Cross-Influence in Abstract German Animation of the Silent Era
by Jim Middleton

Author's note: These notes represent some random comments based on a presentation at the Starved Rock Retreat in April, 2000. There might be a germ of a thesis for some aspiring MFA candidate here, too.

When exploring the evolution of Animation (with a capital A) as an Art, we need not look far into the development of the genre to fall upon some striking examples. The earliest extant specimens, by their basic nature, were replete with abstraction, and by the mid-1920s, the visuals had coalesced into a screen language that had a distinct Germanic flavor. It is understandable, therefore, that artists shared their enthusiasm and cross-pollinated each other's works. Ultimately, their influence made its way to America, where the styles were adopted to the tastes of not only commercial animation, but narrative cinema as well.

The simple line-drawings of Emile Cohl were a by-product of his Absurdist school of art from the 19th century. Fantasmagorie (1906), his first film, blended one dreamlike image into another within its sixty-second screen time. His subsequent films were often stream-of-consciousness rambles that explored drug-induced fantasy (Le Reve d'un Garcon du café) and odd character juxtapositions (Le Retapeur-de cervelles). Later, other French films such as Anemic Cinema or Ballet Mechanique tossed in abstract visuals amid unrelated images (hats, bottles, pouting lips, fitful animations of Charlie Chaplin) in an attempt to explore visual technique at the expense of narrative continuity.

In the United States, early films by J. Stuart Blackton at Edison also toyed with abstract imagery, but only as a method of film illusion. Humorous Phases of Funny Faces (1907) has some blurred sketches that evolve into les visages grotesques, but that appeared to be less an attempt to
Greetings from the President by Jim Middleton

The ASIFA Central retreat and conference is approaching in a few weeks, KAFI in May and as if that isn't enough, there are taxes! Fortunately, software is a valid business expense, not merely a way of life. For those of you on my email spam list, you've already been teased ad nauseam with the door prizes that will be looking for a home at the retreat—and since we're always in the need for space to fill, let's iterate the goods at this juncture.

And note all the ART involved here!
• A 1964 Viennese Weekly ART Calendar. OK, so it's 38 years old, but there are purty pitchers and it represents the year that the Addams Family and the Munsters premiered, It's A Small World debuted at the New York World's Fair, and BASIC ran the IBM system 360, a computer the size of a large upright freezer with all the power of a good calculating wristwatch of today.
• The ART of the New Yorker 1925-1995
• 102 Favorite Paintings by Norman Rockwell
• Jerry Beck's 50 Greatest Cartoons...6 copies!
• An ART Nouveau Coloring Book
• Walt Disney's Animated Characters...2 copies!
• Snow White-- an ART in its Making!
• The Adventures of Aaron, and a load of comic books, both new and "well loved." Aaron Warner, a Battle Creek comic strip artist, ran a taco restaurant in downtown Battle Creek for a year before figuring that it might not be the most logical affiliation for his talents. So he liquidated. He had lots of comic books.
• Rocko's Modern Christmas Video
• A 3-volume set of Simpsons Episodes
• Walt Disney's Bambi ART Book
• Michael Barrier's Hollywood Cartoons -- a hefty book of anecdotes, explored in the last issue of Frame by Frame
• Cartoon Crazy's DVD -- the joy of public domain animation now hits mediocre digital transfers! (There’s also a copy of R. Crumb's Coffee Table ART Book in the collection, but that’s definitely not for the faint of heart.)

Oh! And...and...Volume II of "Animate THIS!" -- yet another collection of public domain musical selections gleaned and cleaned from prehistoric sources (forget vinyl, we're talking SHELLAC here, gang).

Wow! How do these things come to be available? Well, there's a recession on (don't we know THAT) and outlet malls think books are passe. So out they go! I collect 'em, sort 'em, and share 'em. But you've got to make it to the retreat to get 'em! So carpool, hitch, or email yourself to Chicago. I can't take these back with me, and if I leave them in the hands of non-animators it will just herniate the right side of their cerebrums. And that's not a pretty sight.

And then, after THAT, we've got Kalamazoo in May...and Ottawa in October...and before you know it...MORE TAXES!

One more thing, and I'll let our ever-suffering Jennifer try to put this ramble into small enough type to fit...at the retreat, BRING YOUR IDEAS FOR OUR WEB SITE. We're looking at ways to make the site more useful, appealing, and FUN. Have a favorite link? Bring it! Want your registry information updated? Pontificate! Is puce your favorite color? Well, we have therapy for that one...

See you soon!
Yr hmbl tsypst,
Jim Middleton

ASIFA/Central Mission Statement
ASIFA: Association Internationale du Film d'Animation

The purpose of ASIFA/Central is to promote the art of animation locally and internationally and to promote communication among animators and between animators and devotees. -- adopted 3/92

Printed in the U.S.A on recycled paper.

2 SPRING 2002
Stubble Trouble Receives Oscar Nomination for Best Animated Short Film

STUBBLE TROUBLE, the delightful animated film produced by Calabash Animation and directed by animator, Joe Merideth, has been nominated for this year's Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film.

Stubble Trouble is the first film to be completed under Calabash Animation's "Animated Shorts Program," in which a story concept is chosen from submissions from the talent group of Calabash Animators to go into production. Stubble Trouble has already won a second place for animation at the Palm Springs International Short Film Festival and is nominated for an Annie Award for Best Animated Short Film.

Director Joe Meredith explains the premise of Stubble Trouble by saying: "It's the age old story of man's journey to understand and accept himself." The film's hero, Og, fights a losing battle with his hyperactive beard as he pursues love in the Stone Age.

In speaking of Stubble Trouble's Oscar nomination, Calabash Animation's founder and director, Ed Newmann said: "At Calabash we never discovered a formula for inspiring the uninspired-- but we've always been happy to nurture and encourage people who are equipped with their own initiative, and Joe Merideth has plenty of that.

Eight years ago, Joe was hired at Calabash as a cel painter. This year he's been nominated for an Academy Award. That journey was fueled entirely by his own persistence and devotion to excellence. We could not possibly be more proud of him."

Calabash Animation, based in Chicago, is a classical character animation house specializing in cel, computer, clay, cut-paper and sand animation and special effects. In the years since its inception, Calabash has created two original television specials for the CBS owned and operated stations, produced several children's films for Encyclopedia Britannica, and created hundreds of highly successful TV commercials for products such as Lucky Charms, Trix, HoneyNut Cheerios, Little Caesar's Pizza, Mr. Clean, Keebler Wheatables and others. More information can be found at their website www.calabashanimation.com.

Article courtesy of JANE AYER PUBLIC RELATIONS, INC.
While in America, Fischinger was teased for producing more children than films, but managed to create a handful of masterpieces: first, *Allegretto* for Paramount and Lotte Reininger. He created the aforementioned documentary *Berlin*, and was integral in the special effects work on Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. He saw sketches by Fischinger and encouraged him into film, bought a wax-slicing machine for effects that Fischinger developed, and had a striking influence on Fischinger's early techniques. He then coordinated the production of Lotte Reininger's *Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926), brought in Fischinger's wax-slicing machine for special effects, and the result was the first animated feature film, over a decade before Disney's *Snow White*.

With the coming of sound, Ruttmann chose to stay with narrative film, at one point helping edit *Olympia*. However, Fischinger continued developing his abstract style and technique into the sound era, and most notably, into the Nazi era. Nazis hated abstract art. When Fischinger began winning awards, especially after his Italian premiere of *Komposition im Blau* (1935), he was encouraged to take his "degenerate art" to America (his brother, Hans, remained behind, and before being shipped to the Russian front, managed to complete the final abstract animated film in Germany in 1939).

While in America, Fischinger was teased for producing more children than films, but managed to create a handful of masterpieces: first, *Allegretto* for Paramount...
10th Annual Midwest Animators Conference
Friday Apr 26 - Sunday Apr 28, 2002

REGISTRATION DATES
See the ASIFA/Central web site at http://www.asifa.org/animate for registration information.

REGISTER NOW TO ENSURE YOUR SEAT!
ANIMATION CONFERENCE BROCHURE, REGISTRATION & CANCELLATION INFO, SCHEDULE, ALTERNATE LODGING LIST
Contact: Mary Lou Haynes
e-mail: morgpk@aol.com
SUBJECT: "10th Annual Animators Conference 2002"

FAX/WRITE US
Indicate "10th Annual Animators Conference 2002" or "Int'l Helen Victoria Haynes WORLD PEACE Storyboard & Animation Scholarship Competition"
Fax: 1-508-445-5924
Post: Send SASE to:
M. L. Haynes
PMB 324
3400 W. 111th Street
Chicago, IL USA 60655
Email: asifaconf@hotmail.com
Voice mail: 773-233-1017

LODGING
DoubleTree Guest Suites, near I-355 & I-88, is near Morton Arboretum & Forest Preserves!
Accessible from both Chicago airports (O’Hare & Midway)! Please Request 'ASIFA / Central - Midwest Animators Conference'. Lodging fees are payable to DoubleTree Guest Suites.

RATES
$99. per night, Single / Double / Triple occupancy.
$109. per night, Quadruple occupancy.
Suites: 2 Rooms, Kitchenette, 2 TVs, Sony Playstation, Data Port/Internet Access, Hair dryer!
Amenities: 2 Pools, Jacuzzis, Saunas, Fitness Center, Lounge, Restaurants, Local Shuttle, Parking, more!

Hotel
DoubleTree Guest Suites at Esplanade Conference & Fitness Center
Address: 2111 Butterfield Road,
Downers Grove, IL USA 60515
Hotel Phone: 630 - 971 - 2000
Central Reservations: 1-800-222-8733
Fax: 1-630-971-1168
Web site: www.doubletree.com

Abstract German Animation (Middleton) continued from 4

(who didn’t know what to do with it), Optical Poem for MGM (who, with Fred Quimby in charge of animation, also didn’t know what to do with it), and the storyboard for the Toccata and Fugue sequence for Fantasia at Disney (who didn’t understand it). Allegretto and Optical Poem survive as testimony to his ability as both an abstract artist and an animator who knew how to make his work appeal to a general audience, even if his distributors were lost. It took the reissue of Fantasia in DVD "special edition" for Disney to fully acknowledge his contribution—they had gone from complete denial in the 1970’s to an attempt at reconstructing Fischinger’s vision for the DVD release, no doubt due to the diligence of John Canemaker (whose 1977 Camera Three retrospective on Fischinger had a profound influence on your humble typist’s life).

As Fischinger’s output waned in the 1950s, a seemingly unlikely resurgence in abstract animation appeared in the work of Alfred Hitchcock. His opening sequences, designed by Saul Bass, for Vertigo, North by Northwest, and Psycho all bore striking resemblances to films from Walther Ruttmann. The swirls of Vertigo recalled the silent-era
Abstract German Animation (Middleton) continued from 5.

studies by Fischinger. The linear work was
reminiscent of the opening for Berlin. And even
the nightmare by Jimmy Stewart in Vertigo
hearkened back to a similarly staged episode in
Metropolis. There is a possible explanation—
during the 1920s, Hitchcock was employed at
UFA, first as a title writer, then as an assistant
director. He would have been there, learning
the basics of his filmmaking craft, while the likes
of Ruttmann, Fischinger, and Reininger were
creating their own visual vocabulary. Hitchcock,
ever the economist and possessed of a long
memory, probably learned some of this
vocabulary for his own, later use.
-Jim Middleton

References:
Crafton, Donald, Before Mickey: The Animated
Film 1898-1928, University of Chicago Press, 1993
Crafton, Donald, Emile Cohl, Caricature, and
Film, Princeton University Press, 1990
Moritz, William, The Films of Oskar Fischinger,
Film Culture 58-59-60, 1974
Starr, Cecile and Russett, Robert, Experimental
Animations: Origins of a New Art, Da Capo
Press, 1976

Legendary animation director and artist Chuck Jones,
passes away at 89

Chuck Jones, legendary animation director and artist,
best known for his work on the Warner Bros. Classic
Looney Tunes cartoon series, died of congestive heart
failure on February 22.

Jones made more than 300 animated films, winning three
Oscars as director and in 1996 an honorary Oscar for Lifetime
Achievement. His most valued award was the honorary life
membership from the Directors Guild of America.

Jones helped bring to life many of Warner Bros. most
famous characters—Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Elmer
Fudd and Porky Pig. The list of characters he created himself
includes Road Runner, Wile E. Coyote, Marvin Martian, Pepe
le Pew, Michigan J. Frog and many others. He also
produced, directed and wrote the screenplays for "Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas," a television classic.

He worked with and for directors Tex Avery and Bob
Clampett until the early forties when they left the studio, and
for the remainder of his years at Warner Bros. he worked in
parallel with Directors Freleng and Robert McKimson. He
remained at Warner Bros. until the studio was closed in
1962.

Jones also directed the Academy Award winning film,
The Dot and the Line.

Jones established his own production company, Chuck
Jones Enterprises, in 1962 and produced nine half-hour
animation films for television including Rudyard Kipling's
Rikki Tikki Tavi and The White Seal.

In recent years, Jones' work has been honored at film
festivals and museums throughout the world, including a one-man
retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. His autobiography, Chuck Amuck, appeared in 1989, now
in its fifth printing.

Two years ago, Jones established the Chuck Jones
Foundation, designed to recognize, support and inspire
continued excellence in art and the art of classic character animation.

He will be missed.