



Nine Nation Animation

BY CHUCK BOWEN ON SEPTEMBER 26, 2010

***1/2 stars

The title of this collection of short films—*Nine Nation Animation*—prompts you, or it prompted me, for a series of anecdotes that would cumulatively conjure that iconic ideal image of global unity: humankind of all shapes, sizes, and colors holding hands across the world. This title, in other words, is somewhat banal, and, thankfully, misleading. The shorts collected here are indeed concerned with global unity, but of a more interesting, nightmarish sort. These films explore the limitations and constrictions of a mass culture, no matter what the nature of said culture may be.

The films are also remarkably consistent in quality. Of the nine shorts, I only overtly disliked one, the eighth, *The Tale of How*, which sings in mythological song how dodos fled danger and were eventually helped by an enterprising mouse. The film, from South Africa, is assured and beautiful, with 3D work that somehow registers in 2D, but the song is obnoxiously self-consciously whimsical, and it disrupts the overall mood. Even the most amateur creators of mixed tapes understand that tonal variations are traditional and welcome in collections, but this is a variation you don't want or need. The film is the shortest, though, at four minutes, so this perhaps constitutes a bit of nitpicking.

Deconstruction Workers, *Please Say Something*, and *Flatlife* are the richest films of the lot; together they parody taken-for-granted institutions' affect on—and perversion of—simple human interaction. In *Deconstruction Workers*, from Norway, two construction workers discuss the meaninglessness of life as the world outside their fenced-off work site literally collapses in a riot around them. Their conversation is basically centered around the theme (what's the point?) that Woody Allen has been beating into the ground particularly lately, only without his peevish self-pity. And recent Allen films could use a line this simply moving: "I never said it would get okay, I just said it would get easier." The animation uses a more realistic version of a trick that can be seen regularly in *South Park*: the two construction workers are pictures of actual actors, partially mobile, living with the spikes and squiggles that threaten to swallow them.

Please Say Something, from Ireland/Germany, follows a primitively illustrated cat and mouse as they fight, make up, and break up in a futuristic primitive computer landscape that recalls the

ancient *Pong* if it were somehow conceived by George Orwell. The short is designed as a series of surveillance videos: The cat goes to work and faces tedium and humiliation only to brave the battering wind to face the preoccupied, work-at-home mouse. *Please Say Something* jumps around in time, sometimes as far as a century in the future, then doubles back, then shows us the characters' projections of their worst fears before opening a door to confront the other. You lose track of the chronology and the occasionally shifting landscapes (which is intentional), but the authentic despair (the cat at one point asks, "Do you think it will always be like this?") unifies the brilliantly low-fi images.

Flatlife, from Belgium, immediately follows *Please Say Something*, and it's just as bleak at heart, but the execution is more droll and amusing, a dry tonic that recalls the films of Roy Andersson. The view is four apartments that are beside and below one another (a checkerboard pattern), each disrupting the other with conflicting simple tasks. One neighbor tries to hang a painting of a vase (two of the other neighbors have the same painting) while the neighbor below continually destroys it with his tapping, which is meant to shut up the hammering of the nail for the painting. Another neighbor is running the washing machine, which continually interrupts the TV as well, and that's before the fourth's neighbor's TV get's crisscrossed with the other TV, and so on. It sounds tedious, and it is, if not intentionally so, but director Jonas Geirnaert keeps the slapstick building as we accept that these poor dupes are trapped in a fashion that should be awfully familiar to millions.

The other films are blunter but well-executed. *She Who Measures* is an anti-commercialism parable. The premise, obvious and unoriginal, follows characters as they mindlessly march across a desert with advertisement-spewing helmets attached to their heads; but the stark, bold imagery (a little Eischer, a little Burton) elevates it. And ambient industrial sounds and headmaster clowns are always unnerving, no matter how over-exposed.

Home Road Movies, from the U.K., and *Never Like the First Time!*, from Sweden, are the most sentimental of the lot, telling stories of a cherished family car (that commercialism bit again) and a number of losses of virginity, respectively. Of the two, I preferred *Never Like the First Time!* for a clever touch: Two teenagers experimenting with sex are drawn as empty humanoid outlines. The teens, most obviously, resemble those silly cautionary pamphlets many of us suffered through in high school. But these drawings are also unmistakably lonely, building themselves up for maybe the single most mass-culturally hyped act on the planet only to find that...it's just something else (as the first short says, it gets easier).

The most startling images belong to *Bâmiyân*, from France, which follows the Chinese monk Xuanzang as he searches for the statues representing Buddha in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. The story is a passing down of tradition tale and the images are appropriately primal; they seem to be sand art that has come alive and somehow mated with oil paintings. Civilians are swept away with the stroke of an invisible hand, only to be replaced with great, overbearing monsters a moment later.

These monsters haunt this collection, which is consistent and inventive enough not to diminish them. *Nine Nation Animation* is eerily, poignantly irrational enough to justify its occasional sermons.

DIRECTOR(S): Kajsa Do?an, M. Sakir Arslan, Patrick Pleutin, David O'Reilly, Jonas Geirnaert, Veljko Popovic, Robert Bradbrook, The Blackheart Gang, Jonas Odell SCREENPLAY: Kajsa Do?an, M. Sakir Arslan, Patrick Pleutin, David O'Reilly, Jonas Geirnaert, Veljko Popovic, Robert Bradbrook, The Blackheart Gang, Jonas Odell
CAST: DISTRIBUTOR: The World According to Shorts RUNTIME: 82 RATING: NR YEAR: 2010