

CIN105 – Summer 2025
Animation

-not only are we in the last week of the semester, but we are in our last week of a section dedicated to “types of film” -- specifically, types of films other than those with which we were initially preoccupied in this course: that is, those of the fictional, narrative, live-action, and feature-length variety

-so...

-two weeks ago we talked about documentary and noted that there are a couple of interrelated things that define a film as such

-the first is, to invoke John Grierson, its commitment to a treatment, albeit a creative one, of actuality

-another way of putting this is to note, as Bill Nichols does, that documentary cinema pairs the act of representation with that of re-presentation

-AND the second defining attribute of documentary cinema is the expectations of its viewers, which are shaped both by the intentions of those involved in the production and distribution of documentaries AND by those techniques that have come, through their repeated use over time, to inspire trust and to connote truth

-then on Tuesday we discussed avant-garde or experimental cinema

-when doing so we noted that what distinguishes **these types of films**, first of all, are the conditions of their production, circulation, and reception AND, second, their goal of rejecting established cinematic conventions so as to expand the possibilities of film

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-in the process of covering this material in the course from the last two weeks, we also saw that in addition to narrative form, there are many non-narrative forms that a film can take

-documentary films, according to B&T, are typically either narrative, rhetorical, or categorical in form...

...whereas avant-garde films can be narrative, abstract, or associational [and, importantly, these categories may, and often do, leak]

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-when it comes to animation, this week's topic, we will see that talking about form, or a film's mode of organizing its material, doesn't get us any closer to understanding animation's specificity since animation can take any of these forms, narrative and non-narrative alike

-rather what distinguishes animated film from its live-action counterpart is the manner in which it is made, the processes involved in its construction

-to be precise, animation typically involves at least one of the following two attributes

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- 1) the presentation of imagery that has no 'real-world' status beyond the filmic universe
- 2) the creation of movement through the succession of individual static images

-I need to explain both of these attributes at greater length, but before I do so I want to take a slight detour through film history – hopefully this will

prove helpful in really nailing down why animation is a unique case study for our consideration.

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-back when we were studying documentary cinema, I noted that even though Nanook of the North is often designated as the first documentary, the first films ever made and exhibited publicly -- that is, those by the Lumiere Brothers -- can be regarded as its antecedent

-with their commitment to using the newly invented Cinematographe camera to capture reality, the Lumiere Brothers (as well as the team of camera operators that they sent around the world to gather imagery) were compelled by the same agenda that would come to define the documentary enterprise in subsequent years

-very shortly after the Lumiere Brothers began to realize their vision, however, another figure came along who had a radically different take on the questions of what cinema was best suited to accomplish and how one could realize its potential

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-that man was a stage magician by the name of Georges Melies

-in 1896 Melies got his hands on a camera (through Robert Paul) and started turning out his own films, which he produced in an almost entirely glass studio that he had constructed near his home

-in fact, he was so inspired that between 1897 and 1913 he produced approximately 500 films

-the most noteworthy of these for a number of reasons is one called A Trip to the Moon from 1902

Here is a clip – 4 minutes of the film, the full thing is just over 11 minutes in length

SHOW CLIP (4 minutes of a film that is just over 11 minutes)

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-one reason this film is so historically significant is not really germane to our discussion today, but nonetheless merits mention: it is that this was the first film to string together through editing multiple scenes and thereby to offer up the possibility of narrative development

-another reason it is so historically significant, however, should be of great concern to us today

-namely, A Trip to the Moon establishes another possible function for film other than producing slice of life documentation of the world as it is

-because Melies regarded film as a forum for the construction of spectacle and sheer fancy, he substituted staged illusion for unstaged reality, and contrived plots for everyday occurrences. The thing about film that most attracted Melies, unlike other early filmmakers, was not that it reproduced reality through photographic means, but that it did *that*, and the *also that it could manipulate that reality to produce impossible effects*.

-in short, he laid the groundwork for an alternate tradition than that pioneered by the Lumiere Brothers...

-a tradition that, we could argue, gains its fullest expression in animated film

-what do I mean by this?

-well, **first of all** what we see in A Trip to the Moon is a desire to transcend the limits of the world as we know it on an everyday basis

-in traveling to the moon, the characters in the film perform actions that, in 1902, were seemingly impossible, way more impossible than they feel today, post moon-landing.

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- but perhaps even more importantly, the film's representation of the moon's surface is utterly fantastic and as such is characterized by a large degree of artifice: elaborate sets, pyrotechnics, lots of props and costumes
- the only authentic thing on view are the actors

- in short, the film retreats from reality in order to create its own world

- second of all**, the film systematically exploits certain medium-specific devices that enhance the fantastic nature of the diegetic world

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- most significantly, it uses superimposition and a kind of primitive version of stop motion in order to produce magical effects

NOTE: we know what superimposition is, but what is stop motion?

- bearing the precedent set by Melies in mind, let's return to the attributes that I mentioned a few minutes ago

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1) the presentation of imagery that has no 'real-world' status beyond the filmic universe

- in many cases that imagery is not even photographically rendered

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- for example, in the most common form of animation historically -- **drawn animation** and, even more specifically, **cel animation** -- imagery is drawn directly onto layers of celluloid acetate

- likewise, in **cut-out animation**, shapes are created by the layering of various planes (be they pieces of paper or celluloid acetate or whatever else)

-now in both of these animation processes, there is a photography step involved in the production of film frames like those we are looking at

-that is, after the image is composited, it is photographed, as is every other frame in the film as well – these are then projected much like traditionally photographic film

-BUT nonetheless we would still say in this case that the reality of the film is not photographically rendered

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-**computer animation** and **direct animation** are two forms of animation that avoid photography all together

-in the case of computer animation imagery is designed on the computer and then rendered by the computer

- At the time a film like Toy Story was made, the only time celluloid entered the picture was when the movie was printed to film for exhibition on analog projectors. Today, this pretty much never happens anymore, the film will be shipped to theatres on a hard drive, known as a DCP or Digital Cinema Package, and projected digitally.

-direct animation, in contrast, involves a method I mentioned last week: using film as a kind of sculptural medium by etching, drawing, painting, or coloring directly onto the film stock

-in this case celluloid is ever present, but it is not used in conjunction with a camera

-in the case of the last two types of animation I want to mention -- **claymation** and **puppet or model animation** -- the imagery at hand is photographically rendered, but the contents of that photographic imagery have a tenuous relationship to the “real-world,” occupying instead the terrain of fantasy, of simulation, of miniaturization

2) The second characteristic that defines animation is the creation of movement through a succession of individual static images

-this condition speaks to the fact that movement in animated works is produced differently than it is in live-action films

-in the latter, a camera records action as it would be performed in “real life”

-there is the possibility for modifying that action by, for example, changing the speed of recording, but *the continuity of the action* reflects its status as “real-life movement”

-in animation, however, even if the imagery is photographically derived (which is, admittedly, increasingly a minority practice), its movement is still produced in an unorthodox fashion

-for example, an animated film can put inanimate objects into motion through the process of stop motion: it will film a single frame of such an object in one position, then reposition the object for the next frame, which will represent a slightly different stage of movement, then reposition the object again for a third frame AND SO ON

-when the frames are then projected in rapid enough succession, they are combined so as to produce the illusion of movement

We saw an example of this type of film on Tuesday with Ishu Patel’s *The Bead Game*

-you might be thinking to yourself at this point, “But wait a minute, live action films also hinge on the illusion of movement...They also work by way of a series of static images that are projected in succession at a rapid enough rate to ensure the viewer’s perception of smooth, continuous movement”

-sure, that’s true, but the difference is this:

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- with live-action, you have movement initially, which gets broken down into successive stages, when filmed
- ...and **then gets reconstituted** through the projection process

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- with animation, movement at the site of projection is not **re**-constituted
- it is simply constituted
- in other words, what animation does is put into motion objects that have never been anything but static in “real life”

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- to bring this point home, let's watch an example of pixillation, the process whereby three-dimensional objects or figures are made to appear to move through single-frame animation or stop-motion

WATCH Meat Love (Jan Svankmajer, 1988) SVANK-MEYER

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- Norman McLaren, whose film *Begone Dull Care* we watched on Tuesday, sums up this process when he says:

“Animation is not the art of drawings that move, but rather the art of movements that are drawn. What happens *between* each frame is more than important than what happens *on* each frame.”

- with McLaren, this idea is best illustrated by his most famous and celebrated work Neighbours

- in the case of this film the imagery at hand does have a real world status

-McLaren uses as his raw material two live actors who are acting on location in a real world space

-BUT the way he produces the movement of these actors as well as portions of their setting is by way of pixilation

WATCH clip from Neighbours

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-as a result of animation's fabricated movement AND the fact that its imagery is often generated from beyond the realm of a reality that can be photographed, animation offers us a very different kind of world than that which typically prevails in live-action films

-indeed, most animated films trade on their "other worldly" status by creating a diegesis in which the laws of physics and biology, which govern action and existence in the real world, don't apply

-as a result, characters can drop from great heights with no observable damage to their bodies

-animals can speak in full sentences

-objects can dance

-and entire landscapes can shape shift in the blink of an eye

-moreover, when these things occur, viewers of animation take it all in stride since animation encourages a viewing practice predicated upon the suspension of disbelief

Sometimes, the nature of this is played for self-reflexive laughs in animated films, as in this one you may be familiar with:

CLIP – Duck Amuck

-at the same time that animated films usher us into worlds that are markedly different from our own, however, they often do so with formal techniques -- or at least the simulation of formal techniques -- that are incredibly familiar to us from live-action cinema

-in other words, animation is often constructed so that it appears to work in accordance with the many conventions we have studied this semester

WATCH clip from Shrek (from start of ch. 6 [26:17] to 27:31)

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-what this clip from Shrek shows is that even though the world of Shrek deviates from our own in certain fundamental ways -- it contains ogres and talking donkeys, for starters -- the way that world is constructed is very familiar...

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-...since the film works to make sure that its space, time, and causal relations, however fantastic they might be, are rendered legible

-the way it does so is by employing -- or at least **simulating** -- so many of the techniques we have talked about this semester, including shot-reverse shot editing, establishing shots, and a sound mix that privileges dialogue over ambient noise

-the reason I just stressed the word “simulating” is because when talking about animation, particularly computer animation and cel animation, everything that we perceive, from the mise-en-scene to camera movement to a straight cut between two shots of variable duration, is constructed on a frame by frame basis

-in other words, what the animated film actually does is create an impression of those things and it does this through the way the individual images are drawn and then the way those individual images are combined when presented sequentially

-so as much as the vocabulary we've accrued in our study of film form can be used to describe what we see when we watch an animated film, it is important to bear in mind those two fundamental attributes of animation that I mentioned earlier

-what those attributes make clear is the fact that animation is not only a means of constructing a world, but also a means of constructing a particular way of representing that world, one which has been informed by, and typically seeks to emulate, cinematic conventions, but which is *actually* predicated in fundamentally different rules

This notion, that feels particularly pertinent when discussing computer animation, that animated film is in certain important ways *ontologically different from live-action cinema*, will return at the end of the course when we consider more fully the philosophical distinctions between celluloid cinema and digital cinema

For now, that is all for today's lecture – a short lecture just introducing these ideas. It's the last class of the semester, so I want to leave it relatively light – we will return to these questions when we resume the course in July