

Animation Practice, Process & Production

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INTERVIEW

PAUL WELLS

Shane Acker: big worlds, little stories – counting up to 9

The following interview took place between Shane Acker, the director of 9 and Paul Wells at the Holland Animation Film Festival at Utrecht in November 2010. Shane Acker is a UCLA graduate, who made a short called 9, that was later adapted into the feature 9, for which Matthew Teevan (pp. 69–82) was head of production, and Acker directed, as a first-time feature debutant.

PW: Animation seems to attract all kinds of personalities, from different backgrounds, and will a range of skills. Why did you decide to work in the form?

SA: I studied design for a long time, principally architectural design. I went to UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) to study architecture at graduate level, and in the education of architects you are always looking for other sources of inspiration from other forms, like literature and

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films. Along the way I discovered the work of Jan Svankmajer and the Brothers Quay. I was really drawn into the worlds they created, and how essentially 'haunting' they were. They were abstract and used non-conventional characters and objects, unfamiliar in animation, which allowed a metaphorical landscape to be created. Their films were loaded and could be interpreted in many different ways.

Also, I was always a cartoonist and illustrator, though I was never formally trained, and I was attracted to constructing different worlds. In my architectural studies, I focused a lot on computer-aided design, learned modelling, texturing, etc., and having started to learn that 'tool set', towards the end of my architectural education, I started taking some animation electives from the animation programme at UCLA. I knew then and there that that was what I wanted to be as it drew together a number of my interests in one form – sculpture, painting, time-based media, telling stories. In some ways, when you are pitching or presenting you are not actually making buildings, you are presenting representations of buildings, which are basically drawings with implied stories. You are always telling stories. There is a life, a world, an alternative perspective that is embodied in your proposed building. You are explaining that; trying to seduce the commissioning body in some way. All of this seemed to relate to my eventual approach to animation.

PW: What was the thinking behind the UCLA programme at that time – were they attempting to produce independent auteurs, or were they directing their efforts to training people for established production pipelines on major movies?

SA: UCLA was really unique. It was very different from CalArts (California Institute of the Arts), who were teaching process or encouraging experimental work, or USC (University of Southern California), who were very focused on technique. UCLA were trying to make you a rounded film-maker, encouraging you to have your own voice. They were a support team to help you. They did not show you any kind of definitive way of doing things. They gave you certain tools, but really it was about developing your ideas and concepts, and offering constructive critique. They pushed you further as a film-maker or an artist, rather than as an animator, or a technician. Also your classmates were equally encouraging, and we pushed each other to make better work.

PW: Was *9* your first full animation, or was it preceded by other work?

SA: The first film I did was called *The Hangnail* (1999) – a simple 2D film, where I could experiment with character and story. The next film I wanted to make was indeed *9*, which became an enormous undertaking because it was such an ambitious piece. It started as a three-minute work, but expanded to over ten minutes!

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PW: Concepts and ideas rarely fall from the ether, and neither are they fully formed. Was *9* a story with a long history, merely waiting for an opportunity to get made?

SA: It started with the characters. I was really affected by the Quay's puppets, but also the experimental stop-motion work by the Lauenstein brothers. What I really liked about their film *Balance* was that they were using six different versions of the same puppet, and the only thing that differentiated them was the numbers on their backs. At least, this is the case at the beginning of the film, but during the course of the film they revealed themselves as different characters, and I was really impressed that this was done in a non-verbal way, and that this could be achieved in a sustained pantomimic piece. That really is the ultimate challenge, and it was one I imposed upon myself for *9*. I liked the fact that individual personalities could be suggested when a simple 'McGuffin' comes in (the chest), and they all start contesting for this prize in some way, and their characters, formerly committed to collaboration and solidarity, give way to selfish individual pursuits. It was compelling yet economic. These artists weren't trying to hide the fact that these were puppets, and it became part of the design, almost suggesting how the armature was constructed. It was like a modernist approach to architecture in some way. I saw that I could create numerous copies of the same puppet on the computer, and differentiate them with numbers on their backs, but more importantly through their performances. I wanted to prove myself in animation by setting up such challenges to respond to. The film essentially progressed through putting limitations on myself.

PW: It is interesting that you use the term 'pantomimic', as it is often used as a comic term, but you obviously see it in a wider sense.

SA: It's about the idea that even as I express myself now, it is not just verbally but physically. When we just communicate non-verbally, it becomes pantomimic and takes on a universal dimension. There is a kind of common experience through body language. Humans are all cut from the same cloth in some ways, despite cultural differences, and in approaching something through pantomime I am trying to reach that universal dimension, which is basically 'emotional', whether comic or dramatic. It creates a *tabula rasa*, a commonality, which professional mimes exploit to achieve cross-cultural communication. As a film-maker you are also a visual communicator in this way, and you use set design, lighting, etc. as well as the pantomimic performance to reach this common audience. Verbal language for the most part gets in the way. My challenge is not only to tell a story in this way, but to create it in a fashion where the audience can participate in it, too. The movement of a camera, in itself, can direct the emotional experience of the audience, and the pantomime invites interpretation by, and correspondence with, the audience, which hopefully works to secure responses the world over. Lots of different cultures can embrace the universality of the themes and ideas, and hopefully take some value away from what I am trying to create.

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PW: At one level, 9 is a classic science-fiction story. Did you view it partly as a 'genre' film?

SA: It is a spiritual film, grounded in a kind of humanist approach, but ironically I wanted to create a 'post-human' world. I was inspired by the thoughts of my architecture professors on this issue, I think, when they talked about the desire to move beyond human limitations, and to seek to transcend ourselves. I was inspired by this idea, because there has to be another step beyond us. I was trying to imagine what that world would be like, when we are gone. I framed this idea by suggesting that humankind had caused its own apocalypse, but in the short film, I did not want to explain that. I just wanted it to be haunting, and to suggest humanity through all the things that we had left behind. A new life form emerges from all the things. It is a new civilization that is forming from the scraps and detritus that remains. These new 'ragdoll' humanoids still have many positive human characteristics and they're engaged with trying to use a new and positive creative force. They are using old, now redundant objects, as new tools, but infuse them with an incredible creative spirit. But there is this remaining threat from the past that is more mechanical in nature. It has become more instinctive and animalistic, though, and is hunting these new creatures. It is trying to assimilate their energy, so it is very much a man versus nature tale, but reinterpreted in this abstract way.

PW: The art direction in both the short and the feature is very distinctive. We seem to be in a space some time after World War I yet pre-World War II, but also in an alternative world characterized by what might be seen as a 'steampunk' aesthetic. What were you seeking to achieve by this approach to the design in 9?

SA: I wanted to tell my story by placing it between the Great Wars because this was one of the darkest and most uncertain times in human history, and when we almost brought an end to our world and our civilization altogether. The way I have created it, it is almost a parallel universe, which suggests that things did go wrong, and we did destroy ourselves in some way. Being a designer and architect, I have an interest in how things come together and connect, and how they fall apart, and I wanted to create a really tactile, believable world, which demonstrated this. I also wanted to confuse the audience a little by challenging them to think whether this was stop-motion or CGI, and to draw them in, as if they could almost touch the film itself, and know the world. It was also a reaction to the CGI I was seeing at the time, which was clean, overly lit and 'cheerful', and missing the grit, the grime, the texture, the tactile, the real history of a world that existed, and continues to exist even through massive change. It has echoes of 'steampunk', but it is essentially an aesthetic representing the turn-of-the-twentieth-century industrial revolution, when there was this adoration and love of the machine. There were craftsmen building machines, not machines building machines like we have nowadays. Craftsmen took a lot of pride in their work, and in the structures that would support buildings and so forth; there was a kind of ornamentation and a beauty in the form. Those

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wrought-iron structures, for example, that film-makers like Terry Gilliam and Hayao Miyazaki find so attractive and visually enticing, and which bring a kind of 'living' texture to the world.

PW: I find the colour palette to that world very interesting, in that it seems quite dense, subdued and dark, clearly working as a model of narrative in itself, and supporting the view of this as a world with a past history.

SA: This is a world of abandoned, left-over, inanimate objects. The world is dead. The natural world has gone. The way that I could allude to nature was to use all the earth tones. In its way it was a very organic and natural colour palette. For me what is interesting is when things start to decay, and our civilization starts to merge back into the landscape. I like the idea of when the grass overtakes the world and the vines grow, and when metal rusts, and concrete gets stained. It is almost like the man-made is returning to nature in some ways. I like the way the world becomes distressed as a consequence of humankind's desire to separate itself from nature, but nature resisting and starting to claim back its space. Man can never really separate himself from nature and the earth, and the colours were definitely chosen with that idea in mind. It was important to think about how you bring life to a dead world; how do you construct such a landscape? It can be dead grass slightly blowing in the wind, or torn fabric swaying, and this can bring a subtle naturalism to a very unnatural world.

PW: All the elements that we have been talking about are present in the short film that you made, but you had this extraordinary opportunity to extend and develop your ideas at feature length. How did that come about?

SA: The short took me about four and a half years to make, which was both a burden and a luxury. As I was creating the assets, learning the tools, doing the rigging, creating the characters – all the things you have to do to make such a film – I was concentrating on story and developing a story reel. I kept putting it to one side, and engaging with something technical, and then coming back to it. I developed a kind of critical distance, which enabled me to think about how all the elements – characters, action, design, etc. – could combine to successfully tell the story. The short was essentially a finished and complete piece as a result; then the opportunity to do the feature arose. The producers (Jim Lemley, Tim Burton, Timur Bekmambetov, Dana Ginsberg) felt, though, that it was merely a window into a world for them, and they were excited about how it might be developed. It then became a major design project. I was then on a really accelerated schedule, going into six months of pre-production before we were sent off to animate the film. Whereas for the short I had a complete story reel before anything was animated, there was never a completed story for the feature, and we continued working on it throughout the production process. It was difficult because we could not dwell on our ideas, and then I lost my initial story team, so we were still creating and experimenting with sequences as the

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film itself went into production. We were stringing beads together, rather than sculpting a whole thing. It was a big challenge.

PW: Many aspiring film-makers hearing your story, though, would think that it was extraordinary to have their work admired by Tim Burton, and that such an opportunity was so unusual, that it was worth the effort and difficulty.

SA: It was, but at the time, I had just come off finally making my short, and was quite stressed, and I was making a living in the industry – I did some work at WETA when they were making *Lord of the Rings* – and then I was propelled into this Hollywood world I was not used to, of course, with all the pressures that go with that. It was so foreign from the world that I was coming from. I was moving from the world of independent film-making and animation festivals to a commercial environment in which I felt quite overwhelmed. Pitching to executives and major production companies about your proposed ideas is very different from showing your work. The reality is a lot less glamorous than some may think, because I made *9*, the short, in a hand-to-mouth way. I would work for three or four months, save the money, work on the short, then work for three or four months, work on the short again, etc. until it was finished. Even when I was pitching the movie, I actually had no money, so I had to keep working even though I had this opportunity. I had to then put in the work of thinking through what I might do in the movie in order to present it. Even though my short had been very well received, and I was confident, perhaps overly confident, and Tim Burton had endorsed and supported my work, this really was a major step-up, and though exciting, was a major test, as you can never be sure if you will meet the challenge. I had never worked with a writer before; I had never done a piece with dialogue before; I had never worked in the long form, so you worry that you're in over your head. You have to learn from the professionals around you who have done many films before.

PW: The producers obviously saw great potential in the world you had created in the short, so once you had dealt with these initial changes and challenges, what was it that you felt you could achieve in the long form?

SA: In the short, it was a big world but a little story. It is a quiet, little achievement; a little heroic act by a ragdoll to save the souls of his friends. It is not a world-changing event. It changes his world and it changes the struggle to live in the big world, but it retains an intimacy and sense of personal scale. Even as I was making the short, my tutors constantly suggested that I try to create a world-changing event – rainbows, plants, spectacle – but I resisted that because it wasn't at the emotional heart of the story; it wasn't about the characters. When I started the feature, there was once again the pressure to create a story with a world-changing event: a big epic thing. The executives and the

producers kept making this a big part of their story notes, and insisted upon it essentially through the way in which I worked with the writer. When making a feature your strengths and weaknesses become clear, and the ‘weaknesses’ are addressed by having people around you who have strengths in those areas. I could work well with designers and animators, and trust artists to do things, but my ‘weakness’ in not having experience of long-form storytelling, and the complexities of story structure, meant that I was beholden to some extent on a writer. The writer often has a different ‘take’ on the story. I could take over the design or the cinematography – the visualization of the piece – but I could not take over that. So, ultimately, it becomes this ‘melting pot’ of influences and ideas, that at one and the same time are your own, but other people’s, too. The short seems the clearest and most honest work, for all its flaws, but the feature in being a collaborative effort becomes something else. Ironically, the quality of the short inhibited the feature because the producers wanted everything that was in it represented in the feature, as well as extended and additional elements. Again, this was a challenge.

PW: Crucially, though, you were able to develop the characters. For me, many animated characters are informed by dominant ‘characteristics’ that inform their action, but they don’t necessarily develop. In extended narratives, there is the opportunity to reveal character through what they do, and their significant goals and action. It seems to me that 9 develops, but a kind of collective character emerges from all of the ragdolls, that I assume are aspects of your personality, or aspects of the qualities or identities you wanted to explore.

SA: Each character does indeed start off as a ‘one liner’ that all the crew can accrue around and understand, but you hope that your characters will develop through the story arcs they play out. Through the course of thinking about story and animating the character starts to emerge. Even though there were nine characters who looked sort of the same, there still had to be distinctive aspects that defined them. You want to give them distinct voices, which I don’t think in all cases we do, because they speak the same, do the same things, but it happens with the main characters. My instinct was that I wanted the experience the story as it was happening to the characters, and that the backstory was less significant. The producers were really concerned with the backstory, though, and felt that it was important to have a strong sense of the history of this world. The very mandate of a 72-minute feature and a certain budget, meant that we had to balance between my character-centred view and the ‘big-picture’ backstory. The ‘push and pull’ between these things meant, for me, there was a lot of exposition, the sometimes unnecessary and illogical presence of humans, too much dialogue and not enough character-centred story. I was fortunate, though, that I could really trust my lead animators and artists, who helped me solve as many of the significant problems that arose as possible.

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PW: From being a 'director' of a short to being a 'director' of a feature must be an entirely different thing. In the former, you can fully control everything, and tell your story through action and art direction, but in the latter, a big part is also about how you direct actors. What was your experience like in that respect?

SA: The first recording session was with Christopher Plummer, and he is an amazing talent. He was a consummate professional, and drew a lot from the script to contribute to the narrative through his performance. He was aware that I was a first-time director, and he was very helpful. We did not have briefing sessions for the actors, or table readings, so there was no time to properly run through it, talk about it and analyse it, so the actors had to contribute a lot intuitively off the back of my direction. As is usual in animation, they had to perform by themselves, and there was no one to bounce off, and in some ways I thought that was counter to what I wanted to achieve with the characters. Nevertheless, they invested and brought ideas to the performance, which I happily embraced. I grew as an artist throughout this experience because of those contributions and the ways in which you learn through collaboration and everyone contributing key ideas, information and skill.

PW: So, even though you had a demanding and challenging first feature experience, what are you most proud of in the film?

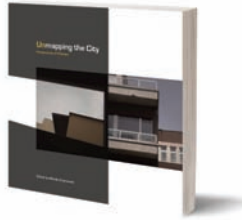
SA: Throughout a production you in effect see the film thousands of times, and even when it is complete, it is a difficult thing to go back to and watch again. Instead of seeing the film as it is, I see all the shortfalls or all the battles and struggles we had to complete the work. I wish I could be hypnotized so I could watch the film afresh and in a pure light. I love the seamstress sequence, where a creature comes and attacks them in the library, and they start to work together as a team. There is something interesting and dynamic in that. I love the 'twins' sequence, where you discover these characters, and they seem so 'other' to the film. It was pure pantomime, in that they were voiceless and we had fun with that limitation. They were more liberating for the animators because we played them broader than the others. The 'worlds' we built were persuasive, I think, and the resolution in relation to the spirits felt like a satisfying achievement, though I am not sure it is the right ending to the film!! It is drawn from the original short, and the quality of animation and feeling is right, even if there is a flaw in the narrative trajectory. We played with different techniques. We made one sequence look like an old newsreel, where we project a history of the world through old news archive; old loops and photographs, etc. The mixed-media approach really helped deal with the exposition, even with the holographic image of our Oppenheimer-style scientist, and so forth. There is a great moment at the end of that sequence between 9 and the scientist, in which 9 makes a connection with his maker in some way. We made it silent, even though we had a lot of dialogue and animated that, but we went with the silent approach, and I think that's more effective because he is going through all the emotions implied in the written dialogue but

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doesn't have to say anything. The sequence in which we play the song from the *Wizard of Oz*, I think is really haunting – its emotion works as a nice contrast to the action in the movie.

PW: Having made your mark and created a film that has been able to find its place alongside features by Pixar and Dreamworks, what do you want to do next?

SA: *9* was successful, and won its money back, and found an audience, at the same time as remaining a little bit 'avant-garde' and 'off the beaten track'. I want to carry on and make films that are mature and serious, but animated, too. There still doesn't seem to be a whole lot of space, particularly in the West, for that kind of film, so I want to pursue that. Basically, the cheaper you can make a film, the more creative freedom you might have, the more risks you might take. While budgets expand though, the independent sector shrinks; the smaller-budget projects seem to be folded into much larger film projects. This is the landscape I am trying to find my way in. What's encouraging is that even the big players like Pixar are trying to explore more mature, emotional work, and though there is still a lot of understandable commitment to family stories and gag-driven material, I hope there may be a place for emotionally driven work with more unusual aesthetic and narrative possibilities.



Unmapping the City

Perspectives of Flatness

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