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## Nine Nation Animation

By Ty Burr

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Shorts compilations are a grab bag, and compilations of animated shorts even more so. They do allow audiences to tour the latest strategies in animated techniques and design, but at their worst you get a face full of creative attitude and not enough oomph to make it stick.

"Nine Nation Animation," opening at the Coolidge Corner Theatre today, is the exception that proves the rule: a traveling road-show of (duh) nine shorts from nine countries that gets points for both style and content. Curated and distributed by the World According to Shorts, an initiative of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the program concentrates primarily on Europe with one side trip to South Africa.

If nothing else, the sheer variety of visual approaches here is dazzling. The opening short, Norway's "Deconstruction Workers" consists of two pixelated hardhats (Anders Mordal and Jan Gunnar Roise) having a cheerful existential chat against a backdrop of Terry Gilliam-esque social unrest that turns increasingly apocalyptic. "Bâmiyân," from France's Patrick Pleutin, marshals myriad materials — fingerpaints, sand, grass, photography — for a gorgeously rendered fable about the giant Buddhist statues destroyed by the Taliban in 2001. And "The Tale of How," by South Africa's Blackheart Gang, is an audiovisual knockout that seems spun off from an acid-trip fusion of Japanese woodblock prints and opera.

Not that the program is above the inspired doodle. "Flatlife," an unabashed cartoon by Belgium's Jonas Geirnaert, turns the interrelationship of four adjoining apartment dwellers into classic farce with a touch of Gary Larson. "Average 40 Matches" is a three-minute tour de force of stop-motion animation in which kitchen matches act out a primal drama of addiction and mob mentality. Turkish animators Burkey Dogan and M. Sakir Arslan get disturbing depth out of their simple materials, although it has to be said that the performances are wooden.

The three strongest entries seem to take us places we've never been, only to reaffirm our commonality. The real-life tales of virginity loss in Sweden's "Never Like the First Time!" run the gamut from funny to terrifying to touching, with a different visual tactic for each chapter. "She Who Measures," by Croatian animator Veljko Popović, uses only one technique but it's a lulu — a brilliantly uneasy CGI surrealism — for a futuristic parable that suggests the shipboard scenes in "WALL-E" crossed with a Salvador Dali nightmare.

Then there's "Please Say Something," which I could watch all day for a week. An Irish-German coproduction and the product of artist David O'Reilly's fevered brain, it re-imagines the eternal cartoon struggle of Cat and Mouse as an epic, all-too-human relationship involving guilt, infidelity, power trips, fights over the car radio, hospital stays, and grudgingly hard-won affection. The animation style is a sort of post-Atari, pre-Sims Tokyo windstorm that seems both familiar and stunningly new, and the dialogue — rendered in squeaks, meows, and potty-mouthed subtitles — is just funny enough to break your heart. I suspect that by December it may look like the best romantic drama of the year.

Ty Burr can be reached at [tburr@globe.com](mailto:tburr@globe.com). To follow him, go to [www.twitter.com/tyburr](http://www.twitter.com/tyburr).

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