RITES OF PASSAGE: GENERATIONAL CYCLES IN CANADIAN ANIMATED MOVIES

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Abstract

Active for more than seventy years, the National Film Board of Canada has allowed the creation of countless experimental animated films. Many works explore delicate and complex themes, such as generational passages and the structure of identity; the paper will take into account how works by artists like Landreth, Forbis, Tilby and Janke developed the theme of memory in cultural, social and psychological contexts.

Riti di passaggio: cicli generazionali nel cinema d'animazione canadese

Nel corso di più di settant'anni di attività, il National Film Board of Canada ha permesso la realizzazione di innumerevoli film d'animazione sperimentale. Molte di tali opere esplorano argomenti complessi e delicati, come il passaggio generazionale e la struttura dell'identità; nel corso dell'intervento si analizzerà il modo in cui opere di autori come Landreth, Forbis, Tilby e Janke hanno declinato il tema della memoria in ambito culturale, sociale e psicologico.

The National Film Board of Canada, since its foundation seventy-six years ago[1], has emerged not only as one of the main institutions aimed at the creation and the distribution of films, but it has also strongly encouraged visual experiments in many of its productions, in particular animated movies. As noted by master animator Alexander Alexeïeff, animated works present themselves as the visual realization of an author's idea, freed from the burden of physicality which live action movies cannot release themselves from[2]; therefore, it is quite

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[1] The company, an agency of the Canadian Government, was founded in 1939; more information can be found on the official website of the National Film Board of Canada, in particular the page containing a brief history of the institution: http://onf-nfb.gc.ca/en/our-collection/.

[2] Alexeïeff himself is reported to have stated: «Contrary to live action cinema, Animation draws the elements of its future works from a raw material made exclusively of human ideas, those ideas that different animators have about things, living beings and their forms, movements and meanings» (quoted in Bendazzi XXII).

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clear that animation is one of the art forms which are more suitable for displaying internal turmoil, psychological traumas and restlessness. The analysis which will appear in the following pages focuses on three short movies financed by the National Film Board of Canada: all of their directors, with the support of the production, succeeded in representing particularly complex themes by adopting a visual language of great expressivity and poetic value. These works are entirely different from one another, and they were made by directors who followed their own personal styles. However, all of the three movies share an interest in one dominant theme: the importance of personal and collective memory, whose value in Canadian contemporary society is approached by the filmmakers from at least three different perspectives – ancestral remembrance, autobiographical reminiscences and historical memory. The artistic outcomes are outstanding, even in the rich field of Canadian animated films. The individual characteristics and the uniqueness of each of the works will be highlighted in this paper.

The body and the city: *When the Day Breaks*

The movie, directed in 1999 by Wendy Tilby and Amanda Forbis, is a partial expansion of themes which Tilby had already addressed in her previous work *Strings* (1991), of which *When the Day Breaks* is almost a sequel[3]. *When the Day Breaks*, which over the years has garnered several awards[4], takes place in a universe populated by anthropomorphic animals, or rather zoomorphic humans, since the characters retain the traits and feelings of ordinary human beings, despite their animal-like appearance and – in part – their eating habits and some 'beastly' physical features, although these connotations are used mainly for humorous purposes (for example, a man-goat is shown while shaving his 'goatee'). The main character, Ruby, is a cheerful girl-pig whose destiny intersects with that of an old and distinguished man-rooster, in a crowded urban environment whose streets and shops resemble a modern metropolis of which both characters are fellow citizens. While entering a grocery store to buy some milk, Ruby inadvertently bumps into the gentleman, who drops his purchases; a lemon falls into a manhole. After scowling at Ruby, the old man walks away;

[3] Unless otherwise stated all information concerning the movie and the themes discussed in these pages was provided by the directors themselves in an interview carried out by the author of this essay. The interview was held on December 12, 2015.

[4] A selected list, which includes also the Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival, can be found on the official site of Wendy Tilby and Amanda Forbis.

a moment later he is killed after being hit by a car. Shocked by the event and maybe by her feeling of guilt (the accidental bump delayed the gentleman's walk, and he crossed the road on a red light), Ruby retires to her room and lowers the blind. In a series of rapid images, we are shown the lives of the inhabitants of the city: they are all strangers to each other, but nonetheless interconnected by an endless network of wires, tunnels, roads and water pipes. After slightly cheering herself up, Ruby opens the blind again.

The main narrative of *Strings* revolves around two main characters: a man and a woman – both of them elderly, residents in the same block, and strangers to each other – whom a water leak unites, albeit briefly. The connections between *Strings* and *When the Day Breaks* are evident, but in the latter movie single individualities progressively disappear and are replaced by a collective consciousness represented by a complex urban organism, a city-hive whose individual inhabitants form, all unawares, tiny components of. The movie, which according to the directors (Pilling 58) was inspired by the Socratic concepts of community and citizenship, tells the story of the individual growth and development of a human being; the man-rooster's death triggers an inner struggle which leads Ruby to the final epiphany, a lightning flash of a journey through the veins and organs of a body-city which contains the girl, countless citizens and the even the old man, although he has passed away – what remains of him is the lemon in the manhole, an organic element which will soon be subject to dissolution and fusion within the large metropolitan body.

The choice of using animals as protagonists serves the main purpose of the narrative. The initial notion of adopting human beings as main characters was later discarded by the directors, both for aesthetic reasons and in order to facilitate identification for the audience: an excessive adherence to recognizable human models, especially when the movements of the characters are modelled on real-life actors through the technique of rotoscoping, can easily induce an instinctive rejection in the viewers. It is, therefore, obviously preferable to encourage empathy towards characters who, as in one of Aesop's fables, do not physically resemble anyone: hence anyone can identify with them[5]. It should also be pointed out that the protagonists are farm animals, even if the gentleman's clothes identify him as a businessman (Slowik 287), thus highlighting the way he blends into the urban context. After his death, the appearance of an enigmatic and almost subliminal image of a countryside view, apparently with-

[5] It is interesting to note, however, that in the world of *When the Day Breaks* 'real' animals do exist: the ambulance which takes the lifeless body of the elderly gentleman away is chased by actual, four-legged barking dogs, to emphasize the urban setting, but also the desolation of the scene.

out any ties to the rest of the story, has been explicitly interpreted by the authors as a reference to the 'Happy Hunting Grounds' – the concept (of Native American origin) of a rural afterlife, sometimes used by the parents of kids whose pet has died in order to comfort them about the otherworldly fate of the animals. In *When the Day Breaks*, after dying, the animal-citizen reverts to farm animal; however, the whole sequence can be interpreted as Ruby's inner farewell to her rural roots, of which she preserves a vestigial memory, before finally embracing her new identity as a city person.

Ruby's inner upheaval induces her to detach herself from the outside world, until the final reconciliation. Fragmentation and reunification are also key elements of the sequence following the car accident: after a shot of the old man's hat on the pavement, the camera moves up (thus suggesting that the spirit of the gentleman is raising itself from the ground) and a series of abstract images are shown: private pictures of the man-rooster, anatomical plates and microscopic images of cellular processes. Physical existence and memories crumble, organs begin to disintegrate into smaller and smaller components, and the only remaining evidence of the man's existence is the lemon in the manhole; however, it is still part of a whole, a large organism made of bodies, lives and individualities, including Ruby's, as she finally finds herself again.

Inner and outer torment: *Ryan*

Inner growth triggered by the encounter with an older alter ego is also the focus of *Ryan* (2004), a short film made by animator Chris Landreth, who was born in the United States, but is active primarily in Canada. The movie, which won several prizes (including the 2004 Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film), is considered a landmark work in the field of movies made by using computer-generated imagery. The film revolves around a meeting between Landreth and Ryan Larkin, who in the 1970s was a promising Canadian animator before entering a downward spiral of alcoholism and drug addiction. Landreth interviews Larkin – who in the meantime has become a beggar – in a cafeteria. The interview (which really happened: Landreth interviewed Larkin several times and the movie can be considered a documentary to all intents and purposes) allows Larkin to relive some phases of his career and personal life, enriched by casual and nostalgic remarks, and occasional bursts of anger.

The enduring fame of *Ryan* is largely due to the peculiar technique with which the film was made: all of the characters are deformed or disfigured, and resemble the anatomical models of Gunther von Hagens' series of exhibitions *Body Worlds* – even if not as gory – according to an artistic approach which

Landreth has named 'psychorealism'[6]. A large portion of Landreth's skull is missing, and on the inner surface of his cranium there is a smiley-shaped field of tiny sunflowers. Landreth's face is devastated, too: only some shreds remain, hanging on a thin strip of skin – he is, quite literally, a shell of his former self. During the interview the characters are subject to endless metamorphosis: their bodies constantly change, depending on the pace of the conversation, and they occasionally generate excrescences, lights, prehensile appendixes or even everyday objects. In the universe of *Ryan*, the boundaries between inner and outer world seem to have vanished: human bodies are grotesque, monstrous masses, and walls and roads seem to melt – a metaphor of Larkin's feverish state of mind. In *When the Day Breaks*, the main character discovers her own connection to the rest of the world, but in *Ryan* nobody needs to come to the same conclusion: the characters already live in a sort of distorted world of Platonic ideas, and they are perfectly aware of it.

At the beginning of the movie Landreth introduces himself; later, he states that this is not his story, but rather Ryan's. This assertion seems at least partly contradictory, since much of the film features Landreth's personal memories – in particular those focused on his own mother, Barbara, whose symptoms of alcoholism he recognizes in Larkin. Landreth is in effect the co-star of the movie, and it could be said that *Ryan* is in fact the story of how Landreth gradually identifies himself with his fellow, and eventually comes to understand the world through Ryan's resigned, occasionally embittered eyes: during the final farewell, Landreth's face shows the same deformities as that of Larkin's. Such empathy is inspired in the first place by Ryan's artistic influence on his interviewer: in the film, some extracts from two of Larkin's best-known movies, *Walking* (1968) and *Street Musique* (1972) are shown, and they are both experimental works without a real plot; the films are basically a concatenation of abstract, multicolored shapes in constant transmutation – in particular *Street Musique*, which can be described as a visual stream of consciousness triggered by the melodies of some street musicians. In both cases, the similarities with Landreth's magmatic universe are evident.

However, the identification between the two artists becomes explicit when, during the interview, Landreth asks Larkin to moderate his alcohol consumption. The remark, uttered in a strongly paternalistic tone (a detail which Lan-

[6] Landreth offered an explanation of the concept by declaring that: «what I'm most interested in is not achieving photorealism in CGI, but in co-opting elements of photorealism to serve a different purpose – to expose the realism of the incredibly complex, messy, chaotic, sometimes mundane, and always conflicted quality we call human nature. I refer to this as 'psychorealism'» (quoted in Robertson 2004).

dreth, with self-mocking irony, emphasizes when a neon lamp resembling a halo appears above his character's head) provokes Ryan's violent and unexpected reaction: on Larkin's face quills sprout. Aware of the emptiness of his appeal, Landreth admits to himself that Larkin reminds him of his own mother, and his failure to save her is mirrored in his lack of success in saving Ryan. Bright threads, the symbol of an ancestral fear of failure, wrap Landreth's head; the same tangle, a few minutes earlier, had bound the head of a younger Larkin, already on the brink of the psychological nightmare which would destroy him.

As correctly suggested (Robinson. *Ballad*: 146-147), *Ryan* is the story of a failure, since Landreth cannot save Ryan, nor does he convince him to change his life[7]. Nevertheless, a message has been communicated: Landreth accepts Larkin's worldview by mixing it with his own, and notes that, no matter how stray and self-destructive Ryan's existence may be, he managed to give his life meaning and balance: Larkin's acceptance is transmitted to Landreth.

Life and stories: *How People Got Fire*

In *When the Day Breaks*, the exponent of an older generation triggered in a young woman, albeit unintentionally, a wider and more complex existential view; in *Ryan*, a senior artist transmits his own artistic and psychological dimension to his disciple; *How People Got Fire* (2008), directed by Daniel Janke and animated by Christopher Auchter and Jay White, concerns similar considerations, in a more strictly educational and cultural context. The story takes place in Carcross, a community located in the Yukon territory and home to the Carcross/Tagish First Nation[8]; the film focuses on Tish, a twelve-year-old girl, who begins to spend time with Grandma Kay, a respected and venerable member of the community. At the beginning the encounters bore Tish, but later they succeed in awakening her interest. During the meetings, Kay narrates a Native Canadian legend, about how the crafty Crow, in ancient times, managed to set fire to a stick with the help of his naïve friend Chicken Hawk, thus allowing all men to get fire.

[7] The release of *Ryan*, however, succeeded in bringing Larkin back to public attention: after the success of the film, Larkin began to work on a new, semi-autobiographical movie, *Spare Change*, before succumbing to cancer in 2007. The film was not completed, even if Larkin's preliminary sketches were later rearranged into a re-worked project by some of Larkin's fellow animators. The movie can be viewed on the official site of the National Film Board of Canada: https://www.nfb.ca/film/spare_change.

[8] The community belongs to the group of Canadian Natives located in the zone of the MacKenzie and Yukon River basins. More information can be found on the official site of Indigenous and Northern Affairs of Canada.

Inspired by the oral narratives of Kitty Smith, a storyteller of Tlingit descent whose version of the legend had already been adapted in 1988 into a radio program created by Janke and Louise Profeit-LeBlanc – an Aboriginal storyteller from the Nacho N'yak Dun First Nation and the narrator in *How People Got Fire*[9] –, the film is a narratively and visually fascinating call to preserve the historical memory of ethnic minorities from cultural levelling. Janke's movie can be compared to a cry of alarm whose importance is particularly remarkable in the Canadian context, where residential schools – Christian-oriented institutions devoted to the forced eradication of Aboriginal culture which were active from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to 1996 – have been accused in recent years of cultural genocide (in addition to multiple types of abuse)[10]. Grandma Kay's first appearance in the film focuses explicitly on a call to abandon institutional education in order to rediscover oral narration, which is part of Tish's cultural roots.

Daniel Janke – a highly esteemed musician and composer, occasionally involved in filmmaking – is greatly interested in the theme of the persistence of memory, as his subsequent short movie *River* (2011), centred on the physical and temporal stream of the Yukon river, demonstrates. In *How People Got Fire* he adopts a unique aesthetic approach to emphasize the timelessness of the world of legend, and to reiterate its value as one of the basic elements of the education of young Aboriginal Canadians. The sequences which take place in the real world were created from live footage through the technique of rotoscoping, while black and white charcoal drawings were used for the scenes which tell the legend of Crow; the stylized characters almost resemble cave paintings. The sketches of the animals also show humorous connotations: the Chicken Hawk, who in his attempt to steal fire burns his long beak, thus reducing it to the current, smaller size, is more candid than the Crow and therefore his eyes are always humorously wide open. On the contrary, the Promethean Crow, a trickster-like character whose presence is widespread in Canadian Native myths, has no eyes nor any discernible expression, thus revealing his unfathomable nature. The worlds of legend and reality are not completely separate, though: the Crow and the Chicken Hawk appear, alive and moving, on the mugs in Grandma Kay's house, and even the old woman's dress is embroidered with flowers which endlessly bloom and wither.

[9] Unless otherwise stated all information concerning the movie and the themes discussed in these pages was provided by people involved in the making of the film in a series of interviews carried out by the author of this essay. In particular, Christopher Auchter (May 13, 2015), Daniel Janke (May 19, 2015), Louise Profeit-LeBlanc (June 3, 2015).

[10] For further information see: https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649.

Tish's education follows a ritual: every day she comes back from school, and her return is followed by a meal prepared by Grandma Kay and the narration of a new part of the tale. Tish is initially reluctant, but later develops a closer connection with Kay: at the end of the movie, she sketches the Crow in her personal notebook, thus accepting her role as the custodian of the culture of her own people, and using a personal instrument – this time a purely visual one – to perpetuate the narrative. The possibility of using different means of expression in order to convey knowledge is indeed one of the central themes of the movie – which is in fact none other than the transposition of one of Kitty Smith's tales, transcribed in 1977 by anthropologist Julie Cruikshank, later transformed into a radio program and a film – even if it reaffirms the importance of staying true to the original cultural essence: it is no accident that the actress who plays Grandma Kay is Mae Hume, daughter of the late Kitty Smith, on whom the character of Grandma Kay is based.

The paintings on the walls in Grandma Kay's house, representing the old woman's family, are populated by moving men and women; similarly, the movie asserts that the world of legend is alive and all around us: human connections and the importance of memory, which were among the central themes of *When the Day Breaks* and *Ryan*, are echoed in *How People Got Fire* and reaffirmed as a call to honour the memory of our ancestors. After all, as reiterated by Tish at the end of the movie, «there's only one story: it's big»[11], and the only thing which changes is the way to tell it.

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[11] As personally reported by Janke, Tish's line is in fact a direct quotation from Kitty Smith.

Sitography

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