The American Pioneers of Abstract Animation

What is Abstract Animation?

“In contrast to industrially produced live-action productions, abstract animation defies the naturalized logic of a forward-moving cause-and-effect narrative.” - Maureen Furniss, Art in Motion.

In abstract animation there are usually no “traditional” type of characters, which the audience can easily identify with, and there is also no definitive concept of time and place. When an abstract animation is over the audience does not leave with a complete understanding of the meaning as they may with a standard live-action or commercial animation. If this is the case, then what is the purpose of abstract animation?

According to Assistant Professor of Kinetic Imaging at Virginia Commonwealth University, Pamela Taylor Turner, abstract imagery can be considered as “forms pulled from observed objects, pulling inner meaning out, going beyond the quest to re-represent what has already been presented.” She goes on to argue that “to create such imagery is an inherent tendency in human nature,” but one that “is often sidelined for more auspicious visual illusions such as realistic rendering of real humans in unreal narratives.” (Turner 1)

Although there is a drive for animators to create animations focused on the simple narrative structure that will appeal to audiences, it is in the artist’s nature to create the opposite. A true artist will take their medium, explore it, examine and push it to the limit in order to represent that which has not been seen before. Over the years of developing the genre abstract animators have used every means imaginable to create their art. From drawing and painting on paper to cut-outs and collages, the artists picked their medium and explored it as much as they could.
**AMERICAN ABSTRACT ANIMATION**

*Diagonal Symphony, Viking Eggeling - 1924*

“While Max Fleischer was making his first Koko the Clown cartoons in the U.S., three abstract artists named Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling (all German animators) created their history-making films, *Opus 1*, *Rhythm 21* and *Diagonal Symphony* respectively, thus crossing... ‘the glistening bridge’ from still to moving art.”

~Maura McDonnel, *Visual Music*

The 1920s was the period when animation started to take off and during that time American directors were focusing solely on creating visual representations of the world, whereas European animators were focusing on recording the abstract possibilities of moving visuals. The avant-garde movement in America did not begin until the 1940s, after World War II, a time that was ripe for abstract animation to flourish.

War changes people and it certainly changed the priorities and views of Americans. After the war people were less idealistic and more introverted in their personal meditations. WWII was a time of chaos and Americans got lost in it. In order to find their way out they began searching for meaning in something new, something they had never seen before. This inevitably led to more artists, and luckily more money for the arts.

The number of grants offered by cultural institutions to independent artists during the 1940s drastically increased, and a flourishing circuit of 16 millimetre films grew in Universities museums, libraries and film clubs, thus creating the American abstract animation and giving birth to several pioneers who led the front.

**THE WORK OF MARY ELLEN BUTE**

*Born 1906 - Died 1983*

Mary Ellen Bute was raised in Texas, where she spent much time studying the art of painting. Over the years she developed her skill but it was never quite enough. According to Bute herself “painting was not flexible enough and too confined within its frame.” (Russett and Starr 104) To release herself from such a confinement Bute began to examine the visual study of motion, and it wasn’t long until she found the art of animation.

During her studies Bute became acquainted with musicologist-mathematician-painter, Joseph Schillinger. His theory of mathematical composition as applied to kinetic arts fascinated Bute, and she began composing paintings using form, line and color, as counterparts to compositions in sound. (Russett and Starr 105) This concentration in form based on mathematics followed Bute throughout all of her career. In fact Lewis Jacob’s describes Bute’s first six films as “... all composed upon mathematical formulae depicting in ever-changing lights and shadows, growing lines and forms, deepening colors and tones, the tumbling, racing impressions evoked by the musical accompaniment.” (Russett and Starr 102)

Bute was a pioneer in the early American abstract animation movement. She directed over a dozen films from 1933 to the late 1950s. One of the first films she created was *Synchronomy No. 2* (http://dai.ly/9PmH1p). Bute was a great appreciator of music, referring to her own work as visual music. She set many of her works to music usually classical pieces like Bach and
Shostakovich and Synchronomy No. 2 is a great example of this visual music style. The piece is set to Wagner’s “O’ Evening Star,” and one of its opening screens states; “The following film is designed by a modern artist to create moods through the eye as music creates moods through the ear.” The animation that follows matches the energy and structure of the accompanying music precisely. It is exactly as Bute wanted. The visual animation appeals to the eye exactly as the music appeals to the ear.

Another work animated by Bute is the short Dada (http://dai.ly/bjvIvs). This piece was first created as part of a newsreel segment, which aimed to show Bute and her husband Ted Nemeth at work in their New York Studio. It is a short animation but its whimsical use of light refraction and its perfect timing with the accompanying music makes it a great example of Bute’s style.

In 1938 Bute animated the film Escape (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRmu-GcClls&feature=player_embedded) which was a visual illustration of Bach’s Toccata and Fugue. The animation could be considered less abstract than Bute’s other works based on the fact that it contains dramatic elements that are animated to what appears like a simple narrative story structure. The piece consists of a triangle struggling to escape from behind a grid of horizontal lines and into a blue abyss which represents it’s freedom. Apparently Bute’s sketches for the piece were “poured onto paper one evening without much conscious effort or any previous determination to do it.” (Russett and Starr 104) A great final example of how brilliant an artist Bute was.

Jules Engel was one of the renowned American abstract artist and animator from the avant-garde post World War II era of animation. Originally from Hungary, he moved to the U.S. at a very young age, where his education was focused on painting, music, and dance. He began his career as a painter and sculptor before becoming involved in animation first with Screen Gems then with Disney.

While at Disney, he contributed his talents to segments of Fantasia. He choreographed “Dance of the Hours” and his choreography for “The Mushroom Dance” is considered a hallmark in animation. Despite this, he felt more culturally in tune with the UPA animators and, after leaving Disney, became one of UPA’s foremost personalities (Bendazzi 241). He later served as the founder of California Institute for the Arts’ Program in Experimental Animation.
THE STYLE OF JULES ENGEL

Engel’s style incorporated painting and art in movement. He was accomplished in both the dynamic and static arts, so his abstract works explored the interplay between movements, shapes, and colors; he saw abstract film as an excellent medium to explore space and time in choreography. As evident in many of his own films, dance choreography is intertwined with a variety of graphic styles (Moritz 109). He also found his inspiration from many sources, not just music. An examination of Engel’s work shows that, while he was able to produce works of “high” art, he was equally able to produce quality work that his peers would consider more “mainstream,” among them his contributions to Gerald McBoing Boing and Mr. Magoo.

Works By Jules Engel
- Swan [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFuH4evmrZI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PFuH4evmrZI)
- The Toy Shop [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULICHByqblg&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULICHByqblg&feature=related)
- The Meadow [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0jMPyzk9Gs&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0jMPyzk9Gs&feature=related)
- Fantasia (The Mushroom Dance) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzfyK_0fmIU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzfyK_0fmIU)
- Gerald McBoing Boing [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNsYQDmEopw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNsYQDmEopw)

THE WORK OF DOUGLASS CROCKWELL

**Born 1904 - Died 1968**

Douglass Crockwell was a well-known American artist and illustrator in the early 20th century. Crockwell illustrated covers for the Saturday Evening Post, among others, and created an estimated 480 full page illustrations during the course of his career. (Russett and Star 106)

According to Giannalberto Bendazzi, Crockwell was interested in moving beyond static illustration and instead painting “continuing pictures.” Crockwell began experimenting with what he called “comic animation” in 1934. His method involved an animation stand on which were stacked several panes of glass, lightly separated. Crockwell would paint directly on the glass panes and then record them using a film camera mounted overhead. Using plastic paint, he would add and remove paint to create the effect that he desired. Crockwell characterized the artistic product that results from this process as “the four dimensional traces objects leave in space during the course of their existence.” (Bendazzi 100)
THE WORK OF DOUGLASS CROCKWELL CONT...

Crockwell patented a system for applying music to abstract animation, but was unable to find a studio who was interested in licensing it. (Crockwell) Later he advanced his plastic painting technique to include clay and high-melting-temperature wax. This wax would melt under film lights, resulting in unique and surreal visualizations. (Russett and Star 108)

Crockwell’s work incorporated animation principles such as squash and stretch, ease in and ease out, and anticipation, techniques and styles that are typically not found in abstract animation and very unusual for any animated films of the 1940s.

Crockwell was fascinated by the visual effect that was produced by the combination of film lights, wax blocks, and manual stop-motion camera system. “A three-dimensional block is thoughtfully built up of many pieces of colored wax, interlaced and twisted to form a progressive composition. The end of the block is successively sliced off and photographed. The resultant animation is delightfully fluid and unique. If some of the waves are transparent or translucent, the motion becomes strongly anticipatory and unworldly.” (Film Culture)

Notable works

- Fantasmagoria I, II, and III
- Glens Falls Sequence - [http://vimeo.com/10882092](http://vimeo.com/10882092)
- The Long Bodies

INTERVIEW WITH MAUREEN FURNISS

The following are questions answered during a telephone interview with Maureen Furniss on June 6, 2010. Her answers have been paraphrased and edited for clarity.

In this new age of 3D CGI animation, do you think there is room for traditional, hand-drawn abstract animators?

More than one practice informs the films of animation. Those that are more art-based in practice don’t consider themselves filmmakers. There will always be room if people are interested in doing it; experimental works continue to be produced. It started with pencils; today the computer is part of film and is as prevalent as the pencil. There are also computer animators versus those that consider the computer a tool. It doesn’t mean it’s going to take over – it’s just here. There are so many different alternatives available now and CGI is just one of many.

Professor Maureen Furniss, Courtesy of USC School of Cinematic Arts
What are some of the latest trends, if any, in today’s abstract art and animation?
Experimentation acts as motivation for people. It’s possible to classify abstract work as various kinds of aesthetics, like live action films. [Experimental films] are less likely to be conventional, though, but based more on personal aesthetic. Feature film lends itself more to trends.

For instance, one of my students is experimenting with animation therapy – creating films for hospital environments, using theory of color and motion of forms for soothing biorhythms. So again, it depends on aesthetics. What makes the work unique is how they personalize it – they’re not just doing it for commercial purposes.

There didn’t seem to be a whole lot of Jules Engel’s work available via the web. Can you recommend other resources for his works and the works of some of the other American abstract animators?

You might want to look at the Iota Center Foundation for more information on Jules Engel. Also, Cal Arts has some, but I don’t think you’re probably in a position to access it. If you search for Janeanne Dill, she has written on Jules and can give you some information.

You can also find a lot of experimental works at film festivals. You can go to the Annecy Films website (http://www.annecy.org/home), the Ottawa Animation Festival (http://www.animationfestival.ca/), the Cal Arts experimental showcase (http://film.calarts.edu/main/streaming/expanim20.html) and also the Iota Center (http://www.iotacenter.org/).

I also recommend my book The Animation Bible (http://www.amazon.com/Animation-Bible-Practical-Animating-Flipbooks/dp/081099545X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1276213952&sr=1-1). You can email anyone there and they’ll be happy to help you.