

Who's Afraid of Noir?: An Interview with Richard McGuire

Written by Steven Heller

Published on March 11, 2008.

Filed in *Voice: Journal of Design* in *Off the cuff*.

F*ear(s) of the Dark* is a collection of animated films by six international artists linked by two demonstrative conceits. First, each piece is produced in black-and-white (with the occasional red accent). And secondly, each addresses an atavistic, indeed nightmarish, fear. Although uneven in spots, the film is a *tour de force* for its emotional intensity—it's amazing how much tension can be conveyed with brush and pen strokes. One of the most fully realized segments in terms of technical mastery and narrative eloquence is by Richard McGuire. A designer, author and illustrator of children's books as well as covers for *The New Yorker*, McGuire contributes a chilling masterpiece of graphic erudition that must be seen to be fully appreciated (coming soon to theaters, thanks to IFC, but you can see a clip here). For now—and for those who have yet to savor it—McGuire discusses his involvement in the film and this challenge to his typically vibrant color palette.

Heller: After what seems like many years, *Fear(s) of the Dark*, the feature film to which you have contributed a major section, just screened in New York City at the Rendez-vous with French Cinema festival at Lincoln Center. It also features work by Charles Burns, Lorenzo Mattotti, Marie Callou, Blutch and Pierre Di Sciullo. What is the film all about?

McGuire: The film is a meditation on fear; each artist designed and directed a story under that general theme. Some of the stories are inter-cut, some stand alone, and there is a collection of short pieces that reoccur throughout. Each segment seems to reflect the other in ways we didn't plan—primordial fears we all share.

Heller: With Etienne Robial as artistic director, were you given any specific directives as to your segment or was this a blank slate?

McGuire: The title and concept came from Prima Linéa, the producers. The only limitation was that the film would be in black-and-white. No other directive was given. Etienne Robial designed the opening/closing credits and was involved in the sequencing of the parts. His involvement with bande dessinée artists goes back to his days with Futuropolis [the pioneering French comics publisher], which he co-founded.

Heller: What is the gist of your segment? What is your fear?

McGuire: My segment—without giving away too much—is about a man confronting madness and the unexpected violence that can sometimes erupt from madness. That’s the gist, but there are other fears interlaced. There are some direct quotes from nightmares I’ve had. I’ve always been a bit claustrophobic, so I’ve managed work that in there as well. It’s funny, I was just remembering, there’s a scene in the film where a man is startled by a bat in a house. While we were working on that scene the same thing happened to me! I had visited some friends in the country, and one evening I got to my room and suddenly there’s this bat swooping down on me and circling around. After I managed to shoo it out the window, I made some notes and drawings to capture just how my body reacted.

Heller: Did you do much preparation to capture the essence of fear?

McGuire: One of the things I did at the start of the project was to go back and look at all the films that had scared me and analyze what exactly is making them work. In some cases it’s purely sound; in a lot of cases it’s what you don’t see.

Heller: We are all afraid of the dark in some way. Did you do anything extraordinary to make your fear bigger than life?

McGuire: Bigger than life... well, in building the sound design, which is one of the parts of the process I love the most, you can play with layering some unexpected things into the mix to enhance a moment. For example, there is a scene where someone is locked in a closet and he is kicking the door to get out. We recorded the sound of a guy kicking a door and, although it was accurate, it lacked the power I had imagined. It just wasn’t big enough. I wanted something more booming. So we took the sound of muffled explosions and mixed them in to match each kick, and then it felt right.

There are all sorts of subliminal things with the sound; like, when someone walks through a door in a dream sequence, I added the sound of someone inhaling. The exhale sound happens only when the dream finishes. I think the held breath adds tension. You may not necessarily be aware of it because you are watching other things, but I think you feel it. Earlier in the same sequence, a man gets a splinter in his hand—because this is a dream I didn’t want the sound to be completely realistic. We tried many different things as he is pulling the splinter out, but we finally used the sound of an aggressive pull of a violin string and the slap sound it makes when it hits. This worked emotionally—it was such a physical sound, kind of violent and unexpected.

I decided to be spare with the music. I didn’t want to use music in the conventional way. It’s too easy to lay down some uncomfortable music to give the cue of what to feel. Sometimes music adds too much of a distance to what you are watching. I wanted it very quiet and intimate. I wanted to bring the viewer as close to the action as I could.

Heller: Your work is, if not warm and cozy, at least not usually gothic or scary. Did you have to alter your visual style for the film?

McGuire: It's one of the reasons I said yes to this project, to push myself. It was a challenge to create an experience for the audience to feel on an emotional level—that was the goal.

I didn't feel going in that I had a universe to protect the way most of the other artists did. Stylistically, I think I'm pretty flexible. I was trying to find my solution to this particular situation. The film I made before looked nothing like this one. In that one [*Micro Loup*], everything is seen from above looking straight down for the entire film. Everything is abstracted, but once you realize what you're seeing you follow the story logically. This film has another way of using abstraction, by putting so much in the dark. Some scenes are so minimal that you need the sound to complete the image, otherwise you're lost. In my research for designing the film I came across the work of Félix Vallotton, a Swiss artist from the turn of the century. In his graphic work he often did a trick of black on black, a person wearing black against a black background. I liked the way your mind would complete the image. I knew this was a key to how to approach the film.

Heller: As I noted earlier, you've been working on this for a long time. What were your major hurdles? Why did it take so long?

McGuire: Mostly every animated film takes years to make. It's a very slow process. It takes days, sometimes weeks, to make seconds. At the beginning we went down a few wrong roads, the first one with the story itself. I choose a short story that I thought would work. It had some nice visuals but the ending wasn't great. As I worked on the storyboard and tried to solve the end, I got lost with it—it just wasn't satisfying. I nearly gave up completely after months of work. I showed what I had done to a friend, Michel Prius—he's a cartoonist/writer who has a history of collaborations behind him. We went through it all and I pointed out the things I liked, and then we brainstormed and transformed the story. Once that was in place, just finding the choice of technique took time. For the previous film I primarily used Flash. We thought we would do the same with this one but it became obvious pretty quickly that it wasn't going to work. We looked into using motion capture, we discussed the possibility of 3-D. In the end we went with traditional hand-drawn animation, then combining this with Flash to ink and clean the drawings. Later, in some cases, we were combining a few techniques. There were all sorts of technical problems that needed to be worked out. Sometimes it was hard getting the software to look integrated. Some backgrounds and objects were created in 3-D. AfterEffects was used to add a blur to the light from the candle.

Heller: Apropos of Vallotton, it is very graphic and very dark. . .

McGuire: The funny thing is that, the way I had designed the film, very little is really seen! For instance, we would design a room with all the furniture, rugs and wallpaper, and then turn the lights out. A character is walking through the space but we only see the little area around the candle glow. Although we don't see much, it all had to really be there in order to feel right.

Heller: Who is this film made for? I, for one, rather forget my fears rather than see them before me on the silver screen.

McGuire: Our film is not exactly a genre picture but the subject has certainly attracted some of that audience. It also appeals to the comics audience, which is taken very seriously in France.

I was recently invited to a horror festival with our film. It was very odd to watch a hard-core gore film with fans of the genre. It was more like an amusement ride, more than a film experience. I was very aware of being in an audience. They were much more vocal and were really participating with the film.

When I go to see a film I want to get absorbed into what is going on in the story and lose myself to the experience. I can get excited by psychological thrillers or a good ghost story, but I'm not interested in anything with gratuitous violence. The films I went back and watched as research were films like Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. Polansky's *Repulsion*, which I've always enjoyed; *The Tenant* is another good one of his. *The Haunting*, the one directed by Robert Wise. *The Innocents* is also a great film.

Heller: Which of the segments most scares you?

McGuire: My own, of course.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press). He is co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.) and *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press). His book *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) will be published this spring.