Animation: How It Has Moved On From Being Goofy

Andrew Connor
PhD Creative Music Practice
University of Edinburgh

Abstract

Animation, often regarded as a little brother to mainstream cinema, actually has a much longer history – possibly from as long ago as 50BC depending on your interpretation of *De Rerum Natura*. Certainly a primitive form of the Zoetrope was in existence in China in 180AD.

And yet animation has failed to capitalise on its history, and has been upstaged over the past century by live-action film. For years, it had an image problem – the funnies, the Disney cartoon, simple Sunday morning telly. Disney epitomised the ghettoisation of animation as a harmless time-waster, insisting on strong characters, adherence to a narrative, the rule of physical laws. Even the Warner Brothers, though more anarchic, remained in the cartoon ghetto.

But animation has had a resurgence. While still aimed primarily at children, works by Pixar and Aardman combine light comedy with more subtle adult humour, and real subversion in parts. And in mainstream films, blockbusters such as *The Lord of the Rings* rely heavily on CGI animation to realise their own intricate worlds.

Animation has a direct relevance to the music made by many of us – the freedom to use random sounds, challenging compositions of soundscape, effects and the odd Wilhelm scream. It can be realistic, conforming to physical laws much as our soundscapes portray the real world – or it can be amazingly abstract and intricate, matching acousmatic, spectromorphological explorations of sound. The two are natural bedfellows, exuberant in their chameleon qualities and their freedom to express whatever the artist desires.

Audiovisual composers should be aware of the proud heritage of the animated image, and explore past innovations which can be exploited in our creations of the future. This paper will address the development of animation, linking it with electroacoustic music to inspire further work in this cross-disciplinary field.

Introduction

My current research focuses on the fusion of electroacoustic compositions and abstract animation to create an immersive audiovisual experience. My initial work in this field concentrated on the work of Pierre Schaeffer, his ideas concerning the sound object and other aspects of electroacoustic theory and practice, and the later work by Emmerson, Smalley and others which expanded the theoretical field much further.

Following on from this initial research, I decided to also look at it from the visual point of view, that of the abstract animator, to see how animation philosophy and theories can be applied and compared to electroacoustic music theories. There is much less material in this area, unless one expands the remit from animation to general theories of film-making. The key reference text on animation and the theories surrounding it is Paul Wells' *Understanding Animation*.[i] While I have made use of this as a starting point, I have also examined important animations from the start of film-making through to more recent times to gain a better understanding of developments in the field.

While I have titled this paper to indicate that animation has been regarded as 'goofy' in the past, that could be slightly misleading. Animation has often been relegated to a minor role in film-making, cartoons are usually regarded as being aimed primarily at children and should not be taken seriously. My intention is to show that animation is a serious artform, and was conceived as such from its early beginnings. In fact, we should regard the attribution of animation as 'being just for kids' as an offshoot of Disney's influence in the field.

There have always been people making more 'grown-up' animation, from the experimental works of Fischinger, Richter, Eggeling, Belson, through to the more anarchic approach of the Warner Brothers, the innovative series such as the Simpsons and Family Guy, and the adult oriented anime from Japan.

But 'goofiness', that relegation of cartoons as the Sunday morning 'funnies' has left a legacy of animation as somehow not being a serious artform. It has as much a claim to that right as any film-based format, and in many ways it can be seen as a perfect foil for electroacoustic music.

Early References to 'Animation'

How long ago was animation invented? There is in fact a reference in Lucretius's work *De Rerum Natura* that could be taken as the earliest reference to the basics of animation -

"For, as one image dies, another is born,
in another position, and so we think there is movement;
Of course all this happens at incredible speed."[ii]

Lucretius' lines could almost be taken as a reference to persistence of vision, the succession of 'frames' that allow us to fool the eye into thinking that moving images reflect a version of reality.

In more practical terms, there are descriptions from China from around 158AD which refer to a pipe that produces dreams, which was probably an early form of zoetrope or magic lantern – a device which is often pointed to as a precursor of today's animated film.

"This was called *chao hua chih kuan* (the pipe which makes fantasies appear). Rising currents of hot air were evidently used by Ting Huan (c. 180 AD) who made a 'nine storied hill-censer' on which many strange birds and mysterious animals were attached. All these wonderful creatures moved quite naturally, presumably as soon as the lamp was lit."[iii]

However, going back to Roman and early Chinese history for evidence of animation would be comparable to equating the start of electroacoustic music with lithophones. A more appropriate point to start comparing animation with electroacoustic composition would be from Schaeffer's original work - the development of the record-player and, more importantly, recording onto tape, allowing the processing and manipulation of sound and the start of electroacoustic composition. This can be compared to the early days of moving images, the period we would consider the start of cinematic animation, which goes hand-in-hand with the development of cinematography. In fact, the earliest cinematographic films made use of many animation techniques, especially using 'special effects' for live-action films, which are in essence the techniques used for stop-motion animation, and which lie behind a lot of visual special effects even today.

One of the earliest examples is the short film *The Haunted Hotel*[iv], released in 1907. It proved an instant hit, and stayed 'up there in the charts' for over a year, leading to many other film producers trying to exploit animation techniques to achieve the same success.

The Haunted Hotel was an American creation, directed by James Stuart Blackton and released in March 1907. There is a popular myth that this was the first 'animated' film. This is not true - Blackton himself had directed several others in the previous seven or eight years. But this film, and particularly when it was released in Paris, resulted in a massive public reaction. The public were fascinated by the sequences where objects moved and interacted without human interference, and it sparked a reaction amongst French film producers to learn and reproduce the tricks shown on screen.

Supposedly, the secrets of animation were carefully guarded. That is, of course, ridiculous. Anyone working in the film industry rapidly became familiar with jump cuts, where objects would appear completely in the 'wrong' place, if continuity was lacking during the filming. But animation made use of these 'errors' in a way that enthralled and intrigued the audience.

'Live-action' Animation

As the film industry developed in the 1910s and 1920s, those making short films needed inspiration for their work. They specifically needed narratives that were short enough to film, but which could be guaranteed to hook the audience.

They looked around, and found that there was already a narrative, visually

based genre that filled these requirements, and which had already established itself with the general public – the comic strip.

Strangely, however, the initial adaptations of the comic strip were not drawn animation, as you might have expected from our viewpoint 100 years later. In fact, the first screen versions were live-action, although often with the animated special effects that were used in *The Haunted Hotel*.

Why was this? Maybe it's because it was a lot simpler and cheaper to shoot some live action, stop, move a few objects, and start again, than to physically draw the 3,500 odd frames you'd need for a 5 minute short.

It might have been the involvement of some graphic artists into the film animation industry, those who had been working on 'lightning sketches' that led to drawn animation, or possibly the interest shown by a leading comic strip artist of the time – Winsor McCay and his *Little Nemo in Slumberland* strip.

In 1911, McCay released a 10.5 minute film, now known as *Little Nemo*[v]. In the earlier part of the film, McCay is shown being ridiculed by his cronies for proposing the idea that his comic strip creations could be animated – after various sequences showing the artist at work in his workshop, we finish up at a sequence, starting at approximately 8'20", showing his famous characters being brought to life. Note that the film dates from 1911, and some of the characterisations here suffer from attitudes to race at the time.

This film was again, well-received.

Given the popularity of Little Nemo in print it had an immediate appeal to the public.

Is this perhaps why animation started to be seen as a children's ghetto? Probably not, as the comic strips at this time were universally popular, and weren't necessarily regarded as only for children. But it may have been a step on the way.

The recurring character

Having hooked the audience with the short film with recognisable characters, the producers saw the benefit in making the next step – a series of short films starring the same character or characters.

As the audience already know what to expect from the character, there is no need to set up any back story. They can just settle in and enjoy the story as it is.

Some of the first characters established in this way were *Ko-Ko the Clown*, who appeared *Out of the Inkwell* in cartoons by the Fleischer Brothers, *Colonel Heeza Liar* by Walter Lantz, later the creator of *Woody Woodpecker*, and the popular *Felix the Cat* – created by Otto Messmer for Pat Sullivan's studios.

Particularly with Ko-ko and Felix, there was an interest in how to manipulate the drawn medium. Ko-ko would draw an object for his own use, while Felix would both draw objects but also use parts of his own body to affect the scenery around him.

Felix made his first official appearance in *The Adventures of Felix* in 1919, although precursors to this very

recognisable black and white cat had appeared in some earlier productions.

While Felix showed some of the expected preoccupations of a cat – often attempting to acquire fish from a local shop, for example – he was anthropomorphised, in the rapidly established fashion of the time. His preoccupied pacing up and down, hands linked behind his back, as he pondered a new scheme became an instant trademark of the character. His world was a surreal development of our own. While children played ball in the street, and shop-owners threw Felix out when he tried to sneak in and steal food from their shops, the laws of physics were often played with for comic and narrative effect. Felix's tail, in particular, would often be detached and changed into whatever item was necessary at the time – an umbrella, a shovel, this world was malleable, flexible and enticing.

Over the course of the next 10 years, Felix would create a ladder out of question marks that appeared over his head as he pondered how to access an attic jail cell (*Felix Saves The Day*, 1922); detach his tail and use it as a walking cane in a Charlie Chaplin impersonation (*Felix in Hollywood*, 1923); and use question marks again to create sledge runners (*Felix Gets The Gun*, 1924).

By 1927, Felix was very well established, and his surreal interactions with his surroundings were still ongoing. In *Pedigreedy*, released in this year, he pulls on his skin like trousers, and when he can't find his tail, a question mark pops up over his head, which he then pulls down to attach to himself as his tail.[vi]

Felix had a great following, and in those immortal words – he could've been a contender. Felix had a loyal following, and *Mickey Mouse* still had to make his début in 1928. But for some reason, Pat Sullivan, though just as ambitious as Disney, would not be convinced that sound was important, or that he needed to invest in new film equipment, and Sullivan's contract for Educational Films was not renewed after the 1928-29 season, leaving Felix out in the cold.

The Domination of Disney

Walt Disney dominated the cartoon world (in the West, at least) from the 1930s onwards. His method of production took him away from front-line animation, but he remained determined to retain the artistic control he had when working as a solitary auteur.

He knew the importance of the 'name above the door'. Who now knows that Steamboat Willie was mainly the work of Disney's early partner Ub Iwerks? Disney's name was upfront, and that fuelled his success.

Disney was a key character in the development of animation and the ongoing promotion of the artform. His cartoons were popular and provided employment for the burgeoning ranks of young aspiring animators.

But his sweatshop model came to dominate the industry methods – even though the Warner Brothers and others carried on with a more anarchic approach to their animation on screen, they had to adopt the sweatshop model in order to compete with Disney.

In Europe and Asia, the vicissitudes of

the Second World War disrupted their burgeoning film industries, and animators were still working mainly as auteurs. Famously, the German animator Oskar Fischinger fled Nazi Germany and went to work for Disney on *Fantasia*, only to quit due to creative differences. Credit must go to Disney for creating *Fantasia*, and for recognising the talents of gifted animators like Fischinger, but his insistence on microscopic control kept that talent in a straitjacket. Audience reaction to *Fantasia* was mixed – some thought it was too 'high-brow', and it failed to make a profit. But who knows if it might have been more accessible, not less, if animators such as Fischinger had been given a freer hand.

The Bach Toccatta and Fugue in D minor section from *Fantasia*[vii] shows a glimpse of Fischinger's style, with clear correlations to his own animations. Those of you familiar with Fischinger's work will see his influence – sadly, his original concepts were adapted after his departure from the project, and given to other animators who were more amenable to Disney's methods, so this is only a small hint at what could have been.

Alternatives to Disney?

The Warner Brothers set up shop at around the same time as Disney, and continued with the more anarchic animation seen in Felix and his contemporaries. However, in order to compete, they also adopted the sweatshop model, which again limited the creativity and expressiveness of their animators.

UPA was an offshoot of disaffected animators who wanted to create more experimental and idiosyncratic work. In some cases, such as *Gerald McBoing-Boing: Jolly Frolics*[viii] (1950), the results were very well received, but others were much less successful.

Plowing their own path as auteurs against the current were the Whitney Brothers, Jordan Belson and their successors such as Bill Alves in the States. In Europe, we had Jan Svankmajer and the Quay Brothers flying the flag for experimental animation

In Japan, anime rose out of the aftermath of the collapse of their studios at the end of the war, mirroring the early inspiration of US animation from comic strips, in this case from manga. Studio Ghibli was particularly successful, and does allow fantastical transformations to take place in its films, although to me, it often feels as if it's halfway between the Disney 'orthodox' standard and a more free flowing experimental style. Interestingly, Walt Disney Studios has international distribution rights to much of Studio Ghbli's earlier output.

Animation and its correspondences to Electroacoustic Music

So why are we looking at the history of animation, and why are we comparing the auteur experimental animator to the workshop orthodox model established by Disney?
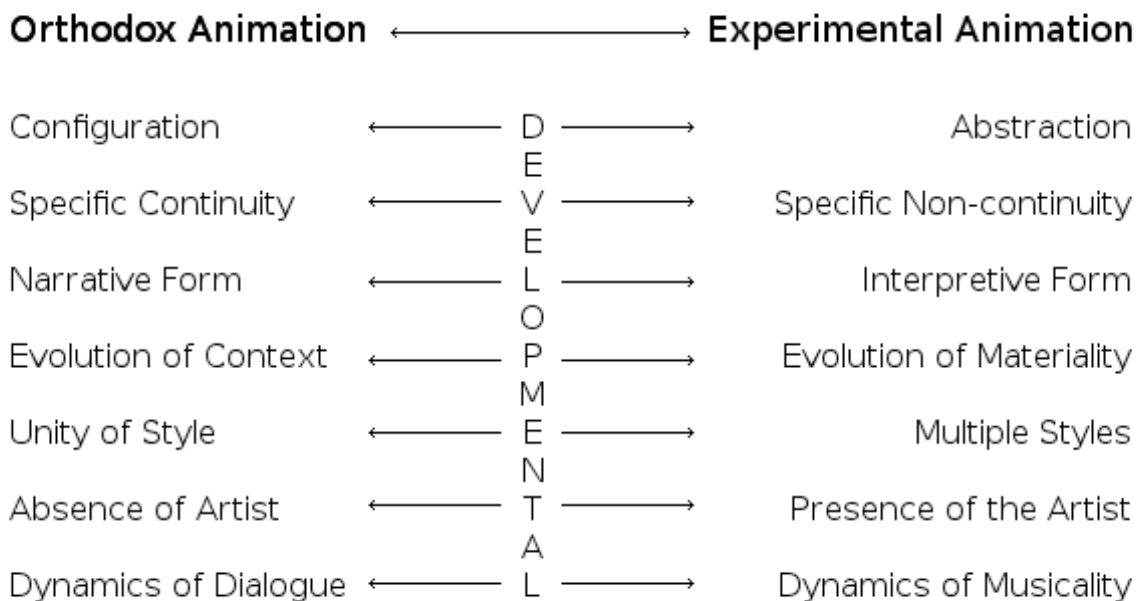
There are parallels to the composition of electroacoustic music. Like animation, electroacoustic music has been made possible because of technological advances. And like animation, electroacoustic music is

perceived as a specialist genre with limited appeal.

The animator has complete control over the visual environment. They can choose where any object appears on screen – how long its appearance lasts – what movements it carries out – what colours are featured – what interactions there are between foreground and background elements. This is far more control over the visual environment than other film genres, such as documentaries, and mirrors the full control we have as composers in this area.

have composers who prefer to work in soundscape, in acousmatic, or who combine tape music with live instruments.

By orthodox animation, Wells is referring to the sweatshop model, epitomised by Disney. In many ways, this attempts to replicate live-action, even if there are elements that can only happen in animation (even if we're considering 'live-action' films such as *Lord of the Rings*, the fantastical elements are mainly achieved through CGI animation). Even if we're looking at *Daffy Duck on Mars,* at heart natural physics are still observed, if exaggerated, and the

Orthodox Animation ⟷ Experimental Animation

Orthodox Animation		Experimental Animation
Configuration	⟵ D ⟶	Abstraction
Specific Continuity	⟵ V ⟶	Specific Non-continuity
Narrative Form	⟵ L ⟶	Interpretive Form
Evolution of Context	⟵ P ⟶	Evolution of Materiality
Unity of Style	⟵ E ⟶	Multiple Styles
Absence of Artist	⟵ T ⟶	Presence of the Artist
Dynamics of Dialogue	⟵ L ⟶	Dynamics of Musicality

(The letters down the central column spell DEVELOPMENTAL)

Reproduced from Wells, 1998.

Having said that, animation has its own categories contained within it, such as the special effects used in live action films – stop motion animation – hand-drawn cel animation – CGI 3D animation. This can be compared to electroacoustic composition, where we

animation is driven by dialogue and narrative.

In experimental animation, narrative is not important – it can be there, but may not be the driving factor. Often dialogue is unnecessary. Rather than subsuming the artist into the

homogeneity of the studio, the vision of the animator is the driving force.

If we compare this to the approaches taken by the electroacoustic composer, we can see several parallels. Both are time-based but have to consider the 'space' being created within the piece. While abstraction may be thought of as being inimical to musique concrète, in this case it refers more to the freedom to regard any element as valid in importance to the work – just as the electroacoustic composer is not restricted to notes and instruments, the experimental animator is not restricted to characters and narrative, although they can make use of these if they want to.

I find Wells' definition of experimental animation as having the dynamics of musicality rather than dialogue interesting – an acknowledgement by a leading voice in the field that in many experimental animations there is a feeling of a composition, an underlying musicality that drives the piece rather than the narrative dialogue we are familiar with from live action films.

The correlations need to be explored further – how would soundscapes as opposed to acousmatic music match against an animation schema such as this? But this still offers an intriguing crossover between the art forms

Audiovisual Composition – putting the two together

William Moritz, Oskar Fischinger's biographer, regarded 'true' animation as being only that which was non-linear and/or non-objective i.e. lacking discernible characters or a driving narrative.[ix]

While I would contend that his definition is a little restrictive, I would put forward his ideal that the creativity and skills needed for this type of experimental animation are demanding, and in many ways mirror the skills and creativity demanded of the electroacoustic composer. As with electroacoustic composition, the animator has to find the right combination of elements from an infinity of possibilities to add to that starting blank canvas – as with an electroacoustic composer, the animator has to marry their creativity with hard-earned skills.

Moving on to the very relevant field of film sound design, the Hollywood sound designer Randy Thom has been responsible for many outstanding sound tracks, especially in the field of animation (*The Incredibles*, *How to Train Your Dragon*). He takes the view that sound and vision have to be considered in partnership in order to breathe life and vitality into the cinematic experience. Film-making is a collaborative process, where the sound is at least as important as the vision. He has called for the sound designer to be involved at a much earlier stage, and to be viewed as equally important as the director of photography.

"I mean new creative ideas, storytelling ideas. New ways to collaborate, new ways to make visual and aural information enrich each other and become indistinguishable as an experience.

"Sound is NOT there to "help the visuals." That's kindergarten film making. Anyone who says that "film is

a visual medium" is being foolish and naive. Sound, when given half a chance, is no less important to the audience's experience than the pictures."[x]

This mirrors my own opinion of audiovisual work – it should fuse, it should be an encompassing experience where sound and vision intertwine inextricably. Whether creating your own work, or working with a collaborator, this is the ideal towards which we should all be striving.

Opportunities abound

This is a great time to be working in this field.

We have incredible access to technology allowing the auteur to create and self-publish. Internet sites such as Youtube and Vimeo offer rich sources of images, inspiration and maybe even potential collaborators.

For the electroacoustic composer who is still developing film-making or animation skills, there are many films online which you can use as a visual inspiration, creating your own soundtrack interpretation to accompany the visuals. And the animator who wants to learn more about sound can take experimental music from Soundcloud, and experiment with a variety of animation styles to create their own 'music video'. And with the opportunities for global contact now, if someone's work proves particularly inspiring, it is now incredibly easy to contact them to discuss potential collaboration, no matter which country they happen to live in.

In addition to the universality of the internet, there are now very accessible, freeware software packages which allow everyone to learn how to animate, edit sound, edit and assemble video. Cross-fertilisation of the disciplines, whether through experimentation on your own, or in collaboration with others is the way of the future.

Bibliography

All Classic Video, 2012. *Gerald McBoing-Boing: Jolly Frolics (1950) – Classic Short Film.* [video online] Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rDCwg0Xcji4> [Accessed 27 September 2013]

Moritz, W., 1988 Some Observations on Non-Objective and Non-linear Animation. In J Canemaker, ed. 1998 *Storytelling in Animation: The Art of the Animated Image Vol. 2*; Los Angeles: AFI. Ch. 2.

Lucretius Carus, Titus (c.99 – c.55BC), 1992. *On the Nature of Things (De Rerum Natura)* Translated by W.H.A. Rouse. London: Harvard University Press.

Needham, J., 1962. *Science and Civilisation in China.* Vol. IV:1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Praytaa, 2010. *La Maison Ensorcelée (1907, Segundo de Chomòn).* [video online] Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqvtRPFnEMo> [Accessed 27 September 2013].

Thereisonly0neNM, 2011. *Fantasia {The Abstract Part}.* [video online] Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zt9iy5THnbk> [Accessed 27 September 2013].

FilmSound.org, 2009. *What is the basic philosophy of sound design?* [online] Available at <http://www.filmsound.org/QA/sound-design-philosophy.htm> [Accessed 27 September 2013].

Tvdays, 2008. *Felix the Cat Pedigreedy.* [video online] Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjjMuqvy7yw> [Accessed 27 September 2013].

Wangjacup, 2006. *Winsor McCay – 1911 – Little Nemo.* [video online] Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcSp2ej2S00> [Accessed 27 September 2013].

Wells, P., 1998. *Understanding Animation*. London: Routledge.

Notes

1   Wells, 1998.
2   Lucretius, 1992.
3   Needham, 1962 p. 123.
4   Praytaa, 2010.
5   Wangjacup, 2006.
6   Tvdays, 2008.
7   Thereisonly0neNM, 2011.
8   All Classic Video, 2012.
9   Moritz, 1988.
10   FilmSound.org, 2009.