

Negative Space - an Animation Critique

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1 Introduction

Negative Space is a French 2017 Academy Awards nominated animated short directed and written by Ru Kuwahata and Max Porter. The stop motion short is based on the poem “Negative Space” by Ron Koertge.

2 The Poem

My dad taught me to pack:

Lay out everything.

Put back half.

Roll things that roll.

Wrinkle-prone things on top of cotton things.

Then pants, waist-to-hem.

Nooks and crannies for socks.

Belts around the sides like snakes.

Plastic over that.

Add shoes.

Wear heavy stuff on the plane.

We started when I was little.

I'd roll up socks.

Then he'd pretend to put me
in the suitcase, and we'd laugh.

Some guys bond with their dads shooting
hoops or talking about Chevrolets.

We did it over luggage.

By the time I was twelve, if he was busy, I'd pack for him.

Mom tried but didn't have the knack.

He'd get somewhere, open his suitcase and text me—
”Perfect.”

That one word from him meant a lot.

The funeral was terrible—him laid out in that big carton and me crying
and thinking,

Look at all that wasted space.

Ron Koertge

3 Plot

A son is preparing his luggage to go somewhere. In the end, it turns out that he was getting ready for his father's funeral. We see that he is narrating stories from his childhood regarding his experiences with packing luggage with his father. This is the time when he bonds with his father. The son explains the process of packing luggage his dad taught him while he was a toddler, and he shares his experience of him packing luggage with his dad. He feels pride when his dad tells him that his suitcase was perfectly packed.

3.1 Story Structure

We have stories and poems and songs related to mothers love but rarely do we see something along the lines of fathers love. This was a breath of fresh air as it captured the subtle nature of fatherly affection. And doing it visually is a job well done.

1st Act: We get introduced to the main character and his know how of luggage packing. We get to know how to properly pack luggage as he explains the simplistic yet tricky art form. He gets ready to go somewhere. We don't know as to why is he packing and where is he going with the luggage. And we are interested in finding out.

2nd Act: The character backstory and relationship with his dad. The first turning point or a significant plot point occurs when he reminisces about the time his father taught him to pack luggage properly and how he used to feel immense satisfaction on getting approval from his dad. We get to know that this is how he bonded with his dad who was not present in the character's life very often. The climax happens when we see that he is attending his father's funeral. More appropriately when he says that he feels terrible about his father's death. This is the most emotional moment of the second act.

3rd Act: Funeral of his father. We see that the character is looking at the coffin and thinking "Look at all that wasted space". This can be interpreted as he is missing his father and luggage terminology is the only way he can express his grief.

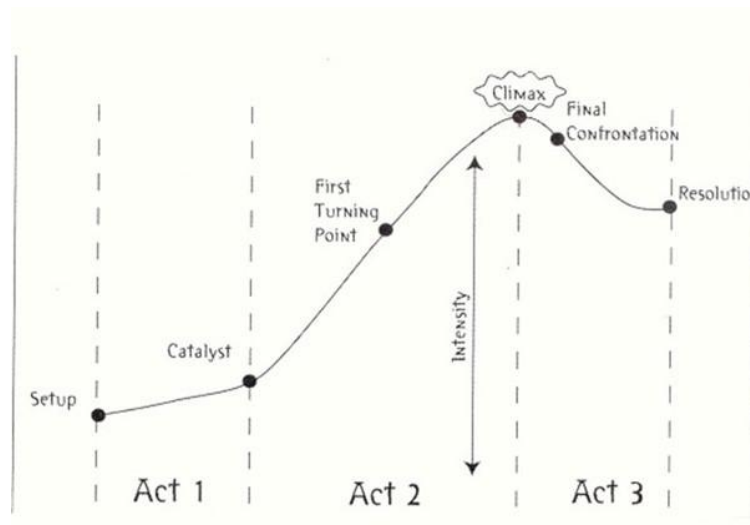


Figure 1: The Three Act Structure of the Story

4 Principles of Character Animation used in the short

4.1 Squash and Stretch

Since being a stop motion animation, I did not find any observable and squash and stretch.

4.2 Anticipation

Some examples of anticipation used in the short:

1. Walking boots

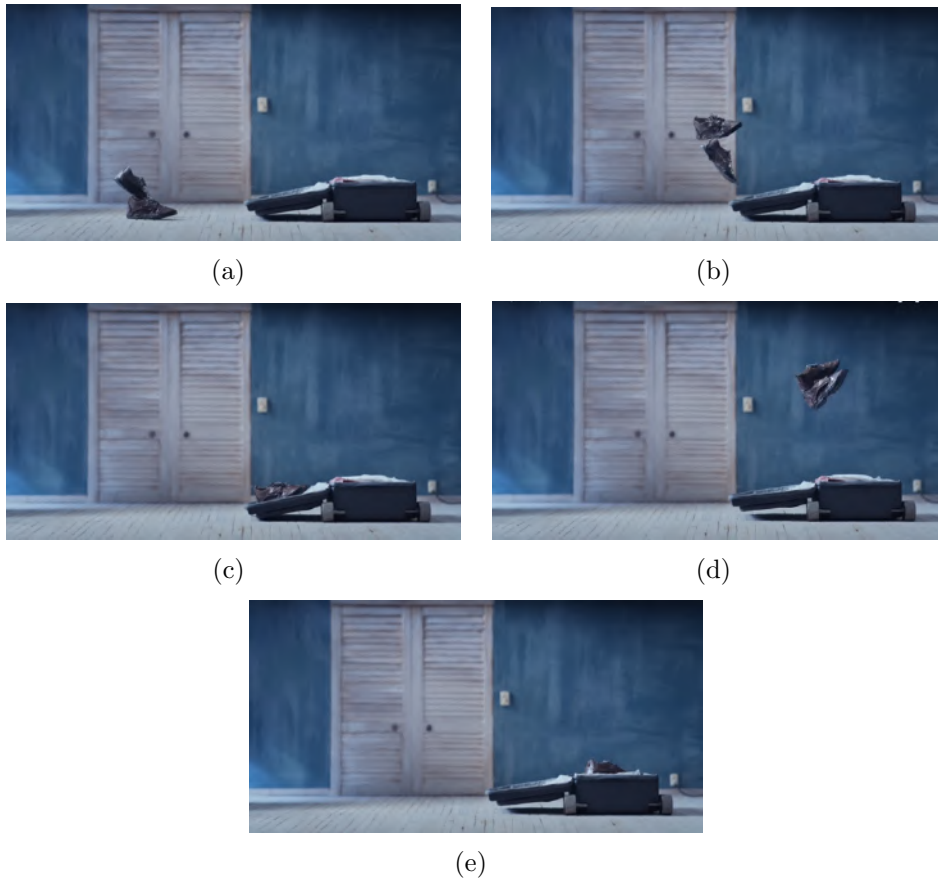


Figure 2: The anticipation on the boots.

2. Muffler scene



Figure 3: Notice how our main character adjusts the muffler before actually putting it around his neck.

4.3 Staging

The staging was spot on in this one. Although the scenes sets were simplistic, you always knew where to look, and it was extremely pleasant to the eyes.

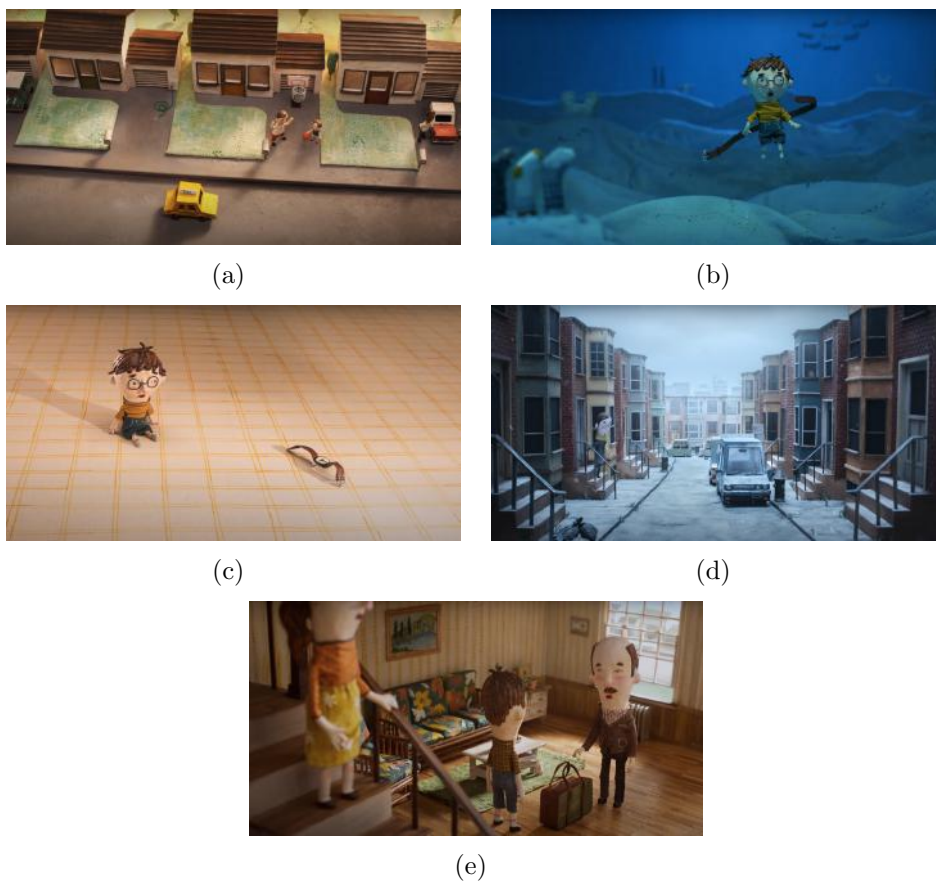


Figure 4: Phenomenal staging.

4.4 Straight Ahead/Pose to Pose

This is a stop motion animation, and no drawings are involved.

4.5 Follow through and Overlapping action

Typical of a good animation, this short also has good overlapping action and follow through action.

4.6 Slow in and Slow out

One of the example of slow in slow out that I found in the short:

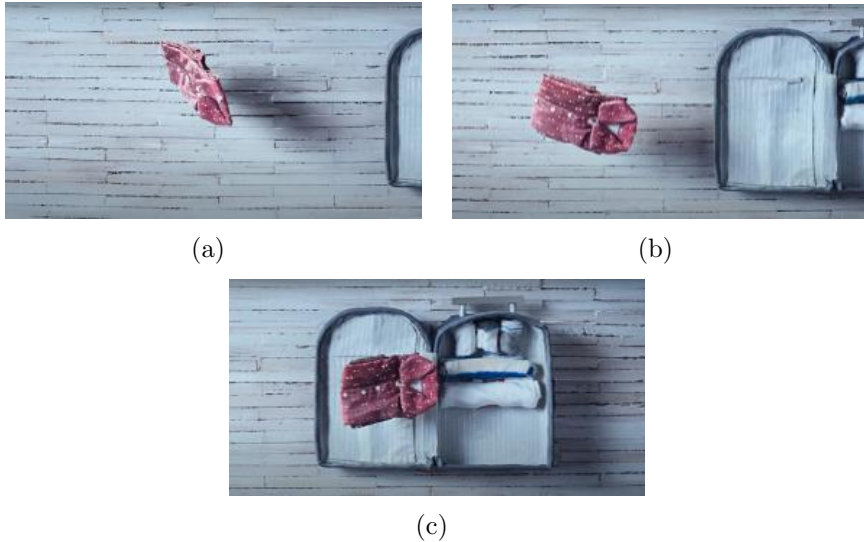


Figure 5: Here the shirt start slow and then speeds up while doing the loopy curvy motion and then slows down again. Fantastic!

4.7 Arcs

Arcs are always subtle to the naked eye but they are there here as well and enhance the overall quality of the final product!

4.8 Secondary Action

Example include:



Figure 6: The head moves up and down while our main character is driving the car while rotating the steering wheel

4.9 Timing

Exquisite timing for everything. The animations start and end at proper times. It is not a drag to look at and the camera cuts and scene transitions are natural.

4.10 Exaggeration

In stop motion animation, it can be hard to exaggerate animation. I did not find any noticeable exaggeration here.

4.11 Solid Drawing

Generally it is mentioned in terms of drawings and 2D animation. Since, we do not have any drawings involved, it is not prudent to discuss it.

4.12 Appeal

In my opinion, the appeal of the characters is a bit underwhelming. All the adult characters look more or like the same. I think this is the only major issue I see when it comes to the character animation of the short film.

5 Review

- Beautiful imagination of a poem into a visual form



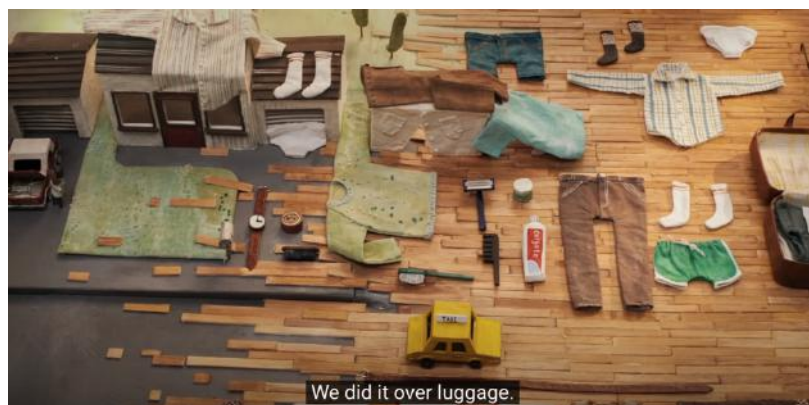
The poem's lines are captured in an aesthetic way that you wanna replay the short and watch the whole thing again.

- Excellent use of visual metaphors



The metaphors were few but so enjoyable and impact full. Quality over quantity!

- Spot on sound design of objects, characters and environments



See above. That's it.

- Phenomenal Staging



Staging, according to me, is the strongest part of this short.

- Underwhelming Appeal



As I had previously mentioned, the appeal of the characters is a bit underwhelming and this is the only negative aspect of the short I could find. This speaks volumes about the quality of the short.

6 Final review



Figure 7: 9 out of 10 !