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Not Just for Kids: An Alternative Look at Animation

Rich Johnson

Notes - Week 4

PART I: TIME

I Dreamt I was an Animal

A look at how anthropomorphism has been used to portray more serious themes, such as political commentary; including the very first Japanese feature-length animation and propaganda film *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors* (1945) and Halas and Batchelor's adaptation of *Animal Farm* (1954). In contrast to this will be the exploration of more surrealist films that have attempted to incorporate dream-like and escapist imagery to reinvent classic stories; such as Jan Svankmajer's *Alice* (1988) and the Kafkaesque qualities of René Laloux's *La Planète sauvage* (1973) and Satoshi Kon's *Paprika* (2010).

Momotaro: Sacred Sailors (1945)

Director: Mitsuyo Seo

Studio: Shochiku

- *Momotaro: Sacred Sailors* (1945) is the first Japanese feature-length animated film. Up to this point, animation was not considered an effective medium by Japanese government officials.
- Director Mitsuyo Seo was ordered to make a propaganda film during World War II by the Japanese Naval Ministry. There is some irony that it's a film designed "For Children..."

Animal Farm (1954)

Directors: John Halas and Joy Batchelor

Studio: Halas and Batchelor

- Entering a financial crisis due to the loss of profit on the 1940 releases, *Fantasia* and *Pinocchio*, new avenues were considered...
- From 1941 to 1945, the war effort saw Disney commissioned by the U.S. government to produce animated training and propaganda films for the Navy, Army, Air Forces and Treasury Department.
- *Animal Farm* (1954) was a propaganda film used as part of the 'Red Scare'; commissioned by the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).
- Halas and Batchelor's subsequent work, post-war, was mainly public service related, laced with a similar sense of humour to the Disney shorts.

La Planète sauvage (1973)



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Director: René Laloux
Studios: Les Films Armorial
Ceskoslovenský Filmexport

- The narrative of *La Planète sauvage* is considered to be an allegory about animal rights, human rights and racism.
- René Laloux (1929-2004). Early career working in advertising. In contrast, he then had a job in a psychiatric institution where he experimented with animation with the interns.
- Surrealist, absurd art and 'Fantastic Realism' influences.
- Collaborated with Jean Giraud 'Moebius' on two films: *Les Maîtres du temps* (aka *Time Masters*, 1982) and *Gandahar* (1982). Moebius was one of the most influential comic book artists.
- Produced conceptual art for both Jodorowsky's (failed) '70s Dune adaptation and Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979).

Alice (1988)

Director: Jan Svankmajer
Studio: Film Four International / Condor Films

- The Brothers Quay and their work have some common roots to Švankmajer, such as puppetry, but in Švankmajer's case it was Czech puppetry and in the Quays' it was Walerian Borowczyk and the Toone Theatre in Brussels, discovered entirely independently many years before Švankmajer came anywhere close to their radar.
- The full 52-minute documentary *The Cabinet of Jan Švankmajer* was originally broadcast in Channel 4's 'Visions' strand and is included with the BFI's DVD set, *Jan Švankmajer: The Complete Short Films*.
- The Quays were originally commissioned to make animated inserts breaking up the Švankmajer clips and talking-heads pieces, which were then compiled as an identically-titled short film.
- The other reason for people jumping to erroneous conclusions was that their major breakthrough "Street of Crocodiles" (1986) premiered in the same year that the BFI started releasing a touring programme of Švankmajer films, so they've been linked ever since, much to the Quays' chagrin because of the knee-jerk assumption that because Švankmajer has been making films since 1964 and they didn't start until the 1970s, they therefore must have been acolytes of his.
- Although there are some moments of animation and superficial links, Lynch references remain tenuous. Czech émigré František 'Frank' Daniel, who was the head of the American Film Institute when Lynch was studying there, attempted to make clear connections but there was no evidence that Lynch was able to show him anything influenced by Švankmajer.

Paprika (2010)

Director: Satoshi Kon
Studio: Madhouse



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- Satoshi Kon was a hugely versatile anime director and manga artist. He passed away in 2010. Other films include: *Perfect Blue* (1997), *Millennium Actress* (2001), *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003) and the mini series, *Paranoia Agent* (2004).
 - His films have pushed the limitations and inherent style/techniques of Japanese animation. Fluid, dynamic and deeply personal.
 - Check out the recent documentary, *Satoshi Kon: The Illusionist* (2021)
 - Interview with the director, Pascal-Alex Vincent:
www.animationmagazine.net/features/satoshi-kon-the-illusionist-anime-auteur-in-the-spotlight