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Puppet Animation: Surreality, Physicality, and Horror

Stop motion animation, or puppet animation, has often been used to disturb, terrorize, and amuse its audiences. What about the process of stop-motion animation that lends itself to depicting the surreal and bizarre in both popular live-action media and independent experimental work? Those who understand stop motion or frame-by-frame animation know that the process takes incredible time and dedication to the craft. The world in which stop-motion animation takes place has to be literally constructed. The filmmaker is responsible for every frame in the film. It works with tangible objects that an audience can recognize as existing in the real world, creating surreality and uncanniness in puppet animation that is unique to other forms of animation. The intricateness of the work and materiality of the objects used in stop motion allows filmmakers to explore the uncanny and produce a specific disturbing brand of horror.

The first puppet animation film was made in the early 20th century by Polish Filmmaker Ladislas Starevich. *Lucanus Cervus* became the first puppet animation partially by accident, as Starevich wanted to make the film of two beetles fighting, but the beetles perished under his studio lights. To rectify this issue, Starevich removed the beetle's legs and replaced them with wire. He continued the film by manipulating the new mechanical "legs" to create the illusion that the beetles were still alive. This incident is significant to note, as the origins of puppet animation began with the literal zombification of insects. At its core, stop-motion animation takes an object void of life and manipulates it to create the illusion of sentience. This concept has persisted in stop-motion animation from its birth to today.

Some of the most popularly consumed stop-motion animated films use the troupe of animated or reanimated corpses as a narrative point. Thus, the most widely regarded use of stop

motion is often assimilated with the macabre or grotesque. One of these films is Tim Burton and Mike Johnson's, *The Corpse Bride,* which follows the story of a woman who was engaged to be married before her death and was reanimated and joined the living. The animation is seamless, yet Burton and Johnson did not shy away from using the physical elements of puppet animation to depict the grosser features that stop motion can portray. Including the depiction of a rotting corpse and how it navigates the world of the living. The animation of the undead, giving life to the lifeless, is at the forefront of stop motion in pop culture. The production of inauthentic sentience often coincides with the issue of the Uncanny Valley.

The Uncanny Valley is a theory that is omnipresent in stop-motion animation. The official definition of the uncanny valley is "[...] a hypothesized relation between an object's degree of resemblance to a human being and the emotional response to the object. The concept suggests that humanoid objects that imperfectly resemble actual human beings provoke uncanny or strangely familiar feelings of uneasiness and revulsion in observers." The manipulation of puppets humanly or inhumanly can lead to the uncanny. Many filmmakers embrace this, and this concept is at the forefront of another of the most popular stop-motion animated works. Henry Selick's *Coraline* plays with themes of the uncanny as Coraline travels into an alternate dimension through a cupboard door in her home. She interacts with idealized versions of her parents, neighbors, and friends who have buttons for eyes. These people resemble the people in her life, but the fact that they are not, or rather imposters of, these real-world entities creates the ominous aesthetic in the film. The most unsettling thing in Coraline is the idea that these characters are not authentically her family. Instead, an unseen entity is puppeteering bodies that represent her family, which stays true to the ethos of puppet animation. The methodology and

mechanics of puppet animation can often produce uncanniness, thus predisposing the filmmaking practice to the horror genre.

The suspension of disbelief is more difficult for an audience to achieve when consuming stop-motion animation, as objects can be recognizable in the real world, and the artist's hand can become visible in the film. The human hand is often made a character in stop motion, whether an invisible entity that is evident based on the impression left behind by the filmmaker or as a character in the film. Jiri Trnka's 1965 film *Ruka* or "*The Hand*," builds a relationship between the puppet and the puppeteer. The puppet tries to live a peaceful life, sculpting flower pots but is continuously interrupted by a human hand who insists the puppet make sculptures depicting the hand.   The film is a metaphor for the relationship between the totalitarian government of Czechoslovakia and the artist forced to create propaganda. However, it also makes an interesting point about the relationship between the artist and the medium. In an ironic twist of fate, once the puppet stands up to the almighty hand and traps it in a cage, he dies shortly after. One cannot exist without the other, much like the puppet cannot live without the puppeteer.

Jan Svankmajer, a Czech experimental animator of the mid-20th century, fully embraced this aspect of puppet animation and used the uncanny and unorthodox elements of stop motion to his advantage. Svankmajer's 1983 film, *Dimensions of Dialogue,* showcases the artist's hand directly, as manipulating the material, in this case, clay, leaves behind fingerprints. Kristoffer Noheden explains in his 2013 article for the *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, "A number of Svankmajer's films evoke touch like few others. Transforming matter, putrefying foodstuffs, coarse or sticky surfaces, and the sudden stop-motion animated life of otherwise inert objects are some of the elements that combine to create tactile sensations through a combination of the

director's surrealist inventions with the viewer's own sensory experiences." By incorporating his hand directly and unmistakably, Svankmajer rejects the suspension of disbelief and states that he, as the filmmaker, is responsible for manipulating the objects on the screen. His 1989 film *Darkness, Light, Darkness* depicts the human hand as a character while also representing the artist's hand in the imprints it leaves behind. In the seven-minute film, Svankmajer showcases an entire life cycle from birth to death, beginning and ending with darkness. The human hands in the film discover different body parts adapting them along the way, which mirrors Svankmajer's animation practice. Svankmajer's work as a surrealist put forth the idea that stop motion does not need to mimic reality; instead, his goal was to insert his fantasy world into the real world.

Svankmajer's dedication to surreality using reality is apparent in his 1971 film *Jabberwocky*, and his 1988 film, *Alice*, both inspired by the writings of Lewis Carol. Svankmajer animates recognizable, everyday objects in a way that does not compute with the laws of physics in the real world. Noheden explains in his article, "There is still a recurring misconception that surrealism is an escapist attempt to abandon reality, when the movement in fact has always striven towards the experience of more facets of reality by integrating it with the imaginary, not to abandon one for the other." The surreality of the original text, *Alice in Wonderland*, where a young girl transports into a surreal, dreamlike world full of everyday objects, is the perfect source material to showcase the intentions behind Svankmajer's animation. Svankmajer is credited with creating an ethos in experimental stop-motion animation that influenced the filmmakers who came after him. The images Svankmajer achieves using everyday objects are nightmarish and bizarre, an aesthetic further replicated in stop-motion animation.

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Recognizing that an object is an object that is being animated by a separate entity, rather than conscious, contributes to the uncanny valley, which creates an apt environment for stop motion to lean toward the horror genre. The Brothers Quay embraced this in their stop-motion work in the 1970s and 80s. The Brothers Quay's choice of dark aesthetics and characters that do not represent humans but rather animation of objects without life is harmonious with the process of puppet animation. Their 1986 film *the Street of Crocodiles* tells the narrative of the original text while embracing the artifice that stop motion creates. The choice to use parts of broken dolls and animate in a way that does not mimic human movement shows how the Quay brothers embraced the nuance of puppet animation.

In Basia Nikiforova's 2015 dissertation titled, *Philosophy of Matter Manipulation in Brother's Quay Metaphorical Animation World*, she explains, "The film Street of Crocodiles is filled with meaningless ritual acts, such as constant strange rhythmic movement, twitching, disintegration of inanimate forgotten matters. Brothers Quay warn that lifelessness is only a mask, a kind of conspiracy, behind which unknown life forms hide. Schulz reiterated that there is no dead nature. Brothers Quay's dolls and phantoms are not dead; instead, they have a temporary, short-lived, and unstable nature. On the Street of Crocodiles, the laws of nature are canceled: the acts of creation and evolution are replaced by the spontaneous act of self-creation." This quote expands on the idea that the Brothers Quay's choice to animate or give life to perceived inanimate objects is directly influenced by the uncanniness often represented in stop-motion animation. The Quay Brother's distinct surreality is evident in *the Street of Crocodiles*, though it is one of their more traditional narrative works. Their 1991 film, *Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies*, leans further into surreality, the disturbed, and the tactile nature of stop motion animation. *Rehearsal for Extinct Anatomies* is hyper-aware of stop motion

as a process. A recurring image consists of a mangled wire puppet neurotically prodding at a mole on its head. The scene is both disturbing and intriguing as it mirrors the systematic and repetitive nature of the art form. Timothy and Stephen Quay become characters in *Rehearsal for Extinct Anatomies*. The audience is made aware that they are spectators to the events happening on screen.

Furthermore, the filmmakers play a distinct role in manipulating the puppets to achieve the images the audience sees, as the Quays are sometimes seen maneuvering, ghost-like and sped up, through a shot. Inserting themselves into the frame is effective as the choice to make stop motion animation as it takes a great deal of time and precision to achieve the result. The Brothers Quay uses the physicality and surreality of puppet animation as a tool in their films to comment on the process itself. They do not relinquish the idea that what they were making was a fabrication, a fantastical representation of an action rather than the action itself. The notion that animation is not a direct reflection of reality is not an uncommon sentiment.

Stop motion legend Ray Harryhausen once said, "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." Harryhausen had a sixty-five-year career in the film industry where he used stop motion animation to create fantastical creature films such as his 1963 film, *Jason and the Argonauts*. Harryhausen used a split screen technique to create the illusion that actors were fighting monsters and skeletons. Harryhausen emulated realism to a certain extent, as he melded live-action actors and animation into the same world. However, he accepted the limitations of the time, focussed primarily on creating something visually dynamic, and pushed the limits of what could be achieved using practical effects in film. Harryhausen's

style inspired several filmmakers in the 1980s who used practical effects to achieve the visceral and grotesque in their movies.

Before CGI, filmmakers relied on stop motion and practical effects to achieve the disturbing images we have come to love in creature films of the late 20th century. Ray Harryhausen inspired Sam Raimi with the idea that the use of practical effects aids in the imagination of the film. Raimi's 1981 breakout film, *Evil Dead*, exemplifies this in its use of stop motion and practical effects. Though budgetary concerns greatly influenced Raimi's choices in the first Evil Dead film, that does not make them any less effective. The use of practical effects became so integral to the tone of Evil Dead that Raimi continued to use these practices in the following films of the franchise. In Alec Jensen's 2016 article titled, "Reality is Mundane: Special Effects and Unrealism," he explains, "However, The Evil Dead's sequels confirm that Raimi truly rejected a realistic look and feel. Given the chance to essentially remake the original film with a larger budget in Evil Dead II, he doubled down on the bizarre visuals, dramatically increasing his use of stop motion. And Army of Darkness, with its legions of jerkily animated skeletons, is a direct tribute to Harryhausen. Raimi creates an ideal home for his special effects by creating an atmosphere of dementia. [...] Through his exaggerated movement and facial contortions, he establishes a world in which the expected rules of reality no longer apply." The most notable example of stop motion in *Evil Dead* depicts zombie-like creatures rapidly decomposing. The animation has the easily recognizable aesthetic of stop motion. The artist's hand is somewhat present. However, the audience accepts the visuals because who is to say what a decomposing zombie would look like? The juxtaposition of reality and surreality meld together to create an entirely new realm of the uncanny. The combination of

reality and surreality using tangible objects is prevalent in John Carpenter's 1982 version of *The Thing*.

John Carpenter's *The Thing* uses the physicality of practical effects in a different yet equally effective way. Though the film does not utilize stop motion, Carpenter's approach to puppet animation expertly depicts the balance of surreality and reality on a much larger scale. A team of artists created larger-than-life monsters as physical entities that existed in the same space as the actors. Each special effect was meticulously crafted and executed in real time, an enormous feat. Not to mention that part of what made the creature in the "Thing" so horrifying was the idea that it was formless and could morph into multiple grotesque and mysterious forms, multiplying the crew's work tenfold. The viscera and craftsmanship of the puppets and the effects displayed in the film could not be as effective using computer-generated effects. There is nothing quite like the "real thing" when it comes to gore.

Practical effects are not lost to the 80s. Guillermo del Toro is a master of practical effects, and he incorporates them in his films to this day. Though del Toro has the luxury of mixing practical effects with CGI, the physical elements of his creature films are the most compelling. Del Toro recognizes that having a monster or entity in the same space as an actor adds to the scene's terror and tension. Costuming, Make up, and performance combined achieve a greater understanding of fear on screen than in a computer-generated image that does not exist in the same space as the actor. Guillermo del Torro represents how the physical and digital can work in tandem, utilizing the ease of digital with the aesthetic of practical.

Del Toro's 2006 Film, *Pan's Labyrinth*, is an interesting combination of fantasy and history. The story covers horrific events of the Spanish Civil War parallel to a fantasy world reminiscent of children's fairy tales. This juxtaposition effectively speaks about complex topics

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while engaging the audience with the mysticism of fantasy filmmaking. Guillermo del Toro physically constructs alternate realities and immerses the audience in another world. This mode of storytelling is replicated in Cristobal Leon and Joaquin Cocina's 2020 feature, *The Wolf House.*

Lon and Cocina accomplish a large-scale immersive experience with a more experimental approach. Leon and Cocina reject any sense of realism as the materials they use range from masking tape and paper mache to hand-painted murals on the walls of a house. The narrative follows the disturbing tale of a young Chilean woman who seeks refuge from a German commune in an abandoned house. The film stems from a religious commune in Chile called Colonia Dignidad, run by Paul Schafer, a Nazi and all-around horrible person. Colonia Dignidad is never mentioned but heavily alluded to through political imagery and narration, which references "the community." The juxtaposition of the classic fairy tale, the three little pigs, and the disturbing animation immediately creates an unsettling atmosphere. Throughout the film, characters and sets materialize and decay as the perspective of the camera explores the space.

At the beginning of the film, the narrator explains how Maria let three pigs out of their pen, and they escaped into the forest. However, as the plot unfolds, the audience sees Maria interact with two pigs who eventually turn into children. Consequently, you, the viewer, are the third pig. Leon and Cocino place the audience in the middle of the action, strengthening the intensity and the overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia throughout the film. Dan Shindel explains in his article titled, "An Animated Horror Film Dredges a Disturbing Chilean History," how the unique method of puppet animation is utilized in *The Wolf House* to achieve the unsettling atmosphere of the film. Shindel writes, "Stop-motion is an incredibly time-intensive process, and León and Cociña took it several steps further than most animators. It was not shot

with miniatures and dolls, but life-sized figures on full sets. [...] This enabled them to adhere to a unique style, wherein the camera is constantly moving and the film appears to unfold in a single shot. The effect is that of a nightmare that Maria, and the viewer, cannot escape. The characters and many of the props are constructed out of papier-mâché, an unusual animation medium that proves fitting to depict the fragility and malleability of a dreamlike world. The action freely flows between 2D and 3D, the characters alternately depicted as paintings on walls, live figures in the space, or in some unsettling in-between state. *The Wolf House* looks like no other film, which makes its horrific imagery all the more difficult to shake from your head."

The use of stop-motion puppet animation in *The Wolf House* works in conjunction with the true elements of the narrative. The semi-fictional narrative is grounded in reality, as is the material of the animation. The surreality and disturbing mode of storytelling juxtaposed with the innocence of children's fairy tales makes the audience feel as though they are trapped in a sinister fairy tale of their own as it plays out slowly and chaotically in front of them. Fairy tales often function as cautionary tales for children or as a means to persuade them to behave in a certain way. The film is bookended with live-action propaganda dispelling rumors of abuse in "the community" and assuring us directly that it is a beautiful place to live. The beginning and end narration of the film reminds the audience that Colonia Dignidad was a real-life horror in which they were partially inserted through the course of the film.

Puppet animation can also use its inherent realism to portray the horrors of reality as it does in *The Wolf House*. Animation often covers unpleasant, scary, and challenging topics. The artist can control every aspect of the filmmaking process to represent their reality. In some ways, animation can be more authentic than live-action films as there is no implication that an actor is acting. Julia Orlik's 2020 short film, *I'm Here*, uses the realism of puppet animation to show the

stage of life that is rarely depicted in media, one's death. The entire film is a shot of an older woman on her deathbed. Her family tends to her and has conversations around her as she moves minimally and makes small noises. Puppet animation is particularly effective in this film, as the composition of the shot in a real three-dimensional space sort of pushes the reality of the situation into the viewer's mind. Though they may want to look away and give this dying woman privacy in her final moments, Orlik does not grant us that courtesy. The characters are not fabricated computer images; they are real entities representing our loved ones and ourselves. The realistic nature of the film evokes a more potent emotional reaction when the woman finally passes away as the audience experiences suffering and sorrow along with the characters on screen.

The characters in animation experience events in the reality in which they exist. Suzie Tempelton's 2000 film, *Dog,* is also an excellent example of how puppet animation can depict real and debilitating circumstances in terms of plot. Yet the medium of stop motion still makes it uncanny and uncomfortable. The story follows a young boy whose mother just died and whose father has agoraphobia. The family dog is dying and needs to be put to sleep, but the father cannot take it to the vet. He has to take measures into his own hands and smothers the dog unbeknownst to him in front of his son. *Dog* is an incredibly gut-wrenching film, aided by the graphic nature of the puppet animation. The slow-burning aesthetic of puppet animation, the long, drawn-out uncomfortable scenes, and the realism of the constructed environment makes it even harder to watch. If Templeton had chosen to create the film in live action, the audience could remove themselves from the thought that "it is fake" the dog didn't die, but in this case, the dog did die.

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Paul Wenniger's 2015 *Uncanny Valley* also uses stop motion to emulate reality with a degree of separation. Wenninger uses actors as puppets to display horrifying scenes of World War I. Using real people was effective as it confronts the notion that actual human beings experienced these events. However, the frame-by-frame aesthetic creates a sense of chaos and panic that may not be achieved when watching a traditional war movie. Daniel Ouannou writes in his 2016 analysis of the film, "The whole paradox of the film thus resides in its impression of realism resulting from a fantastical nightmarish construction. A realism of sensations made possible by the hallucinatory spectacle of the image. Shot in live action frame by frame, the film nevertheless comes as a long sequence shot saturated by omnipresent oppressive music. [...] Immersed in this world of sound and fury, saturated with fear, mud and the crushing crash of bombs and anguish, one can only be sickened by such hysteria of the horror of reality. Finally, Paul Wenninger's film emerges as an ultra-realistic vision of the horrors of war thanks to filmic processes at the antipodes of reality." In this case, the tangible elements of stop motion can reinforce what is real, emphasized in an unorthodox way. The title, "Uncanny Valley," is a clever nod to Death Valley, the space between opposing camps in live combat, and the notion that something is off. In Wenninger's film, this represents itself in the recognizable human soldiers, yet their jerky mannerisms are inhuman, leaving the audience uneasy.

Stop motion is not reserved for making an audience uncomfortable. Several films utilize stop-motion in a wholesome and joyful way. Aardman Animations in the United Kingdom produces primarily children's overwhelmingly cheerful films. Peter Lord and Nick Park use the physicality of the medium to create humor, often slapstick. Yet, their films also dabble in darker themes juxtaposed with comedy. For example, the 2000 film *Chicken Run* is, on its surface, a lighthearted children's movie about chickens; in reality, it is a grizzly feminist war movie that

depicts life in a forced labor camp. Joseph Bullock explains in his 2020 article, "The Playful Physicality of Chicken Run," how the physical elements of stop motion aid in both the comedic and sinister aspects of the film. He writes, "These extraordinarily detailed clay figures and tangible props allow for a degree of exaggerated movements and scenarios, elevating and giving levity to the movie's pastiche of the prisoner-of-war subgenre. [...] Aside from this war film resemblance, Chicken Run is a bit like Toy Story (1995) meets Animal Farm (1954). As in the former, the use of miniaturised objects and protagonists is a constant source of comedy; as in the latter, the narrative and overall aesthetic paint a surprisingly dark picture of a contained, anthropomorphised dystopia. In some ways, Aardman gave viewers the antithesis of Pixar's innovations and success in 3D computer animation: in contrast to these fantastical escapist worlds, there is something uniquely satisfying about something that presented a subversive and slapstick-filtered take on the real world." The absurdity created in the duality of grimy war movies and cartoons mixed with adventure, slapstick comedy, and cheeky one-liners is uniquely achieved through stop-motion animation. Though the film is regarded as a children's movie, its appeal covers an audience of all ages, thus making *Chicken Run* the highest-grossing puppet animated film. The sequel, *Chicken Run 2: Dawn of the Nugge*t, will be released in 2023 using the same method of puppet animation. The charming characters and grimy aesthetics of the original film could not be achieved using a process other than that of stop motion.

Stop-motion puppet animation is still alive and uses the techniques discussed in this essay. In the past year, three stop-motion features have come out on mainstream platforms, all of which fall into the horror category. Henry Selick's *Wendell and Wild,* Phil Tippett's *Mad God*, and a collaborative piece called *The House* made by Emma De Swaef, Paloma Baeza, Niki Lindroth von Bahr, Marc James Roels.

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     Wendell and Wild is a classic Henry Selick film with a creepy aesthetic, reanimated corpses, and fantastically playful themes geared toward a younger audience. *On* the other hand, Mad God is an utterly depraved passion project of Phil Tippetts that uses the physicality of viscera to create an R-rated grotesque hellscape. These films exist on opposite ends of the horror genre and, when compared, showcase the vast range of appeal puppet animation covers. *Wendell and Wild* depicts a fantastical yet macabre world with a semi-clear narrative. The animation is dynamic, and Selick uses the physicality of the medium in a playful, impressive way that adds to the fantastical nature of the film. In contrast, Mad God uses the physicality of stop motion to create a grimy aesthetic and genuinely horrifies his audience. Tippetts uses the grotesque and the recognition of the grotesque to his advantage when depicting scenes of violence and depravity. But the year's most exciting stop motion feature was *The House,* a trilogy of short films that range in theme, character, and tone but all take place in the same physical architecture of a house.

     The House displays the different styles achievable with stop motion, and the common thread is particularly effective with stop motion as the audience recognizes the consistent setting in each film. The three-part anthology spans the past, present, and future, the main character being the house rather than the characters living in it. At its core, each short film explores the concept of materialism, amplified by the tangibility and realism of the film. Olivia Fitzpatrick writes in her 2022 article, "In The House, mystery and the Uncanny Valley take center stage. Puppets are crafted from strange materials, like felt and fur; only one out of the three stories features humans, but their tiny faces make expressions that are impossible to decern; they might as well be wearing masks. The second and third story take it even further, with rats, bugs, and cats used as the main characters and leaving the audience struggling to identify emotions through

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anything other than the dialogue spoken. The use of stop-motion means that the house, the main setting of the entire film, feels surprisingly real. Without the characters standing inside, it is almost as if it is a real house that one could go and visit. [...] It features objects and materials moving in ways they shouldn't be able to, and animals doing things that only humans can. It's unsettling and plays with our ability to connect with the characters of each story, challenging the audience to find humanity when it's sometimes difficult to spot. [...] From a house that shifts and changes based on the whims of its terrifying architect, a house that slowly becomes infested with fur beetles and wriggling larvae, to a house that sits alone in a flooded wasteland, the three stories that make up this films are meant to be disturbing." Part of what makes *The House* exciting is that it uses the traditional elements of stop-motion horror while pushing the boundaries of the mode of storytelling. Its production and wide distribution prove that the medium is alive and evolving in popular media.

The physical elements of puppet animation create a specific kind of horror brought on by the uncanny, the unsettling, and the visceral. The suspension of disbelief is difficult to achieve in three-dimensional real-world animation. Filmmakers can use this realism to their advantage or reject it entirely.   The perceived challenges of stop motion are often used as a storytelling tool. The medium's mode of production and inherent physicality is apparent in the final result. Stop-motion puppet animation takes patience, dedication, and skill—skills ranging from storytelling to sculpture, animation, and construction. The physicality of the medium is engaging to filmmakers and viewers alike, as it is interesting to push the boundaries of our physical world. There is a reason that puppet animation still thrives today while more accessible modes of animation exist.   Puppet animation has a unique feel and visual aesthetic that cannot be replicated with a computer, and this aesthetic often lends itself to the horror genre.

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