WALLACE & GROMIT

Wallace and Gromit are a team of Plasticine characters that animator Nick Park invented in 1989. Wallace is a British home-owner in his late forties. He likes crackers and cheese, reading his paper and having a piece of toast for breakfast. Wallace wants his life to be comfortable and peaceful, and to achieve this, he is constantly inventing machines that make life easier: a spaceship to collect cheese from the moon, mechanical trousers to walk the dog, and a series of machines that wake him up, dress him and make breakfast all in one go.

Wallace's best and only friend is his faithful dog Gromit, who accompanies him on all of his adventures. Gromit likes a cup of tea and his newspaper too, but is a lot more sceptical towards Wallace's inventions. As Gromit doesn't talk, he shows scepticism, indignation, surprise or sadness by raising his eyebrows or inclining his very expressive long ears. Of the pair, Gromit is by far more intelligent and eloquent.

BRITFILMS shows the first three short films of the Wallace and Gromit series. Both The Wrong Trousers and A Close Shave have won an Oscar for Best Animated Short. The films' critical and popular success provided Park with the opportunity to shoot the animated feature length films Chicken Run (2000) and Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit (2005).

Directors: Peter Lord, Nick Park
Screenplay/Camera: Nick Park
Music: Julian Nott
Producer: Aardman Animation
Voice: Peter Sallis (Wallace), Anne Reid (Wendolene)
Running Time: 83 mins
Language: English with German subtitles
Recommended Age Group: 8 +
Topics: film techniques (animation, CGI, stop motion), suspense, types of humour (slapstick, visual puns, allusions, satire, in-jokes), “Britishness”, friendship, family, buddy movie
School Subjects: English, Film

Wallace & Gromit: A Grand Day Out
UK, 1989

Wallace has a problem. There is no cheese in the house and the shops are closed for holiday. Wallace has to find a way to get some of his favourite food. He suddenly remembers that the moon, as everyone knows, is made of cheese, and decides to build a rocket for a trip to the moon. With the help of faithful and clever Gromit, he succeeds and lands on the moon. Their picnic, however, is to be disturbed by a very strange inhabitant: a policing oven who dreams of skiing.

Wallace & Gromit: The Wrong Trousers
UK, 1993

On his birthday, Gromit gets a pair of techno-trousers from Wallace. The idea (that Gromit does not like at all) is that the trousers take him for his walkies while Wallace is busy solving their financial problems. Gromit is even more disgusted when Wallace decides to let his room to a stranger. The new lodger, who turns out to be an escaped criminal penguin, worms his way into Wallace's heart and succeeds in driving Gromit away. However, when the penguin gets Wallace and the techno-trousers involved in a thrilling crime, Gromit returns to help.

Wallace & Gromit: A Close Shave
UK, 1995

In this action-packed sequel, Wallace and Gromit work as window cleaners. One day they clean windows for wool- shop owner Wendolene Ramsbottom. To Gromit's dismay, Wallace immediately falls in love with the sweet lady. What he doesn't know is that Wendolene's nasty dog Preston is secretly stealing sheep and turning them into dog food. When their new little friend Shaun the sheep is threatened and Gromit is mistakenly arrested by the police as the wanted sheep rustler, Wallace has to act.
**Best Buddies**

The Wallace & Gromit short films, especially The Wrong Trousers, work a lot with generic formulae. Genres offer director and audience a safe framework of what to expect from a movie. In a Western, for example, there will be cowboys, saloons, shoot-outs, horses and beautifully shot landscapes. The hero will accept his mission and succeed in avenging evil. He may or may not perish in the attempt.

At the same time, the rules of genre can be bent to great effect as long as the genre as such remains recognisable. The director may disappoint and play with the expectations of the audience to amuse, shock or make a point. In The Wrong Trousers, for example, the discrepancy between the cute plasticine figures and the thrilling plot is a constant source of amusement.

At their heart, the Wallace & Gromit films are buddy movies. As with Laurel and Hardy or Asterix and Obelix, there is one protagonist who is smarter than the other (Gromit) and has to counterbalance his partner's mishaps. His partner (Wallace) on the other hand, is the driving force of the action: he decides to take a trip, he invents things, he falls in love.

During their adventures together the partners’ different characters usually clash to comic and dramatic effect. Conflict threatens to divide them. They will go through feelings of estrangement, sadness, jealousy, anger, disappointment and loss. In the end, however, harmony will be restored and the heroes will have learned again to trust each other and to appreciate their differences.

With Wallace and Gromit, it is usually Wallace who gets things going when he decides to visit the moon, invites the penguin into the house or falls in love with Gwendolene. In his enthusiasm he more than once overlooks Wallace’s needs and tramples over his feelings. Gromit faithfully cooperates, but at the same time his eyebrows keep up a constant commentary on Wallace’s inadequacies. However, when things get tight, the friends stick together and at the end of the day Wallace knows very well that Gromit is his best buddy.

**Suspense and Melodrama**

The Wallace & Gromit films also borrow numerous elements from thriller, horror, caper and action movies. Various allusions to these genres are made, for example, in the style of the title, type of music, film noir camera angles, and arrangement of scenes. Both The Wrong Trousers and A Close Shave showcase spectacular chase sequences reminiscent of the James Bond series. In The Wrong Trousers, Wallace and Gromit chase the penguin on top of a model train and in A Close Shave, the chase sequence involves a whole troupe of sheep performing acrobatics on top of a car. The Wrong Trousers also contains an extended spoof of heist movies. In a heist movie the plot mainly revolves around the planning and carrying out of a robbery or some other criminal act. The comic version of this genre is called a caper film. Examples for caper movies are Ocean’s Eleven, The Pink Panther, Snatch and The Olsen Gang.

Some of Park’s other favorite cinematic means are taken from horror movies, such as the chilling soundtrack of A Grand Day Out, which features creaky stairs, dripping water and the ticking of time running out. The camera is often positioned at extreme angles, showing the action from far below or above or through key holes. In several instances we see the villain’s shadow before we meet the actual figure. The lighting in those scenes tends towards dark blue and the music further enhances a sense of foreboding and danger. In especially dramatic moments, such as when Gromit decides to leave Wallace, sound, lighting, colour and even the weather are used in melodramatic tradition to underline the desperate mood of the lonesome dog.

Park uses these quotes and techniques mostly for comic effect, but at the same time they work as intended and create suspense, fear and sympathy for the plight of the heroes. They also betray Park’s deep love for the „magic“ of cinema:

“I think I’ve always had a strong memory of what I loved as a child, the kinds of things I grew up with and the atmospheres in films I loved. The magic evoked by films in the music or the lighting and the stories. […] But I was also inspired by all sorts of films, especially thrillers, and a lot of Hitchcock; I saw The Birds as a child and it inspired me.”

(http://film.guardian.co.uk/oscars2006/story/0,,1699886,00.html)

**Humour: Slapstick, Allusion, Visual Puns, In-Jokes and the “small quirky Britishness”**

Although animated films are usually associated with children, the Wallace & Gromit films have always succeeded in appealing to a wider audience. While children relate to the cute/funny characters, the slapstick humour and action, the more experienced viewer enjoys the hidden puns that are often found in the small details of the film. Park
likes to satirize different genres of film and literature, he frequently includes references to former episodes or other works of fiction, he enjoys visual puns and he likes to play around with British stereotypes that he calls “small quirky Britishness”. In-jokes and allusions add a layer of interest and form a secret connection between the director and a viewer who shares the same cultural knowledge.

**Slapstick:** The Wallace & Gromit series relies heavily on physical humour. Slapstick scenes involve the sawing-off of the legs of the table Wallace sits on, getting splattered with marmalade and blow-drying Wallace’s large ears.

**Literary references and word games:** Gromit’s books are deserving of a closer look: “Crime and Punishment” by Fido Dogstoyevski, “The Republic” by Pluto, “Men are from Mars and Dogs are from Pluto”.

**Cinematic allusions:** Generic elements are used, such as the chase, the shadow of the intruder, the view through the peephole, and the shoot out. Gromit’s graduation from “Dogwarts University”, of course refers to “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry”.

**In-jokes:** The wallpaper in The Wrong Trousers shows the spaceship built by Wallace and Gromit in A Grand Day Out. One of the newspaper headlines says “Moon Cheese Shares Sour”, another “Dog reads paper”.

**Visual puns:** Wallace hides his piggy bank behind the picture of a piggy bank. When the evil penguin moves in he exchanges Gromit’s bone-patterned wallpaper for a wallpaper patterned with fish. When the penguin commits criminal acts he disguises himself as a chicken.

**Puns on British conventions:** Wallace and Gromit live in a typical semi-detached house featuring fireplaces, toast, knitted jumpers and ornamental wallpapers. They like their cup of tea and their daily paper (Morning, Afternoon and Evening Paper). References are made to the very British Wensleydale and Stilton cheeses.

**Sound and music:** Sound and music are also used for comic effect. The score and soundtracks often imitate the exaggerated orchestral style of 1950s suspense and melodrama movies. There are also instances of the so-called Mickey Mousing technique, which means that sound is acoustically mimicking an action or movement. The technique is often used in slapstick or animation films.

**Animation**

Despite the advances in animation technology, the Wallace & Gromit films are made almost completely without computer generated animation (CGI). Some effects, however, cannot be created with stop-motion, such as the scenes where soap, porridge, or smoke are involved. In those cases CGI is used. For Park, working completely with hand-made Plasticine figures has both practical as well as ideological reasons:

“Plasticine was available when I was a teenager and started doing animation. I wanted to be like Disney, trying to film with plastic cels, but it was all too expensive. I didn’t have enough money to buy cels, at least not enough to make more than four-and-half seconds of animation. But Plasticine was around, user-friendly and available to the masses. It was great because all you needed was camera, an Anglepoise lamp and a table. And you would make whatever you like come out of a blob of Plasticine. [...] I fundamentally like drawing cartoons really and that’s gone into Plasticine form. But there’s something I like about just making characters out of clay.”

(http://film.guardian.co.uk/oscars2006/story/0,,1699886,00.html [09/2007])

The basic principle behind classical animation is the stop-motion, or frame-by-frame technique that turns a static object into a moving object. Stop-motion is based on the principle of a flip book. An object or image is photographed, then changed a tiny bit, than photographed again. When the single images are shown as a continuous sequence at the rate of 24 images per second or even less, the human mind perceives a continuous motion.

Traditional hand-drawn animation uses cels, short for celluloid. Characters, objects, and background motifs can be drawn on these transparent sheets and thus allow the filmmaker to repeat parts of the drawing e.g. a static background behind a moving character. The classic Disney animations such as The Jungle Book or 101 Dalmations are examples of 2D animation.

Model animation has been part of film for a long time. It is based on the same principle as cartoon animation, only that it works with real objects instead of drawings. The Wallace & Gromit series grows out of a largely European tradition of short stop-motion films made by individual artists and stop-motion series made principally for children’s
television. Some famous animators working in this tradition are the Czech surrealist Jan Svankmajer, the Quay Brothers or Tim Burton. In 1978, American filmmaker Will Vinton coined the term Claymation®, combining the words clay and animation. The term means animation with clay figures (or similar pliable material as Plasticine) that are usually sculpted around a wire skeleton called an “armature”.

The second, predominantly Hollywood tradition is the „invisible“ history of stop-motion animation as a branch of special effects for feature-length films. A famous early example of model animation as part of a film is King Kong from 1933.

3D animation was introduced through pure object animation to the audience, but was partially replaced in the 1970s, and then totally substituted for by computer generated images (CGI). With CGI a filmmaker does not need to construct miniatures for effects, move puppets by hand or hire extra people for crowd scenes. Thus, a single artist can produce content without actors, expensive set pieces, or props. It allows the creation of images that would not be feasible using any other technology. An early example of CGI would be the Star Wars episode from 1977 with its Death Star simulation. With its dinosaurs, Jurassic Park (1993) presented the first photo-realistic animals, and the Lord-of-the-Rings trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003) features CGI creature Gollum. In mid-November 2007, Robert Zemeckis’ CGI-project Beowulf is going to be released in Germany, starring the digital counterparts of Angelina Jolie, Anthony Hopkins, Robin Wright Penn, and John Malkovich.

Useful Links:

Animation Film
http://www.atomfilms.com/film/creature_comforts.jsp: Nick Park’s five-minute short film Creature Comforts can be seen in full length.
http://www.stopmotionfilm.de: German platform for stop motion animation.

Score (film music)
http://www.e-filmmusik.de/artikel1.htm Detailed article “Die Geschichte der Filmmusik” including a paragraph about the mickey-mousing technique.
http://www.lehrer.uni-karlsruhe.de/~za1326/seibold/film.html: German tutorial for teachers on “Filmmusik”.
Wallace & Gromit

Before you view the film:

Dialogue plays a minor role in Wallace & Gromit films thus other sounds become more important to support the plot. What kinds of sounds are used and how are they used?

Who are the characters? What do we learn about them? Make a list of items and habits that are used to characterise the protagonists.

Animation

What kind of animation films do you know? What are the differences between a film which is completely computer animated such as Toy Story or Ice Age and Wallace & Gromit? Do you think you recognize all the animated images in a film like The Lord of the Rings?

Animation is based on the principle of a flip book and you can easily create your own: take a small notebook and draw a series of images which vary just a little from one page to the next. When you flip through the pages, the pictures appear animated.

Sound

Since there is hardly any talking in Wallace & Gromit films, sound becomes a crucial element. Take the flip book you made, or any other comic strip, and imagine what kind of sound or music should be heard when you see the images.

Gromit has no voice, but thanks to his gestures and mimics we understand what he wants to say or what he is thinking. Try to do some dubbing on Wallace & Gromit. Remember the scene when Gromit thinks that Wallace has forgotten his birthday. What would he say if he had a voice?

Try the same with another movie or television show. If you switch off the sound, do you still know what the characters are feeling? Why or why not?

“small quirky Britishness”

Nick Park likes to parody things British, such as the morning paper, the toast for breakfast, knitted jumpers or Wallace’s pair of slippers. Can you find more things associated with “Britishness”? Do you think they represent how Britain really is or just an idea of Britain?

If Wallace and Gromit were to live in Germany, what would be different? What would they eat, how would they live and what would they do?

Best Friends

Wallace and Gromit live together like a family and they are best buddies. However, sometimes Wallace is not nice to Gromit and sometimes Gromit doesn’t like what Wallace does. Can you name examples when this happens? How would you react if you were friends with Wallace?

Imagine Wallace and Gromit in a new adventure. What would happen if, for example, Gromit got a letter from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry telling him that he would be expected for the new school year? How would Wallace react? How would Gromit react? What would happen next?