

# The Weapon

## A Tale of Passing Time



The Apollo 11 crew were the first humans to walk on the moon and this year they celebrate the mission's 40th anniversary. All these forty years they have been honoured as heroes for taking the giant leap for mankind. But when they set off on the moon mission in 1969, they were not certain whether they would return back to Planet Earth. And so they planned for their death before leaving. In the Swedish animated film *Vapnet - En berättelse om tidens gång* (The Weapon – A Tale of Passing Time), the same kind of emotions seem to run among the main characters Lydia, Lorenzo and Augustine who work at Minerva space station that is in orbit around the Earth. This is a 29 min film from Nattlek, a young production company originating from the do-it-yourself-movement. The Weapon is their first major film project.

Scripted by Markus Amalthea Magnuson who is also the director and producer, it was inspired by classic slow science fiction films and explores the themes of boredom, isolation and time travel. He says, "The idea was to combine a very dialogue heavy (think *Nouvelle Vague*) script with this whole sterile space station idea found in films such as *Solaris* or *2001: A Space Odyssey* and so,



to confuse everyone even more we decided early on puppet animation, probably the most unlikely method for realizing such a script. Recording the dialogue entirely in Swedish also made sure that nothing like this had ever been done before."

The work on the script began in the late summer of 2006 and the first draft was finished in October that year. The design, recording, construction and animation was done in the next two years. Post-production and DVD production took another year. The station is the most important part of a self

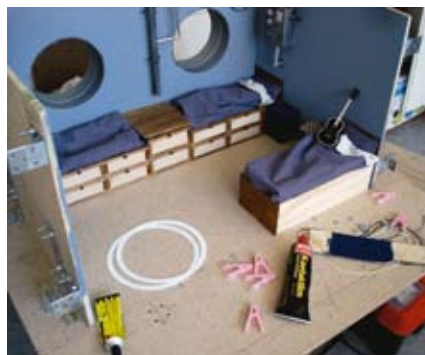
defence system for maintaining world peace and the station crew in charge of a weapon are supposed to defend their nation in case of war. However the situation at the space station gets complicated when there is a sudden change of orders from Earth. The three main characters are now commanded to arm and fire the weapon to start a war rather than prevent it. The Weapon poses a question of whether an individual person is responsible for the actions he or she takes.

There is an element of mystery in the film about the time period. When these events take place and the name of the nation is not mentioned in the film. But the film does include many references to film and television that were watched at the time of production, which leaves the audiences to spot the different codes and secrets in the film.

The Weapon is filmed in a classic puppet stop motion technique. "The puppets are made out of a variety of materials, such as fimo soft clay, foam rubber, cotton fabric and pearls. Basically, when animating a non-resculpturable puppet, you need to have small, removable parts that can move around," says Sandra Valenca, who designed the puppets and was involved in the



direction, production and cinematography of the film. Though the first look of the film may lead the viewer to believe that soft clay has been animated, it was used only for masking holes in the floor and in other similar situations. Everything animated in the film is made of hard materials such as wood, metal and hardened modelling clay. "The puppets are metal skeletons with styrofoam padding and clothes made of regular cloth. Heads and hands are hardened clay with moving parts such as eyes and eyebrows fixed with vaseline, the mouth is actually a whole bunch of replaceable mouths; one for each lip sync sound" says Magnuson. Long discussions were held about the looks and appearances of the characters. To prevent giving the characters a clichéd look the team decided to sculpt the puppets based on the looks of the actors voicing the respective characters.



In the pre-production stages most of the work was done with paper and pencil and sketches of environments, characters and objects in the film. A few sketches were elaborated on by scanning them and adding colour and patterns using Photoshop. A complete set of model objects in regular white paper was built, which enabled the team to plan all the sets before actually building them. A storyboard was made using these paper objects by photographing the set and the dummy characters, which was then replaced by a hand drawn one at a later stage. In this way analogous techniques were used in the pre-production stages.

The film involves a lot of dialogues, conversations and arguments taking place which makes the lip synchronizing process an important part of a dialogue-rich animated movie and had to be done very carefully. Magnuson says, "To plan the lip synchronization based on the dialogue track, we divided the track in the approximately 17,000 frames making up the film, listened to all these files separately, taking note of the sound for every single frame, and saving the sound information in a database. All this was done using software we wrote ourselves for

this purpose only." The dialogue was recorded early in production, since the resulting audio track would serve as the main guide for the timing and tempo while animating. The sound was recorded, mixed and edited in Apple's Logic Pro at The Institute of Digital Arts in Gävle. "I worked on both a Mac Pro and a MacBook Pro, although most of the work took place on the laptop. Most of the sounds were recorded through a Røde NT-2A microphone straight into a Motu Ultralite audio interface," says Mattias Valenca who worked on the sound design.

The animation was done using the software iStopMotion on an iMac. Magnuson says, "Stop motion animation isn't really that performance intensive during shooting. Just about any computer capable of digital video can be used. One of us would keep track of the frame list with lip sync information and similar, e.g. what mouth each character were to use for each frame, when they were to blink and so on, while also shooting the





frames." Post-production was carried out in Final Cut Express, mostly for completing visual effects such as chroma key and image enhancements such as colour adjustment, tinting and sharpening. Editing was minimal since every scene was planned and shot at the exact length down to the frame. The DVD production was carried out in DVD Studio Pro, with subtitles being produced with the free application Miyu.

The team faced many difficulties while filming like animating without a story board, which wasn't made until one-fourth of the film was already shot. Only two people animating increased the workload and time taken in completing the film.

Not knowing much about animation and not having done any proper animation before, the creative team saw all of this as a creative challenge rather than a drawback. Knowing what was to be done with the materials, tool and technology they developed their animation skills as the production moved on — experimenting and learning along the way. Challenges were faced when it came to animating liquids and the scenes where all three characters walk, talk and move around in the same image and keeping track of mouths, eyelids, footsteps and other such detail. Valenca says, "The scene where Lydia



gets into the kitchen, opens a cupboard and gets a glass, and then she pours water into it. The pouring is about a second or two, but that was really hard. The water is made out of thin plastic covered with vaseline and to make it look more like real water we had to rotate the plastic in the tap. This rotating was extremely hard to manage, since human fingers are way too big to get a good grip and the tweezers just couldn't hold it because of the slippery vaseline." This scene involved around nine to ten re-takes for a second and a half sequence in the film.

The music is very essential to the film to bring about the feel in this space journey conveying isolation and restlessness among the different characters. One of the major influences for the music in the film was the song 'A Saucerful of Secrets' by Pink Floyd, which features a lengthy part of organ chords

and choir. Composed by Magnuson on an old electric Farfisa organ, he says that the song is apocalyptic without being too bombastic, and bears a faint touch of sadness, which is exactly how he thought of *The Weapon*. After settling on the chords for the main theme of the film Magnuson collaborated with producer Leo Nathorst-Böös who rewrote it in several styles to match with various stages in the story: intro version, ominous version, and gloomy version giving the film a traditional music approach. Intermission music played on a couple instruments at the same time like the chimes were inserted along with black frames throughout the film, marking the logical sections of the narrative structure.

It was challenging for the team to be working with a small budget of \$3500 with a small crew, but what they liked most was the freedom of doing it their way without being responsible to any financiers or producers. Sandra Valenca says, "From an artistic point of view I am most proud of the fact that we have made a really special film — it's like a mixture of the French New Wave, *2001 - A Space Odyssey* and Czech puppet tradition — and that's really rare! I'm also satisfied with the feeling in the film; it's a bit blue and melancholic which I like."

The film has been well received and is scheduled for the Portello River Film Festival and is also in competition for the Un Film Per La Pace festival in Italy. Satisfied with the visual style of the film and admitting that skill is something you develop from continuous work Magnuson says, "In the end, the ideas that are put into a film are far more important for the end result than any technological aspect."

— Joyce Lemos

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