14. Panoramic Chases into Nowhere: From Tex Avery to *Independence Day*

For more than a decade at MGM (1942–1955), Tex Avery hoped that someone would give him a shot at writing and directing a live-action feature, particularly after the success of Frank Tashlin's films. Then as now, however, animators were classified in the industry as crafts people, incapable of making a movie ninety minutes long. Over the past twenty years, however, animation and live action have moved so close together, this rule has changed.

The Mask (1994) is a classic case in point: it was made and marketed specifically as a Tex Avery feature. According to the press release, "a hundred" gags were lifted directly from cartoons by Avery and by Bob Clampett, in what the effects team called "animation takes."[1] That included the famous Avery double takes: eyes bulging priapically; the shriek while body parts explode; the jaw dropping like cement.

From the first scene, Avery's cartoons are the signature of the film. Stanley Ipkiss (Jim Carrey) runs a video of *Red Hot Riding Hood* on his VCR, while he suffers the humilities of a schlemiel. Then, with Avery on the brain, he puts on the Mask, and whipsaws into cartoon medleys reminiscent of Carl Stallings's musical samplings for *Looney Tunes*. He howls like Wolfie, whirs like the Tasmanian Devil, bounces like early Daffy.

Practically every review of the film cited the influence of Avery or the Warner's chase cartoon. Stanley was as "cocky as Bugs Bunny, as frenetic as Daffy Duck," "styled after the cartoon great Tex Avery,"[2] the "cartoon style,"[3] "cartoon boldness,"[4] "textbook cartooning."[5] Jim Carrey's elastic body made him a "biological cartoon of himself,"[6] "proud to have achieved a personal career goal by becoming a living cartoon."[7]

Even industry "word of mouth"[8] before release promised the next hit in a subgenre called "cartoony" or "comic-book" movies—films that borrow from Warner's animation. Since *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1987), or even *Star Wars*

(1977), practically every special-effects hit had Warner's "takes" buried somewhere, either as a comic-book gag, a black-out aside, or a roller-coaster effect, which originates from the same branch of entertainment as animation.

Also, Warner's gags had become part of the nostalgic humor in many special-effects films. They helped caricature the look of World War II: the candy-box colors; the nightclubs and Nazis; men in porkpie hats, women dressed like Rita Hayworth or Veronica Lake; bawdy chases reminiscent of wartime cartoons like *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943).[9]

The look of postproduction had finally swallowed the world and filled it with Baroque occlusion. The look began with digitalized motion control in *Star Wars*, then much more layered compositing, and finally much enhanced 3-D animation—through quicktime software, computerized flythroughs, texture mapping. But everyone I met who worked on these effects was aware that the result also brought live action closer to a kind of chase cartoon: a sculptural and architectonic update of cel animation, cartoon layout, and the chase. Animation artists were expected to understand techniques developed by Avery, among other Warner's animators. Knowing how Avery handled cartoon cycles and extremes helps them time an action sequence, or splice in surprises in mid-action: the offbeat aside, the wink to the audience.

There are trade-offs, however. The composition tends to get more congested, again like an Avery cartoon. Effects artists usually are asked to add objects or gimmicks, rather than clean up or thin out. They enliven the shot, from blue-screen effects to garbage mattes. That means much more visual throwaway than in the usual live-action film. Avery was, of course, a genius at visual throwaway. He littered the corners of the screen with tiny posters, novelty caricatures on the shelf, puns on the walls. However, despite the clutter, he knew how to make his chase gags hit like a sledgehammer. That fascinates many effects artists. Avery's timing was minutely exact. He might cut as little as a single frame, between the top of the screen, from where the object appears, to the point of impact further down—slam! He was certain that for action sequences, the audience can sense the absence of one-twenty-fourth of a second.

Chuck Jones disagreed. He thought the threshold was more like five frames, perhaps a quarter of second. But both he and Avery knew the tricks of the trade supremely well, for example, add pauses (frames) to make the collision stronger, to have characters look less prepared.

Special-effects master Donna Tracy has faced similar problems on dozens of effects films, from *Star Wars* to *Independence Day*. She often would cut only a

few frames from a chase, and knew how to contrast the spectacle with zany cartoon elements where necessary—the balloony contours, the anarchic use of scale, the upside-downness. She also had to work frame by frame as well. The slightest alternation, a frame or two, can ruin the movement (the effect) entirely, make it wobbly, or suggest a different mass. This is utterly like animation. It has that same time-consuming minutia. The computer does not shorten the work; it only makes it more thorough. At the same time, a certain anarchy is required, to sharpen the chase. Clarity comes out of the collision of the unlikely, with surprise pauses, and sudden lurches.

But beyond the techniques on the computer, there is the subtle influence of the work environment itself. This is a hidden factor in how animation looks, even its story. The mood at work (the pecking order, etc.) always influences the edge to the gags, the layout. That is partly because they are built so laboriously, no matter how whimsical the subject. On animated features, a team may produce only thirty seconds a day. In applied animation (special effects), the result of weeks, even months, might involve only three seconds of film. All of this takes place in a relative vacuum—very limited contact with the director, except through notes brought by the effects supervisor for the film.[10] Indeed, the animation is applied, almost in the absence of story. Even more than cartoon work, where at least the characters are the actors, the effects crew is kept at a distance from the hustle and tactile presence of live production.

This distanced milieu tends to enhance a plot that often is distanced already, emphasizing the nonhuman, the detached, the mechanized. Five hundred hours are devoted to constructing a tornado or a flock of alien reptiloids killing people; forces of nature that have to look convincingly unlikely, the blind crashing into the blind. The process is very solitary; one abstracted shape harvested at a time, microprocessed until finally, one cannot help but feel disengaged from the political or social buzz outside. The workspace itself tends to look more like a campus room at Microsoft than the tumble of location shooting. The sensory deprivation can get strange. "After working for weeks on an effect," says Tracy, "all I want to do is smell a real tree." Within this immersive miniaturized process, other screens nearby can mentally grow into parallel universes.

Also, effects artists have skills that allow them to work in many media, on malls, casinos, theme parks, websites, virtual chat lines, TV commercials, music videos, animated features, kid-vid, and incidentally live-action cinema. Inside an effects studio, one witnesses animation as a global culture, as muscle tissue for a hundred different industries. For a moment, this bank of

screens seems as exciting as a fully packed world. But in fact, it is emptied as well, highly undifferentiated. Anything from a bomb to a cyber toy looks the same—detached, innocent—a computer wire frame, or a miniature. To stay centered it becomes necessary to shut out anything that isn't part of the consumer fantasy at hand.

Then there is the division of labor in the era of the Electronic Baroque—and its "effect" on the final product. I would compare an f/x house to a crafts environment in the nineteenth century. People work in small teams, like a porcelain factory in Sèvres or Barcelona in 1890 (dozens not thousands at once), or even the Fleischer Studios in the late twenties. It is not Fordist, not an assembly line, more like craftspeople gathered around a woolens waterwheel. The work feels autonomous but fundamentally industrial, not at all "postmodern." Beneath the cybernetic politeness, it is a factory for the building of fetish objects. The mood it leaves on its workers is potent indeed, particularly after twenty hours of overtime.

One can sense similarities to Termite Terrace in the thirties into the fifties, to the stream of gags about Leon Schlesinger, to backbiting about working conditions, from You Ought to Be in Pictures to Duck Amuck. As an industry, animation, like many of the "crafts," has always functioned inside an industrial pecking order that resembles a feudal manor, very paternalistic, scattered, but severely controlled. Clearly, the computerized version of this plantation ambience will influence the "gags" in special-effects films as well. It is an insular, layered, horizontal form of production, but very hierarchical.[11] What kind of story feels like a gated cyber work community, or like Imagineering workshops for suburbanized theme parks? Outwardly, it is designed to be isolated from "real" social conflict. Inside, cracks reveal tensions. Whatever the plot of the movie, somewhere the ennui of the pecking order inside an effects studio has to enter, and should; it is practically the only modernity that this mode of production does not obscure.

Besides, audiences are fascinated by how illusions are made in the electronic culture: how each layer is placed inside grids and cycles, manipulated frame by frame—and then blown to bits, made into a car crash, or washed away. That sense of erasure, an allegory about dehumanization, is charming, and echoes something unsettling, despite its escapism. That certainly is a kind of story—a temperature-controlled workplace invaded by forces of nature, from tornadoes to dinosaurs to serial killers, terrorists with foreign accents, alien warships. But what narrative theory explains its impact?

First, there is the metonym of special effects. Would it be a stretch to call the mask that Stanley wears the place (the metonym) where special effects enters? The "device" stands in for the process. It is an f/x costume, a nineties VIA headset; or a time-travel chute you wear, like sliding through an MRI at the hospital. The metonym erases your identity, but you wear it like an accessory.

The Baroque Roots oft he Animated Film

A second stage in understanding these cartoony effects films takes us to the historical roots of animation itself, and its narrative theory that animators have relied upon for centuries.

The roots of animation as special effects are not at all postmodern really, nor modern. They are closer to preindustrial. Most effects, before the computer, borrowed heavily from theatrical techniques already old in the nineteenth century. For example, the trick films of Méliès rely on music-hall gimmickry dating back to medieval carnival, also puppet theater, magic-lantern effects since the Counter-Reformation, the wizardry of Renaissance theatrical machines, as well as Mannerist trompe l'oeil and anamorphosis. Many of these already had entered the home as well, through popular illustration since Dürer, then mass illustration with the steam engine, along with trick gizmos like zoetropes. In that sense, special effects in casinos, Baroque churches, and the movies share a common heritage; as do the costumes and pratfalls of chase characters like Bugs or Daffy, with Baroque masks on their faces, or dancing in masques.

Thus, masque—as in Jonsonian masque—is updated as "animated" entertainment. It lures the audience into a scripted space imagined on-screen. It echoes stand-up comedy, an elaborated direct address, a formalized call-in show, where costuming of some sort is involved. Chat lines, particularly the 3D kind, have this updated spirit of masque, a reification of power and community that is very controlled underneath its outward freedoms. Masque is not the same as carnival, which tends to be much more anarchic, more scattered, where the audience actually helps design the script of the story and the space. It is animation: controlled anarchy with a cybernetic twist, from software to themed spaces to immersive movie thrills.

The crucial point to remember is that special effects is that wing of animation where the building of spaces is caricatured. Then this space is scripted—scripted often with more care than the fictional characters. That is

basically how animation, as caricatural space, operated for centuries, even before it was projected onto the movie screen, before Méliès, Cohl, McCay—who, by the way, were all masters of animation in real space. In addition to backgrounds in illustration, they each had worked for a time in trick entertainment, at circuses, in magic acts, in music halls. They were experts in special-effects theater, where the audience was winked at, treated as an insider.

Thus, like Baroque spectacles, nearly every form of animation will make an imaginary audience a central character; often even more central than the fictional characters themselves. This audience takes the narrative journey, the ride that is more direct, more like a thrilling labyrinth than a dramatic narrative.

Shrinking

In the movies, these caricatural spaces were miniaturized. In the United States, Willis O'Brien popularized the use of the movie miniature, first in the feature *The Lost World* (1925), and then of course with *King Kong* (1933). He transferred what was called "trick work" (as in trick photography, and double exposure[12]) into a genre of Hollywood filmmaking.

But this transition was inevitable anyway. After 1927, with the coming of sound, more film was shot indoors. The need for in-camera effects grew enormously, particularly for very elaborate glass mattes, rear projection, and models, microcosms like a Hoogstraaten box, momentarily trompe l'oeil mixed media spaces, then transferred on to film. These f/x crafts were supposed to be "below the line" generally, hidden rather than exaggerated. They came to be classified within the industry as "animation" because the mattes used techniques similar to cartoon watercolor background, to layout.

Similarly, by the mid-thirties, when models became more essential, they appeared as tabletop animation in Fleischer cartoons; then as sculptural aids for Disney animators, to help them to see more clearly how their characters turned—before Disney tried 3-D as well. A trompe 3-D emerged, but stayed relatively hidden. It was still applied animation. While some masters of the stop-motion miniature (O'Brien and Harryhausen) were treated like movie directors, most special effects were relegated mostly to chapters in how-to pamphlets for amateurs, or manuals for professionals, mostly on cinematography.

But that has irrevocably changed. The older techniques are being retooled as software, even for architectural renderings and casino design. Animation

is older than film, the upside-down story inside a scripted space, or as software for war and pleasure and as graphic story. Now that narrative grammar is slowly being recovered as special effects.[13]

Interact

> With interactivity, characters become pawns who do whatever they are told. How can the reader respect them anymore? … Characters are devices; their job is to engage in transactions.
> —Walt Freitag (1995)[14]

In 1995, the term *interactive* was relatively new, except to veteran computer game designers like Walt Freitag. But the process was very old indeed. Like an amusement park in 1900, or even a Pozzo ceiling in 1685, the interactive was a scripted journey where the audience is a central character: a labyrinth, a ride, a gala, a festival. Character animation is merely descended from a Baroque variant of this interactive or scripted space. To repeat what I said previously: cartoons never were supposed to deal much with dramatic story, not even at Disney really, except for the rhythm and packaging of the animated features. Instead, character animation was used more for parodies of epics and spectacles, about microworlds (microcosms) at risk. It updated themes that resembled folklore, carnival, commedia dell'arte, even borrowing from the Baroque fairy tales of Perrault.

When these microcosms were transferred to the screen, they were still carnivalesque—upside-down—quite different from the Bazinian[15] space. They were not simply illusionistic, but a caricature of normal space, normal gravity. This anarchic, volatile microcosm is littered with self-reflexive and intertextual gags; these gags speak to the audience the way a stand-up comedian does, or a TV talk show does, or a TV commercial. Much on TV, therefore, derives from roots similar to animation, to the navigated "epic" journey of the audience.

The chase cartoon that developed after 1937 was merely an accelerated version of this "interactive" journey, where the audience is hunted and haunted, then parodied. In *Red Hot Riding Hood*, the characters get into war at the workplace. They refuse to perform; they will not play cute melodrama in the usual way. Instead, they prefer a masque on Hollywood Boulevard. Inside a special-

effects microcosm,[16] Avery navigates the audience through madly improvised space, very upside-down, where unlikely gravities meet, and are made to collide.

Building a Chase

If story as a chase cartoon is closer to Baroque "interactivity" than drama, what is its structure? Select your favorite chase in a special-effects action film circa 1995. What is the vocabulary? Do we go to meet the couple, or watch them escape from dinosaurs? In *Speed*, the couple do not meet for sex (not even for first names) until the last scene; after panting together inside that bus for hours. We see that there is no time for love on a runaway bus with a bomb ticking underneath. Or during a fistfight. There is almost no room for dramatic development between characters, except as stock pantomime, what I call dramatic shorthand: a quick "Hello, what's my conflict?" and on to the chase. That is what passes for dramatic structure in many chase films, even in the best of them—like fairy-tale characters racing in a cartoon.

However, despite the pubescent spirit or thudding redundancy in many of these chase films, their sheer impact can be breathtaking. For *The Mask*, most critics solved this problem by isolating Carrey as the good cartoon ("smokin'"), and the rest as the *blague* or blah of the story. But isolating him as what? Reviewers identified with his balletic commedia gags, his mad caricatures, but not as a man in dramatic conflict. Donna Tracy explained: "The cartoony look of Jim Carrey in *The Mask* brings feelings to us about our own lives, not about his life in the story. We feel the exclusion of our own emotions. We feel ourselves hiding our emotions and content so much, as he does."[17]

The character is supposed to be a shell, that is controlled by outside forces, as if "it" were attached to a Baroque machine: to ropes and cams and levers. While wearing the mask, Stanley's frenzy is by no means expressionist, not so much about intimacy (or the unconscious as it usually is represented in movies). Stanley is trapped inside an apparatus[18] that forces him to explode like an animated cartoon. The frenzy is a force of nature taking him over, not about free will, really. It is screwball noir without any interior self. The mask is a container, like all animated effects, an allegory about determinism.

Dramatic narrative, by contrast, is very much about free will, about individualism.[19] If Stanley were in a dramatic story, it might be *Dr. Jekyll and Mr.*

Hyde, though this story also reprises regularly in special effects, recently as *The Nutty Professor, X-Men, The Hulk, Spider-Man* (the marvels of Marvel).

Scripted Spaces as a Schizophrenic Brain

Jekyll/Hyde is a blueprint that continues to prove mythic for many "dark metamorphosis" stories, especially in graphic novels and comics (*The Mask* from Black Horse Comics),[20] for dozens of personae since *Batman* first appeared in 1937. What does Stevenson's dramatic narrative suggest? Clearly it is a tale about the moral dilemma of releasing self-control, as with Poe, one of Stevenson's literary heroes, or with Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and many others. But it is also a response to the burgeoning growth of London in the 1880s, to slums, prostitution, the flammable mixing of classes, the invading proletariat, the revenge of the declining gentry. Let us say that Jekyll's torment is an allegory about evil twins behind the untrustworthy myths surrounding the entrepreneur. The haunted cowboy must face his evil twin while heading west (usually an evil brother, as in Winchester 73). The hard-boiled detective is mostly another criminal down these mean streets. Even Stevenson's good pirates cheat their brethren for gold. Jekyll is the Baroque scientist who is so close to a criminal. Anti-heroes will die trying to figure out where free will ends. Hyde refuses to make an honest profit, or to stop defying God's law.

Melodrama, in its nineteenth-century variant, is often about evil businessmen with a warped idea of predestination and salvation. The proletariat, who in melodrama are rarely socialists, must restore free enterprise to its moral path. But in animation, few of those moral niceties matter. Its individualism is boundless, antilogical; in fact, about the unnatural order of all things. Dramatic narrative is beside the point. It is the hardware of power that drives animated stories.

Animation, even in its preindustrial forms, tends toward stories about the reification of the apparatus itself, the special-effects leviathan beyond the individual. This is a horizontal, hierarchical model more than a vertical, industrial one. Characters inside this horizontal machine, inside this Baroque apparatus, move like folk heroes. They tend to be more *elemental*,[21] and less dramatic, not necessarily dimmer or shallower, simply different. Walter Benjamin contrasted the gaudy revenge plays of seventeenth-century German theater with Tragedy.[22] Brecht continually makes similar observations,[23] that the vastness of nondramatic theater offers a peculiar modernity to contemporary perfor-

mance. Their relationship to the magic effect, to the gag, the magic potion, reminds the audience that this is a journey into developmental moments, in the way a folktale or folk theater operates. The character is supposed to be empty, to be filled by the audience's sensibility.

Of course, all this is a matter of degree.

a) The dramatic story exaggerates the internal dialectic of character.
b) The elemental story emphasized the conflict around the apparatus itself—much more about power, spectacle and presence.

Special-effects film is a hybrid of *both*. To drive this story engine, each tends to erase the other, leading to a very diminished sense of character. Perhaps this amounts to an allegory about diminished individualism, that the self, as an industrial myth about freedom, cannot survive the effects of the electronic workplace. At any rate, the cartoonlike epic or the elemental dominates.

Misreading the Special-Effects Story

Critics and, I must admit, film theorists, as a rule still ignore the elemental form of story that is inherent to animation. And therefore they often get flustered by the special-effects film. For example, let us sort through some of the reviews of *The Mask* at the time of its release.

From Janet Maslin in the *New York Times*:[24]

> *The Mask* underscores the shrinking importance of conventional story telling in special-effects-minded movies, which are happy to overshadow quaint ideas about plot and character with flashy up-to-the-minute gimmickry.

From David Denby in *New York*:[25]

> Some of the shocks are amazing: like pinpricks on your hand, only fun. There's no script to speak of, and the other characters hardly matter.

From *Newsweek*: "The plot's a throwaway. You've got to get on board, or move out of the way."

The responses were much the same with *Independence Day*, which indeed was a bit blunt, a very cynical film, filled with all the hot-button effects, but at least making fun of itself. Still, I saw it from the first row, and wasn't bored, any more than being run over by a runaway bus, I suppose. One of the most common terms used in production of these films is "the ride." As Donna Tracy explains: "The ride is more important than the story. The ride is the story."

What we need to understand is that the ride is an allegory about the audience, about the shocks of globalized economic arrangements, about new forms of visuality, and fundamentally about the collapse of privacy and public space—all of these wrapped into a cartoon *Bildung*[26] without any interior life, in fact bluntly displaying characters incapable of interiors.

In other words, we see a simulation of self as a movie effect. Forget Baudrillard's nostrums for a moment.[27] Simulation (copies without originals) as a device in moviemaking merely announces the folkloric or elemental use of character; then enables the immersive journey, where we the audience cannot distinguish between inside and outside, where our identity is invaded by special effects. And yet, in some ergonomic way, we are comfortable with our self-erasure (or are we?). It is a grim allegory indeed. No wonder critics resent it. Beneath the blithe and thrilling manipulation, there is a warning about the invasion of self—loss of intimacy, personal memory.

We must take these films more seriously, even though they are incredibly cynical about marketing, often so shoddy underneath the powerful spectacle. I could sidestep this problem by taking the high road, of course, use experimental animation as the model for special-effects cinema, for example: stop-motion masterpieces by Starevich, Borowczyk, Rybczynski, Svankmejer, and then the ambient journeys by the Brothers Quay. By melodrama standards, these films are systematically anti-dramatic, outside the range of pop dramatic narrative. But that ignores the engine of f/x. Animated "action" films like The Mask present a very different set of parameters. Unlike a Quay film, they were a category fundamental to the mainstream, immensely popular, even dominant in the nineties. They were built out of a new form of cinematography that took the global film market by storm, led to glittery articles on the animation industry in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and a buzz in the art world. This translated into dozens of new animation programs in colleges, even in high schools. Every major studio invested hundreds of millions of dollars to ramp up for more special-effects films like *The Mask*, or *Forrest Gump*, *Independence Day*, and *The Lion King*. The gold mine for licensing special effects in toys, games, clothing, and VR malls was greater than what animated films had earned be-

fore, very much like cartoon licensing, but on an astronomical level. *The Lion King* alone earned over a billion dollars in clear profit, the most lucrative consumer object of the nineties—and before the crash of the animation industry after 2000. This hybridization of animated and graphic illusion ushered in an era that also converted Marvel comics heroes into lion kings.

Collapsing the Movie Set Into Digital Animation

In 1996, George Lucas promised that digital effects would bring assembly-line efficiency to moviemaking, first in special effects, then for all forms of cinema. Digital libraries were like matte paintings of New York City in studio backlots during the thirties and forties. However, with digital, the process of "blue screen" was so advanced, postproduction almost coexisted with the shoot itself. There would be "no aesthetic advantage in shooting on location anymore."[28] Digital postproduction seemed as integrative as character designs in old cartoons. The era when digital effects shift from a service industry to production had arrived. Eventually, for Lucas's *Star Wars*: *The Phantom Menace*, actors performed on a "digital backlot," on "minimal sets or no set at all, in front of blue screens, with digital set extensions added in post."[29] The trompe l'oeil movie set had finally collapsed into software.

As early as 1994, James Cameron compared his f/x company Digital Domain to a master animator at his light table: "Anything you can imagine can be done. If you can draw it, if you can describe it, we can do it". His version of the collapse of public into private has arrived—as story—on the image-capture stage that he used for *True Lies*. "In Digital Hollywood you won't even be able to trust your eyes."[30] Special-effects films, for all their gaudiness, have become the portable cathedrals for this integrated, weirdly disengaged Electronic Baroque civilization.