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MAC GUFF : THE PARISIAN STUDIO WHICH CHARMED HOLLYWOOD

by

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Overview

When Universal Studios bought a studio in Paris in 2011, it intended to make it its animation department. Since then, Illumination Mac Guff has made the animated feature film 'Despicable Me 2' which was one of the blockbusters of 2013. There are various reasons why the Hollywood giant was interested in this studio : Mac Guff Ligne relied on talented people who were already recognised in the business ; the studio was at the forefront of technology ; and it had proved that its method of production was efficient. Mac Guff Ligne was founded in the middle of the 1980s at about the same time as Pixar. After a twenty-year break, it returned to the animation industry as a contractor (and created films such as 'Azur and Asmar : The Princes' Quest', 'Dragon Hunters', and 'Despicable Me') at a time when the French animation market started growing. The arrival of Universal gave the studio a considerable number of resources. The number of employees increased from one hundred and thirty to six hundred, and it now attracts people who have worked with Spielberg, DreamWorks and Pixar. Illumination Mac Guff's current aim is to benefit from Universal's means and methods while not losing sight of the studio's fundamental talents.

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TALK : Jacques Bled

Behind the phenomenal worldwide success of 'Despicable Me 2', produced by Universal, is a French animation studio, Mac Guff. Why did Hollywood pick this small French company to make its blockbusters ? Probably because of the chemistry which Mac Guff creates with technology and creativity, as well as the balance it keeps between a traditional, practical and European vision of the cinema, and an American vision which is more industrial, formatted and commercial.

The arts of technology

I founded Mac Guff in 1986 with four friends who, like me, had studied cinema and trained in corporate film-making. Very early on we were interested in computers, even though this sector was still in its infancy. During work experience at the French Atomic Energy Commission (Commissariat à l'énergie atomique : CEA), one of us had discovered a machine which designed digital images. It was obviously extremely basic and there were not many colours or animation possibilities, but we felt that it was a production tool of the future which we had to develop. At that time, only two feature films, 'Tron' and 'Willow', had used digital technology which was harnessed from industrial and military uses. By using a Giximage machine which we were able to borrow every week-end, we made our first home-made digital images in our apartments. At the same time, we started a partnership with Olivier Emery, an Imagix3D animation software designer.

First steps into the advertising world

Young creators such as Philippe Starck, Jean-Baptiste Mondino and Jean-Paul Goude quickly became very interested in our techniques. They had an original, new vision of the world, and they asked us to create computer-generated images for their commercials (for Kodak and Jean-Paul Gaultier, for example) and video clips (for Rita Mitsouko, Madonna, and so on). As well as this, we made corporate films for technological companies such as Hispano-Suiza and Aérospatiale. We designed very small parts such as the 3D logo, basic characters and virtual 3D sets. These very short film formats were dictated by the limited technological capacities we had then. At that time, we would have been incapable of producing a digital animated film.

The studio grew slowly over ten years. Due to the small technological exploit which we made in the Evian commercial featuring babies swimming underwater, orders streamed in from advertising agencies attracted by our added value on a both technical and artistic level which produced groundbreaking results.

Getting to know the cinema

Mac Guff made its first steps into the world of cinema with the special effects it created for 'Les Visiteurs' and Jan Kounen's film 'Dobermann'. This required us to make a technological leap in order to produce images which were of sufficient quality to be projected onto the large screen. From the mid-1990s for the next ten years, we worked on a large number of feature films which were mainly French, apart from those with Wim Wenders and Robert Zemeckis, and a few animation series made for television.

Because of our commercials and cinema work, we were able to put in place more sophisticated film-making processes than those which were generally used in animation for the cinema. This sector, however, was changing. In 1998, 'Kirikou and the Sorceress', Michel Ocelot's 2D film which had a very small budget and was unexpectedly successful, helped to relaunch the declining French film animation industry. As a result of the enthusiasm and energy generated by this film, and also the quality of the training given by the Gobelins School of Visual Communication and other similar schools, France has managed to emerge as one of the major national contenders in terms of animation.

Mac Guff launched itself into the production of animated feature films in the mid-2000s with Michel Ocelot's 'Azur and Asmar : The Princes' Quest' as soon as its technologies allowed it to handle larger volumes of images and have access to larger storage and image calculation capacities. At this time, we only used in-house software, not because we mistrusted market solutions, but because of our concern to create something new and to demonstrate our own creative vision. It is one of the studio's characteristics always to have an in-house research and development (R&D) team to design its tools.

'Dragon Hunters', an animated French feature film, presented the opportunity to try out our film-making processes, and more complex means of production using 3D images with sophisticated sets. Unfortunately, although the film was a technical success it was not a box-office hit, and we think that this was because the script was not very refined or well finished, and we were not allowed to do anything about it.

Coming to Hollywood

In 2004, I opened an office in Los Angeles. The aim of this office was solely to produce special effects for commercials. At the same time, Pierre Coffin joined the studio as a film-maker of commercials and television series. He was a graduate of the Gobelins School and an animation genius who was familiar with the American cultural codes of his generation having spent his teenage years in the United States. He was a key factor in our development.

It nevertheless remained difficult to penetrate the impenetrable world of Hollywood. This all changed when I met Chris Meledandri in 2007. This New Yorker, who had co-produced various films at the beginning of the 1980s, was now in charge of Fox Animation, where he had successfully produced 'Ice Age' and 'Ice Age : The Meltdown'. He had bought Blue Sky Studios for Fox and made it Fox's animation department, and it was very successful.

Chris Meledandri was interested in a film project which Pierre Coffin and I had wanted to launch, and we showed him an eight-minute pilot for it. However, during our subsequent meetings, I realised that Chris had another idea in mind. One day, he showed me his idea for 'Despicable Me' which was based on a Spanish screenplay the rights of which he had bought. He asked us whether we wanted to work with him on it. He had sensed that it might suit our technological and creative talents. His larger plan was to introduce Pierre Coffin to an American film-maker, Chris Renaud, who had worked with Chris on 'Ice Age'. These two people were therefore at the heart of the project which was a combination of American and French production logic, and they were able to find the right mix of marketing and artwork.

We therefore formed a working trio : Illumination Entertainment (the company belonging to Chris Meledandri and Universal) produced, Mac Guff created, and Universal financed and distributed the films. This structure gave strength to the creative process, and with it, Mac Guff had found the security which it had never had before.

Why France ?

Chris Meledandri had to use all his powers to convince Universal to put its money into a French studio. France had a reputation for being a country which had never-ending holidays and a 35-hour working week. At that time, France did not have any attractive fiscal propositions unlike other leading countries for film animation such as Germany, the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. However, as far as Chris Meledandri was concerned, France was his first choice to make his film.

French talent in film is well-known. The cinema was invented in France, and it has a strong culture linked to images. There are about twenty excellent Visual Arts schools in France which operate in a network. Graduates of these schools are skilled in animation, but are also open to other professions and are capable of working with both film-makers and producers, and are able to assert their opinions. This breeding ground has been widely exploited by