Overview of History of Irish Animation

i)   The history of animation here and the pattern of its development,

ii)   ii) The contemporary scene,

iii)   iii) Funding and support,

iv)   iv) The technological advancement, which can allow filmmakers do more and do it more excitingly,

v)   v) The educational background.

i) History and Development.

The history of animation in Ireland is comparable to the history of live action film in Ireland in that in the early years it offered the promise of much to come and stopped really before it got started; indeed in the final analysis animation has even far less to show for itself than its early live action cousin.

One outstanding exception is the pioneering work of James Horgan. Horgan became involved in cinema at the end of the 19th century when he acquired a Lumiere camera and established his own moving picture exhibition company for the south show to his audiences - mostly religious events. However soon his eager mind began to turn to the Munster region. As well as projecting regular international shows, Horgan shot local footage to look into cinematography in a scientific way and in fact he made some money by patenting a cog for film traction in the camera, which was widely used. He also experimented with Polaroid film.

He then began to dabble in stop frame work - animation - around the year 1909 and considering that the first animation was made in 1906, this is quite significant. His most famous and most popular piece was his dancing Youghal Clock Tower - where the town's best known landmark has to hop into the frame and "manipulate" itself frame by frame into its rightful place in the main street in Youghal. A representation of the clock tower is given as a trophy for best first animation at the Galway Film Fleadh every year.

However like so many Irish film pioneering endeavours, Horgan's work proved to be a false dawn. Experiments by amateurs and film clubs are all we have by way of an animation archive, that and some advertisements commissioned abroad. In the 1950s some Government bodies commissioned short animated films.

In the 1960s two developments stand out: the establishment of Radio Teilifis Eireann and the setting up of Gunter Wolfe's studio. Gunter Wolfe specialized in T.Y. ads, creating the first Irish character

animation, the Lyons Tea Minstrels. R.T.E. had its own Rostrum Camera department which meant it could shoot its own animated titles while some shows, most notably the very popular Amuigh Faoin Speir, had animated sequences rendered by Gerrit Van Geldrun.

One spin off from R.T.E. was Quin Films - Ireland's oldest animation studio. Quin Films developed short model animated programmes. Model animation is often a good introduction to animation, as it does not rely on fine art skills as much as it does on regular film skills such as lighting, set building and costumes. Another notable animator who initially relied on work from R.T.E. was Aidan Hickey, who specialized in another form of easy to produce animation by using paper cutouts. This technique allows you to use fewer drawings by manipulating the drawings you have as puppets. Cutout animation saves more time and is therefore less expensive than regular animation in which you draw as many as 12 drawings to create an illusion of movement for every second of film length. Another animator at this time worth mentioning is Jimmy Murakami who had no small reputation in Hollywood and Europe when he settled in Ireland permanently, establishing a small studio in Irishtown, Dublin to produce ad's for both home and abroad as well as British T.V. He worked with animators Alistair McIllwhain and Tim Booth.

The development of animation in Ireland should have maintained this level of production, a level not unlike other western European countries, with its national broadcaster commissioning small animation programmes or series, while it's advertisement industry provided for a small share of the business in that area, had something extraordinary not happened to propel animation in Ireland beyond its wildest expectations and lay a foundation for the growth that has happened since and will continue to happen in the future.

In 1983 the Industrial Development Authority decided that animation was a suitable business to encourage as it needed a large semi-skilled body of workers - inkers and painters mostly - to create animated films. By 1985 when Ireland still had a high unemployment problem the I.D.A. had helped establish two small animation studios and one large one employing just short on five hundred people altogether. Suddenly Ireland was the biggest animation producer in Western Europe and with Sullivan Bluth - the largest studio - challenging Disney no less as the leading producer of feature length movies! And all this when there was no Film Board or Authority of any kind in Ireland.

Don Bluth the director of all the films made at the Sullivan Bluth studio believed that feature length animations had not run their course, which seemed to be the given theory at the Disney studios at this time. Indeed, he left Disney to prove that point and Bluth can be given the credit for the massive revival in children's feature length films after the success of his *American Tale*, which was partly made here and *Land before Time*, which was entirely completed in Ireland. Of course most of the skilled animators, like the top managers, were from the U.S., but Sullivan Bluth, after 11 years of production, longer than the cynics had expected the studio to last, passed many skills on both in drawing and producing to Irish staff or European residents living here.

The closure of the studio coincided the down-sizing (a popular euphemism of the time) of studio workforces worldwide. The beginning of integrating computers, as inking and painting tools, made the number of workers a studio would normally employ redundant. This also explains why the government didn't try to maintain a large studio, either foreign or Irish here.

However a number of native companies rose out of the ashes of Sullivan Bluth and they owe their continuity to the valued economy computers can bring to a small studio. Since then these studios have been involved in Feature Films or T.V. series either as complete productions or co-productions with European and sometimes Asian partners. Slowly, they are making inroads into the

Advertisement industry with ironically foreign companies often offering the bigger breaks than Irish advertising houses.

But the point worth bearing for the future is that Government initiatives can create something out of nothing and when, after a period of success for some technical revolution or economic downturn that initiative should go pear shaped, there is still plenty of possibility to recover - especially if a good infrastructure has been laid down. Any initiative the Government might consider to promote animation in the future is bound to pay-off some dividend considering the skill, which has been acquired already and the background in computer technology that is available in Ireland.

It is also worth pointing out the role of Festivals here. The Cork International Festival often programmed and still does short animations before features. The Galway Film Fleadh, because one of its founders worked in animation, staged both the first Irish Animation Retrospective and the first meeting of Irish animators ever, in its first year – 1989. For three years Steve Woods and Cathal Caffney ran an Animation Festival in Dublin from the Irish Film Centre. However film work for both of them - in the case of Cathal Gaffney running the ever-expanding Brown Bag Films - proved too much to keep the festival running. Today Dublin has the Darklight Festival, which runs an animation prize, as does Derry's Foyle Film Festival.

ii) Contemporary Scene.

The contemporary animation scene in Ireland is not unusual perhaps for a country with a reasonably strong record in the performing and the visual arts. It covers large-scale studio operations in Dublin right down to an independent artist making experimental work on an extreme peninsular jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean. The largest studio, Terra Glyph, has the reputation of being the best studio in Europe to go into co-production with should you want to make a feature. Brown Bag Films is an up and coming studio that has been nominated for an Oscar and has won international acclaim with both short art films, T.V. series and advertisements alike. Derry has a centre of excellence around Raw Nerve Productions and the work of John McCluskey. Kilkenny has Cartoon Saloon and there are many individuals around the country (Naomi Wilson is the person "stuck" out on the Loop Head peninsular!) as well as many other small studios in Dublin such as Monster, Boulder and Web 4 Mations.

Overall an observer couldn't say there is a particular "style" to Irish animated films or a "school" of Irish animation but this doesn't mean that Irish animation doesn't have a distinctive feature. Animation here has a foot in both the American camp and European camp. This is literal, in the unique way in that many Irish animators followed Don Bluth over to States when he set up there again and yet still kept close contact with their friends and colleagues at home. However this connection doesn't alienate animators who stay here or go for short work stints in the U.S. from trends that are uniquely European. The European style of short art films with deeper import that the average American film still inspires animators to make an independent film.

What this means is the Irish animator is non-discriminatory. Animators here admire the American short cartoon with all that that entails: "violence", fast motion, very often big eyed cats or mice chasing each other around a "shallow" plot, as well as the European art piece with limited motion but complicated plot. This I believe cannot be said about European animation as a whole where prejudice against mass entertainment and a lack of understanding of the use of animation principals the Americans employ leave many in Europe missing the bigger picture. Of course it has to be said in the U.S.A. producers seem unable to see any animation made outside Hollywood at all. In Europe

and Britain animators switch off at Disney style features and are every bit as discriminatory as the producer who always thinks of the box-office first and it's noticeable that the exceptions – Aardman comes to mind – are usually the most successful studios.

The result of all this is animators here know what makes American animation so strong and when they wish to make a personal film they can and often do apply many of the skills that that discipline entails. They use a strong line, they respect anatomical laws and they develop characterisation. While at the same time they can and often do want to work with a plot that an American producer or broadcaster wouldn't dream of touching. A recent example would be Andrew Kavanagh's *The Depository*.

A substantial body of work is building up and it is always improving. Already a comparison is being made between Irish animation and the work that has come from the Canadian Film Board. This is no accident, for this writer at any rate. The excellent standard in Canada is in no small way due to the fact that Canada is very aware of the competition from its giant neighbour to the South and that it invites well known European animators to work on Canadian scripts, (indeed sometimes nearly all the animators working there have been invited over). So in a way Canadian animation has a foot in both camps as well.

This duality has naturally developed in Ireland because of the educational background - more later. But more directly because of the cultural precedent has been laid down in history ... by the influence of being European, while at the same time having a direct line into American life i.e. the input Ireland has contributed to that culture and the constant export of everything American.

At any rate in future terms this two camp aspect is very significant and will show a continuous payoff both commercially and culturally for years to come.

Ever since Dr Charles Csuri produced the 25 minute film *Sketchbook*, or Peter Foldes *Hunger*, there was an expectation that we were on the dawn of a new style of Art with the computer. Of course the interaction of the artist with the new-fangled computer delayed any chance of a great avalanche of work on an unsuspecting public. And of course despite more rapid responses and sensitive tablets to draw on, this interaction barrier is a stumbling block that still concentrates minds to move to break it down.

Many years on there is a discernable disappointment from some quarters by many people who hoped for a whole new computer-led Renaissance. When thinking of the future we should plan for awards, exhibitions and indeed DVD sales of pure computer art - where the artist is totally involved and synchronised with the medium. That would be distinct from installations or performance pieces, which of course can use computer-generated realities. The animated filmmakers lobbied for awards and contemporary musicians established a centre for themselves; perhaps it is beholden on the artists who choose to work with computers to develop a school of art in this new medium and win some recognition for it as such in the public mind.

(There is this warning with the example of contemporary music - those of us who don't go to recitals hear modern music as sound tracts for films, this is how many of the difficult passages of contemporary music compositions are in the public consciousness - usually used as pieces to heighten tension! Is this how we'll see most of our computer art as sequences - like the light travel scene in 2001 Space Odyssey or some clever piece of C.G.I. in a horror movie?)

iii) Funding and Support.

The state must sustain at least its present support to the Irish Film Board/an Bord Scanánn, Radio Teilifís Éireann and An Chomhairle Ealaion/The Arts Council to help secure a future for animation if for no other reason that this country is on the margins and has a small local market and it needs all the help it can get. Indeed there is no reason why it should not be increased and any attempt to reduce it be resisted. This includes the present attack on section 481 which gives an incentive tax break to people who invest in film - mainly features, but features can create a high tide that all boats can float on including all the various animation ones.

At present the Film Board offers a number of incentives towards animation.

These include FRAMEWORKS which is a short film award of €35,000 for 5 minutes plus animation and which is also supported by R.T.E. and the Art's Council. FRAMEWORKS has built up the body of work that has made Irish animation comparable to Canada. The scheme has also put us in an enviable position to our colleagues in Britain - where 30 mintes is the shortest film length encouraged outside of the art collages - and Eastern Europe where state funded short film fell out of favour along with communism. Five to six awards are made each year.

Another award scheme is Irish Flash, an award of €4,000. Ten pieces around 3 minutes in length are selected each year. Oscailt and Short Shorts are awards open to live action and animators alike. In Oscailt the partner is TG4 - Teilifís na Gaeltactha. Short Shorts, which are often as short as 1 minute, are owned entirely by the Film Board with the idea that they can be shown before features in the cinema.

The Film Board also has a policy to develop animation features and somewhat surprisingly animation T.V. series as well.

R.T.E. plead poverty when it comes to supporting animation and always there the temptation is for them to stock up on cheap foreign shows. If this attitude were to change and we had something of the inventive support from the national broadcaster that the Board has shown we could quickly double the number of people working in the animation sector. There are plenty of postgraduates willing to cut their teeth on jobs like T.V. idents, intros and children's programmes. As it is they should show more of the animation they have already commissioned.

The Arts Council's commitment can be called into question. There isn't a strong vision in developing or promoting animation i.e. working frame by frame in a film, video or computer format as an art form. Just understanding that a different art form can be expressed as distinct from regular entertainment using animation techniques would be a start. There is real potential for the future of animation in changing the Arts Council's "mind" both for the filmmaker and experimental artists.

Developments such as the Digital Hub offer more hope to the emerging young animators. There is something comparable here to the support the I.D.A. gave the industry back in the 1980s and I am sure the payoff will be as long lasting.

Reports commissioned by the Government such as the Kilkenny Report predict growth in the film industry including the animation section; it's a pity the Government don't trust their own findings!

iv) Technology.

As alluded to already there is an intense relationship between computers and animation. Computers are used primarily in the industrial side of the business as a tool, but a tool that has options - a great computer word! These options mean for a studio that it can have an extra special effects department and an offline edit facility. In the special effects area the computer does more than ink up a hard line for the animators drawing and then colour it in - the background too - it can also give a depth to what is essentially a 2d medium. This became evident to a world audience in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and now all Disney's films construct all their backgrounds in total by computer, while since *Tarzan* they are able to integrate their 2d drawings, with the aid of a computer, to use those deep backgrounds in a 3d fashion. All these developments will in the future be passed down the smaller studios in Ireland.

Other big American live actions studios are using computers as much as possible, a process that became evident way back with *Star Wars* where the actors had to "work round" computer operated models that were shot frame by frame making it essentially an animated movie. This convergence is unstoppable; more and more films are made with computer special effects, computer generated images and computer created backgrounds. In the future in Ireland many opportunities will open for animators to apply both animation principals in stop frame work and to create virtual reality for live action productions.

Of course studios are already working completely with computer reality with even the "human actors" rendered by computers. John Lasseter has built up his Pixar studio from the groundbreaking award winning short *Luxor Jnr.* to his big box office buster, the feature *Toy Story 2*. All the time as he progressed he developed more user friendly interactive ideas for the animator to sit in with his/her computer, aware that the industry as a whole was learning from what he was doing. That development is continuing and is being closely watched as ever.

Ultimately these developments become cheaper and faster and eventually we will be looking at Irish companies producing similar work as Lasseter. We may be a little behind some European countries at the moment but that is sure to change.

Another convergence in the media industry is that between the television monitor and the computer monitor. The future will tell how much interaction there will be between the viewer and a Broadcaster / Internet server. If indeed people will really want to use the one machine for entertainment and work. Just as there has always been a problem getting the artist to interact "naturally" with the computer, there is also an interaction problem for the computer user who wants to use his screen for both work and entertainment in that the sitting positions are different. We lean forward at the computer even when we are playing games on them while we lean back - often in company - when watching television. Therefore I suspect there will always be two different monitors in every home and the separation - not convergence that goes with that. Of course that won't mean that there won't be progress always on improving user/viewer interaction.

Animation has cut its teeth in this area by its involvement in CD Rom and Internet web design and the games industry, although much of the projected market that was promised by the investors in CD Rom, hasn't panned out, it has to be said. Nevertheless many Irish animators, most of them collage leavers, have picked up a fair bit of work in this area. More important to postgraduates was the boom in Web design, which has never stop being strong. At the moment games companies

mostly based in Britain are interested in developing characterisation and achieving fuller animation to their product and they regularly recruiting from Ballyfermot Senior Collage.

v) Education.

The educational background to animation in Ireland took off after the arrival of the big studios. Before that there was little in the way to encourage students in the Collages to produce fine art animation pieces or to set them in the right direction for a career in the film industry. The National Collage of Art and Design did however in the early 80's have the services of Harry Hess who ran block courses with day time Graphic students while offering regular night classes as well.

However it was Ballyfermot Senior College that rose to the occasion when it hooked up with the Sheridan Collage in Canada to provide students with a grounding to help them up the ladder, training them to begin in the studios at assistant animator level. This was at the behest of the I.D.A. who were alarmed at the fact that little or no Irish were getting anywhere in the studio system. Sullivan Bluth agreed to oversee the progress of the students and act as a sort of mentor for the collage (although only after the Government began to restrict work visas for U.S. nationals working here!) Later even Disney would recruit from the college; it is still considered the best college in Europe for the full animation style.

Although Ballyfermot Senior College stayed close to the Sheridan College Diploma course (as it had to for Sheridan's endorsement), it did develop its own style around two disciplines inside its curriculum, life drawing, where it won great respect, and visual language, a course developed by Thelma Chambers which Sheridan was to take on board itself.

Thelma Chambers moved to Dun Laoghaire Institute for Art Design and Technology in 1999 where there are now a number of ex-Ballyfermot tutors. Dun Laoghaire had since the 80s been developing their film school to where it's now considered the best in Ireland. The animation department there is mindful of the institute's reputation for promoting the independent filmmaker as well as developing more conventional big studio skills. The belief is that the student armed with full animation and classic life drawing skills can approach studio employment or if they want to go even better equipped into an independent or art film career.

Dun Laoghaire always combined its animation course with a grounding in computers - especially FOTOSHOP, 3D max and FLASH programmes, something Ballyfermot is now only getting around to doing. Both colleges are going on stream to do degree courses, Dun Laoghaire beginning this September. Another college developing a degree course, this time in association with Bradford University, is Colaiste Duiligh, again using ex Ballyfermot staff.

As for Colleges with Fine Art departments and computers, there are always individuals who will take up animation as an approach to a given graphic art or abstract art project. The most notable example of this is Ruairi Robinson from N.C.A.D. and his final year project the short film *The House on Dame Street*. This came second in the best new Irish animation competition at the Galway Film Fleadh and led to him being head hunted by the top end of the postproduction side of the advertising industry. A Short Shorts award he won *50% GREY* earned him an Oscar nomination two years later.

However Robinson's achievement is the exception and his work is still firmly rooted is mass entertainment first and pure graphic art second, along way from anything like the pure computer art style of Glen Marshall and his *Butterfly*. There remains the old chestnut – if that term is applicable to such an innovative medium as the computer – that there is the barrier between the artist and the tool. Computer art seems to be lumbered with this problem. To date, in the opinion of this writer, there is no critical mass of recognisable art can be described as computer art in this country. This despite the fact we are computer literate, have good experience in computer-animated films and that there are plenty of artists willing to try out different computer programmes.

Conclusion.

The future of animation in Ireland is, when compared to other countries, in a good state of repair though not an ideal state. With easier access to better and cheaper equipment, greater opportunities for better work are possible. As it is the skills and the facilities are there to make anything from a feature to a T.V. sting. This and the "natural" convergence, which seems unstoppable between animated special effects and live action cinema allows for a lot of expansion and opportunities for the future.

However this writer believes that two factors hold out the most exciting possibilities for growth and development. They are that Irish animators abroad maintain an active contact with their old colleagues here and the desire by animators in Ireland to achieve a standard of excellence second to none.

In the future we can create a platform for animation as an art form in its own right. The best is yet to come.

Copy Right. Steve Woods, June 2003.

Note. Since this piece was written among the changes to the Irish scene are... Terra Glyph has folded, Web 4 Mations is now Jam Media. The Oscailt Award by the Film Board and TG4 is gone and Cartoon Saloon has just completed a feature.