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Secret Monsters (dir. various, 2013)



Secret Monsters
UK (Channel 4), 2013
Writers/directors: Various

Review by N Emmett.

Experimental animation in Britain has benefited greatly over the years from Animate Projects. Originating as a Channel 4 funding scheme in 1990, Animate is now an independent organisation dedicated to helping animators to realise some of their more offbeat projects.

Animate Projects generally backs work that fits within a current theme. In late 2013, the group unveiled its latest project: *Secret Monsters*, a set of ten films by eight directors inspired by the various imaginary beings to be found in the folklore of the world; each is under three minutes in length and aired as part of Channel 4's *Random Acts* strand.

Monster movies have been with us since the days in which Georges Méliès made devils, skeletons and aliens dance about the silent screen, but it is hard to deny that, for the most part, the genre has been less than reputable. Seeing the subject tackled by Animate Projects, an organisation thoroughly dedicated to work that exists outside of mainstream considerations, is certainly an intriguing prospect...

The directors involved tackle their subjects from a number of different angles. Some films are jokey, as when Motomichi Nakamura's *True Giant* uses the humorous notion that its Umibōzu-like sea monsters are not so different from humans; meanwhile, Atsushi Wada's *Anomalies* is more cerebral, drawing on the natural historian Hitoshi Aramata's views on the concept of the monster to comment on the role of the otherworldly in religion.

Clemens Kogler's *Down of the Cat* plays with the idea of the zombie, but ultimately thinks outside the box in its definition: constructed from a series of scenes in reverse chronological order, detailing the conflict between a woman, a man, a cat and a dog, it invites us to unravel its story and work out for ourselves which of the four characters is the monster.



The Golem, An Inanimate Matter by Vicki Bennett starts out looking like one of the more literalistic takes on the theme: it opens with text explaining to us that the titular golem is a creature from Jewish folklore that is formed from inanimate matter and brought to life when a certain series of letters are written. However, the film itself focuses not on the idea of a living being made from clay – although this is a visual motif – or on the golem's legendary role as protector, but on the fact that the being is given life through writing. The film's golem, a crude lump of stop-motion clay with a smiley face, exists in a world of books; it is superimposed onto pages from various texts, from fairy tales to Shakespeare, and causes such mayhem that the writing has no choice but to fight back against this interloper.



Brothers Quay in the film's aesthetic.

Even when dealing with a straightforward narrative, the films can still indulge in an experimental visual style. The best example of this is Elizabeth Hobbs' *Imperial Provisor Frombald*, a short that takes that most venerable of cinematic monsters – the vampire – and returns to the source by dramatizing an incident from 1725 in which Serbian villagers exhumed and impaled the body of Peter Plogojwitz under the belief that he was a vampire. As the images on each frame were impressed directly onto film using hand-made stamps, the story is rendered as a chaotic jumble of half-formed shapes that capture the frantic and bewildering nature of the story.

Across the varied techniques and approaches that feed into these films, there is a dominant tendency towards minimalism and naïve art. This can be stylish, as with the monochrome silhouette animation is used in Jossie Malis' alien short *Good Morning Isamu*. It is sometimes technically innovative: in *Tiny People Tribe*, based on an Ainu legend about little people who hide in houses, Motomichi Nakamura projects animated silhouette figures onto the walls of his house, giving the impression of two-dimensional beings of light.



Unfortunately, some of this naïve aesthetic is less successful. Vicki Bennett's *We Are Not Amused* sees the Muses – the Greek goddesses said to impart inspiration upon mortals – deciding that they want their ideas back and going on a rampage through Western art. Made primarily using cut-outs from paintings, the short is reminiscent of Terry Gilliam; however, it lacks the tactility and vitality of Gilliam's work – its After Effects animation is too slick, too artificial (Ironically enough, Bennett's deliberately crude stop-motion golem has far more life to it, and is more believable as a fantasy being than her Muses.) *Down of the Cat* is likewise too reliant on the digital puppetry of After Effects, with an interesting visual style – the characters have live action heads and arms attached to drawn bodies – spoilt by overly smooth movements.



The most flat-out bizarre film of the lot is *The Thunderbird's Ballad*, by Mandy McIntosh. The short is based on an incident from 1977 in which a ten-year-old Illinois boy named Marlon Lowe was allegedly lifted a small distance off the ground by a large bird, and was later picked on at school once the story spread. The human characters in McIntosh's

film are rudimentary CGI figures (out of all animation techniques, it is 3D CGI that has the most potential to look crude) resembling Lego or Playmobil toys, with childlike scrawls mapped onto their heads to serve as faces. In her closing narration, McIntosh attempts a sort of stream-of-consciousness psychochronography: "1977, when Marlon was snatched, was the same year Apple launched the first Apple Mac, an affordable computer processing system; the bird snatched Marlon because they wanted to eat him, that's their meat processing system."

The Thunderbird's Ballad contrasts the instinctive behaviour of the thunderbirds with the deliberate cruelty of the school bullies. This is a typical approach for *Secret Monsters*, as the films are almost always on the side of their monsters. Classic monster movies such as *Frankenstein* and *King Kong* portrayed their inhuman beings with sympathy, but still ritualistically killed them to allow the return of normality. *Secret Monsters* is different; it embraces monsterdom, and crafts an aesthetic from the otherworldly and the beastly.



Like many of the endeavours from Animate Projects, *Secret Monsters* is more than the sum of its parts. Taken individually, the shorts are not always remarkable; watched as a set, they become more coherent: a pool of different techniques in which consistent themes begin to swirl and mix together. *Secret Monsters* is an experiment that succeeds by injecting raw new life into old archetypes.

All ten of the Secret Monsters films can be viewed online [here](#).

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