Frank and the Wondercat: Pudgie Wudgie as Index

review by Marcella Scaglione

As Helen A. Fielding points out, “one film scene can shed light on how to understand or take meaning from the film in its entirety” (Fielding 83). This statement rings true as one takes stock of one’s embodied responses during Pablo Alvarez and Tony Massili’s documentary Frank and the Wondercat (2015). This film functions by switching between scenes of punchy attraction (in the terms of C.S. Peirce, various icons, symbols and indexes of Pudgie Wudgie) and scenes wherein the titular subject divulges deeply personal details about his damaging youth. Though this dichotomous variety of information is dizzying at times, there are four scenes in which the boundaries between these two disparate representations of Frank’s life blend, and what initially evoked uninhibited laughter generates a more complicated and layered sense of amusement and understanding. Each of these four scenes complicates our understanding of Pudgie Wudgie’s significance within the broader context of Frank’s life; each scene layers on and crowds out our growing interpretations of the cat’s indexicality. In the end we see that the Pudgie Wudgie act was not about the cat—the cat was, in a way, merely Frank’s medium and his means of connection to his inner and outer life.

The first of the four emotive and revealing scenes occurs early on in the film. It is the first scene in which the cat—which was purchased following his first marriage—is suggested to be an index of Frank’s dissatisfaction with traditional companionship. In this scene one sees an old photograph of him and his ex-wife on their wedding day as Frank is heard describing (diegetically) what happened to the veil in the photo. The dialogue carries over as the film cuts to a shot of Pudgie Wudgie wearing Frank’s wife’s veil; Frank is heard saying, with a happy inflection, (I paraphrase) “Pudgie Wudgie wore the veil for 14 years longer than she ever did.” My body was static during the first half of this sequence, but after the scene cut to Pudgie Wudgie with the veil the audience and I erupted in laughter. As I took stock of my embodied response, I realized that though I was laughing during this half-serious, half-comedic sequence, in which parallels between wife and cat are drawn, I sensed that larger questions were being asked of me. Hence the final notes of laughter felt stale and judgmental. The gesture the film is making is clear; we must see this act (The Pudgie Wudgie years) as more than humor. The veil—a symbol of union—found its real home; Frank discovered something in the cat that wasn’t there even in his most serious relationship and the cat’s wearing of the veil points to his lack of sentimentality towards his this marriage. Pudgie’s mere existence, then, is an index of this dissatisfaction. Its not that Pudgie filled the void left by his wife; instead, Pudgie managed to fill the void his most serious relationship never managed to address.

The second scene that produces complicated associations between Frank’s reality and the artifice that is Pudgie Wudgie involves Frank’s father and the cat’s weight. This scene, like the one mentioned above, relies on Frank’s diegetic explanation of his photo
records; the screen holds a close-up on a photo of Frank’s father and the cat eating dinner together. This is the first and last photograph we see of his father smiling. During the scene Frank mentions that his father really liked the cat, and they would eat together often, and other people would tell his father how good Frank was with Pudgie, but his father only ever mentioned how proud he was of Frank just before he died. During this scene, I noticed my brows tilt outwards and my disposition overall slowed and slacked since, by this point, the father’s coldness towards his son was a defining through-line in the film and in Frank’s life. Seeing the two most influential (for better or worse) beings of his life connect —after all that Frank had said about not wanting to have children because he wouldn’t want his father influencing them, and saying that his father robbed him of his childhood—had a profound impact. I felt myself wishing that the cat in the photo were Frank, while at the same time being thankful for the cat’s role as an intermediary between Frank and his father. Once again, as in the wedding photo scene, the cat’s indexicality is reaffirmed and layered onto: the cat’s weight is a genuine index pointing to its role as both an intermediary between Frank and his father (a means towards paternal affection) and its role as a familial presence at Frank’s daily dinner table.

The third scene in which the artifice that is the Pudgie Wudgie act is complicated by how it feeds into the reality of Frank’s human relationships occurs as Frank recounts the aftermath of the cat’s death. In this scene Frank is in the room where Pudgie’s ashes are kept on a mantel with a shrine full of icons and symbols of the cat surrounding it. As he stands near the mantel he mentions that Pudgie had cancer, so he put the cat down to avoid its suffering. Then a montage of photos of Pudgie’s funeral occurs. In one particular photo, the cat, in his customary sunglasses, is in a cat-sized casket with an American flag draped over it. This humorous montage of Frank’s photographic archives, surprisingly or not, received an unbridled chuckle from the audience—I (we) could tell that Frank was inviting laughter, since he framed the cat’s death as another phase in the Pudgie Wudgie act, rather than a somber end to the cat’s life. Contextually, our chuckling was an ideal and revealing response. The deceased, decorated Pudgie makes clear that the cat is an index of Frank’s need for a carnavalesque level of attention: the Pudgie Wudgie act does not rely on the cat’s being alive, since its only real function within the Pudgie Wudgie act was as a canvas for Frank to act on. Frank furthers this point throughout the film with his ongoing post-mortem fascination and perpetuation of the Pudgie Wudgie legacy—the cat need not even be present for its indexicality to persist.

The paramount and final scene in which affective analysis sheds light on the complicated and layered indexicality of the cat occurs near the very end of the film. Frank is in a local pet store where kittens are being sold. Frank sees an orange kitten alone in a cage and asks an employee to let him look at it. The employee opens the cage and hands him the kitten. Frank examines it then gives it back to the employee and begins showing him a flipbook of Pudgie Wudgie pictures. The first half of this scene made me anxious; my breath slowed and I became physically tense. After spending an
hour looking at Frank’s archives of Pudgie Wudgie, to now see him with an icon of his old cat (same breed) made me conflicted as to whether or not Frank should take the kitten home. This tension was illuminating: It confirmed my growing suspicion that the Pudgie Wudgie act, or rather the eccentric lifestyle to which had Frank dedicated years, had nothing to do with cats in general. The disposition of Pudgie—its unyielding compliance—made it an apt medium through which Frank could achieve a sense of internal and external connection with himself and the world. Since Frank had already attained a platform for attention from his hometown and his father, a new cat would not have the same indexical significance. It would only ever be an icon of the Pudgie Wudgie act, within the ever-perpetuated Pudgie Wudgie legacy.

Though Frank’s cat seems to be of little consequence beyond the Pudgie Wudgie act, it is through exploring its indexicality that one realizes why Frank is dedicating his life to immortalizing its memory. After ample kitschy archival Pudgie footage and real-time biographic narration, I, the viewer, was forced to recognize that Pudgie is a sort of Frankenstein of Frank’s ambition for attention and validation from his father, his community at large, and, in a way, himself. And as Bazin points out, “Realism in art can only be achieved in one way—through artifice” (Bazin 26): it is through focusing on the artifice of the cat that Pablo Alvarez and Tony Massil were, counter-intuitively, able to foreground the reality of Frank Furko, the man.

Works Cited

