

Andrew Norman Wilson

27.01. – 25.02.2023

Clementin Seedorf, Cologne

In the Air Tonight

I first heard the urban legend behind Phil Collins' "In the Air Tonight" as a teenager while getting high in a friend's basement. According to the ritual of the legend, the song is played while a narrator tells the story, syncing the infamous analog drum break with the climax of the narrative. A friend of mine performed this ritual especially well, and the legend stuck with me, haunting my experience of the song into adulthood.

At the beginning of the pandemic, "In the Air Tonight" was on heavy rotation across several Los Angeles radio stations owned by the same media conglomerate. While driving on the Pacific Coast Highway one night, the song came on, and I noticed a woman who seemed to be lip-syncing along to it in the car next to me. Without hearing her voice, I watched her belt out the lyrics, then thrash her arms along to the drum break before turning off the highway. She was, of course, tuned into the same radio frequency as me, but the uncanniness of her puppeting the song that was playing in my car seemed to resonate with the mysterious legend.

Around the same time I made my online movie archive public and started to expand it as part of my nomadic cinema project *This Light*. I was watching movies every day and processing hundreds of files, many submitted by *This Light* users around the world.

I started writing my own version of the "In the Air Tonight" urban legend while extracting establishing and transitional shots from films made around the same time the song was released in the early 1980s; films with a neon noir aesthetic that could have featured the song on their soundtracks, like Hal Ashby's *8 Million Ways to Die*, Paul Schrader's *American Gigolo*, and Brian De Palma's *Body Double*. My dissociation of the clips from their sources through color correction and cropping allowed the varied shots to cohere within my new narrative, rather than acquiescing to referentiality.

The first half of *In the Air Tonight* (2020) operates as a film noir due through the tone of the song and noirish qualities I could identify in the urban legend: a morally ambivalent protagonist within an oneiric, flashback-driven crime mystery narrated in the first person. I tried to adhere to the genre's tendency to withhold poetic language so that the story could unfold procedurally, and allow for the poetry to emerge through the structural shift of the overall narrative, where it ends with the realization that all three men at the beach that night were one. And so the plot closure aligns with the closure of Phil's psychic imbalance, or at least his recognition of it.

Then there's a genre shift to a more essayistic second half in which the imagery switches to an empty Malibu mansion — presumably Phil's — though it's actually a real estate video of a mansion in Marbella, Spain. This sequence allows Slipperman to wax poetic a bit more freely about his own nostalgia for a particular moment in music history, while also reflecting on Phil's Icarus complex and compromises of artistic integrity.

Reality Models

Growing up, a family friend had a VHS tape of an educational home video series called "Peppermint Park" that was produced in the 1980s by a group of investors seeking to profit off the narrative models that "Sesame Street" invented for educational children's entertainment.

I remember being terrified of an unexplained dance sequence by a breakaway marionette dressed to look like a scarecrow. A few years ago, clips from "Peppermint Park" resurfaced on Youtube, and my relationship with the dancing scarecrow shifted from horror to obsession.

Reality Models (2016) is a shot-by-shot recreation of that dance sequence, recorded on VHS. I then added a backstage scene shot on HD video that reveals the puppet as its own puppeteer. On the surface, we see an artist performing and then confronting its private self backstage.

But a very literal approach to narrative technique determined the composition of the mise-en-scène: the straw-man puppet(s) function(s) as literary strawmen through their argument, the red herring lure functions as a red herring, and the loose ends of the wires after the puppet(s) explode(s) function as loose ends (with narrative hooks). Even the fridge participates in what in TV narratology is known as “fridge logic” – how is it on the stage at the beginning of the dance sequence? Or is that still backstage? And if so, how does the hungry puppet walk backstage after dancing?

Beneath this second layer is the original model, which came to me while reading about a discovery made by physicist Aaron O’Connell, in which he proved that an object visible to the naked human eye can both oscillate and not oscillate at the same time. Therefore, objects can be in two places at once. This inverts a lot of modern thought in which existing means being consistent, while ceasing to exist means being inconsistent. Or that classical logic – where things are either A or B, but never A and B at the same time – is being replaced by a quantum logic which says that all future possibilities exist in the present.

This quantum model, in which existence entails inconsistency, has a formal relationship to the other two more relatable narrative layers: an entity moving towards death in quantum logic could be said to parallel the narrative convention of moving towards closure in cinema and literature. The frequency and duration of the action on the screen (plot) synchronizes ever more tightly with the action in the chronological sequence of events (story). Plot and story therefore arrive at a 1:1 ratio, a consistency, through narrative closure.

Popeye the Mrs. Bicentennial Man

Popeye, Toys, Mrs. Doubtfire, Jumanji, Patch Adams, Hook, The Birdcage, Jack, What Dreams May Come, One Hour Photo... Robin Williams loomed larger in my childhood imagination than any other actor. Typically casted in more PG than PG-13 movies, Robin was the superstar the whole family could appreciate, more so than Jim Carrey or Adam Sandler.

In 2014 I was commissioned to make a cover for the summer issue of CURA. Magazine. I designed the image as if it were the surface of a body being prepared for a magazine - airbrushed, tanned (with a tanning decal), lip glossed, and tattooed. I wanted to include an internationally recognizable celebrity to draw in consumers, and chose to pierce the “skin” with the face of Robin Williams. In June of that year the issue was released.

Two months later, Robin committed suicide. Shortly thereafter, I bought a plaster cast of Robin’s head from a Hollywood prop studio that had been made when he was still alive. With the face cast in my hands, it seemed to anticipate his death – it not only required him to “play dead” during the making of the mold, it also outlived him, turning his facial form into a replicable commemoration.

I scanned the cast and worked with a 3D artist to open its eyes and give it a grimace characteristic of Robin’s many characters. I also scanned an electrical alligator clip that the modeler then used to pinch Robin’s eyebrow in virtual space. The clip, but not its effect, was then removed and the model was 3D printed.

Elements of various characters Robin played throughout his career have been combined into the version in this exhibition. As a videomaker producing an object, I think about it in relation to nonlinear editing, in which digital copies of raw footage (Robin’s face) are copied, and then only the copy is then edited. Nonlinear sculpture, or a memory-object in time.