

Cogent criticism requires fairness, attention to detail

For much of my writing career, if it could be called a career, I have been a critic. To be more specific, I have been a critic of culture. Whether it be films, books, music, art or television, they have all been examined with a critical scalpel. That might come off as a bit pompous, but being a critic is the highest form of artistic hubris anyway.

Being a published writer of any kind requires an ornate amount of pride, since it requires the belief that your writing is worth being read. But to believe that your opinions on other forms of art are worthy of public consumption is on a whole different level. I know this, accept it and continue to do it anyway, either out of ego or some all-consuming need to analyze everything. Who knows?



Ryan Nyburg
Budget rack

But despite the inherently proud nature that goes with this kind of work, I believe there is a higher morality system to which it is bound. Criticism has to be valid, even if it is not always fair or balanced. It has to be well-informed and, most of all, it has to be honest. If it fails on these levels it can no longer be called criticism but instead only a personal attack or cheap promotion.

Journalistically, criticism is also in an interesting area. While it is presenting a subjective and informed opinion on a matter of public interest, it still has to be objective. Political columnists work along this same standard. You can't develop a serious personal connection to the subject of criticism because your opinion will no longer be objective. I don't accept gifts from artists that I've written about, nor do I accept free tickets or music, except as promotional material that I do not keep.

I often get the chance to see movies for free. But since I don't pick the movies and see the good as well as the bad, it can be considered promotional material. If I liked the movie enough I'll often go buy a

ticket and see it again. I consider these kinds of things moral decisions and treat them as such whenever they come up.

A number of moral decisions appear every time I write a review. There is a lot of criticism floating around that fails the test of validity, and I try to keep that criticism from being my own. When I review something, I try to analyze it from a valid basis. For example, when "Gigli" came out last year, it was widely proclaimed one of the worst films in the year, decade, history of cinema, whatever. But most of that criticism was based on the fact that many critics hated Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez. An understandable bias to be sure, but still one that should have been left at the theater entrance.

While I never saw the film myself, I could never quite trust the reviews that blasted it mercilessly yet never quoted a single instance that described it as anything more than mediocre. They set impossibly high standards for what was never intended to be more than a run-of-the-mill star vehicle. While high standards are laudable, they should also be flexible. Holding your standards too high invalidates your criticism.

The personality of an artist is also not a valid area. By most accounts, many of the great artists in history have been total bastards. Ernest Hemingway was a drunkard, William Blake was a drug fiend and Salvador Dali was a complete S.O.B. But they were all great artists in their own way. Who they were as people is the subject of biographers, not critics.

One problem that recurs is the perception by many public relations folks that I am somehow a branch of their promotional machine. I am often treated as if it were my God-given duty to plug whatever upstart no-talent who happens to wander through town. As a rule, PR is not critical, hence it makes it difficult to plug something and take it seriously as art at the same time.

I have to be honest about my opinions, and I can't do that if I'm trying to promote something uncritically. So I guess I wouldn't be cut out for PR work, since the need to analyze is a bit too strong in me. It's just my nature.

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French 'Triplets of Belleville' raises bar for animated films

'The Triplets of Belleville' marks an important shift in contemporary animation

By **Steven Neuman**
Freelance Reporter

In between Walt Disney and Tim Burton lies the dark beauty and humor of director Sylvain Chomet's French animated film "The Triplets of Belleville." This film totally upsets notions of the dominance of American animation. Somewhere out there, Uncle Walt is turning over in his cryogenic grave.

MOVIE REVIEW

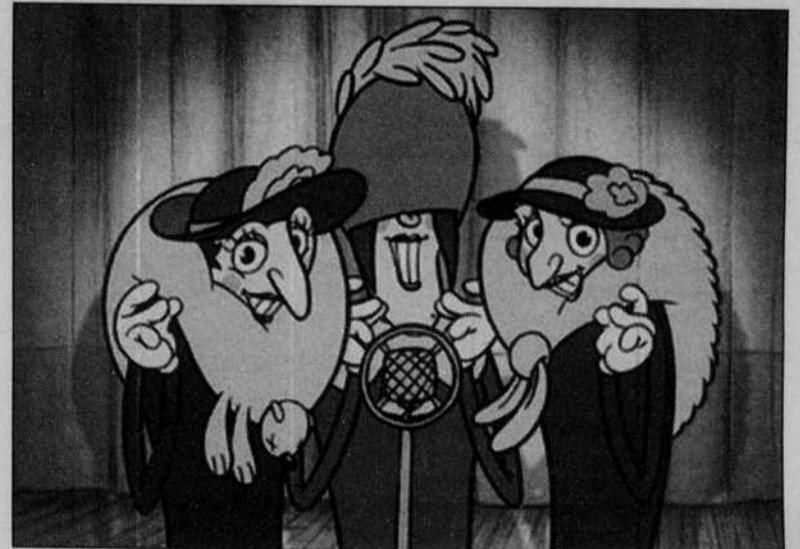
"Triplets" follows a simple plot. The grandmother and heroine, Madame Souza, trains her grandson Champion to be a world-class cyclist. When Champion is kidnapped during the Tour de France by the sinister French Mafia, Souza must travel to the big city of Belleville with Champion's loyal dog, Bruno. With the aid of ancient triplets, a trio of once-famous jazz singers, Souza tames the big city and sets out to rescue her grandson.

However, the plot is somewhat secondary to what amounts to one of the richest animated worlds ever created. The frames are packed with visual delights that make each moment a true feast for the eyes. And while the movie is basically a silent film containing no dialogue of any real importance, the surprisingly expressive characters carry the storyline brilliantly. Despite being a foreign piece, there is no prerequisite background in the French language is required. Most of the scant "speech" is essentially gibberish with a few actual French words thrown in.

The score and sound provide other dominant features that makes this film so unique. Musical director Benoit Charest sets the mood and speaks for the characters while perfectly synching the tone of his music to the jazzy style of the animation. He accomplishes some fantastic feats, such as coaxing jazz tunes out of a vacuum cleaner.

Again, "Triplets" completely lays to waste the conventions of American animation and even Japanese anime. Flawless integration of 3-D computer work to the slightly gritty 2-D animation makes Hollywood's attempts look crude at best. The art direction is closer to innovative long-form graphic novels than to traditionally linear feature-length animations. Chomet's work captures the true intensity and density of often dreary and hectic city life from the perspective of a country grandpa.

The duo of Souza and Bruno is the film's most charming creation. Their partnership calls upon some classic Laurel and Hardy overtones to form a snappy and witty pair of characters that the audience finds incredibly sympathetic without being synthetic. Despite the Triplets' top billing, they



Courtesy

Flashbacks to the heyday of the Triplets of Belleville are rendered in a less realistic, more stylized manner than the rest of the film, which resembles early cartoon shorts.



Courtesy

A simpler time: The movie begins with a young Champion and Bruno as a puppy.

are hardly the stars.

The film's core genius lies in its humor: Subtly subversive, fraught with running jokes, and highbrow and lowbrow all at once. The laughter "Triplets" can elicit adds polish to a somewhat rough story, turning the film into a gem that sparkles with wit. The city of Belleville, which seems to embody the worst perceptions of America, becomes the stage for a comedic exploration of the love/hate Franco-American relationship. The first image we see of the city is a harbor view dominated by a grotesquely obese Statue of Liberty. This image received some of the biggest laughs from the crowd — which I can only assume was an audience primarily dominated by Americans — and further paves the way for other cultural parodies.

This type of lighthearted criticism is made all the more palatable by

Chomet's willingness to mock the French as well. The red-nosed French Mafia boss uses as his cover a French wine organization with the slogan "In Vino Veritas," and the French Mafia proves to be horrific when it comes to driving. However, not all of the jokes are so intellectual; one of the more pleasing running gags stems from Bruno the dog's recurring hatred of trains, which viewers witness to be the result of his puppy-era accident with a model train.

Taken as whole, "Triplets" breaks the mold so completely that it is hard to compare it to other examples. It will certainly become the yardstick for future animated features.

"The Triplets of Belleville" is currently playing at the Bijou Art Cinemas at 492 E. 13th Ave.

Steven Neuman is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

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