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Abstract: Industrial processes such as the Animation studio systems have been a major contributor to the development of stylised and reductive line drawing as a graphic form of communication. Efforts to reduce time and labour as well as the serialised nature of commercial animation have all contributed to a mode of representation that operates not as visual realism but as a codified graphic language. In a visually saturated culture, where there is also an increasing emphasis on fidelity, resolution and realism, what place does the stylised simplistic and flattened pictorial representation have as an affecting experience? The western impulse to 'make real' the artificial has driven image technology towards mimesis, where even electronic portability and bandwidth are no longer factors in determining levels of detail and realism, yet despite this we are still attracted to graphic simplicity and caricatural abstraction.

Using both historical and contemporary examples, this paper will explore stylised animated graphic representation as a form of language, and analyse how it has been used in fine art practice.

Key words: Caricature, stylised graphics, animation, art practice,

The Language of Animated Line

Introduction

The graphic language of stylised two-dimensional animation is an acquired language, but unlike written language, graphic animation language (like its counterpart comics language), does not need tutoring in order to be understood. Somehow through experience rather than instruction, we are able to decipher the ambiguous and idiosyncratic line to make sense of the whole conceptually and spatially. We can decipher a collection of lines and pattern as representational, even though 'the cartoon is wrong in the sense that it does not produce the same sheaf of light rays to the eye that the object does' (Hochberg 1972). The continued existence of this stylised graphic language hinges on our need to find pattern and meaning in the visual world, and often tests the capacity for how minimally pictorial meaning can be conveyed. This acceptance or even desire for 'minimalism' in an industrial graphic sense may have originally developed for economic, budget and delivery reasons, but now as technological restrictions in terms of display and distribution are collapsing, the use of simple animated line rather than pictorial mimesis seems to be driven by purely aesthetic and creative reasons. The qualities of the graphic language of Animation share many qualities with comics and graphic illustration, as certainly their histories have traveled a similar path. But what of course distinguishes the language of animation is time and movement. And although comics do have a temporal aspect to the form, kinetic movement is the realm of animation. I will discuss this temporal graphic language of animation in terms of comparing the following: **traditional studio based character animation and non-studio, independent animation**

Traditional studio based character animation

Early animation, before the advent of the cell system developed from a continuation of print media (illustration and weekly newspaper comic strips) and the newfound novelty of moving pictures. The graphic style of early animation works complimented and reflected the current popular aesthetics of the time, such as the flat poster style of Art Nouveau and *typographic* comic strips. Norman Klein (1993) explains the *typographical* character as an expansion of the illustrated or printed page. He traces the playful use of incorporating typographic forms into the pictorial as an influence of Russian theory from the 1920's, travelling via immigration and popular culture to American print comics.

In addition, early graphic style was also a consequence of the technical limitations of print and moving image media. Colour was still in its infancy in newspaper printing, and early film stock of the 1910's and 20's lacked the tonal sensitivity of later years and so subtle shades of grey were often indecipherable and rendered useless. Simple, bold black and white graphics not only projected well in limited situations and with comparatively inefficient projectors, but also reproduced well as multiple copies were made from the original negative for distribution. This technological limitation was again later highlighted with the advent of Television, where early black and white transmission was not really black at white at all, but rather a limited spectrum of greys.

Otto Messmer's (1892 - 1983) Felix the Cat, also a continuation from the comic strip in silent era animation, was typical of the typographical cartoon style, and utilised ideograms to indicate ideas that would otherwise be communicated via sound such as sound effects, dialogue or verbal exclamations. This gave the narrative a certain freedom, as the audience was not always expected to view the frame as a window or "proscenium arch" into a realistic space, but instead a metaphoric space that was allowed to continuously play between the abstract and the representational. Silent era animation evolved as a kind of technologically enhanced printed page, where reading and viewing coexisted, while also revealing its materiality allowing the presence of blank space as pure projected light.



Felix all puzzled – 1924 from the Pat Sullivan comic

[link to Youtube excerpt:](http://www.youtube.com/user/caricaturestudy?feature=mhum#p/u/2/VL_sqHeJ6OU)

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This period of pre-sound animation was unfortunately brief, but probably one of the most interesting periods of Studio animation, as with the development of talking pictures, these more modernist qualities of playing with surface, line and composition made way for story and illusion. For earlier animation pioneers such as Winsor McCay (1867 – 1934), line drawing allowed a plasticity of form that was ideal for the depiction of his surrealistic dreamscapes (*Little Nemo in Slumberland*) and fantastic spectacle (*Gertie the Dinosaur*) that creatively

wouldn't be plausible using photographic moving image. Winsor McCay created these works single handedly, drawing a staggering amount of images (up to 4000) for each animation. This painstaking process was obviously very time-consuming and costly, and so though McCay was influential with artists from the studio system, labour saving techniques in Studios had to be developed.



Excerpt from *Little Nemo* 1911

[link to Youtube excerpt:](http://www.youtube.com/user/caricaturestudy?feature=mhum#p/a/u/1/_xp17pwbL7E)

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The anatomy of later traditional industrialised animation characters by contrast (i.e. from the studio system) is comparatively more regimented, often based on circular shapes that can be traced from a stencil set and reproduced accurately in accordance to the proscribed model sheets.



Betty Boop model sheet showing circularised body parts

Whether this circularised character is allowed to stray from the sum of its parts depends on the rules of the particular studio and to some degree the era. A general rule of thumb specified that if a character was stretched or squashed (deviating from the circular shapes), the sum total of the shape should never actually change volume, because in doing so rather than representing believable character distortion would actually portray a kind of character morphosis. Character distortion such as 'squash and stretch' as well as metamorphosis were particularly popular during the 20's and 30's but dwindled in use after this time.

Characters from the Fleischer Brothers cartoons were allowed a liberal amount of plasticity and distortion, whereas Disney was very strict about the degree of distortion, and later even describes metamorphosis as disruptive to the depiction of naturalism and so generally outlawed it (Klein 2004). Disney sensed that during the brief moment of the *tween* (the frames in-between) the sequence lost its illusionary depiction of 3-dimensional form and momentarily drew the viewers' awareness to the flat surface of the screen.



Betty's father morphing into a victrola, from *Minnie the Moocher*,
Fleischer Studios, 1932

[link to Youtube excerpt:](http://www.youtube.com/user/caricaturestudy?feature=mhum#p/a/u/1/36Nhbv1f50Q)

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It is also interesting to note that in many Betty Boop cartoons, Betty's form actually mutated from one scene to the next even when distortion wasn't part of the narrative. This was probably indicative of inexperienced animators, tight deadlines and a lack of thorough pre-production charts, however perhaps the Fleischers also understood that because of the endurance of Betty's image as a canonical character, these deviations of form did not hinder the viewers acceptance of the diegesis. The standardised system of designing characters via model sheets, quickly established itself as a mode of practice, and even today the familiar geometry and proportions are still present in much two-dimensional character animation. Though in the West, unfortunately contemporary two-dimensional animation is primarily relegated to a children's or youth audience, whereas pre-television animation was intended for adults. The association of simple character graphics = childishness is now firmly cemented.

The depiction of background space in stylised animation doesn't always strive for the same simplicity as foreground space. Because the background can be static, the imperative for time saving is not so applicable. Examples such as the work of Hayo Miyazaki, follows the aesthetic of the comics of Hergé whereby, while the characters are minimised and iconic, the backgrounds are lush, and realistic. Scott McCloud refers to this process as *masking* where the contrast between the foreground and background styles allows us to identify and almost inhabit the character. The addition of detail and realism prevents us from seeing ourselves, but with an iconic character it 'allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world' (McCloud 1993). We can *become* the character, but only remain a *spectator* of the landscape. This realistically rendered landscape may be beautiful but at the same time unknown or even threatening, and we may seek refuge in the safety and familiarity of the protagonist, whose minimalist iconic anatomy acts as a vessel for us to occupy for the journey of the narrative. Much of the studio animation up until the late

1940's followed the theatrical vaudeville space of detailed painted backgrounds, while pushing boundaries of stylised form predominantly with the characters. It was the groundbreaking studio UPA who made a radical shift in animation aesthetics with their animations *Brotherhood of Man* and later *Gerald Mc Boing Boing*. UPA incorporated Modernist compositional ideas into popular animation. Embracing all aspects of the arts from painting to the contemporary space of interior design and architecture, animation was no longer bound by the cluttered 19th century Proscenium arch and could allow for pictorial abstraction.

In the situation of simplistic stylised backgrounds we further enter into a world of ambiguity. Backgrounds can become protagonists, whether they take on an anthropomorphic nature or simply take precedence over the foreground. In Miyazaki's recent feature length animation *Ponyo*, inert backgrounds such as houses, mountains trees etc, are drawn in a soft rendered style, but the ocean which becomes one of the main characters, is drawn more graphically and stylistically. In an interview with Noboru Yoshida, the Art Director on *Ponyo* he describes this idea:

Mr. Miyazaki told me this in the very beginning, so I put special importance in making water expressive. For example, it is common to draw the outline of water with colour to produce a softer image. But instead, I used a black outline for water, just like I do for human characters. In other words, humans and nature are considered to be on the same level (Hideo 2006)

Non studio independent Animation

Commercially driven studios need simplicity in character design not only to save labour, but to also exploit the branding and merchandising qualities of easily recognisable iconic characters. Where commercial studio character animation strives for clarity and simplification, going to great lengths developing colour charts and model sheets to ensure that the foreground/background relationship is as clear as possible, non-character independent animation may be more pictorially ambiguous, even tending towards camouflage whereby foreground and background may spatially conflate. Camouflage may be considered the antithesis of caricature, where one seeks to distill and refine pictorial representation and the other to conceal and confuse it.

Marko Tadic's animation *I speak true things* refers to the mapping and search of a metaphorical utopian island, and was part of an exhibition of books, drawings and installed animation at Galerija Miroslav Kraljevic Zagreb 2009. *I speak true things* is a constant drawing, an animated chalk composition constantly recomposing itself, and where background/foreground, positive and negative space are continuously conflating and exchanging. Like the quest for the unobtainable utopian world, as soon as we manage to anchor our focus and assume a point of view, the transient chalk lines slide away and cast us again into spatial limbo. Like the typographic style of Felix the Cat, lines fluctuate between diagrammatic and pictorial forms, while also suggesting the chalkboard lightning sketch of 19Cth vaudeville performers, such as Georges Méliès (1861 – 1938) and Winsor McCay (1867 – 1934). The syntax of *I speak true things* is that of pre-cinema, before the language of montage and edits. We read the movement as lines transforming rather than a world in motion.



Marko Tadic, *I speak true things*, chalk animation 2009
<http://vimeo.com/6665648>

The properties of drawing *straight ahead action* – that is drawing every frame as you go, rather than dividing the action into keyframes or poses, are more significant than just a technical point of difference. Conceptually the sequence can evolve spontaneously without preplanning, but also to animate every frame as a consistent rhythm creates a unique hermetic space. The constant vibration of the fluttering lines in *I Speak True Things*, reminds us of the hum of the mechanized pre-digital world, governed by its own laws of physics, where the inhabitants of this space are often unstable and under threat of becoming entangled and fused with neighbouring lines. With *I Speak True Things*, this instability is a pleasant one, a fluctuating perceptual voyage between deep space and material surface. But with the technique of Rotoscoping (tracing from moving source footage) this entanglement can be chaotic and can lead to a problem known as ‘boiling’. Boiling occurs when the tracing of outlines from source material becomes difficult to discern and a single line may begin to jump from one shape to another. Though the lines themselves may be stylised and simplistic, to make sense of their constant regrouping becomes like watching a pictorial *scrabble*, viewed at 25 frames per second.

At its worse, Rotoscoping can be relied on as just a lazy gimmick to make up for a lack of ideas, but at its best it conveys a strange alternate reality, a scrambled transmission from the mind's eye.



Refill, Isobel Knowles and Madeleine Griffith, rotoscoped animation 2001

What the student of rotoscoping quickly learns is that it is often only the *image in motion* that makes pictorial sense, as any one image on its own can appear quite abstract. However in relation to its adjacent frames in motion, the moving form becomes discernable. One of the most well known studies of this phenomenon is by the Swedish psychophysicist Gunner Johansson, in his research in the 1970s of biomechanical motion, where he attached little lights to the joints and heads of figures in motion in a darkened space, and then asked observers to discern the recordings. From the just the tiny dots of light,

Johansson found that the observers could distinguish many more details about the subject than just the movement alone. In his book 'Visual Perception of Biological motion and a model for its Analysis' Johansson explains:

'Our everyday experience also tells us that human vision not only detects motion directions in man and animals, but also distinguish different standard types of limb motion patters. We immediately see whether a person is walking, running, or dancing, and also if he is moving forward with identical speed in three cases. It is also a common experience that our visual apparatus is very sensitive to small deviations from such standard patterns. We immediately recognise, for instance a slight limp in walking, we distinguish between a tired and an elastic gait, etc. Furthermore, we think we sometimes can recognise a person exclusively from his style of walking, his gestures etc.' (Johansson 1974)

To freeze-frame these moving experiments, would probably merely resemble a constellation of dots or perhaps vaguely a human figure, but the continuous motion renders them extremely concentrated with information. Like the single frame of a Rotoscoped sequence, in our mind we rebuild the form, conceptually rendering solid what are merely line and vector points. Johanssons moving dots communicate the language of perceptual biological movement, of recognisable forms, representational in their most minimal.

Much of these qualities that have evolved through animation production may actually be latent and unconscious for both the artist and the audience, but to intuitively *know* these qualities of movement and minimalism the artist can channel and refer to a long legacy of useful process, and the audience also, can appreciate and understand them. The accumulated learning goes both ways.

The animated work of contemporary artist Julian Opie (b.1958), also illustrates this idea well. Although seemingly anonymous and iconic, his figures are actually portraits, working from photographs and video of real people rather than types, reducing and distilling their image to simple outline. In his walking sculptures, which comprise of animated LED screens, the moving figures are surprisingly naturalistic despite their almost abstract form. The antithesis of caricature, where idiosyncratic features are selectively exaggerated in order to create a likeness, with Opie's moving figures the viewer relies not on the lines themselves, but the line movement to sense the likeness. These figures are stripped of compositional detail and yet like Johansson's biomechanical experiments we clearly see individual qualities in the motion, such as body weight, coordination and even whether they are wearing flat or hi-heeled shoes. Opie's moving figures can be understood through the lens of both the studio animation system and scientific imaging, where the visual information is understood both perceptually and symbolically.



Julian Opie *Walking Down O'Connell Street* Dublin 2008

[link to Youtube excerpt: http://www.youtube.com/user/caricaturestudy?feature=mhum](http://www.youtube.com/user/caricaturestudy?feature=mhum)

As I have already stated in the introduction, the current state of image technology no longer has any bearing on its fidelity. From I-phones to 3D cinema, there is no restriction on realism in regard to portability or technical exclusivity, in fact one of the novelties of the I-phone or I-touch is to mimic realistic tactility as a hand held portable screen surface. Despite its small size and consumer price tag, its visual mimesis is as stunning as a big budget movie, yet simple stylised animated applications are still thriving for handheld devices.

The hi-tech LED screens of Opie's 'walkers' portray simplistic monotone figures, whereas the lo-tech blackboard animation of Tadik's *I speak true things*, is intricate and multifarious. This comparison demonstrating that moving image complexity is now merely a matter of what is necessary for the idea and artistic practice need not be defined by its technological sophistication. Artists have the benefit of drawing on the language and tools of fine art, scientific, and the commercial worlds and certainly these worlds are not mutually exclusive as their influence and relationships have historically intertwined. Though these two works both demonstrate a mixed heritage in their use of animation language, they share a common need to use a visual system that is economical in its pictorial depiction, yet rich in its reception. Rather than mimicking the physical moving mirror world, this pictorial economy frees us from the noise and density of realistic representation where we may take pleasure in the reductive rendition. Being aware of the visual construction and accepting the conditions of a limited universe, the viewer may occupy a visual space that oscillates between the grammatic and the pictorial, simultaneously acknowledging the artifice, while also participating in its fiction.

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Martine Corompt lectures in Media Arts on hybrid art practices such as *Comics for Artists*, *Temporal Drawing* and *Experimental Animation* at the School of Art RMIT University. She is also undertaking a PhD at VCA Melbourne University titled 'Forced Perspectives: The analysis and practice of caricature in contemporary artworks'.

Her areas of research surround aspects of animation, such as anthropomorphism, caricature and the animate space. Much of her work is collaborative and interdisciplinary, seeking to incorporate sound, space and image together, while also occasionally exploring ideas surrounding the 'interactive artwork', highlighting the failings and clichés of interactivity, rather than being seduced by it as a form of liberation. Works such as *Dodg'em*, 2000 - 2006 an interactive sound installation, with Philip Samartzis, or more recently *No Answer* 2006, a collaborative public artwork with artist Philip Brophy commissioned by the City of Melbourne are especially mindful of the modulating effects of one medium upon the other, as well as highlighting the more direct relationship between spectator and artwork.