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Courtesy of the Disney Studios

MICKEY GETS PLACES

But Is It Art?

A Disney Disquisition

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THE problem of animated drawing does not date from the advent of the movies. Cinematic animation, however artificial its relationship to the static medium of painting, has tempted artists from the very beginning of human time. The boar of Altamira, galloping on four pairs of legs, is echoed across the millennia by Balla's futuristic dog whose legs in action resemble two full-pleated skirts. Both superimpose a sequence of action snapshots on one composite image. Dürer in his "Martyr of Ten Thousand Christians," Duchamp in his "Nude Descending the Stairs," use another principle—the multiple exposure of a moving body on a single photographic plate. Giotto suggests actual gesticulation through key postures. It takes two people out of his crowd to act despair—one with arms raised and extended, the other with arms and hands gathered forcefully to the head. Picasso, battling against the resistance of his medium to the expression of mechanical movement, brings forth obscure palimpsests of superimposed images. The predellas showing successive scenes from the life of a Saint, the "funnies" in our Sunday papers, present action simultaneously in and out of time. So does a cinematographic film, unrolled and flat. In a subtle way, when the rigid line of the classic gives way to the loose contours of the romantic, the released line frees the painted personage from his carcan of geometry, allows his muscles to ripple and his breast to heave. The baroque masters go furthest into movement—use turmoil as a rule of composition.

It is no superficial urge that makes the painter crave animation, but an essential instinct, as deeply rooted in our nature as

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the sense of width, height and depth. As Dr. Carrel bluntly puts it, man lives physically in a world of four dimensions—the three that can be measured with an inch tape and the fourth with a watch. Time, in effect, is a condition to our being. The curved graph that our body traces while growing from ovus to manhood and receding into dust is vitally ours, impossible to conceive outside the time element. So too are its pettier daily gestures. A measurement of height and weight describes us only in terms of a given date. Any family album of snapshots show a single entity—the tottering baby, the college boy, the bridegroom, the happy father—in the guise of diverse and unrelated bodies. These are selected slices cut into a trajectory through time, into a fourth dimension so physical that, like the other three, it is not outside the camera's reach. The world a man paints is optical, a strictly physical world of objects and bodies. The painter cannot, like those artists who deal in words, treat of time in its imponderable essence. He cannot, like the family album, suggest it over long periods. He can catch time only at its point of impact with the other three dimensions, when it clothes itself in movement.

Because approximate means of animation have been routine among painters for centuries it is difficult to believe that, when a more convincing means has been evolved, its use will bring us (as some suggest) from fine arts to a nondescript bastard medium into which art critics will not dip. Of course animated drawing differs from painting and sculpture, but it will remain art inasmuch as the new freedom brings with itself its own limitations. The main difference between immobile painting and cinematic drawing lies in the fact that the element of time which is artificial to the former becomes one of the essentials of the latter. In this sense animated drawing partakes of the qualities of music, poetry and the dance. It must be appreciated not only in terms of simultaneous proportion, as in painting, but also in successive tempos that have a beginning and an end.

The animator had mostly to discard the classical shapes cherished by painters—the sphere, the cube, the cylinder—for the

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very reason which makes their painted excellence: Raphael's beloved sphere, Seurat's canon of beauty, the cylinder, remain unchanged in shape from whatever vantage point they are seen. Raphael's Madonna, Seurat's "Promeneuse," could look only dull if whirled on a screen; for, beautiful in repose, they are no more adapted to movement than an Ionic column. Sculpture and cinema call for surprising changes of form as an accompaniment to the shifting of points of view. Let us say that a piece of pie is a classical shape for the purposes of animation inasmuch as its top view is triangular, its side view rectangular and its periphery circular. In Disney's "Ugly Duckling" we see a decoy duck floating over the waves. As the duck bobs up and down our point of view changes vertically from ground plan to airplane view, while the shifting currents that carry the duck into a circular movement familiarize us with both its sides. We get out of this thorough observation of its illusive and complex volume the same esthetic enjoyment we should derive from handling and petting an African carving.

In painting we get a sense of proportion when one volume is compared with others. This is also true of animation but here a volume can also compare itself with itself in time. Disney handles this comparison most successfully when he uses abstract volumes—for example the swarm of bees who shift their strategic attack on Mickey from pyramid to sphere and back to pyramid. But the same observation holds true of all the actors. A thinnish personage rotating, both arms extended downwards at a forty-five degree slope, transforms himself into a cone perched upon the stem of his legs, a human Christmas tree. When the arms are extended at an angle nearer to the horizontal the rotating body becomes a parasol. If the arms are raised upwards at a forty-five degree angle, the rotating shape is that of a chalice or funnel.

This sort of transfiguration may sound like a parlor game but has deep plastic significance. Whereas sculptor and painter perforce treat constant shapes, the animator (without needing to use an abstract language) can at will bring into being and

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discard the series of shapes which the body in movement creates as naturally as the mouth spouts forth words. This plastic language depends on the degree of the relationship between the evoked shapes and the mother shape. A cylindrical man may use cubic gestures; a thin man may revolve himself into spheres. The modification may be less obvious—it may be a slight shuffling of the component measurements, the swelling of the chest, the rolling of a muscle (or, in a close-up, the movement of an eyelid over the sphere of the eyeball). Contrasts and affinities make up a language of movement as suggestive as the language of line or color.

Animation portrays the rolling of waters, the mutiny of fire, the growth of spring, whereas the painter is bound by a set of childish symbols—the wave, the flame, the flower. To use the Chinese terminology (which recognizes constant form as distinct from constant principle), painting can tackle the form but only suggest the principle, whereas the principle is well within the range of animation. When Cézanne tips Madame Cézanne and her chair we can check their unnatural angle only against the rigid verticality of other painted lines. When Titian in his "Baccanale" places a wine-glass in the hand of a Maenad he opposes the tipsy diagonal of the stem to the horizontality of the liquid level. The animator does not have to oppose line to line but, more richly, lines to law. In a drunken scene the animated drunk battles against the vertical pull of gravity, makes it the very real if invisible prop against which he essays dangerously diagonal attitudes. The wine-glass he carries can multiply its angles graphically in a pendulum movement set against the immovable reproach of a horizontal liquid.

It has been said that cinematic movement will weaken painting by bringing an added naturalness into the medium. Were there no bounds to means we should it is true have nature instead of art. But movement brings in the element of time and time is a discipline in itself. The elusive time which a painter may conjure up slows down or hastens its pace at will, for it is a

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subjective time. But the time which the animator has to deal with is time measured by a clock. It reigns implacably within the work of art as it does in life; the artist cannot manipulate it but can only toe to its beat. The addition of movement gives freedom of a sort to drawing but it also constructs new boundaries. Since the "short," to be of commercial value, must be compressed into a seven-minute duration the artist is forced into the concision and precise dosage of the moods that one finds in a Japanese *hai-kai*. Artificiality is restored.

The space within which the painter sets his volumes does not call for much elasticity as a counterbalance to their static pressure, for his means include those delicate gradations and veils of air with which a Rembrandt, a Monet, suggest infinite recessions. The animator can also lick and polish his backgrounds with tonal washes until they are as spatial as a painting. But when the drawn puppet steps onto this highly refined stage his blaze of color, his mesh of black outlines, give the lie to the refined setting out of which he has hatched. In order to live and breathe the puppet must create a more functional space around itself, and gesticulation is the only spatial means within its range. With its legs and arms the cartoon-creature pushes away from itself the flatness of the screen that would engulf it, proves space to itself and to us by whirling and running. Like the water-insect enclosed within its own air-bubble, the puppet lives within his subjective private space.

Here is reconciled the clash between the cubists, who would limit a picture to its rectangular outline, and the impressionists, who view the rectangle as a window opening onto unlimited vistas. For the moving screen (responsive to the settings demanded by promenades and pursuits) may at times unroll dioramas vaster than those of a Monet; whereas at other times the scene may be so rectangularly circumscribed by the boundaries of the screen that the personages who rush against the walls, ceiling and floor of that cubist heaven bounce back with broken ribs and bleeding noses. The moving picture has here developed a new plastic theory, that of contrast, and the two

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great schools of thought that painting bred are equally good ingredients for the cinematic sauce.

Peculiar laws govern the landscape in which animation takes place. Although in real life topography governs our movements, in the realm of animation the trees, houses, furniture, are all born of or submit to our own movement. There may be any number of trees in a landscape but they efface themselves from the path of a running creature. Or if a bump there must be, they pile up on the track. Objects have no other weight or texture than that proved by their contact with movement. Of two similar walls one will be passed through as in a dream whereas another will provide a harsh fall. People obey the laws of gravity when need be or they float in air or multiply themselves till they are in three or four places at once. This high-handed use of natural laws to suit special purposes effects a release in us more joyful than any gag. We who have suffered since birth from an incessant pull at our coat-tails by centripetal forces, who tiptoe through life avoiding evilly-set obstacles, rejoice when flung into the world of animation where our moves impose their own elbow room over all creation.

Poussin built up small *maquettes* of places with mannequins propped up at given points and thus established his horizontal composition on ground level before he collapsed the whole scene on the window-pane of the vertical canvas. But not even the severe calculations of a master can overcome the congenital weakness of painted depth—at best only a poetic approximate to physical width and height. Depth dwells in animation as sturdily as height and width, its trail spun under our very noses by the personage in action. Painters who know that depth is a lie use it with discretion, plan spatial compositions that are relatively simple when compared with the refinements of the surface schemes they develop. Animation, by removing their scruples, makes complexity legitimate when they are composing in depth.

Just as a painter composes with physical volumes, an animator composes mainly with diagrams based on motion. The con-

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tinuity of movement as stored by the retina is a pictographic language, related to its moving source as slightly as, for example, figures cut on ice are to the skater. More exactly, composition by movement, since it is in three dimensions, can be compared with the luminous trail left by a swiftly-moving cigarette tip in the dark. Its scheme, moreover, can be more severe than that which the natural form admits of. Who has not thrilled at the spiral into space evoked by the gyrating musicians caught by the cyclone in "Mickey's Band Concert"? No one would be more delighted by it than Hogarth; for here at last, in its three-dimensional reality, has been realized that Line of Beauty, the S shape which, with the imperfect techniques of the painter, Hogarth strove to wind into space by coiling it around a superfluous cone. That spiral which the painter can only hint at and the sculptor can only freeze, animation brings to life.

In discussing the new medium one dreams of endless achievements. It has been suggested that in the hand of a Michelangelo animation could evoke Sistine Chapels; that if this came to pass all the work painted in the pre-Disney era would become as obsolete as stereoscopic views in our decade of "talkies." But the actual use to which animation has been put is perhaps not so much the first mouthings of a wonder child as a classic flowering of the medium. The gesture of the Sistine Christ is beautiful because of its arrested motion; its timing and completion would bring it down to the range of accidentals. On the contrary Donald Duck could gain nothing by being frozen into architecture, for his soul shines brighter amid fits of motion. Animation needs to treat a gesture as continuously in the making; its actors must strive and quibble on a plane low enough to make events or inanimate things conspire against their endeavors, corner them into muscular reactions. When the Mouse has triumphed over its enemies and enters into Beatitude the "short" is over, the fade-out nears. For Mickey steps thus out of the range of the animator, enters the static realm proper to other arts. Michelangelo could not have conceived his heroes

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at a stage previous to apotheosis and might therefore have been a poor man to handle the fluid medium of animation. But it is also true that baroque minds—a Greco, a Magnasco, a Daurier—who worked in a static medium but were haunted by dynamics, would have welcomed cinematography.

In the movies a comic angle and functional beauty are one. The shape that genuinely animates, that brings swift changes from profile to front view and is elastic enough for gesticulation, may have to be funny. The motive, and the shape which implies movement, pull the screen personage from the severity of the permanent into the continuous surprise party of the impermanent. Disney's creations are no vagaries. They are shapes modelled strictly along the lines of their function, and their function burgeons into beauty. When Doc turns around and the sphere of his skull melts blushing into the twin sphere of his nose, one gets an impact of functional beauty. For Doc is as fully consistent with the cinema as Raphael's Virgin is consistent with paint. Beautiful art must be conditioned by the medium, as our own body is by function. To have flowered into appetizing womanhood Galatea must have started out as a very poor piece of sculpture. When human shapes—Snow White or the Prince Charming—are seen side by side with Disney shapes on the screen it is the human that suffers.

Where plastic language is concerned this newest of arts is a major achievement. The painted fan, the radiator cap, may be a reflection of the major art trends of the day but animated drawing is a microcosm of style complete within itself. Though its evolution follows the graphic drawn by the history of art it does so at its own regal good will, in a tempo that within a very few years has telescoped the primitive, classic, baroque and decadent styles which painting took centuries to investigate.

The earliest animation, though the story was jammed with gags, confined itself with a Giottesque severity and decision to black and white. Backgrounds evolved more rapidly than personages from this "primitive" stage because their handling made smaller technical demands upon their creators. They ran

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through a whole gamut of styles only to nestle finally, and triumphantly, in a ladylike photographic rendering. Personages, which labored under the handicap of more involved technicalities, made slower progress. They have now reached a stage where local color has been added to the black outline, where they resemble Gothic windows whose opaque leading partitions light into color. The animated beings of today and their creators seem somewhat absent-minded apropos this archaic glory which is theirs. Alas! some new technical kink may yet rid them of their rigid outline and permit them to melt into their background, long seated on the lap of the Academy. We have already seen the seven dwarfs, emerging from their cave into the sunset, shed their flat Gothic livery for the contrasting light and shade of the High Renaissance!

Cubism had dreamt of an impersonal art that would replace the free-hand line and the open-brush stroke with patterns appropriate to ruler and compass; that would substitute flat areas of tone, as bare of individuality as a newly-painted wall, for subtle shadings. Since works of this sort could be multiplied by mechanical means, the world might at last rid itself of the idolatry of the "original," might resuscitate ancient collective traditions, Gothic and Egyptian. Leger, Gleize and Gris came close to realization, but neither dealers nor collectors wished to endorse an art that was not for the few. Though the cubists had evolved a means their art-for-all dream, their cathedral, was side-tracked on its way.

Without benefit of critical appraisal, and whipped into form by the pressure of balance sheets and the profit motive, the animated cartoon is nevertheless the unexpected flowering of the cubist seed. In this cartoon the impersonality of a work of art has been captured, the cult of the "original" has been smashed. The drawings are manipulated by so many hands from the birth of the plot to the inking of the line that they are propelled into being more by the communal machinery that grinds them out than by any single human being. A first draft

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for a film reveals the creative heat through its pedimenti, erasures, clinical additions in blue or red pencil; it goes further into the alchemy of transmuting form into motion than did many of the Masters. But this holography, which makes the sketch worthy of a Museum, is still not sufficiently purified for the severe standards of the cartoon. Personality is squeezed out through multiple tracings until the diagram, its human flavor lost, becomes an exact cog within the clockwork. The key drawings are cross-sections of each gesture at its mechanical and emotional climaxes. Numerous hands patiently perform the intermediates until the flow of images, so many to a beat, parallels the tempo of the sound track. Time, the fourth dimension, is the conductor which orchestrates the great volume of drawings and files them into a coherent whole. Far from a free-for-all, this motion art composes not only in the media of surface and depth, but uniquely and rigidly in that of time.

Truly an art-for-all, these great murals that move are pets of the people. Ucello's gigantic horseman has become green mold on its smoked wall; ancient frescoes are entombed in deserted museums. It is altogether fitting that new murals should emerge in those places where the living congregate. The new subject-matter illustrates the sharp cleft between our rationalism and our imaginative urge. We work, love, eat and sleep within a riddle of financial pursuit, our brains overbrim with common sense. We bow to this newly-created pantheon of animal godlings, Mickey Mouse et al., for they are different from us, god-like, irrational.