

HISTORY OF STOP MOTION ANIMATION



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THE CURATOR'S OPENING WORDS



The rich history of 'stop motion' animation is a fascinating part of the animation world that's left underappreciated compared to other kinds of animation. Stop motion animation is expressed in many different forms; therefore, the goal is to showcase those approaches while summarising stop motion animation in general.

From its humble beginnings in 1898, stop motion animation has come a long way. Thanks to the help of advancing technologies (especially computers), stop motion is still commonly used today, creating iconic characters like "Gumby" and "Wallace and Gromit^b". Whether it be with puppets, cutouts, clay figures or people, stop motion is one of the most expressive types of animation out there. It allows for traditional and unconventional stories to be told. Whether it be a typical fantasy, like in "Jason and the Argonauts", personal anecdotes like "The Hand", an abstract piece like "Diagonal Symphony", or an experimental film like "Neighbours", any story can be expressed with stop motion animation.

While all these films share the same filming technique (even before computers arrived to help animators), they all have a few things in common. They have underlying messages and give off the feeling that the objects in them breathe new life to their respective stories, providing new insights to their characters. While the premise of some films may seem strange at first, each of these masterclasses of stop motion animation has an intriguing story that will keep you invested to the very end, making you recall them long after viewing.

This program is intended to be a global showcase of what stop motion has achieved over the last century, from Europe to Australia and the East; stop motion animation is all around us. The program will also present the best works from the most respected and influential animators within the stop motion world. Many of them have won dozens of awards and featured at countless film festivals for their work. Ray Harryhausen, for instance, is considered a pioneer of the craft, having mastered the use of puppets in his work and ended up creating the iconic skeleton fight scene in "Jason and the Argonauts", going on to inspire a new generation of filmmakers.

Harryhausen was quoted as saying:

"There's a strange quality in stop-motion photography, like in King Kong, that adds to the fantasy. If you make things too real, sometimes you bring it down to the mundane."^o

This program seeks to highlight some of the best that stop motion animation has to offer and capitalise on some of the most beloved stop motion animators within history. The program will also give viewers a glimpse into some beautiful works of art in the process, as all these films have excellent stories and incredible characters attached to them.





The Haunted Hotel

USA, 3'30, 1907

DIRECTOR: James Stuart Blackton

PRODUCER: American Vitagraph Company

An unknown traveller visits a mysterious hotel which gets overtaken by ghosts and spirits. Tormenting him while he tries to unpack, eat and get some sleep.



Diagonal Symphony / Symphonie Diagonale

GERMANY, 7'29, 1924

DIRECTOR: Viking Eggeling

PRODUCERS: Viking Eggeling, Hans Richter

Eggeling's last animation before his death, this abstract film, attempts to create a new language of 'visual music' with time manipulation.



The Tale Of The Fox / Le Roman de Renard (Excerpt)

FRANCE, 2'22, 1937

DIRECTOR: Ladislav Starevich

PRODUCER: Roger Richebé (1939-1941)

Renard's mischievous pranks on the animal kingdom get him arrested by King Lion, who has him brought before the throne to bring the prankster to justice.



Neighbours

CANADA, 8'08, 1952

DIRECTOR / PRODUCER : Norman McLaren

In one of McLaren's iconic experimental films, a group of once harmonious neighbours fight to the death over possession of a flower.



Jason and the Argonauts (Skeleton Fight Scene)

USA, 2'19, 1963

DIRECTOR: Don Chaffey

PRODUCER: Charles H. Schneer

Ray Harryhausen's masterpiece, this scene, has become a classic of animation history and inspired generations of special effects designers.



The Hand / Ruka

CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 17'51, 1965

DIRECTOR: Jiří Trnka

PRODUCER: Krátký Film Praha

This personal tale about the freedom of speech mirrors Trnka's own experience in communist Czechoslovakia. Capitalising on the struggles he and many other artists faced with their work.



The Demon / Oni

JAPAN, 7'38, 1972

DIRECTOR: Kihachiro Kawamoto

PRODUCER: Fukuma

Based on Japanese legend, two brothers set out to the mountains when a demon suddenly appears. After severing the demon's arm, they make a gruesome discovery on the way home...



Uncle

AUSTRALIA, 6'08, 1996

DIRECTOR: Adam Elliot

PRODUCERS: Ann Shenfield, Robert Stephenson, Sarah Watt

A nephew remembers the memories of his uncle's eccentric, unusual life with a particular focus on his dog, his love of crumpets, and his lemon tree.



Tchaikovsky: An Elegy

UK, 13'14, 2011

DIRECTOR: Barry Purves

PRODUCERS: Irina Margolina, Loose Moose

After being placed in an empty room and prompted by the music score's relentlessness, Tchaikovsky revisits his successes and internal struggles in his life.

FILM ANALYSIS

The Haunted Hotel - James S. Blackton | (1907)

James Blackton's *"The Haunted Hotel"* (1907) was the first essential stop motion film to be released. While not the first stop motion film ever made (that honour controversially debated¹ between *"The Humpty Dumpty Circus"* (1898) and *"Matches, An Appeal"* (1899? / 1914?)) it was the first fully animated film to make an impact on the cinematic world. Despite its storyline closely imitating George Méliès' work, the techniques used and collective world caused a sensation with viewers so much that *"all the French producers racked their brains trying to figure out [Blackton's] tricks that made objects move by themselves"* (Crafton 1993, p. 13).^{2a} Beyond its influence, Émile Cohl was tasked by 'Gaumont' to figure out how the film was made.^{2b} In doing so, he became fascinated with hand-drawn films and later created the influential *"Fantasmagorie"* (1908), which introduced the world to many animation tropes that are still used today and inspired the works of 'Raoul Barre' and 'Earl Hurd', who would go on to work for Disney.⁴

What's truly special about *"The Haunted Hotel"* is how it feels genuinely alive, with the objects appearing completely lifelike. The animation's complexity, seamless combination with live-action, and the smoothness of movement all feel naturally beautiful. Additionally, the fact that no wires are present in the film make the realism much more believable and understandably amazed audiences, resulting in the film selling out 5000-seated Paris theatres (twice daily) for a month.

Diagonal Symphony / Symphonie Diagonale - Viking Eggeling | (1924)

Taking nearly four years to make, *"Diagonal Symphony"* (1924) is undoubtedly the most abstract film in this stop motion showcase. One of the early pioneers of abstract animation, Viking Eggeling used time as the key ingredient of his work, unlike Hans Richter and Walter Rittmann,²⁰ which *"revolutionised the whole existing aesthetic"*, according to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.²¹ The film explores the idea of visual music, where Eggeling artificially creates visual rhythms with abstract shapes growing and disappearing.²² The shapes appear as musical instruments like pianos and drums, reminiscent of Norman McLaren's *"Begone Dull Care"*^k and its approach to music.²³ While the film received critical praise for its time exploration,²² Eggeling would, unfortunately, die of syphilis two weeks after its release.

It's incredible how Eggeling uses only paper and tin foil to film the abstract shapes at one frame simultaneously.²² The film's attempts to create a language (of sorts) built of basic elements are genius and give off a kind of signwriting²⁴ like paintings would have. *"Diagonal Symphony"* glimpses into a form of stop motion that's often overshadowed in the animation world. Still, Eggeling's incredible use of storytelling shows that it's just as effective for stop motion as anything else used today.

The Tale Of The Fox / Le Roman de Renard - Ladislav Starevich | (1937)

Ladislav Starevich's only full-length feature, *"The Tale Of The Fox"* (1937) (or *"Le Roman de Renard"* in French), was the first stop motion film to fully utilise puppet animation.⁵ It was also one of the first stop motion films to use sound; despite not initially having one after 18 months of filming, the UFA ('Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft' in Germany) put funds towards a German soundtrack.⁶ Well-known for using bugs and animals to play characters in his films, Starevich mastered his distinct puppet technique with *"Lucaus Cervus"* (1910) and *"The Cameraman's Revenge"*^d (1912); and was fortunate enough to have a vast set of resources with *"The Tale Of The Fox."*⁷

The best thing about this film is how the puppet's faces allow them to express emotion like real people, from their breathing to the natural plucking of guitar strings. Renard and the other animals feel much more human, setting the bar very high for puppet animation. Another incredible feat is the depth of field, which was revolutionary at the time. The camerawork from Starevich makes the sky feel far away from the camera, making it feel much more realistic. The lighting also helps to give a natural quality to the film, giving the illusion that it is set in a live theatre.

Neighbours - Norman McLaren | (1952)

Norman McLaren's most famous work, "*Neighbours*" (1952), is an experimental stop motion film created to protest the Korean Conflict of the 1950s.⁸ Winning him an Academy Award (in the 'Best Documentary (Short Subject)' category) in 1953, the story is relatively simple, focusing on two people fighting to the death over a flower. It was also called "*the greatest film ever made*" by the legendary artist Pablo Picasso.⁹ "*Neighbours*" utilises pixilation, an abstract approach to stop motion. The camera films moving actors and objects a few frames simultaneously, providing the film with an unnatural look with "frantic" movements.⁸

The best part about "*Neighbours*" is McLaren's use of a synthetic soundtrack, which allows the film to be expressive (despite not having any dialogue) while still maintaining its frantic appearance. The underlying message to 'love thy neighbor' and make peace feels very personal.¹⁰ Given McLaren worked on documentaries filming the Spanish Civil War and, as a pacifist, was disgusted by the state of the world at that point,¹¹ it was only a matter of time until he would create a film such as this innovative masterpiece.

Jason And The Argonauts (Skeleton Fight Scene) - Ray Harryhausen | (1963)

"*Jason And The Argonauts*" (1963) has become an everlasting classic of stop motion animation due to its skeleton-fight scene, undisputedly Ray Harryhausen's most famous animation. Although a box office bomb in 1963,¹² it became a massive influence for Steven Spielberg and Peter Jackson.¹³ These directors would go on to create "*Jurassic Park*" and "*The Lord of the Rings*", some of the greatest sci-fi movie franchises ever made. Additionally, the film is considered to Tom Hanks as "*the greatest film ever made*" over "*Citizen Kane*" and "*Casablanca*".¹² It's easy to say that Harryhausen has earned a special place within the world of animation, representing the link between O'Brien's pioneering days of King Kong and a new age of digital effects.

Notwithstanding its age, it's impressive how well the animation stands today, even with the lack of computers, due to its seamless integration with the live-action scenes. It's incredibly smooth and feels truly lifelike; from the skeletons digging up to the surface to the actual fight scene, they genuinely feel like a part of Jason's world and make the scene one of the most memorable in movie history. It's also incredible to learn that, according to Harryhausen, "[he] was producing just 13 or 14 frames a day", and the scene "took a record four and a half months to capture on film" (Harryhausen, 2010).¹⁴

The Hand / Ruka - Jiří Trnka | (1965)

"*The Hand*" (1965) (or "*Ruka*" in Czech) is a personal yet depressing stop motion film illustrating the oppressive environment that artists like Jiří Trnka faced in post-WW2 Czechoslovakia. A national icon for his complex, political-inspired narratives,¹⁵ Trnka was a master of puppet animation, making over 20 films (including "*Old Czech Legends*" (1953) and "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*" (1959)) that capitalise on his childhood obsession with puppet theatre.¹⁶ "*The Hand*" highlights how Trnka maintained this culture that's been embedded in Czechoslovakia for centuries.¹⁷ Trnka saw his life as a type of freedom, trapped within the confines of a golden cage, which is symbolised beautifully in the film's climax¹⁸. He was also worried about how other artists and citizens might've perceived his work after his death, which can be shown through the film's hand/glove character.

The beauty of "*The Hand*" is best shown in the puppet, with stiff movements and its contained expression.¹⁶ Trnka's masterful use of framing and lighting give the puppet a more personal feel and makes the character feel sympathetic despite only having one facial expression. Additionally, Trnka's depressing music helps to portray the puppet's emotions and enhance the psychological elements of Trnka's sorrowful tale. It's incredible how Trnka ended his extraordinary filmography with this deeply personal story.¹⁹

The Demon / Oni - Kirhachiro Kawamoto | (1972)

"*The Demon*" (1972) (or "*Oni*" in Japan) is a charming little gem within Kirhachiro Kawamoto's extensive filmography. The puppet animator's techniques have a lot in common with Jiří Trnka's work, understandably since he trained under Trnka for a year in Czechoslovakia.³³ The use of the narrative and lighting, emotions, and lack of facial expressions all feel reminiscent of Trnka's "*The Hand*".³⁴ While many Japanese animators exaggerated their puppets' facial expressions and contortions, Kawamoto kept things restrained and straightforward,³⁵ introducing a form of puppet animation that audiences understood and related to, perfectly matching the reawakening of Japanese cultural expression in post-WW2.³⁶

What's truly special is the animation in "*The Demon*", which feels like an authentic live-theatrical performance. The theatrical elements of emotions and behaviour are beautifully restrained and allow viewers to focus on the hidden details. In addition, the music helps to set the story's pace, much like in Trnka's work and helps to engage audiences in the film.³⁷ The animation style also helps make the tale relatively easy to understand, despite the Japanese subtitles, making it reminiscent of a silent film.

Uncle - Adam Elliot | (1996)

Adam Elliot's "*Uncle*" (1996) is the first stop motion piece from this Australian animator, loosely based on his relationship with his eight uncles.²⁹ The first of a trio of short films (alongside "*Cousin*" (1998) and "*Brother*" (1999)),³⁰ Elliot emphasises highly engaging, yet unusual characters with quirky stories for his films. With "*Uncle*", the Oscar winner creates a somewhat damaged man with odd behaviours, which isn't seen often in the animation world. His visual aesthetic and distinct 'bug eye' style²⁹ of characters would help secure his reputation on the international stage and give him the title as one of Australia's most celebrated animators.^{31, 32}

The story is easily the best part of "*Uncle*", which provides an outstanding balance of humour and drama, making the story feel both wholesome and depressing at the same time. Another notable aspect of the film is the animation, which is relatively simple compared to the more complex animations from Barry Purves and Ray Harryhausen. Its homemade feel gives a childlike innocence to the film, and its unique character designs look like a child could've made them, making it more fascinating to watch.

Tchaikovsky: An Elegy - Barry Purves | (2011)

"*Tchaikovsky: An Elegy*" (2011) is an animated drama piece created by passionate classicist Barry Purves.²⁵ A devoted fan of Tchaikovsky's work, Purves' made the film for the short film series "*Tales of the Old Piano*", where he was promised a chance to play Tchaikovsky's piano.²⁶ There is a lot of cryptic information regarding the composer in this film. The glass of water sitting on the piano and the dreams that Tchaikovsky is injected into reference his supposed suicide by drinking contaminated water and the waking dreams he had denying his homosexuality and remembering his mother's death in childhood, respectively.^{27,28}

Purves puts so much work into this film that it feels like a passion project of sorts; the amount of detail alone is enough to show the passion he had for Tchaikovsky and his work. Purves demonstrates his talents with stop motion with incredible details in the puppet's movement. The finger's joints (especially when playing the piano) and the movement's complexity (while eyes are moving and blinking) demonstrate a type of movement you rarely see in puppet animation.

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