

### **New Opportunities, New Freedoms Dutch Animated Film and the Digital Image Culture**

In recent years a renaissance in the genre of the short animated film seems to have been taking place in the Netherlands. Never before have there been so many active producers of animation films. This is all to do with the digitisation of the image culture, which is radically changing the way films are produced, distributed and screened. The equipment and techniques for making animated films are becoming more and more user-friendly and also cheaper. Moreover, digitisation allows the makers of animated films to bring the various aspects of film-making increasingly under their own control.

Where ten years ago there was still a clear watershed between computer animation and traditional animation techniques, today the two worlds merge seamlessly into each other. The rostrum camera has been replaced by the digital miniature camera that can register each image in a resolution up to 4k (comparable to 70mm film). The emergence of digital media has given rise to a new wave of vitality in the world of animation.

One clear supporter of the digital image culture is the maker of animated films and multimedia artist, Rosto. In 2005 he received the major award Canal+ for *Jona/Tomberry* at the Cannes film Festival. His new film *Thee Wreckers: No Place Like Home*, about a one-eyed former TV presenter, looking back at repeats from better days with his now deceased sidekick, recently had its première at the Holland Animation Film Festival in Utrecht.

The hallmark of Rosto's work is visual excess. You could almost call his films baroque, were it not for the fact that that excess is not so much directed at giving pleasure to the spectator, but rather at creating a state of bewilderment. 3D and 2D computer animations, photo montages, film collage, graphic additions, digital effects and colour shifts – Rosto uses all these elements to create an atmosphere reminiscent of the mysterious world in the tales of Edgar Allen Poe. Rosto's films are very much like an interior, or better

'subinterior' monologue. If ever a machine is invented to print our dreams, nightmares and delusions directly onto celluloid, then Rosto will probably be the first to buy one.

As well as making animated films, Rosto is also a musician and an internet artist. His internet sites can be seen as an extension of his films, intended not to promote them in accordance with modern marketing principles, but to explore his ideas, images and music in a new way.

The internet can also be a visual artist's most important platform, and Han Hoogerbrugge is the living proof of that. Until the mid-nineties Hoogerbrugge worked as a painter and cartoonist. The purchase of a computer with an internet connection brought about a radical alteration in his way of working, and he applied himself to making internet animations for his website. In mid-2008 a book entitled *Modern Living, The Graphic Universe of Han Hoogerbrugge* was published – yes, printed paper! – accompanied by a DVD with examples of, and information about, his work.

As the basis for his animations Hoogerbrugge uses video images in which he himself appears as an actor. In this technique, also known as rotoscoping, live-action images are pulled across, image by image, by hand. The result is a drawn image with an extremely natural pattern of movement. His drawn alter ego is depersonalised: a man stuffed into a dark suit and divested of any history, identity or context. He is everyman – comparable to the continually re-appearing man in the bowler hat in the paintings of René Magritte – not a person, but an icon of modern man. The setting within which this 'everyman' is placed is abstract. Sometimes one or two stage props are present, but often the entire focus is on the curious behaviour of Hoogerbrugge's alter ego. Inimitably, with a mixture of absurdism and humour, Hoogerbrugge shows how sinister passions lurk beneath the everyday routine.

The digital image culture leads not only to fresh ways of depicting things and new channels, but also to new models for producing animated films. Broadband and the internet make it possible to work on a project with a team, the members of which are scattered all over the world. The availability of increasing amounts



Rosto, Jona/Tomberry (2005).

of affordable, and sometimes even free, professional animation software makes it possible to create low-budget films that are technically as good, or almost as good, as productions by the big high-budget animation studios. In April 2008 *Big Buck Bunny* had its première, an eight-minute 3D animation made by an international team under the direction of the Dutchman Sacha Goedegebure. The film is the second Open Movie project by the Blender Institute in Amsterdam.

The term 'Open Movie' derives from the software world's term 'Open Source' and refers to software that in many cases is made available free of charge, often developed by internet communities, and which can and may be adapted at will by any user. *Big Buck Bunny* was made using open source software (the Blender 3D animation package) and is available on the internet free of charge. Not only the film, but every frame in the original resolution, all the designs, all the animation databases and the entire musical score can be downloaded and re-used as anyone sees fit.

Technically the film is the equal of animations from the Pixar Studio, which has set the norm for 3D computer animation with films like *Toy Story* and *Monsters, Inc.* However, *Big Buck Bunny* does not seek to identify itself with family entertainment from Hollywood. The superfluity of violence, black humour and the lack of a positive hero make *Big Buck Bunny* a comic anti-film. But maybe *Big Buck Bunny* is first and foremost a state-

this is the film *The 3D Machine* by Erik Verkerk and Joost van den Bosch. The film is a computer animation, but as regards design and narration, and also technique, it harks back to the classic films of the twentieth century. The story is based on the classic theme of the mad scientist: the learned man, as genial as he is deranged, who considers the pursuit of everlasting fame more important than the fate of the world.

*The 3D Machine* is not just about 3D, it also is 3D. Verkerk and Van den Bosch hark back to an old procedure, so old it has almost sunk into oblivion, that was used for a short time in cinemas to create a 3D effect: the red-blue system. The principle of it is simple: project a red image and a blue image on top of each other in such a way that each colour shows a different angle of vision and look at this double image through spectacles with one red and one blue lens. The result is a startling spatial effect.

Another recent example of a computer animation that harks back to the culture of film is *The Phantom of the Cinema* by Erik van Schaaik. This film has a few scenes with full 3D animation but for the most part employs traditional silhouette animation, a technique that is known mainly from the films of Lotte Reiniger from the 1920s. In his film Erik van Schaaik uses not real silhouettes but virtual ones, which allows more nuances and greater control of the image. Nonetheless, broadly speaking, the procedure is the same.

*The Phantom of the Cinema* takes place behind the screen in a film theatre. The running of the film is plagued with technical hitches. Every time the film is

ment. With the emergence of digital techniques, making animated films – even full 3D animation films – is now within the reach of individual, independent film makers. Whether projects like *Big Buck Bunny* really herald a new way of making films still remains to be seen. Certainly, an important new potential is being tapped here.

The digital image culture is applicable to all facets of film-making, but the pictorial language of film and film history remain an important source of inspiration, including for young film makers. A good example of

on every aspect of Dutch animation: design, manner of narration, technique, manner of production and distribution. We are living in an age when the existing modes and methods of working can no longer be taken for granted. Boundaries are being explored and shifted. To some extent this means a break with tradition, but at the same time that tradition is, and continues to be, an important source of inspiration. The culture of the digital image presents the makers of animation films with hitherto unknown opportunities and freedoms, while at the same time



*Big Buck Bunny*, made by an international team under the direction of the Dutchman Sacha Goedegebure (2008).

interrupted the light goes on behind the screen and we see a triptych with the shadows of the characters carrying out their increasingly strange routines. *The Phantom of the Cinema* plays with varying levels of reality: the reality of the film on the screen, the reality of the characters behind it and finally the reality of the cinema-goer sitting watching all this. But that is not all: the film also plays with film design and mixes modern 3D animation techniques with 2D animations from the distant past.

The digital image culture is having repercussions

continuing to build on traditions. Animation is no longer a marginal phenomenon; it is shifting – as Minister of Education, Culture and Science Ronald Plasterk writes in his memorandum on animated film – towards the centre of image culture.

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[www.rostoad.com](http://www.rostoad.com) – [www.hoogerbrugge.com](http://www.hoogerbrugge.com)

[www.bigbuckbunny.org](http://www.bigbuckbunny.org)

[www.ka-chingcartoons.com/3dmachine](http://www.ka-chingcartoons.com/3dmachine)

[www.phantomofthecinema.com](http://www.phantomofthecinema.com)

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