

Willem de Kooning Academy

Does Stop-motion Animation Have a Morbid Disposition and How Can Filmmakers Benefit from It?

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Introduction

The lights go out as the audience eagerly awaits the “Danse Macabre” that is about to commence on the silver screen. What would in natural circumstances repel us is in the context of fiction suddenly feasted upon. This unlikely fixation on gore and other morbid imagery, commonly denoted with the term “morbid curiosity”¹ has intrigued philosophers, scientists, critics, and authors alike since the beginning of written history. Aristotle addressed it explicitly in his *Poetics*, stating, “We enjoy looking at accurate likenesses of things which are themselves painful to see, obscene beasts, for instance, and corpses.” Since then, numerous contemporary thinkers have discussed mentioned attraction in the contexts of the horror genre², violent entertainment³, public broadcasting⁴, etc. In this paper, I will investigate the attraction to the morbid, specifically in the context of puppet puppet-stop motion animation⁵, which, as I will later argue, I believe has an innate morbid disposition. I will consider the topic from the perspective of both a stop-motion filmmaker as well as a consumer of stop-motion animation. Stemming from the existing discourse on morbid curiosity and my perception of puppet stop-motion animation, I will propose my hypotheses on why it may possess a proclivity for the morbid, notwithstanding the genre or narrative elements. Then, I will attempt to explain why the audience might be drawn to the effect of this predisposition by investigating various existing theories. Next, I will address reservations

¹ a powerful fascination with conventionally undesired matters. This includes unwholesome, unhealthy, noxious, gruesome, frightening, pessimistic, punishing, repugnant, shocking, or matters otherwise negative in some way.

² E.g., “The Philosophy of Horror” by Noel Carroll

³ E.g., essays in “Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment!” edited by Jeffrey Goldstein

⁴ E.g., *Morbid curiosity and the mass media: proceedings of a symposium* by James A. Crook

⁵ Puppet stop-motion animation is a filming technique in which jointed puppets and other objects are photographed in a series of slightly different positions. When these pictures are played in a sequence, they create an illusion of movement.

regarding good taste that an author might consider before embracing the morbid disposition through artistic and narrative decisions. And lastly, I will comment on the limits of morbid attraction and how the technical properties of stop-motion affect it.

This paper corresponds with my applied work on the graduation film “Het Pensioen.” As a writer and director of a 6-minute stop-motion short, I have had an opportunity to apply the insights gained through this research. In the supplement, I will succinctly describe some steps I took and provide examples of my creative/narrative decisions.

Morbid Curiosity

For as obscure or extreme sociopath desires and fantasies might excite perverse minds, there is a relief just a few clicks away. Though websites displaying war violence, self-mutilation, or selling murderers' autographed memorabilia (murderabilia) might not be on your daily internet menu, be assured they very much exist, and so do their target audiences. You would be excused to be disturbed or averse to their existence, they only entertain a limited and marginal audience. Yet we can agree on the presence of an obscure and dark fascination with morbidity, uniting the fanbases of such websites. You could argue this fascination is some kind of perversion or illness, but I am convinced it is to some degree present in an average individual. Let me touch upon some milder or more socially acceptable instances of such allure for the sake of argument. Historical sites of utmost horror, such as concentration camps, are increasingly subject to mass tourism. Likewise, torture museums⁶, castle dungeons, and catacombs spice up travel itineraries for adults and children alike. Throngs of horror or action fans fill theaters to feast their eyes on the on-screen violence and gore. For most of human history, people casually gathered to witness public punishments. Youngsters are sharing and laughing at compilations of sport or stunt mishaps that occasionally result in serious bodily injuries on social media. Death and gore are common subjects in visual art and literature. And rare are those who disregard the crime section of their news medium of choice. In no sense is this list exhaustive, yet I am assured many of you would find yourself guilty of relating to at least one of the mentioned examples.

⁶ Such as Museo della Tortura di Siena (Siena, Italy) or The Torture Museum (Amsterdam, The Netherlands) etc.

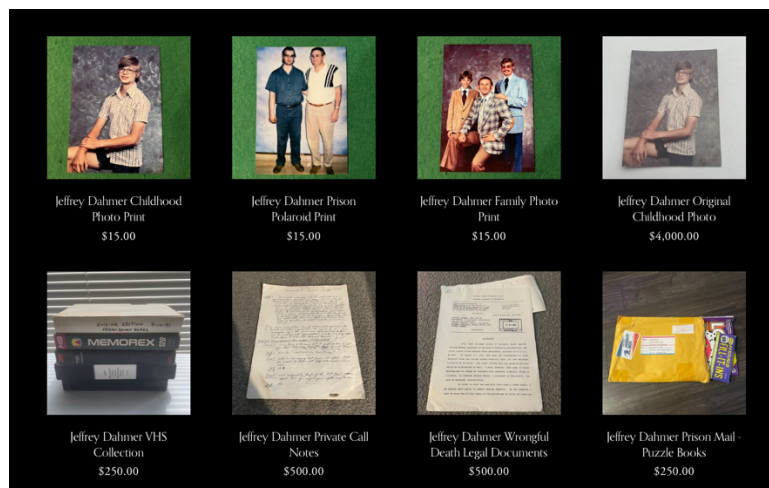


Figure 1 "Murderabilia" assortment. Still from www.cultcollectibles.org.

You could argue I am trying to reduce the source of interest in those activities to one and wrong common denominator, that they have little to do with attraction to morbidity per se, but rather with a variety of other reasons. Such could be knowledge/awareness seeking, vengeance, public pressure, the delight of suspense, and an engaging plot, to mention a few. These examples might indeed be the dominant source of attraction or at least its justification for some. Nonetheless, we cannot claim morbidity is absent from them. Even so, its presence does not discourage the multitudes from partaking; many would go as far as to claim the activity would lose a part of its appeal in the absence of macabre. If not attractive, we can conclude morbidity in such contexts is at least tolerable; otherwise, these examples would not attract the general public.

Some hypotheses are indeed trying to establish the unlikely attraction as an evolutionary necessity, thus naturally present to some capacity in most individuals. Humans and other animals are hardwired to avoid contact with cadavers, fecal matter, and similar sources of diseases as well as other hazards such as predators to enhance chances of survival. Yet in order to learn to recognize threats, animals might be drawn to familiarize themselves with such dangers/risks, certainly, from a safe distance. While factors that lead to death generally induce aversion; completely disregarding them would be dangerously naive.

Next to the evolutionary hypotheses, the notion of such curiosity has been widely discussed in philosophical discourses throughout history, some of which I will refer to in later sections. However, surprisingly little comprehensive psychological scientific research has been done on this

matter. That said, in recent years, the term "Morbid Curiosity" has come into wide use and appeared in scientific papers. Most commonly, when referring to "the mixture of compulsion, excitement, and fear, indicated by a longing to know about morbid subjects such as death and terror", as described in what seems to be the first psychological paper on the matter. (Zuckerman)

It would be wrong to assume that morbid curiosity is some general inert inclination developed and expressed in the same way across all populations or indeed that everyone is morbidly curious at all.

Some evolutionary hypotheses assume only a portion of a population would need to possess this tendency to successfully disseminate the findings among peers less interested in investigating them themselves. The population at large would still experience the evolutionary advantage. (Boyer and Parren; Hilbig)

Some recent psychological studies have even attempted to define a universal scale of morbid curiosity on which we could grade individuals across a specified period of their life. (Scrivner)

While much is still untapped and undefined, the general consensus considers proclivity for morbid curiosity present across the general population in varying capacities.

Death and morbid curiosity

I would like to emphasize that despite the descriptor "morbid" is typically defined as overly interested in unpleasant subjects concerning death; morbid curiosity is by most authors not solely restricted to the notion of demise itself. Death is a relatively abstract term that could hardly act as a general subject of curiosity. Rather the reasons for death, that is to say, the ventures and situations that may cause death, could be regarded as subjects of morbid curiosity. (Kirkpatrick and Navarrete; Navarrete and Fessler)

It is relevant to mention that these situations do not require a factor of explicit disgust, although some might well induce it. Therefore, morbid curiosity could more generally denote the interest in the dangerous and the threatening. Understood this way, the interest in morbid concepts could be likened to Burke's vision of the sublime, which I will refer to in a later section.

Is stop-motion morbid?

The morbid disposition of stop-motion animation

Stop-motion animation, be it clay or model/puppet animation, is not a genre but an art form - a storytelling medium. Therefore, it is, if utilized skillfully, capable of conveying any sort of narrative or emotion conceivable, just as it can be infinitely versatile in its visual style. It is a technique of choice across a spectrum of productions, including many popular children's television series, commercially successful feature films, advertisements, etc.

Moreover, it is well present in the independent festival-oriented production, as students, filmmakers, amateurs, and studios turn to it for various reasons such as its visual appeal, technical accessibility, passion for craftsmanship, marketing, etc.

During my numerous visits to animation film festivals, I have been exposed to a versatile display of contemporary stop-motion production. Among my festival favorites, I noticed a pattern of films that could be categorized by a dark, unsettling atmosphere, morbid/disgusting elements, and overall absurdity. While not all of them fall under a specific genre per se, as the narratives of such films are not necessarily alike in structure or substance, they definitively share distinct visual elements or narrative features. Despite the genre distinctions, they seem to share a certain appeal because of those attributes. While this observation could be a product of my biased taste, the sheer number of such films that appear in festival selections signals that something about these films⁷ appeals to the juries and festival audiences alike⁸. While examples characterized by dark and morbid elements exist in other forms of animation and feature film, I came to believe stop-motion has an innate proclivity for such factors, which I will call “The morbid disposition of stop-motion animation”. In the following sections, I will examine the hypothetical reasons behind it, why it might appeal to the audience, and how a filmmaker can use this disposition as a storytelling catalyst.

⁷ Take, for example, Robert Morgan's Bobby Yeah, which was nominated for BAFTA, IFFR's Tiger Award and Sundance's Grand Jury Prize.

⁸ Animation festivals such as Annecy and Kaboom, as well as festivals specifically focusing on stop-motion animation.



Figure 2 Still from Robert Morgan's Bobby Yeah (2011) ©Robert Morgan and Blue Light

Why does stop-motion have a morbid disposition?

While any work of art can be morbid, in the next section, I will argue why stop-motion might be morbid in its essence, that is to say, without the artist's intentional decision and notwithstanding the genre or style choices. I came to assume this is primarily due to the disparity between the empirical knowledge of our environment and its slightly violated portrayal in stop-motion. In the next sections, I will investigate the specific factors contributing to the imbalance. It is essential to mention this list is not exhaustive, is entirely speculative, and is based on my experience.

Smoke and mirrors

Before stop-motion became a full-fledged animation medium, filmmakers employed it as an optical special effect technique in live-action productions. Special effects might be used solely for economic or practical reasons, meaning the scene could be recreated in the real world and captured on film in real-time. However, such a venture is oftentimes financially impractical. An even more impressive power of special effects is creating an illusion of the impossible: it allows us to visualize what otherwise could not have existed under the rules of physics and human understanding. One of the earliest examples of stop-motion effects, or any visual effects for that matter, is found in J. Stuart Blackton's 1907 *The Haunted Hotel*. A hotel guest is served breakfast without human intervention - a teapot magically pours tea into the mug, and a knife autonomously cuts through the bread before the slices neatly stack, and a plate slides underneath. A similar scene, traditionally animated, could convey the same story. However, it would unavoidably lose the unsettling supernatural dimension. A stylized still image can hardly be mistaken for a capture of reality; therefore, we also naturally perceive a sequence of such images to be a product of human imagination. However, the suspense of disbelief can be achieved more easily if the actual objects, lighting, and environment are photographically portrayed. On some unconscious level, we still perceive photography as truth⁹. It would be interesting to investigate this effect compared to

⁹ In their *Practices of Looking: An introduction to Visual Culture*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright describe the "Myth of Photographic Truth" - a common belief that cameras capture reality and what we see is unaltered truth. (Sturken and Cartwright)

photorealistic CGI animation. My assumption, however; would be that CGI nowadays has lost a part of its curiosity. Despite its complex and highly technical nature, a simplified shared understanding of its origin commonly justifies it simply as “generated by a computer.” We do not need to comprehend the exact technical intricacies of CGI; yet we immediately know there is no magic, only technological developments. Whereas, despite us comprehending the trickery of stop-motion, we are still intrigued by natural objects in the real world moving autonomously.



Figure 3 Still from J. Stuart Blackton's The Haunted Hotel (1907)

Even though every sound filmgoer knows they are watching fiction, subconsciously their senses might be confused by the discrepancy between what they see and what they have empirically learned about the laws of physics. This state of confusion would, if it was not for the safety of the theatre seat, be perceived as dangerous. In the real world, unknown and unpredictable situations might be potentially harmful, so we might feel the urge to explore them and formulate a suitable response. Such an urge

strongly resembles explanations for morbid curiosity as a knowledge-seeking mechanism as well as the hypothesis of the uncanny valley¹⁰.

(Re)Animated bodies

In the previous section, I dealt with the inanimate film objects that resemble inanimate real-life objects but violate their physical laws. Now, let us look at inanimate film objects resembling animate beings - puppets. If not incredibly super-realistic, Puppets always inform the viewer of their inanimate actuality. On the one hand, filmmakers might decide to fully reveal the artificiality of puppets by displaying their constitution, materials, or similar telltale signs. On the other hand, they might decide to disguise their artificiality by using materials that strongly resemble human skin or similar organic appearance of other creatures, as well as resort to image manipulation in post-production. However, to an informed viewer, it is still immediately evident they are seeing inanimate objects consisting of synthetic materials regardless of the method employed. In that sense, a similar discrepancy and supernaturality of moving objects previously described might arise. However, because puppets are creatural or even anthropomorphic in their essence, there might be another layer to their morbid disposition. As previously contemplated, viewers know that the animated bodies are indeed lifeless - dead. Yet they move, which is perceived as a sign of life. Not only is this a confusing discrepancy but indeed a morbid concept, a resurrection of sorts when dealing with creatural objects.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this effect is the early work of Ladislav Starevich, most notably 1912 *Cameraman's Revenge*. In this movie, animated dead bugs take the central stage: Starevich's bug puppets quite literally came back from the dead and now merrily engage in love affairs and adultery on-

¹⁰ The term “uncanny valley” was coined by Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1970. He wrote, “I have noticed that, in climbing toward the goal of making robots appear like a human, our affinity for them increases until we come to a valley, which I call the uncanny valley” (Masahiro 98). This valley is a point at human-like characters (simulations of life, such as robots, prosthetic limbs, wax puppets, etc.) become “too real”. Our affinity towards them sharply turns into aversion. The greater the proximity to human likeness, the deeper the repulsion.

screen. A naive viewer convinced that Starevich trained his bugs would most likely miss the morbid connotation that an informed viewer experiences, knowing the insects' lifeless actuality.

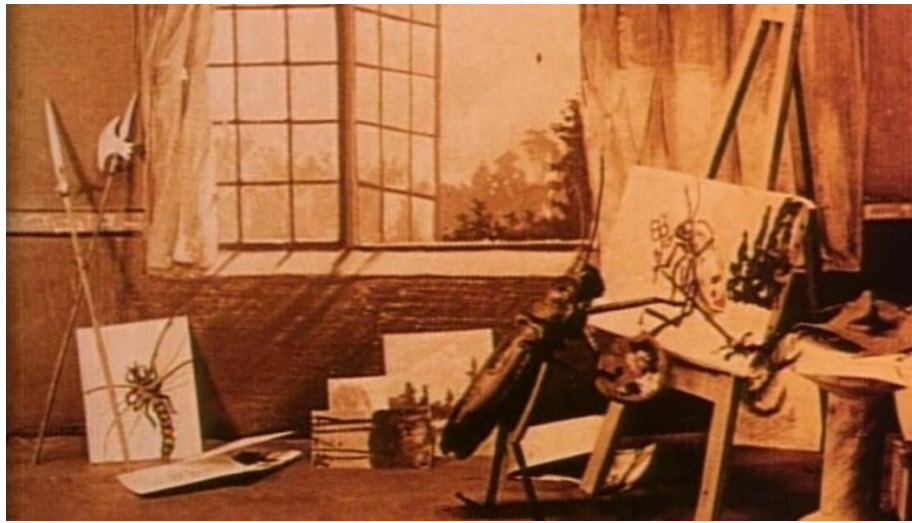


Figure 4 Still from Ladislav Starevich's The Cameraman's Revenge (1912)

Although puppets appear in other art forms, such as puppetry, I argue that the morbid disposition mentioned earlier is mainly unique to stop-motion animation except for ventriloquism. While puppet theatre might be just as engaging, the presence of puppeteers and strings provides logic. It removes the discrepancy experienced when watching stop-motion animation, in which the part of reality where an animator moves the puppet is left uncaptured, erased from the time.

Disproportional materiality

Puppet animation sets are usually fabricated at scales varying between 1:6 and 1:8. However, the natural textures of real-life materials used, such as wood, paper, textile, fur, etc., cannot be scaled. Therefore, if those textures are visible, they might appear inconsistent with our previous experience of full-scale objects. While this is generally not immediately obvious, it might, on some unconscious level, confuse or unsettle the viewer and therefore arouse curiosity. Other non-textual material inconsistencies are possible, such as the viscosity of fluids having the same effect. Lastly, the optical image quality and lighting appear unnatural due to the proximity and scale and thus further contribute to the discrepancy.

Half-alive

If we were to suspend disbelief and perceive moving puppets as animate beings, another discrepancy would arise. About six hundred individual muscles control functions of the human body. The complexity of movements they create is impossible to replicate on a puppet. The facial movements are significantly impacted by this limitation as animators commonly decide to further economize on them for practical reasons or as a stylistic choice. For example, puppets might only be capable of moving their eyes, whereas eyebrows would stay in place. Though the limited movements suffice in creating the illusion of life, they certainly contribute to the morbid disposition. A moving inanimate object is that much more morbid if it is only partially life-like. As demonstrated by several typical horror creatures such as zombies and vampires, viewers certainly feel disgusted by the blurred demarcation line between animate and inanimate characters, a quality deeply integrated into the stop-motion technique.



Figure 5 Facial movements of puppets in the picture are limited to eyeballs. Still from Špela Čadež's Lovesick (2007) ©Špela Čadež

The morbid disposition of stop-motion in the creative arsenal or why we might be drawn to it

In the previous chapter, I discussed the innate proclivity for morbidity that, in my opinion, stop-motion as a technique possesses. Now let us look into how and why it might be employed and intensified by creative decisions.

The appeal of the unappealing

At first glance, the morbid disposition, especially if reinforced through artistic decisions or plot developments, appears off-putting, yet it seems to attract a broad audience. Why would consumers be attracted to something they simultaneously deem repulsive? While perversion might be the straightforward answer to this conundrum, the sheer number of consumers effectively prohibits us from regarding them as such.

Noel Carroll deals with a similar question in his *Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*. The second paradox of heart, the paradox of horror, deals with the fact horror is simultaneously repulsive and attractive. Carroll proposes that the latter is based on fascination and curiosity: "Horror attracts because anomalies command attention and elicit curiosity" (Carroll 195). Similarly, Stephen King refers to a violation of norms rarely seen in real life and thus fascinating in his *Danse Macabre* (1981). Despite them talking about a specific genre (horror), the same argument could be used for attraction to the stop-motion morbid disposition: its source in the sensory perplexity stems from anomalies between what we see and what we know, as discussed earlier. Carroll's theory draws from H.P. Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, in which he proposes the concept of "Cosmic Fear", a fear that differs from natural fear in the sense that it evokes awe and curiosity.

He argues that people are born fearful of the unknown or supernatural and that this feeling is naturally accompanied by awe. In his opinion, this awe is attractive as it addresses the primordial human intuition about the unknown higher forces. In other words, he believes that morbidly unnatural features of supernatural literature trigger some sort of a religious experience as a result of innate convictions about the world. (Lovecraft)

Without going too far into whether such beliefs are universal or not, this explanation certainly seems feasible. And while he is talking specifically about the effect of supernatural literature, I would argue that a similar kind of morbidly unnatural state can be prompted by the stop-motion morbid disposition discussed in the previous sections.

While the mentioned theories argue that morbidness can be immediately and directly enjoyed as it evokes some sort of curiosity, a different outlook is found in Aristotle's catharsis theories. While his exact meaning has been subject to debate over the centuries, the usual literary interpretation of Aristotle's work focuses on the concept of purgation. Purgatives such as tragedies, horror films, or in our case, the morbidness of stop-motion can help the viewer draw out the negative (unsafe) emotions such as rage, fear, or disgust by providing a safe outlet.

While the purgation aspect is subject to criticism and sometimes disregarded by the scientific data (Zillmann), the part that the audience is drawn to the horror genre in order to experience dangerous emotions in a safe environment definitely holds credibility, and I believe stop-motion morbidness might bring about the same effect on a subconscious level.

Another interesting explanation of why we might be drawn to morbid stop-motion can be drawn from Zillmann's theory of mood management theory (1988) in which he proposes that boredom leads to a desire for arousing entertainment. Whatever emotion, including disgust or fear, might be more desirable than pure boredom. Tamborini and Stiff (1987) found the most common reasons for watching horror among filmgoers to be "because it's scary" or "because it's exciting" which directly correlates to Zillmann's theory. (Tamborini and Stiff)

Clark McCauley, however, underlines in his essay "When screen violence is not attractive" that this theory fails to explain why negative emotions might be more attractive than boredom. A potential answer to that might be The Relief Hypothesis, he suggests. (McCauley)

Like the Catharsis theory, the relief theory focuses on the resolution - the viewer's reintegration into the real world. King mentions it in his *Danse Macabre*: "the magic moment of reintegration and safety at the end . . . that makes the danse macabre so rewarding and magical" (King 14). Horror, or in our case puppet morbidness, brings upon unpleasant feelings of disgust,

fear, etc. Therefore, we feel a specific satisfying relief as they end, and we are back in our life and world.

While attraction to unpleasant emotions might not have one agreed-upon explanation, it does indeed appear that pleasantness and interest are unrelated, as proved by Turner & Silvia in their 2006 paper "Must interesting things be pleasant? A test of competing appraisal structure." (Turner and Silvia) As if the tremendous amount of horror fans or, for that matter, adrenaline seekers were not adequately convincing.

Benefiting from the morbid disposition – should we?

As previously discussed, I believe stop motion as a technique has a default penchant for the morbid. This can effectively be ignored or concealed if it is not in the author's interest. However, in my opinion, the cases where stop-motion filmmakers decided to turn the morbid disposition to their advantage through art direction and narrative design work particularly well. That is to say, their impact on the audience would diminish were they replicated in another animation technique. Now, let us examine the possible reservations against employing morbid elements in a work of art.

As defended by the arguments presented in the previous section, morbidness certainly has the potential to attract and maintain the attention of the audience. This attraction is additionally exemplified by the broad interest in other forms of morbid storytelling, such as news. Content analysis has shown that interest in bad news, characterized as violent, tragic, or macabre in tone, has increased by a factor of three between the 1960s and 1996 and is now the most prevalent tone of news. (Patterson) The reason for an increasing number of morbid news is not the lack of other news or an increase in the morbid source material. Instead, the trend has been attributed to positive TV ratings. (Stoehr and Zurawik)

News publishers are evidently widely taking advantage of morbid reporting, which poses a question of whether the artists and their work similarly benefit from employing such elements.

Though morbidity has been ever-present in art, the attitudes towards explicitly morbid art have been changing throughout history. To give an example of such shifts, let us look at Horace's rules of decorum. In his *Ars Poetica*, he stipulates what is fit or proper to be shown publicly and thus sets

rules for “modern poets”. He specifies that gory, explicit scenes must be kept off-stage and delivered by a messenger, as was the case in Greek tragedy. (Brink and Horace)

Shakespeare, for example, has entirely disregarded these rules in, e.g., *King Lear*, where such scenes appear in the foreground. (Shakespeare)

Nevertheless, we could hardly say his work is negatively impacted by the creative decision to show gory elements. Despite the abundance of discourse on the matter and examples, an artist might still find themselves doubting whether including a specific morbid element is socially appropriate and not done in poor taste. While a work that solely relies on the morbid sensation and otherwise lacks aesthetic or narrative qualities might come across as unsatisfying or cheap trickery, this does not determine morbid curiosity in general as such. To clarify my point, I will draw an analogy with humor. A work solely relying on situational humor and lacking other qualities would be regarded as lowbrow. However, at large, employing humor in art does not carry such connotation. On the contrary, it can elevate a work of art and aid in conveying profound ideas. A good story, layered with wit, can challenge our intellect, or make a difficult subject easier to digest. Just as taking advantage of humor in an artwork does not necessarily turn it into a slapstick comedy, so does morbidity not turn it into the self-indulgent Grand Guignol¹¹.

In my opinion, it all boils down to the reasons for using morbid elements and their execution. As previously discussed, they might liven up a narrative work of art, but they are not a replacement for good narrative design. Unless we are trying to produce a work of horror, I think of morbid elements more as an additive rather than the focal point of the work.

¹¹ Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol was originally a theatre in Paris known for its sensational plays intended to horrify. Nowadays, the expression denotes any form of dramatic entertainment intended to shock and horrify the audience with its macabre and gruesome content.

The Buffer or when morbid loses its attraction

Lastly, I will discuss the limit of morbid curiosity, viz., the moment when morbidness shifts from intriguing to off-putting.

In his 1757 "Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," Burke provides his own definition of sublimity, denoting not only the great or elevated in art but also indistinguishable from terror.

According to him, dark, gloomy, massive objects invoke an overwhelming feeling of power and infinity, which fills us with terror. However, he notes; that the astonishment and the appeal of sublime objects only apply to situations where no actual danger is present. (Burke)

Modern authors refer to a similar predisposition. Carroll, for example, notes that "in order to respond appropriately to something like a horror film . . . we must believe we are confronted with a fictional spectacle" (Carroll 67-68). If the audience were to believe it is in real danger, the experience of a horror movie would not be enjoyable at all; instead, viewers would be "calling out the army" (Carroll 67). If this "buffer" of fiction did not exist, viewers would be traumatized or at least revolted by the morbid content.

Stop-motion animation provides an abundance of reminders of its fictional essence. Therefore, it is safe to assume no consumers of stop-motion animation would perceive it as a recording of reality. Arguably, even the willing suspense of disbelief might be more challenging to achieve when compared to live action, given that we are aware of the material composition of puppets. Therefore, I suspect the technique of stop-motion itself provides sufficient distance to act as a buffer. As viewers, we recognize the material composition of puppets as a metaphor for flesh and skin, which enables us to experience morbid curiosity. However, we always know it is just this, a metaphor or fiction. Though everyone realizes a gory scene in a live-action film is a product of fiction - constructed using prosthetics, make-up, and CGI; it might be subconsciously perceived as reality and thus off-putting to some viewers. While some might indeed be repulsed by a similar scene done in stop-motion, I would argue a notably smaller number would be disturbed or traumatized by a bleeding silicone puppet. A good analogy would be the distinction between a photograph and a painting. Take, for example, Francisco Goya's "Saturn Devouring His Son". The concept of a father feasting on his son is digestible if not intriguing when conveyed through a painting. Were it recreated in the form of a photorealistic photomontage;

this concept would most likely result in a repulsive, if not traumatizing, visual, despite our knowledge of its artificiality.

While the “morbid curiosity threshold” varies between individuals, it is safe to assume that puppet stop-motion animation provides a sufficient “buffer” for most. It is, therefore, a suitable method for conveying morbid concepts without disturbing the general audience.

Conclusion

Though any work of art can include morbid elements, stop-motion animation, in my opinion, has a natural morbid disposition. Filmmakers may decide to ignore or conceal it. However, if embraced, it can work in favor of the overall attractiveness of the work. While there is no simple formula for “attractive morbidness”, and it is impossible to say where exactly lies its limit, it is safe to conclude that it can indeed be achieved. To benefit from the audience’s morbid curiosity successfully and thoroughly, a maker must consider the questions of good taste as well as the “buffer” when making creative decisions.

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Supplement

Reflection on the practice project

The findings of this paper have been applied to my graduation practice project; a stop-motion short film “Het Pensioen”. The film is being produced as a collaborative graduation project by me (writer, director, and set designer), Tatevik Martirosyan (producer and art director), and Eva Schets (lead animator and puppet designer).

The idea for my screenplay was born years ago when I stumbled upon an article in the crime section of a local newspaper. It read: “Grisly: A Man Hid his Mother’s Corpse for Years to Keep Receiving Her Pension.” Grisly indeed, I thought, but as much as I wanted, I could not get it out of my mind. Who is this man? What was going through his mind? And most importantly, why am I so unusually interested in this gruesome story?

The story is, in a way, inseparable from the notion of “morbid curiosity”, as my original incentive was a product of it. As a result, I was determined to embrace the morbid attraction by means of gruesome elements as story features, as well as in the general look and feel. Stop-motion was a natural choice, not only because it is my most robust creative tool but because I believed it is fundamentally most fitting for the nature of the story.

I distanced myself from horror or macabre sensation and rather wrote a social drama. (I am not an avid fan of screen violence and gore.) However, I do believe the morbid elements can supplement and liven up an otherwise difficult subject matter. Writing my research paper was a great aid in making narrative and other creative decisions, some of which I will outline here.

The film is yet to be finished and screened to the festival audiences. However, based on the positive responses of the people we pitched the project to, a significant number of volunteers joining our creative team, a successful funding application, and feedback from industry professionals, I believe I successfully applied the morbid narrative elements.

Research outcomes applied

I was conscious of the “buffer” and decorum to keep the film attractive to a broad audience. Therefore, I kept the explicit gore to the minimum. An excellent example of this concern is the story beat with the rigor mortis jaw incident (Scene 12¹²) While this could be a particularly gruesome and graphic scene, I decided to tone it down by manifesting the artificiality of the puppet. Instead of displaying a detached jaw in graphic details, the mouth replacement piece¹³ slides off and reveals the technical composition of the puppet’s head. This became a vital part of the story message – due to the authoritarian upbringing, Harold is literally unable to express himself until he emancipates himself (grows up) at the end of the story when he quite literally takes the voice from his deceased mother.

Another similar example is the use of the vase as a metaphor for the mother’s body. In scene 16, the audience believes Harold is stitching together the decaying body of his mother. However, this is never graphically shown. Instead, we see the reconstructed vase, and the rest is left to our imagination.

A different example of findings of this research being applied in the film is the material choices I have made as a set designer. I decided to embrace real-life textures, such as wood, textile, and paper which correspond to the “disproportional reality” argument in my research. Latex-coated wire umbilical cord and the wet-looking textural environment of scene 22, in my opinion, work exceptionally well in conveying the morbid nature of Harold’s dream.

While I can only mention a few examples here, I ensure there are many more, proving the benefits of doing the research on the chosen matter. For a better understanding of the story, please refer to the screenplay in the appendix.

¹² See Appendix 1

¹³ Mouth replacement pieces are commonly used in puppet stop-motion animation to animate dialogues. They are most usually held in place by magnets.



Figure 6 The umbilical cord from scene 22



Figure 7 Real textures in a downscaled environment of Het Pensioen

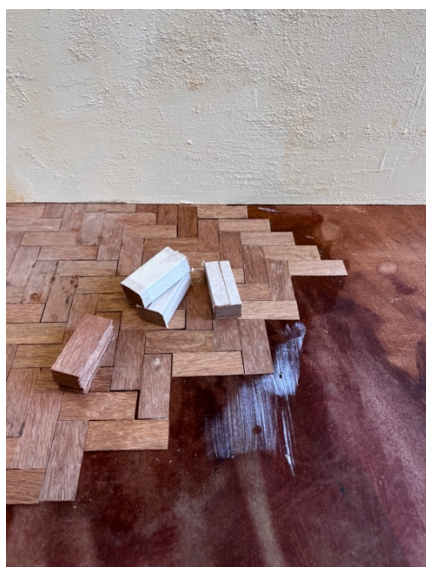


Figure 8 The use of real materials in the production of Het Pensioen

Appendix

1. Het Pensioen – the screenplay
2. The English translations of the dialogues

WORKING VERSION

HET PENSIOEN

Screenplay for a short stop-motion animated film

by

Anej Golčar

Translator and consultant

Marieke Swinkels

Story revisions by

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Current revisions

v18 - 20/05/2022

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READER NOTE

One thing that will be obvious to viewers but less so to readers is how the animation technique of stop-motion replacement animation plays into the story. Whereas HENDRINA speaks throughout the film and is capable of moving her mouth, HAROLD for the most part isn't physically able to verbally express himself due to the blank replacement piece that his puppet bears. (This is to communicate his emotional repression.)

1 INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING 1

The second hand on a grandfather clock is audibly approaching 7AM, followed by a chime. A small apartment block living room is revealed. It's filled with dated furniture scattered with an excessive amount of vases of all shapes and sizes. Walls are decorated with pictures of vases, flowers and portraits of a woman florist. We spot a closed door marked with faded patterned wooden letters reading "Harold". Wall next to it is inscribed with height measurement marks.

2 INT. KITCHEN - MORNING 2

We follow from above as middle-aged male hands cook oatmeal in a worn out pan. Then they symmetrically arrange a tray with two bowls of porridge and two cups of coffee.

3 INT. BEDROOM - MORNING 3

60-year-old HAROLD stands in front of closed curtains, his silhouette barely visible in the gloom. He waits for the grandfather clock to chime before he draws back the curtains. Behind him, an old, weak lady lies in bed, she is his mother, HENDRINA (100). Harold approaches her and gives her a kiss on her forehead. She wakes up. Harold helps her into the sitting position and supports her head with a pillow. He then takes a scoop of porridge and brings it to his mother's mouth. She recoils.

HENDRINA

(scornful)

Ugh, aangebrand! Je zou denken dat
je inmiddels tenminste havermout
zou weten te koken!

Harold tries to counter, but only manages to respond with muffled grunt as a result of the physical limitation posed by the blank replacement piece.

4 INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY 4

Harold pushes Hendrina in her wheelchair past the wallet on a coffee table. He tries to pick it up, but is interrupted by a slap on the wrist by his mother, who grabs it herself. Harold pushes the wheelchair towards the front door.

5 INT. HALLWAY - DAY 5

Harold closes and locks the door. He walks away from the frame and stops after a few steps.

HENDRINA

(irritated)

Oh, Harold, de deur zit dicht!

We hear steps approach again. Harold checks whether the door is locked before leaving again.

6 INT. LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

6

The grandpa clock moves in a time-lapse from 4 to 6. We hear keys turning in a lock and a door opening.

Harold pushes the wheelchair into the living room. He holds bags of groceries and a bouquet in his hands while Hendrina is holding a huge vase in in her lap.

HENDRINA
(gelukzalige zucht)
Prachtig, werkelijk wonderschoon!

DISSOLVE TO:

7 INT. LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

7

Harold and Hendrina both seat in their respective armchairs. Harold is trying read a book, while Hendrina continues her rant.

HENDRINA
Vroeger, toen jij nog jong was,
heeft jouw vader me er net zo een
gegeven. Die wist jij natuurlijk
binnen een week omver te lopen,
mijn mooie vaas zo in stukken!

Harold lowers his eyes.

DISSOLVE TO:

8 INT. BEDROOM - EVENING

8

Harold helps his mother get in her bed and pulls the cover over her.

HENDRINA
We hadden er nog een mee moeten
nemen. Vazen zoals die worden
vandaag de dag niet meer gemaakt,
Harry.

Harold stands by the light switch.

HENDRINA (CONT'D)
Morgen, Harry, morgen gaan we er
samen nog eentje halen.

Harold grunts in disapproval and switches the light off.

9

INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING

9

Harold fills the vase with flowers. We overhear a muffled argument between next-door neighbors. Harold hastens towards the wall to eavesdrop. He takes a small vase from the shelf and puts it between his ear and the wall as the dialogue gets more distinguishable.

NEIGHBOR LADY

Nee, nee, vóór elf uur is de
afspraak!

NEIGHBOR BOY

Maar MAM, al mijn vrienden mogen
tot 12!

NEIGHBOR LADY

Oh? Dus als jouw vriendjes allemaal
van de brug springen, spring jij
erachteraan? Naar binnen,
dondersteen!

We hear a door shutting loudly.

NEIGHBOR BOY

Ik haat je!

NEIGHBOR LADY

Rick, hoe DURF je de deur in mijn
gezicht te slaan?!

Harold retreats, shakes his head in disapproval and returns to the vase. In a short time-lapse, we see Harold trying to find a spot for the vase throughout the living room. He then tries to align it perfectly on a shelf by moving it left and right in small increments. He suddenly pushes it to the floor. It shatters off-camera with a loud blast. Hendrina screams through the walls.

HENDRINA

Jij klungelig duivelsgebroed, ik
sliep!

Harold's face is twitching between satisfaction and shame. He bends over to collect the pieces.

10

INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

10

The grandpa clock rings at 7 AM.

11

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

11

Harold prepares the same porridge as yesterday and arranges the plate in exactly the same way. As he is putting down a cup of coffee, he spills one drop on the tray. Slightly irritated, he wipes it away.

- 12 INT. BEDROOM - MORNING 12
- Harold stands in front of the curtains, waiting for the clock to chime again. He turns around and sits next to his mother. She is still asleep. He hesitantly touches her face to wake her up but she doesn't respond. He kisses her and then gently shakes her shoulders while grunting. Still no response, she passed away. Harold seems sorrowful for a few moments. The clock chimes in the distance. Harold's facial expression suddenly changes to determined. He opens her eyelids and pulls her from bellow the sheets. One of her eyelids slowly closes, so he opens it again. He supports her head with a pillow. He stirs the porridge, scoops a spoon and tries to single-handedly open Hendrina's mouth. Due to rigor mortis, the jaw doesn't give in. He puts down the spoon and tries again with both hands. As he applies the force, the replacement mouth piece of Hendrina's puppet slides off. Harold startles and squints as he thinks of a solution.
- 13 INT. LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER 13
- On the desktop next to a bunch of individual shards (except for one neatly arranged in rows) lies a tube of glue. Harold aligns the out-of-place shard before grabbing the superglue.
- 14 INT. BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER 14
- Harold finishes squirting glue on the separated mouth replacement piece and pushes it back into place. When he removes his hands, it slowly slides back down and hangs on the strands of superglue. He shakes his head.
- 15 INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY 15
- Harold's hands grab a stapler, a sewing kit, a duct tape, a bunch of nails and a hammer.
- 16 INT. BEDROOM - DAY 16
- Close-up of Harold's focused face holding a needle in his mouth as he is sewing/glueing/stapling off-screen intercut with a time-lapse of a clock showing passing time. A wide shot reveals that Harold was reassembling the vase which is now covered with tape, clamps, overflowed glue and thread.
- The clock reaches 7 AM and rings.
- 17 INT. KITCHEN - DAY 17
- Harold yet again prepares the breakfast.

18 INT. BEDROOM - DAY 18

The clock chimes. Harold holds a tray in his hands and looks at something in disgust. Flies buzz in the air. From up close we see Hendrina's sickly deformed face. From what used to be a nose, crawls a maggot. Harold is thoroughly appalled, drops the tray and backs out of the room.

19 INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY 19

Harold sits on the floor leaning toward the front door, breathing heavily. He overhears an argument next-door.

NEIGHBOR LADY

(screams)

Godverdomme, Rick, hoe kun je in
deze rotgeur zitten? Breng het afval
eens weg!

NEIGHBOR BOY

Jézus, mam! Ik heb je rotafval al
weggebracht! JIJ bent degene die
stinkt. Rotwijf.

NEIGHBOR LADY

Godverdomme, Rick, doe eens
normaal!

Doors shutting.

Harold's already frustrated face turns terrified.

20 INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY 20

Harold turns on his desktop computer and searches for a funeral company. He hears a heart beat in the distance and looks up. Hendrina's wallet is pulsating on the side table. Harold hears Hendrina's voice from the background.

HENDRINA

Je zou denken dat je inmiddels
tenminste havermout zou weten te
koken!

Harold looks up and there is Hendrina's head standing on a shelf. He rubs his eyes and now there is the fully restored vase in it's place. The grandfather clock ticks louder and louder. Harold looks back to the computer screen and orders an air freshener instead.

21 INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY 21

Timelapse of the tulips in the vase wilting/rotting away, and a layer of dust accumulating on top of them.

A time lapse of the wallet getting filled with money and emptied again resembles breathing pattern. A time-lapse of harold in the background shows him aligning the vases and eavesdropping.

FADE TO BLACK.

22 INT. DARK SPACE - NIGHT

22

We see Harold's frightened sweaty face. He is naked, lying in a non-defined empty dark space. The camera slides down following his hands as he reaches for a clammy purple cord extending from his navel and disappearing into the darkness. He starts pulling it towards himself increasingly faster. He hears the neighbor lady voice echoing in the background and responds with muffled voice (he is unable to speak due to the blank replacement piece).

NEIGHBOR LADY

Is het ZO moeilijk om het vuilnis
buiten te zetten?!

At the end of the cord is an enormous version of the purple wallet pulsating like a heart. Harold tears the cord and blood spills over his body.

23 INT. HAROLD'S BED - MORNING

23

Harold suddenly wakes up covered in sweat.

24 INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

24

Harold holds a trash bag in one hand and is closely inspecting the wallet, which is no longer pulsating. He touches it with his index finger and retreats as if it was hot. He pushes the wallet, together with the vase into the trash bag.

25 INT. BEDROOM - DAY

25

Harold stands next to the bed, which is off-screen. He looks down, with tilted head, slightly disgusted by the view. He then removes his mouthless replacement piece and replaces it with that of his mother.

26 INT. LIVING ROOM - MORNING

26

Harold exits the flat through the front door leaving it ajar. We hear him knock on the neighbor's door and the door opening a few minutes later.

NEIGHBOR BOY

Wat?

HAROLD

Mijn mam is ook een rottend wijf.

OF: Mijn mama stinkt ook.

FADE TO BLACK.

As the credits roll, we see titles of the newspapers in the background describing the morbid and shameless act of preserving a body to keep receiving the pension.

HET PENSIOEN TRANSLATIONS

Original: Anej Golčar, Dutch translations: Marieke Swinkels

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character	Nederlands	English
Hendrina	Ugh, aangebrand! Je zou denken dat je inmiddels tenminste havermout zou weten te koken!	Uh, it's burnt! Harry, you can't even cook oatmeal!
Hendrina	Oh, Harold, de deur zit dicht!	Oh, for crying out loud, Harold, it's locked!
Hendrina	(gelukzalige zucht) Prachtig, werkelijk wonderschoon!	Ah, it's gorgeous, just gorgeous, this one!
Hendrina	Vroeger, toen jij nog jong was, heeft jouw vader me er net zo een gegeven. Die wist jij natuurlijk binnen een week omver te lopen, mijn mooie vaas zo in stukken!	You know, your father bought me one just like that. But guess what, little Harry broke it.
Hendrina	We hadden er nog een mee moeten nemen. Vazen zoals die worden vandaag de dag niet meer gemaakt, Harry.	Ah we should've bought another one, you don't find vases like that anymore.
Hendrina	Morgen, Harry, morgen gaan we er samen nog eentje halen.	Tomorrow, Harry, tomorrow we'll get another one.
Jet (Neighbor lady)	Nee, nee, vóór elf uur is de afspraak!	No, I said you should be at home before 11!
Rick (Neighbor boy)	Maar MAM, al mijn vrienden mogen tot 12!	But, Mum, my friends can stay until 12!
Jet	Oh? Dus als jouw vriendjes allemaal van de brug springen, spring jij erachteraan? Naar binnen, dondersteen!	Oh, you don't care? You'll see, you thankless wretch!
Rick	Ik haat je!	I hate you!
Jet	Rick, hoe DURF je de deur in mijn gezicht te slaan?!	That's the last time you shut door in my face!
Hendrina	Jij klungelig duivelsgebroed, ik sliep!	You klutz, I was asleep!
Jet	Godverdomme, Rick, hoe kun je in deze rotgeur zitten? Breng het afval eens weg!	Jesus, Rick, it reeks of shit in here! I told you to take the freaking garbage out!
Rick	Jézus, mam! Ik heb je rotafval al weggebracht! JIJ bent degene die stinkt. Rotwif.	I did, Mum, YOU stink! Leave me alone, for god's sake!
Jet	Godverdomme, Rick, doe eens normaal!	Oh, don't you dare!
Hendrina	Je zou denken dat je inmiddels tenminste havermout zou weten te koken!	Oh, Harry, you can't even cook oatmeal!
Jet	Is het ZO moeilijk om het vuilnis buiten te zetten?!	Is it so hard to take the freaking garbage out?
Rick	Wat?	Yeah?
Harold	Mijn mam is ook een rottend wijf.	My mom stinks too.