

14 May 2020

The *Old Man* and The Quarantine

Dear Alicia Eisen,

As I have informed you months ago, I have chosen your film, *Old Man* (2016), to analyze and close read for Animation Studies. Though I was enamored by your work the second I started watching, I did not anticipate how useful your film has been for me during this unprecedented time (which is a thing we're saying now). I approached this film with the full intent to know it inside and out and "befriend" it, as my professor would say. What I have come to discover during our friendship is that this film is quite possibly THE best quarantine partner one could have. I chose this piece well before all of the stay-at-home orders and the necessary solitude a lot of us are going through, and I am amazed, almost to the point of being a little freaked out, as to how well this film portrays this current situation. I don't know what it is, but courses with Dr. Gopalan have this innate power of pairing you with a work you need before you know you need it. With this film in particular, it acted as a kind of mirror for what we're going through right now by not only showing us what we are but what we want. It is a portrait of a collective experience that we were ill-prepared for, but it's as though you knew what one of the core issues would be.

THE ROOM & THE MAN

Starting from the very beginning, we are presented with this dark and dingy room. The film presents us with inserts of each side of the room. These inserts give us a sense of the boxy nature of the space and how encased one would be inside it. Each side has its own unique piece of mundanity out on display such as the crooked window blinds slowly moving with the wind, a desk fan whose blades creak with every rotation, and a digital alarm clock blinking at us with every passing second. It is the dictionary definition of drab. What brings this study in mundanity home is the overhead shot

of the Old Man resting his arm above his alarm clock in anticipation for it to go off. This clues us into this being a routine for the Old Man. These are the images he himself sees day in and day out. He is alone. He is encased. He is used to it.

With solitude established, I want to bring up what makes this piece so essential for the time and that is the materiality and your usage of found objects and textures to create your world. At the first instance of the man, we see that he is a figurine with intriguing proportions, his wiry arms and legs being somehow balanced by his severely protruding gut. It appears to me that the man is constructed with a combination of wires for mobility and foam for the bigger areas such as the aforementioned gut, the head, and the feet. A decision on your part that I admired right from the start was your choice to encase the man's frame with cotton yarn. You could have easily chosen to encase him in clay and have him possess one uniform texture, but the coiling of the thin and fibrous texture around his form, for some reason, feels more tangible to me. I find myself wanting to feel it for myself. Due to the coiling nature of it, as I mentioned, I also view this as a type of preservation or mummification of the figure; the yarn keeping him upright, intact, and safe from the "outside" elements he is about to face.

## THE SHORE

Again, after my first few watches pre-quarantine, I loved the materiality of your world. However, it was during quarantine where I started to really feel everything. At one minute and ten seconds into the film, the Old Man is walking on a beach towards the "water". His cotton coils are now apparent to the viewer as the lighting has drastically changed from his dark grey room to the bright pale-blue/grey outside. The camera also pushes in onto his body, moving upward on him as it searches his form. At the current moment, I cannot help but make the connection of his cotton

encasing as a reflection of our now mandatory cotton masks we all must adorn when facing the elements of our own world. Our own preservation.

Along the Old Man's path, we see and hear the normal elements of the beach such as the crunching sand, sticks and twigs, stones, and a suggestion of wind. We also hear the water the Old Man is approaching. However, once the Old Man arrives at the shoreline, it is revealed to us that the water is this grey, rough, interfacing material. The motion of the water is animated by the stop-motion scrunching and un-scrunching of the fabric while Foley wave sounds play in our ears. As the fibrous cotton coiling meets the stiff interfacing, for a moment I am not transported to the beach but, rather, my mother's sewing room. The materials that make up our main players are materials that one could easily find in a seamstress's work space. This practice in found/readily-available materiality to build your world brings to mind, once again, our cotton masks and the many other ways people have been preoccupying their time during our solitude. Many people have been making masks for others, and there have been many an internet trend of people creating art with the materials they have around their space; all of these being a means to muscle through quarantine.

As these memories, both old and new, flood my mind in that single instance, my appreciation for your tactile art evolves. Though I've noted that this art was able to unlock my own tactile memory, I feel as though your tactilism has constructed a collective memory that had not even happened yet. In her essay "The Svankmajer Touch", Cathryn Vasseleu analyzes Svankmajer's tactile style and his, as he coined, "tactile memory". Vasseleu posits that the tactile memories within Svankmajer's work transform into "analogies that are charged with physical intensity." (416). A momentary conflation of the concepts of memory and analogy is helpful in understanding what I believe to be the most effective aspect of your piece.

The specific function of an analogy is to explain or clarify through comparison of two things. An analogy is constructed by presenting the First Thing that needs explaining and the Second

Thing that will do the explaining with the Second Thing being something more universally known and understood. Throughout the film you present us with found-object materials that you use to represent other materials, such as yarn as skin or interfacing as water. When the viewer sees these materials, they can ascribe their own personal connection or memories to the materials in order to contextualize and understand what the material is. The universal nature of the materials you chose to use make it so that there will always be a construction of a similar universal memory no matter when this piece is watched.

## THE WATER

The entire underwater sequence is quite striking, but the thing that has been weighing heavy on my mind (in the most loving way possible) are the monstrous hands that dominate the Old Man. The viewer is introduced to the hands on the shore as they tease the Old Man's security until he is finally dragged into the water. While in the water, which is represented by an opaque, plastic, blue and bubbly material on which the Old Man operates in front of, the hands toss the Old Man about and guides him through the water. The dominating hands appear to be made of the same interfacing material as seen on the shore, but the material is tightly balled up to create the hand shape. The hands are obviously fabric, but with the change in materiality of the water, the hands appear almost wiry and metallic. Hazardous even.

With these hands being the antagonist of the piece, it instantly brings to mind our preoccupation with hands, cleanliness, and touch during this time. According to your film, the hands appear to only have the ability to exist and live when submerged in water. There is also a dreamlike and surreal quality ascribed to the underwater environment due to this portion being shot through a lens with beveled edges that slightly distort the image of the frame. The dangerous look of the hands

as they operate within this surreal environment looks like a manifestation of many people's inner negotiations as they think about risking their health and safety for a moment with a friend.

THE END

I think the best way I can illustrate to you my feelings surrounding your piece and my findings is with a moment that happened a few days ago. I stayed up late one night discussing with my friend about what I have just presented to you. After I was done, she noted the "crazed but tired" look in my eye and begged me to go to sleep. Rather than sleeping, however, I started to write this. Apparently quarantine really helps blur the preexisting line between avid close reader and crazed theorist. But how can one not be amazed by the portrayal of a memory that has yet to happen? You fabricated a world two years ago that would come to closely resemble our current world and the experiences of so many. Your tactile art captured how necessary and yet unattainable contact and touch would be for everyone.

It has been such a pleasure to meet and know your film. It has preoccupied my mind and my time in the best way.

Best,

Mari Estrada

P.S. Please enjoy all the various ways I was able to refer to the pandemic without saying "pandemic."

Works Cited

Eisen, Alicia. *Old Man*. 2016. Boldly Creative. Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/162462518>

Vasseleu, Cathryn. "The Svankmajer Touch." *Animation Studies Online Journal*. 2009. pp. 409-420. Rpt. in Course Reader. Professor Lalitha Gopalan. *Animation Studies*. Jenn's Copy and Binding.