

Alain Fournier, 1943–2000: An Appreciation

There are thinkers of great repute and intellect who suggest that any objective measure of humankind is in fact a mismeasure. While I am not in the mood to argue the general point either way, it certainly applies to Alain Fournier. I write this appreciation so that those who do not know him may be inspired to learn more about him, and those who do know him are able to reflect further on his remarkable life. I beg the reader to indulge me in a rather personal reverie, for it is not possible to have known Alain without having a deep personal response to him.

Allow me to recount very briefly Alain's accomplishments. His early training was in chemistry. After emigrating from France to Canada in the 1970's, he co-wrote a textbook on chemistry, and taught the subject in Quebec. His career in computer graphics spanned only about 20 years. He received a Ph.D. in computer science from the University of Texas at Dallas, and with Don Fussell and Loren Carpenter reported the results of his Ph.D. work on stochastic modeling in a seminal paper in 1980. He then went on to an outstanding academic career, first at the University of Toronto and subsequently at the University of British Columbia. From the outset, he played on the international stage, especially in Europe and in North America. He has contributed to ACM-TOG as an author, as co-guest editor of a special issue (1987), and, from 1990 to 1992, as an associate editor.

Alain's early contributions to computer graphics on the modeling of natural phenomena were brilliant in themselves; but perhaps more importantly they advocated a methodology that required validation against real visual phenomena. This set the bar at the right level scientifically. His approach, which he once called "impressionistic graphics," both revolutionized the field and drove it forward. Perhaps the best example is his beautiful paper (with Bill Reeves) on the depiction of ocean waves. His subsequent work on illumination models, light transport, rendering, and sampling and filtering is remarkable for its far-sightedness and depth. His theoretical work in computer graphics and computational geometry made us think about the limits of both fields.

Alain's approach to solving problems was at once courageous and rational. Were he to ask himself (as I'm sure he did) for a response to T.S. Eliot's musing,

"Do I dare
Disturb the universe?"¹

¹The quotations from T.S. Eliot are taken from his poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

I'm sure the answer would be his inimitable "Piece of cake! OK kiddos, here's what we'll do." And he would rush forward, leaving us to linger happily in his slipstream. Endlessly resourceful and tirelessly innovative, he would mold ideas of amazing insight into work that also inspired others, often much later, to take up the challenge.

If C.P. Snow were ever in need of a prototypical person to bridge the "two cultures" of science and art, Alain would be it. He was blessed with irrepressible enthusiasm to communicate his understanding and curiosity about the universe, and he did so in whatever language was most appropriate. He wrote wonderful mathematics, algorithms, prose, and poetry. His vocabulary in English and French was gently intimidating; but even when intimidating, he was benevolent. It seemed that his intellect was able to synthesize everything he ever learned. He would routinely interject a Latin *bon mot* into the papers we were writing or practice writing Kanji on the napkins on which we were doing research. We rarely did research in an office. How I miss those days!

His art served him as innately and intuitively as his science. He wrote exquisite poetry that was both challenging and tender. I hope that one day his work will be more available to the general public and his accomplishments be formally recognized by the wider computer graphics community.

Alain's wit, his innate *jeu d'esprit* was legend. His fondness for good jokes, especially Groucho Marx gags, allowed some but not all of us to overlook his weakness for Jerry Lewis.

There are few who are blessed with a wider array of talents, and fewer still with more to say and contribute than Alain. He had a sensibility that is common to scientists and artists who have done many great things in their lives: apart from a lovely retrospective paper for *Graphics Interface* in 1994, he did not look back on his work. He was rooted in the present, and suffered from the belief that he was only as good as his last project. In the end, he may well have believed in Eliot's sentiment:

"I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
I do not think that they will sing to me."²

Oh, but they have always sung to you, Alain. It was just that the melody was lost amid the clamor of disease.

Alain did not separate the personal from the professional. His passions required no qualifying adjective. He loved those close to him with an abandon and devotion that was disarming and humbling. Anyone who knew him was aware that he was extraordinarily close to his wife and daughter. They were his greatest joys, his most provocative muses. They were the foundation upon which he built his life.

Leonard Cohen, among others, said that you can't let the facts get in the way of the truth. The facts are that Alain Fournier, a great innovator in our field, died of lymphoma in the early hours of 14 August, 2000, and is survived by his daughter Ariel, his wife Adrienne, and a legion of admirers.

²*ibid.*

The truth is that the sun seems to shine less brightly now that he is not among us. The truth is that he has broadened the minds and moved the hearts of many people around the world. To those who have never known Alain, I express particular sympathy—for there are few people we encounter in life who make us better than we thought we could be. Such, in truth and in fact, is the measure of this man.

It was difficult not to love Alain—he was such a beguiling bundle of brilliance and benevolent eccentricity that it was simply a matter of time and a question of degree. A unique and wonderful person has left us.

Requiescat in pace, my friend.

EUGENE FIUME

November 2000