festival review

Les Sommets du cinéma d'animation 2018: A Network of Animated Bodies

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The 17th edition of Les Sommets du cinéma d'animation, hosted in late November 2018 by the Cinémathèque québécoise, was an effort to showcase the diverse range of techniques and styles that constitute the animation industry. The festival consisted of various screenings, panels, masterclasses, exhibits and interactive activities. As Cinémathèque programmer-curator and artistic director of the festival Marco de Blois notes, the festival has shifted in recent years from focusing on independent short films to becoming more reflective of the industry as a whole, including feature films and more animation that takes place outside of the setting of the commercial film theatre (Phi, 2017). In an industry as diverse as animation, it is nearly impossible to put the myriad techniques that abound on equal display, but the festival nonetheless ought to be lauded for its admirable attempt to provide a snapshot of such a diverse field. Echoing Norman McLaren's view that there is no one way to do film (or animation), the festival not only included a wide array of styles from across the world (2D/3D, pixilation, puppetry, GIFs, stop-motion, hand-drawn, etc.), but also connected past and present (Phi). One of the central features of the festival was a reconstruction of Winsor McKay's *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914) undertaken by the National Film Board of Canada in collaboration with the Cinémathèque, with support from the University of Notre Dame. This impressive undertaking involved the detailed recreation of approximately 250 drawings following McKay's style by animator/director Luc Chamberland. Alongside an exhibit of the work of Frédéric Back, the *Reconstruction of Gertie* exhibit celebrated both McKay's original work and the recent efforts to recreate Gertie. This reconstructed animation then came to life as *Winsor and Gertie*, a recreation of McKay's signature 1914 vaudeville act produced by Donald Crafton, in which an actor portraying McKay would interact with the titular dinosaur with a prop whip. In this routine, the body is thus doubly on display: both the performer interacting with the animated character and the labouring body that plays a hand in its reconstruction.

While it may have merely been the selection of works we had the opportunity to see, the return to McKay's performing bodies – both live and animated – seemed to focus on the body in a way that was emblematic of the entire festival. The relationship between animation and the body is a pervasive theme throughout animation studies, and Les Sommets showcased many works that offered their own interpretations of the various bodies they featured. From recorded humans to anthropomorphic animals, and transformative potentials to fragmented forms, the types of bodies featured were as diverse as the cultures on display. Equally diverse were the theoretical attitudes towards the body. It was in these discourses that we

found the festival generated the most thought-provoking discussions. This interest in the animated body was a pervasive theme at the festival, tying together feature-length and short films, talks, installations and other events. From the student installation *Animated GIFs: The Body*, to the masterclass on experimental pixilation led by artist and dancer Paul Wenninger, the body was on full display. Short films in the International Competitions offered themes of bodily transcendence, unstable bodies, and bodies fused together. Montreal Gaymers, a LGBTQ+ social group that organizes gaming events, even brought their *Just Dance* party to animate and engage the bodies of the festival attendees in the evenings, concurrently running alongside further screenings.

Les Sommets explored animation through a variety of styles, tones, and forms. Exploration of the self, the body one inhabits, remained at the center of many of the films screened at the festival. The freedom of form resulted in Les Sommets' inclusion of many more popular short films in their exhibit Young Independent Animation from the U.S. *Late for Meeting* (David Lewandowski, 2013), a hilariously absurd short animated film. It places a contorted computer-generated body into a mundane streetscape, demonstrated the relationship of the human body to its surroundings using obscure humour without explanation. The uncanny animation was widely circulated online following its release, where hundreds of memes surfaced using GIFs or clips from *Late for Meeting* as over-the-top reactions to otherwise ordinary circumstances. Similar shorts show in Les Sommets such as *Hi Stranger* (Kirsten Lepore, 2017) and *Time for Sushi* (David Lewandowski, 2017) were also widely circulated online as memes. The inclusion of popular, short films-turned-memes provides insight into the response generated by the public, as well as what is programmed in an animation festival circuit. The festival celebrated animation from all modes of reception, and *Late for Meeting* demonstrated the form's capacity for a less serious exploration of the body's role in experiencing the world. The absurdist humour in these animations displayed how a body animated to be unrecognizable as a human could then stand in for the bodily experience of the viewer. Awkwardly rendered or sculpted, uncanny animated bodies interacting with live-action footage negotiated the body in new terms that can be understood through the circulation of those very videos displayed at the festival. The bodily experience in *Late for Meeting* and those similar to it suggest that the body is out of place in the world, however the body's ability to grant a person experiences should not be discounted. A short film by Canadian filmmaker Alex Boya titled *Turbine* (2018) explores a pilot whose face becomes a plane turbine, morphing the biological and mechanical into one being. His body changed, the man cannot interact with the world in the same way he used to. By forfeiting what makes him human, the man's relationship to his surroundings is fundamentally altered. Here, the body is mediated through technology to form a complicated chain reaction of the human experience in modern life, where the technology is as much a part of the body as its biological components. In these examples, animation intentionally creates ambiguity as these bodies are animated to be shaped by their experiences, molded and rendered through the animated technology, rather than by their physical descriptors. Turbine's animation interprets the body as a site of transformation, where the world becomes visible. Combining a realist style similar to a pencil sketch, the short further commented on the use of absurd expression to understand the role of the body and our relationship to it.

Absurd bodies also came to the fore in the short *A Demonstration of Brilliance in 4 Acts* (2018) by Morten Tšinakov and Lucija Mrzljak, depicting a bizarre chain of events preceded by the birth of a fully-grown man in a hospital. Inherently nonsensical, the short follows a series of domino-like effects partially influenced by the arrival of the man – eagerly anticipated by an audience who sits waiting on a bench outside the hospital. Eventually, the man from whose palm extends a group of string-like appendages, is literally joined with a woman with a matching group of holes in her hand – their bodies becoming one. This grouping is one of two conjoined bodies in the film, with the other being a pair of men who periodically go to the window to view the unfolding activities. The film portrays both conjoined bodies in a positive light. When one of the conjoined men dies, his constant warning of a perpetually incoming bird is lost, and the bird flies straight into the head of the lone man. *Brilliance* praises bodily complexity, and suggests that the body is not only an individual mode of experiencing the world, but a connected one as well. The result is a literal network of bod-

ies. Les Sommets' circuit of films painted a layered picture of what the body's significance is in experiencing life. Not only is the body something to identify with, it can be changed, altered, and shared with others. In this way, Brilliance is able to summarize this notion through its narrative network of bodies. The animated method of all of these shorts investigating bodies and their consequences encouraged a reflection on the bodily experience of the viewer, and the alternative interpretations of daily life that they offered. As such, the body comes to represent a site that mixes together the experiences of others with its own through mechanical and biological means.

Screened during Austrian filmmaker Paul Wenninger's masterclass, the short pixilation-technique film *Tresspass* (2012), winner of the Sommets 2013 Grand Prix, offered further insight into the way that experimental animation might prioritize the body over both space and time. In filming *Tresspass*, Wenninger did not use a storyboard but instead allowed motions to flow into one another, using the position of the on-screen body as inspiration for each successive action. The film tracks the body of Wenninger himself through a series of movements, from walking to eating to reading a newspaper. The world around his body appears in a constant state of flux, with objects in a continual rapid-fire transitory state until grasped in Wenninger's hands. The human body here appears to offer the only access point to stability and reality. Yet as Wenninger himself noted during the masterclass, despite appearing as one continuous shot, we are reminded of the instability of the body through the instability of the world surrounding it. In fact, there are cuts after every single shot, a reminder of the artificial and constructed nature of the body as it is animated on screen, regardless of however natural it may seem.

Some films offered a more liberatory stance on the animated body. French filmmaker Sarah Van Den Boom's short *Raymonde ou l'évasion verticale* (2018), winner of the festival's Special Jury Award and Audience Award, explored the socially transgressive potentials of the animated body through its heartfelt message of embracing one's inner nature. In the incredibly detailed and beautifully animated primarily stop-motion puppet short, titular character Raymonde is an anthropomorphic elderly owl who yearns for sexual freedom denied to her by the tidy workings of her societal and religious

surroundings. Her increasing desperation, as she tends to her garden, makes trips to her church, and sells dirtied panties online, is underscored by the disjointed and repetitive upbeat score. Raymonde is surrounded by (or haunted by) two-dimensional animated female figures that represent ephemerality and transcendence from the weightiness of the stop-motion world she inhabits. Raymonde achieves transcendence, but rather than exit into the world of two-dimensions, she embraces an inner nature writ on the surface of her character design: that she is, in fact, an owl. After she flies off into the night, Raymonde inspires another citizen of her town, who is subsequently visited by the two-dimensional figures as the short closes. *Raymonde* is far from the only film, even among those shown at the festival, which oscillates between the animal and human in the anthropomorphized. One prominent example is Alison Snowden and David Fine's Oscar-nominated 2018 film *Animal Behaviour*, which relies on this oscillation for its story's wildly humourous antics. But *Raymonde* goes against the grain by locating the transformative potential of animated bodies in their ability to cast off societal norms and attain greater freedom, which represents a different ideology towards the anthropomorphized subject. Whereas *Animal Behaviour* finds humour in a regression to animality as moments of mental instability, *Raymonde*'s animal half represents liberation and self-expression.

The animation process allows the filmmaker to fashion a customized world from an infinite bank of elements limited only by the creator's imagination. As such, animation results in a sense of absolute freedom in which bodies can take a multiplicity of forms. It is then no wonder that animation festivals often describe themselves as being eclectic. Les Sommets does indeed offer up an eclectic survey of films, both in terms of narrative and of stylistic techniques. But this tendency is also evident in the way it represents diversity, showcasing films from around the world, while also acting as a place to give sexual minorities a voice. Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema alumna Brenda López Zepeda's short film *ABEO* (2018) uses a panoply of the animation techniques discussed throughout this article. The film tells the story of two Latin-American women, a lesbian teenager named Nadia, and an older woman named Lupe, as they walk the Arizona desert to cross over the U.S. border. It mainly uses stop-motion animation

but also uses sand animation to portray Nadia's past love story, and a 2D digital animation style for Lupe's souvenirs of her children. *ABEO*, which means 'change' in Latin, is a call to humanize often ill-portrayed, undocumented Latin-American immigrants. The work spends most of its time focusing on the two women discussing their past, and their hopes for the future as Lupe is meant to reunite with her family in the U.S. This way, the viewer is invited to identify with the characters, as they discover parts of the protagonists' interiority. While the characters' inner selves bring life to the animated figures in some ways, López Zeped, emphasizes the importance of the character's body, and how she decided to present them (Itchysilk). Both are people of colour, contrasted with a whiter America, and while they have a similar goal, their age and body types differ. *ABEO* shows difference across the border, but also within the same community in order to challenge the singular, and most often negative, idea that is promoted about asylum-seekers in Conservative-leaning news outlets. The relationship between the animator and the bodies she animates before the camera is only heightened as she voices Nadia, while her own mother infuses Lupe's voice with hers. While not autobiographical, *ABEO* nevertheless feels personal due to the filmmaker's choice to shoot entirely in her own bedroom, and because of the stories she gathered from undocumented immigrants. As she lends her voice and craft to these characters, she also speaks as many, acting as a conduit for both queer and foreign bodies.

With such a heartfelt film about acceptance and breaking down borders, and taking into account the above films that celebrate diverse bodies and identities, as we have outlined thus far in this review, it is with a sense of contradiction that Les Sommets chooses as its opening film Nina Paley's *Sader-Masochism* (2018). The film's content is not per se problematic, on the contrary. The unapologetic way it illustrates the history of violence towards women shocks, and consequently invites the viewer (although in a too obvious way) to acknowledge, and challenge the wrongs committed by patriarchal societies. What is of issue takes place outside of the cinema screen, and begs the following question: can we separate the work from the creator? The animated film presented as one of the main events, gains a celebratory quality, as it is singled out as a rare artefact alongside only seven

other feature length films. Putting *Sader-Masochism* on a pedestal therefore heightens the filmmaker's profile, which becomes problematic if we turn to look at her activity on social media. A quick browse of Paley's Twitter account reeks of transphobia as she not only shares articles against trans identities, but also damaging artwork presenting trans women as dangerous rapists, and murderers. One of the infamous tweets, dated January 22, 2018, infers the melody of the famous children jingle "If You're Happy and You Know It, Clap Your Hands," while renaming it "The Transjenner Song" in direct reference to transgender celebrity Caitlyn Jenner. It includes transphobic lyrics such as "if a person has a penis, he's a man," and "if he isn't born a woman, he's a man." In reaction to the online community calling her a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF), she labels herself as a "gender-critical radical feminist" in her own online blog, acting here as a victim. While her feature film does not engage with queer issues, do festivals not have a responsibility to be wary of giving a platform to this type of individual? In this situation, eclectic takes a dark turn overshadowing diversity, by allowing the body of the festival to be an open site of hate and discrimination through its association with Paley. Here, we do not wish to condemn Les Sommets, but to interrogate what is included in the animation festival circuit, and how the celebration of a discriminatory individual trying to close borders of acceptance, can be featured in the same program as others who are tirelessly trying to open them.

Our intention here is not to paint the festival as an anchored place, but more as a site of connections that allows for the viewer's mind to travel. Les Sommets features animated films from thirty-four different countries around the world, showcasing various languages and cultures in the process. The programming grants an access point to both imaginative excess, or personal stories specific to the filmmaker's origin country, such as closing film *Chris the Swiss* (Anja Kofmel, 2018), which recounts the artist's cousin's story, a journalist who died in the Yugoslav Wars in 1992. That being said, the festival acts as a node in a network of festivals, and nations, where most of its content strongly depends of its special presentations, which is dictated by each screening's specific sponsor. An entire screening presented by Glas Animation Festival and the U.S. Consulate General of Montréal featured independent films strictly from

the U.S., while the presentation sponsored by the Swiss Consulate General, and Swiss Films, exclusively featured films from Swiss filmmaker Isabelle Favez. Another special event took the form of a 68 minutes *carte blanche* program curated, and coming from, French distributor Miyu, counting nine films from France, and one from Belgium. With such affiliations, the festival transforms into a transnational body that strongly relies on foreign partnership, bringing notoriety and selections from other festivals into their own programming, as is the case with their Best of Annecy 2018 screening. In this review we have focused on the movement, transformation, and borders of the body from within and outside of the animated screen. We chose the body as our theme, not only because it featured so prominently in the films, but also because it speaks to the nature of the festival itself. Les Sommets acts as a node within a network of bodies, which may take the form of animated works, but also of its partners, its festival team, and various collaborators. Portraying the festival as such can help trace a path of investigation into the streams of content that travel through it, therefore allowing us to map out the interconnectivity between various bodies. It is the relation between these entities that dictates, to some extent, the programming of Les Sommets, acting as a sort of neurological system, or a rhizome. As we have mentioned before, when reviewing such a platform, it is important to both look at the films, and what surrounds them, such as the behaviour of its participants. Paley might not address hate towards transgender people in her work, but the simple fact that she is included (and celebrated) in festivals, negates the repercussion of the hate speech she has been promoting online. The inclusion of the work of Paley, in such a way that it gives her a spotlight, arguably threatens the resilience of this system. Her disavowal of gender multiplicity beyond the strict heteronormative binary, pushes against the diversity upon which such a system is built. After all, these bodies are linked together growing towards other geographical regions, influencing one another, reflecting social issues, and engendering an inclusive expansion of representation, in form, content and source, on a global scale. While Les Sommets deserves praise for the diversity it brings in the form of diverse bodies that resist and subvert dominant structures, the negation of any association with hate speech ought to be seen as the next step. This makes it an imperative not to take lightly comments targeting the safety of others, and to champion diversity both on, and outside of the screen.

References

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