

POULTRY IN STOP-MOTION: THE CHALLENGE OF TECHNOLOGY IN CHICKEN RUN



he feature-length animated film *Chicken Run* (Peter Lord and Nick Park, 2000)¹ generated \$224 million in ticket sales worldwide and became the third-highest grossing English film of all time in the United States. The success of this film is due to the strong storytelling techniques, humour and distinctive style for which the world's leading stop-motion studio, Aardman Animations, is renowned. *Chicken Run* is a comedy with sinister undertones: it offers entertainment but also a commentary on modernity

and the threat of technology, both through its storyline and by the directors' determination to retain their traditional clay animation technique.²

The Aardman studio was established in Bristol, England, in 1976. It has a reputation for producing short, innovative animated films with a distinctive 'English' look and handmade style. Nick Park, who joined the studio in 1985, has won Oscars for two of his short films featuring the characters Wallace and Gromit: *A Grand*

Day Out (1989), *The Wrong Trousers* (1993) and *A Close Shave* (1995). More recently, the two characters also starred in a successful feature-length film *Wallace and Gromit: the Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (Nick Park and Steve Box, 2005).

Chicken Run, Aardman's first feature-length film, was made in partnership with the US studio DreamWorks SKG and the French company Pathe. Aardman had rejected offers to make a feature film from Disney, Warner Bros. and Fox

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**FILM
& TEXT**

**MARIAN
QUIGLEY**



studios because they wanted to maintain control of production and their individual aesthetic style and model animation technique. While *Chicken Run* utilizes the production methods and generic conventions characteristic of Hollywood films, it avoids the smooth perfection of those made by Disney and DreamWorks. The film also

production of *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995), the first animated feature created entirely by a computer, 3D CGI (computer-generated imaging) films have become immensely popular with audiences. In comparison, Aardman employs the more traditional technique of stop-motion animation using models made of clay or

the eighty-minute feature *Chicken Run*. Consequently, one day's shooting generally produced only ten seconds of footage. The necessities of mass production for a feature-length film included the construction of 387 chickens. For the large body parts of the models, the animators favoured metal armatures covered with

syllable. For example, the character Rocky required the creation of approximately twenty different mouths.

The construction of background scenery and props was equally painstaking. The background skies were hand painted and clothing and props involved detailed construction – for example, the miniature knitted

garments created by the character Babs in the film were actually knitted

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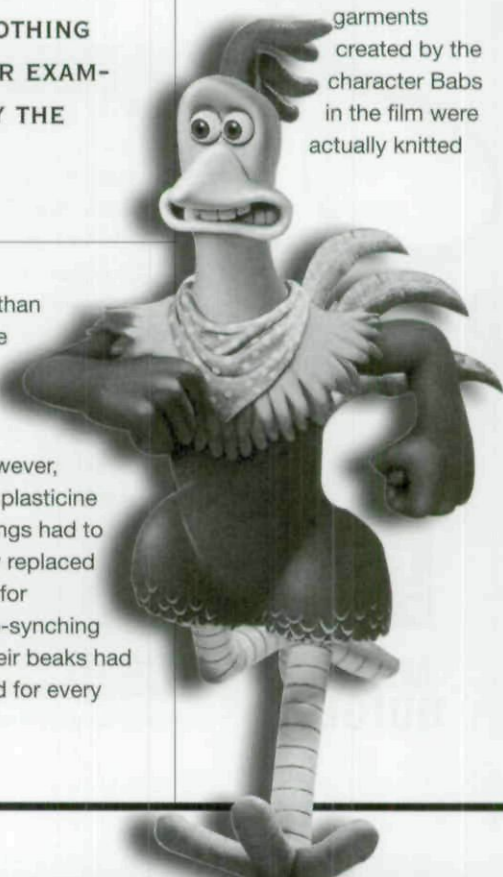
retains the British humour, characters, dialogue and settings made popular by the Wallace and Gromit films, including the characters' distinguishing 'coat hanger mouths'.³

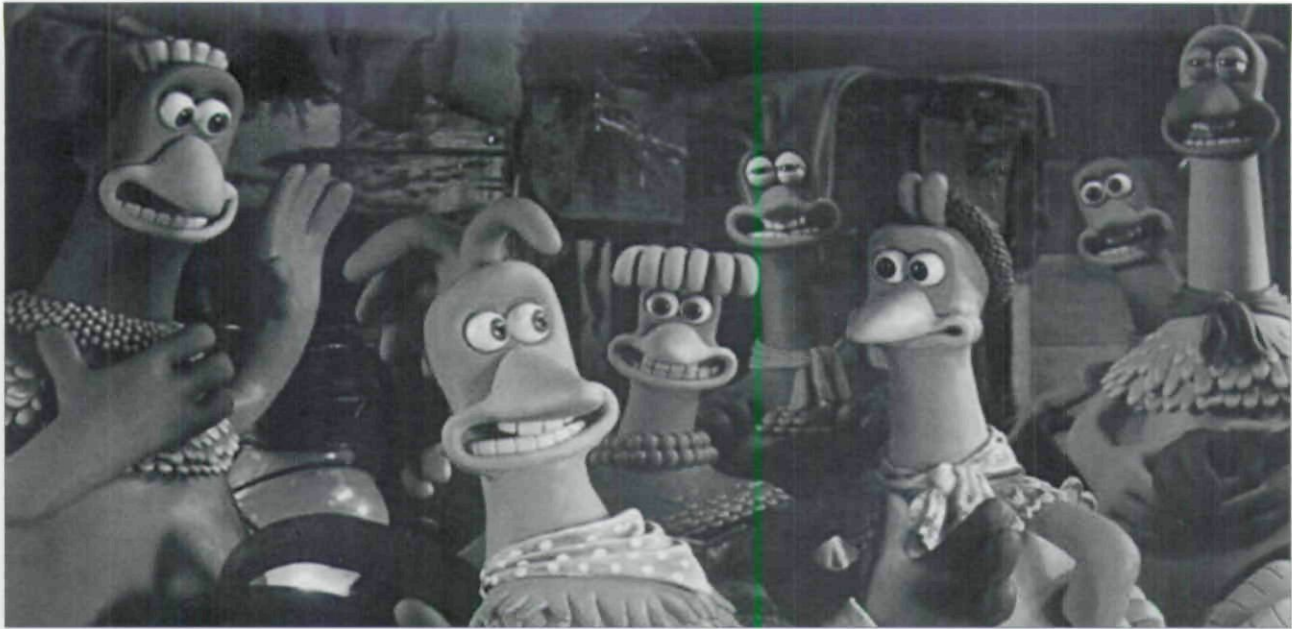
Stop-motion animation: an arduous naturalism

Since the Pixar studio's

plasticine – one of the most arduous forms of cinematography. This very hands-on method requires the re-sculpting of the moving parts of 3D figures and filming frame by frame – as opposed to the continuous filming used in live-action filmmaking. At the rate of twenty-four frames per second, this meant approximately 100,000 individual frames for

silicon rather than plasticine, due to silicon's lesser weight and greater durability. However, the chickens' plasticine heads and wings had to be continually replaced and the need for meticulous lip-synching meant that their beaks had to be changed for every





by the model animators using toothpicks. Close examination of Mrs Tweedy's (Miranda Richardson) dress reveals a pattern of chicken feet; the interior of the Tweedys' house is cluttered with miniature furnishings and ornaments including a wedding photograph in which they cut a cake topped by a chicken decoration.

Although stop-motion remains the essential technique, computer technology was used for editing and in visualizing and planning film sequences. Computer graphics were used to calculate the dimensions of a set and to plan camera angles and to enhance the film's visual appearance. For example, the support for the 'flying' chicken was digitally removed from the chicken catapult sequence.⁴ As Peter Lord notes:

[There] are things in there – the elemental things like fire, water, and gravy – that

you can't do nicely in stop-framing ... they were done in CGI. At the end of the film, we spent several months retouching and repairing in a digital form at a computer film company in London, because all the chickens were supported on huge steel rigs, which we had to make disappear.⁵

Whereas CGI tries to replicate reality, stop-motion is filmed with real-world objects and the lighting is similar to that used in live-action films. Consequently, a greater degree of naturalism is achieved. Aardman refers to their particular style as 'live-action in miniature'. Where CGI tends to be characterized by a smooth perfection, it is sometimes possible to see the animator's fingerprints on the surface of the plasticine models used in stop-motion. In addition, Aardman films tend to place a more subtle emphasis on character and story rather than on spectacle and special effects (notwithstanding the pie machine sequence and

the final escape scene which are both splendid examples of spectacle). Peter Lord explains:

There is a fundamental difference between working with your hands and your arms and your fingertips, and working on the keyboard ... You grab the puppet with two hands, and you feel the whole thing move, you feel the twist of the chest away from the hips, the roll of the shoulders ... The camera has to move right, the light has to be right, the actor has to do the right thing – make-up, costume, everything has to be right. Just for one moment in time. That's the way we work. I believe that the humanity in what we're doing, the process, all comes through in the final film.⁶

Although the scale of the project meant that Lord and Park had to sacrifice the hands-on animation to their large team of animators, they maintained creative control of *Chicken Run*.

A prisoner-of-war film ... with chickens

Chicken Run's opening sequence deliberately sets out to fool the audience. It conveys a night-time vision of a prisoner-of-war camp: a barbed-wire fence enclosing rows of huts and what seems to be a watchtower (it is in fact a water tank). We see a silhouetted figure hiding in the shadows of the (prison) huts. Guard dogs and a man with a rifle patrol the fence. However, the sinister elements of the film are suddenly subverted by a close-up of the figure's large chicken foot. After capturing this runaway chicken, Ginger (Julia Sawalha), the farmer Mr Tweedy (Tony Haygarth) pronounces: 'No chicken escapes from Tweedy's farm'. In this way the film clarifies its setting – a chicken farm in northern England – and the driving motivation of its characters – escape.

Elements of the sinister and the absurd permeate the film. The chickens' fear of death



is symbolized by Mrs Tweedy's Nazi-like boots, the shadow of the axe used to kill Edwina when she fails to produce eggs, and by the monstrous, chicken-devouring pie machine. These images are contrasted with unlikely scenes of chickens practising tae kwon do, rock 'n' roll dancing and catapulting into the air in their

such as the roller skate used to pull her along the underground tunnel and the egg beaters used to drill a hole to the surface – also foreshadows the chickens' eventual escape in an aeroplane made from a crate.

The film's intertextual elements playfully draw upon a range of early and contem-

wealthy American GIs seducing British women.⁷ As Fowler notes derisively, they are 'overpaid, oversexed and over here'. The two rats, Nick (Timothy Spall) and Fetcher (Phil Daniels), are modelled on the scroungers in prison films who aim to trade black-market goods for eggs (but they receive what is literally chicken

– hut number 17 is the secret meeting place for the chickens' escape plans – and *The Great Escape* (John Sturges, 1963) – Ginger, like Steve McQueen's character, is continually placed in 'solitary confinement' when caught escaping, but here it is a coal bunker and she bounces a sprout rather than a baseball against its inner wall. Rocky (Mel Gibson) and Ginger's escape from the pie machine recalls Indiana

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desperate but clumsy attempts to escape. The impetus of the film, and its comic absurdity, is highlighted in the four unsuccessful escape attempts which are compressed into the section featuring the opening credits. Here, the natural ungainliness of the chickens continually foils Ginger's attempts to free them. However, the inventive use of simple, everyday objects –

porary British and American films and serve to heighten its comedy. Parodic allusions to escape films include the post-Second World War prisoner-of-war films made by Britain's Ealing Studios such as *The Captive Heart* (Basil Dearden, 1946). Complete with a stock RAF veteran Fowler (Benjamin Whitrow), *Chicken Run* playfully alludes to the British wartime experience of

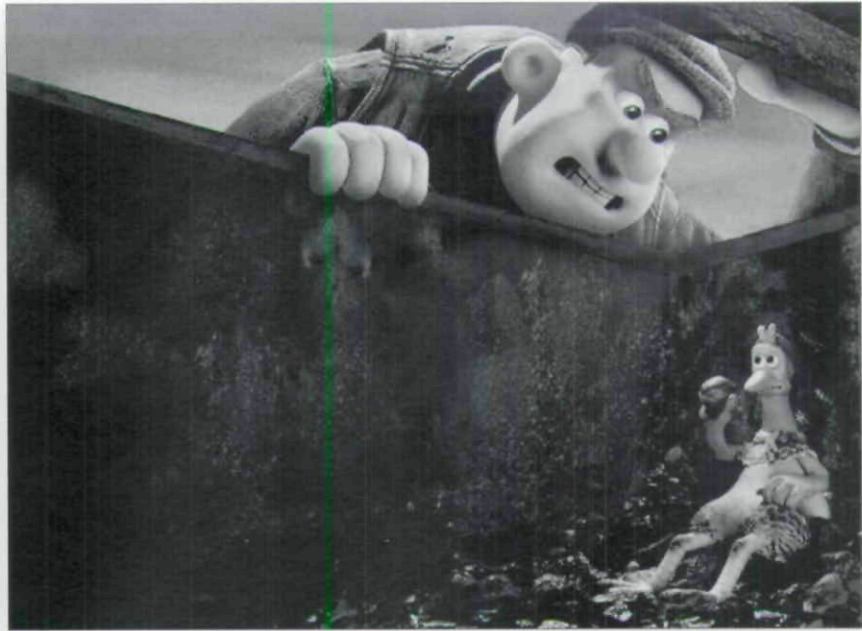
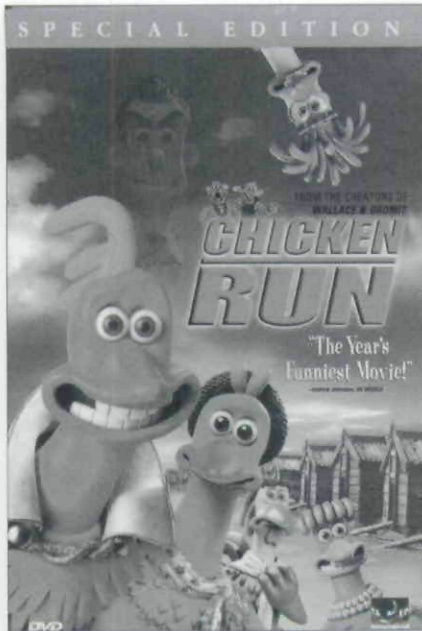
feed). They also provide comic commentary throughout the film – on the chickens' attempts to fly ('It's raining hen'; 'Poultry in motion') and at the end of the film in their 'what comes first' chicken and egg debate.

There are also direct references to the American films *Stalag 17* (Billy Wilder, 1953)

Jones (*Raiders of the Lost Ark* [Steven Spielberg, 1981]). Rocky's cry 'Freedom!' as he is catapulted into the sky alludes to Mel Gibson's lead character in *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995) and the shaking ground and puddle which herald the arrival of the circus truck remind us of *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993).

Chicken Run's dark-edged humour and the sense of the absurdity of human life recall Ealing comedies such as *Kind Hearts and Coronets*





(Robert Hamer, 1949) and *The Lavender Hill Mob* (Charles Crichton, 1951).⁸ However, despite its 'English sensibility', *Chicken Run* features a number of recognizable Hollywood generic conventions such as the musical song-and-dance routine, which, though used more sparingly here, is a staple element in American animated features. For the most part, though, the film retains the Yorkshire idiom in keeping with its 1950s Northern English setting. A clash of both gender and culture underlies the relationship between the leading characters, the English Ginger and the American Rocky who are based on the American Hollywood celebrity duo of Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracey.

Director Nick Park, who once worked as a chicken packer, explains that he chose chickens for the characters because they are humble creatures often ridiculed.⁹ His ability to endow them with human emotions and frailties

makes them convincing and evokes empathy. Although there is more dialogue in *Chicken Run* than in the Wallace and Gromit films (the dog Gromit doesn't speak), Park's masterful manipulation of the models' glass eyes and plasticine eyebrows is a major element in conveying the characters' human-like emotions.

The character Ginger, who spends night after night sitting on the roof of her hut watching a flock of geese wheeling freely overhead, epitomizes the individual's yearning ambition to rise above the limitations imposed by others. One of the inspirations for the film was the fable 'The Golden Eagle' in which an eagle who grows up amongst chickens fails to fly himself because he thinks he is a chicken.¹⁰

Ginger and her ally Mac (Lynn Ferguson), the frenzied, fast-talking Scottish inventor, continually devise schemes for escape. But it is not until the arrival of Rocky, the 'Lone

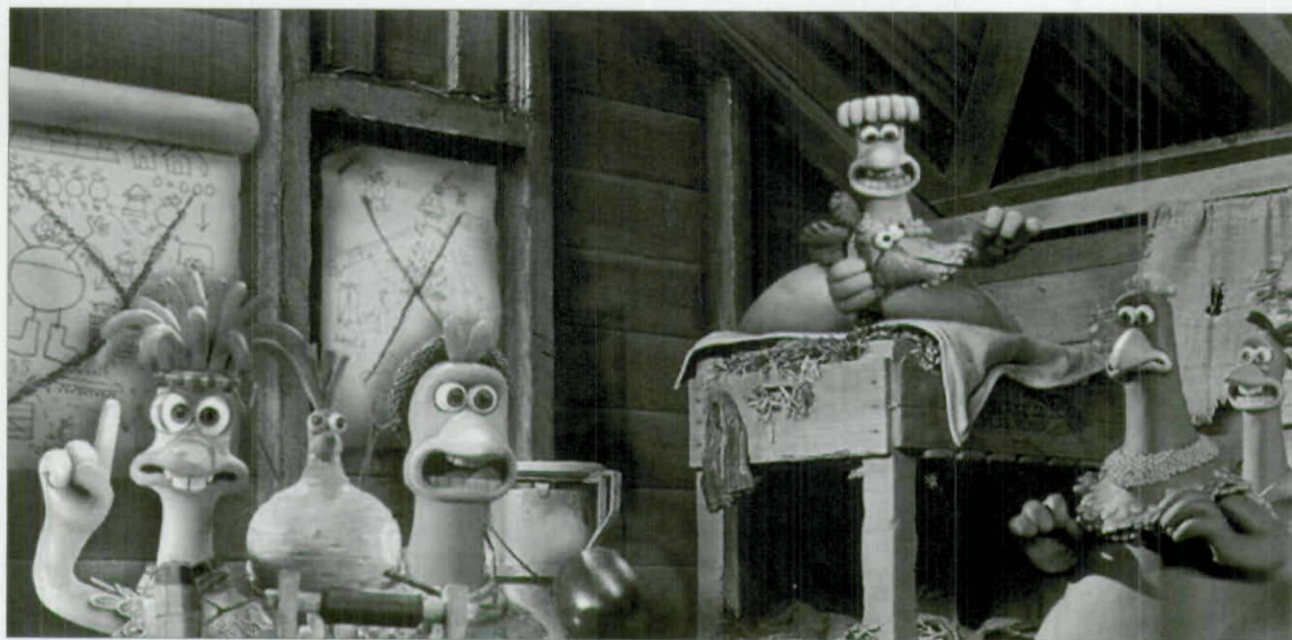
Free Ranger' who is catapulted into the chicken farm by circus cannon, that the possibility of 'flying the coop', rather than digging underground, occurs to Ginger.

For Ginger, the American interloper Rocky symbolizes freedom and the paradise of the natural, free-range world that she glimpses from above the narrow confines of Tweedy's chicken farm. The character Rocky is inspired by Mel Gibson's portrayal of Maverick in the film of that name (Richard Donner, 1994) – a loveable but unreliable rogue who comes through in the end – and the character The Fonz in the 1970s American television series *Happy Days*.¹¹ Ginger is at first taken in by Rocky's charm and her mistaken belief that he can fly. She agrees to shelter him from another form of animal captivity – the circus. Although, like Fowler, she becomes sceptical of his brash promises to teach the chickens to fly, she is won over after he heroically

rescues her from the pie machine.

The following scene, in which they sit together on the rooftop, marks a change in their relationship and reveals the character traits that underlie their outer bravado. A more compassionate Ginger is apologetic and grateful to Rocky, who in turn tries to admit that he doesn't deserve the medal Fowler has given him, as he is unable to fly. When his verbal attempt at honesty fails, he leaves the medal and the bottom of the circus poster revealing the truth about him for her to find. Escaping on a tricycle he has cadged from the rats with the false promise of paying them with eggs that he will lay (they aren't aware that only hens can lay eggs), his conscience is pricked by a billboard advertising Mrs Tweedy's chicken pies. And so 'the wanderer' returns at the eleventh hour to aid the chickens' flight to freedom.

The other hens, who provide



the source of much of the comedy in the film, are easy prey to Rocky's charm. Lacking Ginger's organizational skills and strong drive to escape, they fall into disarray without her determination and leadership. Bunty (Imelda Staunton), the champion egg layer, accepts

organized, the chickens all contribute to their successful escape. A teapot covered by Babs' knitted tea cosy fools Mr Tweedy into thinking it's a hen, while it is Fowler's picture of a RAF plane which inspires Ginger's ultimate escape plan. Like Rocky, Fowler himself has not been

Wrong Trousers; and the Mutton-O-Matic machine in *A Close Shave*. These, together with the pie machine and the plane in *Chicken Run*, reflect the influence of William Heath Robinson, namely the British cartoonist and

Lord's attraction to this 'magical vision of technology' echoes their humble beginnings as filmmakers when 'just about all you needed could be stored in a cardboard box'.¹² The battery-operated radio with which Rocky escapes reminds us that *Chicken Run* is set in an era of less sophisticated technology, prior to the computer and the Internet, and that even the transistor radio was not commercially available until 1954.

A MBIVALENCE TOWARDS GLOBAL CORPORATISM AND MODERN TECHNOLOGY IS EXEMPLIFIED BY THE CRUDELY AND LOCALLY MADE FLYING MACHINE, WHICH REPRESENTS FREEDOM AND THE 'AUTOMATED SLEEKNESS OF THE PIE MACHINE SYMBOLIZING ENTRAPMENT AND, ULTIMATELY, DEATH'.



her lot in life as hereditary – all her ancestors were egg-layers. Babs (Jane Horrocks), whose constant knitting recalls Gromit, lacks intelligence and is prone to thinking Ginger has returned from a holiday whenever she returns from solitary confinement. When Mrs Tweedy doubles their feed rations, it is only Ginger who is alert to the farmer's underlying motives. However, once

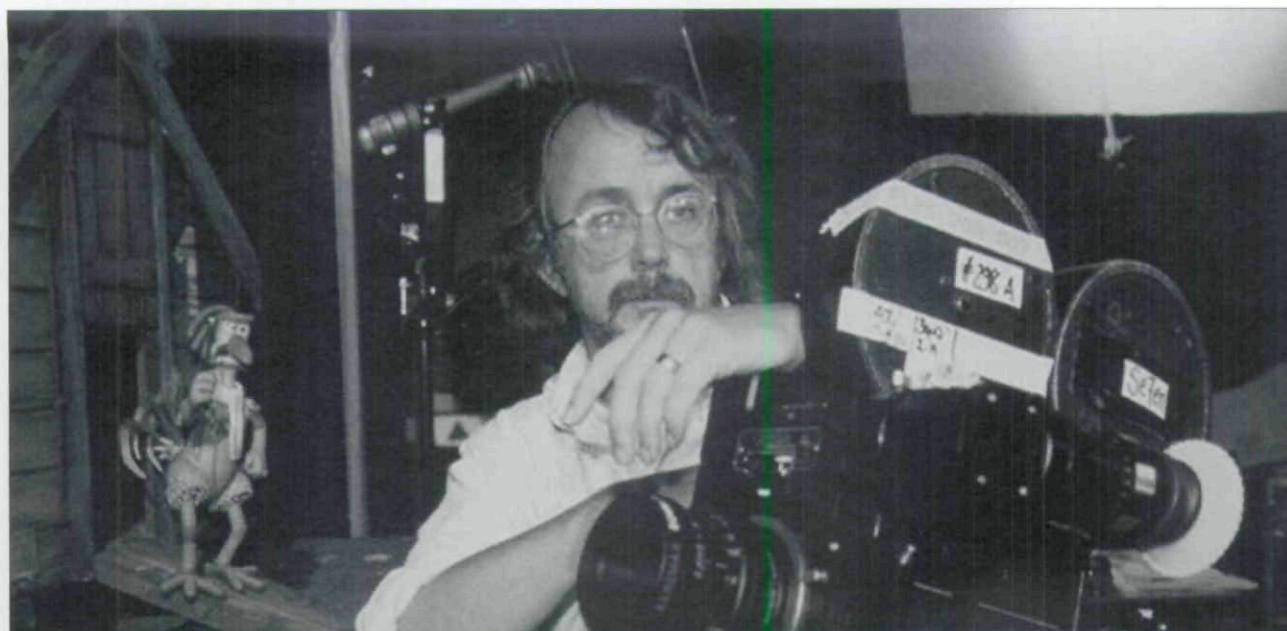
altogether honest, finally admitting that he was merely an air force mascot who never flew a plane. Nonetheless, he too overcomes his inadequacies in the end.

Against the machines

Machines feature in all three Wallace and Gromit films: Wallace's Auto-Jam Ballister in *A Grand Day Out*; the Techno Trousers in *The*

illustrator's early twentieth-century whimsical drawings of imaginary machines. The American counterpart of these early visions of technology can be seen in the early animated film *Plane Crazy* (Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, 1928) in which, just like the chickens, Mickey Mouse flies an aeroplane made out of old crates and planks. Park and

But there is a darker side to mechanization linked to the rise of large global corporations. In *Chicken Run*, the chickens live in constant fear of death – firstly if, like Edwina (named after a politician who triggered a crisis in the British egg industry), they fail to produce eggs, and secondly by the pie machine which threatens to turn them into consumer goods. In the end, however, it is the malevolent employer Mrs



Tweedy, rather than the worker chickens, who is devoured by the machine – which she installed for her own mercenary ends. Not even her henpecked business-partner husband comes to her rescue.

Thus even the lowly and apparently dim-witted worker-chickens can overthrow the means of production and their profiteering human employers, provided that they are 'organized'. Furthermore, modern technology and global capitalism can dehumanize. Ambivalence towards global corporatism and modern technology is exemplified by the crudely and locally made flying machine, which represents freedom and the 'automated sleekness of the pie machine

symbolizing entrapment and, ultimately, death'.¹³ Similarly, resistance to the sleek perfection of CGI and American corporate dominance has enabled the film's British directors to maintain their own artistic integrity¹⁴ and to produce a delightful film imbued with a strong sense of humanity, albeit with chickens.

Dr Marian Quigley is an honorary research fellow at Monash University.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Chicken Run* [DVD] TM and © DreamWorks LLC, Aardman Chicken Run Ltd. and Pathe Image 2000.
- ² Clay animation, which featured prominently in the earliest days of cinema, has undergone a revival since the mid 1970s.

Plasticine, rather than clay, is often used today as it is cleaner and offers a wider range of colours.

- ³ Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred Years of Cinema Animation*, Indiana UP, Bloomington and Indianapolis/John Libbey, London, 1994, p.278.
- ⁴ Brian Sibley, *Chicken Run: Hatching the Movie*, Harry N. Abrams Inc., New York, 2000, p.160.
- ⁵ Quoted in Jeffrey Wachs, 'Fire, Water, and Gravy: the Secrets of *Chicken Run*', <<http://www.reel.com/reel.asp?node=features/interviews/parklord>>, accessed 23 September 2007.
- ⁶ Lord in Wendy Jackson, 'An Interview with Aardman's Peter Lord', *Animation World Magazine*, 2.2,

May 1997, <http://mag.awn.com/index.php?ltype=search&val=peter+lord&article_no=771>, accessed 23 September 2007.

- ⁷ Wachs, op. cit.
- ⁸ David Stratton, 'Chick Flick as Escapist Fare', *Weekend Australian*, Review, 9–10 December 2000, p.22.
- ⁹ *Chicken Run* DVD, op. cit.
- ¹⁰ Sibley, op. cit. p.47.
- ¹¹ *Chicken Run* DVD, op. cit.
- ¹² Sibley, op. cit. p.31.
- ¹³ *ibid.*, p.37.
- ¹⁴ Marian Quigley, 'Globalisation vs. Globalisation: the Work of Nick Park and Peter Lord', *Animation Journal*, AJ Press, Savannah, USA, 2002.

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