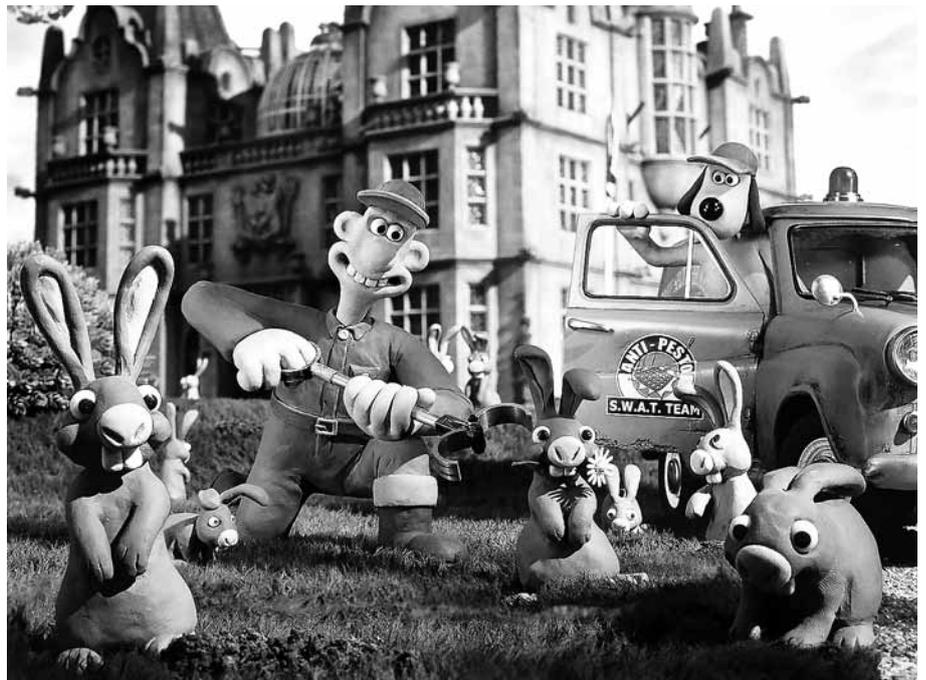


ANIMATOR IN FOCUS: PETER LORD

THE TRUE GIANT OF ANIMATION



From *Wallace & Gromit in The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (2005) by Peter Lord.

The combination of skillful fingers and animation technique transformed mundane lumps of clay into some of the 20th century's funniest and smartest "people". Their home is the famous animation studio Aardman.

ANIMATED FILM CAN be divided into two general categories: animated film (animated cartoons, cutout, moving illustration) and animated objects (puppet animation, claymation, ready made animation). In relation to computer-generated films, the terms 2D and 3D correlate as counterparts to these two forms of film.

THE ANIMATED IMAGES of our time are dominated by three-dimensional animation, above all as a result of digitalization, which has cut costs and simplified production and distribution processes. Moreover, the great creative and commercial successes of a few production companies – such as the American company Pixar – have led to three-dimensional animation becoming all

the more common since the end of the 1980s. But three dimensional animation is much older than the Digital Age. The method of handling the creation of figures and presenting illusory space in digital 3D films is based on an aesthetic tradition with roots in stop-motion puppet animation.

In this account of history, the famous British studio Aardman plays a prominent role. What Aardman accomplished combined digital animation with traditional stop-motion animation.

Stop-motion is based on animating three-dimensional models, including puppets among other things, in a real three-dimensional space. This makes stop-motion a unique means of expression in film animation – the origin,

aesthetics and traditions of which are extensively tied to theatrical puppetry.

TO UNDERSTAND THE Aardman phenomenon, you have to shed light on a few fundamental historical and aesthetic concepts central to the birth of puppet animation. Puppet animation is a special kind of stop-motion animation that loaned various means of expression from puppet shows. This type of animation highlights the figurative puppet. With the help of the puppet theater's technique and its analog or digital animations, the puppet is presented as a particular kind of "actor". There are varying definitions of the word puppet issuing from the origin, form and technical aspects of puppets. To be able to



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call an object a puppet, it must be recognizably human – even if it’s an anthropomorphic animal-puppet or another kind of stylized puppet. Various kinds of puppets are normally distinguished from each other, for example a doll, a puppet, a glove puppet and so on.

DESPITE THE DIFFERENT approaches of the puppeteer and the animator, they share three basic features: figure representation, movement and voice.

Figure representation is a process that lends form, appearance and physiognomy to the puppet. Physiognomy can be defined as the interpretation of the person’s appearance based on an analytical observation of human gestures and movements. The idea that the human face and appearance can be seen as a reflection of inner qualities at all – that a person’s unseen nature can be reached through the seen and manifest

itself there – is a central thought in silent theater and other disciplines, which has greatly influenced the aesthetics of puppet theater.

CONCERNING MOVEMENT, PANTOMIME (Greek for “all-imitating”) plays an extremely important role. Pantomime is a dramatic presentation in which body movements and mimicry are the only means of expression. It hinges on the premise that mankind’s inner drives do not reveal themselves in human appearance, but in behavior and action.

THE PANTOMIME WAS first seen in theater’s silent melodramas and ballets, and was of course a central means of expression in theatrical puppetry. Over time an extensive compilation of emotional expressions was systematized through body motions in puppet theater. Through its gestures, poses and countenance,

the portraying puppet became a living thing reacting to stimuli. Using stylized body movements the puppet didn’t only express basic emotions but also the most refined nuances of feeling.

NATURALLY, IN THIS context the actor’s voice and accompanying sounds were another important medium to further personify the figurative object. The interplay between the puppet and the human voice gave many possibilities for new and original strategies of storytelling.

All of which came to use in the aesthetic and ideological shift from theatrical puppetry to cinema puppetry, likewise in the shift to digitalized animated imagery. By implementing the aesthetics of theatrical puppetry, a few animation pioneers would conclude an epoch in the history of the figurative puppet and at the same time begin a new phase of development in a new





From *Chicken Run* (2000) by Peter Lord.

medium – moving pictures. This was a technical and aesthetic development stretching from the end of the 19th century to the digitalized puppets of our time.

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AT FIRST, FILM took over theatrical puppetry's aesthetics (characterized by each scene corresponding to a steady point of view, a full figure and a narrative sequence).

The first crucial step forward from theatrical puppetry was that in animated film you could create a much more believable illusion of a "living" object. Soon after followed essential changes with purely cinematographic

approaches including montages, picture resolution and close-ups.

AS A RULE the presenting puppet is a cultural symbiosis, a result of inter-cultural exchange. Theatrical puppetry's aesthetics, technique, motifs and genre conventions have geographically drifted over time by means of international contacts and relations between various film and cultural circles.

The UK is one of the countries that developed a rich tradition of theatrical puppetry early on. In fact it was the Englishman Arthur Melbourne Cooper who already in 1899 made the first, or at least the oldest preserved, 3D animated stop-motion film, *Matches: An Appeal*. Just like his counterpart from Russia, Vladislav Starevich, Cooper ventured out of the studio, which at times resulted in the Earth's rotation adding macabre light effects, such as in his film *Noah's*

Ark (1906). With the film *Dream of Toyland* (1908), he set in motion the concept that "toys come to life", which alongside animated dinosaurs has been one of the most persistent sub-genres of animated film.

At the end of the 1920s it became technically possible to copy sound on the same film strip as the film's images. Voice, music and sound then dramatically rose in importance in theatrical puppetry. With the soundtrack embedded in the film strip, it became possible to create moving images that would correspond with sound and musical illustrations. Along with sound film came so-called "lip sync", which didn't only refer to matching lip movements to spoken words, but also to matching a voice with a face.

SINCE IT WAS easy to use lip sync in animated films, two-dimensional animation dominated the field for a long time. "Pose drawing" was



From *Wallace and Gromit: A Close Shave* (1995) by Peter Lord.

introduced in order to stress spoken dialog or musical rhythm. This involved drawing key illustrations in movement with corresponding accents on the soundtrack. Animators began using a shot sequence, a kind of score-sheet for images that included detailed instructions for the camera operators in accordance with the foundation of music and sound, which incited the animators to begin making more refined animation.

THE LEADING MASTERS of theatrical puppetry, like Starevich, Jiří Trnka, George Pall or Kihachiro Kawamoto, made enormous creative efforts to technically harmonize animated film. In their successful films, Starevich and Trnka made puppets with skeletons of steel wire that they later clothed and fitted with heads and limbs. Since the union of an actor's voice and a puppet's immobile, exceptionally expressionless

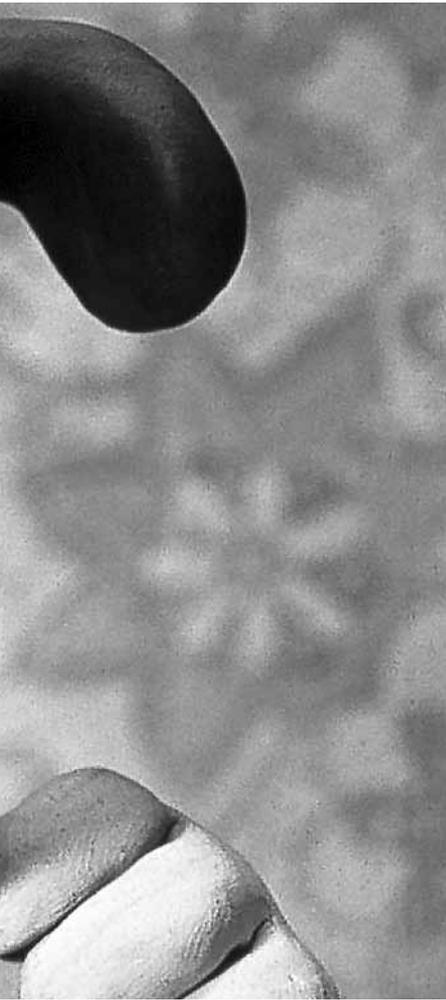
faces hardly seemed genuine, dialog was in most cases completely omitted. Instead the animators let their characters communicate exclusively through gesture. Trnka tried solving this problem by introducing the so-called soft puppet, which had a wide repertoire of shifting facial expressions. Pall instead made several puppet models in various poses that he filmed separately.

But the definitive solution to the technical problems of animation was the use of another material for modeling puppets – clay. Animating and sculpting with clay gave animators the possibility of a soft, flexible animation as well as a rich variety of expressions and attitudes for the figures.

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IN HIS DOCTORAL thesis, *Clay Animation* (1994), Michael Frearsons describes how clay-animation was used as early as 1901 at Edison Manufacturing Company by Edwin S. Porter (among others) – only ten years after William Harbutt made modeling clay an industrial product. Clay and its expressive possibilities as an animation material are described in the smallest detail in the French magazine *Lecture Pour Tous* as early as 1908. Among the most important animators who began working with clay at this early stage was the Russian, Vladimir Ptushko, whose animated feature film *The New Gulliver* (Novyj Guliver, 1935) was partially animated with clay.

ANOTHER FORERUNNER IN claymation was the surrealist Jan Švankmajer who used clay already at the beginning of his exceptional career, for example in *The Last Trick* (1964). History's first



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studio specialized for claymation was built by the American Will Vinton who, alongside clay animated short films and advertisements, made the *The Little Prince* (USA, 1979) and the feature film *The Adventures of Mark Twain* (USA, 1985) in which he created poetry and fantasy based on literary models with help of clay “actors”. Will Vinton inspired the Swedish animator Birgitta Jansson to use this technique. In her masterpiece *Semesterhemmet* (*The Holiday Home*, 1982), made with pre-recorded documentary sound, she stands as a direct predecessor to Aardman’s most renowned work.

PETER LORD IS a central figure in the history of this art. He was born in 1953 in Bristol and his name serves today as a synonym for claymation. He’s not only a director, animator and producer, but also a diligent lecturer and writer who endeavors to formulate the theoretical grounds of his

work. He is of course the founder of Aardman Animations studio.

In cooperation with David Sproxton, a friend and schoolmate who shared his interest in animation, Lord began animating in the 1960s. And it wasn’t just about clay. Lord and Sproxton created a large number of short films with many different animation techniques per orders placed by BBC’s children’s program *Vision On*. They tested cutout, sand animation and pixilation, in which you “animate” living actors by filming them frame by frame.

AFTER GRADUATION THE duo moved to Bristol where *Vision On*’s studio was located. Between 1966 and 1977 they continued producing animated images for TV. In one of these projects they developed a character called Aardman, a man with a potbelly and a crooked back and who walked around in a Superman-suit. The

short-lived figure’s name was lent to the future studio and a unique style of animation.

IN 1975 LORD and Sproxton began making a series of claymation films with the character Morph. It was a great success and a few years later came the *The Amazing Adventures of Morph*, an animated children’s show encompassing 26 episodes.

They got a chance to make films for adult audiences by request of Channel 4, which between 1983 and 1989 ordered the series *Conversation Pieces*. In the most successful episodes, such as Lord’s films *Early Bird* or *Late Edition*, the Aardman style took form, based on combining of documentary recorded sounds and claymation. The chief distinguishing characteristic of the Aardman style was however the characters’ sensitivity and acuity. Lord and his coworkers melded poetry and humor, thereby



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overcoming one of the fundamental obstacles in stop-motion animation: transforming the objects into subjects. All “clay actors” were detailed and carefully characterized, and their stylized body movements could express a broad repetition of feelings including wonder, respect, hope, wrath, anger, disgust, fear, love, longing, dread, hate, physical and emotional pain, happiness, laughter, despair, agitation, delight, compassion and regret. On top of everything they were armed with the peerless “Aardman Smile” – that unique expression blending discomfort and delight. Without exaggeration one can state that claymation was perfected at Aardman.

This is particularly true after 1985, when the exceptionally talented Nick Park joined the studio. With him he brought an idea about two new clay figures – the cheese-loving Wallace and his super-intelligent dog Gromit.

DURING THE 1980S, a new field opened up for animation: advertisements and music videos. Lord was the driving creative force behind successful advertisements like *Domestos* and *Hamlet*, and in particular the cult music video *Sledgehammer* (1986), made for a Peter Gabriel song.

Aardman’s international breakthrough came in 1989. At that time they produced, among other things, Peter Lord’s films *War Story* and *Going Equipped*, and Nick Park’s *Creature Comforts*, which won an Oscar the following year in competition with another Nick Park film, *A Grand Day Out*, which first introduced Wallace and Gromit. Four years later another Wallace and Gromit film, *The Wrong Trousers*, would be awarded with the revered statue, which also happened again in 1995 with *A Close Shave*. Peter Lord was also close to becoming an Oscar

winner in 1991 with the short film *Adam*, further demonstrating that Aardman became a globally renowned and widely appreciated animation phenomenon.

FOR ADULTS, BOTH puppet theater and puppet animation act as allegories for human reality. Most puppet masters do not make their work as barricades against reality, but as a way of cleaving into the present and attempting to understand it. As a metaphorical substitute for the modern person, the figurative puppet clearly witnesses of the situation at the time of its creation. The puppet does not only attain its own life and will, but becomes an entertainer with the capability of criticizing and mocking power structures.

The basis in reality found in Aardman films is foremost dependent on documentary methods





From *The Pirates – Band of Misfits* (2012) by Peter Lord.

and a remarkable feeling for the unique tradition of British humor. Aardman often made use of the standard clichés of documentary films and TV journalism – above all pre-recorded sounds from real life. Peter Lord himself was among the first to merge fantastic, humorous clay animations with conversations with actual people. In *Creature Comforts* Nick Park used the same method. The collisions between the comical figures and the clearly authentic interview voices – which often make typically British ironic comments – provided an entertaining result.

In the beginning of the 1990s Aardman also made progress using means of expression typical to feature film such as cross-cutting, simulated camera tracking and hand cameras, as well as shifts between varying angles and perspectives. This brought Peter Lord and Aardman to the next developmental stage.

After all their success it wasn't unexpected when Hollywood came with an offer to make an Aardman feature film with a budget of 45 million. This offer posed a great challenge considering that the longest format that the studio had worked with was 30 minutes. The feature film did not only entail a new narrative form, but also a significantly longer production period. It took five years for 120–150 employees to make the hilarious farce *Chicken Run* (2000). The difficulty was retaining the recognizable Aardman feeling and humor. Peter Lord solved this problem brilliantly.

AFTER WALLACE AND Gromit got their own feature film – *The Curse of the Were Rabbit* (2005) – the next great challenge stepped in: digitalization. The most substantial adjustment related to modeling and personification of characters.

In claymation animators bring characters to life with their fingers. But how do you put feelings into digital puppets that are visible, but untouchable? Aardman sent a small team of employed animators to be trained in digital animation at Dreamworks. Aardman's third long film was also its first to be digitally animated. Flushed away was released in 2006. In his most recent feature film, *The Pirates*, Peter Lord sleekly melds the traditions of stop-motion and digital 3D. It's the latest episode in one of the most brilliant careers in the history of animated film.

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