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DEATHS, FINGERPRINTS, AND SCREENS

WHEN FILM DIED, IT DIED FAST. That's what I tell my students as spring comes and we near the end of the second half of my film history course. Within a few years—2010ish to 2013ish—everything was suddenly shot, edited, and released on digital film, and 35mm projectors—once the essence of shopping-mall movie-theatre commerce—became exotic objects. I challenge you to find a single one still installed in any *commercial* movie theatre in Halifax.

In this light, Nick Park's latest feature, *Early Man* (2018), feels prehistoric indeed. It tells the story of a transition not so unlike the transition to digital film: the giving way of the Stone Age to the Bronze Age. It's overall a very silly little story about a scrappy band of cavemen whose idyllic valley is suddenly taken over by a group of pushy, greedy metal-mining imperialists, who are led by the preposterously imperious, faux-French-accent-having Lord Nooth. The narrative comes to a head when the cave dwellers and metal mongers make a bet: the cavemen will get to keep their valley if they can defeat the poncy bronzers in a game of soccer. The cavemen take to training slowly—*very* slowly. Cave paintings seem to indicate that their ancestors invented the sport, but further inspection reveals, in the words of Lord Nooth, that “your people were really *crap* at football!” As the game unfolds, various forms of suspense and silliness ensue.

The narrative, then, is not much more than sweet will-the-underdog-triumph kind of stuff. That's true of a lot of Park's films, all of which have been produced by Aardman Studios—the production company founded by *Early Man* producer Peter Lord in the 1970s. Park and Aardman breathed a tremendous amount of new life into claymation in the 1990s with a series of short films that were at once quiet, minimalistic, and so very wondrously English, but also chaotic, technically advanced, and absolutely cutting edge in terms of what you could do with a few mounds of clay shot one frame at a time. The Wallace and Gromit shorts—especially *The Wrong Trousers*

(1993) and *A Close Shave* (1995)—were, for me, symbols of the profound goodness of mirthful art. The feature films that followed never rose to that level, but they were still intensely pleasurable in a comfortingly English kind of way. Something similar was true of Aardman's *Shaun the Sheep*, which began as an utterly wondrous television series directed by Richard Starzak and Christopher Sadler (2007-2016) and then morphed into a perfectly enjoyable feature film directed by Richard Starzak and Mark Burton (2015).

Early Man, in essence, skips the first part of this Aardman evolution—that is, the wondrous and life-affirming part—and starts right at the second part—that is, the not-great-but-still-funny-enough-to-justify-investing-two-hours part. (You could say something similar about Aardman's *Chicken Run* from 2000.) *Early Man*'s narrative is completely formulaic, with predictably-proportioned elements of narrative tension, setbacks, triumph, etc. Much like the Muppet movies, it represents the full domestication of an artist who really works best in shorter-length formats—the three-minute sketch for Jim Henson and the twenty-minute short for Park—but who clearly longs for the wider audience that comes with feature films. The fit between Park's vision and the broad canvas of the feature-length format of *Early Man* is obviously awkward, as was late Henson work like *Labyrinth* (1986). Okay, maybe *Early Man* is not as awkward as *Labyrinth*, but something is discernibly, viscerally not quite right.

That is in no small part because the pleasures of these Aardman animations are basically non-narrative. They are about the intonation of the voices (or, in the case of *Shaun the Sheep*, the grunts and bahs), the enormous number of different ways the artists find to express blank looks, the play of earth tones, and the alterations between slowness and breakneck speeds. That kind of thing is not exactly lost in *Early Man*, but it is pushed to the side by that Lord Nooth of contemporary visual culture—that is, the classical Hollywood narrative template. The element of wonder that still remains is the fingerprint of the artists. Like all of Aardman's productions, the figures are visibly hand-crafted and traces of the artists' digits are evident on each of the characters. It's a pleasant reminder that digital film can still accommodate the artisanal vision of a director like Park.

No, the problem here is not that Aardman emerged in the film era and must now make films in the digital era. Both technologies can accommodate cinema made by hand, and *Early Man* does provide happy confirmation of that, however secondarily. The problem runs deeper than that. Aardman

emerged, like the Jim Henson Company, in a world that could accommodate lots of different styles, lengths, and narrative approaches (including the approach of just forgetting about the narrative altogether). That world has been fading since the 1980s, as Anglophone television (especially PBS, which was so important for Henson, and the BBC, which was so important for Aardman) either radically contracts or more rigorously commercializes (or sometimes both). That is the death I'm more worried about, and it has been much slower—and more significant—than the death of film.

“You’ve got to see it on a big screen.” For most people, not just cinephiles, this is synonymous with “It’s a terrific film.” A business trip to Montreal last year clarified this cliché. I found myself with a free half-day and thus with enough time to see either Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight* (2016) at the Cineplex theatre, which has moved into what was once the Forum, or Raoul Peck’s *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) at the excellent art house Cinéma du Parc (oddly enough in the basement of a shopping mall right next to the food court). I did not have time to see them both, so I chose *Moonlight*.

It was an excellent choice. I was caught off guard by the sheer grimness of the narrative, which was not at all grim in the way I was expecting. Visually speaking, however, the film is nothing short of a revelation. Jenkins’ earlier work, including some of his masterful shorts (especially *King’s Gym*, his 2013 portrait of San Francisco’s boxing mecca, all of three minutes long and easily available with a membership to the streaming site fandor.com) showed him to be a bona fide stylist with a searching and restless desire to find what can only be done in cinema. *Moonlight* is the full-on realization of this search. It’s defined not only by languorous duration, as we see in an early sequence in the apartment of Juan and Teresa (the film’s most loving, lasting relationship), the climactic reunion between childhood friends in a quiet diner, and the now-legendary sequence of learning to swim in the ocean. It’s also defined by sharp, powerful bursts of colour and movement—abstraction that is fully mimetic in a way that cinema makes especially possible.

Holding forth in the 1999 documentary *Cinéma Vérité: Defining the Moment* on what made impressionist painting revelatory, the great American documentarian D. A. Pennebaker recalls how, as the nineteenth century wound down, people no longer wanted to see simple technical perfection: “I think of [Paul] Cézanne coming along, when everyone had to swat the

flies on the *trompe-l'œil* Dutch pictures or they weren't any good, and he's suddenly saying, 'Forget the fucking flies. Look at this schmeer!' And everybody said, 'What schmeer? Get it out of here!' In the beginning it had to be really hard. . . . [But] eventually everybody said, "Those schmeers were great! I want some more of those schmeers. Who's making those schmeers these days?" These days, those schmeers are being made by directors like Jenkins, and it is necessary to see them on a big screen if you want to take in the play of colour, movement, and light, just as a postcard wasn't enough for someone who wanted to see what Cézanne was doing.

I made the right choice in Montreal for a different, more unexpected reason. I finally saw *I Am Not Your Negro* on DVD in my study at home, and that was the perfect medium to appreciate its special magic. Don't get me wrong: Peck (who served as Haiti's Minister of Culture from 1996-1997) is also a master stylist, and one of my all-time favourite essay films is his *Lumumba, la mort d'un prophète* (1990). But *I Am Not Your Negro*, which builds its dense visual and sonic montage around an unfinished manuscript by African-American writer James Baldwin, is a very different work. It is in essence a series of sketches that enters into a dialogue with a literary object whose fragmented, tentative quality can also be usefully, if imperfectly, compared to a sketch. Here the relevant visual-art connection is not with Cézanne's canvases but rather with something like Vincent van Gogh's drawing *Pollard Birches* (1884), which expresses much (although certainly not all) of its sense of depth, movement, and possibility through absence and distance. It feels right to look at this as the tentative working material that it is, and calling it that takes nothing away from its beauty, power, and insight into the life rhythms of those whom much of visual art has ignored. That's just as true of *I Am Not Your Negro*, whose rough, unfinished quality is fully of a piece with its historical analysis of the incomplete nature of the Civil Rights Movement and its uncertainty about exactly which way the arc of history will bend. Seeing it on the same screen that is used to write, revise, and work with all manner of words and images was as much of a revelation as what I experienced with *Moonlight* at the Forum. *I Am Not Your Negro* is a terrific film. You've got to see it on a small screen.