Sheridan Gets Its Day in New York

By Peter Goddard

Image courtesy of Alliance Releasing

John Leguizamo as the "clown" in *Spawn*

There was a monster in the room when Sheridan "animated" Manhattan last mid–winter. That's Sheridan College, of course, the Sorbonne of computer animation out there in Oakville, Ont., the Toronto–proximate commuter town best known for its pricey lake–front properties, upscale eateries and quiet executive enclaves. The monster was Sheridan's spawn—actually, the movie *Spawn*. The crisp, clean scent of success rises even from the sewers of Oakville which, until recently, was best known for its most prominent citizen, Oscar Peterson. But, because of *Toy Story*, *Jurassic Park* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, Sheridan is now part of local Oakvillian lore. And the college is only too aware of it. For an entire day, Sheridan brazenly gave New York a taste of Canuck chutzpah via a computer–animation forum and showcase for the best CGI effects in the business.

My own education began with the crowd of wannabe animators who had turned up for the class. Jason Salotelle, 22, was in his 4th year a New York's School for Visual Arts and his pal Danny Kimanyen, 21, was also in the graduation class. Both were looking for jobs and thought the Sheridan master class might have pointers. But both were cautious about the computer–imaging business. Neither was entirely enthralled at the prospect in living their professional lives hunched over, staring for 12 hours into a computer, which is often the regime at ILM and other industry–supply shops. Both felt that they were artists and would love to work in traditional cel animation. "The problem with CGI," Danny told me, "is that everyone is always trying to out–do each other."

He's right , of course. CGI history has been macho history. And this history was framed initially by the Cold War research from companies such as IBM ("Big Blue") and General ("What's Good For America") Motors. Together they created a system called DAC–1—"Design Augmented (by) Computers"—which allowed for a 3–D read–out of the guts of a car or long–range bomber. Right from the start, CGI work was on a war footing. One of the first, if not the first, video game was called "Spacewar" and the first CGI movie was for flight simulation.

CGI didn't gain entrance into the equally macho world of entertainment until the late Stanley Kubrick remembered a documentary he'd seen at the Travel and Transportation exhibit at the New York's World Fair made by Graphic Films of California, which supplied NASA and the United States Air Force. Douglas Trumbull, one of those responsible for the training film, was hired by Kubrick as one of four special effects mavens on *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Trumbull (who later became a partner in the Canadian–developed IMAX system) eventually worked on the next generation of special–effects flicks such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *The Andromeda Strain*, *Bladerunner* and *Brainstorm*. By then Atari had developed the game Pong and computer graphics pioneers began to seriously swap information—the first conference devoted to the subject took place in 1973—and Lucasfilms created REYES, the prototype for Renderman, which Pixar would later use to created Disney's *Toy Story*, the first fully CGI feature–length film. [Ed.'s note: The first CGI short, *Hunger*, was made by Peter Foldès for the NFB in 1973.]

"Go get 'em, Dennis," called out Williams from one side of the stage as Dennis Turner (animation supervisor at ILM who worked on the special effects for *The Mummy*) talked about the old days—by which he meant 1988—when, as an animator, "you had to have a little broader range. You were creating a whole image. You were assembling a script. You were building a model and animating it. Now there are separate modellers and animators. You can't do both." James Straus (animation director for Santa Barbara studios) showed off some remarkable morphing work done for *American Werewolf in Paris* and finally Spaz himself ambled across the stage to the lectern like a young Neil Young ready to plug in the amp and crank it up to 11. But even before Williams started to speak, another character had come to dominate the morning, the morphing evil clown in *Spawn*, the movie Turner, Straus and Williams had all worked on.

Over and over again, the clip showed the grotesque clown body contorted into a great alien monster. After a while, I found I was getting hooked on the distorted mutation. It was like staring intently at a painting where the shapes refused to sit still. But, of course, you could sense why Straus, Turner and Williams were equally hooked on *Spawn*. It was tapping into the *other* history of film, the one that's rarely mentioned on Oscar night—the history of the technology's impact on what's seen in the film work itself. Ironically, as high–tech as CGI is, it represents moviemaking's break with technology, perhaps a long overdue break. More than any other 20th century art, filmmaking reflects what Lewis Munford called "the myth of the machine."

In Hollywood, the only thing sexier than sex are the toys, cowboy guns, Flash Gordon spaceships, nose–diving bombers, cannons, rockets, lasers, pointy bras and fast cars. However, CGI is morphing the machine out of existence. CGI is turning morphing itself into a new mythology. In the techno reconstruction of history, you go directly from Chuck Jones's cartooning—where, as historian Michael Barrier notes, Wile E. Coyote "converted the camera, and through it the audience, into an active participant in the cartoon"—to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. In *Terminator 2*, the sexiest bit came when the audience wanted to have sex with the morphing man–of–mercury who had just paused long enough in his transmutations to become a woman. After *Spawn*, its the mutation not the mutant that gives us the kicks.