Media & Message focuses on the experience of information-sensory, aesthetic, and intellectual—in literature, comics, film, plastic arts, and video games. Our goal was to gain insight into the way texts speak to us and to learn how to appreciate each medium more fully. Despite a great diversity of approaches, all the critics we study have in common a desire to reform their practice, and consequently, to challenge our own viewing, reading, and listening habits. In this assignment, students were asked to ‘play the critic’ in turn, and to analyze a work of art of their choice in light of a theorist on the syllabus. In his refined investigation of the stop motion film A Town Called Panic (2009), Ansh Shukla compares an early French cinéaste’s celebration of realism with a technique traditionally relegated to the fantastical. His subtle analysis of gesture and sound reveals the humanity in what is otherwise an unbridled farce; in the process, he also discovers the essence of animation—in the production of life. With careful and attentive prose, he captures the helplessness and frustration inherent in grief, the dizzying confusion of a late-night party, and the improbable hustle of an industrious man. Ansh’s literary sensibility is evident in his musical analogies—“staccato” cries of indignation are followed by an “adagio” whimpering—as well as in the skilled manipulation of terms, which he re-creates, such as “sonic deep focus” and “phonogenic.” Truly we can say that Ansh accepts Susan Sontag’s challenge to write criticism “which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art.” What’s more, he comes to understand sui generis what animation and representative art are all about.

—Inga Pierson
The Sounds of [Stop-Motion] Cinema: Bringing Epstein’s Photogenie to a Visually Constrained Medium

Ansh Shukla

In his essay *Bonjour Cinema*, French filmmaker and critic Jean Epstein (1897-1953) discounts any cinematic work that is not created to embody *photogenie* as a misuse of the medium. Indeed, he argues that art and human drama can only be faithfully represented in movies by a process that emphasizes close-ups, motion, and rhythm; any other approach strangles the humanity of film. However, this definition proves to be applicable only to cinema as experienced by Epstein—one that captures life. When trying to bring the same approach to the stop motion *A Town Called Panic* (2009), we find that the limitations of the medium prevent it from approaching *photogenie* in the same way. In *A Town Called Panic*, Belgian animators Stéphane Aubier and Vincent Patar expand their eponymous puppetoon series into a feature-length film. Derived from plastic toy figurines and clay, a host of characters, Cheval (or Horse), Madame Longrée, Cowboy, Indian, and farmer Steven populate the screen with their desires and fears, shenanigans and mishaps. Yet, in spite of the obvious absence of such photogenic qualities as are found in the human face or moving bodies, *A Town Called Panic* remains cinematically beautiful, and its characters maintain the illusion of life. In this essay, we will argue that this is achieved by simulating *photogenie* with gesture and sound.

The fundamental constraints of stop motion animation complicate the basic characteristics of photogenic filmmaking that Epstein idealizes. Epstein emphasizes movement and close-up as fundamental building blocks of *photogenie*: in *Bonjour Cinema* he writes that “only mobile aspects of the world...may see their moral value increased [by cinema]” and “the photogenic aspect of an object is a consequence
of its variations in space-time” (114a, 144b). More telling is his fixation, in the essay “Magnification,” on the ephemeral frames of facial close-up where “muscular preambles ripple beneath the skin. Shadows shift, tremble, hesitate. Something is behind decided. A breeze of emotion underlines the mouth with clouds” (9). However, these characteristics of photogenic filmmaking depend heavily on film as a reproduction of life; they are concerned with bringing significance to minutiae capable of being captured only by the camera’s eye. Their corresponding applications in A Town Called Panic lack a sufficient beauty.

Cheval’s romantic dream sequence at the outset of the film typifies the failure of motion and close-up in introducing photogenie to the medium. At the end of the scene, Cheval and Madam Longrée are framed in one of the rare close-ups of the film: their heads awkwardly wobble in from opposite sides of the frame for a kiss, their eyes are fixed open, and their mouths are molded in the same apathetic half-smiles donned for the entire movie. In this intensely romantic moment, we see details of Madame Longrée’s horn-like ears and carrot-colored hair for the first time—its thick, artificial creases reminiscent of Laffy Taffy candy. Despite the romantic lavender background and musical cues, the scene has a rightful mood of silliness because of close-up. The detail afforded by the shot divulges the contrived existence of Cheval and Longrée and reduces their drama and humanity to irony. In this case, Epstein’s qualifications for photogenie ultimately fall short.

As we see above, the cinema of A Town Called Panic focuses on the filmic production—not reproduction—of life, making it incompatible with photogenie as envisioned by Epstein. The stop motion camera is not afforded the same intimate access to rich details as the live-action one: faces of characters are fixed, objects are rough approximations of reality, and even the most meticulously constructed animation cannot emulate the spontaneity of real-life actors. Similarly, mastery of cinematic rhythm, which has “great aesthetic importance” to Epstein, is visually impossible to accomplish on a medium shot at a perpetually frantic 12 frames per second (112a). The directors of the movie are aware of the constraints of their medium. The film hides the static composition of its actors and the absence of nuanced motion by
privileging medium and long shots. However, even with all of these limitations, *A Town Called Panic* seems to retain a strong sense of cinematic beauty, captivate its viewers in the drama, and humanize its principal actor-figurines. How it does so may provide insight into a translation of the concept of *photogenie* to animated film.

Physical gestures in *A Town Called Panic* approximate or signify real action and, in doing so, serve as critical anchors of characterization. In the case of policeman and postman, gestures derived from occupational stereotypes symbolize their respective characters’ literal role in the movie. The policeman always has one arm up in an enforcement of law and the postman has his arm around a messenger bag over his shoulder. Because these roles are fundamental to their existence, the two are rarely seen without their corresponding gestures, even when contextually inappropriate. As a result, these gestures are not directly useful to interpret character, but are important visual signals of personality and function. The farmer, Steven, is perhaps a more conspicuous example of physical action: his absurd, frenzied character is mirrored in a morning routine of even more incongruous physical acts. He executes slick backflips to enter and exit bath tubs; levitates over oversized toast, chomping off head-sized chunks in each go; and finishes his coffee in the instant between crashing into one side of the cup and exiting out of the other. These motions are abstracted and exaggerated indicators of Steven’s true disposition. He is a man with perfected routine, driven by a sense of urgency, and, like any good rural figure, unconventional. Although we see that physical actions are excellent at developing the outlines of character, they leave details unconsidered and leave the onus of interpretation to the viewer.

The sound of *A Town Called Panic* has a cinematic dimension that simulates the nuances of Epstein’s close-up motion. Consequently, sound takes the principal role in developing the subtleties of character. Much of Epstein’s descriptive vocabulary for photogenie repurposes aural terms: he speaks of photogenie as a “musical phrase”
that captures nuances—“fundamental rhythms”—of activity and creates a sort of “euphony” in each scene (111a). It is not surprising, then, that the directors of A Town Called Panic draw upon sound to play a fundamental role in vitalizing their characters. During Horse’s birthday party, much of the night passes by with the camera fixed in a medium-long shot of the house. However, the diegetic sounds from the party are not diffused into ambient noise. Instead, a sonic deep-focus makes us privy to the developments of the party, and this is how we first experience Steven’s alcoholism and the policeman’s love for the party. Another simple instance of sound substituting for visual character development is found by returning to Cheval’s dream. Again, the restrictions imposed by the models create a situation where Cheval and Longrée’s love is visually less legitimate. However, sound offers a potential resolution to the issue: subtle wind chimes ring every time the two approach each other, substituting for the emotional expressions and gestures displayed by real lovers. In these subtle effects, we can find fine details unfulfilled by the visual aspects of the movie.

Together, a coordinated dance of sound and gesture offers a compelling characterization of the figures in the film. The sequence following Steven’s arrest is one of the few where his wife Janine is featured in the movie. She has two primary positions in the sequence: the first is with her arms up as she bangs on the prison door and the second is with her hands covering her face as she cries in her home. These two gestures divide her reaction into outrage and depression, and sound adds the humanity of suffering to these two templates. The indignant phase has a distinct sonic rhythm and tempo. Janine bangs on the door and then transitions into staccato cries to convey the sense of pounding fury. Her speech is at a rapid presto and the texture of her voice betrays her suffering as she wails: “Steven, Steven, Steven”. On the other hand, the second phase of her reaction has an entirely different sonic composition. Here, Janine’s newly conferred loneliness is brought out as her melancholy sobs are drowned out by Cheval, Indian, and Cowboy’s conversation. Her crying is an adagio drone that is no longer powerful. In the brief
span of 15 seconds, we experience—along with Janine—a dynamic range of emotions assisted by gesture and sound.

A Town Called Panic embodies a certain conception of photogenic driven by its manipulation of sound and gesture. As we have seen, much of this cinematic beauty exists—as in a ballet—in the phonogenic synchronization of the aural with the visual. Although we can find examples of more traditional photogenic scenes in the movie, sound—in the human voices of the animators and the conjuring of natural happenings—imbues the perpetual misadventure with an unmistakable humanity. In the blizzard scenes, the continuity of snowflakes across separate shots is a visual detail certainly greater for having been preserved on film and worthy of photogenic. Even in these scenes, however, it seems possible to argue that the photogenic effect can be traced back to the sounds and gestures of the characters that enliven the situation; the floating specks of white would not be as interesting if they were not accompanied by whistling winds, the heightened pitch of panicked voices, and all the visual and aural cues to harried activity and clumsy execution.

WORKS CITED


