INTERVIEW: BRUCE BICKFORD

March 26, 2019

By Daniel & Clara, originally published in *Mr Bickford Discovers a New Land* (2017)

In the films of Bruce Bickford everything is alive – people, places, objects and creatures constantly pulsate, mutate and transform in an eternal dance of destruction and creation. Working with claymation and drawn animation, Bickford has given life to a mythical universe in his own unique and instantly recognisable style, a universe where solid objects become fluid and reality is in a constant state of flux – a landscape can transform into a face, a face into a pizza and a pizza into an island inhabited with all manner of life forms, all this can take place within a few moments. Great gangs of soldiers and savages emerge from the earth and ravage the land, spilling the blood of their victims in a wave of chaos and violence, but in these films each act of destruction is also an act of creation, from the flowing blood or severed limbs new forms take shape. All matter is alive and will reorganise itself into something new in the hands of this cinematic magician.

Working from his home in SeaTac, WA for the last fifty years, Bruce Bickford has single-handedly created some of the most distinctive and exciting animation films we have seen, we are very honoured to have had the chance to speak with him about his life, work and inspirations.

DANIEL & CLARA: If you could start by telling us how you got started making films and what was the first film you ever made?

BRUCE: The first things were done with 8mm, it was back in 1964. I had seen a TV commercial the year before around Christmas time that had Santa Claus riding on the floating heads of a Norelco shaver. It was to demonstrate how they could undulate over the surfaces of your face, so they had Santa riding a little sleigh, but no reindeer, just a sled. He was riding on the floating heads of the shaver and I wanted to recreate that kind of image with some plastic model cars. So I had these cars running over these hills that were over by where the freeway is now in a construction site and just dirt hills, and I was trying to recreate the look of the shaver heads as like the shock absorbers of the car. It was just a plastic model, it didn't have shock absorbers or anything in it so I didn't get the same effect, all I had was a car rolling over these hills. But then I kept on animating and I had clay figures in the cars – that was my first stop motion in the summer of 1964 – pretty soon I started animating the clay figures that were in the cars. In '66 I went in the service for three years and when I got out in '69 I went back to animating with clay and in 16mm film, and then a year later I started doing my first drawn animation, just pencil drawings, you just make a drawing and put another piece of paper over that and trace it and then trace that and just keep going frame by frame.

In the early 70's I went around LA showing it to animation houses and boy, back then there were just a fraction of the number of animation businesses there are today, and it was all film, there wasn't all the digital stuff back then. I finally got to the animation house that did the animation for Frank Zappa's *200 Motels* and I showed them my animation and they put me in touch with Cal Schenkel, who worked with Frank on *200 Motels*, coordinating the animation stuff. Then Cal arranged for me to meet Frank Zappa and I stayed down in LA for a couple of months that trip, just looking around for work. Cal Schenkel let me stay at his place for a while, he was doing album covers for Frank and other people and Frank was interested in my stuff and said that in a year he would be doing a movie, so I hung around for a while showing my animation around town to whoever I could and then I went back to Seattle and kept working. It was a year later that Frank called me back and wanted to buy the animation that I had shown him and hire me to do some more. So in '74 I moved down there to work for him and I spent the next six and a half years under contract to Frank.

DANIEL & CLARA: How did the collaboration with Frank Zappa work? Did he give you music to animate to or did you animate things then pass them over to him not knowing how they would be used?

BRUCE: Well sometimes, like with the *Greggery Peccary* song, he wanted that animated and he had a specific storyline and everything to it. I did some animation for it but he was dissatisfied, he thought that the Greggery Peccary character was just too flat, too one-dimensional in the way that he moved, he didn't have enough expression and everything so he wanted me to reanimate it and he was going to give me a timing sheet so I could get some stuff lip-synched to make it more effective.

There wasn't that much coordination between us because he was usually out on the road touring with his band or in the recording studio. I never did redo the *Greggery Peccary* so in the end he did use it, he put it all into the film he released in 1979, *Baby Snakes*. But usually there wasn't much cooperation between us, I am sorry to say. I was really a disorganised worker, I made a lot of things, a lot of clay figures and sets and things that never got used in that period, so our relationship could have been better but nonetheless I got some animation done during those years.

DANIEL & CLARA: One of the things I wanted to ask you about is this particular style you have of things constantly transforming and mutating, and how things that are ordinarily solid can become like liquid and change – I was wondering how this approach came about?

BRUCE: I first tried it in 1969, I had a little figure of Richard Nixon and I had him turn into some kind of a creature, it was brief but I just thought he looked like he would turn into something. I don't know what kind of animal it was, it was similar to a hippopotamus or something but it didn't go very far, just a brief transformation. Then gradually I tried other things, like in the big bar room scene, I had things like a windmill that turned into a swastika, the blades of the windmill were turning around and it transformed into a kind of a swastika image. And I had someone blowing smoke out, it was clay, with a clay cigar and the cigar exploded and the flames were a replacement animation made of wax. I started using replacement animation during that same period, the early 70's, for blood shooting out of a woman. You make successive models of the same things but in different sizes or different shapes and you replace one with the next one for each frame that you film.

But it was during the Zappa years that I went more and more into the transformation or metamorphosis kind of animation, which later in that era became known as morphing, where one thing would turn into another. In *Baby Snakes* there is one extended sequence where you are going through rooms, up stairs and through corridors, which was done by enlarging the whole set. It was a small scene but I would enlarge every piece of the whole scene for every frame so it would look like you were getting closer, and then there would be faces or pyramids or recognizable figures like JFK and James Dean. In the hippy sequence from *Baby Snakes*, where all the hippies were having their orgies, I tried various kinds of morphing and really those techniques were pretty new, I was doing things then in the 70's that couldn't be done with digital animation until ten years later, it took them that long to evolve the technology.

DANIEL & CLARA: Do you have any interest in creating animation using digital technology?

BRUCE: Sure, I would love to work with people doing that but I can't do it myself. I'm not good with computers, I'm not good at typing things in or making any sense of codes or computer language of any kind, I never have been. In grade school when it came to math I was always the worst kid in the class at dealing with numbers. To me numbers were boring, there wasn't enough image to them, one looked pretty much like another and to organise things like that wasn't in me. I just found it really repulsive, it was agonising, it was torture, I was put through that all the way through school, through high

school. Everything, algebra, geometry, I could make no sense of it. And today I know less about math than I did when I was in fourth grade.

DANIEL & CLARA: Maybe you could tell us something about your interest in mythology, you quite often use mythological creatures, monsters and characters like Prometheus, I was wondering what draws you to these mythological subjects?

BRUCE: Probably the same reason little kids like them, they are different, they are interesting, the fact that they are well known, people can relate to them so if you do a certain kind of creature it is going to be recognizable. But lately I have been making up a lot of my own, I am doing some graphic novels, I try to find all the well known creatures and monsters from the past and then I've come up with quite a few on the side that are combinations of those various things. I don't know how to define my interest in things like that except that it's fun, it's interesting doing variations on things.

DANIEL & CLARA: What's the graphic novel that you are working on?

BRUCE: It's about vampires. It's called *Vampire Picnic*, it's about some vampires, quite a group of them and then there's other groups besides, and they want to be able to go out in daylight and have a picnic. One of them, an ancient vampire – some of these vampires are hundreds of years old – there's one woman among them, Countess Bathery, she wants to have picnics like she did when she was a child and so eventually they get to do that but it doesn't work out well for them in the end.

DANIEL & CLARA: What stage is this at, is it nearly finished?

BRUCE: Yes, I am just trying to get it all in sequence, there are hundreds of pages of this stuff, drawings and written text, I am trying to get it all in order so I can submit it to a publisher.

DANIEL & CLARA: You have recently released *Cast'l* on DVD. We read somewhere that the film took you twenty years to make, is that correct?

BRUCE: Well, from about 1988 until 1995 at least, about seven years or eight years. It wasn't a real story, just a collection of a lot of animations that had similar things and a lot of morphing.

DANIEL & CLARA: Do you usually script or storyboard your animations in advance or do you let them develop scene by scene?

BRUCE: I sometimes do that but I usually just improvise as I go along, I'll have a vague idea of what the scene is but I am not working from a script.

DANIEL & CLARA: Where do your story ideas come from?

BRUCE: Well, I've got a whole file here, three big file boxes, each one a couple of feet long and there's about two hundred stories in those three big boxes. Some of the folders are pretty thick, there is a lot of material in them and each one of them is a story and they are all in various stages of development. Some are written out enough that they could possibly be published the way they are as a short novel, or novella or short story. Others have a long way to go before they'd really be readable but they are all really just packed with information and details. They are all movie oriented things, they have very visual imagery in them, as they are designed as movie treatments, so there is a lot of potential movies in all those stories. The stories aren't hard to come up with, if I get an idea I'll try to write it down before I forget it and a lot of these I just add to the story year by year, if I get more ideas on that same thing I'll put them into that particular folder.

DANIEL & CLARA: Do you have a film that you are planning to make next?

BRUCE: Yes, I am trying to concentrate on just a few of these things, there's one called *Matchstick Man*. I remember a song from a British group called Status Quo, from 1967 probably, they had a song about a matchstick man which was inspired by a painting by Laurence Lowry, a famous artist from the last century, and well, my character is something that is like that. He has come up in one of my stories that's in a realm around here where I live, east of here back in the hills there's this imaginary place. It has a lot of potential I think.

DANIEL & CLARA: And is that something that has been started already?
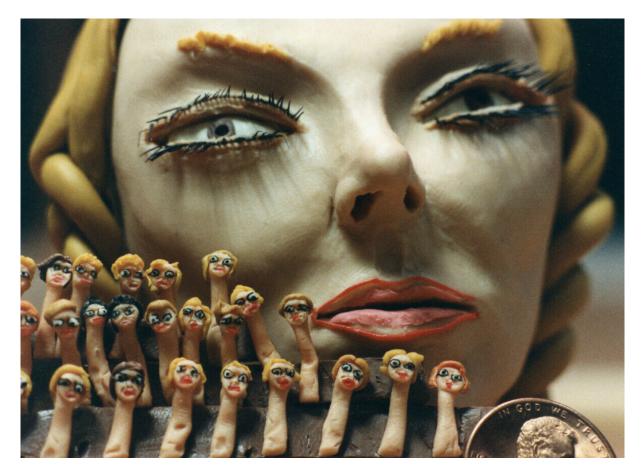
BRUCE: Well, I've got some drawings of the character but I don't have the whole story worked out yet, but I have definite ideas for it all.

DANIEL & CLARA: Is this going to be a clay animation?

BRUCE: No, it will be a live action with clay and drawn effects.

DANIEL & CLARA: That sounds fantastic! Have you ever done any live action before?

BRUCE: Not much. It's a whole different thing, you need actors, you need a lot of things, I've never gotten it together to do much actual filming.

DANIEL & CLARA: How has the environment around SeaTac and your home played into your films and has it been an inspiration for your work in general?

BRUCE: Well, SeaTac is something new, it's the town surrounding the airport, which is about two and half miles northwest of here. It's a new city, it's only fifteen or twenty years old, they just incorporated the whole area around the SeaTac airport – but I grew up here. I'm up on the west ridge of the Kent valley, that's south of Seattle, and there is always this panoramic view there so I grew up with that and I had that kind of perspective on life of seeing the valley with the river winding through it and three towns. You could see distinct towns then, now it's very much a strip city running north all through the valley, north to south, but back then it was mostly farms and you could see trains running across the valley and beyond the east rim of the valley there were the foothills and then the mountains, the Cascade mountains. So I always had that kind of perspective on things, of being in an actual environment. And then between here – I am still in the same house where I grew up – between here and the valley it was just woods. Now they have housing developments down there and the woods have been gradually diminished, I wish they were still there. As a little kid it was just solid forest from here down to the valley and it was a great place to play around, and we are not far from Puget Sound, which is connected to the Pacific ocean.

DANIEL & CLARA: I suppose this perspective of being up high and looking down is the god's eye view, it is similar to the animator's perspective. This is present in your films, quite often we are looking down on groups of people and they are all very small and moving around.

BRUCE: Yeah, I was fascinated by how small the buildings looked down in the valley when I was a little kid. When I was five years old, I once had a dream where I walked down there and here I was next to farmhouses and barns that were just a couple of feet tall and I saw one little man but only briefly, he ran behind something and I went to look for him but I couldn't find him.

DANIEL & CLARA: Do you still remember your dreams?

BRUCE: Not as much, my dreams lately have been just too complicated and I can't remember them unless there is something in them that was very distinct, a very clear image or sequence of events and if it is interesting enough I'll write it down and try to include it in one of my stories. I used to be able to remember my dreams pretty clearly but in recent years not that much.

DANIEL & CLARA: Is there anything in any of your films that specifically came from a dream?

BRUCE: Not specifically but in my stories there are a few, in my written stories. If you saw these stories you would understand, it's hard to relate, there's two hundred of them in my story file and then other stories in drawers and cabinets around the place. There's too many for me to ever turn into movies.

DANIEL & CLARA: Do you have anyone who would be interested in publishing them as books?

BRUCE: Well there's the publisher that I am working with to do the graphic novel but they are just interested in me turning in the finished novel to them. They have other things they are publishing, something has to be really ready to go before they can take it seriously.

DANIEL & CLARA: Have you done a graphic novel before?

BRUCE: No – well, I have been doing these for the last nine years. There are two others that haven't been finished, I put them on hold to do the vampire story so I am trying to finish that up, but these other two could be finished also.

DANIEL & CLARA: What are they about?

BRUCE: One of them started out as a crime story with some space aliens involved, and then it became political and just kept evolving from there about a trip across the country with mythological creatures and criminals and things that are all involved with the political system. And then I started on a pirate story, about an accidental talk show host who gets sucked into a time warp and into a realm where pirates still exist. But both of those earlier stories were put on hold to do the vampire one.

DANIEL & CLARA: One thing we wanted to ask you about is this situation that you have in your films of gangs of brutes attacking little people and fairy folk, this seems to be a recurring theme in your work, can you talk a bit about that? Why do you think that is?

BRUCE: Well, it's just something to animate, some kind of action sequence where you have the good and the bad. The big brutes have no right to go into that area and try to take over, that's their whole game, trying to dominate something, so the little people are just defending their own territory. It's probably kind of based on the movie I saw as a little kid, when I was about six or seven years old, I saw the first Disney version of *Peter Pan*, the animated version. I was just transported into that realm, I'd never seen anything like it. As a little kid you are very impressionable. I've seen that movie a few times since and there is a lot of things I don't like about it, I think some of it is very manipulative. The Captain Hook figure I think was very brilliantly done, and the colours and a lot of things about it. Disney was very tasteful in a lot of ways, very sensitive to the colour spectrum and everything it takes to make something visual. And I was really strongly influenced by that and that kind of story where the good characters are the little ones, the more helpless ones, but they manage to get by.

DANIEL & CLARA: Are there any other key films that have inspired you?

BRUCE: I've seen a few things like *King Kong*, I've seen that almost twenty times and that has some of the best stop motion animation ever done. Willis O'Brien, the animator, was probably the best. Ray Harryhausen, I love his stuff, but it didn't have the same feeling that you got from *King Kong*, the real identity of the creature, very human. Stop motion animation is something where you can see the character of the animator in it because of their personal style, there is always in almost all stop motion animation a kind of a jittery quality, frame by frame there are little bits of imprecision and so it tells you that it's not real but that's what's interesting about it. There are some stop motion animations lately, done by Laika studios, Henry Selick and that crew, and it's looking an awful lot like digital animation, very smooth and slick. I mean, it would be hard for me to tell some of that from digital animation, from totally computer-generated stuff, even though it is solid armature models.

DANIEL & CLARA: So, it kind of loses something maybe when it becomes too perfect?

BRUCE: Well, for me it does. There are modern techniques of animation and modern styles that are a little too fast for me, everything goes by too fast. I like to savour the moment and understand what's actually happening.

DANIEL & CLARA: Are there other animators that you take inspiration from?

BRUCE: I don't really see much as I've been working on these graphic novels and before that all the animation, the way I do it with the amount of detail I try to put into things it just takes all my time. I don't have a TV set up for watching things and I don't have cable. Generally I don't watch much TV, except when I was on that trip to Germany a couple of weeks ago to do that museum exhibit. There was a TV in the place and for ten days I watched some TV, I caught up on a few movies, I got a glimpse of a few modern movies and most of it is not for me, it is not the kind of entertainment I like. Generally I don't see much animation because I don't look for it and I don't have time for it, if I am going to get anything done I have to work.