Constructivist Animation for a Disappearing City: Hong Kong's *Mcdull* Series OR, Constructivist Animation as Archive: a visual ethnographer's site for cultural memory & dreams

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Linda LAI

(presentation version)

Since the works I'm going to discuss may not be something many people outside Hong Kong are familiar with, I would begin with some basic description of the work, followed by a 3-minute clip, before I concentrate on the idea of an archive, its relevance to the works in question, and the significance of the use of term.

The *Mcdull* series is actually two individual feature-length animation pictures, *My Life as Mcdull* (2001) and *Mcdull, prince de la bun* (2003). They have the same protagonists, a little pig and his single mother. There are many levels of continuity cutting through the two works, but they are basically two self-contained works. Both works engage with the difficulty and impossibility of story-telling. If there has to be a summary or synopsis of any sort, one may say that the two works are both about a pig/boy struggling to become something, his mother exhausting all methods to make her son somebody, and Hong Kong dreaming to put its name on the map of international affairs of significance – viewers know that all of these attempts are inconsequential. Almost as a form of compensation for the futility of narrativity, *Mcdull*'s makers present to us a bulk of spectacles that are fragmentary sampling of doings and makings at the micro-level of everyday life in Hong Kong. These

activities may look trivial, non-sense and neurotic, but are all loosely subsumed under

the burden of globalization.   Although there are significant differences between the

first and the second feature, I've chosen a three-minute clip from the 2nd feature,

which I think covers the characteristics of both.   The clip begins with the little pig

Mcdull in a typical lesson in his kindergarten, where he learns nothing but pragmatic

survival skills.   We also see *Mcdull* shake his legs, a compulsive habit unexplainable

and yet running through both films, except that the rhythm of leg-shaking seems to be

mysteriously connected to the basic rhythm of the urban space of Hong Kong where

construction, demolition and reconstruction never stop.[1]   We also get a sense of the

discursive flow of the visual story. [A 3-minute clip shown at this point…]

The *Mcdull* series first caught my attention for a series of contradicting features

that sit together uncomfortably.   The hand-drawn-style animation gives the picture

an immediate look of innocence and yet it is suggestive and unsettling.   The works

show the everyday activities of two pigs in a world in which no distinction is drawn

between humans, pigs and other animals, yet the minimal drama of the fantastic is set

against a backdrop of hyper-realism, composed of highly recognizable local Hong

Kong urban landmarks and commercial signage with geographic and perspectival

exactitude.   The animation picture's rhetorical units comprise mainly of

demonstrations, illustrations, admonition, and visual fragments with a documentary

function, yet what results is an enigmatic, unexpected, dream-like quality.   In a

nutshell, the works' surrealist spectacle is also implicated in the task of collecting and

showing, resulting in an ambiguous touch of historiography.

I have used the term "constructivist animation" in the title of my essay to refer

to the two works' digressive narrative design.   A constructivist method is one that

assembles and adds up, inventing relations that is more than the total sum of the parts.

Instead of telling a character-based, action-driven story with a proper beginning,

middle and end, the arrangement of narrative information is topical, thematic,

episodic and divergent.   These units, with titles such as "my school," "my mother,"

"my perfect world," all have "McDull" the little pig turned into the passive object

rather than the active protagonist of on-going events.   Together they present to

viewers a series of narrative impossibilities: the attempted stories have no

development, with only the exposition and the final resolution, just like the bed-time

stories that McDull's mother invents for him in view of the popularity of Harry Potter.

A prominent result of all this is an endless list of things that may or may not have any

tight relations but are nonetheless found contiguous on Hong Kong's urban surface.

This also refers to the local person's being unable to develop a story and constantly

jumping to conclusion… the two pieces' general anti-story narrative…. After a long

while, many things have happened in a series of digression, we realize that Mum is

still telling the story… McDull keeps interrupting his mother during the bed-time story session, "Mum, tell me stories about Harry Potter."   But Mum would think he is lack of filial piety.   In view of Harry Potter's popularity, Mum began to write her own "local" bed-time stories, and as a result she writes the story of "the Prince de la bun," which is the inconsequential story of nonsense and fragmentary fabrication, also the story of the absent father lost in his longings for the past and his origins.

The relative autonomy of the individual components in the two features prevents us from forcing upon the works any kind of deep structure: they remain spectacular as a system of surfaces.   Yet they are haunting to the memory for the lack of any obvious explanation due to the absence of an organic whole.

The use of a scientific, objective method to dialogue with the fascinating space of modernity has its precedence in the Surrealists in the 1920s, especially Pierre Naville's adoption of a popular science magazine's layout for *La Revolution surrealiste* (the Surrealist Revolution).   The document- or evidence-like design approach, and the heavy use of photographs matched by dense textual description, only enhanced the enigmatic, unexpected, dream-like quality.[2]

Adopting the language of animation picture, which is almost synonymous with children's cinema, the two films turn naivety and innocence into the weapon of mockery; obsession with food and compulsive bodily movement into everyday drama;

and lived out personal fantasy into ecstasies of urban existence.   It is the collage

method, alluding to surrealism, which gives the *Mcdull* series its subversive edge.

The compilation quality of recognizable street scenes, architectures and landmarks at

once signifies the urban space of Hong Kong and alienates the viewer with the unreal

and the impossible, or perhaps a sense of in-between-ness at once familiar and

strange.

Switch in methodology: from textual exegesis to ethnography

My essay begins with the examination of the two works to make sense of the

peculiar use of animation to invent a language of <u>political commentary</u>.   A useful

reference I picked up at an early stage is Terry Warburton's "Cartoon and Teachers:

mediated visual images as data" [collected in the anthology *Image-based Research*

(edited by Jon Prosser). (Warburton in Prosser, 1998)], in which he studies social

lampoon of education in British newspaper cartoons, a highly stylized visual form

comparable to animation which I'm studying. The value of Warburton's piece is his

treating cartoons as constituting a field of research data.   Besides, the procedural

laying out of how he moves from visual depiction to create an inventory of the

signified, followed by the analysis of cultural-specific connotations, and finally the

teasing out of the many embedded narrative threads.

In my project, I have abandoned Warburton's semiotics approach. Instead, I

began with stock-taking manifest audio-visual information for immediate

classification, then moved on to mapping the significant categories to those in the

broader social-cultural terrain. My argument is that a lot of what seems to form a

signification system in the *Mcdull* series are actually the play of the signifiers for its

performance value rather than for structured representation. In many cases,

everything we see is the exact illustration of what we hear, and sometimes we are

simply told that something is there but cannot be explained. The emphasis on the

surface and what is obvious to the aural visual senses heightens the visual and speech

elements as objects to be collected and resembled. Moving away from

textual/narrative study, from questions of signification and cultural representation, I

appeal to a new set of critical/analytic vocabulary derived from my role as a visual

ethnographer, and from the two works as a site of collectibles, thus the idea of a folk

archive. As an ethnographer, my task is not to look at the *Mcdull* series as a field of

meanings for interpretive excavation but to classify recordable components. The

works in question are rather explicit and unambiguous in their display of meanings

anyway, at least so to the local audience. Audio-visual components are comparable

to objects: they are studied as units on display and for the frequency of their repetitive

presence.

As an ethnographic exercise, my analysis shifts to the process of the construction of social knowledge and its legitimacy.   The series' narrative strategy, which minimizes causal treatment, enhances the isolation of individual moments and segments as autonomous units.   The individuation of visual and audio spectacles, too, heightens the "attraction" effect of the images on the viewers.   Here I want to emphasize that the quality of a mnemonic system is materialist at the same time potential: materialist, as it is cleansed of abstraction and value assertion; potential, because the components of an archive are free for selective usage by those who want to tap its commemorative value.

A recent, emerging trend in local artistic activities I need to tie in is the making of an archive as creative projects and interventionist tactics, as well as and the artists' multiple roles as not only author, but also collector of material culture and critic of local politics.   The MAP office, run by two French architects with the collaboration of local scholars, turns the urban space of Hong Kong into a big "laboratory," which is also the title of their publications.   Their archival style photography projects churn out an open inventory of architectural shapes and structures in the constructed space of Hong Kong.   More critical examples include Tozar Pak's catalogue-like art book on the signature event of July 1 demonstration (after June 4th commemoration), which is full of lists of things gathered after random rules and principles; Dong Kai-cheong's

novel *Visible City*,[3] a tribute as much as the parody of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*,

as well as his short story collection *The Catalogue*, with names of objects as the title

and subject matter of each of the stories; and Stephen Chow's cinema of non-sense,

the ensemble of colloquial Cantonese dialect and norms of film and story genres,

which I have written about in an essay published a few years ago titled "Film and

Enigmatization"; and the list should be much longer.

The shift from the reading of the animation pictures as texts embedded with

meanings to the use of the works as "archive" necessarily transforms the

epistemological status of the units or members of the list.   An overview of key

definitions of the word "archive" finds many specific features beyond that of a place

or collection of records and documents.   The most notable one is the archive's

retaining power – being a long-term storage space, allowing users to keep returning to

extract new elements.   Built with a basic certain sense of order, an archive does not

necessarily privilege immediate active use, but rather seeks to make information

available.   A system that ensures the stored records to be extractable is essential.

This also means that the content of an archive is always waiting to be turned into

something more structured and interpreted.   The role of <u>preservation</u> rather than that

of <u>communication</u> and <u>dissemination</u> is stressed.   In this light, the *Mcdull* series'

topical emphasis and divergent framework heighten the works' retaining power and

historiographic potentials.   There seems to be an unlimited number of discourses,

lessons to learn, hidden stories to narrate, relations to form etc., that can be generated

from the *Mcdull* series' body of objects to produce new knowledge.   The meandering

discursive flow thus frees the collectibles of the archive from the burden of coherent

stories for a more open-ended game of connectivity and commemoration exercises.

   Douglas Harper points out that anthropology, as it emerged at the end of the

19th century, was primarily a science of classification.[4]   The materials collected, be it

a photograph, a physical object or field notes based on observation, are **to be labeled**

for their potential use.[5]   Citing the Bateson and Mead photographic project as an

example, he calls attention to the method of how the catalogued and sorted images –

for the purpose of presenting several perspectives on a single subject.[6]   Photography

in examples as such is thought of as "reflection" rather than "interpretation."[7]   My

approach to the McDull series abandons the binary opposition of usage.   The

"attraction" quality of the animation picture is neither only reflective nor

interpretative.

   So what exactly is stored in the *Mcdull* series as an archive?   It is an inventory

of manners of speech, catch words created by the ordinary people, minimal gestures,

punch lines in which top-down ideologies are embedded, beliefs and sentiments,

images of old Hong Kong and contemporary Hong Kong, old and contemporary

legends, food, popular hobbies and leisure, schooling, common sense for survival, the

cult of entrepreneurialism, moments of collective pride and so on…all in fragments.

The most interesting records of all are the variety of speech forms a local person

experiences – from the sound bites of tv commercials, radio announcement, rhetoric

in salesmanship, the tone of a teachers, a Chaozhou accent with reminds us of tycoon

Li Ka-shing, a mother's grumbles with her child and chit-chats with other mothers.

The v.o. is sometimes little pig Mcdull's, other times teenage or adult Mcdull

recalling the past.   It is a kind of urban soundscape in which the ordinary individual

is constantly interpellated – to be a good student, good son, good consumer, and most

of all a willing subject ready to think big as a global citizen and therefore adjust his or

her life goals.

Not only have I found myself the new role as a visual ethnographer, analyzing

visual documents like the *Mcdull* series, but there is also the animation maker, who

has turned himself into a collector, a cataloguer, and an ethnographer via audio-visual

forms.   As said, my argument of the animation maker as an ethnographer rests on my

analysis of the works' narrative mode and the strong "attraction" quality in the Tom

Gunning sense of the term; while my job as a visual ethnographer would be to isolate

these attraction components to map them on to other fictional and factual realities in

the everyday culture of Hong Kong.

Hector Rodriguez's analysis of the loose kungfu series on the martial art master Huang Feihong produced throughout the 1950s and 1960s helps to open up another dimension to my view of the animator as ethnographer and archivist.[8]   The 100 something films involved educate viewers on the distinction between the northern and southern styles of martial arts as well as folk customs of the various Chinese festivals. In his essay, he suggests the effort to preserve and collect folk culture as a quality emblematic of modern Chinese intellectuals and artists, which explains the series' intense regional flavor resulting from heavy citation of folk practices.[9]   Such an unstated assumption on a contemporary Chinese filmmaker's vocation to actively preserve folk culture sometimes gains urgency when the need to reinstate a local identity…. On a more general level, Rodriguez argues for cinema, whether fiction or documentary, being "a vehicle of historical documentation."

What else is unique about *Mcdull* as an archive?   In my view it is the incommensurability of method and purpose that I pinpointed in my introduction.   On one level, animation occupies a space somewhat between life and art, which in Bakhtin's view is a unique quality of spectacles.   Compared to live action films, animation pictures draw more attention to the pleasure of the eyes, especially how things are set to motions.   As spectacles for the eyes, the two animation pictures are themselves commentaries on the inadequacy of cinematic realism in HK cinema to

capture what really captivates the five senses of the everyday person and what really

carries away an urban drifter.   With the constant switch of style and method, from

moment to moment, from one segment to another, one travels from lyricism to

caricature, know-how demonstrations, illustrated lectures, to abstraction.   The close

mimesis of urban surfaces is substantiated by the scoring of the underlying rhythm

and order of motions, thus the texture of moods exteriorized visually.

Qualification for visual ethnography…

Gillian Rose calls it a growing discourse that "the visual is central to the cultural

construction of social life in contemporary Western societies," a move away from

Stuart Hall's focus on individual person's meaning-making.[10]   Marcus Banks,

however, contends that "not all images use in anthropology can or should be

considered as visual anthropology."   **To qualify for visual anthropology**, or

ethnographic investigation, the study of visible cultural forms has to: first, be

concerned with interpretation that seeks to understand cultural thoughts and action

within the local context; second, to help to illumine the gap between the global

situation and local forms; and third, be underpinned by long-term participant

observation and local language proficiency.[11]

"The anthropological approach to film and photography has been largely anti-aesthetic and focused upon the technological and methodological."   "There are almost no studies of non-ethnographic film… There is little explicit anthropological consideration given to the properties of film as a medium of record."[12]   **And this is where my focus on the Mcdull series as "folk archive" comes in**.

The basis of new ethnography is to think of ethnography as "partial truth" rather than "complete document," partly because culture is "not precisely boundaries" and partly because it "continuously evolves."[13]   As a form of analysis and critique, new ethnography "is most usefully thought of as a created tale," drawing upon narrative, emphasizing a particular "point of view, voice, and experience of author."[14]

This, I hope, provides a tentative framework for further clarification of how the quality of the spectacular in *Mcdull* can partake in the task of new ethnography.

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[1] Leg-shaking is associated with nervous, anxiety, a compulsive action in moments of restlessness, or in character Mcdull's terms, "I shake my legs when I don't want to move but don't want to sit still or go anywhere either."

[2] See Ian Walker's City Gorged with Dreams.

[3] Dong Qizhang (Dung Kai-cheung), 1998: Visible Cities [V cheng fan sheng lu]. Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong.

[4] Douglas Harper, "An Argument for Visual Sociology," in Jon Prosser (ed.) *Image-based Research*.   RoutledgeFalmer, New York, 1998.   Pp. 24-41.

[5] Ibid., p. 25.

[6] Ibid., p. 26.

[7] Ibid., p. 27.

[8] Hector Rodriguez, "Hong Kong popular culture as an interpretive arena: the Huang Feihong film series," in *Screen* 38:1 spring 1997, pp. 1-24.

[9] Ibid., p. 7

[10] Gillian Rose, 2001: *Visual Methodologies: an introduction to the interpretation of visual* materials; Sage, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, p. 6.

[11] Marcus Banks, 1998: "Visual Anthropology: image, object and interpretation," in Jon Prosser (ed.) *Image-based Research*; RoutledgeFalmer, New York, p. 11.

[12] Ibid., p. 14.

[13] Harper, p. 30.

[14] Ibid., p. 31.

Post-script: Notes on floor discussion after the presentation:
-was asked about the theoretical substantiation of the idea of surfaces (asked what it means and whether it's the same thing in Rey Chow's *Primitive Passion*…): my position is mainly to set up the "surface" emphasis as the diametrical opposite of depth hermeneutics… More relevant to the discussion of Mcdull was Deleuze's discussion in *A Thousand Plateau* – the emphasis on the overlaying of diverse components to form textured surfaces, and the impossibility of isolated each components to deduce the abstract whole…   There is, of course, a lot to explore regarding the Surrealists' fascination with photography, especially the emphasis of photography as a façade, underpinned by the tension between the indexical immediacy of the photographic image and the impermanence embodied in the images of a frozen moment.
-more on the differences of the two works…
-more on the use of sound – the technology of subjectivity
-more on visual anthropology
-more focused discussion on the epistemological status of the fragments
-on animation pictures…