

The Mason

The Mason is my post graduate film I made whilst studying for my Masters in Media Animation at the University of the West of England. It took me just over a year to complete it. Even though I received a lot of useful advice from fellow students and staff along the way, I was responsible for all stages and areas of the film-production. Which means I learned skills in; story and character development, research, scriptwriting, storyboards, set building, model making, time management, equipment, animation, teamwork, budgeting, editing and directing. I now understand and have a great respect for the whole process of film-making.

The story is told by the movement of the characters. I wanted the challenge of telling a story by means of non-verbal communication. Stop-motion gives me this possibility. It is relatively simple moving a puppet around, however giving the character life, making the audience understand what the character has gone through before the film starts, making it show feelings and interact convincingly with other characters are vital skills for a successful animator. I design this project to allow me to improve on these skills.

The theme

There were initially two events that inspired me to make this film: the death of my mother's best friend and that of my grandmother. The way the people left behind struggled to cope with the demands of everyday life and their grief showed itself in different ways. Some carried on as if the event had not affected them, whilst others displayed signs of a more serious emotional breakdown. Noticing the spectrum of reactions made me want to explore the theme of bereavement. The film has an international theme. Death and grief are things everyone can relate to.

Research

Cultural setting and time period

The Mason is set in Norway. But I wanted to make it familiar to my culture. This project has given me the opportunity to look into my culture and heritage. Norway has therefore been a major part of my research.



The 19th century was a difficult time for Norwegians. The country had been under Danish rule for 400 years. In 1814² Denmark made a deal with Sweden to exchange Norway for some other territory (The Kiel Treaty, 14.01.1814)³. The Norwegians expected independence, but due to international politics there was no support for that. Foreign rule and the tough climate left most Norwegians extremely poor. Many moved from the countryside into the cities in desperate search for work, and between 10% - 15%⁴ of the

¹ ill. Private pictures from the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History

² *Store Norske Leksikon, volume 8* (Oslo: Aschehoug og Gyldendals, 1985) p. 750

³ *Store Norske Leksikon, volume 6* (Oslo: Aschehoug og Gyldendals, 1985) p. 761

⁴ <http://www.norge.se/facts/people/migration/migration.htm>

population emigrated to America in the hope of a better life. The endemic poverty had a catastrophic impact on the general health situation of those who stayed behind, both urban dwellers and the rural population. Life was tough.

The reaction of Norwegian artists, during the National Romantic period to Swedish rule was to present an idealised and romantic picture of rural life. This was partly an attempt to raise Norwegian national pride to fuel discontent against Sweden. However, by the end of the 19th century a truer picture rural condition is mirrored in the work of writers and painters of the Realism movement.

Artists I looked at were Tidemand (1814 - 1876) and Gude (1825-1903) from the National Romantic era and Christian Skredsvig (1854 - 1924), Harriet Backer (1847 - 1907), Christian Krogh (1852 - 1925) and Hans Heyerdal (1857 - 1913) from the Realistic period.

Characters

There are two characters in the film that develop differently; their interaction is the plot of the film.

In the very beginning they both come through the same door, sharing the same grief, namely the burial of the wife and mother.

The father is dreaming and nostalgic, he represents an unrealistic perception of life; he is a romantic trying to withdraw from the realities of the world he lives in. Rather than facing up to reality, he focuses on his past happiness. He is basically a pathetic figure who feels life has dealt him a lousy hand.

In contrast, the daughter has a much more hard-nosed, realistic attitude to the world she lives in. She is affected by the death of her mother, but has the courage to meet life's hardships face on. Although she knows that she is soon to die, she also realizes that the

family needs food on the table. She knows she is fighting a losing battle against her illness, but stays strong for her father's sake.

The turning point comes when the father pulls himself together, and takes responsibility and the daughter realises this. The film ends by the audience understands that the daughter is mortally ill.

Discussion of my practical work



The daughter's courage and perseverance can be compared to the struggle of a tragic hero from Greek mythology, Sisyphus, who was condemned by the Gods to push a rock up a mountainside for eternity. In spite of the fact that that Sisyphus was doomed to fail it was his struggle against the inevitability of his failure that gave his life meaning. In the same way, the daughter knows she is going to die, so her struggle is also pointless. However, while her father is submerged in self-pity and apathy, she gives meaning to her remaining time on earth by striving to make sure her father will cope. Her making candles symbolises the light and hope she sees despite the tragedy of her situation. Light is the same symbol that H. C. Andersen uses in his tale about the Matchstick Girl.

The daughter wants to give her father hope, and make sure he has a chance of surviving when she is gone. I have chosen the moment the father starts showing an interest in life to let the audience see the blood stain on her handkerchief, an indication that her illness has entered its final stage. I have left the question of whether the Mason will handle another loss to the viewer's interpretation.

In my view, the most powerful endings are often achieved by the use of ‘dramatic irony’, when the audience knows something one or all of the characters do not. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, when the audience knows Juliet has taken a potion and is only sleeping, while Romeo takes his life because he mistakenly thinks she is dead. *Corpse Bride* uses a similar device when the audience and everyone apart from Barkis Bittern, the villain, knows that what he is about to drink is poison. Secrets work well on screen and can create a bond between a character and the audience. There is something powerful about knowing something others do not. I felt the girl’s courage should be rewarded, but with a twist.

I chose to withhold the information about her illness until the ending not to take focus away from the concept of the film. It is about their relationship, while she is still alive. The audience’s focus should be on the mason and whether his behaviour will change.

*“Entertaining people is making sure they have really engaged with your idea. And they get some emotion from it”*⁵ My intention has been to tell story about how these characters deal with grief and hopefully the audience can identify with one of characters.

Model-making



I bought John Wright ball and socket joints parts to make the armature. This is a durable armature with a remarkable level of control. Something I left I needed to create the sensitive and subtle movements I needed to tell this particular story.

After making working out how I needed the characters to move and the size in relation to the set I measured and made detailed drawings of what the armature should look like. John Wright looked over my plans and helped me pick out the right joints. I then learned how to solder the joints together with silver in the metal workshop at university..

⁵ Susanna Shaw, *Stop Motion – Craft Skills for Model Animation* (Oxford: Focal Press, 2005) p. 33



I padded the armatures with foam and latex glue shaping it to the form of the characters. With a lot of help from the technical instructor I sewed little costumes for them in the style of Norwegian work clothes in the 18th century. I tried a few different solutions at this stage making sure the costume and padding didn't compromise the flexibility of the joints.



I tried several different solutions and materials to create the hand. It was a struggle getting them as small and thin as I needed. The final hands were hand by twisted wire covered in Copydex (latex glue) mixed with paint and wrapped with string to make it more durable. It also helped making the shape of the palm of the hand with hot glue to keep it all together. With this method I achieved a texture look on the hands of a

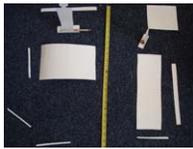
⁶ ill. Private pictures from metal workshop at UWE

workman's hands and every finger was easy to manipulate.



As this hands were quick, easy and cheap to make, I could pre-make spares replacements which didn't set me back whilst shooting if a pair broke.

Set-building and prop making



With the set I started by making silhouettes of everything in cardboard first. This made it easy to work out the size relationship and amount materials I needed.

I had to be conscious not to overload the film with messages. The set I designed is Spartan in its simplicity. By adopting this minimalist approach I have tried to focus the audience's attention on my themes of despair and nostalgia vs. courage and perseverance in the face grief.



I wall of the house are all separate element so I am able to move them around to achieve the shots I wanted. The furniture is made out of MDF wood, glued together, sanded, texture with a Sharpie, painted with wood-stainer and sanded again. This created a warren look that is closer to what the Mason would be able to afford. The fire place is MDF covers with carved foam (the kind you use to insulate your walls) and painted for effect. The logs in the fire are a mixture printed bark paper glued on the bamboo and painted Clay. My friend, Rita Sampaio, was very helpful in showing me different materials and their qualities to make the props. We were vable to make all the props very cheaply with a wire or cardboard frames and covered them in Milliput, Latex or plaster depending on need. A coat of paint and matt varnish made the job relatively cheap and

⁷ ill. Private pictures of various stages of the set building process.

easy. I had all the sizes worked out by this point so it was just a matter of making them



all.

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Sound

Michelle Green was my sound designer. She is very good and has also worked on short films like *The Forgotten Comic* (2006), which was shortlisted for the Depict'07 screening. I wanted her to create the feeling of emptiness and hopelessness. Instead of relying on music we used more natural surroundings like wind and the fire to create an atmosphere of emptiness and uneasiness. I didn't want anything to smooth over the fact that my characters are not communicating verbally.

⁸ ill. Private picture of the set

Lighting

The use of light in Baroque paintings creates quite dramatic effects. I have especially looked at the Dutch painter Vermeer for inspiration for this project. He creates depth and moods by using daylight shining through a window. I have tried to recreate the lighting in some of his paintings in my film in order to enhance the sense of depth. I noticed that lighting up the background seems to bring the character forward.

Animation

The challenge is to give a character life, a simple move can tell so much about a character's life or state of mind and personality. In my film the mason is a reclusive man. The daughter is more expressive about what she desires, more open to love and, as a result, more vulnerable. I have made the father's gestures smaller and more constrained than hers. But I was concerned that this must not make him seem cold hearted.

In *The Mason* I have tried to tell the story through the movement of the whole body rather than using facial expressions and speech. This is a form of animation that Barry Purves believes in. Purves says that he favours a more "movement-based form of storytelling, seeing the whole body of the character as much as possible – using the body to tell the drama and emotion." Purves says that full-body animation is more interesting than a "generally over-animated mouth flapping away." I agree, in most cases in stop-motion the body is the main storyteller. That is why I decided not to use dialog in this film.

The Mason is the first animated film I have made with two characters in shot at once. This demanded a little more planning than usual. It becomes more important to guide the audience's eye, so they see what I want them to. If both characters move at once the less important one could distract their attention. Blocking out the characters' movements, making sure they don't up-stage each other, camera focus and sound are methods I have used and will use to guide the audience's attention.

Camera

I used a Canon digital SLR to shoot this film. As this only provided me this still frames I set up a low quality video camera next to the SRL capturing a low quality version on in to Stop-Motion Pro so I could get a better idea of what I was shooting.

After Effects

I used the software After Effects to create the flame in the fireplace and the view out of the window. The view is a still take by the Oslo-fjord and the fire is live action footage that I manipulated by masking and keying out the surroundings to make it fit the shots.

Contextual evaluation

An audience will not necessarily pick up on the fact that this film is set in Norway. However, the film is an authentic depiction of what life could be like in the time and place I have chosen to set it. The set and the costumes work well as a reference, but do not interfere with the content. I think the time I put into the researching the cultural, historical, architectural and social condition has improved the quality of the end result. This project has underlined to me the importance of research.