Wallace and Gromit: an animating love

Esther Leslie

Wallace and Gromit have become national heroes.
What's it all about?

we're all found of our anmial matter.

James Joyce, Finnegans Wake*

One man and his dog
The success of Nick Park's Wallace and Gromit animations may be down to their proverbial premise: the renowned affinity between an Englishman and his dog.¹ Such rapport between human and canine, while famed, is a modern liaison, and culturally specific. Delving into it gives vent to some sonorous ideas inspirited by the bond between Wallace and Gromit. John Berger, in 'Why Look At Animals', registers the historical nature of the man-pet affiliation.² It is, he claims, a fraught relationship, anchored firmly in the industrial epoch. In a broad mapping of human-

---

1. Success is understood here in terms of public and critical recognition. As measure, here is an indication of the variety of awards and accolades won by the three films in the Wallace and Gromit series. A Grand Day Out, Park's graduation film, won a BAFTA. The Wrong Trousers won an Academy Award and over thirty other awards and wins a position in the International Animation Festival's shorlist of all-time animation favourites as voted by a jury of five animation experts. Apart from its Oscar, A Close Shave won a succession of prizes at the 1996 British Animation Awards: Best film over 15 minutes; Best scenario; Public choice favourite film; Public choice funniest film. On Christmas Eve 1995 10.62 million people watched A Close Shave, comprising BBC2's highest audience that year.

animal relations across time, Berger notes how animals, once resident at the centre of the human world, subjected but also worshipped, endowed with magical significance and anthropomorphised, 'disappear', during the process of urban industrialisation in the nineteenth century. They re-surface, first as machines, and later as raw materials - meat, leather and horn. Exotic animals become inmates of public zoos. Used up or caged in, animals’ special and equal relation to humans vanishes. A chasm opens up between people and nature, which is really a gulf within nature. However, simultaneously, the 'marginalisation' of animals is revoked by the invention of the household pet. Pets, asserts Berger, are but animals reduced and drained, 'mementoes from the outside world', lodging in the hermetic family-home, along with pot plants and romantic landscape paintings. The owner's relationship to the pet is corrupt, because the animal is corrupted. Pets resemble their owners for they live lives like them, but in as much as they do this, they lose their animality and autonomy. In such a filiation, nature, lost to people of the urban era, is regained in compromise form.

Wallace and Gromit dovetails with audiences because it reflects upon the dynamics of a commonplace, yet remarkable, relationship. But while Berger is appalled by devaluation of the animal in its debasement to pet-status, the home life and frolics of Wallace and his dog demonstrate how fulfilling and equitable such a partnership may be. Their animated antics recast an abusive and unequal coupling in Utopian form. In pulling together to combat time after time an evil that is technologically-enhanced, the two act out the idealised interconnectedness of humanity and nature.

Since the nineteenth century, children have been surrounded daily by likenesses of animals; toys, pictures, cartoons. These animal icons are frequently cute and often humanised. It is a peculiarity of the industrialised world, and it ensconces early on in life the fantasy that to be at one with animals is to inhabit a lost paradise. Images of reconciliation rescind recollection of an ongoing instrumental violation of animals - as initiated by Descartes, who conceived animals as soulless machines. In order to prove that animals have no soul, Descartes nailed his wife's dog by its four paws to a board and dissected it alive, thereby installing a common practice for scientific researchers at London's Royal Society. Live animals, flayed and dissected, appeared to the vivisectionists as watch or clock mechanisms. Ostensibly activated by wheels, ratchets, springs, gears and weights, they were conceived as automatons. It is here that the cuddly
toy and the faithful pet submit their counter-claim, voiding the justification for cruelty and overriding its actuality. Here Gromit, as toy (for us) and pet (for Wallace), with his resourcefulness and fidelity, rehumanises or re-animates (from *anima*, Latin for soul or spirit). And he seems all the more human when confronted by the truly automated Cyberdog in *A Close Shave*. The pet is vindicated, the pet-man relationship sanctified. But, at the same time, the punishment meted out to animals in industrialism is never completely screened out. Gromit is falsely put behind bars in *A Close Shave*, and in *The Wrong Trousers* the diamond-thief penguin ends up in what seems to be a prison, but when the camera pulls back it is revealed to be a zoo. As Berger insists, the fact that those Victorian institutions, prisons and zoos, are so alike reveals at one blow our affinity with animals and our tragic species-isolation. To keep a pet may be, however misguided, an attempt to overcome this breach.

In a radio lecture for children, titled *True Stones about Dogs*, Walter Benjamin notes that the dog is the only animal (with the possible exception of the horse) with which humans have been able to establish a bond of intimacy. Benjamin attributes this familiarity to the victory of humans over animals, secured long ago, when animals were tamed and became dependent on people. Not for Benjamin Berger's idea of a pre-industrial golden age of animal-human relations, when humans depended upon animals, and so had to respect them. For thousands of years, Benjamin insists, dog has been slave and humanity master. But man's victory is not absolute, and dogs retain traces of their untamed and self-sufficient origin. Caught between wolfish past and devotion to humans, the dog straddles the line between nature (animality) and culture (humankind). Like any domesticated dog, then, Gromit oscillates between two worlds; from kennel to bed, from dog-bowl to dining-table. Gromit's frequent sojourns in the human world demonstrate the fantasy of pet-lovers. Their dogs are their friend and their mirror. When favoured by Wallace, Gromit lives a human's life. He knits, he does d.i.y., he listens to music. And he reads the philosophy handed down by a doggish antiquity; *Pluto's Republic*. He might more gratifyingly read Aristotle's


To prove that animals have no soul
Descartes dissected his wife's dog alive'
Soundings

*History of Animals* - a work which ascribes moral qualities to animals, noting that, like humans, they are capable of mildness or ill-temper, courage or timidity, fear or confidence, high spirits or low-cunning, and they exhibit something akin to sagacity. True to Aristotle’s vision and countless Disney films, Gromit’s appeal, like the appeal of the pet, is that he is just like us. He is anthropomorphous.

The plastic arts

Aardman Animations, the studio that took on Nick Park while he was still a student at the National Film School, emerged into public consciousness in 1976 with a clay creature whose very name hinted at the essence of animation: Morph. This cheeky homunculus was animated using a process known variously as 3-D, clay, stop-motion/stop-frame animation. Patronage by the advertising industry and the music business brought about a nourishing of British animation. Aardman Animations were commissioned to experiment with stop-frame techniques. These forays led to the notable *Sledgehammer* video for Peter Gabriel, and memorable advertisements, including Nick Park’s theriomorphic series for the Electricity Board. The *Creature Comforts* animals, animated to the sounds of documented human voices, allowed Park to hone his skills in clay animation, and initiate the mundane but cute regional characterisations that have become his trademark. The tiniest movements, idiosyncratic and yet familiar ticks and quirks were reconstructed. *Wallace and Gromit* continued this exploration of the point at which English ordinariness segues into eccentricity. It combines familiarity and cliche with high adventure and suspense, just as it also synthesises a demented irreality with naturalistic observation.

The rendition of Englishness in *Wallace and Gromit* oozes with sentiment and nostalgia. The routines of toast and jam for breakfast, four o’clock tea and day-trips at the weekend are irresistible, the simple pleasures being always the best. Framed photographs testify to past good times and companionship - recognition of the photos’ motifs arouses our own private familiarity and knowledge of the storylines, as does the generic and intertextual playfulness. The theme-tune, an oompahing ditty, sets up the tradition-seeped scene, echoing simultaneously the

4- Apart from deploying suspense-movie techniques, including Julian Nott’s Bernard Herrmann style compositions, intertextual references abound. In *A Close Shave*, for example, there are references to *Brief Encounter*, *Indiana Jones*, *The Third Man* and *Alien*. 

152
regional peculiarity of a colliery brass band and the empire-oriented World Service signature tune. Wallace and Gromit reside in West Wallaby Street, a sort of Coronation Street of Victorian back-to-backs in a Northern town. Art director Yvonne Fox travelled to Manchester to capture ideas for houses and skylines. While the skylines that surround their urban domicile do not omit the tower blocks and gasometers of late twentieth century cityscapes, the Victorian terrace-house setting chimes well with prevailing ideas about pre-modernist, post-towerblock solutions to city habitation. Nostalgia abides too in the technical vision. Wallace's self-built mechanisms issue from a pre-electronic age. Even though they are built to visit the moon or execute complex industrial tasks, they look mechanical rather than electrical or digital. Both the moon rocket of A Grand Day Out, and the multi-tasking machine in A Close Shave resemble old-fashioned copper brewery distilleries. But Wallace and Gromit does not simply present a twee parochialism or mourning for a lost era. It plays with those themes, unleashing them in the context of modernity. The episodes follow a pattern borrowed from the conventions of Hollywood action movies. At a certain point the chase sets in and anything can happen. There are no boundaries to what might occur and how the available implements will be used. Wonderment at Wallace's inventiveness and Gromit's good strokes (i.e. Park's ingenuity) taps cinema's very essence.

The figurines, Wallace, nine inches, and Gromit, five inches high, are made of a concoction of plasticine, a shinier and more colourful American modelling clay, beeswax, and dental wax for extra sheen or hardness. The clothes are fashioned from foam latex. Non-moving parts are moulded from a modelling clay that can be baked hard, and the swirling eyes are wooden beads, whose holes in the pupils allow adjustment using the tip of a paperclip. Inside the figures is an articulated metal skeleton, and magnets are used to maintain balance. The models are constructed to maximise morphability. This morphing of objects into real and non-real states fixes a Utopian and infantile edge to the clay-animation form. The chunkiness of the plasticine world and its slightly oversized objects, evoking a childlike perception of scale, combines with the material's unjaded Utopian and surreal faculty for moulding the potential

5. Childlike connotations persist with the clay form despite the adult-oriented efforts of Bruce Bickford or Xhonneux's Marquis. See Frank Zappa presents the Amazing Mr. Bickford, Honker Home Video/Barking Pumpkin Records, 1989 and Marquis, ICA Projects, 1989.
mutability of all things into all other things. Clay-animation appears as realisation of Coleridge's esemplasticity, the imaginative law of a world where everything is made of the same stuff and everything could be everything else. This perfect unity of the universe and its contents is underscored by the similarity of our duo’s features, their oblique foreheads, their squeezed together ping-pong ball eyes.

Watching inanimate objects metamorphose induces immense joy. Roland Barthes accounts for this effect in an article on plastic in *Mythologies*. Here he analyses the alchemical and miraculous associations of mouldable, infinitely transformable materials. He describes:

> the reverie of man at the sight of the proliferating forms of matter, and the connections he detects between the singular of the origin and the plural of the effects. And this amazement is a pleasurable one, since the scope of the transformations gives man the measure of his power, and since the very itinerary of plastic gives him the euphoria of a prestigious free-wheeling through Nature.\(^5\)

In tandem with eliciting the exhilaration of an unfastening from nature's necessities, the building matter of stop-frame animation's mouldable universe draws upon potent associations. In *Genesis* God is cast as the original animator, who forms man of the earth's clay and exhales into his nostrils the breath of life. The poetic meaning of the word clay takes up these religious resonances, standing for the material of the human body. The formation of these clay bodies intimates an originary aspect of creation, and asserts the existence of the human.

Some have claimed that the special thing about animated puppets is that - unlike eel-animation - they tender something akin to live-action. 3-D animation is essentially vital. Such an inkling coincides with Aardman Animations' philosophy of 'shoot and light' as if the animation were a live-action movie. Everything is designed and built around the camera. The clay world and the clay-puppets possess an undeniable reality. They are not shiny clean like 3-D computer animations. They cast actual shadows and throw around real weight. This morphing parallel world *is* a world, not a sliver of painted celluloid or a digital fantasia.

Love and craft

In 'Plastic' Barthes remarks that this infinite material can never perfectly imitate the triumphant smoothness of nature. The same might he said of Park's plasticine figurines. They are handmade, literally. It is possible to see fingerprints on the figures' bodies. In the context of an industrialised society wherein crafted goods exert a fascination, such manifest facture becomes an advantage in the quest for an audience. Imperfections place Park's animations in the realm of craft, and so by default, remove taints of self-serving commercialism. Not insignificant here is the fact that stop-frame animation was, prior to the Fall of the Wall, a tradition associated with apparently non-capitalist, i.e. non-profit-oriented, Eastern Europe. Much of the rhetoric around Nick Park and the three Oscars, 'gained for Britain', identified his output as homespun, virtually a craft product in comparison to the industrial machinations from Disney's studios. This domestic sensibility is reinforced by the connection to television, specifically to the BBC. Park's films all appear first on TV and, once for sale as home videos, they pointedly refuse aggressively to promote either the series or any other product. Wallace and Gromit, and Park himself with his shy persona, become plucky fighters against Disney corporate products. The process that produces the animations is artisanal in its methods. It is relatively low-budget. No expensive computers are needed for scanning in and out to film. The characters' flexibility, their incessant movement that appears so effortlessly achieved, is in fact the result of an effort obsessional in its dedication. Each two syllable word spoken by Wallace necessitates six different facial expressions. Breaking movement up into tiny constitutive parts renders defamiliarising close-ups of the banal, just as Adrian Rhodes' close-miking of ordinary noise makes sound extraordinary. This is the closely-observed surrealism of actuality. Each second of film may involve twenty-four movements for every clay character or prop. Each day about three seconds of film may be completed. Such work emerges, it is said, from love, devotion and craft.

7. Of course success changes things, and processes industrialise. Thirty-odd people worked on A Close Shave, with Park taking on more of a director-role. The budget was £1.3 million rather than the £650,000 spent on The Wrong Trousers. Digital technology makes easier the execution of certain optical effects and enables previously unrealisable things to be done, such as the aeroplane scene in A Close Shave.
and obsession. The animation's theme also happens to be about love and devotion. Such a labour of love, in a tale about love, generates in turn its own devotees, as is testified by the internet's countless internationally-authored pages of fan stuff - all lovingly composed by adults who make it their business to broadcast quotations, images, scenarios, reviews. It is the stuff of d.i.y. and true amateurism.

Apparently low-tech, these animated lumps of moulded clay and wax dramatise questions of technology and control. Wallace, a Heath Robinson style inventor-hobbyist, self-builds or acquires his machinery, which in turn goes out of control, in some way or another. The narratives feed off rather routine fears of the techno-age. In *The Wrong Trousers* the ex-NASA technotrousers are manipulated by the criminal penguin, and end up effecting Wallace's monstrous alienation from his own self-directed activity. He awakes upside-down, swinging from a museum's ceiling, about to undertake a diamond heist. In *A Close Shave* it is the Cyberdog who wreaks havoc. The narratives are driven by the attempt to regain control over technology run wild. In *The Wrong Trousers* the train set, a homely technology, is used to defeat the evil Feathers McGraw. In *A Close Shave* the wash-shave-knitting machine finally does the business of refurbishing the Cyberdog. Unlike Jan Svankmajer's animated surrealism, this is not a cosmic display of magic and the supernatural but demonstrates rather the extraordinary temper of technology and its alternating empathy with masters and slaves. The twentieth century fairy-tale involves the voodoo of machinery not the wizardry of goblins.

In 'The Mass Ornament' Siegfried Kracauer discusses fairy tales' intimation of genuine reason. Fairy tales, he claims, 'are not stories about miracles but rather announcements of the miraculous advent of justice'. He goes on to relate how in the fairy-tale, 'fidelity triumphs over the arts of sorcery.' Truly in Wallace and Gromit it is fidelity, as 'personified' in the dog, that, in the end, triumphs over the mischievous diabolism of technology, and holds aloft the banner of love. Gromit always facilitates the victory, irrespective of Wallace's disloyalty in chasing money or seeking love elsewhere. Our pleasure in doggish fidelity signals a strong desire to be at one with nature; that is, to transgress the 'new solitude', so poignantly pinpointed by John Berger.