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JIRI BARTA

Searching ‘In the Attic’: a visual production diary

Keywords

puppet animation
Czech animation
children
mixed media
political metaphor

Abstract

This is a visual essay recording the production process of a 75-minute stop-motion feature animation, made in the spirit of traditional Czech puppet animation, but using mixed media techniques. It is a story called In the Attic: Who Has a Birthday Today? and though it is a children’s animation, based on the way children conduct their games and imagine their play environment, it is also a political metaphor, reflecting upon past Czech history. The images in the essay show different aspects of production and reveal some of the approaches taken to achieve certain craft effects. The film includes puppet animation, clay animation, cut-out animation and drawn animation; and uses post-production tools, but has no computer animation.

Jiri Barta

My name is Jiri Barta, and I am an animation film-maker from the Czech Republic. I began directing animated films a number of years ago. *Disc Jockey* (1980) used animated cut-outs; *Projection* (1981) animated on architectural drawings; *The Extinct World of Gloves* (1982) animates objects, in this case, gloves. Some of the animation was done by Vlasta Pospisilova, who also animated on Jan Svankmajer's *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1985). I made *Pied Piper* in 1985, which showed some of my influences – medieval art and German expressionist work – but mainly tried to advance aspects of the great Czech puppet tradition, and the work of my early mentor, Jiri Trnka. I was part of a generation of artists who wanted to preserve this tradition and, even today, this seemed important when making *In the Attic*, as the generation of students that now attend the institute are far more interested in computer animation.



Searching 'In the Attic'

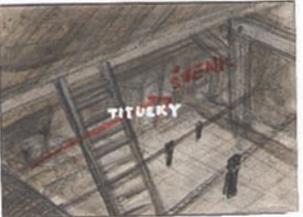
In the Attic is a story I wrote and developed with Edgar Dutka, an established novelist and screenwriter at the Trnka studio, who has also written about animation scripts. The story is set in an attic to establish a particular story world of lots of discarded or forgotten things from the past, which people still keep but which carry on having a life of their own.

hra	
<p>OBRAZ 000:</p> <p>EXTERIÉR</p> <p>C Střecha rodinného domku – v pozadí zahrady a domy. Rozednívá se. Předjítní světlo.</p>	
<p>OBRAZ 001</p> <p>PŮDA – PŘED ROZEDNĚNÍM</p> <p>VD Půda rodinného domku. Hlava spícího holuba. Holub se probudí (reaguje na zvonění budíku) a zavrká.</p>	
<p>PC Holub na prádelní šňůře. Holub (v pozadí pohled do krovu) se pohne a zamává křídly, opět usne.</p>	

1 P

Jiri Barta

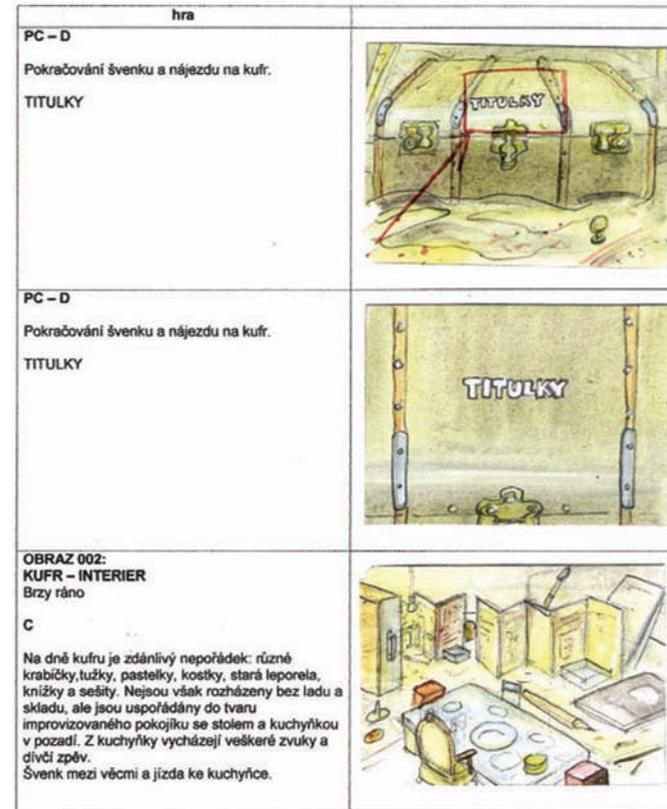
Mood and atmosphere are very important in any storytelling, and while we wanted the film to appeal to children, we wanted the sense that any adult would remember their own childhood. Edgar and I thought about our own childhood, and remembered the places we liked, or were afraid of, and the games we played.

hra	
<p>PC Prostor půdy rodinného domku. Mezi kleštinami jsou nataženy prádelní šňůry, pod střechou, mezi krokvemi jsou odloženy různé staré krámy a harampádi. Pomalý nájezd a švenk mezi krámy.</p>	
<p>PD Švenk a jízda mezi haraburdím – pokračování.</p>	
<p>D Švenk a jízda mezi haraburdím – pokračování. Blízko před kamerou se mihne cosi chlupatého, asi kocour. Z trámy se skutálí plechovka a zazvoní o zem.</p>	

2 P

Searching 'In the Attic'

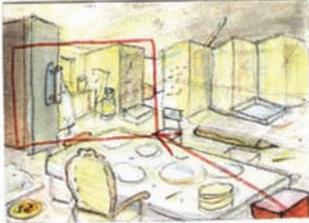
The first shots move towards a particular piece of luggage, a case which includes the happy world of the main characters, Buttercup, Sir Handsome, Teddy Bear and Schubert. Storyboards are useful for thinking about not only what will be in the shot to tell the story but how the camera can be used to help direct the viewer to what you want them to see.



4P

Jiri Barta

Buttercup makes a cake for her friends each day, and each day they roll a dice to decide whose birthday it is, and who should be celebrated. We wanted this to be like a child's game, and to show a happy, contented world.

hra	
<p>C – PC</p> <p>Nájezd ke kuchyňce.</p>	
<p>PC</p> <p>Kuchyňka je poskládána z různých krabiček, kyblíků a lahvíček, prostor je osvětlen malou žárovčičkou, která visí na provázku.</p> <p>V kuchyňce čile hospodaří malá celuloidová panenka – Pomněnka (právě zdobí hliněný dort skleněnými korálky). Pomněnka se otočí k obrázku na zdi.</p>	
<p>PD</p> <p>Pomněnka se otočí k obrázku na zdi. Je to nakreslené okno s měsícem a noční oblohou.</p> <p>Pomněnka odšpendlí obrázek, který se sroluje jako roleta. Pod ním se objeví jiný – okno se sluncem a bílými mráčky. Kuchyňku ozáří denní světlo.</p>	

5 P

Searching 'In the Attic'

There are lots of 'toys come to life' stories in animation. The *Toy Story* films are now the most famous. Those films show that the toys are aware of their relationship with children, but I wanted to show that the toys carry on living their lives after the children have forgotten them, or even after the adults have put them in the attic as 'a memory' but do not really think about them. Toys then get mixed with other objects in the attic. So, the world of the luggage, or some call it a steamer trunk – here is a piece of inspirational art – is the world of Buttercup and order, but soon she and her friends will encounter 'the Golden Head', who is emperor of the evil part of the attic.



Jiri Barta

All stories must immediately introduce their characters and the style of the film so that the audience can know who they care about, and how the story world will work. Because we intended to mix puppet, clay, cut-out and drawn animation, we had to show this mix quickly, so when Buttercup pulls up the blind, we see the outside world as a drawing.

hra	
<p>PC</p> <p>Obrázek ožije – na parapetu přistane kos a krátce zazpívá.</p>	
<p>PD</p> <p>Pomněnka pozoruje kosa, pak se rázně otočí a zatleská směrem do pokoje.</p>	
<p>PC</p> <p>Spací kout s bačkorou.</p> <p>V bačkoře na polštářku, pěkně v pyžamu, spí plyšový medvídek, sotva k němu dolehne hlas Pomněnky, otevře jedno oko.</p>	

6P

Searching 'In the Attic'

A lot of work has to go into the pre-production of a stop-motion puppet animation. We went out and bought or borrowed lots of toys and objects that could be in our attic. We built puppets and sets, and had to make sure that everything would be durable and consistent to use throughout the production. This was especially the case because we were working with sets of different scale, and had to prepare certain sets to not only achieve stop-motion animation but visual effects too. The design and visualization of the film took over six months and was fundamental to the planning of the animation.



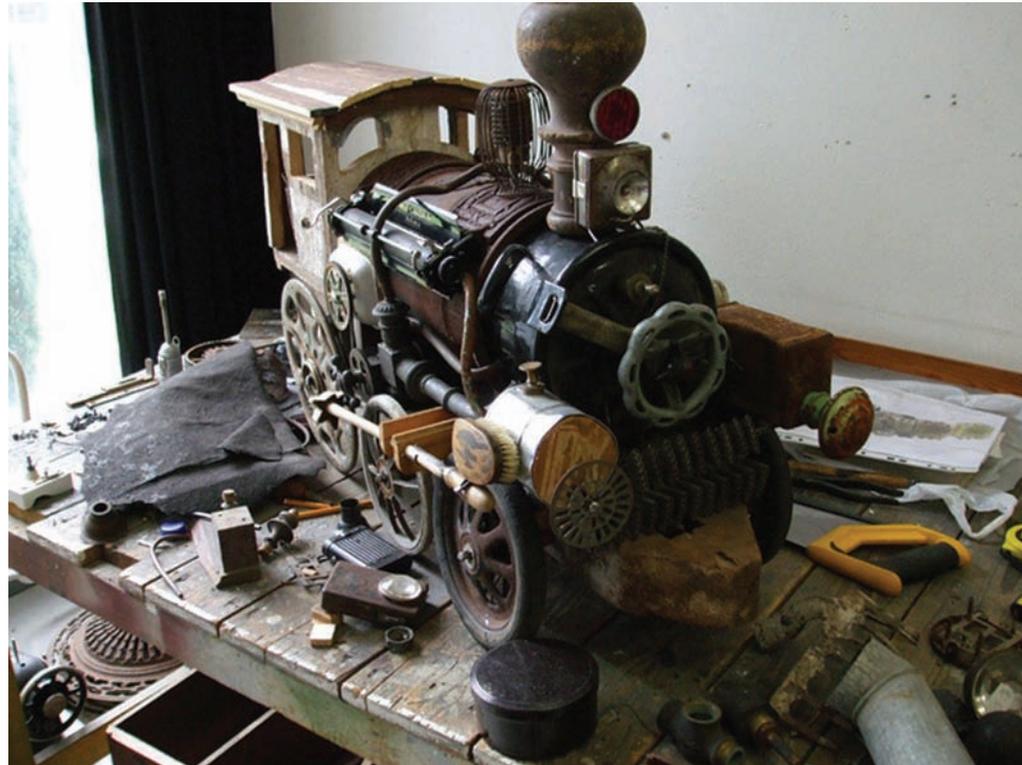
Jiri Barta

Buttercup is the main character, and a mother figure, looking after the rest of the characters. She is kidnapped by a black cat and a hoard of insects who are in the service of the evil 'Head', emperor of the Land of Evil, elsewhere in the attic.



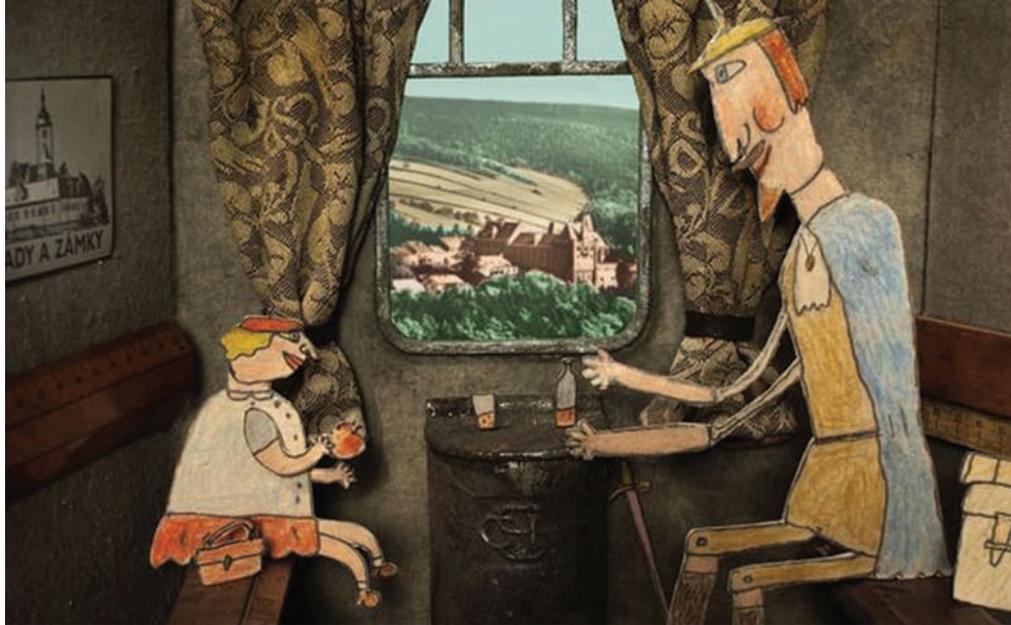
Searching 'In the Attic'

The train is a very important part of the story, and contributes a significant part of the action, so we needed to give it a strong visual identity. Teddy Bear is stationmaster and presides over the model railway, and the order and routine they bring until things go 'off the rails'. What I am always looking for in the attic is an analogy to the real world, but also a way in which a child finds an analogy to the real world in the objects they play with. My grandfather was an engine driver. Electric railways, steam engines and a marionette theatre – it was my childhood. That is why I could not miss the train in my film.



Jiri Barta

When the main characters are on the train they become two-dimensional drawn cartoons. This is when the characters have their own imaginative worlds that they must keep secret from the human beings. Andrea and her grandma, the human beings in the film, sometimes come to the world of the attic and the interruption causes the toys to become objects again.



Searching 'In the Attic'

This is the moment when we had an opening ceremony to celebrate starting the production. There is an irony that before 1989 the state funded films, and you could create work, even in the light of censorship and so forth, but after 1989, when part of a free economy it was hard to make films. It is about trying to get sponsors who might support a personal film that might get a popular audience. It is important to tell a good story and make it appealing but also to have something to say, and to also preserve the traditions of influential artists like Jiri Trnka and Jan Svankmajer.



Jiri Barta

Sometimes people think that stop-motion puppet animation is constructed only on small sets. We had to construct a set of considerable size to make the film. Three-dimensional (3D) CGI has no limits in the computer, but 3D stop-motion is limited by the animators and their access to, and work with, the characters and sets we build. It is a physical and material limitation that we have to deal with through the animation and through the cinematography.



Searching 'In the Attic'

Working with different scale sets creates challenges for the cinematography, and a great deal of preparation and planning has to go into the building of each set, so that it can be accessed and the camera positioned. As a stop-motion animator you have the mix of the close-up scale of minute actions and working in sometimes live-action-style sets. Making sure that everything exists in proportion and works in relationship to everything else is a challenge.



Jiri Barta

Here is a good example of this idea of scale. In the film this sequence is quite spectacular and needs to have the sense of live-action scale as the characters scale the wall, and fall, because even though the viewer knows these are not real people, they have to believe in them as characters, and that they are in fact in danger. But the animation, of course, requires close, precise work, which seems 'invisible' when the scene is playing in the film.



Searching 'In the Attic'

We set our story into a real space of an attic because this has a rich store of ordinary and extraordinary things, which provoke children's fantasy and creativity, as we know it from our own childhoods. Our aim was to combine animation with real movement and it was a good way to use a 'green screen' in some parts to extend our cinematography by using digital effects. We could create flight and aerial motion much more persuasively. Sometimes animators have to really imagine what something is like to animate a puppet to do a certain action, or a director has to think really hard about a particular experience. Here we are practising flying !!



Jiri Barta

By using a green screen and dressing the technician in the same material, we could create the effect of moving an object in real time and space, but putting in the backgrounds digitally in post-production. This is another way of animating, but the frame-by-frame adjustments may be made afterwards. I could direct what I wanted to happen and change it later.



Searching 'In the Attic'

A complex example of an animated trick shot was the dialogue between an animated puppet and a half-alive and half-still Head. We had to shoot these two characters separately in the same place but with a different method of shooting and then put everything together in the post-production studio. The Head was a big and complicated challenge. We combined a live actor and his plaster cast in one shot. Computers were very helpful in achieving this experiment.



Jiri Barta

The 'Golden Head', the evil emperor, was played by Jiri Labus. The Head / Statue is modelled on any VIP who, originally, was standing in any government or institutional office (mainly during our communist period). He could be compared with any politician in general, really. The main thing is that he represents totalitarian rule and makes a comment about political systems and power.



Searching 'In the Attic'

This was the final composition, showing how all powerful the Head is, but also how static and immobile and fixed he is, too. This is a metaphor for totalitarian government. This, though, is a children's story, so just being evil is enough!!



Jiri Barta

The main characters from the suitcase are old, abandoned toys that met in the same place by chance. Their different temperaments and sizes suggested funny situations even in serious scenes. This is the principle of children's games – serious problems solved in a naive and funny way. Buttercup, Teddy, Sir Handsome, a traditional Czech Marionette and the plasticine goblin, Schubert (my father gave me a plasticine doll when I was young) who has gathered up things from the attic on his body, and other characters from the 'Light side' of the attic live their peaceful and ordinary life until Buttercup is kidnapped. Her friends resolve to get her back, and become brave fighters against the 'Mad Head' and his 'Land of Evil'. It is not an original idea, of course, but the story tries to show the importance of our emotional lives and friendship. This is my 'toy story', and looks back at childhood in Europe, and the imaginative worlds children can create even in the most difficult of times and circumstances.



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Contributor details

Jiri Barta was born in Prague in 1948. He has been a successful puppet animation film-maker for over 40 years, initially training at the Department of Film and TV Graphics at the Academy of Art & Design in Prague, and working at the Jiri Trnka Studio as an artist, director and screenwriter since 1978. His first film was *Riddles for a Candy* (1978), but his breakthrough film was the multi award-winning *The Extinct World of Gloves* (1982). In 1986, he made his first feature, *Pied Piper*, which advanced Czech puppet animation by its use of wooden figures with limited movement. In 1993, he made a pilot for a long cherished project, *The Golem*, and completed a range of commercial projects before embarking on the current feature, *In the Attic: Who Has a Birthday Today?* (2009).

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