

David O'Reilly & Robert Seidel

Interview by Zsuzsanna Király & Daniel Ebner

Zsuzsanna Király: David, Robert, you are both working successfully on two different poles of computer generated experimental film. To start with, could you both describe your individual working process?

David O'Reilly: It's always different, I am still figuring it out. I don't have one single studio I work with. I am kind of an itinerant, if someone wants to do something, and it also depends on the amount of money. Ideally I will write the film, design it, sometimes I co-design it. And then there's the storyboard, which is a huge creative influence in a project. So usually I do the writing, modeling, rendering, compositing, editing, and sound editing. And I feel all of those things are hard to delegate in different orders. Actually I have also always modeled everything, all of the sets and characters. If someone is a bad modeler it would make stuff stand out, and that's what you want to avoid. Modeling, at least in what I am doing, is a big part of what we would call cohesiveness or coherence. I would set up cameras, too. But I delegate the actual animation or things that involve programming. As I am not obsessed with animation, but more the communication of ideas to the screen, it makes sense to have animators for that.

Daniel Ebner: Robert, is your work process in any way comparable?

Robert Seidel: It's hard to compare, because I am not animating characters but creating abstract worlds. The tools for animating characters are very specific. I sometimes work with programmers, sound designers, scientists or editors. But my budgets are never high enough to afford somebody working on a specific thing over a longer period of time. As such I am responsible for most of the work phases myself.

David, in your early works there are ideas that look like they resulted from technical mistakes which you pushed and pursued. Now that you are delegating control or power to others, you won't see these "mistakes", because your animators try to avoid them. Don't you find that problematic?

David O'Reilly: Totally, right. You do sacrifice control. It's a weird feeling and it was very hard to do it in the beginning. I guess, I still embrace the process.

Robert Seidel: Do you work in the same studio with these other people, or do you only communicate by email?

David O'Reilly: It's 50% long distance, and 50% people around in the same office. It's getting complicated if something is not working and you are long distance. For example, there were situations when I would explain three times that a pose isn't working and every single time there is almost no change, so I have to change it myself, because I know the software, and then that person gets really upset. And then doesn't like me. (laughs) You also have feelings to manage. But at the same time, work happens much faster. „Please say something” and a couple of other ones were done completely alone, and that is a sort of process I don't want to do again. It's too hard to keep my own interest in it, and I have no social life, I couldn't have any relationship etc. I know this is crazy, this is sometimes a badge of

honor for artists, but you know years go by very quickly when you are doing that kind of work. That can be kind of scary. For me it is not sustainable. It's good for a few projects, but I always wanted to delegate.

Robert Seidel: I only have people around to help with the setup of the video installations. These complicated experiences that you describe I only have in my real life part when working with the setup. When people see films, they never see this complexity behind the process, if you are working with a dozen people or just three. It's always a nightmare in terms of having enough power in making your idea survive. If you do work by yourself you are responsible for everything, but as soon as projects become more complex it is really hard to keep everything together. And if you have to imagine what if the project fails or the money is not enough...

David O'Reilly: Yes, it can be the worst thing ever. But also every now and again there will be people who would do something better than you want. And I've had that happen often with music, because I am so not musical and I am bad at mixing. Generally I have an idea of sound aesthetics but no musicality. So it's amazing when you can explain and when someone actually makes something that is better than all of those things. It's the same with animation. It's a gamble.

Robert Seidel: As your projects become more complex in production costs and work, do you see yourself steadily growing? Or do you sometimes want to stop the process at a certain point because you think you're on the edge of losing creative control?

David O'Reilly: Not really, because I am more interested in doing things than being obsessed with the control aspect of it. I think it happened earlier sometimes, today not anymore. But I feel there is a danger of getting too obsessed with it, for me at least. Over all the process is better for me, mentally, when I have people helping. It's less scary and I can share the blame if anything goes wrong. (laughs)

Robert, have you ever thought about using an off set render farm?

Robert Seidel: Yes, but my experimental 3D-scenes break so easily...

David O'Reilly: ... really, too complex?

Robert Seidel: Sometimes frames turn black or defect, and there are lots of possibilities to trace the defaults that I can do myself, so I rather keep the stuff on my own computers. And it's also better to have decent frame render times, otherwise you completely lose the overview. Today's standard render times in Hollywood are crazy, hours of hours, and render farms of thousands of computers. All part of this craze for realism...

David O'Reilly: It's gone to another world. The first time I have delegated modeling is on a project I am doing now. This guy is taking care of the rendering and it's most bizarre, he has a completely different idea of what rendering is than I do. He would say, „I optimized the scene, it's really great, it's only 1min per frame!” And I am literally used to a hundredth of a second per frame, or maybe a 25th of a sec per frame, and he is talking about hundreds of times that. And that is the standard for 3D now. I think it just gets unreasonable at some point. And also it gets a lot less fun.

Zsuzsanna Király: How much do you have to keep up with new standards of technology and software updates?

Robert Seidel: I think there is just optimization of existing technology right now.

David O'Reilly: Right, there is no new technology. Things just get faster, optimized, that's it. But for me, I could have done this exact same work 10 years ago.

Robert Seidel: A question I get a lot and probably you as well, David, is which specific software I use. I think you can do almost everything with every software. You can take the cheap or most expensive, as long as you spend a lot of time in understanding and finding your ways through. I have been writing for publications about 3D software for 10 years. And I gave up for different reasons, but the main reason was that there are just a few companies now making most of the products and they are not innovating anymore, they are just selling a few new features.

David, I am interested in your early influences... I was brought up in former East Germany. And I really liked the Eastern European movies, especially the animations and fairy tales with all these surreal ideas and characters. Films you wouldn't necessarily show to your children anymore, with all these ideas from Hollywood being so dominant.

David O'Reilly: I honestly wasn't interested in any kind of film until I was about 15. And then I got very quickly into animation. One of the first artists I liked was Norman McLaren, it seems kind of obvious, but whatever. I hadn't seen anything like his work before. That was great. There were also interviews with him on the same tape, and this guy was a total artist. I was blown away by these drawings, just the persistence of vision, that magic trick, that effect that happens. The magic trick still works, even after you know how it is done. Norman McLaren's films looked playful, unpretentious. It has craft, and it had everything I liked. Then I got obsessed with him and Oskar Fischinger. I was just interested in abstract stuff. And at the same time I was trying to learn to draw animation. I watched all the Disney stuff very quickly, just for the movement. I could tell you where the character would pick something up in a story. I wasn't watching it for the story, I just watched the movements. I wasn't interested in storytelling for a long time either, just motion movement. And then I was watching all from Andrei Tarkovsky and Stanley Kubrick, Roy Anderson and David Lynch. I often feel like some of my favorite live action directors would probably be really good animators because they have a very good sense for motion and rhythm, a very animatoresque musical type of rhythm. The motion is not an accidental element, on the contrary a very conscious composition.

Daniel Ebner: How did you get into storytelling then?

David O'Reilly: It was kind of by accident. I just liked drawing images that I felt were powerful. In my film „*WOFL2106*” I put the images together for the first time. I just did it as Photoshop drawings in the beginning, and then I started putting them into order. It was basically a primitive storyboard, just that I didn't really know yet how to make a storyboard or anything. It's just a natural thing to happen: if you have things that you want happen in a film, you can't help but to decide where to start, where to put the middle, etc. And once you start rearranging that, it is basically storytelling. It is super primitive, but that

is ultimately narrative, because you are leading someone, you are leading this into a certain direction. And then I watched loads of films – realizing that an image alone is powerful but when you have a sequence of them they have power above and beyond, greater than the sum of their parts. The more I have been writing with my co-writer Vernon Chatman for the last couple of years, the more I have learned the classical way things work. But there are really no rules. The one trick with drawing and writing is being able to throw stuff away and start over. And the other thing that I have learned is that if you have an idea you need to milk it as much as possible. Try and get as much out of it before moving forward. Because it is easy to move forward, instead of fully exploring each idea. It's just like a mental process in which I have to constantly ask myself: „Did I really think this through, can it be funnier or more beautiful?“

Daniel Ebner: Do you work with a storyboard or a script, Robert?

Robert Seidel: I have a vast collection of sketches and material, but never in any specific order. In contrast to film, the installations are created as loops and have neither a beginning nor ending. There is no priority, which makes it easier for me to put material in a free order. The viewer starts to watch at some point, and can come back to the same part later and maybe it adds up to a new meaning, for the viewer as well as for me. You are watching the film as part of the installation over and over again, if you want – it's like putting one song in repeat – you can always discover a new aspect.

David O'Reilly: I think it's almost like putting a sound on repeat. Because a song has a structure that grows, builds. The sound however has a certain taste or sensation. It is a constant.

Robert Seidel: That is why I reduced my animation work in the installations. And made it more abstract and more about this moment which concentrates all sensation that I want to show. Since the film is tied to the installation it becomes very functional.

Daniel Ebner: So you want to eliminate any form of narration?

Robert Seidel: No, it doesn't eliminate the narration in itself, but it frees the narration. The viewers can build their own "stories" in a way. They can sit or walk around in the installation and come closer. The loop is not too short, around 3 to 5 minutes. Maybe they see a detail of the sculpture while the projection is moving and it reminds them of something specific, and another part of the projection might evoke another feeling. What is interesting about it is that it shifts all the time – without me.

David O'Reilly: To me this is anti-narrative and I also think your work is very anti-composition. When you learn about rules of composition and then you see your work, it's "boom" – you don't know where to focus at all. I like that a lot.

Robert Seidel: But it should make sense. It is not random.

David O'Reilly: Of course, you have a fractal effect, not in the image but in the idea. It is anti-classical and cutting edge. I don't know if you disagree with that. I feel it breaks a lot of rules, with color, composition, layout, time, from a traditional sense what image making is.

Daniel Ebner: David, would you be interested in going back to abstract works?

David O'Reilly: I would rather not. I am not that good at it. I think what Norman McLaren and Oskar Fischinger did was great for their time and is still good now. But to be good at it now, it should be more generative and more procedural. I think all loops and stuff like that have been explored to death. The most interesting stuff to do would require more programming and more technical knowledge than I will probably ever have. I would maybe just be copying work like Robert's, if I'd try to do it. I wouldn't imagine it for myself, no.

Robert Seidel: I think there are still more options to create abstract worlds. When we look at some of your works and some of the compositions of the frames – if you take out one element, it would be completely abstract. And they are not generative at all.

David O'Reilly: That's true.

Robert Seidel: And I often see those generative and procedural processes not helping in making good decisions. I like to have variations but don't want to have a certain set of rules to create something. I am not interested in creating abstract worlds just out of formulas, because it would be important to have a much stronger background in mathematics and in programming. I prefer to add another layer with transforming my abstract films into reality with the installations. But in your work I see a lot of potential for abstract things coming out of the surreal.

David O'Reilly: Right now I still want to explore some character creation. I'd need to really fail hard. The exciting thing about abstract stuff is that there is a lot more potential for happy accidents and coming to ideas organically. When working on a character and something goes crazily wrong, I always save that file, and sometimes it's the most beautiful abstract thing. If you are working with a story board the actual process of animation after writing and story boarding is very mechanical. There is a little bit of influence in design but it's quite a mechanical process over all. Working on an abstract space is closer to making music.

Daniel Ebner: You both work with 3D animation that is set between the abstract narrative (David O'Reilly) and the narrative abstract (Robert Seidel). Do you see a connection between your works?

Robert Seidel: I would put it this way: The main point is that we are both interested in the possibilities and potential of 3D animation and not the recreation of the „real world“.

David O'Reilly: Yeah.

Robert Seidel: We are trying to use these tools in unusual and unexpected ways, to create images that are new, to create our own metaphors. David even wrote this manifesto about not simulating live action film and its camera work. My work is also not about recreating something naturalistic and preexisting.

David O'Reilly: Right. I think, Robert lets the software guide him a little bit, it feels organic but it is still not imitating something organic. Also it is all computer generated. I feel like your work is pure digital. I

always try to avoid sampling because it is so easy. But with your work, it is always so distorted and so taken to another place, that you have a contiguous self-contained creation. I think that is rare for computer graphics, it was definitely much rarer 10 years ago. There is not that many people who can say they did a piece of art on the computer that's totally their own thing.

Robert Seidel: If something new comes out that has a certain success, like David's films for example, there's always a flood of people trying to imitate it afterwards, without really understanding what it is about and how to construct the original artist's motivation. Films as David's become blueprints somehow. You mentioned that it takes quite a lot of effort to learn the tools and to understand them, and most people learn them with long operating instructions and in tutorials without questioning them. They are following the path of the software producer. You are pursuing another direction and I am exploring new methods to construct visual images. So we both try to avoid the given possibilities.

David O'Reilly: Robert's work carries on from the tradition of abstract fractal works that happened in early 3D, but that became old very quickly and suddenly everybody could do it. Your work doesn't look repetitive or like a pattern. It always has the effect that it is going very deep because it is also difficult to figure out how it was done. If you have done 3D for a couple of years you can usually figure out quite easily how 99% of the stuff was done. Even if something looks simplistic you still have to get your hands dirty and find tricks and try weird things to make something special. That's a quality I admire in all art, that is a quintessential thing – you can look at something, no matter if it is a sculpture or music, and you really like it but don't have any idea how it was made. That gives it so much more mystery and makes it much more intriguing.

Zsuzsanna Király: Most people think of Pixar animations with films like „Toy Story” or „Nemo” when it comes to 3D computer animation. What filmmaking traditions do you align yourselves with? Where would you allocate yourselves to?

Robert Seidel: I think what we both try to create is a universe with full believability and coherence. Every part of the work should make sense. I think this is what good filmmakers and also for example good cooks do. Everybody who is good at a certain thing tries to make everything balanced and perfect. And even though we both work with artifacts that are not existent in the real world and that are kind of side products of the digital age – we try to blend them with something people can relate to. David uses narrative storytelling and I use abstract emotional aspects. I think that is what we have in common – we want to create something that is perfect in its imperfection.

David O'Reilly: Yeah, that's true. That's it! (pause and laughter) For my part, I never liked mixed media for example. It became a big thing as soon as people figured out Chroma Keying with video. Even when I was a kid, I remember watching these TV shows and knowing that this guy isn't part of that background and being very uncomfortable with that. And when computer graphics started appearing it became worse and worse and worse, because people started mixing it with everything. In college mixed media had a lot of attention. But I never liked it because of that disconnect. I think everyone hated Jar Jar Binks partly because it just felt so stuck on, like a sticker, it felt wrong and awful. The strange effect you figure out in computer graphics is that even if the picture looks all unrealistic, it is fine if it is all equally unrealistic. But if you put a picture of a realistic CG Human in a real scene it feels so unrealistic,

even though that is closer to realism. You know what I mean, in a sort of technical sense. So it is a phenomenon of how we perceive images and how we engage with a piece of work. We are talking about visuals but it also goes with sound. If it all feels like part of the same thing it can be much more impactful. You allow yourself, your brain, to go down a certain path, instead of getting thrown away and being confronted with the medium, and if the image is realistic or not, over and over again.

Zsuzsanna Király: A feature film audience will rarely question how something was done. When watching 3D animation, however, you're immediately confronted with the medium and the style.

Robert Seidel: You are used to the aesthetics and medium of film, its relation to humans within our realistic world, and its refinement and shaping of something that we all know. But if you look at for example Jodorowsky or Tarkovsky's films, I wouldn't know how they made the scenes or how it was possible to utilize hundreds of extras and kind of crazy set ups for dreamlike sequences. In contrast, we are now the ones who are trying to create something magical without realism, although the word may not be really precise, to do something that is kind of related to cinema but also holds this moment of beauty, uncertainty and surprise.

David O'Reilly: Animation is bottomless, it goes on forever. Every time you make something in animation you start from zero. It is a vacuum. Because they are simpler to produce, films can exploit so much more. Animation takes a lot of time, as well as money. The possibilities are crazy. I think the most interesting things you can see are in the short format. There are maybe 30 animated features in the world every year, but hundreds of short films. And if you have somebody doing something consistent in that space it is interesting for sure.

Daniel Ebner: Are there any taboos? Things you think people shouldn't do?

David O'Reilly: Not really. I used to think you shouldn't mix animation and live action, I always felt that it was something futile. But then again, every single film coming out of Hollywood is a mix now. They are almost 50% animation. These big blockbusters, they are not seen as animation or categorized as that. But it is getting to a place where it is pretty seamless. They are realizing that actors need to be actors, they need human faces, because we are not good at recreating that yet. But everything is augmented. I think there will always be a market for that special effects stuff. But characters... You can work very hard to mix a live action and an animation character, it has been done for 20 years. Or you can get a more realistic result by having two human characters or two animated characters. Both of those solutions are more realistic.

Can you think of any taboos, Robert?

Robert Seidel: It's the same for me, combining abstract worlds with human beings is something I find difficult. If you put the images I create next to a human, they easily could become wallpaper – and that is something I'm not interested in. I still haven't seen any good solution where you create something believable in combining abstract complexity and human scenes without making it special effects or cheesy. The classic example would be „2001-A Space Odyssey”, but it is quite minimal in a way. And if people do it again, you just can't cut the connection to this imagery.

David O'Reilly: Sure, it was just the biggest impact for psychedelic kind of scenes. And it is still great. I watched it again recently, on a Blu-ray, I never saw it in the cinema. It holds up. You like it?

Robert Seidel: I find it inspiring, but I still hope that there will be a filmmaker one day that has the sensibility for the more abstract world and for the storytelling world as well to create something like this movie, but for our age.

David O'Reilly: Right. I think we are there with the limitations just no one helped it, because now everything is getting so detailed, all effects are filling the frame with so much noise and detail, and there is little graphic use of it. But at the same time what we do is quite niche, probably in our lifetime there will be not as much people seeing all of our work combined as having seen „Transformers 3“. That's the reality of the effects and the technique, most people kind of like them and abstract work is mostly a niche thing and mostly will always be. So I don't know if one is more effective than the other, it just appeals to different sets of sensibilities. I don't think that what I do is better than other solutions or a Pixar film. It's more familiar and less scary than to go into an abstract world. The nicest compliments you can get from somebody that is not in animation or in some experimental world, just a normal person, who would say something like „my kids love your work“... because if you work in that field of experimental animation or independent animation it is rare for that to happen.

Robert Seidel: For sure. In recent years I have been doing installations and projections, and if you take the animation world outside of the black box and put it into a reality, it's interesting how much people like it. I had one exhibition for example where I projected on plaster casts of ancient sculptures, the objects you usually walk by in a museum and just look at for a second. I was told in the museum that the visitors were requesting to get chairs to sit and watch my abstracted animation blending with the sculptures.

David O'Reilly: Really? Maybe that's because they wanted to be in the cinema, they wanted the black box. Popcorn also. (laughs)

Robert Seidel: I think there are a lot of possibilities to reach people but it is really hard to go against all the Hollywood loudness that is around.

David O'Reilly: Same on the internet as well.

Robert Seidel: A cat video is more successful than...

David O'Reilly: ... you got a problem with my cat video? (laughs)

Robert Seidel: Not at all! (laughs)

David O'Reilly: So Robert, have you ever been interested in psychedelic drugs? (laughs)

Robert Seidel: No.

David O'Reilly: Never?

Robert Seidel: No, I think the human brain is capable of a lot of things without drugs. I am interested in the way what could be possible, but I am still amazed what reality can hold. If I go outside there are so many beautiful things that I can't capture them all. Thus my approach is to recreate this in a way but not on the basis of chemical influences.

What's your interest in drugs? Because this is a question I usually get from an audience... (laughs)

David O'Reilly: Sure, I get this a lot as well. I think Robert would get it more, because it is abstract work and also because it is similar to a psychedelic experience, as mushrooms and LSD, it does have this amazing similarity. But at the same time, all art that is done by people who associate themselves with drugs and this lifestyle, all psychedelic art is shit, somehow it is never ever any good. I am not surprised that you are not interested in it.

Robert Seidel: I mean there have been convincing cases in history of people creating good art and finding another representation of reality while under the influence of drugs. However, I see myself more as a, I wouldn't say scientist, but as a person looking at things and trying to see what happened before and making decisions to create art in directions where it hasn't been before.

David O'Reilly: When I was making stuff as a teenager, people would ask: „oh man, what kind of drugs are you doing”. And I always hated that. I hate that creative responsibility is put on a drug. And also people I knew who did drugs were always just kind of lazy. I did eventually have a bunch of experiences on psychedelic drugs and really enjoyed them, not for creative reasons but more for personal general life experiences. Still I don't feel they are necessary for the creative process. Of course when your work is compared to that stuff you would have a different attitude about it.

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Biographies

Daniel Ebner

Born 1981 in Feldkirch, Austria. Co-founder and artistic director of the international short film festival VIS Vienna Independent Shorts and film journalist at APA Austrian Press Agency. Studied political science, film and cultural theory in Vienna and Berlin. In 2006 and 2007 he organized the Austrian Short Film Night in collaboration with the Diagonale, in 2008 he initiated the Swiss-Austrian short film compilation „Eleven Minutes“. In 2009 he was selected as Young European Talent of the EU Committee of the Regions, in 2012 he was co-founder of the Austrian Film Festival Forum. In the last few years he also worked as a curator and as part of many juries, among others the International Emmy Awards.

Zsuzsanna Király

Born 1985 in Székelyudvarhely, Transylvania. Journalism and Communication Studies in Vienna and Berlin. Diverse projects with the film networks „Nisi Masa“ and „Kino“. Worked in cultural public relations, on film festivals, and in film production at X Filme and currently since 2009 at Komplizen Film. Participated as a story editor in the Script&Pitch programme of the TorinoFilmLab.

David O'Reilly _ www.davidoreilly.com

Born 1985 in Kilkenny, Ireland. Director and author. Short films (selection): „Ident“ (2005), „WOFL2106“ (2006), „Serial Entoptics“ (2007), „RGBXYZ“ (2008), „Octocat Adventure“ (2008), „?????“ (2009), „Please Say Something“ (2009), „The External World“ (2011), „A Glitch is a Glitch“ (episode of the „Adventure Time“ series, 2013).

Robert Seidel _ www.robertseidel.com

Born 1977 in Jena, Germany. Artist and Director. Studied Media Design at Bauhaus University Weimar. His projections, installations and experimental films have been shown in museums, galleries and festivals world-wide (selection): „_grau“ (2004); „vellum“, Art Center Nabi Seoul (2009); „chiral“, MOCA Taipei, (2011); „grapheme“, permanent installation at Museum Wiesbaden (2013). He recently curated the programme „Penetrating Surfaces“ for the Film Museum Vienna (2014).