

Secrets of Oscar-winning Animation

Olivier Cotte

with a foreword by
Peter Lord

Behind the scenes of 13 classic short animations



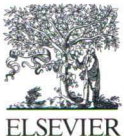
An insight into the minds and techniques of the undisputed masters of their art.
Peter Lord, Aardman Animation Creator and Director

Olivier Cotte

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Behind the scenes of 13 classic short animations



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Anna & Bella, production Cilia Van Dijk
L'homme qui plantait des arbres (The Man who Planted Trees) production Radio Canada
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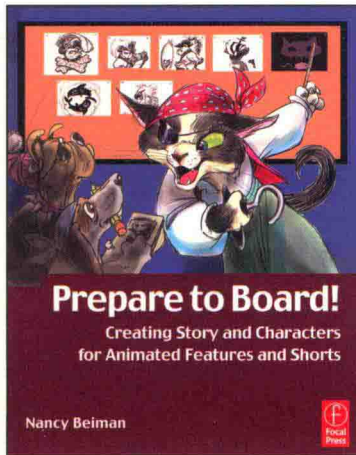
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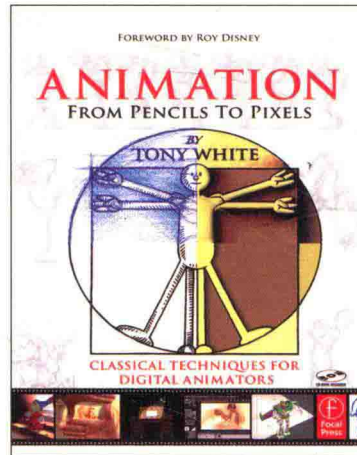
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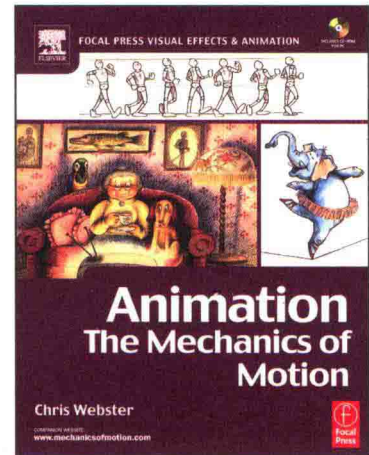
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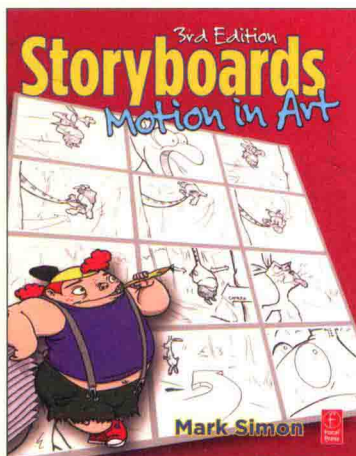
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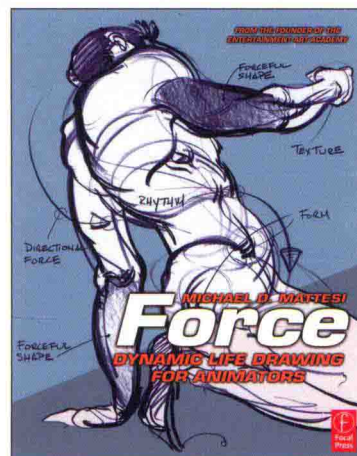
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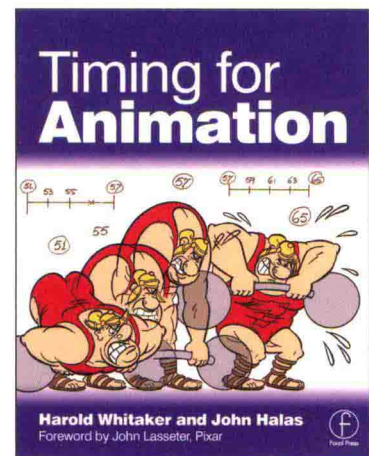
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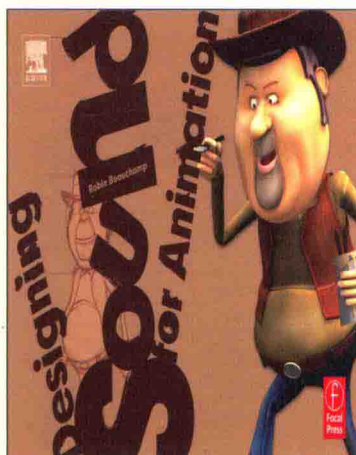
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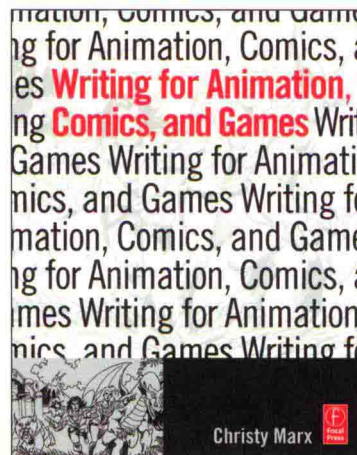
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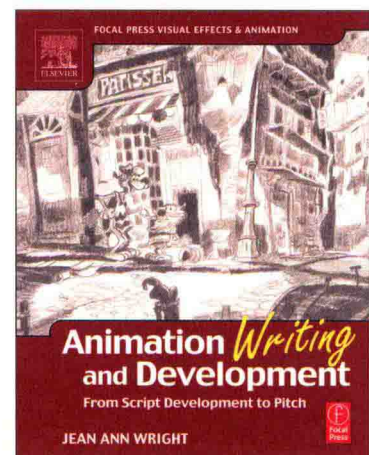
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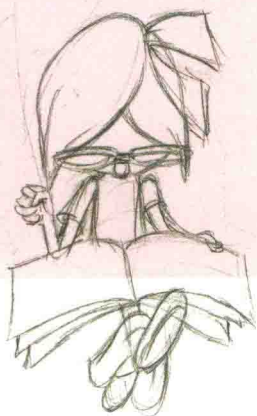
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I would equally like to thank Stéphanie Poisson, my editor, whose professionalism and constant enthusiasm for the project has enabled this book to come to fruition.





Preface

Winning an Oscar is an accolade that has long been the preserve of American films. For everyone else, there is currently only one Oscar for live action movies – for the 'Best Foreign Language Film' – thereby assuring that the United States sweep the board in most other categories.

But in the wonderful world of film animation, boundaries are being broken; mere words have been replaced by language, and the essential magic of these masterpieces elicits more feelings of enchantment than comparisons between performances of this or that technician.

From the great collection of worldwide animation, Olivier Cotte has chosen thirteen of the most incredible Oscar-winning experiences. Through these thirteen perfect films, he offers us the immense pleasure of breaking a unique and secret code. In this tour de force, he succeeds in explaining techniques without revealing any tricks of the trade; with the author's complicity he exposes the mechanics of each film without in any way affecting their charm and spellbinding perfection. His secret is simple: he is a director himself. So as an interviewer, he is both an enthusiast and an expert, eager for information and reality, an unrivaled guide through these acclaimed and awarded works, each so very different from the next.

As a simple spectator, I savored these pages as if I were on an extraordinary journey, like a little mouse that had crept onto the shoulders of these great geniuses of animation. I experienced a strange feeling – I now understood aspects of these films that I had never appreciated before, despite having watched them so many times. It was almost like discovering the secrets of those who we know and love.

As I allowed myself to be cradled by these thirteen stories, I became a child once more.



Serge Bromberg
Artistic Director
Annecy International Animated
Film Festival



Foreword

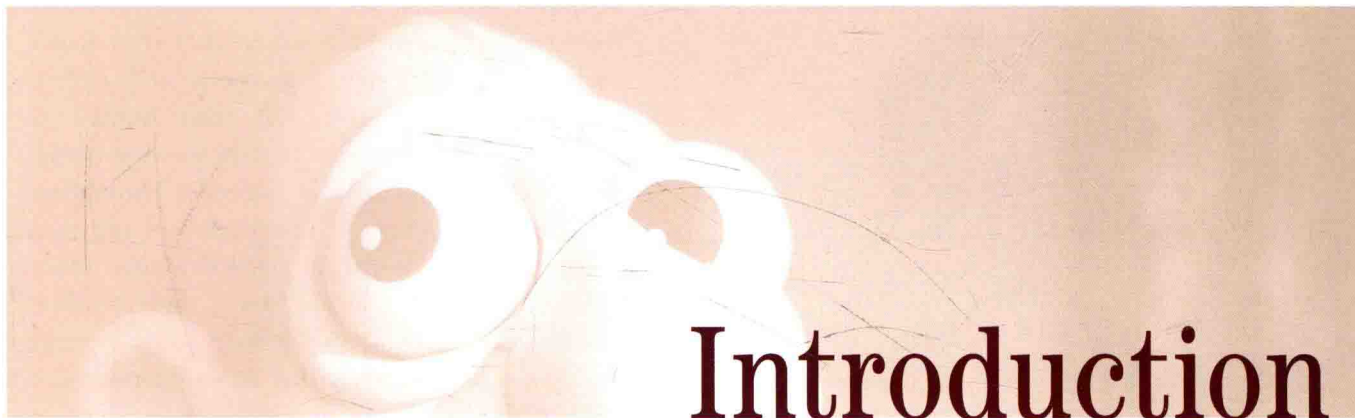
I first met Olivier Cotte, in the mid-1980's when I was directing animated shorts for my company Aardman, and he was a young journalist. We shared a passion for animated film-making in all its forms. Since then, our respective careers have grown and flourished. Aardman has become a major player in world animation – notably for our Wallace and Gromit films, and for two successful animated features, while Olivier became a very successful computer artist, specialising in FX for feature films and of course in animation. He's also continued to publish widely, a series of books about animation and animators.

Secrets of Oscar-winning Animation is about a subject dear to my heart – Academy Award winning animated shorts. This category has always been a very special one, allowing brilliant independent film-makers to bring their work to the world's largest stage. Often, as the book shows, launching hugely successful careers.

It seems like one of those obvious ideas for a book that leaves you wondering why it hasn't been done before. Olivier has managed to get his hands on some fascinating (and beautiful) original documents, and most importantly has conducted a series of in-depth interviews with some of the Greats of film animation. The insights into ideas and techniques are many and detailed. As a teacher, a writer and an animation practitioner, Olivier is uniquely qualified to conduct the interviews, drawing out those subjects of particular interest to the general reader as well as to young film-makers and students of animation. His respect for the film-makers and love for their films shines through.

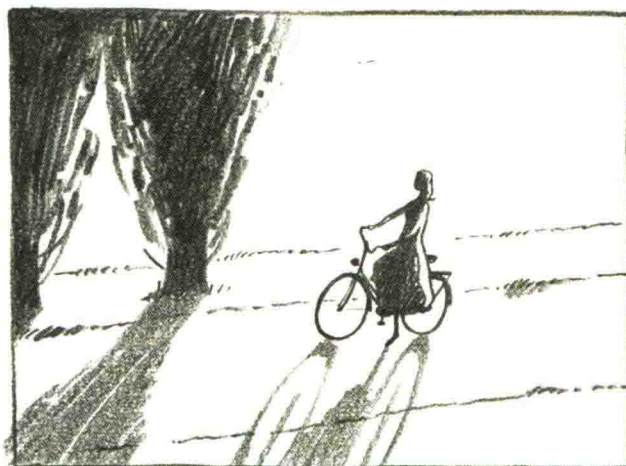
Simply, this is exactly the sort of book I'd have loved to have owned early in my career as an insight into the minds and techniques of the undisputed masters of their art.

Peter Lord, Aardman Animation Creator, director



Introduction

An animated film that wins an Oscar always carries a certain prestige, because, these days, any award that comes out of North America is certain to attract films from all over the globe. To some extent, when one such film is elected 'Animated Short Film of the Year', it is awarded an international honor. In reality, though, things are certainly not that simple. The choice of a winner is always debatable and, amongst specialists, there is no shortage of critics; but it is undeniable that the chosen work impacts very strongly upon the Academy's voters, or at the very least becomes a part of the zeitgeist.



For a long time, the Animation category (originally called 'Cartoon' when it was created in 1931) was reserved for American productions. Up until 1939, Walt Disney won all the Oscars, but thereafter had to share them with other American animation companies. It was not until the beginning of the 1960s that a production from another country (*Surogat*, by Dusan Vukotic, Zagreb Film) was awarded an Oscar. From this moment on, there was no going back; the short films that have been distinguished since then have reflected a multiplicity of cultures.



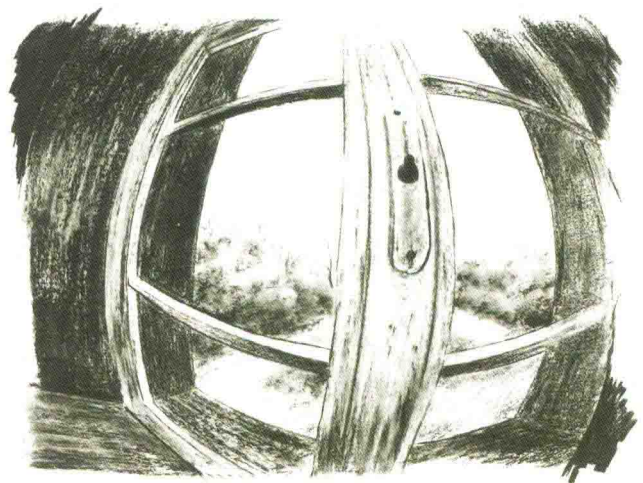


The techniques used for the creation of these films have also evolved through the twentieth century, and they continue to develop, in line with technical progress and public taste. Until the middle of the 1970s, nearly all animated films were created on celluloid. From then on, the media began to diversify: modelling clay, digital technology, paper cutouts... The industry has become even more fascinating, for the cinema is a wonderful place to present differences.

Within the context of my professional experience in animated cinema and live-action feature films, I have often noticed great similarities between the experiences of different people; every producer and every technician shares the same fascination for their art and for the cinematographic illusion. The idea for this book was born from the desire to tell the story of the passion and determination that are needed to create a work of animation.

My wish was that the thirteen films presented would complement each other, that they would each possess an original aesthetic and employ different techniques; I was also limited to productions recent enough that the knowledge and methodologies are still available. Throughout this work, the voices of the producers and their collaborators are heard; they tell how their desire to make a film is born, show their working techniques and analyze their work with as much honesty as possible. Whether you are a producer, student, amateur artist, or simply just curious, you will be in turn fascinated, amused and even, I hope, encouraged by all the stories.

If animation is a solitary profession, there exists, however, a community culture which has made the writing of this book possible, a collaboration which has broken through sociological, linguistic and cultural barriers: I would like to thank once more all the artists whose work is depicted in this book for placing their trust in me so generously.



Summary



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Secrets of Oscar- winning Animation

Neighbours

This lyrical short film, filmed in frame by frame live action, tells the story of two neighbors. At the beginning, they read their newspapers quietly in their gardens whilst smoking their pipes – a peaceful scene. But a flower grows between the two of them; at first both of them are delighted by it, but then they lose their tempers as they attempt to keep it. They come to blows, and with increasing violence, accidentally stamp on the highly-prized flower in uncontrollable rage. They massacre their respective families and finally kill each other. In the end, a flower grows on each of their graves...



Oscar 1952



Norman **McLaren**





The National Film Board's title painted by McLaren himself. The credits are simple as the technical team is small and wants to move straight to the heart of the matter.



Credits

descriptive

Title: *Neighbours*

Year: 1952

Country: Canada

Director: Norman McLaren

Production, distribution: National Film Board

Producer: Norman McLaren

Screenplay, animation: Norman McLaren, Grant Munro, Jean-Paul Ladouceur, Wolf Koenig

Technique used: Pixilation

Music: Norman McLaren

Sound: Clarke Daprato

Cast: Grant Munro and Jean-Paul Ladouceur

Camera: Wolf Koenig

Length: 8 minutes 10 seconds

Norman McLaren was born in Scotland. He worked in London with John Grierson, later he emigrated to New York and was then invited to Montreal by Grierson (who had just founded the National Film Board of Canada) to set up an animation department, where he directed and produced his own films, encouraged new artists and won international recognition for the National Film Board. Norman McLaren is quite simply the greatest genius in the history of animation: the artist who created the most original techniques, using them in frame by frame film-making. With more than 50 films, he is the film-maker who has best demonstrated that the medium defines the expression.

The Idea

Let us go back to the strange definition of a 'live action film shot frame by frame', which may seem surprising. If animation is defined as 'the art of giving the illusion of life by creating each frame in a film separately and from scratch', then the materials used are generally those employed in the visual arts. Nevertheless any other element can be used, including human beings, who can be animated like puppets by deciding on the sequence of poses they must hold, frame by frame. This is what has been done in this film.

This technique, invented by Norman McLaren, is called *pixilation*. There is no doubt that Norman McLaren created it to combine his two interests: body movement and cinema. (The art of dance was of particular interest to McLaren; he even admitted that he would have preferred to have worked in this field, rather than in animated film; some of his last films are hymns to the human body and the art of choreography.)

The two men literally slide around the flower. It is a dance (their feet almost in the ballet "second position") a spring celebration of sorts...



Shortly before the filming of *Neighbours*, McLaren returned from a UNESCO-sponsored visit to China with the aim of initiating the Chinese in animated film making. He was in China for four months from August 1949; during this time, he was a spectator to one of the most significant events of the twentieth century: the Maoist revolution. He also witnessed the force imposed by the Chinese army in the villages. As far as his artistic work was concerned, this journey left little mark on him; however, it developed his humanist spirit further.





Pixilation



The symmetry of the image, the theatrical design of the houses in the background: all of this characterizes the film-maker's desire to tell an allegorical tale through an almost minimalist image.

On the other hand, the Korean War, which started soon after he returned to the West (in June 1950), inspired him to make an anti-war film. It is for this reason that *Neighbours* opens with the image of two men who are similar in almost every way; they are positioned symmetrically on the set, in front of their respective houses, dressed in a similar fashion, each sitting on a deckchair smoking their pipes. Only the newspapers they are reading have different headlines: 'War Certain if no Peace' and 'Peace Certain if no War'. While McLaren continued to develop new techniques throughout his career, he admitted that, in the case of this particular film, the theme was the sole driving force.



The appearance of the flower and the reactions it provokes in the two protagonists. However the frame is still symmetrical and the shot wide: we're 'voyeurs' to the scene.



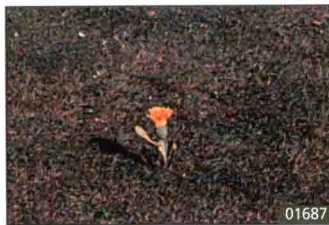
The object of desire which will lead the two protagonists into a merciless war: the flower is fake; its arrival is animated in stop motion. It even sways, slightly mischievously, to announce its appearance.

The message of the film must be simple and comprehensible enough to impress viewers. The allegory becomes crucial because of the length restrictions on short films. There are consequently few essential elements to the film: two men, their wives and children (who appear very late and only fleetingly on the screen), their houses and the flower which triggers the chain of events. According to McLaren, the choice of a flower was simply guided by the need for there to be a catalyst to set off the story. Nonetheless, it remains highly symbolic.

As technical experimentation was such a key aspect of the filming process, the screenplay was not fully written in advance (far from it), which is rare for an animated film. Filming started with a general idea made up of several guiding themes: the opposition of the two men, the situation which develops into a dramatic crisis, the use of a flower as a triggering factor. The original pitch and synopsis were thus incomplete and, of course, there was no storyboard of any kind. The two actors (Grant Munro and Jean-Paul Ladouceur), Wolf Koenig



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(cameraman) and Norman McLaren thus had to improvise continuously. Each morning, they sat for an hour on the grass, thinking and planning for the day ahead. For this reason, each of them contributed to the film in their own way. For example, Grant Munro had the idea of wearing make-up to symbolize the regression into savagery in the scene involving the massacre of the families.

When three-quarters of the film had been completed, the end of the story was still undecided; the team debated whether the film should have a happy ending or, on the contrary, the destructive logic should be left to reach a tragic end. It was decided that they would show the two protagonists killing each other if they could not come up with any other idea. As no alternative came to light, McLaren kept this fatal ending.

The flower starts off by innocently delighting the two men. Its appearance is hailed as a small miracle of life. Who could imagine what would come next?



Norman McLaren pondering how the screenplay will develop: writing the script for this type of film is always problematic - attempting to communicate a serious message, whilst trying not to appear self-righteous, often has the effect of distancing the audience.