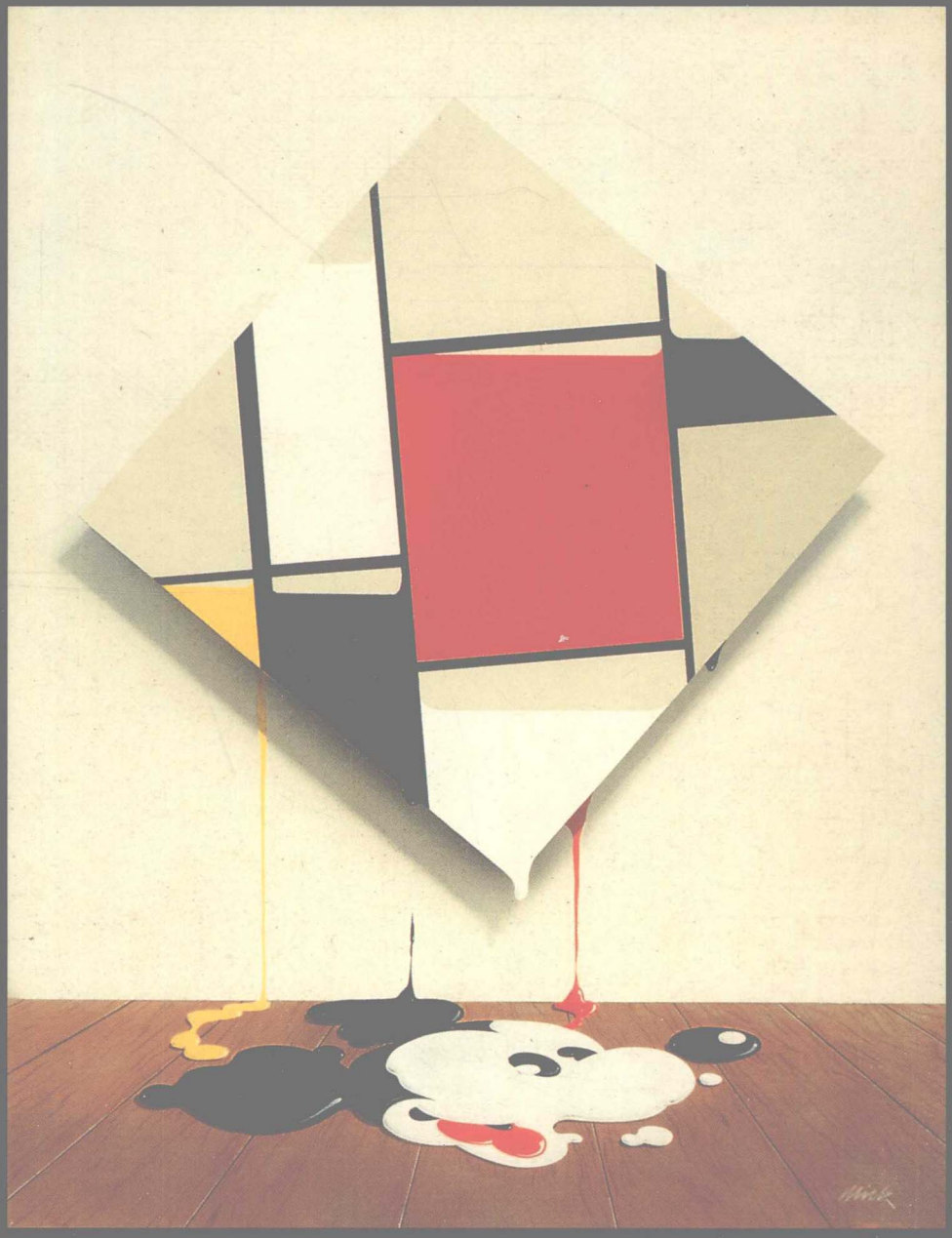
Cartoons

Giannalberto Bendazzi

Cartoons One hundred years of cinema animation



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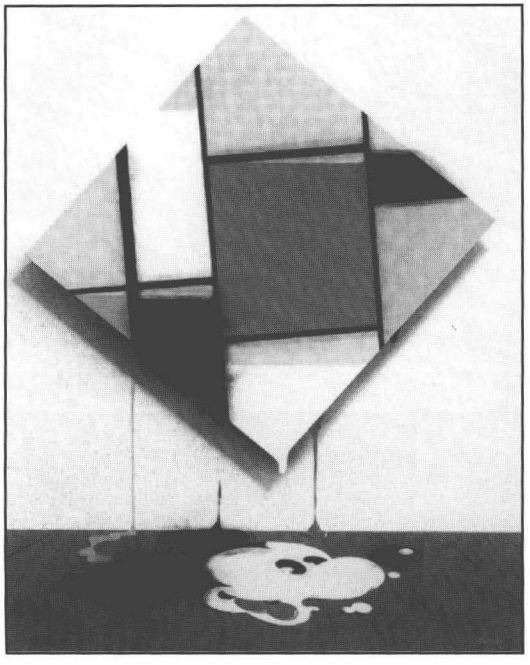
years of cinema animation

by

Giannalberto Bendazzi



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Translated by Anna Taraboletti-Segre

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One hundred

Foreword

A little over one hundred years separate the first animated shows (Pantomimes lumineuses, Paris, 1892) from the date of publishing this book. In the meantime, animation has become an imposing trade, a job for hundreds of thousands of people, a ubiquitous art. Its development underwent cycles and changes, often influenced by major historical events. Such an event is the recent fall of the Soviet system, which re-drew the world map, politically as well as economically. For animation a whole marketplace disappeared, studios were shut, jobs, careers, schools, styles ended. In addition to these dramatic changes, another revolution came, centered on the media. The markets were 'globalized' in a very short time, and the trend is currently developing. As a result of cable and satellite television, the programmes were exported, as beforehand, but private producers – as well as those nations with existing power to do so - were able to conceive, produce and distribute on an international scale. The IDATE report, commissioned by Media 95's CARTOON programme in 1992, showed that from 1989 to 1992 animated programmes in the Western European televisions had had a growth of 15 per cent a year: an unforeseen challenge, after many years of stagnation.

The history of animation is thus entering a completely new stage, and it will be years before it will be possible to describe its real shape and analyse its events. This means that the first century of animation's life is a completed era, which we can and should analyse like all things belonging to the past, even though many of its men and women are alive and active at the time of writing. Besides, studies on animation are rather young. The first serious historical works go back no more than twenty years. They have had to face a large number of misunderstandings which still endure among many filmgoers, critics, historians of live action cinema. Yet it must be reiterated here that animation cinema is not necessarily for children, is not always comic, and has only a faint relationship with printed comic strips (with the exception of the first twenty years of this century in the United States of America). Unfortunately, the historical and critical literature on animation is comparatively one of the most scanty in the field of cinema The following chapters aim to demonstrate that, on the contrary, animation deserves to be studied and that this rich, eclectic field includes some of the most valuable works of our time.

Why is there such a chasm between the richness of creative minds on one side and the lack of a receptive audience on the other? It may rightly be argued that animation would be more popular if the mechanisms of film distribution were different. Equipped with a most concise instrument, animators release primarily short films, while the theatrical market favours feature films over all other forms. Thus, animation makes rare appearances in movie theatres, except in its most commercial and therefore aesthetically-lesser forms (animated feature films are rarely major artistic achievements). True, there is television, however this irreparably distorts the formal values of works made for the big screen. The television market, moreover, does not provide the

economic conditions necessary to encourage a careful creative process. Animated television series are most appropriately discussed within a framework of the history and theory of television, and are, therefore, almost entirely excluded from this work.

Under these circumstances, it is quite understandable that animation has taken a course parallel to, but not the same as, that of mainstream cinema and has a history of its own. The fashionable currents and trends of live action cinema (which are also its most visible and imposing aspects) have little influence on animators who have chosen to develop instead, their own trends and movements.

The last step in this process of isolation is the cultural ghetto into which the men and women who work in the field have segregated themselves, and which has acquired world-wide proportions, especially over the last thirty years. From within, animators attend specialized festivals to show their works, view those of their peers and discuss topics which are familiar to a few, while outsiders remain uninformed.

The critic is therefore forced to make much use of footnotes, explanatory paragraphs and outlines of methodology.

Some of the most active followers of animation cinema believed in its aesthetic autonomy and proclaimed it 'an art in its own right' (with the ironic result that someone nicknamed it 'Seventh art-bis', after the cinema).

Linguistically, technically, stylistically, animation as an expressive form is indeed autonomous, and there is no need of examples to prove it. For a long time, filming technique was considered the discriminating element on the basis that in live action cinema, actions are filmed exactly as they take place, at twenty-four frames per second, whereas in animation the action is constantly reinvented: objects or drawings are filmed frame by frame and, in between frames, they are moved or changed by the animator.[1] The earlier introduction to the ASIFA[2] statute stated that live action cinema was produced by mechanical analysis, through pictures of events similar to the ones which appeared on the screen; whereas animation cinema created events through different instruments which differed from actual reproduction. In an animation film, events took place for the first time on the screen. Later on, the development of new techniques (especially electronics) as well as the rise of philosophical issues (from the standpoints of aesthetics and language, the characteristics of production work do not count) suggested a 'negative' definition, so that the 1980 statute of ASIFA defined animation as everything which is not a simple representation of live action shot at 24 frames per second.

With this explanation, the author does not intend to solve an aesthetic conundrum or exhaust all themes in the theory of animation cinema, which have been treated in specialized texts listed in the bibliography section of this book.

More modestly, the intent is to warn against self-complicating problems as well as to point out how unfair it is to isolate a phenomenon (in this case, animation) from the context in which it belongs (in this case, visual communication or visual art). A precise separation between animation and other media is not easily identifiable. In its most realistic version, animation expands to 'live action cinema'; in its own abstract forms animation expands into kinetic art. In pursuing this research, I have not pre-established any kind of paradigm but have rather worked pragmatically.

In this light, some classic questions arise: whether

1 In fact, there were one, two or more frames, as required by different creative needs. The procedure gave rise to the expressions 'single frame' or 'frame by frame'.

2 ASIFA is the acronym of the French name of the International Association of Animation Film Artists.

animation is or is not cinema and whether it can be considered plastic art in motion. The system of 'dynamic' visual communication is not separated from static visual communications such as drawing or sculpture. Interchanges and analogies between these related forms are more than legitimate. The world of animation, in particular, has held an ongoing dialogue with contemporary schools of painting and graphics.

This work covers little more than one century of animation. It begins in 1888 because in that year Emile Reynaud released (although to an audience of only friends and relatives) the *théâtre optique* and dramatically improved the quality of animated drawings which, for the first time, recounted stories and thoughts. The first films of animated drawings were born that year.

This study focuses on works and consequently, artists, and stresses a documentary, critical approach rather than an analysis of economic, industrial or political events. It is not a 'history of animation cinema' (it does not involve a study of facts and intentions) but attempts to fill the void of knowledge on the topic and to give an interpretive introduction to little known filmmakers.[1]

Pages filled with names, titles and dates may be boring to the reader, but are necessary because the often fragmentary, uncertain sources require classification, and information had to be definitively written so as to become available to other scholars. In short, it was imperative to do some 'preventive archaeology' (pardon the oxymoron) and trace a map which could be later used for monographic studies. As for the critical approach, filmmakers have been studied within their own single, specific cultures and inspirations, creative projects and ideas; they have not been compared to any pre-determined aesthetic credo to which they might or might not answer. This approach, which may appear incoherent or digressive to some, actually offers some degree of flexibility in a field which spans farce, tragedy, caricature, abstract art and Western and Eastern cultures.

Although this work purposely abstains from historic or philosophic interpretations, it cannot avoid some general observation on the past century. This fascinating period has witnessed the birth and development – albeit with pauses, contradictions and dead-ends – of a new language which has been opened to the creativity of individuals and groups of artists. Animation in the strict sense of the term, as the invention or orchestration of forms allowed by the development of optical machines at the turn of the 20th century, has offered no less artistic opportunity than have colour, line and volume. Animators have been able to develop forms in the dimension of time, as opposed to the two-dimensions of painting or three-dimensions of sculpture. This opportunity, which at times has been misunderstood, is at the root of an evolution which, after one century, has not yet seen its full potential.

Much of the information presented in this book has been made possible by the cooperation and courtesy of the filmmakers themselves. I wish to thank them all without doing them the injustice of naming them on a page which does not mention their artistic work. Similar thanks should be given to the relatives of deceased filmmakers.

I am grateful to the Canadian critic Robi Roncarelli, a computer animation expert who not only provided me with information, but actually wrote the chapter on this topic. My thanks to the Swiss historian Bruno Edera, a tireless, meticulous researcher who furnished me with copies of his published and unpublished works; and similarly to my American colleague John Canemaker. I thank my British colleague Ken Clark for having very kindly revised my paragraphs on British animation. The following people (listed in alphabeti-

1 To give a complete listing of each artist's complete filmography was not the main purpose of this study. The works cited here are merely representative.

cal order) gave me information and first-hand documents:

István Antal, Budapest; Jordi Artigas, Barcelona; Sergej Asenin, Moscow; Mike Barrier, Washington, DC; Alfio Bastiancich, Turin; Louise Beaudet, Montreal; Maria Benesová, Prague; Jehangir S. Bhownagary, Paris; Fulvio Capezzuoli, Milan; Joan Cohen, Los Angeles; Nico Crama, The Hague; Harvey Deneroff, Los Angeles; Robert and Shirley Edmonds, Chicago; Robi Engler, Lausanne; Simón Feldman, Buenos Aires; June Foray, Los Angeles; Lisbeth Gabrielsson, Stockholm; Luis Gasca, San Sebastian; Rolf Giesen, Berlin; Marcin Gizycki, Warsaw; Mattias Gordon, Västerås; Vasco Granja, Lisbon; Lalla Grimes, New York; León Herman, Buenos Aires; Robert Jung, Munich; Torsten Jungstedt, Stockholm; Mark Kausler, Los Angeles; Jan Klava, Sydney; Jerzy Kotowski, Lodz; Joachim and Detelina Kreck, Wiesbaden; Jirí Kubícêk, Prague; Manfred Lichtenstein, Berlin; Rubens Francisco Lucchetti, São Paulo; Raymond Maillet, Paris; Massimo Maisetti, Milan; Marie Catherine Marchetti, Paris; György Matolcsy, Budapest; Anne Melblom, Milan; Inni-Karine Melbye, Copenhagen; William Moritz, Los Angeles; Antoinette Moses, Cambridge; Ranko Munitic, Zagreb; Takashi Namiki, Tokyo; Giuliana Nicodemi, New York; Huguette Parent, Montreal; Angie Pike, Los Angeles; Fazo Premilovac, Zagreb; Karen Rosenberg, Brookline; Michel Roudevitch, Paris; Charles Samu, New York; Georges Sifianos, Paris; David R. Smith, Burbank; Charles Solomon, Santa Monica; Véronique Steeno, Genk; Gunnar Strom, Volda; Hélène Tanguay, Montreal; Juan Gabriel Tharrats, Madrid; Naoki Togawa, Tokyo; Rinaldo Traini, Rome; Christine Tréguier, Chatillon; Ervin Voiculescu, Bucharest; Anatolij Volkov, Moscow; Pat Webb, London; Ytzhak Yoresh, Jerusalem; Fiorello Zangrando, Venice. Thank you also to Markku Salmi for his very detailed reference checking.

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I have been provided with documents by the following institutions: Art Institute of Chicago; ASIFA; Associazione Italia-URSS; British Film Institute; Cinémathèque Québécoise; Cinémathèque de Toulouse; Danske Filmmuseum; Embrafilme; Film Polski; Filmbulgaria; Goethe Institut; Hungarofilm; ICAIC; Danish Cultural Institute; Joop Geesink Dollywood; Kinostudioja Shqiperia e Re; Len Lye Foundation; Library of Congress, Motion Picture Division; Museum of Modern Art; National Film Board of Canada; Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek; Suomen Elokuvasäätiö; UCLA, Theater Arts Library; USIS.

Last but not least, my sincere thanks to family and friends who helped and advised me, at different times and in different ways, and made my task a little easier, to Anna Taraboletti-Segre who has translated this work into English, and to Ellis Edmonds who helped her.

I wish to express my gratitude to my editor, Manuel Alvarado, who made the best out of the text I submitted him, and to my publisher, John Libbey, who had faith in this book. Last, but not least, I thank my wife, Graziella, for having been at my side in this endeavour.

Giannalberto Bendazzi
Milan, 1994

Preface

In Praise of Animated Film

Serge Diaghilev to Jean Cocteau, while riding a gig in the Bois de Boulogne: "Stupefy me!"
Louis Pasteur to Odilon Redon, during the opening of the artist's exhibition: "Your monsters are alive!"

The task Giannalberto Bendazzi took upon himself with this book was to reconstruct the events of animation cinema throughout the years, and to describe the linguistic aspects which group the visual arts into families. I will limit myself to simply adding a few notes.

Among all the animal species, man is undoubtedly the only one which challenges his faculties in order to extend his limits. (Have we ever seen a deer training by repeatedly jumping over the same barrier so as to outdo himself?) Yes, man's nature is that of a challenger. Every new exploit gives him a new challenge.

Classical antiquity was aware of this, organizing the Olympic games; and further, challenging future generations by inventing the actions of fictitious heroes in the form of metaphors disguised as myths.

Our century has seen an identification with the image of Icarus, not to mention Prometheus, who moulded human features in mud and then blew life into them. Now, from the graffiti of Altamira to the canvasses by Balla, painters endeavour to create *living* forms. They have never attained actual movement, but only the idea of movement. In the 15th century, through the discovery of perspective, Italian painters added the illusion of a third dimension – of depth – to the two-dimensional image. But it wasn't until the end of the 19th century that we were able to see the two-dimensional image (already put in perspective) gain a fourth dimension: with a *fictitious, but evident* movement. And this happened long before man learned to fly.

It happened in 1892, in Paris, three years before the introduction of cinema. This Prometheus was Emile Reynaud, and nobody seemed to understand the meaning of that invention; as H. G. Wells once said, 'When a thing is strange enough and great enough, nobody seems to notice'.

After Emile Reynaud, there have been men able to create living images, and this does not surprise anybody. What are the reasons?

Animation film falls victim to an error in classification – or rather, to two errors. One consists in mistaking animation for animated drawings (as one might mistake an airplane for a kite); another, in considering it simply as a sort of 'cinema', while it could just as well be *painting, drawing, engraving* or even, *sculpture* in movement (do we ever consider an oil portrait as a sort of photo?)

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This confusion between *animation* and 'cinema' dates from the first film projection by the Lumière Brothers, in Paris, in 1895. Now, Emile Reynaud had already been showing his Théâtre Optique at the Grévin museum since 1892. All images by Reynaud had been drawn by hand. It is certain that the invention of 'cinema' had been patented by Reynaud who did not have enough money to sue the Lumière brothers and win.

Anyhow, it is legitimate to consider cinema as a particular kind of animation, a sort of cheap, industrial substitute; which was destined to replace the creative work of an artist, such as Emile Reynaud, with photography of human models 'in movement'.

It should be remembered that photography itself was still too new for its non-artistic aspects to be evident: at that time and even much later, photographers loved to dress as 'artists', with Rembrandt-style hats and Lavallière ties, like painters. Nadar felt a closeness to Manet.

In reality, it is possible to take pictures artistically, exactly as it is possible to paint canvasses with craftsmanship. However, there is still a major difference between the work of a photographer such as Nadar, who chose his model and many other elements, but who did not filter 'indifferent' details with an awareness of the meaning and the form of *all* the details he used; and Manet, whose work precisely does not have anything to do with 'nature', but with the idea that he – Manet – had of nature. The great naïveté of the public should also be remembered; when it saw photographs for the first time, one can imagine the enthusiastic and indiscriminate shouts, in front of all the mechanically reproduced *details*: 'here is the ring on mum's finger, and here the wart on dad's nose, and here the fly on the dish'. How can one be surprised at such an incomprehension for works of art, since such naïve observations are uttered still today? Thus, the presentation of *L'arrivée du train à La Ciotat* in the first cinema was amazing: a *real train*! (Real, because photography is 'real'). Thus, a still unsolved problem emerged: What is reality? What do we mean by 'objective reality'? In another place I will deal with the absence of any relationship of the flat image of a monocular photographic view with the binocular understanding of the world which is typically human. The only possible relationship between these two views is filtered through the words 'there is even the fly ... ' (a relationship which is false and sad because of its stupidity, since the fly is present only by chance. In art there is no place for the superfluous, and in a photograph almost everything is superfluous). Thus did the Lumière brothers' cinema overshadow Emile Reynaud's Animation; the industrial product won over the genius's work easily because it proved to be more marketable. The proliferation of photographic 'cinema' was such that Emile Cohl's drawings could be shown only in public theatres equipped with 'cinematographic' projectors; this element contributed to their classification as 'cinema' because, as much as they were bizarre vaudeville performances, they still were 'cinema'. Thus one of the two errors in classifying Animation was made.

Once Emile Cohl's animated drawing was considered as a particular kind of 'cinema', Reynaud's work found a way to survive. Several talented artists drew many animated drawings and always used movie theatres for the projection of their drawings, printed (exposed) on standard film stock, at a standard speed of 24 frames per second. In a word, the big brother of cinema accepted its role as a junior. But the 'art-animators' did not have the personality of Reynaud, who was an inventor even before being an artist. When some artists, mainly Europeans, came up with the idea of establishing a non-industrialized animation cinema with an awareness of its mission as a new art-form, it was treated as cartoons, industrialized caricatures, produced on an assembly-line in order to survive the competitive

prices of photographic cinema. Gradually however, animated film looked for new techniques which were suited to the creation of individual works; the works of these artists became renowned, and in recent years the public has become aware of the existence of a newborn plastic art in movement called 'animation'.

Now, any registered patent is usually accompanied by a list of claims (exactly like the claims accompanying the application for exclusive rights over a gold mine). The higher the number of the 'claims' in a patent, the more important is the invention. But the high number of the possible applications of animation is precisely what makes its classification so difficult. How shall the new vein of animation be adapted to the old forms such as Cinema, Art Galleries, Television or Museums?

Film directors do not see any relationship between animation and the full-length feature films whose audiences go to see the stars advertised by billboards and by the press. Television programmers do not find, in animated fantasies, the advantages of direct and immediate reproduction of real events, such as coronations, revolutions, robberies and so on (this is the basic goal of television, isn't it?). Art dealers (serious people, if ever there were any) look for 'the signature' and inquire about the 'original work'.[1] No, art collectors and dealers do not buy or sell 'fantasies'. They need *goods* to be measured and, sometimes, even weighed!

As for Museum Directors, they compare animation to toys ' ... and after all, museums lack projectors, because whenever electricity is present, there is the danger of fire ... '.

The absence of animated films in the Automata collections, such as in the Museum of Arts and Industries in Paris, is more difficult to explain. Do we have to hope that videotapes will give Animation the communication tool it needs?

What are, then, the 'claims' of animation?

Before starting the praise of animation, let's point out the changes in values acting on performances as a whole, which have occurred in our society in the last 50–150 years. If it was easy to amaze the public with thread-controlled marionettes, wise elephants, musical tobacco boxes or with Vaucanson's mechanical duck which ate, digested and eliminated food, it was because the public loved to be amazed.

It is probable that today's public is no less naïve than in the old times, but it loves to look 'knowledgeable'. In praising animation, therefore, I will have to be careful to avoid old expressions such as 'miracle', or 'magic'.

I will praise animation, a pure work of the spirit

Animation, which has found numerous production techniques, presents itself as a 'frame by frame' method of creation of movement, no matter which technique has been used. Using the word 'creation' clearly involves some exaggeration, since man cannot create anything: stones, plants, animals. Rather, this word describes a manipulation, or an arrangement of existing things. This is the case, for example, in the photographic-film, when the director chooses a certain actor, a certain framing, a certain mimicry, a certain lighting, and so on. One can believe that, in such a repertoire, there is only a limited range of choice, which only faintly represents the director's creative will.

Once these components have been chosen and arranged, more or less well, they move on to the final result exactly as they were before, without

1 For movie animators, the movement which happens on the screen *for the first time* is the one which makes the original work: contrary to the 'photo-film', which is satisfied with a photomechanical analysis of the real events that the synthesis of the screen recreates as *déjà vu*.

the director becoming aware of them through analysis. The making of a live action film is thus easy, quick and abundant ... What else can this century wish, being so obsessed by notions of quantity and speed? These are the producers' obsessions; are the public's similar? Nothing is less certain. The steady decrease of attendance at the movies is well-known and normally explained by competition from television. Is such an explanation sufficient? What should we think of the flood of violent or pornographic films? It seems that, in motion pictures, any means is justified to attract the public. If we remember that the wave of pornography had been preceded by two decades of uninteresting technical inventions, such as the large screen, the several 'ramas', the circular screens and so on, we have the right to suppose that the motion picture industry has realized that it has exhausted the interest in novelties which had been its own characteristic, and no longer knows what to invent in order to attract a bored, saturated and indifferent public.

In considering the popular movies, it can be noted that, other than by violence or pornography, the public is interested by unusual subjects (such as undersea filming or erupting volcanoes). It is already evident that the day is near when machine guns and nudity will be boring. In short, the repertoire of photographic cinema is limited and close to exhaustion. After all, closing doors, cars coming and going, musketeers' and cowboys' costumes, Belmondo's uppercuts as well as men's and women's anatomies offer very few variations.

Contrary to live action cinema, Animation draws the elements of its future works from a raw material made *exclusively of human ideas*, those ideas that different animators have about things, living beings and their forms, movements and meanings. They represent these ideas through images they make with their own hands. In the causal concatenation of their images – a concatenation they conceive themselves – nothing can be left to chance. For this reason, creation requires an exceedingly long time which is out of proportion to live action cinema. But the repertoire of human ideas is inexhaustible.

For animators of my generation this slowness has been a very serious handicap. The barbaric need for immediate economic revenue took animated films away from distribution circuits. But times are changing, and the increase of free time will relegate to the past the inattentive rush of the last fifty years spent in old vestiges of wild superproduction. Thus, the same economy which had pushed companies to adapt to a get-fast mode of action, will soon force managers to change their minds and to understand that economic gain has always been alien to really important activities, such as discoveries and inventions. And what is the art work which is not an invention as well? Isn't such work a copy, or plagiarism? The fifty years spent alternating engraved illustrations with film animation have taught me the values of Gutenberg's culture (a stable culture) as well as the values of modern culture (a mobile one). The second will never be able to substitute for the first, and vice versa. Being complementary, these two cultures will remain incomparable as well as irreplaceable, because they represent two opposite processes of the spirit.

To the artist, animation is a totally new discipline. It is, first and foremost, ethic: the painter's intention to greedily keep in his files even the smallest sketches, with the hope of selling them in the future, is foreign to the animator. A 12-minute film is formed by about 16,000 frames. Have the masters done as many drawings in their entire lives? Therefore, the animator does not have time for a Bohemian life.

When I make an illustration, I look for the most valuable exposures, avoiding difficult angles and unrewarding fore-shortening. While animating a film, I cannot omit any of the aspects which the logic of movement forces me to go through. I

must study many elements which are not necessary to painting: I must know optics, physiological optics, psychology, neuropsychology of visual perception (sorry, but this is its name), sensitometry as well as music (and I am forgetting others).

In animating composite pendulums in order to trace abstract figures, I took up again the study of basic physics. Moreover, I learned that man has three ways of perceiving objects in movement. Examples of these modes of observation are: an aeroplane propeller, perceived as a translucent and shiny, 'totalized' disc; the moon, the movement of which cannot be seen (but which can be 'totalized' with a long photographic exposure); and finally, the universally known way of seeing, which perceives both the form of the object and its movement (and which photography can 'totalize' as well). These methods of spectatorship are according to their speed in relation to something I am not capable of explaining and which I had to call 'speed of observation'. *Totalization* has taught me the relativism of the notions of speed and form. I can affirm that animation teaches how to know better the way man sees and thinks. It allowed me to enter the true fourth dimension, introducing me to an unknown universe, which I used to create new effects.

In the same way that painting develops an awareness of colours, values and forms, animation develops an awareness of movements and time spans.

I spend beautiful moments in my tiny garden, observing the effects of thousands of small, blurred suns, the images of which are filtered through the foliage of my lime tree. This celebration, caused by the slightest breeze, is a choreography which you cannot perceive, because you do not make animation.

Yet, young people are no longer satisfied by seeing animated films: they want to make some. They are right. Let the new generation reform the economy of future society in such a way as to honour 'the well-done work', in the words of Peguy's mother. This is the challenge!

Alexandre Alexeïeff
Paris, 1973

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