

HAPPY ENDINGS AND BLOWING IT ALL TO HELL - A COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF CLASSIC AND MODERN ANIMATIONS FROM BOZZETTO, BAKSHI, AND PIXAR

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The interrogation of diaspora, diasporic nostalgia and diasporic reconstruction are intertwined in films such as *The Incredibles* (Bird, 2004), *WALL-E* (Stanton, 2008), *Fritz the Cat* (Bakshi, 1972) and *Allegro non Troppo* (Bozzetto, 1976). In each of these works, extremely dark and subtle explorations are made into diaspora, its mechanisms, and its fallout. These strikingly different films all purport a happy ending for mankind, even when that happy ending is annihilation. These films share a playful sense of the inevitable, a joy in complete obliteration.

These films use one of history's finest comedic devices – diaspora. Triggered by rampant destruction (Stern, 2010) necessitating physical upheaval, the subsequent suspension of culturally appropriate activities permits a wide range of farcical opportunities. The faux pas of being beyond one's cultural understanding is obvious in each of these works; and in placing people in situations that are diasporic and comedic, there is an assumption of relationship – of universal 'truth'. In a modern context, while diasporas are ongoing, the target audience these media address no longer demands dispersion or repatriation. The perceivable need for mass upheaval is markedly absent. In this absence, diaspora ceases to have relevance, except through its history. It is linked to nostalgia — a nostalgia for the need to leave and to return, places to go back to, and for a cultural connectivity that demands the desire for repatriation (Baronian, (2006) .

The Incredibles begins in nostalgia – using an anachronistic 'newsreel' presentation, we are introduced to “the *Superhero Relocation Program*”, which echoes unpalatably of the Holocaust. More than this, in this sequence of initial plot exposition, we are able to see the original Supers – who and how they were before being forced underground, and the disaster that caused it to happen. We bear witness to this, so as to give weight to their altered habits in the film's diasporic phase.

Pixar uses a similar device in *WALL-E* to undertake initial plot exposition, which also is the telling of a diasporic event in the aftermath of destruction. In the opening minutes of the film, it is slowly revealed that a consumptive way of life has completely destroyed the Earth. *WALL-E* is one of many robots charged with the duty to clean up the mess of mankind – but this is a system corrupt. Broken-down robots and a world in disarray are testament to the failings of this delegation of responsibility. The assumption that automatons could do what humans should have is short-sighted and catastrophic. There is significant strength in this

political comment on the desire for power without its responsibility, the desire for leisure and luxury without its cost, the desire for a convenient world without its maintenance. The destructions here are not only physical ones that create diaspora, but also societal ones that instigate and perpetuate a loss of place. It is a self-imposed destruction, realised as a terminus for consumerism. Here, Pixar issues us a warning – if you mess this up, you have nowhere to go. There is no escape.

This idea is played off in *Allegro non Troppo*, made decades earlier but with the same bitter agenda. The metaphors presented are multiple; with the animator in shackles – a 'binding' contract of 'mutual respect', the orchestra housed like livestock and fed like prisoners, and the elitism with which the conductor and presenter stand above it all, dining on exotic foods and imported wine, highlighting a revelation in hierarchy. Its ill-placed supremacy echoes of Orwell's dismembering of the 'exploitation of the proletariat' (Leab, 2007) in *Animal Farm* (Halas & Batchelor, 1954). Here it is the same – totalitarianism is employed entirely to show the fragility of that construct. It inevitably fails, and as the diktat of the oppressors crumbles, their captives escape from the film into an unknown world beyond.

Fritz the Cat pokes at societal 'norms' until they unravel, which takes a heartbeat. Bakshi takes great care to show us the saprogenic nature of how society relates to diasporic groups and vice versa, focusing primarily on the African Americans of Harlem; but also making mention of his own Jewish diasporic heritage as a slightly saccharine contrast. Bakshi doesn't just play the racial prejudice card; he exposes that hatred as universal – perhaps the sole commonality among peoples: we are united in our dis-union. This fractious philosophy makes implosion inevitable, just as it is in *Allegro non Troppo*. *Fritz the Cat* erupts in riots and bloodshed, foreshadowing an even greater destructive crescendo awaiting Fritz, who absent-mindedly incites violence and devastation wherever he goes. Like Pixar and Bozzetto, Bakshi is letting us know we cannot run or hide from our own destructive nature. We have no better place to return to. Where Bakshi differs is in his counter-cultural agenda – if the world is going to hell, why not blow it up? It's crap anyway. In destruction lies the possibility of a better future, a non-future. As the release of *Allegro's* captives does not allow them a future we can perceive in the filmic world they occupy, Bakshi's release is the destruction of the filmic world. The result is the same; the suffering cannot go on. The enactment of violent endings is a statement that surely is as much a warning as *The Incredibles* or *WALL-E* has to offer.

It is interesting to consider these warnings as a desire for diasporic nostalgia. Is longing for a place to go back to, a nostalgic history - linked to a desire to escape current political structures gone wrong? The homogenisation of international politics, trade and 'the culture industry' (May, 1994) has left behind nowhere to escape to or return to. In the commodification of culture, nostalgia has no native place. Therefore this desirable state that cannot be achieved or returned to takes on the quality of being purely escapist. Diaspora is the ultimate escape, one that promises the annihilation of history, culture and practices in a seemingly stable system that is innately corrupt, festering, and set to explode. Bakshi, Bozzetto and Pixar

all clearly see and demarcate the limits of the social construct that is capitalism – “an immanent system that is constantly overcoming its own limitations, and then coming up against them once more in a broader form, because its fundamental limit is Capital itself.” (Derrida, 2001) The destructions within these films and their diasporic events exist as a cathartic expression of angst in the face of these societal limitations and ills. The restraints and traps of modern life and its relation to the romanticisation of the diasporic are obvious from this perspective. Haen and Weber express the underlying rationale for this joyous self-destructive catharsis: “Responses in media to social injustice convey a glorification of conflict and relational aggression... This engagement is a form of revenge fantasy” (Haen, Weber, 2009). The doling out of a punishment that outdoes the crime, that is the crime; that glorifies the crime – also examines and adjudicates the crime.

WALL E's destruction is a frightening extrapolation of consumptive culture, *Fritz the Cat* erupts in race hate and self-annihilation, *The Incredibles* plays out the hapless fate of a city at risk having dispersed its protective protagonists, and *Allegro non Troppo* lets the veneer of film magic slide away to reveal the bullshit and incompetencies of the Disney Dream; the industrial system it represents, and by extension, the greater societal system within which we all function. Each film takes a kernel of truth and adds to it, blows it up larger than life, makes it grandiose.

Diaspora has other qualities that are reflected in animation. Diasporic post-memorial experience is the memory of trauma shared between generations, and from within a culture to outside it. A strong example of this would be Jewish descendants whose grand (or great grand) parents endured the horrors of the holocaust, and how this is relayed. For generations born in new countries, their background and history as a culture and family has its foundation in a very dark place – one defined by the mass extermination of their extended family and aspects of cultural history. This precludes any sense of familial history before it - the towns and areas previously habituated by the Jewish people in Europe were de-identified and destroyed so completely, that nothing remains to return to except the holocaust.

The post-memorial functions as a form of trauma. Art, being deeply rooted in the transference of trauma (Sirois, 2008), relies on traumatic material and themes that allow for the carrying of messages from the screen to the viewer. In these works it is easy to see the viability of diaspora in the post-memorial as vehicle. Traumas are conveyed that relate to diasporas real and desired, mingling actual threats with imaginary ones. It also serves to convey notions of nostalgia that can only be realised through diaspora negation. In Judaic culture this is expressed in the word “aliyah” – literally to ‘go up’ or return to Israel. Aliyah is realised in each of these films as a critical feature of their joyous endings. Whether it is returning to Earth, to crime-fighting, or to nothing – a return is made to the beginning in the end. This is mirrored realization of death drive (Freud, 1961) : in representing the cycle of returning, an allusion to the natural order of returning is made. In the uncertainty of future happenings beyond the happy return/end, a return to nothing is invoked. Even this inevitable destruction/death is joyous.

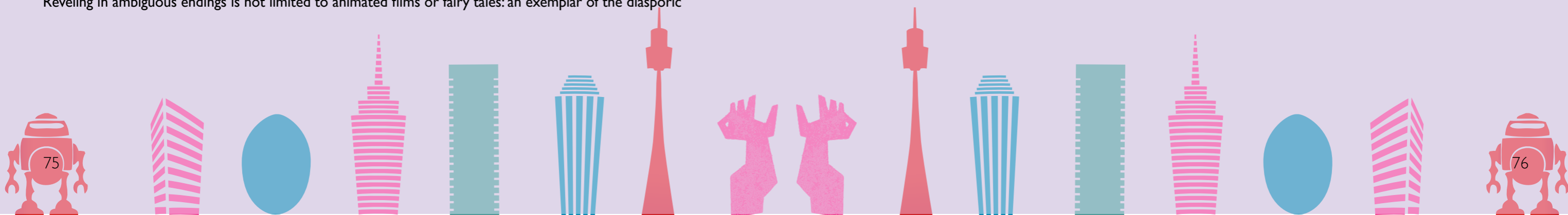
Reveling in ambiguous endings is not limited to animated films or fairy tales: an exemplar of the diasporic

tale, the Judaic book of Esther, exists as a strange book apart from other in the Old Testament as just such a story. Esther functions as both diasporic fantasy and a conveyance of post-memorial trauma. In different ways the films examined here bear striking familiarity to this Scripture. There is destruction in the past, which allows for the diaspora to exist, the destructive force of edicts against the protagonists and their internal sense of duty against them; there is danger around every corner that could be fatal, and in the midst of new destruction(s), there is a happy, albeit ambiguous, ending.

While one might construe that in Esther, there is certainty and security to be placed in the special place allocated in the warm fluffy heart of the Lord to the Jewish people, but in Esther, God is absent. It is commonly understood that the reason why God is not mentioned in the book of Esther is that the avoidance of so many bad endings is the divine at work, God protecting his people, who are not forsaken in their struggle. Present in absence; a happy, if uncertain, ending for Esther and the Jews dispersed in Persia is the providence of the divine - uncertainty becomes a gift. The book of Esther bears striking similarity to the plot structure of *The Incredibles*, a tale of diasporic heroes who save the day despite the odds, and their own persecution, although in the end they are represented as still wearing their disguises, alluding to a possibility that they are still forced to live undercover.

Fritz the Cat presents its ambiguous ending as an uncertainty between life and death. He has returned to his beginning, but his energetic recovery – a libidinous miracle – suggests that death has come to meet him. The presence of God is crystallized in his deathbed scene by the inclusion of the Last Rites, and his end is returned to the beginning by the presence of three ladies he seduces at the start of the film. God in *Fritz the Cat* is as unforgiving as Fritz, who stumbles through the film, explaining the sad state of his spiritual disillusionment as he destroys himself and his world. God spares him from the calamity that ensues, however the ambiguity of his demise questions the validity of that God. Bakshi has discovered a philosophical God, an anti-god, God as causa sui and simultaneously he is the murderer of that God. Heidegger suggests that “god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy... is thus perhaps closer to the divine God” (Heidegger, 1969). In Fritz' crisis of identity and belief, he finds his solution/salvation whilst blowing himself to hell, and is saved by the invisible hand of God. Fritz experiences a personal reconciliation with the diasporic divine through hedonism and destruction; a celebratory death/rebirth. Nothing really changes but everything has changed – Fritz has become something else, his colleagues have also, and there is a return to the beginning in the end. The happy ending is the renewal of Fritz, his rebirth, as himself, for himself. In his own destruction, he finds his place of origin, his aliyah, which is the ultimate happy ending.

In Allegro non Troppo, every ending is a return to the beginning. Viewers are rewarded with rebirth and the understanding that nothing really changes but everything has changed. Here we compound Heidegger's God with Baudrillard's notion of the perfect crime: not real, not referential, exterminating otherness and perspective in order to swindle away identity (Baudrillard, 1996). Without otherness, there is no diaspora.



As Fritz murders God, *Allegro non Troppo* murders diaspora. All that is left is destruction, which is undertaken with an irrational exuberance. The birth, death and rebirth of culture is something of a fixation for Bozzetto, and in this work the cyclical return to the beginning is simply a vehicle for other messages. It bears parallel to *WALL-E* in its destruction of reality, but reinforces this by being repetitive and re-destroying the world in an attempt to discover it. Bozzetto's cycles of returning are also cycles of removal. As we are returned from each animated sequence into the belly of the theatre, more and more there is a sense not only of degradation but also of removal of otherness. Obstacles such as the conductor are removed; and without a conductor, what is an orchestra? What Bozzetto is doing in stripping away the negative forces at play in the theatre is to remove otherness, thus rendering the sameness as nothing. How can a people be diasporic if there is no society to compare them to? If they are nowhere, they cannot possibly have lost their way, been dispersed, or be at odds with the world around them.

Bozzetto murdered difference to remove the framework of diaspora so that we may morbidly engage with animation in explorative cruelty. It is a comedic farce, best represented in the series of destructive endings sought out after the animator absconds into his drawings with one of the theatre staff. He has returned, despite the murder of diaspora, he goes up – literally achieving aliyah – and returns to animation. To the hyperreal, the unreal, the undead: reborn into 'lifedead' (Cholodenko, 2007). He beats the perfect crime with a more perfect crime: diaspora negation - and reminds us that we can always reconnect with our diasporic roots, even if they have disintegrated.

Comedy and the matter of God's presence in absence seem to be the most base and conspicuous threads that tie all these varied works together. Returning to Esther, comedy and the divine rebirth of presence in absence abounds. Stern's brilliant re-evaluation of Esther in the Jewish Quarterly Review, 'Esther and the Politics of Diaspora', is particularly enlightening in its positioning of Esther as a comical reflection of diasporic existence, and all of the fears and dual loyalties that go with it. Quoting Berlin's evaluation of the same text, Stern drives home the message that this text was most likely kept alive as an entertainment:

Esther conforms to the "classic" plot structure of comedy, which often begins with a "startling pronouncement or outrageous situation" and proceeds, through a "succession of unlikely events" to a happy ending... Esther belongs to a particular subset of comedy: the farce. Quoting M. H. Abrams, Berlin describes farce as "a type of comedy designed to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter." (Stern, 2010)

All these filmic works sit well alongside Esther as comedic farce, diasporic revenge fantasy, and as tall tales with gloriously uncertain endings. The manner in which they draw out their spiel varies, however what Stern applies to Esther is very visibly applicable to all of these diasporic tales. The curious presence of God intermingles with the comedy, and also stands apart. Just as God's absence in Esther has a profound effect, in *WALL-E* judgment is most present in nobody passing any. In *Fritz the Cat* God is someone to shake a fist at in

anger, knowing nobody will see it. In *The Incredibles* we see a close parallel to the absent divine as in Esther, and in *Allegro non Troppo* we sit within the deus ex machina: privy to the creation and subsequent destruction of a multitude of imperfect and unacceptable worlds. The last laugh belongs to an idiot, and death is the happy end. We are, in each work, returned to the beginning, to the 'big bang'. The joke is on us, and we are left to consider how to clean up the mess.

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