Waking Life
(directed by Richard Linklater, designed by Bob Sabiston))

Having read a tantalizing piece in the paradigm-shifty zine Rez, I made
sure to see Waking Life the day it opened, just to assess the hype.
My advice: Run, don't walk.
It might not be around too much longer. The distributor opened it on
Wednesday on one screen; it's arty, talky, experimental; no stars, sex,
violence. So it may not have "legs" after all the film and art students
have seen it.

I found it by turns exhilarating, irritating, beautiful, wise, fun, and
profoundly dumb. After the first few soliloquies it is evident that
Linklater's script is sophomoric rubbish, composed of serial
bull sessions one might encounter in Austin among stoned grad students.
The main character is a gangly, Slacker Redux drifting passively
from one orator to the next. OK, near the end he achives a kind of
insight, which may erase some of the shaggy-dog smell on your hands.

But do watch it. Give your eyes a treat, even if you get a little seasick.

We all know film reviewers can't write about animation because they're
too enchanted by celebrity, literature, and theater, all of which are
irrelevant to what's going on up on the screen.

Is it really animation? Of course. Even though it was rotoscoped from a
DV source, with all the rhythms of loosely-edited, hand held live
action. In only a few scenes, though, are we interested in its character
animation: exaggerated facial tics, rubbery limbs, levitation. Often
this animation resorts to very lame sight gags that illustrate or
comment on the characters speech, e.g. a guy's face appears to fill up
with liquid when he says that the body is 95% water or his head turns
into a gear as he says he'd like to beÓ gear (maybe they were different
characters, but it really doesn't matter).

In other words I found those "comic" moments which are the traditional
realm of the animator to be the weakest in the film. Those also happened
to be the moments that elicited audience laughter at the Union Square
screening. That makes me think I was really out of it or the audience
was just eager to let off some tension created by the film's unrelenting
logorrhea.

But if we think of animation as an open-ended method of playing
graphically, of structuring and restructuring shapes and color in time,
as an Art, not just a technique or mechanical apparatus, then WL has to

be considered a breakthrough film. This purely visual appreciation is based on its design, backgrounds, and what I'd have to call its composition, a term which includes not just compositing but the novel attitude (itself a subject of the rambling soundtrack) to each scene's molecular structure.

1. Paint-By-The-Numbers. Posterization. Bob Sabiston's Soft
ware. Whatever you
call it, it defines the WL look. The photographic image of each frame contains a limited palette, "artistically" selected I assume. The shaded areas on faces are often reduced to a few topographic pools of color (somewhat like the "Woodcut" filter in Painter 6), backgrounded areas are usually flatter. It seems that old characters, with more lines and folds get rendered in a highly detailed way that pushes their complexity. When the faces are given a totally flat rendering (as in the red-faced convict and the auto speechmaker) the effect is quite startling.

This automatic colorizing has a definite design consequence: shapes are not defined by line as in a traditional 2D cartoon. Thus frontal and 3/4 faces are nose less with emphasis focusing on eyes, mouth, and shadows; hair seems to often have a life of its own as if vector strokes are cycling on a random seed. There is a wide range of stylization with characters pushed or pulled from scene to scene depending on the animator/designer-in-chief. This provides its own excitement and seems appropriate to the episodic structure of the story. And above all, it's loose and never really takes itself too seriously.

2. Ever since Gertie the Dinosaur animators have been contriving means to separate subject from background: trace backs, cutouts, cels--each providing its own esthetic and dynamism. To avoid deadly frozen grounds the WL designers opt for a constantly fluid field of planes which seem to float in and out of perspectival logic, even when the live cam is locked off. It looks like what may have started off as an LSD (labor saving device) ends up being a perfect trope for a universe unhinged. It's actually quite funny that the hero is told that he can tell if he's in a dream by flicking a light switch to no effect (which he does), when the riotous scene before him is composed of impossible, drunken plate tectonics. There are specific background moments, actually cutaways only a few seconds long, like the tracking shot of a convenience /store candy rack, which are startlingly and scrumptious.

The downside to all the layering occurs when elements tend to look the same from frame to frame. Ears and eyeglasses always tend to be swimming about on their axis. These repurposed characters have a Frankensteinish patchwork nature as if reassembled from cloned body parts, always

threatening to pull off into another unintentional orbit.

3. Not having read any detailed description of the methodology leads me to suspect that Sabiston may be planning to patent or, lord knows, market or serialize i«t. Rotoscope may be too limited a term for what actually amounts to a recomposing or collaging of the live action. And ultimately the technology is secondary to the design. WL is light-years away from geeky 3D puppetry. Even though created on a bunch of G4's it seems to wallow in funky, painterly, avant-garde experimentalism, as if "mistakes" were sort of strung together to form a coherent esthetic. David Hockney's delicious photo-collages seem to have been covertly inspirational, not to mention the wan pictorialism of Alex Katz, Tom Tomorrow, and Daniel Clowes.

So, in the end I was bowled over, not by the nattering nabobs whose mouths were always in sync with voices by famous and unfamous alike, not by the animation (which I'd have to call "bad"), but by the sheer audacity of moving pictures which appear to be on semi-automatic pilot, while anatomies and landscapes teeter in a mad tango of Euclidean improbability.

George Griffin NYC 10/11/01