

Waking Up from Cinema

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“Waking Life” DVD, Richard Linklater 2002.

“Final Fantasy” DVD, Hironobu Sakaguchi 2002.

Who was that theorist that tried to argue that being in a cinema was like experiencing a waking dream? When director Richard Linklater was pitching the idea for his first animated film “Waking Life”, he wanted to show some studio executives the different logic that operated in the dream state. Every dream explorer knows that the way to test if you are dreaming is to switch the lights off. If the light stays on then you must be dreaming. Linklater got up from the meeting and switched off the lights of the board room. The lights stayed on. Unknown to him the lighting circuit in the building had recently been rewired and some of the switches had been disconnected. Perhaps the separation of dream and reality requires a greater effort than it once did.

“Waking Life” is a simple talking heads film about a young man (played by Wiley Wiggins) who finds himself in a dream world from which he cannot awaken. On the way he meets a succession of professors, raconteurs and café philosophers who wax lyrical on themes of human consciousness, free will and identity that seem to offer the protagonist a variety of perspectives on the problem of reconciling the inner self with the world external to it. By the end of the film it is suggested that Wiggins's subjective experiences are a dream he has created due to his resistance to the fact that he is already dead. It gives rise to his mistaken impression that he is a subject living through continuous linear time, rather than a dead person dreaming the live world in a single moment.





But the real substance of “Waking Life” is not in the pop-philosophy ruminations of Linklater’s own brand of Texas Existentialism but in the fact that the entire film has been animated from DV video. It is this process whereby each live action scene is given to an animator to recreate that gives the film its intended look of “realistic unreality” as Linklater puts it. Using Bob Sabiston’s rotoscoping software, the animators are able to redraw each scene element or character - delineate them, re-colour them and separate them out into independent layers. The result is a flattened, sketched, elastic world of shapes depending on the individual styles of each of the thirty or so animators. Sometimes appearing like sketchpad drawings, sometimes superrealistic paintings, comic strips, lino prints or graffiti art, each scene element is also animated on an individual layer to mimic the hand held camera style. Combined with the effects of the shape interpolating software, this creates the appearance of the screen breaking up into a number of gently floating, stretching and undulating planes. The film’s surface plays like a collection of life’s jetsom bobbing up and down on the surface of a river as it is carried away past our eyes.

As well as redrawing the video footage, each animator is encouraged to add their own interpretations to the scenes. A professor talking about a human being as a bag of water himself fills up with liquid, two people trying to achieve Bazin’s “Holy Moment “ turn into clouds, a lecturer is portrayed as his favourite animal – a chimpanzee. But although relatively unorthodox, these animated extrapolations are little more than whimsical asides. The strongest effect occurs when while watching the film as an animated cartoon you suddenly notice nuances of behaviour that betray its live action roots. The unexpected fluidity of a character skipping down the steps, a squint, shrug or incidental hand gesture, the glint of a passing reflection on glass, an enigmatic expression or change in someone’s eyes can create a kind of puncture through the perceptual continuity of the animated surface. All the little ticks, hesitations and detailed shading that an animator would never get time to include in an exclusively animated film suddenly key you into another world. The film begins to read like a dream in which we periodically attain glimpses of reality forcing its way through.



"Waking Life" achieves a material representation of the current trend in the inter-penetration of reality and fantasy which is observable in a more narrative form in many special effects films. A good comparison is with Hironobu Sakaguchi's computer animated feature "Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within". Although the film's scenario is based on the spectacular rendition of humans battling alien monsters on a post apocalyptic planet earth, the film's main distinction is that it is the first animated feature to be entirely depicted in live action cinematic "realism". Here the intention is to convince the viewer that the synthetic actors, hi-tech urban metropolis and fabulous creatures are as "naturalistic" a portrayal of live action scenes as damnit. "Waking Life" and "Final Fantasy" both follow analogous production processes but employing different technologies and pursuing different aesthetic aims. Yet the result introduces a related tension between the perceptual modes it offers.

The story behind "Final Fantasy" is as maddeningly convoluted as the process of its visual construction. A testament to the Japanese love of recklessly combining elements of mythology, sci-fi and the supernatural, we are lead into a narrative of dream like divergence and fragmentation. To give a brief flavour, the Earth has been invaded by alien "Phantoms" that arrive on a meteor, only it turns out that they are not invaders but alien ghosts that are trapped in a violent purgatory and feed on the souls of the living. The main character Aki is "inflected" with a Phantom, and her only hope is to find eight "spirits" that can release a "wave" of "bio-etheric" energy that can "heal" the alien "proto-phantom" using the Earth's own Gaia life force and also save the planet. And the only clue that "explains" all this is Aki's recurring dreams.



When one considers the technological advancement of today's digital video cameras and the sophistication of Bob Sabiston's animation software, it seems odd to try to categorise "Waking Life" and "Final Fantasy" in terms of "hi-tech" and "lo-tech". Certainly "Final Fantasy" needed to use a far wider range of technological procedures to achieve its look. Although "Final Fantasy" is completely computer generated and contains no direct visual trace of the live action world in the final image, its animated origins are similar to "Waking Life". For a start, about half of the animation in "Final Fantasy" is derived from motion capture – the technique whereby actors play the scene while sensors record the motion of their bodily extremities, which is then used to animate a computer modelled character like a form of puppetry. But because motion capture is not very detailed, the computer animators also rely on video recordings of the voice actors to reproduce the subtleties of their facial expressions (in this case including the likes of Donald Sutherland, James Woods and Steve Buscemi). A computer animated character can therefore be animated from data recorded from the motion capture of one actor whilst talking with voice and facial expressions of another actor as modified by the animator, whilst wearing clothes procedurally simulated and sculpted by another animator at the same time as dodging an explosion created by simulated laws of physics all against a digitally hand painted landscape.

There was once a time when it was assumed that 3D computer animation would soon be able to completely recreate a live action scene, to recalculate and replace the physical world with a virtual version. But what is actually happening is an emerging aesthetic that articulates the tension between the two. As in "Waking Life", there are many occasions in "Final Fantasy" when one becomes uncomfortably aware that a character clambering over some rubble is moving too smoothly and subtly to have been entirely animated by hand or computer. Equally, sometimes the lighting and texturing on a face seems so close to human flesh that for one startling moment it appears that the dead have come back to life. The physically based modelling of hair, cloth and atmospheric effects also creates detailed, fluid motion that suggests an autonomous natural force at work, a connection with reality in this case constructed at the level of theoretical scientific analysis. Once again it is as though the synthetic surface of the film fantasy has been momentarily punctured by the real, although in the case of "Final Fantasy" this "real" is not quite the same.



Even though there are sequences in “Final Fantasy” that are unnervingly realistic, it is always in terms of mimicking the “realism” of mainstream live action cinema – which was the stated goal of the film makers. This tendency to copy the realistic styles and conventions of other media is one of the defining characteristics of computer generated imagery as observed by theorists such as Andy Darley. It is perhaps an inevitable consequence of a medium composed of freely floating digital symbols that seem to lack any structurally based aesthetic of their own. For instance, although there is nothing to stop the film makers from designing the most elaborate and daring virtual camera moves, the camera motion is really quite conservative (there is only one constructed scene transition in the whole film). The directors state that they were deliberately constraining the camera to the cinematic style of the seventies and eighties – no DV style “shaky cam” here. In the same vein, the design of the vehicles, props and sets were toned down so as not to detract from the centrality of the characters, as is demanded in the conventional action hero film. This restriction seems to extend to the scripting as well, which as well as being translated into a kind of Jap-anglais, often resorts to copying the well worn phraseology of action movies. Characters bark orders, warnings and wise cracks to each other but without necessary motivation or consistency, as though they are just mimicking the concerned determination of typical action hero dialogue.

In this way “Final Fantasy” slips in and out of different styles of “realism” – from manga comic book styles to fantasy art to cinematic narrative realism. On the other hand, “Waking Life” gives the impression that some external presence is breaking through the animated exterior like the cold light of day. This is not to imply that the production processes of DV video are more “real” than the Hollywood action movie, but the stylistic distance between the animated treatments of “Waking Life” and its live action foundation opens up a kind of perceptual axis that allows the reality effect to achieve greater impact. In “Final Fantasy” this axis has far more dimensions and the result is that the reality effect seems more confined to the surface – to the slippery interplay between the cinematography of the action movie, manga, marionette animation and digital sceneography. “Final Fantasy’s” juxtaposition of familiar realistic styles operate within a relatively closed intertextual system, while “Waking Life’s” styles are less easy to recognise and therefore appear juxtaposed by their proximity from reality itself.

“Waking Life” takes place entirely within the dream world, but a world whose appearances are engaged in a constant struggle, teasing us with the possibility that there is a “live” world beyond it that cannot be directly defined and portrayed. In “Waking Life” the differently styled narrative encounters of Wiggins are just ruses to disguise the fact that his subjectivity is an illusion and he should just “wake up” from this animated everyday world. This film unites the dream world as a world of difference. “Final Fantasy” narratively separates dream and reality but without a perceptible difference. There is no visual distinction between Aki’s dream sequences and her waking sequences - they are both portrayed using the same carefully

coded stylistic conventions. So what can she “wake up” to? What lies beyond the dream world of the carefully preserved stylistic conventions of reality cinema?

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Figs. 1-3. *Waking Life*, dir. By Richard Linklater, 2002. © C20 Fox Film Corp., all rights reserved.

Figs. 4-6, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, dir. By Hironobu Sakaguchi, 200. © FFFP, all rights reserved.