

## Panel F2

Sala delle Colonne 1

### Animation and Memory: Forms, Methods, Contexts, Practices



Nicholas Miller

#### Remains to Be Seen': Animation and the Matter of Memory in Chris Sullivan's *Consuming Spirits*

In his forthcoming meditation on the human perception of time, *Why Time Flies: A Mostly Scientific Investigation* (Simon & Schuster, 2017), Alan Burdick argues that what distinguishes a modern from a classical psychology of temporality is the contemporary notion that the present is not an element we inhabit but, in fact, a memory, one that “we create for ourselves over and over, moment by moment.” The implications of this description, namely that memory is a continuous and sequential creative praxis operating in a manner that structurally resembles animation is, if not entirely intended by Burdick, intriguing. Among other questions it raises is that of memory as an expressive form, instead of a faculty of mental retrieval as it is typically understood.

This paper explores the concept of memory as a fundamentally creative rather than perceptual faculty and investigates animation as a powerful material and structural model for memory's operational *techne*, its poiesis as an expressive form. In particular, I examine *Consuming Spirits* (2012), Chris Sullivan's beautiful, difficult, and painstakingly handcrafted work of experimental animation, to demonstrate that it is precisely the element of craft, the errant execution of the handmade, that connects traditional animation as an expressive form so closely with the work of memory.

*Consuming Spirits* tells the story of a fragmented family whose members, refugees of the past, are haunted by the spectres of addiction, sexual betrayal, and emotional abandonment. Midway through the film's labyrinthine narrative, the mummified remains of a human corpse are discovered in some local woods. The body, presumed to be that of a Native American shaman, is transferred to an exhibit at the local natural history museum, the town paper reporting the news under the punningly suggestive headline, “Remains to Be Seen.” This phrase, along with the body it describes, speaks to the complexity and eloquence of the film's interest in memory: what “remains to be seen,” quite literally, is that the body of the presumed shaman lies at the crux of a bewildering tangle of traumatic memories involving foster care, adultery, drug abuse, mental illness, forced institutionalization, suicide, and murder.

Sullivan has described the film as “born from flashes of images....a fiction that had links to my actual childhood, which featured alcoholism and social service intervention.” That acknowledgement alone would qualify the film as a document deeply concerned with family memories, the debilitating effects they bestow, and the challenge and complexity of what remains to be seen in them. But the film's interest in memory reaches beyond autobiography. Its stunning and frequently jarring visual vocabulary, alternately comprised of animated cut-outs, drawn images, and photographs, impose a visually discontinuous effect on the story that replicates the lacunae and disruptions of memory itself. The viewer encounters characters as flat paper puppets and sketched figures whose pain, paradoxically, registers as uncomfortably, devastatingly true. The effect, so far from

alienating the viewer, is one of what Sullivan elsewhere called “negative joy,” a participatory intimacy in which, I argue, the viewer’s principal task is not that of voyeuristic watching, but of working alongside the characters to gather, arrange, and express the matter of memory.

## Biography

[NMiller@loyola.edu](mailto:NMiller@loyola.edu)

Nicholas Andrew Miller (Loyola University Maryland) is Associate Professor of English and Director of Film Studies at Loyola University Maryland. His areas of teaching and scholarly interest include film animation, early cinema, the intersections between modernist print and visual cultures, and twentieth-century Irish and British literature. He is currently at work on an interdisciplinary study of metamorphosis in modernist visual culture. He is the author of *Modernism, Ireland, and the Erotics of Memory* (Cambridge, 2002).