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Jim Trainor

Jim Trainor is an artist who works in film, video, comic strips, as well as performances in which he narrates slide projection versions of his comic strips to musical accompaniment. He is best known, though, for his animations, which he has been doing since he was thirteen. His favoured technique has remained constant, black felt-tipped marker on white typing paper, though lately augmented with coloured paper and coloured dots. The animations are, generally, representational narratives with voice-over narration.

I met Jim about seven years ago. We had both just relocated to Chicago for our first full-time academic posts, his in Animation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, mine long since happily abandoned. We were drinking buddies for several years before I saw his work. I liked it immediately. This is a common reaction; it is very agreeable work. I began showing it around and thinking about it. I included the script of The Moschops in a book I edited with Chris Gehman, The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema. Over time, I began to think that the work was more than merely agreeable, more than simple and direct and charming with a disarmingly sly take on morality and transgression. And more, too, than incredibly funny and moving. But what is this ‘more’? It is, I think, something that exceeds genre, something that points the way to – not to be too Deleuzian about it – new ways of being in the world.

The Fetishist (38 minutes, 1997) is a biopic of serial killer William Heirens, active in Chicago in the 1940s and best known for the lipstick message he left on a victim’s bedroom wall: “For heaven’s sake catch me before I kill more: I cannot help myself.” Trainor’s longest work to date, it took several years to complete. Perhaps he was aiming for a feature-length work — he generated an amazing two hours of footage using his usual magic marker on typing paper, which he then edited down.

The story is told chronologically in a series of telescoping vignettes. Trainor augments his drawings by employing archival newspaper photographs as occasional background elements. Rather than disrupting the insular, childlike world of The Fetishist, these documentary envoys from the world of historical reality shore it up. Unlike the bulk of contemporary American crime dramas/documentaries, the film does not attempt to mine the inner world of Heirens in order to “get inside the mind of a serial killer.” To quote the press material, “It presents a world depopulated by the limitations of a psychopathic personality.” This means, I think, something more than eschewing the normalising/moralising tendencies of American popular culture, which would provide particular reasons for the development of the psychopathic mind (some childhood trauma), and go to great lengths to assure us that the psychopath is radically different from us.

As the title suggests, Heirens’ activities as a fetishist are emphasised over his assaults and murders. Fetishism is certainly easier to relate to than serial killing: even if we are not fetishists, we generally have preferences, making the difference between fetishist and non-fetishist a matter of degree rather than kind. Fetishism is based on metonymy: it occurs when one’s desire/fear (anxiety) in relation to a particular object (classically, the maternal phallus) is shifted to a proximal object, in Heirens’ case, women’s undergarments. The Fetishist eschews metaphor in favour of metonymy, to marvellous effect. In particular, Trainor’s depiction of body fluids – simple black drips, drops or puddles – form a particularly productive metonymic chain: tear – sweat – blood – vomit – semen – urine – faeces – spit – bile – milk – phlegm – menstrual blood. Trainor plays around with this representational ambiguity, producing at turns humour, anxiety, dread and a general sense of physical abjection. Not only is it often unclear to viewers what a particular body fluid might be, it seems unclear to Heirens (who may not care, or have the capacity to distinguish between particular fluids and whether they come from him or someone/thing else).



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In this jittering animated world of crude line drawings and foleyed liquid plop sounds, bodies are reservoirs of various seeping, dripping or spewing liquids. If a body – a subjectivity, an identity – is represented by simple marker lines that delineate forms without volume, this body is under constant threat of dissolution through these fluids that escape it and gain volume aurally, through the sounds they generate hitting the ground. The fluid plop sounds are incredibly important to these dramas of physical dissolution, of the unstable boundary between self and world. Our fluids, whether vital or waste, gain dimension as they leave us.

The Bats (8 minutes, 1999) and The Moschops (13 minutes, 2000) have a lot of things in common. In fact, they are part of the series The Animals and their Limitations, though the two components subsequently finished – The Magic Kingdom and Harmony – diverge from many of these commonalities. The Magic Kingdom, for instance, consists mainly of live-action footage of a zoo's monkey cage – though with short animated sequences – while Harmony, discussed below, has multiple protagonists. Despite their titles, both The Bats and The Moschops have, respectively, a single particular bat and moschop as their protagonist.

Though the voice-over narrations for these two films are in the first-person, the films are not narrated by their protagonists. Both the bat and the moschop are silent, incapable of speech. The jittering line drawings face us mutely. They do not (cannot) address us directly from their worlds, but through narrators who adopt the first person, confessional mode. Both alternate between a male and female narrator, though the protagonists are decidedly male.

In The Bats, the male narrator voices the unnamed protagonist bat who narrates his life story including his death (January 4, 1361, of old age) and three visitations from God. Though God is identified as a male who appears, there is no visual depiction of him, and his words are narrated by a woman, who provides philosophy (“Sometimes you have to kill more than you can eat.”), law (“You must only have sexual intercourse with your own species.”) and prophecy (“In another 900 generations, you lower-than-mid-pitches will become extinct.”). Trainor describes The Bats as the “story of a life devoted to carnal pleasures and the avoidance of predators under the guidance of a prescient but ineffectual God.”

The moschops was a mammal-like reptile of the Permian era. It had a thick skull and short little hind legs. According to Trainor, “Scientists believe the Moschops was capable of interior tenderness, which it expressed, ironically, through incessant fighting.” In The Moschops, the narration alternates between a male and female voice. The male voice is identified with the protagonist, who tells the story of his life – fighting and fucking until he is fatally wounded – while the female voice speaks on behalf of the herd. Both narrators also speak in a voice that is primarily informational, the voice of a nature programme. If there is anthropomorphism going on here, it is one that simultaneously inverts that of the nature show and children's literature. The anthropomorphising force of the nature show is one that attributes certain human abilities and motivations to creatures, but limits their consciousness. The creatures have a strictly demarcated interiority, limited to the fulfillment of basic drives. Cartoon animals are, in some respects, fully individuated. They are, in effect, human subjects in drag. Their assumed costumes limit them to functioning in a theatrical-allegorical manner.

One of the things that makes Trainor's work so interesting, I think, is his developing use of anthropomorphism, particularly in relation to narration and point of view. In The Bats, the relationship between the narrators and the protagonist is fairly straight-forward. The male narrator speaks (first person, in the past tense, from beyond the grave) on behalf of the mute protagonist, a particular lower-than-mid-pitch bat. In one sense, the protagonist exists completely within the register of the image, while the male narrator exists completely, and retrospectively, within the register of the textual/aural. This clean split allows the bat to be simultaneously mute and speaking/spoken, simultaneously not-anthropomorphised and anthropomorphised (the female narrator speaking in the present tense as the voice of God is, of course, another kind of anthropomorphism,

wherein supernatural or transcendent beings – gods – are given human characteristics).

In *The Moschops*, these relations are basically maintained, though in a more complex form. We still have a single protagonist who remains mute in the visual register while being spoken/speaking in the aural, as well as a male and a female narrator. Both narrators speak in the first person, the male – identified with the protagonist – in the first person singular (“I”); the female – identified with the herd – in the first person plural (“we”). On the one hand, this social/sexual division makes it easy to read *The Moschops* as an allegory of male aggression and homosexual panic, which it certainly is. On the other hand, both narrators equally perform as nature show hosts, providing factual commentary that exceeds their narrative function.

Trainor’s synopsis of *Harmony* doesn’t describe the work so much as provide a particularly perverse extra-textual bracketing of it. “A male god bestows upon animals the gift of self-awareness, which they promptly use to express guilt for their behaviour. This moral breakthrough is somewhat undermined by the appearance of humans, whose invention of magical belief systems degrades the whole of Nature.” Nothing of the sort happens in *Harmony*. No god appears in the film, there occurs no bestowal of self-awareness, no moral breakthrough, no invention of a magical belief system. What Trainor describes here aren’t the narrative events of his film. Rather he is describing a kind of extra-textual allegory of his own role as both anthropomorphiser and (to coin a truly awkward term) counter-anthropomorphiser. If there is a God bestowing upon animals the “gift of self-awareness” (in this phrase, Trainor’s irony seems to me border on sarcasm) it is Trainor himself as that particularly limited creator of worlds: the animator.

The concern here is not so much the difference between the human and animal, or – banish the thought – primitive and technological societies. Rather, the concern is that which constitutes the human itself. Slavoj Žižek, in his usual combination of Hegel, Lacan and the Marx Brothers, puts it like this. If at the zero level of subjectivity, the Lacanian Real, “the subject is confronted not with constituted reality but with the spectral obscene proto-reality of partial objects floating around against the background of the ontological Void,” how does the human appear? ¹
On the level of the Individual:

...as the “minimal difference” on account of which an individual is never fully him/herself, but always only “resembles him/herself.” The Marx Brothers were right: “You look like X, so no wonder you are X...” The means, of course, that there is no positive-substantial determination of man: man is the animal which recognizes itself as man, what makes him human is this formal gesture of recognition as such, not the recognized content. Man is a lack which, in order to fill itself in, recognizes itself as something.²

The work of Jim Trainor activates this minimal difference.

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About the writer

Steve Reinke is an artist and writer best known for his work in video. He lives in Toronto and Chicago, where he is Associate Professor of Art Theory & Practice at Northwestern University. A book of his scripts, *Everybody Loves Nothing: Video 1997 - 2005* was recently published by Coach House (Toronto). He has also co-edited a number of anthologies, most recently *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema* (with Chris Gehman).

1. Let’s take this as (also) a definition of animation: “the spectral obscene proto-reality of partial objects floating around against the background of the ontological Void.”

2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 2006