

Graduation 2012

Oration for Honorary Graduate Kwok Yue Ellen Poon

Orator: Professor Martin Henson

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Kwok Yue Ellen Poon.

Ellen Poon is a world renowned expert in both the creative and technical fields of visual effects and animation – and has been for the last 25 years. During this time she has collaborated with many acclaimed and award winning directors such as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Tim Burton, Woody Allen and Christopher Nolan.

It gives me great personal pleasure to be delivering this oration today. In my early years as an academic here at the University of Essex, I had the great pleasure of teaching Ellen Poon. The course I gave that year was compulsory for all our students. It was very mathematical and it was deemed to be good for them. But for most students it was rather like taking cod liver oil and they suffered it, barely in silence. Ellen not only enjoyed the course, she did outstandingly well, and after graduating, went on to study towards a PhD in the same topic at University College London. Later, with colleagues there, she published a textbook on the subject.

What happened next in the development of Ellen's career is I think an object lesson in capitalizing on talent, enthusiasm and intellectual preparedness – and then grasping serendipitous opportunities with an entrepreneurial spirit.

In her spare time as a PhD student, and through the friends she was making in London, Ellen began to study Computer Graphics – an emerging field of computer science that was still somewhat in its infancy. Through this work Ellen was asked to join the Moving Picture Company, the premier post-production facility in Europe, to be their Senior Technical Director and Animator. She earned a reputation for being artistic and innovative, creating some of the most memorable advertising campaigns – and she won many international awards. After three such awards in the late 1980s, she won the Worldwide Alias Power Design Competition award in 1991 for a government information advert that those of us here who are old enough to remember the 1991 UK census will certainly recall. The concept was to make a three-month old baby appear to talk as naturally as possible. In the remarkable final version that was televised, the baby appears to be asking itself questions such as: "Where will I live?", "What will I do for a living", "Who will I marry?" and "Will I have children" with perfect synchronization between the animated mouth and the text, and between the animated mouth and the film image of the real baby – it was a stunning technical achievement. The campaign was a huge success and received national attention. As a result, Ellen appeared on the BBC's Tomorrow's World program and on the front page on the Times newspaper.

Ellen, as a huge film buff, must have been overwhelmed to be asked to join George Lucas' company, Industrial Light and Magic, the film industry's most prestigious production house for high-quality cutting -edge visual effects and animation in Hollywood. Ellen worked there for 11 years and was the only female ever to be made Visual Effects Director at that company. Ellen's computer-generated realization of the miracles in "The Green Mile", the creatures in "Star Wars Episode 1" and the dinosaurs in "Jurassic Park" are just some of her many on-screen accomplishments while working with Lucas.

Other notable film achievements have been “Hook” for Steven Spielberg, “Jumanji” for Joe Johnston, “Mars Attacks!” for Tim Burton, and “Celebrity”, for Woody Allen.

Ellen however developed a passion for Chinese film projects whilst living in Hollywood. This began when she was asked to be a consultant working closely with the director Andrew Lau. But her real involvement came when she worked with the Mainland Chinese Director Zhang Yimou on “Hero”. She later continued her collaboration with other Chinese directors with projects such as “True Legend” and “Warrior and the Wolf”. More recently she supervised the famous Chinese fable “The Monkey King” in Beijing. The film “Hero” won her the Best Visual Effects at the 2003 Hong Kong Film Awards.

Ellen also worked at Dreamworks animation and focused on two fully computer-generated films that are extremely well known and regarded: “Shrek2” and “Madagascar”. She then entered the interactive gaming industry as a Senior Director of Art Production for Electronic Arts, the biggest game company in the world. The computer game “Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2007” became the best selling title in the franchise history up until that time in large part due to its amazing visual effects.

Ellen continued her ground breaking work in films during 2010 when she joined the production team for “Inception”, directed by Christopher Nolan. The film won critical acclaim the design and execution of its spectacular visual effects. It became the year’s summer blockbuster and subsequently won the Academy award for best Visual Effects in 2011.

Ellen started her own company Lancet Films in 2007 and is now an independent producer and visual effects supervisor based in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Hong Kong, focusing on feature films and interesting media projects.

Friends and working colleagues have enormous respect and admiration for Ellen’s work. It is important to recognize that before she entered the scene, special effects and visual animations in films were based largely on the animation of models. Her contribution has been much more than to refine existing techniques, but rather to help introduce a new paradigm based on computer generated images. She is known for bringing to her projects a unique combination of inspiration, meticulous technical expertise that is enhanced by a refined creative aesthetic.

Chancellor, I present to you Kwok Yue Ellen Poon.