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Global Film Auteurs

**Class on the animated film**  
***Window Horses: The Poetic Persian Epiphany of Rosie Ming***  
**(Ann Marie Fleming, 2016, 85m.)**

Learning objectives:

- To develop students' cultural self-awareness, openness, and empathy
- To explore how the film depicts cultural assumptions, expressions, exchanges, and translations
- To investigate how Fleming's own cultural self-awareness shaped her narrative and stylistic approach to the story
- To create a framework for how we assess a film's cultural awareness and consider our positionality when engaging with work from other cultures

The filmmaker:

Ann Marie Fleming was born in 1962 in Okinawa, Japan, to Chinese and Australian parents and was raised and currently lives in Canada. Fleming studied English and animation at university, first emerging from the West Coast art scene in the 1980s with visual artists-turned-filmmakers such as Fumiko Kiyooka, Linda Ohama, and Mina Shum. She received her M.F.A. in filmmaking at Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts in 1992.

Fleming has directed seven features and 18 shorts utilizing a variety of methods, including animation, documentary, avant-garde, and fictional narratives, and her work primarily deals with themes of family, history, and memory.

In her early days as an animation student in the 1980s, Fleming sustained serious injuries from a car accident. Her severely limited mobility during recovery allowed her to draw only "tiny little gestures" which led to the creation of her now-iconic avatar and muse, Stick Girl.

Fleming used Stick Girl to represent herself in her biographical animated documentary, *The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam* (2003), about the life and times of her great grandfather, a travelling Chinese vaudevillian acrobat and magician. Stick Girl has also appeared in a number of graphic novels and provides the basis for the protagonist in today's film.

The plot:

Rosie Ming lives in Vancouver with her Chinese-Canadian maternal grandparents following the death of her mother in a car accident when she was young. An aspiring poet fixated on French culture, Rosie self-publishes a book of her poems. The book draws the attention of the organizers of a poetry festival in Shiraz, Iran, who invite Rosie to

participate. Though Rosie's grandmother is firmly opposed to the trip—Rosie's father, who Rosie believes abandoned her when she was seven, is Iranian—Rosie is determined to make the trip. The film follows Rosie's adventures at the poetry festival, where she meets poets from different countries, learns the rich history of Persian poetry, is invited to translate into English the poem of a famed Chinese poet in exile, and is eventually reunited with her father after discovering the true story behind her mother's death and her father's disappearance.

#### The film (background):

*Window Horses* was more than twenty years in the making. In the mid-'90s Fleming was invited to an artist residency in Germany, the Akademie Schloss Solitude, where she was surrounded by artists from different cultures and countries, and heard their stories of exile, migration, and homeland. She also was introduced to the poetry of Rumi, a thirteenth-century Persian poet, and regularly saw horses grazing in a field outside of her window.

Said Fleming of her experience: "I learned a lot about the experience of the German diaspora after the Second World War, especially in North America: the discrimination, the difficulty, the schisms between generations. ... Several years later, back in Canada, I became deeply involved with an Iranian family, and as I learned about the culture through their stories I realized that many of the issues Germans faced after WWII were the same as those faced by the Persian diaspora after the Islamic revolution. I thought that by moving the story to Iran, I could contemporize it, and by having so many cultures within the story, people could connect the dots that although we are talking about Persian culture we are actually talking about everybody. We are not defined by our wars. We are defined by our art."

Since Fleming did not have the opportunity to travel to Iran in preparation for the film, she worked actively with Persian cultural consultants, musicians, artists, and voice actors in the creation of the film.

You'll also note from the credits that there are a number of different animators contributing to the 2D computer generated animation. Fleming has said that the original inspiration for the animation came from the paintings of the Edo period, a time when Persian and Chinese art influenced the artists of Japan, but quite a few different visual styles are on display in the film.

Both through the plot and the use of different animation styles, the film explores themes of personal, family, and cultural identity; the impacts of cultural assumptions and misinformation; the power of art to cross cultures and reveal shared humanity; the process of cultural translation; and the value of openness and empathy.

#### Class structure:

\*film has been introduced and screened prior to class meeting

- Small group discussion (discuss all):
  - What are the functions and effects of animating Rosie as Stick Girl? Consider in relation to issues of culture and identity.
  - What narrative and/or stylistic strategies do the filmmakers use to represent the development of Rosie's cultural knowledge of Iran?
  - What narrative and stylistic patterns illustrate poetry as a form of cultural expression, exchange, and translation? Provide examples.
- Individual writing reflection (pick one):
  - Have you ever found yourself in a situation where, like Rosie or the German poet Dietmar, you made a cultural gaffe because of a well-intentioned but incorrect assumption? What prompted the gaffe? How might you have handled the situation differently?
  - What enables art—say, a film—to speak across cultures? When does this process not work successfully? Discuss an example from your own viewing experience.
  - What are the challenges and responsibilities of translating from one language to another? Should translations strictly reproduce, creatively interpret, or something else entirely? Discuss an example from your life.
- Break
- Watch: “How do you make art about a culture you’ve never experienced?” *Window Horses* panel discussion (7 min.):
 

<https://www.cbc.ca/arts/thefilmmakers/how-do-you-make-art-about-a-culture-you-ve-never-experienced-1.4741001>
- Large group discussion (discuss all):
  - How might we summarize the strategies Fleming used to engage with and depict a culture that is not her own (Persian)?
  - Were these strategies successful? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the film's cultural awareness and process of representation?
  - Moving forward, how might we assess the degree of cultural awareness and processes of representation in the films we watch for class?
  - What practices should we put in place to be aware of our own positionality as we approach each film, and to engage with the culture of each film on its own terms?
- Summarize main points of discussion and proposed class practices

Assessment:

- Based on the small group discussion, were students able to analyze the filmmakers' strategies for depicting cultural knowledge, assumptions, expressions, exchange, and translation?
- In the individual writing reflection, did students demonstrate cultural self-awareness and openness to different cultures?
- During the large group discussion, were students able to formulate best practices for assessing how responsibly filmmakers represent different cultures?
- During the large group discussion, were students able to develop strategies for curious, empathetic, and respectful cross-cultural film viewing?

Fig 1: Stick Girl as Rosie in *Window Horses*

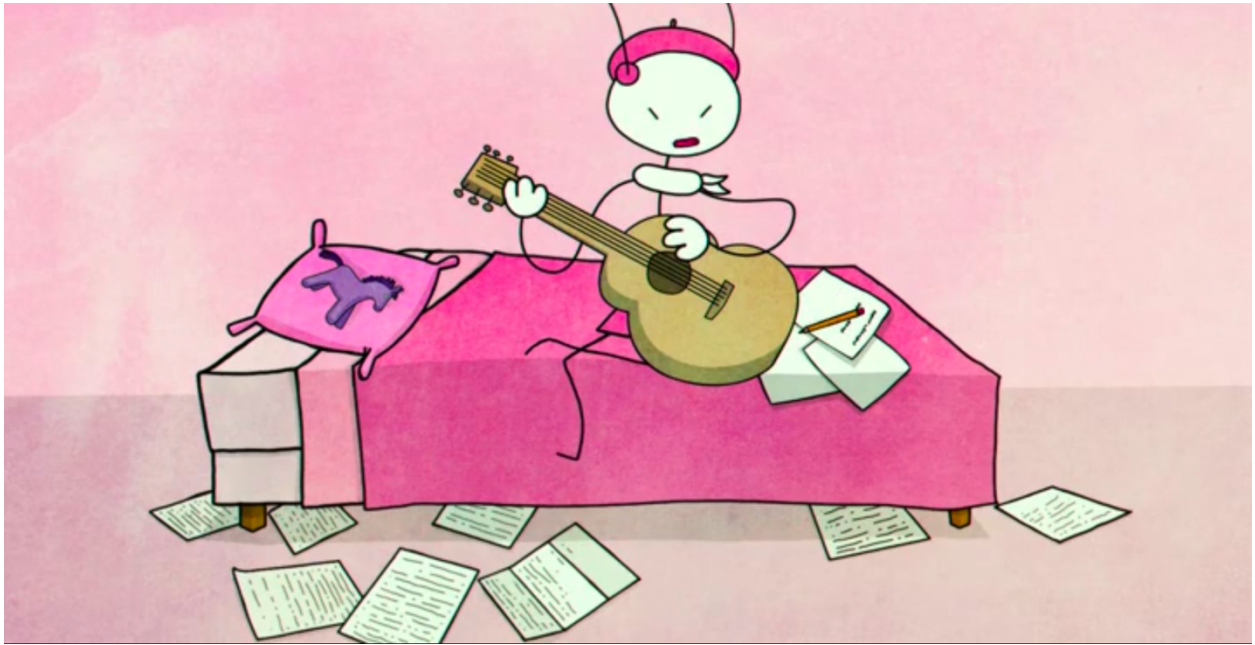


Fig 2: Rosie with her mother's parents



Fig 3: Rosie with her father's family



Fig 4: Rosie and cultural assumptions



Fig 5: Animation and sound

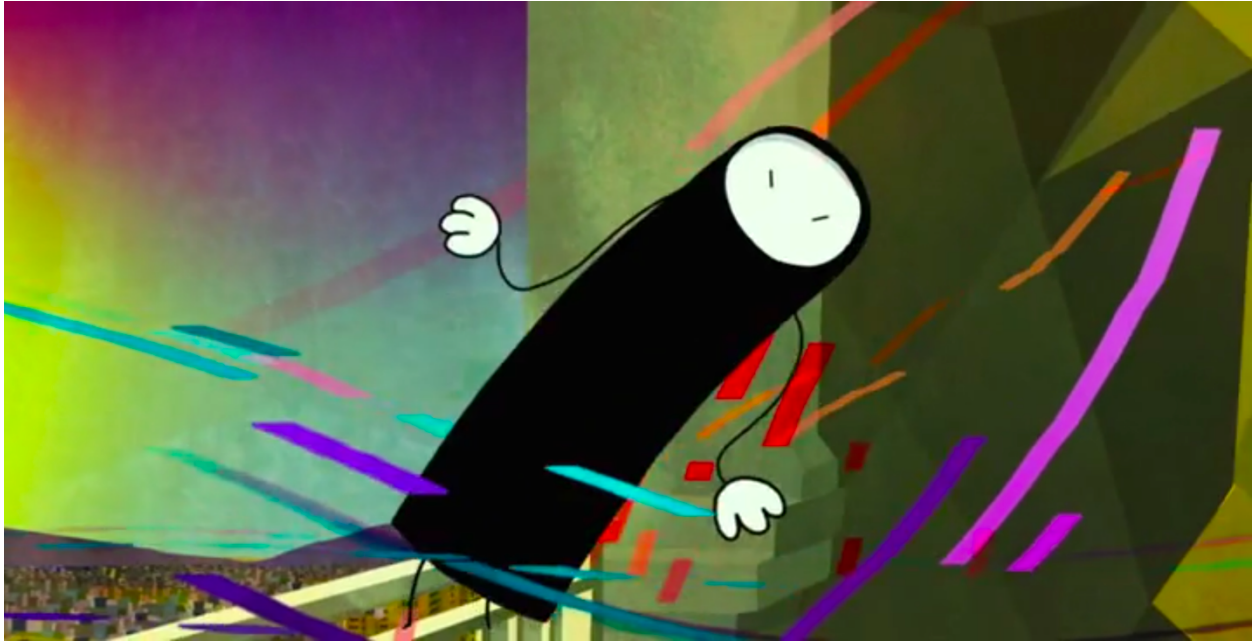


Fig 6: Animation and poetry



Fig 7: Animation and translation



Fig 8: Animation and translation

