Experimental Animation, Hybridisation and New Media

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the resurgence of experimental animation in terms of its contemporary redefinition as an expanded and hybrid form of moving image practice, one that moves beyond conventional reception, modes and sites of display and into the realm of new media art. Indeed while experimental animation is enjoying a revival in the animation industry and various film platforms, it is at the same time emerging as an expressive medium within new media art practice. This is partly due to the current dominance of moving practices within visual culture but can also be attributed to its innate interdisciplinary potential. Wells and Hardstaff (2008) acknowledge that a hybrid approach has always been present in experimental animation, but they argue that the digital era has brought this all-embracing characteristic of the genre to the fore because the digital revolution has provided a platform with seemingly endless creative potential (Wells & Hardstaff 2008: 7, 15)

Keywords

Experimental animation, Modernism, hybridisation, new media, digital platform, contemporary art

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The field of experimental animation is traditionally associated with non-linear, non-objective abstract animated film. However, in more recent debates the definition of experimental animation has expanded to include all manner of creative expression concerning the moving image. In particular it has resurfaced in the digital age (from its relative obscurity in the analogue era) as a dynamic hybrid form within contemporary and new media art practice. That experimental animation is an expressive medium that pushes interdisciplinary boundaries has been characteristic of this genre since is

early inception at the turn of the 20th century. Innovators of the genre were painters Léopold Survage (France, 1914), Walter Ruttmann (Germany, 1921) and Viking Eggeling (Germany, 1924). They were members of the avant-garde who believed the relatively new technology of film, with its characteristic dimensions of movement, light and projection, paved the way for a new expanded painterly art (experimental animation) that had the potential to "represent the artist's core experience of modernity". Peter Weibel in his essay "The post-media condition" discusses how the emergence of old technological media such as photography and film at the turn of the 20th century exerted a significant influence on traditional artistic media, to the extent that not only were these innovations "a new branch on the tree of art but actually transformed the tree of art itself" (Weibel 2006).

This can be said of the development of early experimental animated film (old technological media), which developed out of a few Modernist artists' desire to engage with the relatively new medium of film and to find a new language and new possibilities for traditional artistic practice. In particular, cinema technology provided a platform for "the move of art into film" (Leslie 2002: 37). According to Esther Leslie in *Hollywood flatlands: Animation, critical theory and the avant-garde* (2002), these painterly experiments in film "surfaced out of the extension of problems posed in the fine arts: how to represent rhythmic processes not just in space and on a flat surface but also in time" (Leslie 2002: 37). The innovative painterly abstract animated films of Walter Ruttman epitomises this approach. Ruttmann, who painted directly onto celluloid, believed that the new technology of film paved the way for a new painterly art (experimental abstract film) that had the potential to "represent the artist's core experience of modernity". To Ruttmann, time, speed

and tempo symbolised the "essence of modernity" and were also central characteristics of his painterly animated experiments which he described in his 1919 manifesto on art as "Malerei mit Zeit" (Painting with Time) (Schönfeld 2006: 172). Ruttmann's first film, *Lichtspiel Opus 1*, opened in Berlin in 1921 (see Figure 1), and featured the abstract movement and rhythm of colour and soft, sensuous marks, synchronised to an original soundtrack. Experimental animation thus not only extended the vocabulary of traditional artistic media but also allowed for the mixing of the media, consequently blurring the boundaries of previously medium-specific genres. However, until recently, these artists and their films faded into relative obscurity or they moved on into other filmic or artist media. This is attributed mainly to the dominance of orthodox animation during most part of the 20the century, and of course due the enormous expense and labour intensiveness of producing animation during the analogue era.

Figure 1. Ruttmann, W. 1921. Still from Lichtspiel Opus 1 [Online] Available: http://www.see-thissound.at/files/60/large/large.jpg?1273514587 (Accessed 3.07.2017)

Another factor that has influenced the resurgence of experimental animation is the democratising nature of digital technology. Experimental animation is largely associated with independent animation. While independent animation production has been in existence since the early 20th century, until the advent of digital film technology the production of independent animated film has mostly been the preserve of a few individuals. This is due to the fact that, before about 1990, making an independent animated film was costly, labour-intensive and technically demanding. Nowadays, with advanced computer technology and animation, editing and stopmotion software, the process of producing an independent animation is cheaper, faster and far less labour-intensive than it was using pre-digital technologies. In addition, computer hardware and software, and digital camera technologies are becoming more and more affordable and thus more accessible to the individual (Simon 2003: xiv). The digital platform and digital technology significantly eases the pain of working with more traditional animation techniques. Accessing animation software not only speeds up traditional hand-crafted animation processes, but also enables one to view and review the movement in progress, for example. Processing, storing and editing individual frames digitally have a significant labour saving impact. Thus animation techniques and approaches that draw on handcrafted media, (such as paint-on-glass, graphic and paint media on paper and paper cut-out animation) are generally greatly facilitated by the digital platform. Of course digital animation has become another form of the medium and is just as easily integrated with hand crafted animation with the assistance of digital cinema technology.

While the interdisciplinary potential of experimental animation has been there since its inception, Pilling points out that the digital platform and new technological media have reinvigorated independent animation by further broadening the scope for it to cross disciplinary boundaries (2001: 7), and making it much more accessible for the independent film maker. Moreover, Weibel claims the one of the most significant impacts of digital technology on creative practice is that it allows for a greater "mixing of the media-specific idiosyncratic worlds of the media" (Weibel 2006). It is thus not surprising that experimental animation is thriving in the digital era because with its innate mixed media approach it is well suited to this aspect of the digital platform. While the digital platform

allows for a greater diversity and extension of creative approaches, it does not necessarily challenge or threaten old approaches with obsolescence. Rather, it becomes an accessible, facilitating and labour-saving tool, making it possible for individuals to use digital and traditional animation processes without the expense, and extra time and labour such processes traditionally require. While this is true for the production of commercial animation aimed at mainstream audiences, it also applies to the production of independent, experimental animations. Pilling notes that the growing interest in independent experimental animation is reflected in the significant rise in animation festivals. Pilling regards the short experimental animation format as an ideal platform for experimentation and research, and animation festivals as the ideal platform for showcasing such films:

> *International festivals are another factor in raising the profile of animation and have mushroomed all over the world reflecting growing audience interest. Short films are the lifeblood of such festivals. Since most animation is the most labour intensive, shorts are often seen as the 'research and development' branch of the industry, a test bed for new ideas, approaches, styles and techniques. (Pilling 2001: 7)*

Figure 2. Landreth. C. 2004. Still from Ryan [Online] Available:

https://encirculos.blogspot.co.za/2011/08/100-as-lxvryan-2004-chris-landreth.html (Accessed 1.01. 2018) It is such festivals that have brought innovative experimental animation to the fore – Such as Chris Landreth's documentary animation *Ryan*, which debuted at the Cannes

Film Festival in 2004 - a blend of highly sophisticated digital and traditional animation processes, integrating drawing, found imagery, live film 2D and 3D formats. While this film celebrates the traditional handmade animations of Canadian animator Ryan Larkin, at the same time Landreth innovatively engages with the 3D platform as an expansive artistic tool not bound by the conventions of mainstream 3D film (Pixar) (Figure 2.).

While hybridity has been integral to experimental animation since its inception, approaching the genre through the digital platform is relatively new. As with other artistic traditions, the digital platform has further expanded the interdisciplinary potential of experimental animation, from its mixed media fine art and early animation origins to the contemporary assimilation of the medium into new media art. Contemporary Canadian animator, Rose Bond, for example creates site specific installations in urban public spaces which combine digital and hand crafted animation processes. She is concerned with re-defining experimental animation in terms of its hybrid importance to new media, and moving away from traditional sites and modes of viewing. One of her most shown installations, *Intra Muros* (20072015), (figure 3) consists of projected animations in windows of buildings. These installations move the genre out of the cinema space and into the urban landscape engaging passers-by, re-inventing the genre and at the same time introducing experimental animation to the general public. While the installation still has vestiges of animated narrative, echoes and celebrates the experimental processes of early Avant-Garde animators and evokes the cinema screen, it goes further to reevaluate reception, conceptual engagement and exhibition within a new media context. This relationship between new media and animation is becoming increasing accepted as a legitimate development within

contemporary moving image practice - evident in the fact that many film festivals now have a new media category for productions that include film and animation.

Figure 3. Bond, R. 2007. Still from installation Intra Muros (Utrecht's Stadhuis (City Hall), Holland Animation Film Festival 2008 [Online] Available: http://rosebond.com/work/intra-muros-utrecht/ (Accessed 3.01.2018)

Karolina Sobecka's *Wildlife* (Figure 4) similarly denotes this expanded form of moving image practice, but in terms of a shifting setting and a transient experience for the passer by. An animation of a tiger is projected from a moving car onto various urban structures and at various times of day and night. The animation is programmed to correspond to the speed of the car via a sensor – thus as the car slows down so does the tiger. When the car stops the tiger sits. Like Bond's *Intra Muros* evokes the cinema screen in the static framed sequence of windows in buildings, *Wildlife* also refers to the cinema screen in that the car passenger views the works through the car windows. *Wildlife* however while specific to the urban setting is not site specific, *like Intra Muros* - rather the visual projection is moving through space and its constant transformation is determined by the shifting urban setting. Aside from the car passengers and driver, the audience experiences the work as something glimpsed rather than contemplated or watched as a conventional narrative. While presented differently, both Bond's and Sobecka's works challenge conventional sires and modes of reception, without negating the animated traditions they are referring to.

Figure 4. Sobecka. K, 2006, Still from Wildlife [Online] Available: http://www.gravitytrap.com/artwork/wildlife (Accessed 16.01.108)

Jihoon Kim (2009) observes that much experimental animation has not been duly recognised in mainstream contemporary art but is 'celebrated in exhibitions or festivals held in new media contexts' – as with Rose Bond and others such as Karolina Sobecka. But this is tied up with the problematic and complex relationship between the mainstream contemporary art world and that of new media art in general, in particular the failure of new media art to conform to mainstream contemporary art values. Shankin posits that new media art "does not meet the familiar expectations of what art should look like, feel like and consist of …" He goes further to quote Christies contemporary art expert Amy Cappellazzo who notes " collectors get confused and concerned about things that plug in" (Shankin, 2011). Although he points out the recent recognition and value now placed on video art by reputable mainstream galleries and the art market and suggests that there will come a time when 'new media and the longer history of electronic art' will achieve similar recognition within mainstream contemporary art.

The same can be said of experimental animation within the expanded new media context. Although there are exceptions. William Kentridge for example - of global contemporary art fame and arguably South Africa's most successful artist whose collaborative multi-media productions integrate experimental animation along with

performance, music, installation and storytelling, as epitomised in his 2010 multimedia production of *The Nose* based on Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich's opera of the same name (1927–28) (Figure 5).. Combining musical composition, dance, film projection, animation and puppetry, Kentridge's approach, as seen in this production, embodies the hybridization of media in the contemporary digital age (Shankin, 2011, p 471). His acceptance within contemporary mainstream art could be partly due to his adherence to a linear, conventional narrative format and recognisable fine art traditions and processes.

One artist/animator whose work successfully bridges both the contemporary mainstream art world and new media is Han Hoogebrugge. Originally a painter and cartoonist, he gained notoriety in the 1990s for his *Modern Living/Neurotic*a series. This series began as a semi-autobiographical comic strip which Hoogerbrugge adapted to the Internet, first as animated gifs and later as interactive Flash animations. Hoogerbrugge chose Flash because of its interactive tools and because the vectorbased nature appealed to his stripped-down, Hockney-like drawing style that he uses in the interactive, animated works (Frederiks 2012, np). His acerbic, humorous take on the contemporary human condition emanates in much of his animated work - which ranges from digital interactive online animation to interactive and noninteractive installation and performance. While his creative productions almost always break with traditional modes of viewing and reception even his non - animated drawings, comics and sculptural installations reflect in various ways his engagement with the practice of animation (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Kentridge. W, 2010, Set of Kentridge's multimedia production of Shostakovich's opera The Nose [Online] Available: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/arts/music/28kentridge.html *(Accessed 12. 01. 2018)*

The interdisciplinary nature of experimental animation, and its integration of digital and traditional creative processes, negates perceived anxieties (within the traditional creative disciplines) that digital media and the digital platform, which is central to new media art practice, threaten to replace traditional creative media. WJT Mitchell articulates this fear in his article, "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture" (2001). He perceives the growing importance of digital culture, technology and digital media within academia as partly attributing to the rise of "disciplinary anxieties" within traditional disciplines, which he claims is sometimes articulated in terms of a "territorial grumpiness" (Mitchell 2001: 166). Contrary to this perception, using the digital platform as a creative tool or medium neither dilutes nor serves to replace traditional media. Rather, the mediation of the digital platform can invigorate traditional media and broaden the ways in which they are conventionally conceived, processed and accessed. This is exemplified by the resurgence of experimental animation practice and its emerging status as a dynamic hybrid form within contemporary and new media art platforms.

Figure 6. Hoogebrugge, H. 2003, Installation: La Grande

Fête des Voyeurs [Online] Available:

https://www.artslant.com/ew/works/show/687895

(Accessed 3.01.2018)

To conclude, from its relative obscurity during the analogue era, in the digital age experimental animation has come to represent a hybrid form of moving image practice with infinite creative possibilities that are well-suited to new media art practice. Weibel talks about how with "the practices of the new technological media we can also embark on a fresh evaluation of the practices of the old non-technological media" (2006). In this regard, one can hold up the new media practice of experimental animation against the old technological medium of experimental animation as a prime example.

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