

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH BRAD BIRD

Brad Bird made his mark as an animation director with the 1999 film *The Iron Giant*, which has gained recognition over time as a classic of storytelling and visual style. Bird's next film, *The Incredibles*, won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. Inventive and rich in its characterizations, it is the story of a family of retired superheroes trying to settle into suburban family life. The Pixar film was an enormous critical and commercial success. Bird spoke at Moving Image as part of the Museum's annual New York Film Critics Circle series.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *The Incredibles*, moderated by Deputy Director and Director of Digital Media Carl Goodman (January 9, 2005):

GOODMAN: It is my great pleasure to bring to you the voice of Edna Mode of *The Incredibles*, who—oh, yeah, he also happened to write and direct the film as well. Please welcome Brad Bird. (Applause)

I'd like to get a sense of how *The Incredibles* started, both as a story—how it germinated—but also as a project. And I'm assuming this happened some time after *The Iron Giant*.

BIRD: I actually had the idea way before *The Iron Giant*. My now-twelve-year-old son Jack was a little baby—and we called him Jack-Jack, and that's why I named the baby in the movie after him—he was a baby when I had the idea. I started with the idea of a superhero that was based on the kind of guy that we all know from high school: the guy that's the star quarterback and then doesn't play in college, or doesn't start in college, and then never has that moment again. So I just thought, "Well, what if a superhero was looking back, and he was still relatively young and still fairly vital?" But once I had that, I said, "Well, what made him stop? And did only he stop or did all superheroes stop? And is he married? Is she a superhero?" And it just kind of proceeded from there.

But I think that at the time that I was doing it, I had several projects. I was working on *The*

Simpsons—happily—but I was also trying to get movies made. I had projects all over town in Hollywood and I could always get on the runway. I could give them a pitch and they'd go, "Great idea, let's develop it." But I would never get cleared for takeoff. Every time the reason was slightly different. My executive would get fired, and then the next executive wouldn't want anything that the other executive had... Or a movie that was vaguely similar would fail at the box office, so all movies that are about the subject are suddenly bad. It just drove me nuts, because these really cool things were being kept from happening for the most boring, bureaucratic reasons. So, it was kind of like Insuracare: this guy can do amazing things, but he's sitting in this cubicle being asked to not help people. You know? So, I think that the movies, to me, were the magical, super things that were not being allowed to take off.

And at the same time, I was having a new family, and they were demanding more of my attention, and I was wondering—I thought, I haven't made a movie yet. If I do what I need to do, I'm not going to pay enough attention to my family. And if I'm a really good dad, I'll never make a movie. I wanted to be good at both. I think that anxiety made me keep returning to this idea.

GOODMAN: And how did it [*The Incredibles*] end up with Pixar? And how did you end up with Pixar?

BIRD: Well, after *The Iron Giant*, they had been talking to me about coming up there. I knew John

[A. Lasseter] from school. When *Toy Story* came out, I just went crazy over it. I thought it was just really fantastic, and the best animated film made since Walt [Disney] died. I told John, and so we kind of got back in touch again. And during *A Bug's Life*, they started talking to me about coming up. We just kept talking, and I was doing things and they were doing things. When I finished *The Iron Giant*, I thought this [*The Incredibles*] would be a great thing. So I pitched them the idea, and they went for it. So I was sort of the first outside virus let into this climate-controlled atmosphere.

GOODMAN: And what was the effect of this virus on that atmosphere? And then, vice versa.

BIRD: Well, to their great credit—and it's really completely astonishing—at the time that I was talking to them about coming up, they had had three hits in a row. They'd had the two *Toy Story* films and *A Bug's Life*. And instead of going, "Hey, man, we have it figured out," like every other studio in the world would say: "We got the formula, baby; you just follow the formula, you're gold." (Laughter) You know, "This machine drives itself." Instead of doing that, they were saying, "The only thing we're afraid of is getting complacent." And they said, "The minute we start to feel that we have it figured out, that's the minute we're dead." And they said, "We are, I think, in danger—if we don't really continually shake the company up—of not continuing to push ourselves." So they said, "We want new—outside—new ideas. We want to do these films in different ways. We have things that we've learned, and you have things that you've learned. And we would love to just see what happens."

So they were kind of asking me to rock the boat. I've been... (Laughs) I was fired out of two of my first three jobs for rocking the boat. And so to be actually hired to rock the boat was really weird and wonderful. I think that it was good. I learned a lot. And I felt like I was very safe, because I was with the best people on the planet for making a CG [short for CGI, or "computer-generated image"] film. I mean, I was doing my first CG film (even though there's a little CG in *The Iron Giant*—the giant is CG). So, it was just an incredibly supportive atmosphere, but they also push you.

They really want the story to be good, so they question it constantly. And you have to have good answers. And if the answer isn't good, you better come up with one pretty soon. They push you, but they also support you. It was a fantastic experience.

GOODMAN: In fact, a theme in *The Iron Giant* was this fitful relationship we have with the machines that we invent. And you say, in the short feature we just showed, that the process of making this film—it was a constant battle with the computer. But we won. So, I'm wondering about what sorts of battles those were and how they played out.

BIRD: Well, the computer, from my point of view—some of you may feel different—but the computer actually does have a character, I think. The computer wants to make movies a certain way. It wants things to be absolutely, spotlessly clean. So the computer's very anal. (Laughter) It wants things to move very smoothly and evenly; it wants things to be weightless; it wants things to be small; it wants things to be plastic; and it wants them to be hard, geometric surfaces. So if you wanted to do an animated feature about cubes spinning in a white void, the computer would be the happiest little computer on the face of the earth. (Laughter) But we wanted things to be smoochy, heavy, large, dirty, messy. So we were fighting it every step of the way. Sometimes I'd imagine it was like Hal 9000 [from *2001: A Space Odyssey*]. You know? "Don't make it big, Dave. Don't you think you ought to make it plastic, Dave? It'd be much nicer."

GOODMAN: I guess there isn't much of a call, also, for bald, naked human beings.

BIRD: (Laughs) No, but it wanted it.

GOODMAN: Yeah.

BIRD: It wanted it.

GOODMAN: So describe those challenges with clothes and hair. Also, within Pixar, you were having to have them push the envelope in those areas.

BIRD: Yeah. The other thing that's interesting about computer [animation] is that in hand-drawn [animation], the process is very orderly. It takes time to do things, and in some ways it's not as flexible, but it's a very orderly march towards the screen. Whereas in computer, stuff doesn't happen forever, and then, seemingly, it happens all at once. It seemed like for years I was throwing a thousand decisions a day into this bottomless pit, and I'd go, "Is anything going to happen with these constant judgments I'm making?" And, "Oh, yeah, we got them, we got them." So it's another day, another thousand decisions into the pit—where you'd never hear the splash, either—and it's just (makes a wind sound). (Laughter) And you go, "Is this movie getting done? I don't seem to see any..." "Oh, yeah, we got it, it's getting done." And, seemingly, nothing happens. Then, suddenly, you get these images, and they're more complete than you could ever imagine them, and all the lighting is there, and all the details are there. It seems like it was made overnight. So that was very different.

But it was also the—we had one scene in the tunnel with Helen, and there was a white flash, just, like, a streak. I said, "What? What was that? Let's go back." So we rolled back in the film and there was one frame where there was a white line, just going from her mouth all the way off-screen. I go, "What is that?" And one of the computer guys went, "Well, that's one of her teeth breaking out of her head at Mach 5." (Laughter) And it's like, "Oh." So, that's really weird. (Laughter)

The weird thing is that after a while, you get used to that stuff. So, I'll be looking at a scene where a character's walking through the scene, and there'll be a naked version of the character stiff as a board, with his arms out like this, impaled through this character's torso. He's walking through the scene with a naked version of himself rammed through his stomach. I'm just kind of going, "Yeah, okay. Just checking, the naked guy won't be there, right?" (Laughter)

GOODMAN: I hope this is a future that we as humans won't be living in anytime soon.

BIRD: (Laughs) Me, too.

GOODMAN: You never know. I had read of a tool that was invented that allowed you to kind of draw over finished frames. What sorts of things were invented to make this process go more easily?

BIRD: Well, see, that was part of when they [Pixar] wanted to know some of my methods of working. On *The Iron Giant*, we had a very short schedule and a budget that was about a third as large as all of the other animated films. So we had to be relentlessly efficient, because we didn't want it to look cheaper. One of the tools that I developed—that was just a bailing-wire kind of thing; there's nothing fancy about it—but we just projected onto a dry-erase board, would freeze a frame, and I would draw with a marker. I would say, "This is what I think you ought to do," and if somebody disagreed with that, I'd say, "Come up," and they would come up and draw something else. That way, we had a very open interchange. I wanted to continue doing that at Pixar. And of course they didn't. I said, "It's okay; we can just get the dry erase," and they were like, "Are you sure you want the dry-erase? I mean, we can do a much more complicated, sophisticated version." (Laughter) You know? And I went, "Well, I'm okay with the dry-erase, but..." Then they came up with this thing that saved the images. You could even scroll motion and do limited bits of animation over it, and color things different colors, and send it to every department in ten different directions. It was very fantastic and wonderful. I mean, they're geniuses there.

GOODMAN: I hear you're a very meticulous storyboarder...

BIRD: Yes.

GOODMAN: ...and the film, in a sense, is made in your head and gets out on paper. I'm curious whether anything emerged after that that was, indeed, spontaneous or serendipitous, that wasn't in the storyboards, but that you kept.

BIRD: Sure. When I first started, the standard way of doing things in animation—and the way I was taught, too—was that you used storyboards just to figure out business. So you're figuring out what the characters are doing. If they're picking something up, what are they doing? Or if they're

doing any little bits of business, what is the business? But the filmmaking part was sort of saved until later. And I always had trouble with that, because when I think of things, I think of where the camera is. It's the way you assign words to construct a sentence, you know? For me, I can't separate it. I can't separate what I'm saying, oftentimes, from how I'm saying it, so I don't want to wait to do boards. I'm impatient to do boards. So I tend to work with people who are also into staging and all of that stuff. I work them out very precisely, but I always say, "If you can figure out a better way to do this, I'm all ears." But that way, if nothing changes, it will still look good in the film; if no one comes up with a better idea, it will still look good. Partly, that was born a little bit out of necessity, too, on *Iron Giant*, because, again, we didn't have any margin of error. So I actually spent more than Disney or DreamWorks on the boarding part of *Iron Giant*. I spent more money and resources than they spent on theirs. And that was the only area where we spent more, because I figured if you're going to make mistakes, it's better to make them in the cheap part of the process. That way, you figure it out, and you know exactly what you're doing by the time you're in production. So we do very elaborate animatics. You'll see some of those on the DVD. But they have elaborate camera moves, multidimensional stuff. And they're flat drawings, but the movement and the camera work is very figured out.

There was one sequence that we did that I actually planned to do this way. The sequence where he gets hit with the goo balls, you know? I actually had the animator animate it, the whole scene, from once he starts to run, as one piece of action. In other words, he animated the whole thing as one long take, then I went through and picked a bunch of camera angles, and essentially covered it from a lot of angles. Then in editing, we did all the really quick, fast edits. Once we had the cuts figured out exactly, the animator went in and fine-tuned it to camera, so that was more like editing a live-action film. And that was more spontaneous.

GOODMAN: It seems like we had very realistic computer animators, and you were probably

marveling at the movement of the strands of hair. Normal folks are just, "It's hair."

BIRD: Well, that was the downside of the whole thing. I mean, my producer John Walker said, "Look, you know, there's no upside to this, because if we do a fantastic job, no one's going to notice it. If we blow up the planet, everybody'll applaud, but if somebody's fabric moves nicely, nobody's going to care." And yet huge resources were poured into it.

GOODMAN: I'm curious, because there was a tremendous amount of realism there—with the clothing, as well; costume changes, locations—but there was a choice made as to how the faces were represented. You weren't going for a kind of photorealism.

BIRD: That's right.

GOODMAN: It was something else. And it worked because I didn't notice it; I mean, they were people. Where[as] in other films, where people attempt a kind of photorealism, there's something uncanny about it.

BIRD: Part of the problem is with the medium itself. The medium has a very narrow tolerance, because it will do as much detail as you put in it. If you want to go in that direction, you can go unbelievably far in that direction. But to me, it's a false enticement. Meaning that, okay, let's say you're doing the face. Okay. "Well, do they have eyebrows?" "Yeah, they do." "Okay. Do you want individual hairs?" "Okay, yeah, I want individual hairs. Seems like that's good." "Okay, good. Okay, you got the individual hairs. Does he have a five-o'clock shadow?" "Probably he should have a little bit of five..." "Okay, well, if he has individual hairs here, he probably should have tiny, little hairs here, right?" "I don't know...I guess." "Well, if he has those, then you got to give him pores." "All right, pores." It's starting to get creepy. (Laughter) You know? And the thing is, if you change the style of their face at all, they look stylized in their faces, but the amount of realism on everything else makes them look like deformed people. And it gets into the creepy zone, in CG. And so I feel like you have to take it to a point and say, "I'm not going any further," because every detail you add

begs another detail. And pretty soon you have these—I won't name names, but there are these... Humans are notoriously creepy in animation, in CG animation. And there're a lot of films that I find very disturbing. Even early Pixar films, *Tin Toy*—Lasseter jokes about *Tin Toy* now because the little baby in it is really disturbing-looking. But, you know, he kind of waves it off and says, "This is the best that we could do at the time." But that's the weird part about it: it can go as far as you want it to, and I think that leads people into very creepy final designs.

GOODMAN: I don't know if any of you have been looking at the blogosphere. There's a theory from the seventies or eighties that has been resurrected by this obscure Japanese roboticist; they call it "The Uncanny Valley." They say, in more pretentious terms, exactly what you just said. But that also, as we approach something that closely resembles a human being, our emotional response to it drops off a cliff and gets extremely creepy. And the trick is to take it up to that point but not go any further. I think you guys did a fantastic job. *Jerry's Game*, actually, a short—did a great job on that one.

BIRD: Yes, and that's what gave me encouragement that it could be done. And when I moved up to Pixar...

GOODMAN: This is a Pixar short.

BIRD: It's the old guy playing chess against himself. Have you seen that? It's really great. And that was my model on: Hey, this stuff can look great if you stylize it and keep it stylized. And so, we made a very conscious attempt to put detail in parts, but not in other parts. Bob [Parr, a character in *The Incredibles*] just has a general color shift there; he does not have individual pores for his five-o'clock shadow. His ears are unbelievably simple, almost like Flintstone ears. We did that because we felt like it's away from the face; we don't want to have complicated shapes drawing the eye. We want to keep everybody focused right here. We also didn't put a ton of little individual—I forget what you call those facets in the eye, the colored part of the eye, but we also simplified that. We didn't want it to look real, we

wanted it to feel real. A lot of times what feels real is different than what looks real.

One thing that I noticed when I got up there: it was in the earliest days of [*Finding*] *Nemo*, and they were doing tests. They did a test of the underwater stuff in *Nemo*, and they said, "Okay." They had a shot of a whale, they had a shot of a reef, and they had a shot of the surface of the water. And they were real shots—a real whale, real surface of water. They said, "Okay, our goal is to imitate these things." So they went in with the computer, entirely with the computer, and imitated those three shots, and then put them up side by side. It was amazing how close they got. You could barely tell. On the surface-of-the-water one, you couldn't tell. And they looked at it and they went, "Bleeaah! I don't want that!" Who wants to look at that? That's like a mind trick. "Hey, it was done by computer. Wow." Who cares? You know? "Isn't that amazing?" That might interest a guy in a classroom, in a computer class, but it's not—[there's] nothing compelling about it. So they said, "What we want is what the ocean feels like emotionally, not what it looks like." Lasseter was very good. He said he wanted all the lead art guys to get licensed to dive and they went on these dives in Hawaii, so that they could experience what it was really like. Then they recreated what they emotionally felt, and how they remembered it feeling, rather than how it actually looked. So if you look at *Nemo*, everybody's going, "Man, it's so real!" But it really isn't. If you look at it and look at an underwater documentary, they're very different. It's just that it feels right. The way the water and the shafts of light work. And that's partially why it's so magical, I think.

GOODMAN: I want to focus a little bit more on the film itself, and the non-technical aspects, for a second, before we plunge into geekdom with audience questions. (Well, you never know.)

BIRD: Viva la plunge.

GOODMAN: What is the time period in which the film is set?

BIRD: It's kind of an alternate future, as seen from the mid-sixties.

GOODMAN: That's about right.

BIRD: Whoa, it's about right! (Laughs) I should've talked to you first.

GOODMAN: I mean, that's my perception. No, it's kind of what I was getting. I just didn't know whether I was missing something. The film blows you away, but it resonates. And it also engenders discussion and debate. It also encourages people to project their own political viewpoints (and social) onto the film, and sometimes wildly different [political viewpoints]. What's your reaction to that? What were you intending to say? What would you like people to get out of it versus what they've been talking about?

BIRD: Well. It's bothered me that people have appropriated some of this stuff and said that it's right-wing or whatever. It's certainly not my view of it. Some people say that the thing of celebrating mediocrity or whatever is like Ayn Rand. And I liked Ayn Rand for about 6 months when I was 22, but you start to realize she had zero sense of humor and that sometimes compromise can be a good thing and something that makes something better, rather than worse. To me, there's something kind of adolescent about the Ayn Rand thing, and that's certainly—nobody ever points out that Bob screws up, too. If Bob had simply done—you know, given the kid some props when he's flying around on these amazing boots that he made, instead of worrying about him sharing the stage with him... If he'd said, "Look, I work alone, but you know, you're great, very inventive, and I think you should do this," and tried to harness some of that, a lot of the bad stuff wouldn't have happened. So, Bob makes a mistake too. But the left side of the equation sees Syndrome as kind of a Bushy-like figure, who's more about looking good than actually doing good.

GOODMAN: Like he invents a nemesis in order to defeat it.

BIRD: Exactly. So the main thing is... (Laughter) Yeah. Well...yes! (Applause)

GOODMAN: We're in a blue state right now, I think.

BIRD: Yeah. No, I don't want to plant my flag on either side, because I'm basically one of these people that hates the whole blue state/red state argument. If you actually look at the way people—if you go by percentage, it's like varying shades of purple, and they're not really that different. I feel that the whole red state/blue state is kind of a Karl Rove thing to make it look like: it's only the crazy people on the coast, and the rest of America feels this way. And in fact, if you look state by state, the percentage is, like, one percent? It's basically purple. And so I view the audience as purple.

GOODMAN: The film did come out one week after our wonderful election, and so I think that did inspire some creative punditry at the time that you could never have foreseen.

BIRD: Well, the funny thing is this guy from *The New York Times* gave me... And he was not an entertainment guy. In fact, he was actually—no, he was from Chicago, but he was writing for *The New York Times*. And he started the interview going, "This film is kind of pro-Bush, isn't it?" I was like, "No, no. Really." I said, "I had the idea long before Bush. You can't pin that one on me, and da-da-da." Then he went, "So, you're a Kerry man." And I went, "No, the idea's before...da-da-da. I'm kind of in the middle. I can see some things on either side, and blah-blah-blah. Let's not—it's not to be seen as a political film." And if I spell out what I'm trying to say, it diminishes the film. It's kind of like explaining a joke. You know? It's like if you explain a joke, you've just suddenly lost everything. I like it to resonate with people how it does. So he wrote the article, and he starts out saying it's a Bush film and by the end of the article, he's saying it's a pro-Kerry film. And I thought, "Exactly!" (Laughter)

GOODMAN: Very good. And in fact, *The Iron Giant* itself could've been seen as left-wing propaganda.

BIRD: Well, it was, by a few. In fact, one nutcase here in New York—not *The New York Times*; what's the other one? What's the kind of crazy one?

GOODMAN: Probably a member of the New York Film Critics Circle who you'll meet tonight at the

awards dinner... [Editor's note: *The Incredibles* won the New York Film Critics Circle award for Best Animated Film.]

BIRD: But somebody said that the giant represented the Soviet Union, saying that the Soviet Union was all cuddly, and how dare we suggest that we shouldn't have had the Cold War? And I'm just like, shhk. (Laughter) But the thing I wanted to get to is that the thing I'm most delighted about is that it's being discussed—that a mainstream animated feature is being discussed in these ways at all. We had three articles in *The New York Times*, at various times, by different people talking about this film in a deeper sense. And I was very gratified by that.

GOODMAN: And in fact, there are articles about how the film is being talked about in these articles.

BIRD: Yeah!

GOODMAN: It got to that next stage: meta-reflection in the media. These feature animations often are a cauldron of incongruous pop-culture references that are sort of a disservice to the story. There's a sense in which the references—and there are billions of them—are in service to the story, and they reach back to another time.

BIRD: Well, I have an opinion about that: I think that there's something really lazy about just pressing audiences' buttons, like, "You like this movie, so I'll do a parody of this; you'll like this theme song, because it'll remind people of this; and here's a joke from that mouthwash commercial. It's just like (makes noises)." Everybody goes, "Ha-ha," because they recognize it. But in ten years, people aren't going to recognize those things, and they're going to seem... A lot of those jokes, to me, seem old by the time the movie comes out. So, I feel like it's better to give people the sense of other things, rather than the exact reproduction of a moment, only substituting your characters. I don't like it when movies overtly reference other movies. I think there are ways to do it where, if you haven't seen the movie, you can still enjoy it. I like the *Toy Story 2* thing where Buzz goes, "Father!" But see,

that one would work even if you hadn't seen *The Empire Strikes Back*, so... Anyway.

GOODMAN: It also has people trying to figure out the secret messages and the codes in the film. But the only one I could figure out was this A1-13 business.

BIRD: Yeah, I do that in every film.

GOODMAN: Can you explain what that is?

BIRD: I put it in every film that I've made, even *Family Dog*, and even some *The Simpsons* episodes I directed. It's the classroom number of the class at CalArts. When we started there, the whole program, every class—life drawing, design, animation—every class was in this one room. And now, within a couple of years, the program has gotten so big it is in a million rooms. But now it's a huge part of CalArts's success. But at that time, it was all in one room. And so I've always kind of tipped my hat to CalArts, because there was a spirit that we had there where we were really wanting to learn everything we could learn. And I like tipping my hat to them.

GOODMAN: Do other people who come out of this school do the same thing?

BIRD: Yeah. Lasseter was in that class with me. After I did it in *Family Dog*, he put it in *Toy Story*. So it appears in *Toy Story*, and I think it might be in *A Bug's Life*. I don't know if it's in any other ones—other than *The Incredibles*—than that.

GOODMAN: So, it's something to look for. Was Tim Burton in your class, also?

BIRD: No, he was the next year.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I saw that you thanked [Disney animators] Frank Thomas and Emily Johnson—you have a clear Max Fleischer, sort of *Superman*-esque influence. How much is the old animation style... Do you miss that in the death of cel animation? How does that affect you?

BIRD: I love the Disney masters and I love the Fleischer *Superman*. To me, that was the last time that superheroes were done in animation with full-

on production values. Ironically, it's the first time it was ever represented on film and it was the last time. Then animation kind of got corralled over into Saturday morning [TV], for superheroes. So the Fleischer *Supermans*, to me, were done full-on, and that's what I loved about it. But I don't really agree with the idea that 2-D [two-dimensional animation] is dead. I think there is a look to it that you cannot reproduce in any other way. I think that we're in a stupid period now, where people think that CG equals box-office success. And if you look way back—way back—to 1995, (Laughs) you'll see that people were thinking that if you took a familiar story and slapped five Broadway songs on it, you'd also have immediate success. So everybody and their mother tried to emulate *The Lion King*, and after some horrible films, they all went running for the exits. A lot of those same people are back, because they're sure that if you buy a computer, their bad ideas will suddenly not suck. "If you put it through a computer, it's great! It's automatic box-office success!" (Laughter) So we're in a period of lunacy right now that'll go away once a lot of bad CG films come out. They're coming. (Laughter)

GOODMAN: Can't wait.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What do you think about schools that aren't teaching cel animation?

BIRD: I think it's wrong.

GOODMAN: That schools aren't teaching cel animation?

BIRD: Yeah. And I think it's wrong because you cannot—the only thing that you can learn is moving stuff. There's so much else to learn about animation, whether it's layout or character design. If you only teach in CG, it'll take you a year just to build your character. And that's a year where you could've been making a film. The design theories are true of—they could be applied to any medium. So I think of hand-drawn animation as—it's kind of like Latin. If you learn it, you'll be able to speak anything. We certainly have some great animators that do not draw, but a lot of the guys on this film also do draw. I think that it's a mistake, in a teaching environment, to not offer 2-

D. I'm not saying exclusively; they should also teach CG. But I think it's [2-D is] the center of animation.

GOODMAN: (Repeats audience question) That's actually a very good question. The different superpowers of—especially with the family...

BIRD: Right. Well, when I was first playing with the idea, I was more interested in the aspect of somebody kind of torn with family problems and all that. That's the part that interested me. And I tried, for about ten minutes, to think up some new powers that you'd never, ever seen before, and I realized that, (Laughs) everything, somebody has done. You know? And all that's left is really obscure stuff, like his fingernails grow really fast, or his nose hair has power or something. I mean, it was just like all the good stuff had long [been exhausted]... And I wasn't even interested in that part, anyway. So I just based the powers on their roles in the family. So the dad is—in the typical, nuclear family, the dad is always asked to be strong. They always say, "You got to be strong. You got to be strong for your family. Be strong." So I made him super-strong. Moms are always pulled in a million different directions, so I had her stretch. Teenagers, particularly teenage girls, are really insecure and a little bit defensive when they're going through adolescence, so I had her be invisible and have a protective shield. Ten-year-old boys are like hyperactive energy balls; they're bouncing off the walls. So I had him have super speed. And babies are unrealized potential. So that's kind of how I keyed in on it. And, you know, a lot of this stuff goes back to the times of the Greeks, anyway. The Greeks—a lot of the Greek legends are flawed gods. Gods with flaws that are petty—and they have power, but they're not perfect. So I think this stuff goes way back, and superheroes are just the latest incarnation.

GOODMAN: Is there a bit of yourself in any of these characters?

BIRD: All of them. All of them. Even the villain. Which I—I was, like, halfway through production before I figured out that the villain was modeled after me. (Laughter) I didn't see it, I didn't see it. And I'm like... Somebody finally went, "You know it's modeled after you, don't you?" (Laughter) And

I'm like, "No, no, my hair's not that long." And they said, "Oh, yeah, that's you, man." I went, "No, I'm a good guy!" (Laughter). They're like... Yeah. No, every single character in the movie I relate to. I've either really known that person well or I've been that person. And you know, from my own vantage point, I've been the spoiled baby of the family, I've been the annoying little brother, I've been the bumbling husband to a really patient wife. And so I viewed the movie from multiple perspectives. The only thing that I would say that's in common with almost every main character in the movie is that they're all underestimated. Even the villain. I feel like a lot of us are. That we are not challenged enough in our lives to be the best that we can be, or we don't challenge ourselves. And I think the movie is full of people that can do more than they think they can do.

GOODMAN: I don't know if anyone has the guts to follow up that statement with a question. Here, why don't you...?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: As a storyteller, can you talk about whether the CG liberated you or constricted you?

GOODMAN: Either [then] or now.

BIRD: Yeah. It constricts you in terms of, if you have any new ideas, if you don't have the pieces already in place—in other words, if you need a new location or a new character, it is very restrictive, because it takes so long to build everything. But in most other ways, it's liberating, because I loved being able to really move the camera, rather than simulate camera movement. I loved being able to mimic lens selection and stuff like that. I liked working with lighting, which is very similar to working with live-action lighting, where you might want to have a kick just to define something against an area of black, or something like that. So, I really loved being able to move things in space and all of that.

It just takes... I wish I could be out of the country when they're building everything, because that stuff just... We had meetings where you were only discussing leaves. Like, for hours. (Laughter) "Now, how many kinds of leaves would you like?"

And it's like, "Well, lots of leaves." "We can't say 'lots,' because we could spend a lot of money just on leaves." And it's like, "All right, ten." "Okay, well, you know, ten—I don't know if you're going to have enough variation." I said, "Well, maybe we could vary it with scale." "Okay, you can scale these leaves differently, so that they look different when they're actually the same. What about coloring?" "Okay, let's have a variety of coloring." "Do you want it to be in the center or...?" Aahhh! Meanwhile, it's like one of those time-lapse films of a dead rat, kind of going (makes explosive noise) and disintegrating. I just feel like my life is going by (makes a wind noise; talks like an old man): "Yeah, make it red." (Laughs)

GOODMAN: So, that being said, for your next feature... With *The Incredibles*, when you saw it in your head, was it a CG film?

BIRD: No. I actually did the first artwork on it before I came to Pixar. I came to Pixar with all this finished stuff. If you get *The Art of "The Incredibles"* book, several pieces in there predate me coming to Pixar in 2000 and those pieces I came to Pixar with. It was designed for 2-D, going to be a hand-drawn film. The thing is, is, we didn't change the designs; we kept them the same, and just made sure that the same people that were going to do it 2-D followed it through in 3-D. A lot of my *Iron Giant* guys came up to Pixar and are working there now, which I'm very happy with because they've got a nice, stable, good place that loves them. Yeah, so, no, it was designed as a 2-D film, and I think it would've been a good 2-D film. I just think that Hollywood wouldn't have embraced it, because they would've seen it as that stupid thing of: 2-D equals failure. Everybody forgets *Lilo and Stitch*, by the way. Nobody brings up that. "Hey, Lilo?" (knocks) It was a success; it was hand-drawn! (Makes wind noise.)

GOODMAN: (There's another A1-13 reference in that one, too.) Has that affected your imagination, in terms of what you're seeing now? Do you envision films in 2-D or...?

BIRD: No. Well, sort of. I mean, some—I have some ideas that I have trouble seeing in 3-D, because I just know that they would have a certain thing that you just—it's a drawn thing. I

love it, but I got to wait for this stupidity to pass. But no. When I talked about doing it in CG—once we said, “What are the problems with humans that we’ve got to fix?” And they were substantial—once I was assured that we could fix those, I was thrilled, because this kind of movie really takes advantage of the 3-D thing, I think.

GOODMAN: Yeah. I would assume a lot of this current crop of superhero movies, which probably made various executives more comfortable with making this film, because they’re very successful...

BIRD: You’d think, wouldn’t you?

GOODMAN: ...are done as live-action. Although there’s an extent to which they are animated films...

BIRD: Yeah, but you know... I won’t go into this too much, but if you haven’t done something before, Hollywood doesn’t really want to do it. So you’d think that they’d be enthused, but: “There are no big animated superhero films.” “Yeah, there’s lots of big superhero films, though, and people like animation, so put the two together...” “Well, yeah, but it’s never really been done before. There’s, like, one Batman film, and that didn’t do very well, and...” So that’s kind of the way Hollywood is. So I think we had to convince them a little bit. Pixar was always behind it, though.

GOODMAN: Sure. And there’s the extent to which the film exists in this region between animated and live-action films, because of the thing—I read about virtual costume fittings, and...

BIRD: Oh, yeah, yeah. We had to have a real tailor come in to help us with measurements, because the fabric wouldn’t respond and we weren’t necessarily cutting it for movement. So, things would bunch up in a weird way and we’d go, “Why is it bunching up?” We’d bring in a tailor, and she’d go, “Well, you have to fix this over here,” and... And suddenly it went away. So, yeah. It’s really strange. Logical though.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I’ve got a question for Edna [Mode, *The Incredibles*’ designer character

voiced by Bird]. I’ve got a tear in my jacket; could you help me out?

BIRD: (in voice of Edna Mode): Dahling, you could not afford me. (Laughter) I’m saying this as a courtesy to you. I did a lot of temp voices. For the temp soundtrack, we used a lot of people within Pixar to do the voices, just to get stuff in the ballpark. I was also Bob and Syndrome and a few others. Everyone just—I was ready to replace all of them. And everybody liked Edna so much that they—I kind of got conned into leaving her in, so... But we actually had several Pixar guys do other voices. Rick Dicker is Bud Luckey, who directed *Boundin’*—did Rick Dicker. Kari, the babysitter, is done by Brett Parker, one of our animators. Lou Romano, the production designer, did the really tight teacher that’s trying to catch Dash. So, there’s actually several Pixar guys that are voices.

GOODMAN: The boy on the bike?

BIRD: That’s my son Nick, who was also in *Finding Nemo*, as the little turtle, the surfer dude turtle. (In turtle’s voice): “See ya later, dude.”

GOODMAN: So either this is child exploitation, or it’s...

BIRD: Oh, no, the exploitation went the other way. Because I had him saying something else. I think “bitchin’” or something. I forget what it was. And I gave it to him and he went, “He wouldn’t say that, Dad.” (Laughter) And I was like, “Aw, right,” you know. “And what would he say, Mr. Big Shot?” And he said, “Totally wicked.” And I went, “Okay.” (Laughter)

GOODMAN: That’s beautiful. Chuck Jones was on this stage about ten years ago, and he had, for him, an epiphany when he was younger watching his cat, named Johnson, devour grapefruits. He had this bizarre habit of devouring grapefruits. He said something to the effect of “Character is the point; it’s all about character.” And it’s not about what they look like or how they sound, but how they move.

BIRD: That’s right. And that’s something that people... You’d be surprised at how little people think of that most of the time. And I mean a lot of

animators, too. The strength of our generation of animators—meaning the generation after the great old guys that really developed everything—is also our weakness. And that is that there are more A-level animators now than there has [sic] ever been in the history of—even in the golden age of animation, the so-called “golden age.” There are more great animators now that are capable of putting really beautiful animation onscreen. At the same time, because we are—and it’s because we know every trick in the book, because we can look at all the work that they’ve done, on DVD and all that stuff, and study it. And they didn’t have that, and they couldn’t do that.

At the same time, it’s our weakness, because we tend to animate collections of movements that we’ve seen before, rather than drawing from life. And so, you know, if you really know animation, you can look at people’s stuff and go, “Yeah, that’s that little shoulder turn that they got from Frank Thomas in *Pinocchio*,” and, “Oh, yeah, there’s the blink that so-and-so did in *The Sword in the Stone*,” and “Oh, there’s the...da-da-da.” You can literally go through the scenes and see a collection of things that people have studied and picked up on. They’re almost Frankenstein-ing their scenes together. You can fool critics a lot of times, because if the movement is beautiful, if it moves smoothly, they’ll go, “Wow, that’s great animation.” And, you know, no, not necessarily. You could have beautiful movement that is not specific to the character, not specific to the moment, [that] doesn’t reflect the character’s sex or age, or where they’re coming from, or where they’re going to.

When you go to acting class, they teach you that you’re not starting a scene at zero, you’re coming from somewhere and you’re going to somewhere. There’s something that you did, your character did, ten minutes prior that is going to affect how they come into the room. And animators are not used to thinking that way—a lot of them aren’t. At Pixar, I feel like I was pre-sold on the place because I love their stuff, but [also] they are thinking more in depth. Like: take a shot of the audience right now. Everybody here is facing forward, they’re all sitting down, they’re all here watching us. But everyone is sitting in a slightly different way. This woman right here’s got her little

shawl pulled up, she looks very comfortable, she’s sinking down lower. (Laughter) The only thing missing is maybe a cup of cocoa. (Laughter) But the guy next to her is kind of up here and, “Yeah, prove it to me that you deserve to be on that stage.” You know? And the girl sitting next to him is kind of leaning forward, kind of leaning toward him a little bit, kind of taking it all in. And every single—if you took a great high-resolution snapshot of this audience, everyone is sitting in a unique way. They’re sitting in a way that reflects who they are and where they’re coming from and where they’re going to. I think that that is really the home of animation—of character animation, anyway—and the thing that’s neglected the most. Because if you do pretty movement, people will think that it’s good animation. And, man, it is not! It’s about acting, man, and it’s about performance and individuality.

We tried to make every single character in this movie move differently. Syndrome has these kind of flashy, aggressive gestures when he gets full of himself. When he’s a kid, it’s a little more like a pup. But it’s the same guy, moved up the scale. Edna’s movements are very confident. She’s never experienced doubt in her life. Bob feels like an athletic guy gone to seed. There’s a certain physicality to the way they hold themselves. Helen’s got these buttery movements that suggest that she could fit into any situation. I just feel like that is the home of—that’s what makes the old Disney stuff so great; that’s what made [Chuck] Jones’s films great. And it’s missing, I think, in a lot of animation.

GOODMAN: So, in a way, while the technology may have changed, actually, and since there’s a return back—your film is a return back—to films also when characters were truly in peril, people actually died... And also, they are classics, because I think a film like *The Incredibles* can be viewed in 25 years.

BIRD: That’s the goal. The funny thing is that people constantly—when you get talking about CG, they always want to talk about the technology. And that is not the reason I came to Pixar; the technology was a bonus. I came there because they were interested in characters and stories. Original characters and original stories.

You feel like this issue comes up during awards season because people don't want to consider an animated film a film, they want to consider it an animated film. While it's wonderful to be nominated for any award and to win any award, there's sort of a marginalization of it. It's kind of like winning "Best Black Actor." On one hand, there are a lot of good black actors, so it's an honor. You're the best of the black actors, for that year or that performance. But at the same time, you'd really rather just be considered an actor. Or "Best Old Actor." You know what I mean?

GOODMAN: The hope with this film—I'm not allowed to personally stake a position, but the idea that it would be considered among... As it is on all the Top Ten lists and so on, and did fairly well at the box office, it is conceivable that this will be nominated for Best Picture [at the Oscars], and I think it certainly deserves it.

BIRD: Right, and again, I'd be honored to be nominated for Best Animated Film, too.

GOODMAN: Well, that's in the bag. (Laughter) [Note: *The Incredibles* earned four Oscar nominations (not including Best Picture), and won two, including Best Animated Feature.]

BIRD: It's just that you kind of want it to just be considered a film, though, because I feel like the job of creating characters that, hopefully, the audience cares about and telling a story is [sic] the same job. The animation part of it is kind of a

technicality. These films aren't made by a computer, they're made by humans that are fighting the computer. (Applause)

GOODMAN: "Guns do not kill people..." (Bird laughs)

BIRD: Yeah. (Laughs) There's definitely a CG contingent in the audience. It's funny to watch the film, because if you watch the film, you can always find the CG guys in the audience, because when he [Mr. Incredible] moves his hand through the fabric, two people in the theater will go, "Oooh!" (Laughter) Everyone else will just be going, "Ah, he's got his hand in some fabric."

GOODMAN: The hair behind the ears...

BIRD: Yeah, right. "Ohhh!" CG guys, you're outed!

GOODMAN: Outed. Well, we wish you the best of luck going forward with this project.

BIRD: Well, thank you.

GOODMAN: And I thank you for taking time from your schedule to be here.

BIRD: Oh, it's a pleasure to be here. It's a great, great museum. I'm going to join! (Applause)

GOODMAN: Check's in the mail... (Applause)

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