

Accommodating Avant-Gardism? Amateur Animation and the Struggle for Technique

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Although sometimes regarded as an exceptional pursuit within a cine culture exhibiting such strong roots in still photography and amateur dramatics, animation has represented a persistent strand of non-professional filmmaking in Britain, since the emergence of “small-gauge” technologies, and the consolidation of an organised amateur movement in the 1920s. The distinctive nature of such interest was recognised early by movement insiders, and soon marked by the creation of dedicated “classes” within developing competition spheres,¹ in the provision of customised technical devices and services by commercial suppliers,² and by the emergence of reflection and critique within related hobby literatures.³ By the early 1930s, animation had

¹ Notes announcing the first “Amateur National Convention” of small-gauge filmmaking organisations, identify a specific class for “A cartoon film lasting not more than 5 minutes,” adding suggestively that “cut-outs may be used, provided the cartoon effect is achieved.” See Anon., “The National Convention,” *Amateur Films* 1 (1929) 10, p. 222.

² Several companies emerged in the post-war decades to supply animation equipment and materials for the amateur market, such as Filmcraft, established by well-known enthusiast, David Jefferson. Specialist devices and services for the would-be animator abound: see, for example, Alan Cleave, “Cartoon Animation For Everyone,” [part one] *Movie Maker* 5 (1971) 11, p. 710-12, which directs readers towards the “Graphical Cartoon Kit,” a complete outfit for beginners, including an animation light-box, base-board, registration pegs, camera “dope” sheets etc. Retailing at £5.25, the kit is described as, “a very handy way for a newcomer to ‘have a go’ at cartooning.” An advertisement for the kit appears on page 752.

³ Specialist animation literatures emerge from the cine sector in a range of contexts: *Animator’s Newsletter* (1982-1995) edited by David Jefferson, marks the culmination of this trend, see: www.animatormag.com/animators-newsletter. More basic circulars are represented by *Anima News* (1983-7) and *Practical Animator* (1987-94), both distributed to members of the Animators Association, ANIMA which was formed in 1982 under the guidance of Neil Carstairs, with Sheila Graber as Honorary President. Amongst the more influential of the British instructional monographs are: John Halas and Bob Privett, *How to Cartoon for Amateur Films*, London and New York, Focal Press 1951; John Daborn, *The Animated Cartoon*,

frequently been validated as a suitable interest for both the “hobby” filmmaker and the “pre-professional trainee” with more elevated ambitions, and as the practice evolved thereafter, came to form a particular focus for the aspirations, concerns and contradictions of small-gauge cine’s “modern” amateurism.⁴ Much fascinating production would ensue through the decade, whilst successive waves of animation work would also characterise the 1950s and the 1970s, and by the close of the cine era, several high-profile amateurs had made the move into the professional cartoon studio, subsequently earning a permanent place in the established history of the mode.⁵

Encouragement and Attachment

Would-be animators are offered sustained encouragement and guidance in the cine literatures of the interwar years. Articles on amateur cartooning appeared regularly in the two main British journals—*Home Movies and Home Talkies* (1932-1940), and *Amateur Cine World* (1934-1967), where much attention was also directed towards the burgeoning professional output. Features such as “The Father of Movie Cartoons” (a short study of Windsor McKay) traced the mode’s primitive history, whilst essays including “Elstree Rivalling America” (a celebratory account of Anson Dyer’s British animation unit), scrutinised current commercial initiatives for its instructional value.⁶ Neighbouring contributions such as “Practical Animation for Amateurs” and “How We Made A Colour Cartoon”, cultivated the hobby production of films along similar lines, stressing the possibility of worthwhile work in the field, even for

London, Fountain Press 1958; Anthony Kinsey, *Animated Film Making*, London, Studio Vista 1970.

⁴ Robert Stebbins, “The Amateur: Two Sociological Definitions,” *Pacific Sociological Review* 20 (1977) 4, p. 582-605.

⁵ See for example, Giannalberto Bendazzi, *Cartoons: One Hundred years of Cinema Animation*, London, Indiana University Press 1994, which recognises the pre-professional contributions of Norman McLaren, George Dunning, and Bob Godfrey. Significant “cross-over” is also achieved by a steady stream of other British amateur animators, including Derek Phillips, Tim Wood, Sheila Graber and Lew Cooper.

⁶ Ern Shaw, “The Father of The Movie Cartoon,” *Home Movies and Home Talkies* 3 (1934) 3, p. 93; Anon., “British Colour Cartoons: Elstree Rivalling America,” *Home Movies and Home Talkies* 4 (1935) 5, p. 178-9.

those lacking sophisticated technical resources, or the basic graphic skills of the draughtsman.⁷ With “cel” animation emerging as a base-line practice according to a good deal of writing—often suggestively dubbed the “straight cartoon”—numerous advocates offered tips on how to avoid too much drawing, the means to stylise figures as simple shapes, and semi-secretively explaining “short cuts” to a range of impressive animation effects.⁸

[INSERT FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE – HOME MOVIES AND HOME TALKIES]

Cel animation however represented just one recognised approach: partly because the process was felt to be especially challenging, problematically dependent on inherited artistic skill, some commentators recommended that work in the mode be tackled via other techniques: the nearest approximations, for several, were “cut-out” and “silhouette” movies, versions closely related to the puppet animation, itself supported on the grounds that it abolished drawing altogether. “Stillie films” (based on the animation of pre-existing photographs or other static images), along with more abstract variants such as the “scratch” work, and the “doodle” picture, also attracted attention for similar reasons.⁹ Elsewhere, advertisements for Plasticine and competing products such as Play-Wax, implied three-dimensional approaches that would prove popular across the following decades,¹⁰ whilst “hybrid” cartoons combining drawn and live-action elements are also contemplated, as a form of more advanced animation project.¹¹ From the 1950s in particular, such coverage is joined by often highly technical commentary,

⁷ B. G. D. Salt, “Practical Animation for Amateurs,” *Home Movies and Home Talkies* 6 (1937) 7, p. 289-90; J. R. F. Stewart, “How We Made A Colour Cartoon,” *Amateur Cine World* 5 (1938) 9, p. 443-44, 474.

⁸ Ern Shaw, “Animated Cartooning - How it is Done,” *Home Movies and Home Talkies* 1 (1932) 2, p. 52; David Fulton, “Shapes and Short Cuts in Animation,” [part one] *Amateur Cine World* 2 (1961) 46, p. 933; [part two] *Amateur Cine World* 2 (1961) 47, p. 973-4.

⁹ J. F. Marshall, “Living Lines: Simple Cartoon Work for The Amateur,” *Amateur Cine World* 3 (1937) 12, p. 585-7; Alex Strasser, “Shadow Plays for The Christmas Film Show,” *Amateur Cine World* 3 (1936) 9, p. 407-9; Gordon Malthouse, “Making A Silhouette Film,” *Amateur Cine World* 6 (1939) 6, p. 278-82; the “stillie picture” is discussed in T. R. Trenerry, “Why Not Try Your Hand at Animation?,” *8mm Magazine* 3 (1965) 9, p. 14-19.

¹⁰ Douglas Butcher, “Cartooning in Clay,” *Amateur Movie Maker* 1 (1958) 5, p. 81-83.

¹¹ See B. G. D. Salt, “Hybrid Cartoons,” *Home Movies and Home Talkies* 6 (1938) 11, p. 481-2.

explaining object-based techniques such as “pin-screen”, and primitive “motion capture” methods such as “rotoscoping” and “animascope”, registering affiliations with exploratory film practice—both artistic and scientific—well beyond the amateur scene.¹²

Encouragement is sustained through the later decades of the cine era: *Amateur Movie Maker* (1957-1964) and *8mm Movie Maker and Cine Camera* (1964-1967) carry numerous articles reprising early themes: readers of the former are invited to “Discover The World of Animation,” whilst the latter offers refresher courses on basic approaches, before *Movie Maker* (1967-1985), perhaps sensing waning interest, re-recommends “Cartoon Animation for Everyone,” in a series of features leading from elementary to “full blown” methods.¹³ Such fascination persists into more recent decades. Video-based animation, for example, is being explored enthusiastically by amateurs by the mid-1980s, and undergoing artistic evaluation in commercial publications such as *Making Better Movies* (1985-1989) and *Video Maker* (1989-90), whilst amateur-produced counterparts, including *Amateur Ciné Enthusiast* (1990-2003) and *International Movie Making* (1995-), are equally keen to offer positive support to the diffusion of the computer-assisted, and eventually digitally-based approaches, contemplated at very early stages of their development.¹⁴

A range of factors underpin this ongoing commitment to animation. As Sheila Chalke has noted, encouragement was sometimes initially in keeping with the cultivation of discrete

¹² Informative accounts of animascope, rotoscoping and pin-screen are provided by: John Halas and Roger Manvell, *The Technique of Film Animation*, London and New York, Focal Press 1968, p. 304-5, 310.

¹³ Nathan Alexander, “Discover The World of Animation,” *Amateur Movie Maker* 6 (1963) 5, p. 228-29; Alex Cassie, “Beginner’s Course in Animation.” [2-part series] *8mm Movie Maker and Cine Camera* 10 (1967) 1, p. 15-16; 10 (1967) 2, p. 55-7; Alan Cleave, “Cartoon Animation for Everyone,” [part one] *Movie Maker* 5 (1971) 11, p. 710-12.

¹⁴ See for example, on video-assist: Peter Carpenter, “Six Day Wonder,” *Making Better Movies* 4 (1988) 4, p. 7-9; on basic video stop-motion, see Anon., “Video Animation is Possible,” *Making Better Movies* 5 (1989) 14, p. 8-9. Useful detail on the early diffusion of computer animation techniques amongst amateurs appears in: Mike Joyce, “Micro Computer Rostrum Control,” *Animator* 16 (1986), p. 13-14, and Sheila Graber, “Conversion to Computer Animation,” *Animator* 29 (1992), p. 1-3.

modes of film practice, imagined to best serve amateur “improvement.”¹⁵ Adrian Brunel, sometime Vice-President of the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC), recognised the specific importance of animation for the serious-minded hobby filmmaker throughout the 1930s. According to Brunel, the amateur’s true vocation would be most authentically expressed in the production of the “burlesques” already explored in his own short film work, within which cartoon, silhouette and puppet sequences often provide significant critical components.¹⁶ As elements of such a deconstructive “trick” style, animation is seen as lending a particular charge to the expression of amateur distinctiveness and independence, a somewhat curious potential also envisaged in terms of cross-over into the mainstream:

Cartoon films, silhouette films and puppet films require a terrible amount of patience, but they are splendid subjects for small units any amateur who really distinguished himself in this class of work would soon find a lucrative profession for himself in the film business ... To expect anyone to improve on Walt Disney is asking too much, but surely new forms of cartoon work are possible ...¹⁷

By contrast, encouragement from *within* the amateur movement itself, is as often underpinned by sensibilities inclined to favour exploration *across* genres and modes, evidencing widespread suspicion concerning the distinctly professional connotations of specialisation of any kind. Here, a commitment to generalisation is allied to a certain advocacy of the “rounded” practitioner as the amateur ideal. For those who feel that the true amateur filmmaker should be able to demonstrate facility with a *range* of techniques, animation figures as a welcome opportunity to broaden live-action expertise on unfamiliar ground. Journal correspondents such as B. G. D. Salt thus recommend animation as a way to enhance live-action footage or add

¹⁵ Sheila Chalke, “Animated Explorations: The Grasshopper Group 1953-1983,” in: Ian Craven (ed.), *Movies On Home Ground: Explorations in Amateur Cinema*, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2009, p. 238-69.

¹⁶ Early examples of such burlesques are represented by *Crossing The Great Sagrada* (35mm, 15 mins, 1924) and *Pathetic Gazette* (35mm, 15 mins, 1924); see Adrian Brunel, “Experiments in Ultra-Cheap Cinematography,” *Close Up* 3 (1928) 4, p. 43-6.

¹⁷ Adrian Brunel, “What Shall I Film?,” *Home Movies and Home Talkies* 2 (1934) 10, p. 386-8.

variety to an evening's screenings,¹⁸ whilst letter-writers often indicate their desire to “have a go” at animation, from senses of creative responsibility as much as technical or aesthetic curiosity.¹⁹

Logistical benefits, it was often underlined, also recommended animation activity to amateur movie makers, be they “lone workers” or cine club members. Stresses on compactness helped to characterise animation as a concentrated activity, feasible even for those working in confined circumstances. By working indoors, animators might of course avoid the vagaries of weather, especially during the winter months, which could so easily disrupt outdoor shooting, along with the complex legal permissions required to film in many locations. Problems involving personnel and their potential unreliability were likewise removed; actors (consistently understood as troublesome in the cine journals) could be dispensed with, as might costs incurred for the sets, costumes and make-up necessary for even basic live-action production. Whilst such attributes undoubtedly recommended animation to the reclusive or isolated, the mode is deemed equally at home in more communal settings. Noting the demands of its production methods, animation is often pictured as socially connective, and for some writers necessarily so: “if there is no division of labour, inspiration is likely to lapse into tedium. Cartoon films are essentially a team job ...”, according to at least one manual.²⁰ In this vein, the surviving record frequently references animation as an opportunity to involve significant numbers of enthusiasts in a single production over an entire “season” of filmmaking—an idiosyncratically amateur take on the division of labour, sponsored in the name of shared creativity—a potential always especially important within the club sector in particular. With production necessarily broken down into repetitive small-scale tasks, the protracted investments involved in animation—demanding meticulousness and systematic organisation—are widely regarded as cultivating good amateur discipline, equally important for both solo projects and team efforts. The rewards of such “professional practice in miniature,” are further recognised in both economic and creative terms:²¹ produced frame-by-

¹⁸ Salt, “Practical Animation for Amateurs,” p. 289-90.

¹⁹ Anon., “Making Silhouette Films in Reverse,” *Amateur Cine World* 6 (1939) 9, p. 424; a typical enquiry identifies animation as a “more ambitious undertaking,” see H. Leeves, “How To Cartoon,” *8mm Movie Maker and Cine Camera* 7 (1964) 9, p. 462.

²⁰ Halas and Privett, *How To Cartoon For Amateur Films*, p. 21.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

frame, animation might represent the most cost-effective of all cine methods, minimising the consumption of film stock; with rates of production amenable to pre-calculation, timetabling to deadlines becomes more feasible; with careful pre-planning, even the basic splicing often so intimidating to the small-gauge filmmaker, could be substantially avoided, encouraging creation of innovative editing effects within the camera—a particular expertise advocated for both novice and more “advanced” participants.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE – JOHN DABORN LEAFLET]

Such a combination of supposed benefits underlines animation’s importance for those seeking integration and consolidation of the wider cine community, and appropriately enough a particular role for animation in advertising the movement is sometimes envisaged.²² Always constituted by distinct sub-groups, distinguished as much by their differing fascinations as their levels of expertise or resource, the cine movement searches constantly for such unifying possibilities, both within particular collectives and across its wider social world. In this context, animation seems to bear a specific potential to reconcile ongoing tensions between the technically- and the aesthetically-minded, perhaps the two most significant sub-factions within the cine movement as a whole. A proliferation of articles with titles such as “A Parallel/Series Foot Switch for Animation,” and “A Frame Counter for Animation or Time Lapse,” suggest that work in the field involves particular satisfactions for the technophile, and offers a persistent incentive to the improvisers of devices, processes and gadgetry of all kinds.²³ At the same time, the animated film’s particular regime of representation, with its oft-celebrated liberations from the laws of physics, the constraints of reduced physical resources, and the very indexicality of the photographic sign, are repeatedly seen to promise unparalleled expressive potentials for the creative. According to much of the surrounding discourse therefore, it is the

²² Animated advertisements, trailers and service announcements are identified as suitable small-scale projects for the club sector: see Daborn, *The Animated Cartoon*, p. 197-8.

²³ A. M. Davis, “A Parallel/Series Foot Switch for Animation,” *Movie Maker* 5 (1971) 2, p. 89, which illustrates the construction of a single-frame control device; see also E. A. Terry, “How To Become A Double Oscar Winner,” *Amateur Movie Maker* 5 (1962) 11, p. 1162-3, which illustrates the use of the toy-engineering system ‘Meccano’, to fabricate turntables and other rostra, or the self-explanatory, Alan E. Lott, “A Frame Counter for Animation or Time Lapse,” *Amateur Ciné Enthusiast* 8 (1997) 2, p. 49-50.

responsibility of the amateur animator to realise this potential, as one leading enthusiast comments, in a 1960s article on the use of modelling clay:

We are dealing with a plastic medium, and this property should be used to full effect. Never be bound by conventional things, but let your imagination roam freely... Just as normal film-making must be logical, plastic animation can be—indeed, should be, illogical. Therein lies animation’s true function. It must never copy real life, for then it becomes a poor second. It should be used to show those things which in real life could not possibly come about.²⁴

In its enthusiasm for the unconventional, senses of removal from the obligations of “normal” filmmaking, and advocacy of the seemingly impossible, such commentary not only extends amateur cine’s ongoing critique of live-action, but gestures towards the limitations of a professional filmmaking that has granted such a cinema priority.

Construction of the mode in the rule-breaking terms described here indexes the somewhat over-determined attraction of animation for the more self-conscious cine participant, marking deeper affinities with ideologies of amateurism as a cultural practice, notionally unfettered by dominant commercial orders, formal protocols, and institutional constraints.²⁵ Injunctions concerning the possibilities of animation as leisure filmmaking, more specifically reveal themselves as symptoms of instinctive, sometimes partially-theorised commitments to amateur identity as a “renegade” condition. Beyond the pragmatic emphases of much instructional literature often lie unevenly articulated, but deeply felt formulations of animation as a mode with peculiarly amateur resonances, which is simultaneously credited with *authenticity*, recognised as a practice somehow faithful to an *essence* of cinema, and as recalling the *origins* of the medium, familiarity with which exposes a distinctive possibility of amateur *ownership*. Within much amateur-oriented commentary therefore, animation is often presented as schematic reminder of the basic properties of the cinematographic apparatus—a kind of ontological memento—whose operation illustrates the condition of the moving image

²⁴ Fred O’Neill, “Camera, Clay and Imagination,” *Amateur Cine World* 1 (1961) 4, p. 581-2.

²⁵ For an early and typical construction of the amateur sector in these terms, see Paul Barralet, “Amateur V. Professional,” *Amateur Films* 2 (1929) 3, p. 67-8.

in its most fundamental form. As one typical encouragement to the amateur animator summarises:

It's the most liberating form of movie-making ... It frees you from so many of the constraints ... in philosophical mood, we might reflect that animation could be considered the ultimate and purest form of movie-making in that we're actually creating motion itself.²⁶

Before explaining theories of persistence, fusion frequency and intermittence, it is suggestive therefore that such “purist” accounts habitually introduce a significant *historical* narrative, stressing animation’s precedence and displacement by “live-action” cinema. Halas and Privett, for example, trace the medium’s origins to mediaeval studies of motion, charting the fascinations of its “supernatural” effects “before the live-action film turned to realism,” whilst the specifically *non-photographic* characteristics represented by the optical toys of the pre-cinema period, are seen by Anthony Kinsey as underlining animation’s distinctive “hand drawn” genealogy.²⁷ Historicisation in these contexts serves amateur validation, conferring a sense of tradition on the contemporary participant, within which he or she may understand their own local intervention as an extension of a grander narrative; “anyone thinking of trying his hand at animation,” according to one commentator, “is taking up an honourable and relatively ancient craft.”²⁸

Studies of animation history generated beyond the amateur sphere similarly offer a sense of *compensation* for inherited senses of the medium’s marginalisation by live-action cinema, also perhaps of particular interest to amateurs. Ralph Stephenson contends for example, that:

²⁶ Alan Cleave, “From An Animator’s Drawing Board,” *International Movie Making* 4 (1988) 1, p. 36-7.

²⁷ Halas and Privett, *How To Cartoon For Amateur Films*, p. 3; Kinsey, *Animated Film Making*, p. 12; one widely circulated account traces origins even further, as far as prehistoric cave paintings, before discussing pre-cinema devices such as the “Zoepractiscope.” See John Daborn, “Making A Cartoon Film,” in: Beatrice Cox (ed.), *Exploring The Arts*, London, Longacre Press 1961, p. 36-42.

²⁸ Cleave, “Introduction,” *Cartoon Animation for Everyone*, p. 9.

There was at the outset a purely coincidental combination of recorded movement with photographic realism. If historical development had proceeded differently, there might have grown up an art of animation quite separate from the cinema, and having no more to do with photographic realism than painting or sculpture. For, fundamentally, animation is an art form entirely different from “live-action” film-making ...

According to Stephenson, animated film-making becomes “tied” to photography thanks largely to historical accident, and as a result, has “remained the little sister of the live-action film, which dominates the cinema like a *prima donna*.”²⁹ Such historicisation of animation, emphasising its pre-dating of live action cinema, and its lines of separate development, etc. registers a sense of precedence shading into “secondariness” that amateurs may well be inclined to share, echoing as it does related feelings of displacement and removal, apparent in more casual understandings of their movement’s ongoing relationships with the professional sector. Fascination with animation here dramatises a kind of *conditional* perspective on the evolution of dominant live-action cinema, given particular charge within amateurism, and involving attachment to an almost counter-factual cinema history, posing an endless “what if” to the cine-photographic. As animation seemingly suspends the default standards of live-action representation, postulating parallel lines of development akin to those traced by cine amateurism, it proves peculiarly amenable to symbolic appropriation by the non-professional.

Experimental Associations

Detailing encouragement to participate, and sketching its practical and sectoral attractions, is not to imply that animation was considered an easy business for cine enthusiasts, indeed typical writings clearly see their task as to de-mystify techniques presumed to be felt intimidating. Conceptual explanation somewhat at odds with movement discourse is often deemed necessary: the simplified accounts of Newtonian laws governing inertia and momentum introduced into most animation primers, for example, contemplate levels of theoretical abstraction remote from most live-action instruction, whilst highly sophisticated understandings of optics and the physiology of perception are nurtured by journal materials

²⁹ Ralph Stephenson, *Animation in The Cinema*, London and New York, Zwemmer-Barnes 1967, p. 7-8.

encouraging exploration of more advanced techniques.³⁰ Demanding such intellectual investment, animation is often pictured as the form of amateur filmmaking least compatible with the “casual” involvement of the “dabbler”, characterised by Robert Stebbins as exploring “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training”, in stark contrast to the “careerist” participation of his or her more serious counterpart.³¹ Thus animation *par excellence* in the language of much later leisure theory: “impels the part-time participant away from play towards necessity, obligation, seriousness and commitment, as expressed in regimentation (eg. rehearsals, practice) and systematization (eg. schedules, organisation), and on to the status of modern amateur for some and professional for others.”³²

Dependent as its production methods are upon enthusiasm sustained over long periods, meticulous organisation and absolute technical consistency, animation is seen to involve especially high degrees of pre-calculation: “Don’t be too anxious to start shooting before making exhaustive tests,” recommends one guide, whilst another guards against the dangers of even minimal discrepancy with sobering advice that “information regarding tests should be written down or charted, and placed near at hand so that it can be referred to easily and quickly during filming.”³³ Such stresses on pre-production and the maintenance of rigour are frequently recognised as discouraging exploration of the animated film, and with some justification. Replacing conventional “footage” with visual interest produced frame-by-frame, fabricating recognisable figure movement, and controlling elements such as abstract shape, texture, and colour etc., whilst simultaneously mastering the representational conventions of a more graphically-generated screen space, undoubtedly create significant additional burdens for the filmmaker. Even working at minimal frame rates to reduce cel counts, exploiting the

³⁰ A limit-case is perhaps provided by G. A. Gauld, “Multi-plane Model Sets,” [5-part series] *Amateur Cine World* 10 (1944-45) 2, p. 160-3; 10 (1945) 3, p. 189-92; 10 (1945) 4, p. 228-31; 10, (1945-46) 6, p. 300-3; 10 (1946) 7, p. 344-7.

³¹ Robert Stebbins, “The Costs and Benefits of Hedonism: Some Consequence of Taking Casual Leisure Seriously,” *Leisure Studies* 20 (2001) 4, p. 305-9.

³² Stebbins, “The Amateur: Two Sociological Definitions,” p. 583.

³³ For approaches to pre-production see Alan Cleave, “Cartoon Animation for Everyone,” [part seven] *Movie Maker* 6 (1972) 5, p. 315-7. See also Halas and Privett, *How to Cartoon for Amateur Films*, p. 112; and Daborn, *The Animated Cartoon*, p. 199, for the importance of “foolproof systems” in cartoon production.

deceptions of “double frame” animation, or employing deliberately restricted ranges of formal device, involves considerable extra effort, potentially increasing the psychological “costs” over the social “benefits” of an activity supposedly conducted for the purposes of leisure.³⁴

[INSERT FIGURE 3 NEAR HERE – AMATEUR MOVIE MAKER]

Discussion of amateur animation frequently construes such benefits in peculiarly “artistic” terms, with compensations for the courageous relentlessly emphasised in terms of unparalleled creative satisfactions. Animation is envisaged repeatedly as a space amenable to amateur artistry, involving a poetic license less easily accommodated in the live-action sphere. Whilst working to popularise and involve, most commentaries therefore introduce a decidedly experimental accent and, for the dedicated, animation is seen as suggesting creative possibilities, thanks to its unusually diverse vocabulary of visual forms and effects. From such a perspective, it is indeed the very “mechanistic” rituals of its production which promise an expansion of creative freedom, even within the supposedly already relatively “liberated” domain of the non-professional. Amateur aspirations to “artistry” thus coincide in a particular way with the disciplinary protocols and aesthetic potentials of the animated film, which emerges as a recurrent point of contact between conformist inclinations, nurtured by “movement” guidance, and more experimental instincts, often taking their cue from creative sectors well removed from amateur cinema’s immediate social world.

Discourses of encouragement around amateur animation identify aspirations shared by small-gauge practitioners in numerous fields, but in particular with those filmmakers espousing versions of independent practice, more usually associated with the interventions of an “avant-garde” cinema. With influential commentary insisting that in animation the “techniques of abstract filmmaking can be applied to the advantage of more straightforward filmmaking,” various areas of over-lap are charted, exploration of which periodically re-kindles discussion of affiliations with avant-gardism, widely entertained in the emerging amateur cine movement,

³⁴ The potential costs of casual leisure have been seen to include boredom, its inability to secure a significant leisure identity, its imagined “waste” of precious leisure time, and its limited contribution to senses of self and community. See Stebbins, “The Costs and Benefits of Hedonism,” p. 305-9.

during the formative decades of the 1920s and 1930s.³⁵ As Patricia Zimmermann has noted, writing of the North American context, the amateur movement at this time tended to regard both itself *and* the avant-garde as occupying a certain “restorative” common ground, regarding *both* sectors as immersed in the politics of culture, and as properly dedicated to the securing of an artistic creativity and individual productivity seemingly under threat within modernity:

This celebration of the individual artist, and by extension bourgeois individualism, found many congruencies and resonances with the formal interventions of the avant-garde, which rejected consumer culture through aesthetic experimentation ... Avant-garde interests, then, coincided with the ideological underpinnings of amateurism: experimentation, freedom, creativity, exploration, personal expansion and self-improvement ... the amateur film movement saw avant-garde technique as an experimental vanguard ...³⁶

Through such alliance, amateurism expresses therefore deep-seated senses of social and artistic responsibility, both to “salvage” individualism from the anonymising tendencies of mass society, and thereby to contribute something of value to the development of a film art already seen as growing stale and moribund—imaginatively transcending in that process sectional distinctions between amateurs, avant-gardists and commercial-professional filmmakers.³⁷ Inspection reveals similar sentiments underpinning links between the emerging film communities in the British context, where journals acting as focal points for avant-garde activity such as *Close Up* (1927-1933) draw together anecdotal reminiscences of “Making Little Films” over the weekend, penned by prominent amateur insiders, with more esoteric accounts of “The Film in Relation To Its Unconscious” by pioneer film theorists. At the same time, experimental filmmakers including Oswald Blakeston and Vivian Braun contribute material to newsagent titles such as *Amateur Films* (1928-30), promoting less restrained

³⁵ Stuart Wynn Jones, “Doodling in Picture and Sound,” *Amateur Cine World* 1 (1961) 16, p. 658-60.

³⁶ Patricia Zimmermann, “Startling Angles: Amateur Film and The Early Avant-Garde,” in: Jan-Christopher Horak (ed.), *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde*, Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press 1995, p. 137-155. Quotation appears p. 141.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

approaches to non-professional film style.³⁸ Braun reminds readers of *Home Movies and Home Talkies* for example, that “amateur cinema is to-day the source from which should spring the works of film art”, sketches principles of construction which ought to govern their work in the medium, and underlines amateur affinities with supposedly more elite groups:

Film does not rely on the purely realistic reproduction of a scene, but on the representation of the subject through filmic expression ... These simple principles of film are not for the few highbrow lone workers, they are for all amateurs. For every amateur who takes into his hand a motion picture camera becomes a film director, an artist, and an artist with the most potent means of expression there has ever been.³⁹

Connections between the sectors remain thereafter, with amateur cine journals giving coverage to experimental film festivals, and following the careers of former amateur experimentalists with interest as they move into the professional sphere.⁴⁰ Although such open-ness to avant-garde inspirations declines slowly towards the 1970s within the pages of key publications, enthusiasts will still be reminded from time to time of the importance of experimental outlooks in their approaches to filmmaking, and give expression to such interests via animation in their private explorations and public competition entries.⁴¹

³⁸ See Peter Le Neve Foster, “Making Little Films,” *Close Up* 3 (1928) 3: p. 50-58; L. Saalschultz, “The Film In Relation to Its Unconscious,” *Close Up* 5 (1929) 1, p. 31-8; Oswald Blakeston, “Read This First,” *Amateur Films* 2 (1929) 1, p. 19, 26.

³⁹ B. Vivian Braun, “Amateur Avant-Garde”, *Home Movies and Home Talkies* 6 (1937) 7, p. 294.

⁴⁰ See for example the survey included in Harold Benson, “Experiment in London: The BFI Makes Amends,” *Amateur Movie Maker* 1 (1958) 11, p. 419-20.

⁴¹ Commentary on experimental filmmaking *per se* fades conspicuously in the amateur cine literature during the 1970s, although an exception is represented by Russell Roworth, “Accessories for Creative Filming,” *Film Making* 12 (1974) 8, p. 42-44, which relishes a proliferation of devices with which innovative effects may be created; 1974 was dubbed the “Year of The Cartoon” in reports of that year’s “Ten Best” competition, which saw five animated films winning top awards, including Theo Buttner’s *The Box* (standard 8mm, 7 mins, 1973) employing an innovative translucent cut-out technique, John Straiton’s *Horseplay* (16mm, 7 mins, 1973) revising the “doodle” picture to narrative ends, and Martin Funnell’s *R.I.P.* (16mm, 5 mins, 1974) combining “process-black” and emulsion paints to produce a satire on academic expertise, resembling a newspaper cartoon.

Certain distinctions are always retained however between the experimental impulses of amateurism and the avant-garde, and fields-of-force between the groups are defined in decidedly asymmetrical terms. Despite sometimes unrequited appreciation, amateurism nonetheless demonstrates ongoing fascination and a qualified approval of avant-gardism throughout the cine era. “Be Kind to the Experimental Film” insists a typical *Amateur Cine World* editorial of the 1950s, illustrating the determinedly inclusive outlook:

It should not be condemned out of hand as arty ... We haven't any Picassos in the amateur film movement, and much of the experimental work turned out is the lamentable result of trying to run before learning to walk. But when the producer genuinely tries a new approach, not as a short cut or because he is too impatient to learn the technique of filmmaking, his efforts should secure sympathetic attention.⁴²

Such senses of connection between amateurism and the avant-garde arguably find their most concrete expression in the production of animation films by British amateurs, where experimental approaches are entertained, in the name of an “accommodated” avant-gardism and a rejuvenated film practice of universal benefit.

Within a movement reluctant to recognise ideological polarity between commercial cinema and the provocations of the avant-garde, animation frequently marks a particular sense of reconciliatory potential for the amateur filmmaker. Apparently blurring or even dissolving boundaries between oppositional and mainstream practice, the mode enjoys instinctive support from amateurs inclined to seek transcendence of sectoral priorities, and to revitalise artistry for all those involved in filmmaking. Celebrations of Walt Disney's rationalised production methods recorded in *Home Movies and Home Talkies* thus sit comfortably alongside accounts of Norman McLaren's more idiosyncratic approaches in the pages of *Amateur Cine World*, underlining the importance of animation as a place to qualify absolutisms, and to stress cross-

⁴² Gordon Malthouse, “Be Kind To The Experimental Film,” *Amateur Cine World* 16 (1952) 5, p. 463-4.

fertilisations.⁴³ As a mode that seems to link the creativities of the ultimate Hollywood machine and the experimental fringe, animation remains of particular appeal to a movement concerned to reduce difference, perhaps to cultivate consensus, and to share and create mutualities that may advance the art of filmmaking for all. From this perspective, animation emerges as a somewhat liminal place within which, rather than dutifully recording the family, or struggling to match the professional standards of live-action fiction, the amateur may explore his or her own creative fancies, relishing a particular invitation to fabricate a recognisably personal style.

Abbreviated Ambitions

Widely recognised as something of a “golden age” within amateur circles, activity around animation expanded especially quickly in the post-1945 decades, with numerous filmmakers “graduating” to the mode from live-action work in more standard amateur genres.⁴⁴ British enthusiast Alan Cleave, for example, joined this growing migration in the early 1960s, after early explorations of home mode travelogues, newsreels, and micro-dramas.⁴⁵ Cleave’s filmography currently lists some twenty animation titles, with further work in preparation.⁴⁶ Fortunately for the researcher, samples of this output survive within the archive, whilst written

⁴³ Anon., “Mickey Mouse Methods: How Disney Works,” *Home Movies and Home Talkies* 2 (1933) 3, p. 97; “Lynx”, “The Doodling Movie Maker,” *Amateur Cine World* 19 (1955) 8, p. 754-8; “Lynx”, “Eight New Techniques,” *Amateur Cine World* 19 (1956) 9, p. 946-52.

⁴⁴ Jack Barton’s *Go West Young Man* (16mm, 2 mins, 1950) was the first “puppetoon” to be awarded a “Ten Best” award; John Daborn’s *The Millstream* (16mm, 3 mins, 1951) was the first cartoon film to enter the IAC “Ten Best” lists, soon to be followed by several other Grasshopper Group productions.

⁴⁵ Early live-action production by Cleave includes the travelogue *Pine and Polder* (9.5mm, 10 mins 1955), a series of local newsreels *News Begins At Home* (9.5mm, 14 mins, 1952-7), a supernatural thriller *The Shed* (standard 8mm, 10 mins, 1961), and the domestic comedy *Home Rule For Hubert* (standard 8mm, 17 mins, 1962). Several works formed entries to the annual “Ten Best” competition, organised in collaboration with the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers (IAC), by the leading British cine journal, *Amateur Cine World* (1934-67).

⁴⁶ An account of the animator’s early fascinations and influences is provided by: Alan Cleave, “When Necessity Was The Mother of Animation,” *International Movie Making* 14 (2008) 1, p. 17-20. Key animation titles include; *The Owl and The Pussycat* (standard 8mm, 3 mins, 1967), *Yonghy* (standard 8mm, 3 mins, 1974), *Technitopia* (standard 8mm, 6 mins, 1983), *The Courting of Mary Ann* (standard 8mm, 3 mins, 1988), *Rooney The Rhino* (standard 8mm, 4 mins, 1993), *Debra The Zebra* (standard 8mm, 3 mins, 1997), and *Ozymandias* (standard 8mm, 2 mins, 2003).

accounts of several projects preserve a suggestive insight into the ambitions and characteristics of much related work in the field.⁴⁷

Mainstream inter-texts clearly inspired the impulse to animate in the case of Cleave at initial stages. Decades later, the filmmaker recalls the impact of cartoon features such as *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Pinocchio* (1939), along with a sense of intimidation at the technical standards achieved by such works: “I could obviously never hope to do anything similar without the resources of a Disney studio,” he comments in recent recollection.⁴⁸ More direct encouragement was however derived from viewings of “the marvellous black and white *Felix The Cat* classics” of the mid-1920s, valued on later reflection for their minimalist style (uniform mid-shot staging, monochrome with few half-tones, imaginative “impossible” transformations etc.) which might possibly be emulated, and for their “cut paper” mode of production, deemed especially suitable by sector leaders to the limited resources of the amateur.⁴⁹ The particular graphic form of the Felix figure seems also to have appealed, well described as “rather square and angular in his early appearances” by one commentator,⁵⁰ and usually defined in bold outline by a solid black body, suggesting the importance that a simplified visualisation might play in creating convincing character

⁴⁷ Freelance submissions to cine journals led Cleave towards a career in cine journalism, and the production of many articles detailing his filmmaking practice and that of numerous other animation enthusiasts. The filmmaker was offered appointment to the staff of *Amateur Cine World* in 1964, by then editor Tony Rose; when the journal was re-launched in 1967 as *Movie Maker*, Cleave rose to the rank of assistant editor, before becoming principal editor in 1977. He subsequently re-joined Rose, as part of the team, including John Wright, assembled to produce the new publication *Making Better Movies* (1985-89), launched by Henry Greenwood & Co Ltd. in 1985. This substantial body of writing awaits academic scrutiny.

⁴⁸ Memories of early Disney “Silly Symphonies” cartoons (1929-39) are also stressed, along with those of two specific Mickey Mouse shorts, *The Band Concert* (1935), “featuring Mickey conducting the ‘William Tell’ overture, and encountering increasing trouble with players such as Goofy and Donald,” and *Clock Cleaners* (1937), recalled for “lots of vertiginous angles from the top of skyscrapers.” Letters to the author, dated 16.03.11, and 03.09.11, respectively.

⁴⁹ The “cut paper” method is well described in Halas and Privett, *How To Cartoon For Amateur Films*, p. 94-5, and Daborn, *The Animated Cartoon*, p. 179, 182.

⁵⁰ Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 31.

movement.⁵¹ More contemporary incentives are acknowledged as the spread of the “limited” animation style of post-war “cartoon modernism”, and closer to home, the organisational exemplar provided by amateur collectives such as the London-based Grasshopper Group. This fusion of professional and amateur inspirations shapes Cleave’s animation projects in distinct ways, underlining the “relational” norms of amateur aesthetics more generally, and establishing creative dialogue with both “normative” and “transgressive” animation practice that will remain a significant feature of his extensive body of work.⁵²

Post-war “cartoon modern” trends are embraced enthusiastically in Cleave’s early animations, indexing wider recognition in the 1950s of the styles as more within the practical reach of would-be animators than the “fluid” technique epitomised by Disney, and previously celebrated in hobby literatures. These innovatory styles perhaps also suggested a certain redistribution of cultural capital which the amateur might share, potentially enhancing amateur prestige and senses of legitimacy. Hallmark features such as figure movement liberated from the life-like; backgrounds defined less by detail than angular geometry and irrational perspective; and characterisation via bold outline, disproportionate physiognomy and exaggerated expression, all suggested a certain inheritance from “high” European modernism, lending the styles a credibility attractive to amateur senses of value, and which many were keen to articulate in their own work.⁵³ Often identified with the output of United Productions of America (UPA), the new cartoons’ celebration of economy and simplicity, and stress on the graphic underplayed by Disney’s pictorial realism, are thus seen to offer both templates for viable non-professional work, and connection with the “grander” narratives of art history. Such

⁵¹ Alan Cleave, “Cartoon Animation for Everyone,” [part three] *Movie Maker* 6 (1972) 1, p. 26-8, 36.

⁵² For a discussion of the “relational” norms of amateur film style see Ian Craven, “Sewell, Rose and The Aesthetics of Amateur Cine Fiction,” in Ryan Shand and Ian Craven (eds.), *Small-Gauge Storytelling: Discovering The Amateur Fiction Film*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 2013, p. 55-82.

⁵³ For an account of the new animation style see Amid Amidi, *Cartoon Modern: Style and Design in Fifties America*, San Francisco, Chronicle Books 2006, p. 7-18. Attraction to the “high modernist” tradition in amateur animation is well represented by Alex Cassie’s *The Three Musicians* (standard 8mm, 6 mins, 1962), a “Top Eight” winner in 1963. For an account of the film’s production see “Animating Picasso,” *8mm Movie Maker and Cine Camera* 7 (1964) 12, p. 596-7.

a potential is often seen, within the amateur sector, as troublingly absent from the Disney output, as Anthony Kinsey stresses in his widely circulated study:

Much critical comment has been made about the later Disney productions. In the light of the more sophisticated and adult work of the post-war period the Disney features with their sugary sweet sentimentality and slick, characterless drawing appear almost entirely lacking in artistic merit ... the constant striving after realism as exemplified in the full-length features ... led to the almost total decline of the animated feature film ...⁵⁴

By contrast, approving reference to “rough” animation becomes a familiar note in numerous festival and competition reports around this time, encouraging the hesitant amateur to begin cartooning, and holding out a promise of aesthetic recognition according to standards fixed beyond the realms of strictly amateur practice.⁵⁵

[INSERT FIGURE 4 NEAR HERE – ALGERNON CAITHNESSBY]

British domestication of the “cartoon modern” style is felt widely across non-professional animation from the early 1950s, although an article by Grasshopper-member Stuart Wynn Jones, is recalled specifically as encouraging Cleave into production, and its guidance is traceable in his subsequent output.⁵⁶ The short essay epitomises the broader rhetoric: animation is validated, “even if you have always made your films by pointing a camera at real life,” as a basis for the enrichment of technique, as a way to develop one’s competence as a filmmaker, and to nurture the patience and organisation identified with worthwhile work.⁵⁷ Wynn Jones’ descriptions of “direct” film techniques seem to have inclined Cleave towards a distinctly “geometric” aesthetic, best seen in his own excursions into

⁵⁴ Kinsey, *Animated Film Making*, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Daborn, *The Animated Cartoon*, p. 192.

⁵⁶ Stuart Wynn Jones, “Anyone Can A-n-i-m-a-t-e! This does mean you!,” *Amateur Cine World* 21 (1958) 10, p. 996-7. Alan Cleave, interviewed by the author (September 2011) recalled the pervasive influence of the Grasshopper Group, and expressed a particular affinity with the experimentalism of Wynn Jones.

⁵⁷ Wynn Jones, “Anyone Can A-n-i-m-a-t-e,” p. 996.

“abstract” animation, but also to have endorsed his view, that even in the animated story film, “characters and actions are most successful when they are *not realistic*.”⁵⁸

For Cleave, emphasis on visual estrangement and the stylisation of effect in contemporary amateur practice is seen as consistent with the longer-term evolution of animation aesthetics, which he suggests “have tended to swing away from the super-smooth Disney type of animation... to a more sketchy, abbreviated and rough-and-ready style,” well within the reach of the amateur enthusiast.⁵⁹ For Cleave, the style also enables a closer relation with full-time filmmaking counterparts, re-forging the imaginary solidarities of the early interwar years between filmmakers across the great divide between professionals and amateurs:

Prevailing fashion is on your side ... What were once regarded as blemishes to be avoided at all costs, such as wavering outlines and shimmering patches of colour, are now O.K. characteristics of the medium—rather like grain and fuzzy focus in “art” photography. There is now no “correct” way of tackling your artwork; if your technique (or lack of it) works in its context, then it’s legitimate.⁶⁰

Reiterating senses of amateur attachment to origins and ontologies explored above, Cleave openly comments that, “rough and ready” conventions represent an opportunity to *return* to foundational animation styles only *temporarily* displaced by pictorial realism:

In the course of sixty years or so, styles in cartoon “scenery” have come full circle; fashions have progressed from the very simple to the ultra-elaborate and back again ... It was not until the arrival of ... Disney production methods in the early thirties that cartoon settings got away from their simple line drawing look ... with the emergence of the more stylised schools of animation (such as the U.P.A. studio) after the war, the pendulum started to swing the other way ...

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 997.

⁵⁹ Alan Cleave, “Cartoon Animation for Everyone,” [part one] *Movie Maker* 5 (1971) 11, p. 710.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 710.

If you choose to go for a simple skyline-only type, no-one can say you're wrong

....⁶¹

Tangible here in a particular microcosm, such networks of aspiration, resistance and nostalgia are widely traceable across the amateur animation sub-culture, as practitioners negotiate with influential professional standards, simultaneously relishing their separations and re-claiming a heritage supposedly mis-appropriated through the somehow unfortunate course of film history.

Accounts of Cleave's first animation, *The Melancholy Case History of Algernon Caithnessby* (1963) illustrate tensions resulting from sensed relations to animation's past, and identifications with contemporary design trends, as they organise the structure of the film's short narrative, and rationalise its stylistic priorities.⁶² Effectively a "fable picture"—later recalled as a satire on the "fatuous psychobabble surrounding child psychiatry at the time"⁶³—the film offers a cautionary tale concerning the dangers of a supposedly typical British predilection for understatement: Algernon Caithnessby, a troublesome child grows into a juvenile delinquent, slides into a life of crime culminating in robbery and murder, and suffers capital punishment—against a background of repeated insistence (in the accompanying verse's refrain line) that he's simply "highly strung!"⁶⁴ Suggestion that at the planning stage, the story's dénouement "seemed to rule out live action," illustrates an open-ness to the exploration of *appropriate* technique very characteristic of the aspirational amateur filmmaker, whilst recollection of childhood experiments with films "drawn in coloured inks on semi-transparent paper" for showing on a toy projector, mark an association of animation not only with Cleave's

⁶¹ Alan Cleave, "Cartoon Animation for Everyone," [part six] *Movie Maker* 6 (1972) 4, p. 240.

⁶² *The Melancholy Case History of Algernon Caithnessby* (standard 8mm, 4 mins, 1963), is described in the 2009 IAC distribution catalogue as, "an animated cartoon reflecting humorously and cynically on juvenile delinquency"; the film is preserved in the East Anglian Film Archive, and will soon be joined by further works. Contact details: East Anglian Film Archive, The Archive Centre, Martineau Lane, Norwich NR1 2DQ, United Kingdom; tel.: 01603 592 664; www.eafa.org.uk; email: eafa@uea.ac.uk. See Alan Cleave, "Cartooning Back to Front," *Amateur Cine World* 8 (1964) 11, p. 326-28.

⁶³ Letter to the author, dated 16 August, 2011.

⁶⁴ *The Melancholy Case of Algernon Caithnessby* was originally accompanied by an unsynchronised tape soundtrack, but later acquired "married" sound stripe. See John Aldred, "Talking Shop at The South Bank," *8mm Movie Maker and Cine Camera* 7 (1964) 7, p. 343.

first experiences of movie-making, but also with the genesis of the projection apparatus itself.⁶⁵ Recollection of *Caithnessby*'s creation recalls the experimental scenarios of many an account of the early film pioneer, on the brink of breakthrough:

I felt that somehow my home-made titler could somehow be adapted for filming the drawings, but what could I use instead of the usual "Cels"?

I pondered the question from first principles. Why were "cels"—thin sheets of transparent materials—used by animators? Answer: so that animated sections of a scene can be drawn separately from static elements and the background. Was there another way of achieving this? I thought there might be.⁶⁶

The solution arrived at is described as "cartooning back to front", a version of the "cut paper" method remembered from the primitive *Felix* films, ie. drawing the various mobile elements of the image stream onto sheets of paper, before placing these in sequence, beneath background sheets establishing the frame's fixed elements; the mobile component is then made visible through apertures cut through the upper sheet to accommodate them, and varied according to the immediate needs of the action. For *Cleave*, such a simplified method helps secure visual consistency across "the many months of animation that lie ahead."⁶⁷

[INSERT FIGURE 5 NEAR HERE – ALGERNON CAITHNESSBY – 2 IMAGES]

With this very basic composite image technique established, *Cleave*'s account details the steps taken to reduce the number of paper "cels" required per scene, and to "streamline" character outlines, before explaining the role of simulated editing in generating effects of action from still images. Echoing the constructivist cine-literatures recommended as primers from the

⁶⁵ See for example, Ralph Stephenson, *Animation in The Cinema*, London and New York, Zwemmer-Barnes 1967, p. 8-9, which draws attention to the use of similar "paper strips" in the operation of the 1834 Horner zoetrope, and the 1877 Reynaud praxinoscope.

⁶⁶ *Cleave*, "Cartooning Back to Front," p. 326.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

1930s to cine amateurs, the account locates amateur animation within critical traditions which may accrue credibility.⁶⁸ Describing the hold-up sequence in *Caithnessby*, for example:

The progress in this sequence is really conveyed, not so much by animation, as by editing virtually static images. As its climax builds up, the length of shots gets shorter, thus creating an impression of pace, without much actual movement. To have attempted to animate the scene in one continuous medium shot would have been quite beyond my capabilities, and from the cinematic point of view, far less effective.⁶⁹

Animation work thus realises a commendable aesthetic rehearsed by live-action cinema and dignified by critical tradition, without its practical tribulations: authenticating montage effects are achievable, through imaginative “pre-editing”. With enough forethought, the animation film may be returned from processing as a single spool, awaiting in the case of *Caithnessby*, only the addition of poetic commentary, background accompaniment by toy xylophone, and synchronisation with “twang” effects, to be introduced at the end of each stanza.

Reflection upon the specialist tasks peculiar to the animation process, emerges here in terms of a decidedly scientific managerialism: rational planning anticipates systematic manufacture; a series of small-scale operations are completed meticulously many times; repetition and accumulation secure the inter-changeability of parts which will form the final whole; precious economies follow from this conveyor-like execution:

Before shooting, I prepared a script of each shot in which every frame was represented as a square that contained the identification number or letter of the animation sheets to be used. It was thus possible to plan the exact form and

⁶⁸ Constructivist texts find wide circulation through the amateur cine movement, following translation in the late 1930s; Vsevolod Pudovkin’s *Film Technique*, London, George Newnes 1933, is advertised regularly in the pages of its publisher’s related journal publications, including *Home Movies and Home Talkies* (1932-40).

⁶⁹ Cleave, “Cartooning Back to Front,” p. 327.

length of shots to the split second, and so “edit” the film in advance. During filming, each frame was ticked off the script as it was taken ...⁷⁰

Such an account of the filmmaking process, stressing as it does mechanistic execution and meticulous precision, depicts a *model* amateurism, standing in fascinating tension with senses of animation as the most “liberated” of cine modes. Despite long-standing endorsement of cartooning’s “exciting and boundless possibilities,” Cleave’s summary suggests rather that in animation, the amateur is faced with the challenge of maintaining balance between the freedoms of creativity and the disciplines of production, in an especially attenuated form. In this respect, Cleave’s discourse itself plays here a distinctively amateur role, with the medium’s limitless artistic potentials recuperated by sustained emphasis on the rigours of manufacturing, and the abiding need for self-discipline.

Thereafter, tentative explorations led Cleave towards both more sophisticated literary adaptations in cartoon form, and explicitly avant-garde exercises. Ambitions in the latter direction are represented by *Mouvement Perpetuel* (1976), Cleave’s most conspicuous excursion into “pure” abstract animation to date, and a reminder of deep-seated needs to legitimate amateur filmmaking as a creative-artistic endeavour, as well as the more prosaic matter of mastering reliable technique, emphasised in so much hobby literature.⁷¹ Effectively an extended exercise in the generation of “spot effects” via perfect synchronisation of sound stress and screen action, such a film gestures towards what Cleave has described as an animation “with all the trimmings,” revealingly understood as perhaps the “ultimate technique” for the amateur animator.⁷²

[INSERT FIGURE 6 NEAR HERE – MOUVEMENT PERPETUEL]

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 328.

⁷¹ Cleave’s short experimental animation, *Mouvement Perpetuel* (standard 8mm, 2 mins, 1976) offers a visual interpretation of the well-known piano piece of the same title by composer Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) performed by his son. An account of the genesis and production of the film appears in Alan Cleave, “Musical Abstractions,” *International Movie Making* 11 (2005) 3, p. 28-32.

⁷² Alan Cleave, “Cartoon Animation for Everyone,” *Movie Maker* [part seven] *Movie Maker* 6 (1972) 5, p. 315.

Inspired by memories of abstract animations by Len Lye and Oscar Fischinger, and encouraged by amateur efforts closer to home such as Mike Kent's *Mathemagic* (1974) and *Magic Squares* (1976), Cleave's *Mouvement Perpetuel* develops effects perhaps inhibited, even in the most "unrealistic" of his animated narratives, to exclusively figurative and decorative ends.⁷³ The film takes as its basis the well-known piano piece by Francis Poulenc, described by Cleave in terms illustrating some distinctly amateur constructional preferences:

It's relatively short ... and has a clearly defined structure which makes it ideal as an accompaniment for rhythmic abstract patterns. It also has a pleasing "geometrical" symmetry, one section balancing another. The melody, which is made up of nine phrases, is played twice and then rounded off with a coda formed from the first two bars of the tune, plus a rising arpeggio-like figure culminating in an interesting dissonance.⁷⁴

The filmmaker's visual accompaniment is provided by the synchronised animation of simple cut-out shapes representing white piano keys, arranged in "regular" and "tapered" fashion across a black background, appearing-disappearing and changing colour in time to the beats of the music, here carefully arranged in strict 4/4 time. A sense of movement onscreen is created therefore not by any apparently *physical* shifting of the keys across the frame, but rather by the addition or subtraction of individual keys, or by progressively substituting keys of a different colour – in effect, an extension of the principles described earlier as "impressionist" animation within the pivotal sequences of *The Melancholy Case of Algernon Caithnessby*. Variation is introduced across the reprise of the initial melody, by replacing the initial monochrome palette (black, grey, white) with a variety of vivid colours (red, yellow, green, blue), whilst the coda motivates more spectacular "spectrum-like" effects, in which the basic white keys fragment into rainbow-like displays of colour. Through simple rhythm and pattern, the film advertises

⁷³ Both Michael Kent's abstract exercises *Mathemagic* (standard 8mm, 6 mins, 1974), and *Magic Squares* (standard 8mm, 4 mins, 1976) gained "Gold Star Awards" in the IAC "Ten Best" competitions of 1974 and 1976, respectively, and are suggestive of wider trends in amateur animation of the 1970s. Techniques employed are discussed in, Michael Kent, "Animating With A Geometry Set," *Movie Maker* 7 (1973) 2, p. 106-9.

⁷⁴ Cleave, "Musical Abstractions," p. 28.

insistently the dedication and meticulousness of the amateur animator, whilst renewing a claim to artistic “seriousness” elsewhere generating a certain discomfort and scepticism.⁷⁵

[INSERT FIGURE 7 NEAR HERE – MOUVEMENT PERPETUEL]

Alongside the satirical reposts and whimsical nostalgias of his earlier animation work, Cleave’s venture into such filmmaking underlines background maintenance of an avant-garde “attitude,” and abiding affiliations between amateurism and film experimentalism never entirely dissipated by the divides of the 1930s, or the skirmishes of the 1950s and later. Rather, the film speaks in the 1970s of amateurism’s continuing sense of artistic inclusiveness, its desire to reconcile the experimental with the amateur mainstream, and its self-construction as meeting-point between priorities often strategically constructed as contradictory within more schematic typographies of film practice.

Conclusions

Where it has achieved visibility beyond the social world of amateur cinema, the work of amateur animators has generally been historicised in relation to the avant-garde, allied with broader “progressive” movements and agencies of social transformation, or recognised as significant tributaries of a generic experimental mainstream. On this basis, several amateur animations have achieved canonical status beyond their original contexts, with their makers achieving a notoriety generally denied their counterparts in live-action cinema. Broader scrutiny of amateur output suggests however a range of more contradictory affiliations and ambitions, and exposes a network of formative traditions within which the work of previously unexamined practitioners might be productively located, a network often activated by the particular historical conjuncture within which their participatory interests emerged.

⁷⁵ Production of the finished 2-minute film involved the creation of around 200 or so individual keys, meticulous positioning of the elements with templates, and the creation of precise “dope” sheets, setting out the individual exposures necessary to ensure synchronisation of music and image. Cleave estimates that around 28 hours of shooting were necessary to complete that process, a rate relatively slow in comparison with the shooting ratios possible with cel animation. See Cleave, “Musical Abstractions,” p. 32.

Animation emerges as a particular sub-set within the emerging amateur cine movement, developing its own rationales, procedural norms and senses of value. These represent a crystallisation of “live-action” amateur protocols, simultaneously establishing the animated film as an élite sphere within the broader social world of cine amateurism. With connotations of particular difficulty, cine literatures work hard to de-mystify the animation film, to place its realisation within the imaginative reach of the rank and file amateur, and to underline the unique satisfactions its production promises. As they do so, senses of creative and experimental potential particular to animation, draw many participants towards more avant-garde interests and their apparent infiltrations of the commercial mainstream. Such apparently contradictory loyalties underline amateurism’s reconciliatory functions, with animation providing a peculiarly apposite space for contact between traditions regarded by the amateur as illogically opposed.

Competing and conflicting senses of amateur attachment to the animation mode are usefully indexed by the output of particular practitioners such as Alan Cleave, whose work draws inspiration from the “abbreviated” styles of cartoon modernism, indicating an open-ness to the experimental further indexed in his own avant-garde explorations. Such movement between animation styles offers an illuminating insight into the perennial “semi-autonomy” of the amateur filmmaker, underlining the potential for reconciliation of the mainstream and the avant-garde, articulated as a mission for the amateur from the origins of the movement, and perennially dramatised in the ongoing struggle for an appropriate technique.

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