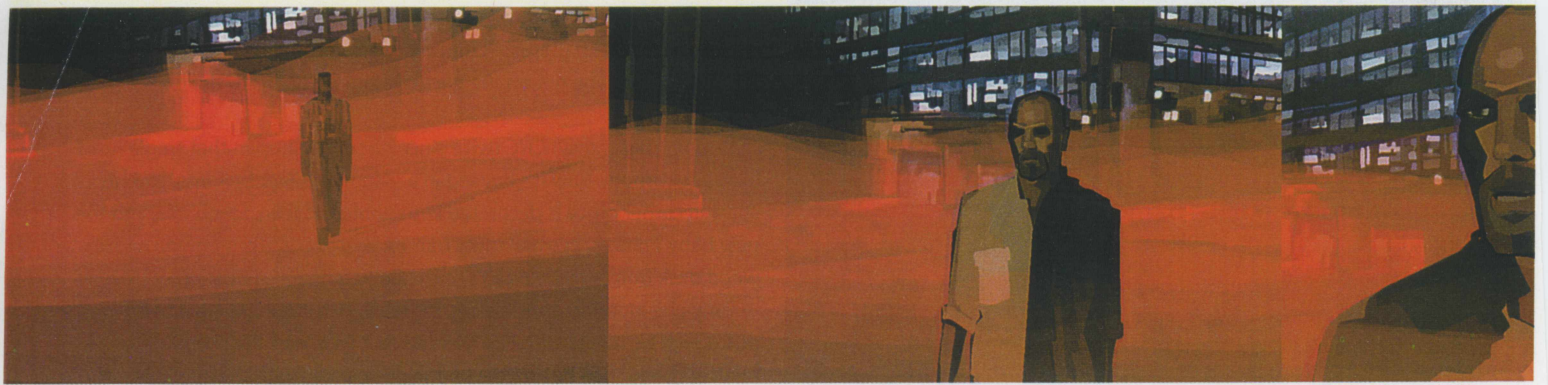


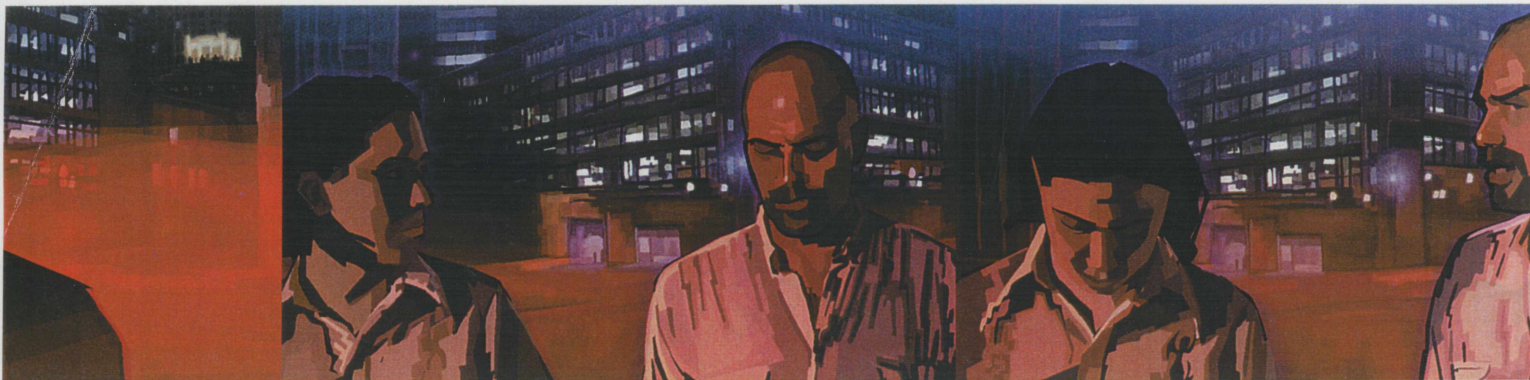
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Forget pixel-perfect computer animation. *Waking Life*, built with Flat Black Films' rotoscoping software and directed by Richard Linklater, turns reel life into the ultimate trip.

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REAL WORLD

By Richard Baimbridge

It's mid-afternoon in Austin, Texas, and Tommy Pallotta, half of the two-man Flat Black Films, has been hunched in front of a Mac since 2 am, watching his 90-minute movie, frame by animated frame. It's a mind-numbing process, this last-minute editing work on the rough cut, but for Pallotta and film partner Bob Sabiston, there's history to make. Not to mention a 24-hour deadline to get the film to Sundance.

The object of their devotion, *Waking Life*, written and directed by indie icon Richard Linklater (*Slacker*, *Dazed and Confused*), is considered the first independent computer-animated feature film ever made in America – an abstract, psychedelic, digital video improv that takes the Disney/Pixar formula and

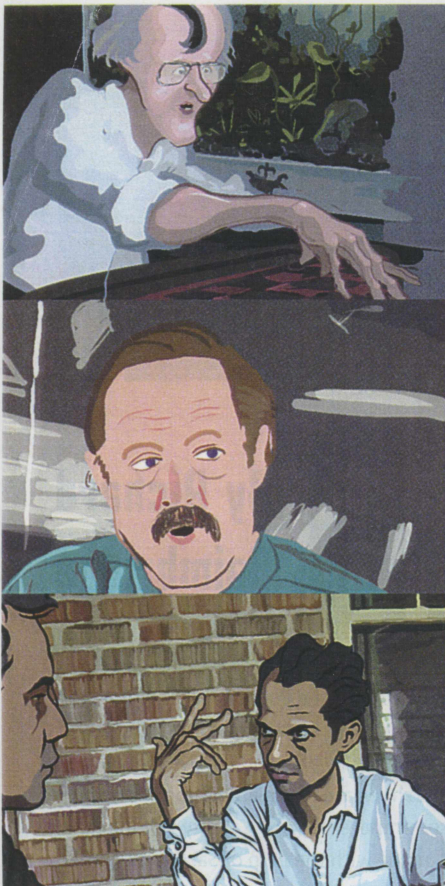
turns it on its perfectly coiffed head. Sabiston and Pallotta, collaborators for three years, have always had that goal in mind, but the major-league debut of *Waking Life* at the Sundance Film Festival in late January gives them their biggest, most esteemed forum yet: a showcase for an animation style that is unprecedentedly artful. They use computers to paint reality, not mimic it.

In that sense alone, *Waking Life*, made with the help of Sabiston's home-grown software, swims against the photo-realistic tide – the masses of animators striving for perfectly rendered blades of grass or strands of hair. But it goes further. Sabiston's as-yet-unnamed creation – nicknamed "RotoShop" by some *Waking Life* artists – is so simple that even neophytes can quickly



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Waking Life director Richard Linklater (center) with Flat Black Films' Bob Sabiston (far left) and Tommy Pallotta.

master an otherwise daunting process known as interpolated rotoscoping, in which animators trace over live-action DV footage. The roto-code makes animated filmmaking more affordable, too – Sabiston is considering plans to share, or sell, his ware at www.flatblackfilms.com – since it runs on relatively cheap G4s. (By comparison, Pixar this year bought 250 Silicon Graphics workstations, which typically run up to \$30,000 a pop – think *Toy Story 3*.) The invention, in other words, could do for digital animation what handheld DV cameras have done for filmmaking – make it accessible to the indie masses, who, in turn, could redefine the genre.

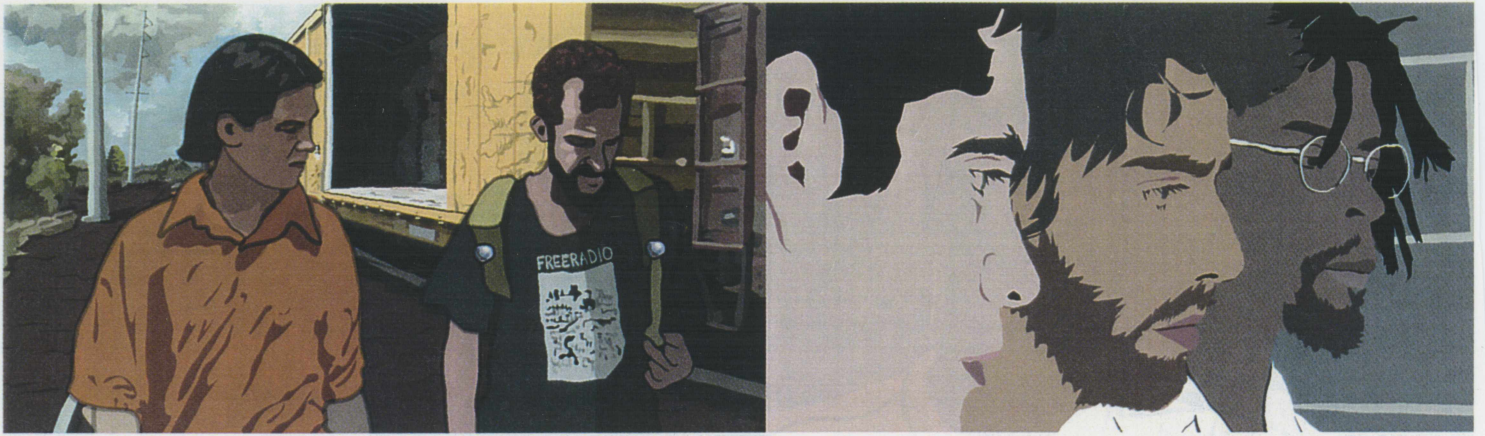
Waking Life is quintessential Sabiston-Pallotta: hard reality with a trippy, pop art twist. Watching some of Flat Black's earlier work is not unlike trying to hold a conversation with someone who's just morphed from Mr. Potato Head

into Jesus. In one short film, two coeds demonstrate a kissing technique on each other; their lips form a welding arc of color. In another, a man, depicted as an armless teddy bear, describes his obsession with self-destruction.

In *Waking Life*, the most linear Sabiston-Pallotta film to date, Wiley Wiggins – the skinny, rubber-faced kid brother in Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* – serves as a kind of floating human consciousness that consorts with street gurus and other entities, including an autistic teenager who talks like an alien (and eventually turns into one and beams into space). The series of seemingly random vignettes follows Wiggins on a dreamlike journey in which shape-

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shifting characters talk about life and death. Essence is revealed not in the ways that characters remain constant, but in the ways they constantly change.

Linklater, though a newcomer to animation, is of course no stranger to the Sundance scene. He first appeared at the festival 10 years ago with his ultralow-budget paean to aimlessness, *Slacker*, which led to bigger-budget fare like *Dazed*, *Before Sunrise*, *subUrbia*, and his latest, *The Newton Boys*. Characters in his movies are often touched by anarchy; with *Waking Life*, so was the filmmaking process.

The feature entailed shooting an entire movie's worth of footage on handheld digicams, with a cast that includes Wiggins, Ethan Hawke, Julie Delpy, Adam Goldberg, and Timothy "Speed" Levitch, the flamboyant star of Bennett Miller's groundbreaking 1998 DV film, *The Cruise*. After the edited footage

was loaded onto G4s, a team of Austin artists began the nearly yearlong process of turning video into animation.

Each actor was drawn, or "interpreted," by a different artist, intentionally lending every character a distinctive style – the antithesis of what goes on at animation houses like Disney, where the goal is seamless cohesion. Sabiston's roto-ware, used with Wacom pens and tablets, enables artists to paint over DV footage in ways similar to putting brush strokes on paper or canvas. The result – an eerily precise replication of human expressions and movement – is accelerated by the software's interpolation function, which frees animators from having to hand-draw each line in every frame. Instead, the computer connects fluid lines and brush strokes across a wide range of frames.

Sabiston, who has a graduate degree in computer graphics research





from the MIT Media Lab, says he wrote the software because he couldn't find anything off the shelf. Though his invention saves time, it still requires the tedium that is animation's hallmark. It took up to 250 hours to make one minute in *Waking Life*. The process is not for the faint of heart.

Even so, Sabiston and Pallotta had no trouble rounding up a rogue animation crew. In true Austin-indie style, the partners posted flyers in coffee shops and art supply stores, and recruited at University of Texas student art shows. Some of their hires were painters who had no experience with computers, much less computer animation or rotoscoping.

Invented in 1915 by animator Max Fleisher, rotoscoping originally involved projecting live-action film onto an animation table and tracing

the images. The technique's feature debut came with Walt Disney's 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, its heroine's graceful movements the contribution of high school student Marjorie Belcher. Rotoscoping is still used for live-action special effects by companies like Industrial Light & Magic to, for example, create the illusion of people being blown up in explosions. It appeared in music videos like a-ha's 1985 *Take On Me* and the Beastie Boys' 1989 *Shadrach*. Rotoscoping was also used in films like Ralph Bakshi's 1978 *The Lord of the Rings* – but its broader applications have largely disappeared.

Rotoscoping's return – in animated shorts like *Avenue Amy*, by Joan Raspo and Amy Sohn – can largely be credited to Sabiston and Pallotta. Spend any





time on the computer-animated short-film circuit – say, at Resfest, a touring digital festival, or Conduit in Austin, which Pallotta cofounded – and you’ll soon know Flat Black’s titles: *Roadhead* (14 minutes of interviews with odd-ball characters encountered on a New York-to-Austin road trip), *Snack and Drink* (in which Ryan, the autistic teenager/actor who also appears in *Waking Life*, goes to 7-Eleven to buy a Double Gulp and some Nerds), and *Figures of Speech* (PBS fillers, featuring a reformed deadbeat dad turned actor, a chain smoker reminiscing about a hurricane, and many others).

Waking Life, backed by the Independent Film Channel and Thousand Words, an independent production and finance company, is distinctly Linklater-esque. Its loose, *Slacker*-style dialog drifts without explanation

from French post-structuralist Michel Foucault to conspiracy theories. In one segment, two men having a staring contest vaporize into clouds.

Linklater says the basic idea behind the film came to him 10 years ago. But it wasn’t until he saw Sabiston and Pallotta’s work that everything jelled. “I’m not really a fan of animation,” he says. “When I saw Bob’s software and what it was able to do, I was convinced. I thought it would be an interesting marriage with what I had in mind, which was basically a movie about ideas – something very heady, on a plane that’s not necessarily the real world.”

On the other hand, says Pallotta, the real world *is* heady, so why shouldn’t people draw it that way? “Ultimately,” he says, “I think that ends up being more realistic.” ■ ■ ■

