On the Language of Abstract Animation

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Introduction

This paper documents a part of a research project which aims to contribute towards the notion of an *aesthetic language system* being applied to *abstract animation works*. This investigation focuses on theoretical and *philosophical* aspects of a *syntactical system* combining elements of different *media grammars,*[1] formed by a vocabulary of *tones, colors, shapes* and *forms*, as a system of reference following *semantic rules*, by which we wish to interpret the "*language*" of abstract animation, as used for both *artistic practice* and the *production of meaning* in the process of perceiving abstract animation works.[2] According to Arnheim, "The artist conceives and forms his image of the world through directly perceivable sensory qualities, such as colors, shapes, sounds, movements. […] however, an artistic connection of visual and auditory phenomena is not possible. […] Such a connection can be made only at […] the level of the so-called expressive qualities. […]."

Furthermore, in the context of media art history, it could be suggested that abstract animation language is an aesthetic system that is evolving into *new media genres*.[3] Arnheim first raised this basic aesthetic question of "how various media can be combined in a work of art".[4] The word "intermedia" appeared in the writings of Coleridge in 1812 to define works which fall conceptually between media that are already known. Often the creation of *new media* is done by fusing old ones. This formal fusion between media was very common in the late 1950s and early 1960s.[5] The notion of "new media" is currently used to represent a convergence of two separate historical trajectories: computing and media technologies.[6] Our hypothesis conceptualizes the above theoretical schema at a *phylogenesis-ontogenesis model*, as used for *literacy theory*.[7]

Towards an evolutionary theory of abstract animation language

Abstract animated film has its own language that gradually evolved from abstract painting.[8] The origin of abstract animation as an art form can be traced to the notion of *correspondences of the arts*, common in 19th century symbolic poetry and expressionist paintings.[9] Such correspondences appear in the abstract paintings and writings of Kandinsky and Klee,[10] who had a similar vision of an abstract visual language, relating to music. Kandinsky used color to associate tone with timbre, hue with pitch, and saturation with the volume of sound. Klee also developed a systematic approach linking musical counterpoint to color gradation and harmonic structure to color composition.[11]

The aesthetic experience afforded by these *systems of correspondences*, could be somehow related to *synaesthesia*, a neurological condition in which stimulation of one sensory modality triggers involuntary sensation felt by another.[12] One essential ability that has been suggested by cognitive scientists as a prerequisite to language has been termed "cross-modal abstraction".[13] It has also been suggested that through the process of

natural selection, the gene that causes synaesthesia has been preserved, because it is responsible for the ability of language formation in the human brain.[14]

As the 20th century progressed, film enabled painters, who had been confined to merely suggesting motion and rhythm in static images, to create flowing movements and rhythmic schemes that unfolded over time, thereby drawing visual art closer to musical composition.[15] Survage was the first known artist to design a work of abstract animation. He created sequences of abstract paintings which he called "Colored Rhythms", and patented what he considered to be a new art form. Eggeling with *Symphonie Diagonal* (1917) and Richter with *Rhythmus* were probably the first two painters who made films out of abstract moving images, along with Ruttmann and Fischinger. Eggeling was a visionary that saw in music "*a logical basis for composition within an abstract medium and that visual form could similarly be susceptible to laws of composition, at the same time providing the basis of a universal language*". [16]

Such abstract audiovisual works could be categorized into two directions, with regards to the way that artists approach the correspondence between the audio and visual *logos*: a) as an attempt to visualize a pre-existing musical composition or b) as an attempt to build a more balanced audiovisual synthesis, by setting rules according to which specific elements and characteristics of the audio and visual aspects of the composition correspond. Interestingly, similar categorizations may stand when analyzing several of today's computer-generated abstract audiovisual compositions, like the works of Carsten Nikolai, Ryoji Ikeda, Semiconductor and others.

According to Goodman, Art forms an *aesthetic language system*.[17] Most obvious examples of such systems are scores and notation systems. Music is considered to be closer to linguistics[18] than visual art because it is abstract, while visual art is most commonly representational. Narrative film is considered to have a language of its own.[19] According to the theory of *film analysis*, each *frame* of the film take, every different camera *angle*, is a structural element that can be considered as a *syntactical proportion* of a *phrase* or *sentence* in order to communicate meaning. Abstract moving images, however, may express and convey meaning in a different way than narrative film genres, since they too follow a course of structure, but the language of abstract animation tends to become a score or *notation system itself*. In 1969, Sitney suggested that *Structural Film* is a type of film not open for interpretation to the viewer, drawing his/her attention on the primary material it is made of: *Film as Film*. Absolute film or "Film as Film" can only be perceived as a Kantian object per se.[20]

"Begone Dull Care": A case study of the analysis of an abstract animated work

In terms of methodology, abstract animation works can be analyzed in order to identify such *linguistic elements* and more specifically, to identify possible correspondences between abstract moving images and certain musical parameters such as rhythm, timbre and tonality. As a case study, we present an analysis of *Begone Dull Care* (1949) by Norman McLaren. This film is a carefully structured work in which McLaren experiments with film's basic elements: lines, movement, colour, texture and visual rhythm. In this film, McLaren used the technique of cameraless animation[21] and painted onto the blank film stock directly, added dyes, and then scratched away at the surface, etching in glyphs and abstract lines. Each frame was scratched directly onto the film in order to be in perfect synch with the pre-recorded soundtrack.[22]

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In *Begone Dull Care*, McLaren achieves a synchronization of the audio/visual channels of the composition. The film adapts to the score's rhythm and as the soundtrack's rhythm changes, more complex visual patterns emerge. Certain shapes, textures and colors correspond with different sections of the score. The complexity of the visual motifs increases proportionally with the intensity of the music.

All these *structural elements* of media grammar, as analyzed in abstract animation works, may form a *syntactical system* coming from different sensory modalities, which, when combined, contribute to what we suggest as *an aesthetic language system*. This analogy from music to visual imagery describes the original concept of abstract animators who use moving images as pure forms (points, lines, planes) and arrange them in time and space.

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22 Other important filmmakers who worked with this technique were: Len Lye, Harry Smith and Stan Brakhage.