

Panel G1

Auditorium

Death, Life, and (Re)Animation

Lisa Bode

(Un)Dead Poets Society: Jim Clark's Animated Photography and Poetic Animism



A photograph is often considered a kind of opposite to animation, being characterized by stillness and a direct connection to physical reality. André Bazin famously situated photography in the lineage of embalming and the death mask (1960, 4) because it freezes the appearance of subjects at the exact moment in time when they appeared before the camera. If a photographic portrait captures and preserves something of the person in the image, what happens when the frozen faces in such images are made to move?

This paper focuses on the so-called 'poetryreincarnations' of Jim Clark, a poet and videographer who uses 2D image warping techniques to bring motion to the long-stilled features of nineteenth century and early twentieth century poets. In what Clark calls his "virtual movies," animated photographs of poets such as Walt Whitman, Wilfred Owen, and Emily Dickinson are paired with a recording of a voice, sometimes that of an actor, occasionally that of the poet themselves, reading one of their poems. The visual effect is often unsettling, as due to the technique used, the poets' features seem to melt and reform in strange combinations of stillness and motion, or contract and expand like facial accordions. They remind us of Alan Cholodenko's observation that the term 'to animate' has a doubled definition: to endow with life, and to endow with motion, and these two meanings are not always synonymous (2007). Machines and zombies move, but we do not say they are 'alive,' while the magic of animation can bestow inanimate objects such as the Pixar lamp or Jan Svankmajer's beefsteaks with an illusion of living consciousness. I draw upon Cholodenko's arguments about the nature of life and the nature of motion in animation to analyse these re-animated poets, as well as Ji-Hoon Kim's work on how animated photographs may activate a "subjunctive mode" of viewing, allowing us to imagine what "might have been" (2011, 375). I also consider the ways in which they are distinct from other digitally animated "posthumous performances" such as those of actors. This entails thinking about the interrelationship between the poem, its author, the reader, the animator, the photograph and the viewer/listener, and here I draw upon work by Lesley Wheeler on the "poetic voice" and authorial presence (2008). More broadly, this paper argues that those seeking to reanimate images of the dead for posthumous appearances need to consider the specific creative and professional identity of the dead subject, as this is where the key to pushing beyond undead motion to a retrieval of the subject's animism or life-force may lie.

References

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Biography

Lisa Bode is Lecturer in Film and Television Studies at The University of Queensland, Australia. Her research is concerned with understanding the intersections of digital animation with older media forms such as film and photography, and the implications of these intersections for aesthetics, ethics, spectatorship, acting, stardom, illusionism, and cultural memory. Her work has been published in *Cinema Journal*, *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, and *Special Effects: New Histories, Theories, Contexts* (ed. Bob Rehak, Dan North, and Michael S. Duffy). Her first book, *Making Believe: Screen Performance and Special Effects in Popular Cinema*, will be published in 2017 by Rutgers University Press.