

Wonders of Computer Animation

The Computer Animation Show
Princess Theatre
January 20-26

review by Dragos Rulu

The Computer Animation Show is like a legal hallucinogenic trip. It's a series of 28 video clips, ranging from 40 seconds to seven minutes, which fill up a 90 minute journey to places that we

will never see. Most of the clips were made for showing at an international computer conference called SIGGRAPH, where manufacturers of software and hardware for animation compete in a show of onepmanship.

Everyone wants to show the world that their stuff is better, bigger and shinier than the company next door. So they create videos that are essentially company commercials. This movie is a collection of those

commercials.

Commercials are not the entire movie, though. Several clips are from universities, notably Montreal and Ohio, and one humble yet funny spot named "Dance of the Stumblers" was done on an Amiga home computer in the director's bedroom.

This movie cost \$3000 dollars (U.S.) a second on the average to make, and most people will say "so what?" when they see some scenes...but anyone who knows anything about graphics will gasp at the complexity of some of the animation.

One particular scene in Apollo's "Fair Play" has the stylized characters in a hall of mirrors. Drawn with a technique called ray-tracing, up to 22 reflections of reflections may be seen in some spots. The same piece also features a hectic rollercoaster ride, where the camera "movements" simulate the inertia/gravity of an actual head on a ride, bobbing and tilting as if you were on it.

Little technical details like these that often we wouldn't give a second glance to in an actual movie, but which would be sorely missed if they weren't in the image are what makes these animations masterworks. An eye for detail is needed to see this movie.

A really interesting piece from a group called the Disney Late Night group, is about a "junk-yard dog." (Who is actually made from pieces of vacuums and such). The group which drew it worked on it in their spare time, hence the "Late Night" name. They used special programs to "flatten" the normal 3-D graphics, and draw fine outlines of the characters, to give them the "classic" hand drawn look. The result is heart-warmingly Disneyesque.

Another really interesting effort comes from Symbolics in a clip about a bird named Stanley and a fish named Stella. "Stanley and Stella" features hundreds of flying metallic birds and pastel fish. A human animator, even computer-assisted, could never hope to animate all those creatures.

To create this effect, behavioral patterns

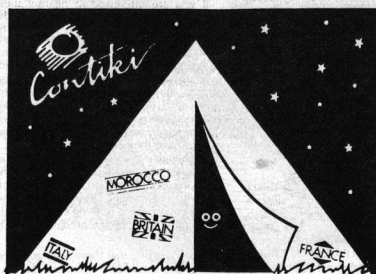
of birds and fish were used. Each animated bird and fish "knows" about neighbours and obstacles and adjusts their movement (flight or swim) just as if it were a real animal, actually flying around obstacles and avoiding collisions.

The uncontested winner of the upmanship contest and best pieces of the film come from Pixar, the company of Stephen Jobs and George Lucas fame. Directed, and written by an ex-Disney animator named John Lasseter, "Red's Dream" and "Luxo Jr." are funny, technically amazing and just all-round great.

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Each of these two segments is about an inanimate object, an unicycle and a pair of Luxo lamps respectively. In mere minutes, these inanimate objects develop personalities — the lamps actually take on a father-and-son aspect in their play, and the unicycle shows off its mischievous personality. The realism offered us by these animations is breathtaking, and there are some scenes that are indistinguishable from photographs.

From surrealism, to realism, these examples of "Gee Ma, look what I can draw" are a great way to spend a couple of hours. You will say be amazed at several of the sights, and I guarantee you will smile a couple of times too.



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