

Animated Short Film Critique: House of the Small Cubes

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The animated short film, *House of the Small Cubes*, was released on June 10, 2008. Written and directed by Kunio Kato, this animated short tells a story about memories and the passage of time. With the ever-rising water symbolizing time, memories eventually get overrun by the tides, but they never disappear. Instead, they lie underwater, awaiting rediscovery. This film was produced by Robot Communications and animated by Oh! Production. Furthermore, this short film went on to be critically acclaimed for its visual style and bittersweet storytelling, winning many awards and nominations like being the first Japanese short film to win the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film in 2009 (Kunio Kato being the first Asian to win this award). Based on these accolades and the deep heartwarming story it manages to portray beautifully, this is one of the best 2D animated shorts produced in my opinion.

In the beginning, the audience is presented with a low panning shot showing a wall of photos and pictures of a loving family, showing the long history these individuals have to one another. After this shot, an old man is seen performing his daily routine while living alone in his cube home tower, smoking a pipe and casting a line down the fishing hole. From here, the audience is presented with a state of the world, where the ocean has overtaken and flooded everything and people get around with boats (setting up the theme). After the title screen and the old man concluding his night with a fish dinner by himself, he wakes up the next morning noticing that his house is, once again, getting flooded by the ocean (water level grows with time). At this point, he realizes he needs to build another floor on top of his current house to get some distance from the water level. Getting help from a clerk selling bricks and plaster, the old man gets down to business, spending days and nights even in the rain to get the next floor built, but after many days, he finally completes his building project and moves on to move all his essentials up to the new floor. Using a dingy boat to move the items from the flooded floor, he is well on his way to moving everything, but when he gets the TV onto the boat, he drops his pipe. It falls into the water and, unfortunately, sinks down the open fishing hole. After moving everything, he realizes that he

really wants his old pipe back, going through replacement pipes at a clerk but none of them feeling right to him. However, he notices the clerk having a scuba suit on hand, and he makes the decision to dive down to get his original pipe. Fully suited up and ready to dive, the old man falls in, and when he picks up his pipe on the first floor down, he gets a sudden vision of his late wife handing him his pipe. Taken by surprise and initially bewildered, he then gets curious and continues to go down deeper into the older floors. As a result of him going deeper down his whole house, he gets *flooded* with the memories of his past, including ones with him tending to his ill wife, his daughter's wedding, and him playing with his family when his daughter was but a baby. All of this culminates to him reliving his childhood memories with his then future wife (back in a time where there was no water). This memory trip leads him from humble beginnings up to both him and his wife building the first part of the towers house, and in the end, he remembers his dinner after the first room was built, as he goes to give a toast to his wife before realizing that it was all, again, a memory. After that heavy experience, he goes back up to his newest floor and pours a glass of wine for himself and his late wife, remembering their iconic moment together back when they were young and concluding the beautiful narrative with a cut to black.

Analyzing this further, the three-act structure can be relatively easy to identify. The first act starts the flooded world establishing shot and the old man going through his daily routine, and it ends with the old man's current floor starting to get flooded. From there, the second act starts with the old man building up the new floor, and ending with him dropping his pipe down the fishing hole as grabs his TV. Finally, the third act resumes with the entirety of the memory trip in the diving adventure and continues until the ending of the film, when the old man clangs the wine glass (callback to flashback). Throughout the short, one thing that has been consistent is the constantly rising water. As everyone goes about their lives, memories are created and remain in everyone's brain until the day of passing. However, while those memories can never be deleted or fade away into nothingness, they can be *drowned* in time as everyone goes about their lives. This is evident when everyone tries to recall events

from their childhood, whether it be from elementary school or from when they were babies. Some people can recall them easily while others have trouble remembering or fail outright. This is symbolized by the panning shot when the old man reaches the ocean floor. He witnesses the number of houses that were buried underwater, never again reaching the surface and being forgotten. It is a somber note that is presented in this short, but it is also a comfort because while memories can be buried, they can always be rediscovered through objects and other people. So, everyone can be relieved knowing that no matter what happens, the past is always there to look back on, whether it be good, bad, embarrassing, or heartwarming, and I personally love how memory and time is used in conjunction together to create a beautiful narrative supported by stylistic animation.

The animation principles were used in this short to great success, and some of the animation principles that I observed include Squash and Stretch, Anticipation and Overlapping Action, Secondary Action, Staging, Timing, Solid Drawing, and Appeal. Squash and Stretch is exhibited everywhere in the short as the old man's body is shown to contort and transform like a balloon. Whenever he is seen to sit down or even in the sections where he is swimming, his body is squashing and stretching constantly. Looking into Anticipation and Overlapping Action, the fishing rod when the old man casts the reel and his daughter's doll are seen with a good amount of drag as both objects are moving around the space, adding to the style of the animation. On top of that, when the old casts the reel, the motion of the action creates anticipation for the casting action, even though it goes by fast in the short. Secondary action can be seen with the boat rocking as the old man puts the TV down on it, reacting to the shifting weight, and regarding Staging, the lighting is exaggerated when the short wants to direct the audience's eyes on a particular subject, such as the fish dinner the old man made right in the beginning. Timing in this film can vary greatly between the gentle placement of plastered bricks for the walls of the new floor and the swift erratic motion of the fishing rod cast and the old man swimming. Finally, the solid drawing and appeal can be found with how the 3D space is distorted and played with throughout the entire film,

contributing to the art style of the film. Overall, this short film remains faithful to the fundamentals of animation, and its style only flourishes because of it.

In my opinion, I believe that this film, despite it releasing 14 years ago, still holds up to this day. Having such a bittersweet yet heartwarming story isn't that rare nowadays, but I haven't seen a film that exhibited the same memory and time themes that this one employs. What is also interesting now is that back when it released in 2008, global warming wasn't a huge headline issue compared to today. When I showed this film to some of my friends, they immediately thought the rising water symbolized climate change. Therefore, while the memory and time themes remain as the primary symbolisms of the film, it has the secondary symbolism of climate change due to the changing times of real life and the style and narrative that was used here. Speaking of the art style, I believe this film has one of the most unique and stylized character design and the art directions of any short film or film in general. It is made to look like an abstract art piece while also playing with the 3D space and distorting it when establishing the shots, and it looks very pleasing to eye when all aspects are combined. All in all, I really enjoyed this short film. It really got my heart moving, and I hope to see more with the same amount of creativity.