Taking Out the Trash

With *Between Garbage and Science*, Pierre Hébert drags the icon of art animation into the digital age

*Found subject: A sample sketch from Pierre Hébert's Between Garbage and Science*
by Chris J. Robinson

Too many of us perceive animation as being limited to the disposable fables of Walt Disney and other cartoon-candy salesmen. It's understandable. Such candy is sold everywhere you turn, and it tastes good. But, as poetry is to paperback novels, “personal animation”—or, as some prefer, “art animation”—is to Snow White et al. Relegated to the margins (that is, to film, festivals and museums), this more mature and contemplative style of animation has a revolutionary spokesperson in Canadian artist Pierre Hébert, whose films—as well as his latest multimedia collaboration with avant-garde musician Bob Ostertag—are the subject of a two-day program at Walker Art Center (on Friday, September 14 and Thursday, September 20).

Thanks largely to his anthropological background, and to the influential presence of Norman McLaren (art animation’s answer to Disney), the Québécois Hébert spent 34 years, until 1999, as an animator, director, and producer at Canada’s National Film Board (NFB). While McLaren’s acclaimed, cameraless drawing on celluloid placed the NFB at the forefront of animation as an artistic endeavor and social tool, Hébert’s late-Sixties works—including “Op Hop” and “Around Perception” (the latter being an early experiment in computer animation)—displayed an almost scientific approach to optics and perception, characterized by geometrical shapes that flicker and float randomly across the screen. Then, in the Seventies, Hébert began to combine his artistic innovation with political commentary: In “Between Dog and Wolf,” for example, the artist mixed a variety of techniques (including cutout and scratch animation) into a multilevel narrative that merged Brecht dialogue with somber images of people waiting at a bus station. Alas, the animator’s output began to appear reductive and didactic during this phase—not to mention that its formal complexity distanced the work from those whom Hébert claimed it was speaking to and for.

The turning point for Hébert came with “Souvenirs de guerre (Memories of War),” made in 1982 (and screening at the Walker on Friday at 8:00 p.m. along with two other Hébert films). Inspired by the birth of his son, and by the war in Afghanistan, the artist employed a mix of cutout animation and live-action images to create an ominous world on the brink of apocalypse; the film finds Hébert wondering how his boy will survive in a violent world where children are little more than “leaves on a tree.”

Moving far beyond the earlier films’ simplistic connections between family, labor, and war, “Souvenirs de guerre” reveals us as participants in our own destruction, and asks whether we might also participate in our own salvation.

In terms of his early multimedia performances, the challenge for Hébert was to find a way to improvise not just sounds, but images as well. Eventually experimenting with film loops in the projector, he made “La lettre d’amour” (“Love Letter”), a filmed performance from 1988 that evolved out of workshops conducted by him and his wife, writer Sylvie Massicotte. Expanding their scope to include music and dance performances (by Robert Marcel Lepage and Louise Bedard, respectively), Hébert and Massicotte allowed each collaborator to riff jazz-style on the subject at hand: the myriad thoughts and emotions that awaited the recipient of a love letter. Unfortunately, “La lettre d’amour” stops short of capturing the freedom and tension of artistic improvisation—or of a love letter. The dance element, for instance, is reduced to a poorly flickering image on a TV screen.

Following this failed but fascinating experiment, Hébert completed La plante humaine (The Human Plant) in 1996. His first feature-length film, it combines live action and scratch animation in relating the rather uneventful life of a retired librarian named Michel, whose days are spent walking his dog, reading traditional African stories, and watching television newscasts. As this couch potato amasses a variety of knowledge, only to do nothing with it, Hébert playfully alludes to his old activist days—leading his audience to expect a critique of Gulf War-era apathy, but not succumbing to such an easy target of attack. Rather, Michel is merely observed—and we, like him, are left to fumble for our own solutions.

La plante humaine asks: What hope is there if we can no longer actively participate in, let alone change, the direction of our world? For Hébert, the answer is a modest one. In the film’s final scene, Michel leaves his house and visits the local library, where he passes his stories along to a group of children; our ability to share our knowledge and experiences with one another, it seems, augurs well for the future. Yet the filmmaker throws another loop into the works, as the previously animated slackers has now become a well-dressed live-action character. Is this professorial type merely a projection of Michel’s psyche? Indeed, has our hero even left the house? Suggesting that such a dream may be more “real” than mundane reality, Hébert subverts the common practice of interpreting live action images as authentic, and reminds us (à la theorist Walter Benjamin) that all images are constructed from a particular point of view.

Given this message, it’s perhaps no wonder that Hébert has chosen to play even more elaborately with the layers of reality and artifice in his latest work, Between Garbage and Science, a fully digital multimedia effort (presented Thursday, September 20 at 8:00 p.m.), finds Hébert collaborating with so-called dumpster-diving musician Bob Ostertag on an hourlong exploration of the disposability of modern culture. In the piece, the animator’s digital-video camera is connected to a specially designed drawing table and a PowerBook packed with QuickTime images of news footage, while Ostertag’s own PowerBook contains a variety of music samples ready for all manner of improvised manipulation. Similarly tweaking the sequence and pace of his data (along with its color and texture), Hébert relies on live action material to make up only 20 percent of the whole; the rest derives from spontaneously created moving pictures using cutout and drawn animation techniques along with paint on glass and chalk on board. That one or both computers might crash during the performance—a possibility that no PowerBook user could fail to imagine—adds to the inherent drama of the piece, and also to the artists’ message about the impermanence of technoculture.

In a sense, Between Garbage and Science marks Hébert’s return to the experimentalism of his early films—and his anticipation of things to come. As independent animation has become more, well, independent over the last 40 years (for better and worse), the artist’s recent work seems an attempt to minimize the insularity of the form, to open it up to new creative and democratic possibilities. Somewhere between technology and the trash bin, Hébert suggests, is a place where anyone can draw distinction.