

120 Years

by Rob Hartzell

Before he entered the machine, the films of D.L. Bryson were moderate in their critical and popular appeal. They were fabulistic pieces, the kind of animated fantasy which is too often dismissed as kiddie fare, even though (if only from a visual standpoint, which I have argued elsewhere is not the case) they often reach a level of beauty that cannot be written off as disposable or simplistic. The climactic battle between the two armies of shape-shifting children in *The Toy Castle* is a notable example; the moment of truth that comes in the middle of the battlefield is the culmination of an existential crisis that's delicately nuanced and fraught, and frankly, more sophisticated than most of the films that took home medals from Sundance and Cannes that year.

As is far too often the case, however, the surface simplicity of that film and its distributor's decision to market Bryson as a director of children's movies that adults could enjoy (or at least sit through) pigeonholed Bryson, and despite the film's box-office receipts, it kept him from attaining the kind of critical acclaim Japanese counterparts like Miyazaki and Tezuka enjoyed. In interviews from the period, he maintains the proper game face: hopeful that his film will be recognized as more than just an afternoon's diversion for children, while insistent that future work will be less easily pigeonholed. True to type, however, Bryson continued making movies that were primarily marketed to children, despite the subtle cues and subtexts only their parents would recognize — most newspaper reviewers did not, however, and for the rest of the decade, Bryson found himself trying to straddle the line between art and commerce, a delicate balancing act which never permitted him to take root in one extreme or the other.

It has been speculated that his failure to become either a recognized *artiste* or a blockbuster director is what ultimately led him, when the opportunity presented itself, to upload his

consciousness. *Charcoal Grey Feathers*, his final work as a corporeal director, is often trotted out to defend this notion: a morality play of sorts about souls (possibly suicides, though we're never told for certain) which find themselves in a sort of limbo in which they either work out some sort of peace with themselves, or fail to, and either rise to the sky in a flash of light or remain forever "sin-bound" to the earth. This conundrum is then sloppily overlaid onto Bryson: unable to resolve the limbo in which he finds his career, he resolves to take on a new life in the machine, it's said, where he may resolve it to his satisfaction.

I find this particular reading of the film less-than-satisfying. For one thing, it ignores the novelty of machine transference at the time; the technology was still by-and-large unmapped territory, and Bryson himself only begins to describe his becoming machinic in such romanticized terms after the fact, not before it. For another, it ignores the fact that most of Bryson's work is about similar sorts of existential crises: his characters are usually caught between conflicting loyalties, conflicting identities, or conflicting desires — the appeal of his work to both children and adults (as I have argued elsewhere) derives precisely from his focus on these sorts of conflicts. Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, such a reading is tone-deaf to the reality of Bryson's career since his uploading.

As is well-known by now, Bryson uploaded himself to the machine at the same time that *Charcoal Grey Feathers* debuted widely in theaters. The film was his best-received as a corporeal director, both critically and financially; its receipts to date alone have been enough to pay for his software maintenance and upkeep for a decade. The result of this was, as he noted himself in a newsblog interview a year or so later, that he was free to explore whatever artistic avenues struck his fancy.

In the course of that year, he and his engineers developed the tools that allowed him to realize his films directly, and though the mechanics of process are, underneath the hood, more complex than simply piping daydreams into hi-resolution disc images, the effect is much the same — once past the learning curve, the *machineaste* can

practically will his/her creations into being. Bryson's first few years in the machine were ridiculously prolific: in the process of developing the software most machinic directors use today, he produced 50 short films, 20 feature-length productions (at least three of which qualify as grand epics), and three closed-ended TV series, each one consisting of four seasons of 24 episodes. A number of these works went undistributed (and thus, unviewed) until the recent spate of Bryson retrospectives, and even then, it's difficult to tell how much of this fresh enthusiasm is prompted by the news of Bryson's present circumstance.

The work which did find distribution, however, was fairly well-received (though again, it's difficult to figure out just how much of that praise was owing to the novelty of Bryson's circumstance as one of the first wave of artists to enter the network cloud); *Sol Phoenix* alone has since developed a cult following that has, along with *Feathers*, ensured Bryson's continued upkeep. Though the film's art direction tends toward the same manga-inflected direction much of Bryson's corporeal films have taken, its storyline — about a pair of adversaries who are reincarnated again and again, with each iteration of their conflict differing ever-so-subtly from the previous one — is typically seen by critics as a distinct break with the aesthetic of the corporeal Bryson. Where *Charcoal Grey Feathers'* characters know, though imperfectly, the nature of their existential conflict, it's not clear that the adversaries in *Phoenix* are able to possess the same level of self-knowledge, thanks to the device of reincarnation. As a result, a cottage industry of active fans and tenured scholars has arisen and sustained itself almost solely around the presentation of interpretations and exegeses of the film.

It was around this time that Bryson first began to find himself at odds with his handlers. Though he was careful to maintain a proper facade of public gratitude to his engineers at Morpheus Studios, it's also become clear in recent months that there were tensions beginning to come to the fore even then. Leaked email messages — which Morpheus will neither confirm, nor deny, nor permit Bryson to comment on — suggests that there was some pressure on Bryson to

keep producing the same kinds of steady revenue-generating material as he had been.

In that light, it's easy to see his next film, *Die Lichtenliebenden*, as a response to studio provocation. A surreal telescoping of the Oedipus myth with the Pygmalion story, dense with visual allusions to Dali and Buñel, it's decidedly not for children. The scene in which the Oedipus character has his eyeballs sliced with a straight-razor, a grisly beginning for what turns out to be his journey to redemption, would be tough going for little ones, even if they recognized the reference to *Un Chien Andalou*.

The film as a whole is provocative and unsettling, with vague undercurrents of incest burbling beneath the charged and confused eroticism which is evident. Is the woman with the straight-razor his mother? Is it the woman in his erotic animations? Bryson never gives clear answers in the film; there are echoes and visual cues which suggest a variety of interpretations, any of which may be "correct". The approach is itself like one of the late 20th-century experimental novelists of France or Portugal, though arguably not as self-consciously metafictional as those writers tend to be.

His next film — the last one to be released, at least until recently — is perhaps even more transgressive. *The Virtuelle* is, depending on the critic, "a major work of art from one of our most important directors" (A.G. Stone, in the *New York Times*), "a muddled film with higher ambitions that most — regardless of how successful it is in realizing them" (Dean Ellison, in *The Atlantic*), or "a triumph of self-indulgent amorality and pseudo-intellectual posturing" (Dimitry Alexsovich, in *The Weekly Standard*). The controversy that surrounded its release almost derailed it — and almost certainly led to Bryson's current state.

In the film, Bryson returns to the Pygmalion story — this time, mashing it up with Nabokov's *Lolita*. A young(ish) girl — she claims at various points to be anywhere from 13 to 17 years old — strikes up an online chat with an older man (age unknown) and begins to groom him for a sexual encounter, which happens in virtual reality-space. Even though the film is completely computer-animated, and

at no time does the title character appear in anything less than full dress, the infamous masturbation scene midway through the film (shot as an extended single take closeup of her face) was enough to prompt obscenity trials in the US.

Bryson and Morpheus prevailed in the end, and the film was eventually given limited release. If their relationship was strained before, however, it was almost certainly irreparably damaged by the protracted legal fight. Morpheus CEO Thomas Clary resigned within the year, and though he denied (and still does) having put any kind of pressure on Bryson, it's clear from the tone of his interviews since then that he was deeply unhappy with the returns on the company's investment in Bryson's machine-state.

As for Bryson, interviews with him from the period find him growing increasingly defiant.

My films have always treated children with great respect — maybe even more respect than most directors of 'children's films' ever have. I have always taken seriously their ability to recognize how much of the 'adult' world is an artifice. It's just that nobody else noticed, until sex came to the forefront. And then, predictably, they reacted — whether from deeply held principles, or sheer knee-jerk terror at the subject of pubescent sexuality.

— Cinemagicians.com

You cannot tell the truth about children or about sex or death, artistically speaking, unless and until you can tell the truth about all three. I could understand the furor if I'd made several films in a row that dealt with sex the same way The Virtuelle does — but I haven't. Yes, I treat it with a certain amount of moral ambiguity — but have I stepped outside the bounds of the plausible? If I had, I don't think the film would be receiving the kind of attention it has. In fact: I've had the legal troubles I've had with this film because I deal with sexuality as it is — fluid and confused and, at times, even morally dubious.

— 24fps

It is around this moment in time that the allegedly-leaked e-mails are dated. For my part, I shall not rehash the details which have been the focus of so much press — but I think the following excerpt, attributed to Morpheus CEO Clary, bears noting:

Are we going to turn you off? Are you fucking stupid, Bryson? It's not that we couldn't — for the moment, you machine-ghosts exist mostly outside the law, which is probably why your artist-posturing bullshit hasn't cost us more than it already has in legal fees. But I'd be much happier if you'd just realize that we're both after the same thing — seeing you make movies that move an audience. Pissing off a potential audience is not the same thing, and you're smart enough to know the difference. So quit dicking around and prove it, already.

Again: at the time of this writing, there has been nothing to confirm or deny the authenticity of this correspondence. What we do know is that, within a month of it, Bryson began going rogue on his engineers.

The controversy surrounding *The Virtuelle* naturally pumped up interest in Bryson's next film, and when he announced that he would be releasing a trailer for it to the social networks, there was a spike in new memberships. When the trailer was finally released — a thirty-second montage of screaming nudes, with no title given — the anticipation which had preceded it turned to further controversy; Morpheus was left to issue hurried apologies and content-free press releases while Bryson refused to answer any questions, whether from the film world, the mass media, or Morpheus executives.

Whatever good-faith remained between Morpheus and Bryson evaporated shortly thereafter, when Bryson circumvented standard release channels, uploading the infamous “Day 1/Year 1” to multiple filesharing networks. Morpheus took steps to contain Bryson, eventually confining him behind a router to his own network — but the damage had been done: the four-hour episode laid out a programme of slowly-escalating perversion and violence which

promised to be almost utterly unwatchable, even if it were to find a distributor bold enough to take it on.

Such is Bryson's current state: firewalled from the rest of the network, Bryson grinds out a pornographic catalog of fetishes, paraphilias and depravities, an oeuvre which, to all appearances, is on its way to becoming a sort of *120 Years in Sodom* (this was, we are told, its working title at one point). It's unclear what future generations will make of this work; as long as the firewall remains in place, it's unclear that Bryson will ever be able to find an audience for it. Given the almost-unheard-of scale of the work, one can only speculate as to whether he, like the author of the original *120 Days of Sodom*, is even concerned with an audience; indeed, it is hard not to picture Bryson's home server as a sort of digital Charenton, with Bryson's brain software filling disk space with block after block of debasement, with no motive apparent other than pure spite, whether directed at his captors, or the larger society which they represent to him. What's difficult to imagine — and perhaps tragic, if it remains forever speculation — is the state of Bryson's psyche, caught as he is between worlds. And even in speculation, Bryson is caught between camps: one which holds that this current nightmare work of his is a map of sorts to the depths of his psyche, and one that believes the story behind the making of this work is bound to be far more interesting than the work itself. It is a conundrum not unlike that which most of his characters have faced, one that would have done the corporeal Bryson, not to mention Sade himself, proud.

