

Throbbing Desire

During the 70s and 80s, a feminist animation movement grew forth with the Czech creator Michaela Pavlátová as one of the central figures. This year's animator in focus is an exuberant fountain of ideas who with humor and rich imagery portrays inequality, masturbation and unhappy marriage.

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When the Englishman William Hogarth, one of the pioneers of visual humor, wrote in 1734 one of the first theoretical works on the art of caricature, he described the caricature as a "comic comparison." This gives a rather precise definition of a humorous picture, whose goal and purpose is to uphold a satiric or parodic relationship to its object. Illustrative satire has, throughout history, pointed at alternatives and exposed societal injustices, including perhaps the largest one of all: that women have been men's slaves for thousands of years.

Since the 70s and 80s, humorous pictures in the form of animated film have been one of the media through which women have most clearly and definitively articulated their demands for equality. One of the prefigures of feminist animation is Michaela Pavlátová.

Animation had long been dominated by men. Aside from a few exceptions, like the German Lotte Reiniger and Czech Hermina Týrlová, women who worked with animation until the 1970s were mainly relegated to mechanical-technical tasks such as coloring or menial drawing. It was their responsibility to do the new phases of movement, which tied together the key illustrations that were created by male animators. Female creators mainly worked in the shadow of their husbands. One such animator was the American Claire Parker, active in France together with her Russian-born husband Alexander Alexieff. Another example is Faith Hubley who worked together with her husband, the outstanding profile from UPA studio, John Hubley, up until his death. Other couples that are famous in the film animation industry are the Brits Joy Batchelor and John Halas. The same was the case with the closely related industries like comic strips and cartoons.

For some time there has been a misconception that women have not been active in the humor industry due to lacking interest in humor. It has even been claimed that there is a "feminine" sense of humor which differs greatly from a "manly" sense of humor. Thus for a long time the main characters in comic strips and animated films were men drawn as complex, movable and free beings, while female characters played minor roles, either as sex objects or humorless agitators.

As a representative of the typical representation of animating men and women, the once enormously popular comic strip series *Andy Capp*, whose "humor" often bases itself on the psychic, and sometimes physical, torture and humiliation of the series' female character. The male leading character is a workshy alcoholic, portrayed as a sympathetic barfly while his wife Florrie is depicted as a hag who limits his freedom with her moaning and groaning. Well into the 1970s you could encounter comic strips with narrow-minded content where Andy demeaned his wife and even gave her beatings because she complained about his laziness and visits to the bar. Everything

changed in the 70s and 80s when several female cartoon and comic illustrators like Claire Bretécher, Angela Martin, Posy Simmonds or the Swede, Cecilia Torudd, established themselves. Their work inspired animators and sometimes worked as indirect models for animated films.

A number of female animators, above all in Canada and Great Britain, stepped at this time forth before the international festival audience, on TV programs and in theaters. A new production policy—more balanced with respect to equality—at the Canadian state-owned film company NFB resulted in women creating an equal position for themselves and thereby putting an end to male dominance that had lasted many decades. The most successful of them was the American-born Caroline Leaf, who perhaps was the first female animator generally acknowledged as an equal with the most well-respected male colleagues.

She made several widely appreciated films with varying techniques, included *The Owl Who Married a Goose* (1974), and *The Street* (1976), but also the self-biographical, openly feminist *Interview* (1979), which she made together with her colleague Veronica Soul, whereby they united several techniques and genres. This female wave in film animation coincided with the feminist movement, and demands for self-fulfillment and equality were present in many films.

At the end of the 1970s, with the expanding production of animated films, above all thanks to TV, the role of animation was redefined. Many animated films were strongly critical contributions in the current societal debate, and in there being more women in the industry, the new “female” subjects were brought up, which now mediated “new” perspectives on topical political issues. The “female” films were liberating and creative, and had clear messages directed at society’s unproductive and power-confirming status quo. In many such films, humor and satire are combined with social observations focusing on women. Female animators like Marjut Rimminen, Gillian Lacey, Karen Watson, Candy Guard and Joanna Quinn have treated the deep issues lying between the sexes and questioned patriarchally colored preconceptions about the relations between men and women, as well as media’s terror that forces itself onto women an ideal with respect to hairstyles, clothing, weight and body shapes. Even the modern family as an institution that restricts women’s lives was scrutinized in various films as well as previously taboo subjects such as sexual abuse and violence towards women. Female characters left the old school’s moulded roles and received sophisticated personalities and individuality—and they were, at the same time, funny. With just such a character, Joanna Quinn’s Beryl made a symbolic castration of male rule in the groundbreaking film *Girl’s Night Out* (1987), whereby the uneven playing field was evened out with respect to gender roles in the world of film animation, and the debate about equality between the sexes seemed as if it had reached its closing negotiation.

Since the 1980s, female animators like Alison De Vere, Monique Renault, Ruth Lingford, Michèle Cournoyer or Michaela Pavlátová have directed their gaze at scrutinizing the female soul’s innermost recesses and the most secret sexual fantasies that there lie. Thus they became pioneers in a new type of animated image that explored the unconsciousness. They asked what it means to be a woman and answered by visually depicting their characters’ inner lives.

An all-pervading motive is the woman who reflects on her sexuality, which she explores with the aim of building her own inner sanctuary. The body, the bodily

hybrids and physicality in general are the central axis around which the artistic decisions are articulated. In several films the viewer encounters sexual organs and carnal desires in all their variety: humorous, colorful or metaphorical depending on the chosen visual style and narrative strategy.

Michaela Pavlátová is one of the animators' who has left the strongest personal impression on feminist animation and the general history of mass medial gender representation. Animators like Jiří Trnka, Karel Zeman, Jan Švankmajer and Jiří Barta have made Czech animation known above all for its dimensional animation based on the country's long tradition of theatrical puppetry. Yet Pavlátová's models were animators like Zdeněk Miler, Jiří Brdečka, Adolf Born and especially Pavel Koutský. The somewhat off-handed animation style, the speed, the directness and the active treatment of large surfaces were things that Pavlátová picked up from Koutský. Her visually rich and ambiguous moving animations are characterized by a breadth of psychological deliberation and an intricate weave of references to modern existence. Her films are exuberant fountains of ideas wherein bodily and facial languages are the main means of expression. With playful self-assurance, Pavlátová portrays her animated characters' inner lives, and animates them with a voluminous catalog of emotional articulations.

Pavlátová's typical thematic and visual characteristics recur in all films shown at the festival. In her early film *Words, Words, Words* (1991), Pavlátová, just as in several coming works, deals with communication difficulties, in particular between men and women. The film is marked by inventive visualizations of a social interplay between the sexes that is full of impaired understanding, shown through fragile domino and puzzle games that can fall to pieces at any moment. The modern women and men seem to have become two different kinds of people who don't understand what the other says.

Repete (1995) is full of images, melancholy and a drastic depiction of the conflict between the animal and the mechanical in the inner life of modern humans, which takes form through complex visual symbols and associations. Various kinds of animals work as metaphors for woman and men and their desire becomes a refuge from civilization's suffocating codes and duties.

This Could Be Me (1995) is a charming autobiographical feature that was included in a broader international cooperation in which Pavlátová presents her tendency to put animations in real spaces. The film is also a personal, intimate depiction of her city Prague and can even be seen as a clever irony about media invading our private territories. In the film, Pavlátová expresses her artistic credo: "I like the world of ordinary things. Reality can be more interesting than fiction."

In Forever and Ever (1998), Pavlátová makes an analytical observation about marriage by ironically contrasting pessimistic animations and absurd scenes from married life with documentary images from an actual wedding. Here, Pavlátová once again shows that she is not interested in some abstract concept in which the content is subordinate to form. Her films are instead politically loaded and didactically structured. Her critique of marriage is devastating. The woman is shown to be in her husband's reins but even the other way around. It's not just about the misery a traditional marriage forced on a woman, but also the phenomenon

that the French animation historian, Olivier Cotte, describes as “the infantilization of the man.”¹

Pavlátová’s favorite film is Zdenko Gašparović’s cult film *Satiemania* from 1978. Her own *Carneval of Animals* (2006) reminds one of it and is an outrageous comedy, visually innovative and a well-told film. The film is structured like an array of fragments that exhibit hidden and suppressed desires at a very high level of abstraction. The film takes place in an illusory space broken down into its simplest distinctions, where Pavlátová creates happy images of sexuality, including original portrayals of masturbation and homosexual scenes where a nose functions as a sexual organ.

Are You Listening to Me (2011) is a rhythmically formed visual composition that in a systematic and repetitive way thematicizes an intimatization through mass media. In reality however, the distance between the woman and the man continuously grows.

Tram (2012) is a funny story told at a graceful tempo and presented in a superb animation where the cute collides with the grotesque. The film reveals a female tram passenger’s sexual fantasies and throbbing desire. By portraying caricatured human figures, abstract concepts, dream images and metamorphoses, Pavlátová illustrates the complicated, but at the same time funny things that arise when you try to please your body and its needs.

This enormously talented creator continues to explore female sexuality in provocative, unparalleledly entertaining films, with characters that eagerly crush the brittle shell of convention and let the innermost yearnings spring forth. With her robust artistic temperament, her idiosyncratic visual language and her ironic narrative approach, Pavlátová has volcanically burst into her rightful position in animation history. By all accounts, she’ll keep it for a long time to come.

¹ In Pilling, Jane (ed.): *Animating the Unconscious. Desire, Sexuality and Animation* (2012 : 50).