

Michael Dudok de Wit's distinctive line, protagonist and time

A distinctive line and an equally distinctive protagonist are two characteristic features of Michael Dudok de Wit's animation. His films are also distinguished by their economical style, precision and pursuit of excellence. Out of his six pictures, as many as three received Oscar nominations and one of them ('Father and Daughter', 2000) was a winner in its category. Apart from the distinction granted by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Dudok de Wit has also won César and BAFTA awards, prizes in Cannes, Ottawa and Hiroshima as well as a nomination to the European Film Awards. In 2001 he was presented with the FICC Jury Award at the Krakow Film Festival and this year his collection of honours will grow to include the Dragon of Dragons.

Michael Dudok de Wit was born in the Netherlands. Although he has liked to draw since childhood, his decision to choose an artistic school was made in a spontaneous manner, under the influence of a friend. He learnt the technique of etching in Switzerland but his fascination with animation developed later, after attending a festival in Annecy, where he, immersed in the festival's unique ambiance, could appreciate the mastery of the genre. He went to study animation in England. He also received education in Barcelona and worked, among others, in France before settling permanently in London. Along with animated films, his portfolio also includes commercials (for AT&T and United Airlines, among others) and book illustrations. He has also worked on feature-length animations produced by reputable film studios (e.g. the European preproduction of Disney's 'Beauty and the Beast'). As he has emphasised it himself, whether he is making an artistic film or a commercial is irrelevant for him as he treats each work in an equally serious manner. Nevertheless, artistic animation offers certain advantages, such as greater freedom and an ability to tell a story in one's own way.

Black ink leads to Japan

Dudok de Wit's characteristic style could already be noticed in 'The Interview' (1978), his diploma animation about an adorable large-headed film character who attempts to conduct an interview but fails to find an interlocutor. The animation protagonists are drawn with a black line and resemble comic strip characters (when asked later about his inspirations, Dudok de Wit mentioned such artists as Hergé from Belgium and Jean-Jacques Sempé from France). Additionally, what makes 'The Interview' unique is minimalistic and perfectly composed frames, which only sometimes are filled with colours. Despite the fact that the major theme is the interview, no word is uttered in the film. The absence of dialogues is yet another characteristic of his films, which Dudok de Wit has consistently applied throughout his career, even in his feature-length work 'The Red Turtle' (2016).

In 'Tom Sweep' (1992) and 'The Monk and the Fish' (1994), which were made after 'The Interview', the director continues to use the same style, i.e. distinctive contours drawn with black ink. This time, his hand-drawn line is irregular, either very thin or thicker at times, which emphasises the role of a human element in the creation process. The background is filled with vivid colours, while slapstick gags send the viewer back to comic strips. 'Tom Sweep' was to be a pilot episode of the series which was never made, but 'The Monk and the Fish' is a stand-alone work which brought the director many international distinctions.

His greatest success was the Oscar-winning animation 'Father and Daughter' (2000). Once again, it exposes his precision in frame composition where ink is substituted by charcoal and the computer. Lines are thinner and less distinctive, while colours are more muted. Rather than comic strips, this animation resembles etchings by Rembrandt or Dutch landscape paintings. Along with the technique, the mood changes, too, as this story about longing and the passing of time exhibits more melancholy and nostalgia.

Only seemingly different is the experimental work 'The Aroma of Tea' (2006) – an abstract poem about a ball which ceaselessly follows its aim. Tea leaves were used to create the animation frames.

Just like tea brewing is not far from the rituals of the Far East, his earlier animations were reminiscent of the art of Japanese calligraphy. The culture of the Far East was also an inspiration for 'The Monk and the Fish', a film in which the main character metaphorically follows the path of Zen Buddhism. While creating these animations, Dudok de Wit could not foresee that he would become the only non-Japanese director making a film for iconic Studio Ghibli.

'The Red Turtle' – time and space

Allegedly, Studio Ghibli (famous for, among others, 'My neighbour Totoro' and 'Spirited Away') approached Michael Dudok de Wit with a proposal to direct a feature film. The work on 'the Red Turtle', starting from the idea and the script through consultations and drawings to production, lasted a few years.

Although at first glance this animation does not resemble the director's short films, it successfully encapsulates the atmosphere of his previous works. This involves the allure and lightness of Dudok de Wit's first films as well as the melancholy, loneliness and longing reminiscent of 'Father and Daughter'. The films also share the concept of time, typical of Dudok de Wit. On the one hand, time runs linearly pushing the plot forward and, on the other, it is cyclical. Time comes full circle, the same schemes are constantly repeated and nature measures the passing of time by the changing times of the day, alternating seasons or weather.

Dudok de Wit's animations may also be set in a man-made space, both geometrical and rhythmical. Tunnels, corridors and bridges look similar both in 'The Interview' and in 'The Monk and the Fish'. What becomes evident is the contrast between the static civilisation in place and fluid nature susceptible to passing (as well as revival). Both space and time in Dudok de Wit's films are unspecified and unlimited, suspended somewhere in the universe, which makes his works universal and timeless.

A lonely journey towards enlightenment

A constant in all Dudok de Wit's animations is the lonely and steadfast character who performs repetitive tasks and perseveres in striving for an aim, although he or she usually needs to accept his or her destiny.

As early as in 'The Interview', the character does not surrender when he is unable to find an ideal interlocutor, just like Tom Sweep does not give up his Sisyphean task of waste collection. The monk in 'The Monk and the Fish' returns every day to the monastery lake to try once again to catch a fish. The daughter comes every day to the lake hoping to meet her

father there. Although 'The Red Turtle' was made almost 40 years after 'The Interview', the characters in both films were constructed in the same way. A lonely protagonist must once again face the adversities of fate in order to accept his or her place in the universe as the time passes. It should be added that Dudok de Wit moved to live on a remote island while he was working on 'The Red Turtle'. The director, however, allows for the individual interpretation of the characters' feelings or the film message as every viewer may understand the metaphors and ideas concealed in his films in a different manner.

In one interview, Dudok de Wit said that what motivated him to create films was the exploration of beauty as well as a desire to create timeless stories which encouraged the viewers to become immersed in them. Let's allow the director to invite us to all those unique worlds he created for cinema fans. Let's allow ourselves to contemplate them, feel nostalgic and become touched by them. Let's make ourselves comfortable in Krakow's cinema chairs and enjoy beauty in the making.

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