María Lorenzo Hernández

The *Double Sense* of Animated Images

A View on the Paradoxes of Animation as a Visual Language

"The cartoon is a playful art. […]
A false devotion to the cinematic approach
inexorably stifles the draftman's imagination."
LINDVALL & MELTON (1997, p. 204)

"Once upon a time, or maybe twice...."
GEORGE DUNNING, *YELLOW SUBMARINE*, 1968

Introduction

Representation in the visual arts, such as cinematography – and in particular animation – contains a degree of ambivalence because they reconstruct the continuity of movement as the result of a visual trick, indeed the term *moving picture* contains a contradiction, linking stillness and motion in the same sequence. While this paradox remains dormant in most live action films, in animation it acquires what I term in this paper, a "double sense", the duplication of a virtual image.

The double sense of animated images is a conceptual movement that calls attention to the surface of representation, instead of its actual contents. From the earliest age of cartoons, their high degree of self-reflexivity has reinforced the status of animation as an invented environment, building what has been labelled as the *language* of animation. In addition, the evidence of these images as an optical illusion has accelerated a formalist search for narrative processes, questioning the conventions of filmmaking as can be noticed on a heterogeneous but characteristic corpus of works: the independent short animated films, which lines exceed the regular routines of screenwriting.

Contrary to live action cinema, animation is a medium of uncommon plasticity that frequently avoids a semblance to reality and steadiness. As Lindvall and Melton suggest in the opening quote, the artist's imagination needs to break the codes of representation, focusing attention on the particularities of their art work. The ambivalence of images supplies the breeding ground of a noticeable simultaneity that disrupts the identity of fictional beings and destabilizes the uniqueness and coherency of time and space, stressing the autonomy of animation to generate its own codes of representation.

By analysing specific examples of animated films, this paper will discuss the extent to which visual ambiguity contributes to animated storytelling and will be divided into the following sections:

1) The generation of a dual language through the plastic and cinematic foundations of animation;
2) The implementation of this deceptiveness in the hidden aspects of a whole storyline; and
3) The appliance of visual ambiguity in the form of storytelling, stimulating innovative formulas for narrative continuity.

Most of the study cases on this issue are extracted from a broad but characteristic category of works suitable for narrative experimentation: the independent animation films, from classic filmmakers such as Chuck Jones or Tex Avery – who can be considered as *auteurs* since they

enjoyed a significant degree of autonomy –, to acclaimed contemporary artists and talents revealed in festivals, these animators give another turn of the screw in the search for a revolutionary, even transgressional style of representation.

1. The Ambivalence of Visual Objects: Foundations of Animation as a Dual Language

This section will focus on the misleading constituents of animated images that subvert the viewer's expectations about fiction, from the creation of sight gags to the possibilities of a symbolic language. Animation manipulates the unawareness of the audience about the staged situations as the most regular manifestation of visual humour, when fiction is re-addressed in a different context. For Henri Bergson, "is comical every incident that turns our attention to the physical aspect of a person, when we were regarding his moral aspect" (1899, p.840). Moreover, Freud finds the origins of laughter "a deviation of the mental process, the displacement of the psychic accent towards a different theme from the initiated" (1905, p.1055). Then, visual humour is related to the teasing discrepancies between figure and background, the visual form and its regular meaning, causing a momentary incongruity, a variation between *the uncanny* – the unsuited relationships aroused by images – and its possible interpretations, which produces the conciliatory reaction of laughter (Carroll 1991, pp.146-147).

Defined as an optical equivalent of wordplays, visual puns are intimately linked to the double sense of animation because they turn our attention to its particularities as a visual code (Wells 1998, p.132). For example, in *Chromophobia* (Raoul Servais, 1966), an artist hides himself inside the canvas he is painting; since both elements belong to the same pictorial universe, the visual pun provides a conceptual interchange among the actual contents of fiction and their most noticeable surface, only justified through the sudden consciousness of the act of watching a cartoon. In each case, these twists are primarily provided by one of the following catalysts:

a) The *low degree of iconicity of images*, that reinforces the idea of animation as an invented, arbitrary universe;
b) The *manipulation of animated movement*, which set up unforeseen reactions from characters and objects; and
c) The *relativity of the viewpoint*, when the frame shows an equivocal fragment of the fiction context.

Firstly, the prevalence of smooth colours and linear silhouettes enlarges the potential falseness of representation. Due to the absence of dialogues, an oversimplified visual depiction becomes the most powerful instrument for distortion of information about the characters or their surroundings. Above all techniques, the cartoon is especially suitable for these astounding twists, because its degree of iconicity is lower than other animation processes restrained by their innate or virtual volume – as in stop-motion or 3D Computer Animation.

Although some perceptual dilemmas are solved within a plausible context, other puns set up irrational outcomes: freed from the need of reliability, consistent objects can arbitrarily change into misleading surfaces, raising the paradoxes of a two-dimensional image that codifies a volumetric space – as in an M.C. Escher's maze. Perhaps the most celebrated moment of Richard Williams' *The Thief and the Cobbler* (1993) is the pursuit at the Arabian palace, when the real depth of lounges and corridors is revealed – when not transformed – by the trajectories of characters, disestablishing the principles of graphic representation.

Secondly, as Norman McLaren's classic definition suggests, "animation is not the art of drawings that move, but rather the art of movements that are drawn" (Solomon 1987, p.11). The interpretation of movement by the artist is indeed more powerful than their resemblance to real models, reproducing their specific behaviour to dissolve the uncertainty about their nature, or produce confusion about them.

Despite their obvious flatness, drawn characters are usually conceived in volume and move with consistency; nonetheless, motion can be manipulated in ways betraying the resemblance to real models, setting up an irony, a mocking reaction from their animated counterpart. For example, the paper inhabitants of *Flat World* (Daniel Greaves, 1997) arbitrarily act as three-dimensional beings or purely plain creatures –sticking themselves to the elevator's doors, or literally folding their neck to look backwards. Other puns describe the idiosyncrasy of this imaginary universe, setting objects out of context: for instance, fishes do not live in bowls but in pictures hanging on the wall. Likewise, motion can create funny parallelisms, when triplets are born as a paper garland that unfolds; these visual ironies do not obey normal cause and effect principles but rather to a non-written regulation of cartoons: if you handle an object in any eccentric way, most probably it will reply according to this incongruous usage. The possible changes of sound also play an important role, emphasizing the uncanny changes of behaviour of these animated objects.

Thirdly, the relativity of the viewpoint is a powerful instrument to create distraction and error in the audience's expectations. This relativity of context is given by the frame size and the camera angle – and is not dissolved until the frame moves to a more enlightening position, providing the correct interpretation. But this restricted view may also involve all intricate twists that defy the coherency of *mise-en-scène*. Animated camera movements are mostly generated frame-by-frame, imitating their cinematographic equivalents – as travelling, zoom or tilt shots –, although they contain the possibility of subverting their effects: Chuck Jones' *Duck Amuck* (1953) sets up a hilarious situation when the camera follows Daffy dressed as a French musketeer, but the background landscape progressively blurs into white to mock the poor duck, attaining an ironic duplication of the cinematographic space that sabotages representation codes.

Eventually, as animated puns emerge from the unexpected among unrelated objects, finding a new context for their usage, this eccentric use of visual signs also evokes the meaning renovation of regular words through poetry – as "the *pearls* of your mouth" operate as "your perfect, immaculate *teeth*". Visual metaphors and metonymies arise from any community of form or function, which creates rhetorical links. The discovery of a secondary meaning enables a double speech, operating through parallelism, substitution, or even euphemism as, for instance, those eyeballs enlarging greatly and the pupils popping out, for John Canemaker representing "a metaphor of lust as well as Avery's meditation on all the ways an erect penis can be implied without actually drawing one" (1998, p.33).

The absurdity of puns can transcend a purely hilarious purpose, reinforcing the properties of animation as a symbolic language, a divergent dimension of reality. Since animators purposely re-invent reality to satisfy, in the words of Phil Denslow, "the desire to make real that which exists in the imagination", (1992, p.4) their creation encircles an autonomous universe, unfastened from factual existence. The double sense of images provides a suitable context for a lyrical storytelling that recalls animation as an autonomous, essentially visual universe.

2. Focusing the Storyline: the Visual Twist as a Narrative Outcome

This section regards the implementation of double visual code in the hidden aspects of the storyline, when the outcome reveals an irony about the original premise of the fiction. Since the storyline basically exists in the mind of the viewer and needs to be continuously rebuilt (Bordwell 1985, p.14), filmmakers can cheat with the need to set up an initial situation and subvert it later. In this sense, the sight gag behaves as an autonomous cell of narration, a micro-tale purposefully aimed towards the final twist; this phenomenon can be echoed on larger structures, when ambiguity underlies the entire storyline. These transcendent twists of narration, expressed through any visual irony or metamorphosis, become a distinctive symptom of short animated films, achieving their resolution when unconnected objects are suddenly linked or the nature of a mysterious context is discovered.

There are three basic elements in animated storytelling, whose unexpected evolution produces such an adjustment of interpretation to the narrative climax: *characters*, *backgrounds* and –maybe the most contrived –, the *fiction genres*, whose twists re-address the discourse to a different category of representation.

The element of characters and their evolution, or metamorphosis can be divided into *equivocal identities* and *symbolic transformations*. In the first category, the narrative pretext lies on the audience's initial mistake regarding the situation, eventually mitigated by the sudden emergence of the character's authentic nature, making the animated short film an elongated gag. The second case relates to more subtle ambiguities, inherent to the character's conception or the special relationships among figure and background; symbolic transformations are actually unreliable in a medium other than animation, since they essentially work within a context of allegory or lyric narration.

The allegoric tone of some noteworthy films raises storytelling to a visual fable where every metamorphosis –even graphic metamorphosis – is feasible. As a poem is written considering its last line, the pulse of lyrical films is addressed to a final emblematic image, a symbolic transformation. Totally animated in black and white plain surfaces, the Portuguese film *Estória do gato e da lua* (*Story of the Cat and the Moon*, Pedro Serrazina, 1995) stresses the idea that perfect happiness is unattainable for human beings – as the moon is for the cat. Nonetheless, due to the relativity of structural depth, the cat's tragic obsession is solved through visual means that strictly belong to imagination: the final transformation of the cat reconciles the storyline to its outcome, when the waxing moon descends to the roofs and invites him to jump onto her; then both melt to form together the full moon, as the emerging solution of a riddle.

Furthermore, when the scenery remains ambiguous or undetermined, the source of amusement consists in discovering its nature to restore the context itself of narration. The initial perception of *equivocal backgrounds* can be restored by a camera rotation, showing a different, inventive point of view about the things that we do not usually perceive. In the 3D computer animation film *Maestro* (Géza M. Tóth, 2004), a bird inside an hypothetical dressing room prepares its voice like an Opera singer; after this five-minute-long ritual, the bird goes out to sing his aria – at no other time than the noon hour, since he lives in a cuckoo clock. The sudden readjustment of perspective at the outcome offers an unpredictable focus on a customary object, an independent microcosm that briefly converges with the human sphere.

Other equivocal situations rather emphasize disturbing paradoxes provided by the collision between alternative views or dimensions. The Hungarian film *Labyrinth* (Ferenç Cakó, 1998) describes a human exodus, all crossing over a pretend maze, a mysterious surrounding which is

not real architecture but the cipher "1999", revealed by the final aerial shoot, symbolizing this uncanny space as a tragic century that finishes and a new millennium's ironic beginning. The restoration of the viewpoint breaks the coherence of the stage, becoming the abstract environment of a visual allegory.

Finally, this section must include those films that show unexpected *swings of narrative genre*, interrupting the representation principles established at the beginning. This mocking strategy is fairly regular when the storyline starts as an archetypal genre – drama, thriller, and science-fiction – reproducing their specific atmosphere through the corresponding soundtrack, lighting, iconography, and so forth. When any new element reveals the original cause of misunderstanding, the opening premise and the subsequent development of the fiction are definitively cancelled.

These swings in narrative genre raise a whole discussion about filmmaking, turning attention to the production processes. For instance, the clay animation film *El ladrón navideño* (Javier Tostado, 2002) pretends to be a mystery story, setting up an initial context – the daily life at a school –, introduces a suspicious character, and even shows the first distressing events that anticipate the film's crucial conflict; however, at this point the producer of the film – a well-known Spanish actor – rushes into the scene and interacts with the clay characters to report that there is not enough budget to finish the film; since the starting line never arrives at its corresponding conclusion, the story remains open, focusing on intertextuality as the real pretext of storytelling.

3. The Form of Storytelling: Visual Evolution vs. Cutting

This section will consider the application of the double sense as a powerful key for narrative continuity, discovering avant-garde mechanisms of storytelling. This experimental impulse helps to distinguish filmmakers as *auteurs*, becoming recognizable through their personal depiction of time and space evolution. In their works, the form of narration may even precede the story itself, which in most of the cases becomes a pretext to develop a daring visual concept.

These varieties of animation filmmaking can be categorised in the following broad terms:

a) *One-shot films*: the oneness of the shot-scene is offset by the fictional stage's fluency and versatility, implementing all kinds of stage transformations to enlarge the possibilities of a theatre-like *mise-en-scéne*.

b) *Animated camera movements*: the conventional editing – standardized by live action cinematography – is replaced by visual metamorphoses, which suggest paradoxical junctions among consecutive shoots or sequences.

c) The *formalistic progression as the film pretext*: this definition embraces experimental attempts in which the film form prevails over storytelling, constituting a genuine contribution to atonal cinematography – emphasizing animated movement as a deconstruction of its material and static foundations.

One-shot animated films are formulated from the potential changes of the scenery, running without cutting interruptions. To overcome this narrative restriction, the singularity of the shot is mitigated by the fluency of transitions and transformations at a blank stage, and the division of the frame to support simultaneous storytelling. The uniqueness and continuity of animated narration recalls the fluency of *mise-en-scène* in contemporary theatre. In many senses, animation is actually a language closer to the stylized representation of theatre -where the incredulity of the public is temporarily cancelled – than to live action cinematography; for instance, animation can simplify the scenery so much that characters may move convincingly even in the most neutral

landscapes, insofar as the viewer's imagination is activated by this undetermined space. Raimund Krumme's films supply excellent examples of this, since this German animator uses simplified means to describe the evolution of his Beckett-like sceneries. In his first personal film, *Seiltänzer* (*Ropedancers*, 1987), the only object dressing the stage is a square that helps to define an imaginary architecture with amusing unsteadiness, becomes a serious metaphor of the struggle for authority; the players of this tragicomedy provoke its continuous evolution, becoming a carpet, a window, a wall, a pit, and so on. These transformations are uttered through slight changes of sound, behaviour, or the introduction of soft chiaroscuro signs as, for instance, projected shadows, continuously redefining the dimensions of space.

Otherwise, split-panel narrations are employed to develop multiple storylines. Paul Driessen's lifework is well-known for this narrative style, splitting the fictional universe into independent parts – which can be recombined. Split-panel films contain original alternatives to cinematographic intercutting, devising multidirectional stories that eventually converge or are re-combined –as, for instance, *Ter Land, ter Zee en in de Lucht* (*On Land, at Sea and in the Air*, 1980). While these stories independently progress in the film, they reach balance and reunification at the outcome, when the real connection between the characters emerges to resolve the mistake about their nature and scale.

Animated camera movements condense time intervals, suggesting a formal continuity among consecutive scenes. Animated camera movements establish a peculiar atmosphere for experimental storytelling, since these metamorphoses do not simply imitate the cinematographic travelling or zoom, but are rather designed to break the continuity of fictional space. Moreover, these metamorphoses have been extended through animation techniques focused on form and colour. The watery impression of reality achieved by liquid mediums like glycerine, oil painting, or even malleable substances like sand, clay or plasticine underlines the subjective perception of time, developing a particular style of camera movements. Paul Wells (1998, p.69-70) notices this relationship among the subjective atmosphere of the tale and the morphing pictures in Caroline Leaf's *The Street* (1976), where the evolution of a painting on glass provides an economical, fluent storytelling that reinforces the disturbing nature of this tale.

Turning around an object, or focusing on a motif shared by two successive sequences, animated camera movements can evoke strong emotions contained in the unsteady shelves of memory, eradicating the linearity of narration to release the animator's creative intuition and improvisation. In *78 Tours* (Georges Schwizgebel, *78 R.P.M.*, 1985), the visual rhymes assemble the story development, when the roundness of a cup of coffee, a spiral staircase, or a merry-go-round spinning, provide visual connections among the different memories and regrets from the main character's existence. This characteristic style of transitions come close to what Gilles Deleuze called *Time-Image*, when visual transformations become a rhetorical line which connects what is disconnected, while keeping it disconnected (1985, p.242).

Finally, the visual wrapping of the film arranges revolutionary ideas for experimental animation, starting a formalistic evolution. This progression points to the film form, stressing the correlation between visual terms – such as figurativeness and abstraction; motion and immobility; live action and animation –, and undermines the borders between storytelling and atonality. Although these films are not exactly abstract, they bring into question essential components of storytelling such as characters or scenery – while they are not completely absent –, focusing on movement, aesthetics, rhythm and climax – a sensorial experience that involves a specific idea or philosophy.

These works generate a characteristic variation and repetition of visual patterns; therefore, the fragment, the collage, the kaleidoscope, and the cycle, become stylistic indications. Equally, the progression of motion makes evident the material constituent of images; a similar phenomenon occurs when amplified photographs of Impressionist painters highlight the brushstrokes and the mass of pigment: no matter if they depict an eye of a necklace, anything contained in a picture by Monet or Velázquez is strictly *painting*. As figurative shapes become abstract, the rhythmic evolution raises the film to a new representational level; for instance, *Copenhagen Cycles* (Eric Dyer, 2006) was shot from a number of photographic zoetropes in and around the Danish city, although the consecutive turns of these machineries are deliberately aimed at an abstract blur. The film displays a double code: photography in movement is not still photography anymore, but it is neither cinema, nor lifelike motion, since they are fastened to endless re-beginning. The manipulation of the kinetic rhythm switches on the sense of the uncanny, the phantom of life flying over a tragically still postcard, to literally embody that which exists in imagination.

Conclusions

Although the creative power of visual ambiguity has been formulated from these independent films, this philosophy has been gradually apprehended by more widespread genres: from short narrations – such as TV spots and video-clips – to live action features, the double sense of animated images set up a whole perspective to contemporary thinking: while reality is attached to uniqueness, continuity and coherence of cause-and-effect, the morphing of identities and the variability of time and space destroy the traditional boundaries of motion pictures.

Although this paper has focused attention on the two-dimensional appearance of animation, generating unexpected metamorphoses, the ambiguity of representation can be articulated through the intense mimesis of Computer Graphics – in the same sense that Baroque painters pointed to the falseness of the physical world through the hyperrealism of *trompe l'oeils*. Moreover, the recent emergence of digital editing has approached live action cinema with the versatility of drawn images, as can be noticed in a significant number of resources to depict the evolution of time, or the inner reality of beings, as the result of a growing interchange of resources among animation and live action cinema – which deserves to be analyzed in subsequent extensions of this research.

Under the general name of *double sense of animated images*, the previous discussion reflects all those durable sensations inspired by animation, shaking the consciousness through an unexpected reaction, an irrational transformation, any twist that suspends reality to trap the viewer into watching that which happens on the screen. This witchcraft expels the implicit surrealism of animation, detaching all its humour and melancholy. Live action cinema does not remain aloof to this incongruity, it is only withdrawn when necessary; motion pictures are always the result of human work; the capture of movement is actually as old as painting. I agree with Alan Cholodenko when he asserts: "Not only is animation a form of cinema, cinema – all cinema – is a form of animation" (2005, p.5). The sudden realisation of its double sense is a call for great joy, the will of creativity, the variety of means, the divergence of thought – that becomes profoundly human.

María Lorenzo Hernández is a filmmaker and Animation Teacher at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Polytechnic University of Valencia, Spain. Contact: Departamento de Dibujo, Camino de Vera s/n, 46022 Valencia (Spain). A reduced version of this paper was originally presented at "Animation Universe", the 19th Society of Animation Studies Conference, Portland; June 29th – July 1st, 2007.

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Edited by Nichola Dobson