jan Švankmajer has insisted apropos of his use of objects,

> I prefer the kind of objects which, in my opinion, have some kind of inner life. In addition to the hermetic sciences, I believe in the "conservation" of certain contents in objects which people touch under conditions of extreme sensitiveness. The "emotionally" charged objects are then under certain conditions capable of revealing these contents and touching them provides associations and analogues for our own flashes of the unconscious. (Qtd. in Hames 118)

This idea that objects have some sort of emotional inner life that is somehow conserved and liberated by touch—"tactile memory"—is arguably at the core of the ways in which animators view the potential of the object or puppet, using animation as a method to reveal this emotive narrative. It is also at the heart of the quasi-fetishistic imperative that viewers have in wanting to hold and admire the physical artefact. Crucially, though, the emergence of an "inner life" is bound up with determining agency, so many animators would view their mediation of the object as a process which insists the object is an actor and a mode of technical apparatus. It is something that can be intrinsically acted upon, acted with and acted through, in order to use its organic or constructed structures as agents to determine meaning and affect in motion.



Figure 2: *KaBoom!* (Adam Pesapane, 2004). Screenshot.

Animated films by PES (Adam Pesapane), for example, draw upon the deep resonances of objects that enable him to facilitate wordless narratives with emotive impact. This is not only concerned with sensuous interpretation and response in the recognition of "inner life" but in an appreciation of, and engagement with, the knowledge embedded in the object. Lauded for his first film, *Roof Sex* (2002), featuring two chairs appearing to have sex on a roof ("furniture porn" as PES would have it), it is *KaBoom!* (2004), however, that best epitomises the complexity and depth of his approach in using objects. Prompted by how his computer circuit boards looked after burning out during a power cut, PES reimagined his charred electronics as a far-off desert terrain as if seen from a plane (Figure 2). This became the backdrop for a thinly veiled metaphoric piece about America's bombing of Iraq—the exotic Middle Eastern skyline depicted with salt cellars, drill bits, thimbles, candlesticks and oil cans, while a blue toy plane fires matchstick missiles and peanut bombs. Shots from the plane are returned with machine-gun fire represented by plastic clown heads rat-tat-tatting from key barrels, while explosions are played out as ballooning ribbon bows and a variety of Christmas tree baubles. The peanut-shaped atomic bomb, echoing the two compartments of an actual bomb, is especially ironic as peanut butter is often sent to war zones and famine territories as a protein-rich and nourishing foodstuff in care parcels. Here it is the vehicle for the final destruction of a city in the midst of a cork and fur "sand" landscape. This is the art of the "found object", thereafter each object serving as a prompt for reminiscence and recognition in the viewer. PES takes great care with the compositional aspects of his frame, using the scale, colour and texture of each object to persuasive effect, while at the same time changing its purpose and context. Importantly, though, these everyday objects remind the viewer of the people who use them, always made so abstract and absent from the imagery of bombing with which the TV viewer became so familiar during the coverage of the Iraqi invasion. The objects here recall their period too, catalysing a certain sense of nostalgia, but also, in largely being composed of children's toys and the trinkets of the Christmas season, suggest the compromise of innocence, peace and goodwill. The things that should offer pleasure and sustenance in the material world are the very things that are ultimately used to represent death and destruction in the animated one. Here, then, is a Dixonesque redefinition

of objects in motion; a Tarrantian reconfiguration of objects of play, and Mackinnon & Saunders–styled understanding of compositional matter in the structuring and exposition of performance. Further, there is a radicalisation of Turkle's "formal, propositional ways of knowing" and a clear example of the ways that animation, when thought through in the mannerist fashion sometimes adopted by Švankmajer, can provoke feeling and inspire insight.

Jean Piaget has argued:

> [T]o know is to assimilate reality into systems of transformations. To know is to transform reality in order to understand how a certain state is brought out … To my way of thinking, knowing an object does not mean copying it—it means acting upon it. It means constructing systems of transformations that can be carried out on or with this object. (17)

To this end, animation becomes the most instrumental form of revealing knowledge, since it is most obviously an authored engagement with the artifice of the implied transubstantiation of the object. "Reality" is assimilated and transformed through the principles of analogy and metaphor. Animation is inherently a "system of transformation", deliberately constructed as a process by which to deliberately construct. Such construction and transformation is informed, however, by some prior or primal understanding of the object, in the way that Norman Klein has defined the parameters of the "scripted space":

> Scripted spaces are a walk-through or click-through environment (a mall, a church, a casino, a theme park, a computer game). They are designed to *emphasise* the viewer's journey—the space between—rather than the gimmicks on the wall. The audience walks *into* the story. What's more, this walk should respond to each viewer's whims, even though each step along the way is pre-scripted (or should I say preordained?). … By scripted spaces, I mean primarily a *mode of perception*, a way of seeing. (*The Vatican to Vegas* 11–12; emphasis in original)

After Klein, I therefore wish to propose the "scripted artefact", since the animator, in principle, invites the viewer into a pre-scripted narrative of an object, stimulated by knowledge, association and feeling, that in itself constitutes a necessarily new mode of perception. Klein adds:

> Within these scripted spaces are slender epiphanies, like the instant when you glance up at Mantegna's ceiling of 1470. They are a scripted phenomenology, where the shock that is a "special" effect can be very, very brief—brief yet scrupulously designed again, three acts in a few seconds. During the Baroque, those few seconds were often called "moments of wonder". (*The Vatican to Vegas* 12)

This response is almost a correspondence between the subliminal and the sublime, and has a direct relationship to the phenomenological response to the object. A scripted artefact, then, is an embodied object whose meaning and affect is revealed through its use and reuse, demonstrating an oscillation between its status as a design idiom, its functional purpose, and its associative and symbolic implications and interactions. When animation

employs an artefact, it changes the "mode of perception" by which an object is understood, placing it within a "system of transformation", creating the "slender epiphany", which reveals its inherent and intrinsic "script".

The Scripted Artefact Redux

The scripted artefact in the animated film essentially exists in four states (Figure 3): first, as a "profilmic 3D object", an object that is either created or already exists, cast (literally and otherwise) as a material aspect in the development of the film text; second, as a "filmic object", literally and symbolically playing its role in the text/narrative; third, as a "postfilmic object", most commonly recognised as a studio or archival holding (or sometimes something readily disposed of); and fourth, as a "real-world object", either transposed into toys, models or merchandising, or existing as a collectible (or again, as a disposable, potentially recyclable set of materials and elements).

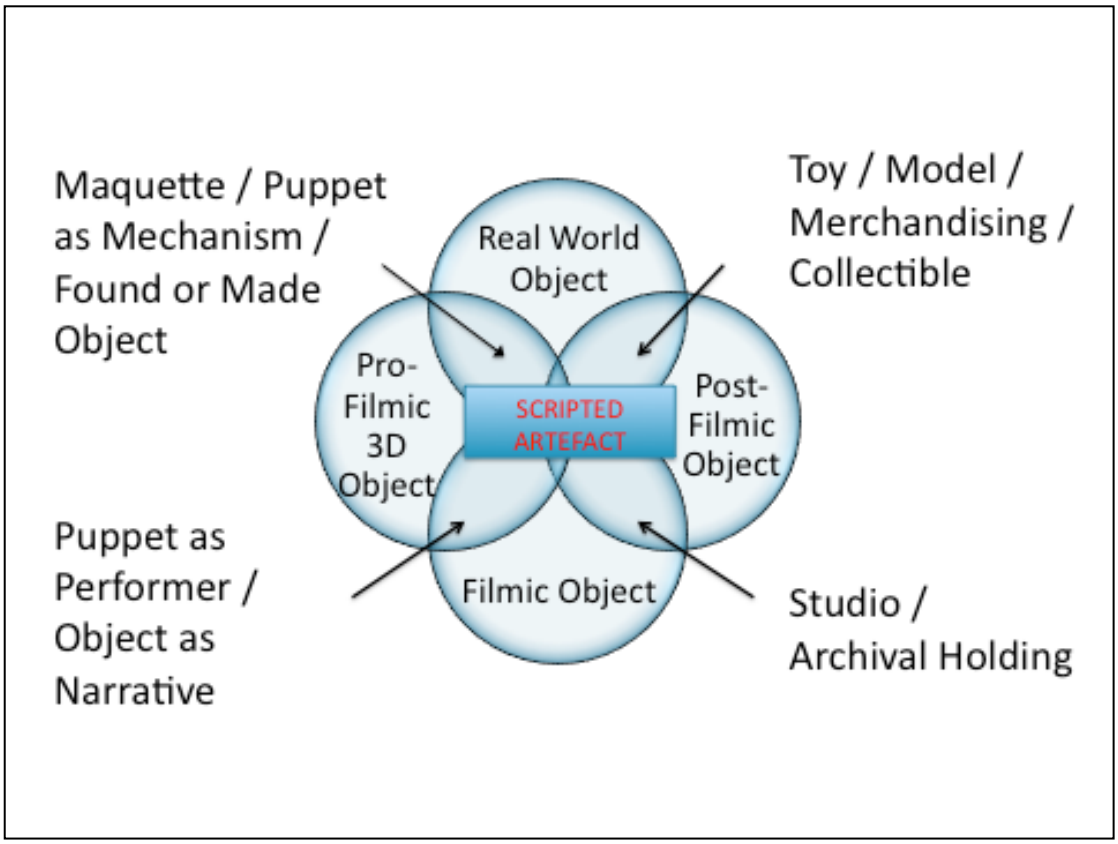


Figure 3: The scripted artefact. © Paul Wells.

Figure 3 also represents the interfaces between the shifting definitions of the object. For the sake of clarity, it is pertinent to think this through using an example from the Mackinnon & Saunders studio. Sparky the dog in Tim Burton's *Frankenweenie* started life as a range of 2D designs by Burton, before being transposed into what are essentially 3D sketches in the form of maquettes in different stages of refinement. Even in 3D computer

animation, characters are often made as 3D maquettes to aid scanning and virtual design. This is essentially the first object, the prototype by which a mould is made to accommodate the second object, the 3D mechanised armature that facilitates the animator's manipulation. Ultimately, there is a final object (or several, for the purposes of extensive use during filming) that is the Sparky puppet. These profilmic objects are constructed specifically, but could equally be found objects like those seen in *KaBoom!*. Sparky then becomes a filmic object operating as a performing character in the animation itself. Thereafter, the puppet is either kept/stored by the studio, given to an archive or museum, or is even thrown away. This postfilmic object then has close affiliations with its status as a real-world object, since it may be transposed into toys and merchandising, or may be understood as a collectible, or deconstructed into its constituent elements to be recycled. In this case, Sparky still exists as a maquette, an internal mechanism, a puppet, but also as deconstructed clay, plastic and metal.

These four stages of the scripted artefact are effectively the literal aspects of its status as an animated production object, but are critical to the understanding of the changing presence and absence of the object, and the shift in its function, use and value. By thinking of the scripted artefact initially in this way, it is possible to recover the object within the primary system of transformation, which precedes its potential transubstantiation within the narrative itself. This system of transformation is for the most part invisible since the object/puppet is not often thought about in its preparatory stage, or in its construction, or in its use or fate after the fact of its presence in the film. Arguably, too, it is often equally as invisible as a "puppet" if it becomes a highly persuasive and entertaining character. To articulate this aspect of the scripted artefact, then, is to reveal and theorise the animated object in practice, and to offer a view of materiality and craft of the object that insists upon its presence, volume, weight and tactility. It suggests it can exist as an actor/performer, ornament, rare antique, archived item, clay-in-transition, mechanical infrastructure, constituent materials, or refuse. Though this situates the object back in a political economy to a certain extent, it more readily narrativises the object within its primary and secondary functions, grounding it in real world conditions that resist its fundamental absence in virtual forms.

Counter-Realism

Some years ago, as part of a comedy sketch for a radio satire show, apropos of the advances in visual effects in film, I wrote, that "in reality, if you want realistic realism, use the real thing". Now in an era when photorealistic animation is indistinguishable from live action, and further, that such representation can accurately depict objects from the real world to completely persuasive effect, this seems a passé irony. This sense of perpetual Baudrillardian simulacra has been viewed in a number of ways, Mark Cotta Vaz noting, for example, that this works as a kind of "third reality": the first being physical reality; the second the photoreality of perfectly executed visual effects; the third being a completely authentic "real world" but facilitating fantastical scenarios that foreground animated interventions and stylisation. Interestingly, too, this "third reality" does not wholly embrace complete verisimilitude, sometimes abandoning total imitation for believability and readability in the image. Stephen Prince suggests that this phenomenon is inherently related to the idea of "perceptual realism", where the virtual and the nonvirtual have nearly complete correspondence in how they are viewed and understood. Somewhat ironically then, the overt

and specific use of material objects works as a counter-realism to the orthodoxies of the contemporary virtual cinema. The very "thingness" of the object, not merely differentiates it from other objects, but from the virtual object, whatever its fidelity. This is not then the art of resemblance or appropriation but the application of materiality and form, and as such it more properly recalls the relationship between humankind and its investment of power in objects, rather than the seeming autonomy of the virtual object. This also advances more of an idea of the permanence of the object, even in the light of its transubstantiated potential. Indeed, it insists not merely on the idea of "interior life" but multiple life and after life.

The prop has performed an important part, of course, in traditional theatre and film since their inception—such an object often playing a fundamental role in defining a character, space or environment. Rarely the prop is merely functional, and is in fact used in a number of ways. It is pertinent, then, to trace how objects in nominally orthodox live-action films also serve the counter-realism of the material form in the face of the emergence and dominance of the postproduced virtual property. Further, by tracing these applications it is possible to see how this might inform an extended definition of the scripted artefact in animation. Scott Jordan Harris has written extensively about evocative objects in film, noting of the red balloon in *The Red Balloon* (1956) that "it reminds us of that time in our childhoods when we could find a friend in any object to which we turned our imaginations … the balloon works best as an emblem of innocence, and the film is an essay on it" (34). It might be suggested, therefore, that by identifying the nature and function of the object in film, it situates the object as both a primal site of recall and association, and as the deep metaphorical imperative in the narrative. Thereafter, I wish to argue that the animated film serves to take such an object and, essentially, make it the *subject* of what is a more saturated and condensed moving image, thus heightening the associative and analogous aspects of the scripted artefact.

Objects in traditional film form fall mainly into the following eight categories, each distinct, but inevitably some objects straddle a number of functions identified in the typology. Each is accompanied by an appropriate example:

- Instrumental Objects—objects fundamental to facilitating the plot/narrative, e.g. the letters of transit in *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942);

- Stunt Objects—purely functional objects in the facilitation of action, e.g. the skyscraper clock in *Safety Last!* (Fred C. Newmeyer and Sam Taylor, 1923);

- Symbolic or Metaphoric Objects—objects with overt associative meanings, e.g. the floating globe in *The Great Dictator* (Charles Chaplin, 1940) (symbol) or the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) (metaphor);

- Mythic Objects—objects specifically made up or created for story and/or folkloric purpose, e.g. the falcon ornament in *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941);

- Fetish Objects—objects of quasi-erotic or obsessive investment, e.g. the ruby slippers in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) or Maria the Robot in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927);

- Enigmatic Objects—objects that are significant in the plot/narrative but do not explicitly surrender their meaning or intent, e.g. the briefcase in *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) or the portrait of Laura Hunt in *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944);

- Obscure Functional Objects—objects that are not common in everyday life but support important functions, e.g. gynaecological tools in *Dead Ringers* (David Cronenberg, 1988);

- Origin Objects—objects which operate as the source/origin of a story or character imperative, e.g. the Rosebud sled in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) or Rooster Cogburn's eye patch in *True Grit* (Henry Hathaway, 1969).

In identifying these categories, which are not exhaustive, it is possible to see some of the ways in which objects effectively work as an implicit dramaturgical tool, but when applied in a selective and concentrated manner in animation become an explicit dramaturgical tool. The object in animation fundamentally takes on greater meaning by affecting and absorbing both the human and the material function and affect. This is more than merely anthropomorphism in that the object remains defined through its own facility and agency. Animation is intrinsically informed by a simultaneity of the literal and the metaphorical—any one puppet or object (common or obscure) is inherently an instrumental, stunt and origin object but will almost inevitably have symbolic, metaphoric, mythic, enigmatic or fetishistic properties. Arguably, too, when seen as a scripted artefact informed by these functions, the categories here also find correspondence with the four-stage practice process identified earlier. This may be termed the Animated Object Cycle.

The Animated Object Cycle

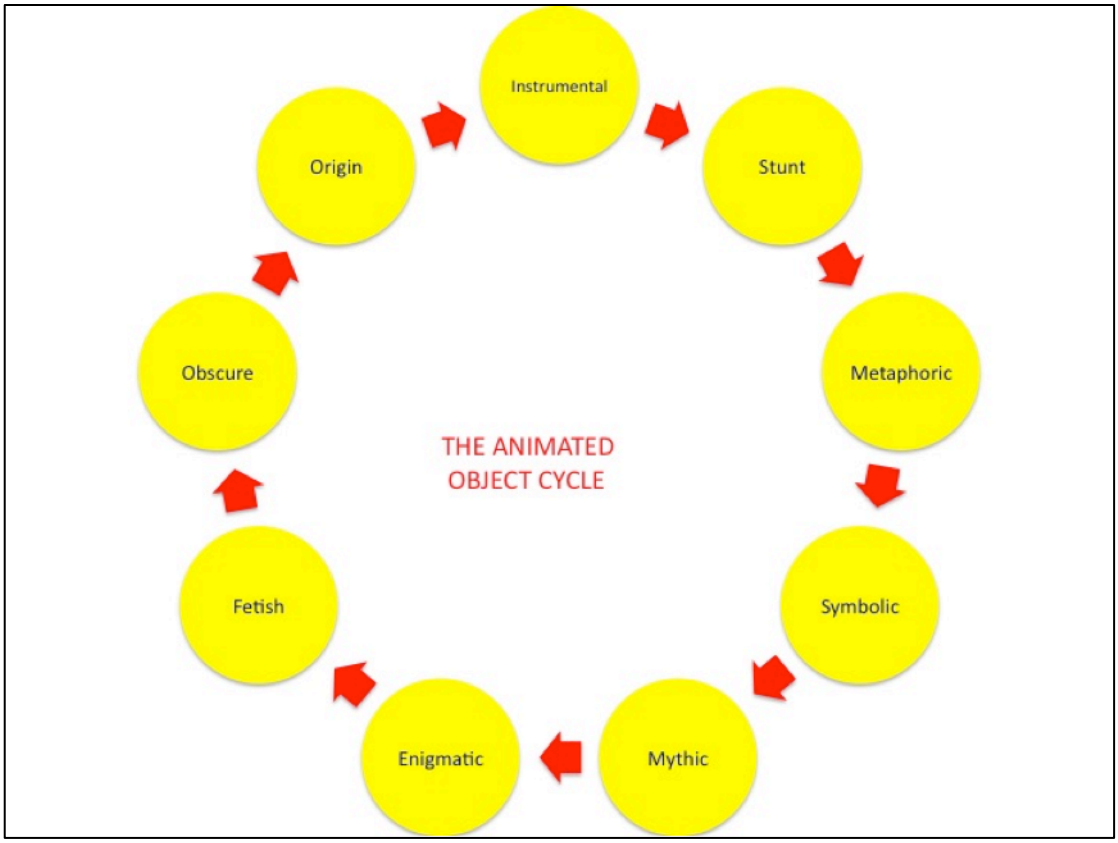


Figure 4: Animated Object Cycle. © Paul Wells.

All animated objects start as instrumental forms since they are intrinsic to, and ultimately drive, all 3D stop-motion narratives. They inevitably become stunt objects in facilitating the literal action in such films, even if they later, and usually, take on metaphoric and symbolic functions. Their fundamental status as illusionist prefilmic, filmic or postfilmic objects often catalyses their mythic, enigmatic or fetish status, either through their rarity, loss or lack of original context. The lack of attention given to objects after their use in animation often renders them obscure and, with the passage of time, the harbingers of the knowledge of origin, and original instrumental function. Whether thinking about the skeletal figures, rods and plinth in the Lauenstein brothers' *Balance* (1989); the up to 9,000 machine-tooled replacement parts for each one of George Pal's *Puppetoons* (1932–1947) or the unused puppets made for *Mars Attacks!* (Tim Burton, 1996) (luckily residing in Burton's office), each seems, in varying degrees, to inhabit this Animated Object Cycle (Figure 4). This seems to be common to most scripted artefacts in animation, and suggests that objects and materiality in animated film are of a particular kind; not merely evocative to think with, but subject to a life experience that draws attention to both the political economy and cultural practice of animation and its status and impact—the latter often as much about absence and marginality as it is about presence, acknowledgement and value.

The scripted artefact in animation, then, has an intrinsic dramaturgy. The animation of the object reveals the tacit knowledge and emotion within, and related to, materiality. Such objects possess a transubstantiative potential and versatility and paradoxically represent a counter-realism in an era of virtual verisimilitude. The narratives of these objects are informed by a shifting definition in relation to their methods of construction and use, their meaning and affect, and their postfunctional presence and value. Such scripted artefacts in animation revise and resist the "formal, propositional ways of knowing" offering alternative perspectives on aesthetic and cultural practices. To know the object in this context is to recognise theories of practice and practices of theory in systems of transformation and new narrativisation of the physical realm.

Notes

[1] This process is vividly portrayed in the *Toy Story* trilogy (John Lasseter et al., 1995; 1999; 2010), when Woody the pull-string cowboy, ostensibly "a child's play thing", discovers that he is also a collectible toy as part of a merchandising set commemorating the characters of a 1950s TV show, *Woody's Roundup*. The films show Woody's presence as a quasi-human sentient character, a self-conscious performer, a puppet TV star, a toy, a commodity, a piece of merchandising and a rare artefact.

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