

The passing time of pastimes

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnography explores stop motion animation, a traditional, time-intensive means of granting motion to inanimate objects and drawings by individually arranging each frame. Though it can, pragmatically, be replaced by modern technology, it remains a distinct medium with a unique capacity for expressing a certain existential, and material humor. In the author's use of the medium the process melds with the practice of procrastination, engaging with the conjunction of the passive and the active, when work is unjustified by a 'productive' result, and rendered valuable only by the process itself.

Absently I lift my mug to my lips, and find that its contents have gone cold, though I could have sworn that mere seconds had gone by since I had last been scalded. Absently I set it down, and tapped gently on the phone screen, so as to avoid jostling the set up, and replay the same three seconds of video which I had now seen countless times, every detail, every shift of the image, every mistake made painfully familiar. I've passed the point where the pettiness of the product pains me, and into the realm of the quasi conscious, where there is no motivation, but merely continuation.

Present again I am aware of the absurdity of my position in the eyes (of the non-existent spectator, having stood here for hours, hardly moving, attempting to imitate a gesture which could be accomplished within seconds. Returning to the work I considered how absurd such an activity is, and how absurd to call it work, for it is a clear refusal to participate in something constructive, erasing hours without concern for more significant activities left undone — looking up at four in the morning, and deciding that rather than sleep, perhaps I could finish just this one detail, and looking up again only two hours later to the sound of my alarm. The overview of autoethnography we read for class claimed that it was most often retroactive, reflecting on experiences of epiphany (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). On a smaller scale I thought to turn to the more minor, intellectual epiphanies — moments of clarity brought about by a clever phrase or well-wrought sentence, when a variety of texts attach themselves to a thought, providing context and depth. Unable, however, to predict their occurrence, and lacking the clarity of recollection to turn to prior experience, I decided on an alternative — a process initiated by an effervescent thought, but whose purpose appeared to overlap with that of the autoethnographic essay, and to provide the opposite of epiphany.

Returning from this consideration, I realized that I had allowed my finger to tremble, as it moved to shift the ‘star’ which I was currently adjusting, flicking it off a couple inches, significant, considering that it was only millimeter in diameter, and meant to move only half that distance. To replace it, I had to move back three frames, and forwards once more, following the trajectory of each object, calculating the appropriate distance and direction for its next move.

I have long been drawn to those instants of epiphany, when clarity of mind transforms abstract thoughts into accessible images, and apparently disparate facts fall into orbit, and was disappointed to find that attempts to verbalize the experience came off as facile, and drawings lacked the dynamism of the instant, conveying something fixed rather than something vibrant. I was most recently struck by a scene from Joyce, an illustration of the length of infinity, as explained by a priest in a *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The moment brought to mind reflections on the limitations of dignity, ambition, and linear progression, as represented in novels by Miranda July and Chris Kraus, which I had classified as *Portraits of the Artists as Ageing Women*. Put so bluntly, the idea seemed crude, drawing direct comparisons where there only existed vague associations, and intellectualizing impressions into definitive claims.

Stop motion animation provided an alternative, a practice rather than a result, a bounded reality in which the magnitude of an instant was inevitable, as every second was produced only by dint of protracted effort, infusing it with the depth that a single representation had failed to convey. I was drawn to its torturous practice, less interested in the success of the result than in the painstaking nature of the process itself. Making minute adjustments, countless times, in order to create a single movement — and one which is generally dissatisfactory in retrospect — hardly sounds appealing in the abstract, and yet there is something to losing oneself in something so dependent on continuous concentration. Doubts as to how a task is to be accomplished, or whether it is worthwhile are pushed aside, for in the moment, all that you can effect is the adjustment between two frames, and then again, and again, ad infinitum.



The accusations of navel gazing and self-involvement leveled at autoethnography can surely be applied at least as fairly to animation. Shut up in a room, denying the existence of an external reality, reconfiguring one’s gaze to accommodate the standards of the world being created seems opposed to the more social appeal of ‘deep hanging out,’ or the attempt to join a critical eye with human experience. However, the product of such an immersion is not drawn solely from the moment of isolation, but from a synthesis of social understandings and details, an attempt to condense an experience into a visual form, an alternative approach to thick description, where not only detail, but time expended per detail lend significance.

Documenting her first experience with stop motion, Anna-Kaisa Nässi records a similar effect, for looking up after completing a sequence she found that six hours had passed. Immersed, she continued to work for 60 hours stopping twice and only briefly to force herself to sleep. Rather than citing an exalted artistic motive, she claimed a sense of duty to the emotional wellbeing of a clay bear (Nässi 2014). Seeking a justification for such a task, I turned from writing on animation, to writing concerning procrastination (an adjacent field) and found Richard Beardsworth's definition of the 'practice of procrastination,' to be a fitting theoretical frame. He claims that the apparent contradiction within the phrase — passivity referred to as practice — is, in fact, indicative of the nature of the act. "The inability to move from thinking to action reveals itself, phenomenally, then, as a passive relation to time. For [the]...quality of time is reduced to reenactment and repetition: the future is closed off, never arriving as a future, but falling into the present as the repetition of the past...This loss of the future often appears as the loss of the real." (Beardsworth 1999) This serves as a very effective summation of the animation process. Both the literal process, where photo replaces photo, each only slightly distinguishable from its predecessor, each instantly redefined as the precursor once it has been shot. Likewise, there is a subjective experience of the suspension of temporal perception, as broad swathes of time are lost between thoughts, while instants drag along when one happens to take note. Rather than being marked along the consistent progress of the clock, time vacillates between the meagre seconds accruing on the final product, and the hours which pass by unremarked.

The abstraction from the real is evident as much in the product as it is in the expressions of the creator. The absurdity of the creative act — granting toys or paper a life of their own — is rendered meaningful by the attention required to realize it. The limitations of scope in a world which must be created by hand, in combination with the unlimited time applied force an examination of implicit ambiguities, reveal a potential for humor (Raskin 2008). The practice is dependent on the erasure of the mechanics of the process, concealing the hand that moves the subject, and the time between frames, to create a continuous illusion. Assigned such rules, and set to follow them for hours, their perversion seems inevitable. Jiří Trnka allows the animating hand to creep in as a character in its own right, harnessing the destructive power it has in the delicate maneuvers assigned, for the sake of the narrative. William Kentridge enters his own animation and mixes media, creating illusions even as he claims to unveil them. Even when the illusions of the medium are retained, the results seem to reflect the melancholic inclinations of their creators, exacerbated by the tendencies of the medium. It seems inherently opposed to the parabolic arc of the hero's narrative, progressing too slowly to encompass the easy pleasures of conventional victory. Nässi claimed that the loneliness of her subject was, to some degree, a personal reflection, but that the manner of representing it was affected by the process of animation, where she found that attempts at rapid movement came off as unrealistic, forcing her to work on the creation of stillness.

Completing the final frame, and reaching once more, instinctively, for my cold tea. I attempted to reorder my thoughts, to call them back in and reformulate the disjointed notes I had jotted on scraps of paper, and on my palm, and the back of my hand, and found myself unable to reorient my expression for public perusal. Each sentence was followed not by its natural continuation, but

rather by a reformulation of its claim, or a tangentially related point which happened to come to mind. The resulting text was like the animation it described, inconsistent and repetitive, circling back on itself, or turning to irrelevant details. The result captured neither the individual experience nor any larger social conclusion, hinting, perhaps, at each but never quite achieving the mark.

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