

**Simone Roth**

**500442099**

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New Media History Essay

A. Bal

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## New Media History Essay: Animation

Imagine waking up on a Saturday morning, 8:00am, going downstairs and turning on the TV. It's 1993, you're three years old, in your pajamas, and start to watch Mickey Mouse. You flip the channel to Flintstones, Bugs Bunny, Power-Rangers, and Batman. The smile on your face grows bigger and bigger. The "Saturday morning cartoons" and the pure childish joy we derive from watching this style of film has a long history. Animation began with a simple idea, which evolved considerably because of creative and technological innovations and is now part of the consciousness of most people living in the Western world.

Animation is defined as "the technique of photographing successive drawings or positions of puppets or models to create an illusion of movement when the film is shown as a sequence" (Oxford Dictionary). It is a type of art form that demonstrates movements in a series of pictures and frames. It starts with single pictures and combines them to form the illusion of continuous motion. In essence, drawings are linked together with successive images depicting slight change from the previous one, and these are played rapidly. Animations date back to before 1900's, and early techniques were very tedious and labor intensive. The artists were required to draw every single frame and show slight changes. Currently, advancements and developments in technology have allowed artists to explore the medium of animation in countless ways.

The artists explored in this essay can all be considered new media artists and innovators in their time. New media is a type of progress and growth where the novelty becomes a medium in which we can use to communicate with the audience. The three artists all used the medium of animation to create their own identities and style of work, each playing a role in the development of the medium as well.

The introduction of imaginative, expressive, and communicative faces in animation can be attributed to the creativity of James Stuart Blackton, a British filmmaker who lived from 1875-1919. Blackton was born in Sheffield, England. He moved to New York City where he was an editor and illustrator. Although he was a very "unsophisticated and a man who lacked film talents", he was a skilled showman (Screen Online, 2003). He created the silent film called "The Enchanted Drawings", which was one of the first projects that had animation-style filmmaking. He would draw faces



*"Humorous Phases of Funny Faces", 1906*

and add expression and objects while it was being recorded at quick speeds to make it seem as if it was a continuous story-like event being shared. He is known as a man who “pioneered animation in America” (Brain Pickings, 2010) and was one of the first artists to use stop-motion techniques. Technology in the early 1900’s was limited, however, Blackton was innovate in that he was able to interact with his artwork. In many of his pieces, he draws sequences from a storyboard with chalk while he mimicked the expression of the characters in the particular sequence. One of his most famous animations was that of “Humorous Phases of Funny Faces” and included a simple “blackboard, stick of chalk, and a wrist of an artist” (Palm Beach Post, 2006”). The audience would see the character be developed right before their eyes on the chalk board, as Blackton would draw their physical features. This style of work in this time frame was very innovative and fresh, and the public became amazed and fascinated with film. (Palm Beach Post, 2006).

Animation is a very theatrical and exaggerated form of artwork. Artist Max Fleischer was born in Krakow, Poland, in 1883 and can be seen as an influential player in the world of Animation. Fleischer and his family immigrated to America in 1887 and settled in New York City.

In 1915, Fleischer and his brother David developed a technique to create



*Max Fleischer and “Betty Boop”*

animation films to simplify the work. Rotoscoping is a technique in which “which an animator took a live-action move and traced it...to create an animated film that simulated human movements” (Hinkley, 2005). This technique essentially involves copying the previous scene and showing slight change and the actions are transferred frame by frame; the scene is often filmed and traced by the artist.

Fleischer’s famous work includes Betty Boop, Koko the Clown, and Popeye. He is also the animator who created Superman (Max Fleischer’s Famous Out of the Inkwell, 2002). His

work with the Rotoscope can be clearly seen in “Koko the Clown” where he would “trace and animate the footage” (Betty-A-Boop). The talented Fleischer took animation to a new level when he incorporated sound, music and effects, into his work in 1924. At this point, animation stands on it own; there is no live acting in the performance. By this time, Fleischer had his own studio where he produced his work, called “Fleischer Studios”, and thought that it would be exciting if the audience could sing-a-long with the characters. He decided to place the words of the song onto slides that the audience could sing, and the idea of the “bouncing ball” was

used as a guide for the audience to follow along. He called this concept the “Car-Tune Songs”. It was an “instant success [and even] some eighty years after the fact, people continue to use the phrase ‘follow the bouncing ball’”(Digital Media FX,).

The cultural icon Walt Disney was an American filmmaker who was one of the first artists to incorporate dialogue in his stories. Disney was born in Chicago, Illinois in December of 1901. His family, including himself and four siblings, moved to Missouri where he grew up for most of his childhood. He had an early interest in the arts, specifically drawings (cartoons and doodling), and he even “sold small sketches and drawings to nearby neighbors” (Just Disney). In 1928, the ever-so-popular Mickey Mouse was created. Disney was born in 1901, and prior to Mickey Mouse’s creation, he was a family guy, who failed multiple times while trying to establish a career in animation and commercial art in Hollywood. His optimism and creativity led to Mickey Mouse appearing in the screen debut in Steamboat Willie, which was the “world first synchronized sound (effects, music, dialogue) cartoon in 1928” (Just Disney). Disney has been credited as the man who “bridged the gap between history and the future”, and used technology advancements in his work. In the late 1920’s, Technicolor was invented. Disney had the exclusive rights to use Technicolor for two years, which allowed him to be the only individual to create colored cartoons (Just Disney).

Prior to the invention of Technicolor, all of the short animations had been in black and white. When we look at society today, everything booms and bursts in colors. To think of a visual world without the use of color would be very unthinkable.



*Walt Disney drawing “Mickey Mouse”*

Walt Disney was an incredible asset to the development of animation. His company and studio located in Burbank, California have taken animation to completely new heights. In 1937, Walt Disney Studios released its first Technicolor feature, “The Snow Whites and the Seven Dwarfs”, and since had boomed in creativity and technology. For example, the use of Computer Generated Images (CGI) has influenced the animation industries and Disney Studios have used the new technology to create famous childhood films like Shrek, A Bug’s Life, and Finding Nemo. It is impossible to think of television, film and childhood, without thinking of Disney.

In conclusion, animation is a unique medium that all members of society can relate to, understand, and enjoy. This type of media has come a very long way since its inception, from the depiction of very simple faces to adventurous, emotional, expressive characters and stories. The advancements in technology have enabled this medium to expand and develop in a variety of ways. Currently there are different genres of animation, some favored by eastern cultures such as Japanese animation, some in widespread usage in violent video games and film, and others characterized by dream-like images and scenarios. The advancements that all three artists, Blackton, Fleischer, and Disney, were involved in all contributed to our enjoyment and the pleasure while watching animation. Stephen Worth, the director of the International Animated Film Society (Hollywood Chapter) says that “there’s something elemental about cartoons...there’s a magic in them that just can’t be captured by live action films” (Palm Beach Post, 2006).

In 2004, Disney Studios made the jump from 2D to 3D animation films. Interestingly, this was not well received by the public for reasons that remain unclear. Barbara Robertson, author of “Computer Graphics World” explains how two animation directors, who took the huge leap to 3D were actually the individuals who stepped backwards to 2D animation. Robertson shares that the “duos latest film, The Princess and the Frog, is the first traditionally animated feature created at Disney in five years...It’s entirely hand-drawn” (Robertson, 2010). The amount of computer assistance in Princess and The Frog is quoted as subtle.

The world of New Media can push boundaries, but the technology and productions need to be embraced by the public. Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian educator and philosopher, says that media should be “the voice of the people, an extension of ourselves and the public” (Slideshow: Lecture 3, September 2011). McLuhan’s statement here is proven true, as we are able to see with Disney, if the public does not embrace an innovation, both media and medium are considered ineffective. New Media is about experimentation; succeeding and failing to discover what is the greatest for the public. It is about adapting to what best meets the needs of the public and the members of the specific society. After the 1950’s, the quality of animation in society decreased, as animators and studios began to only produce films that entice children. It wasn’t until the 1980’s/1990’s when studios began to target the older demographics and revived the industry. Films such as “Who Framed Roger Rabbit”, “The Lion King”, MTV cartoons, and more recently Japanese-anime have shown “that the medium could draw adult audiences” (Palm Beach Post, 2006).

We live in a visual world which represents ideas and concepts in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Society creates mass media, and is influenced by it. Individuals cannot escape these influences. Sometimes we may feel that advertising is the strongest and most influential when we are out in the public, social world, but it is equally as strong in our private spaces, where we voluntarily expose ourselves to

the influences of print media and television. Crisis Control, a program created to raise awareness about the amount of TV and violence that children are exposed to shares that the “average American watches over 4 hours of television per day” (Crisis Control, 2011). They also bring forward some interesting things to think about when it comes to violence and media. They also share that the “average American child sees 200,000 violent acts on TV by age 18” (Crisis Control, 2011). This draws some concerns because animation is a medium that is communicated on the TV most commonly, and the quality of the story can influence our society. For most of us, watching cartoons and animated characters is for entertainment and humor. Perhaps we need to be more conscious about what we are watching or allowing younger individuals to be exposed to. If we think about it, every Bugs Bunny episode involves someone getting hurt or doing something very silly. Then again, it would be impossible to image a world without cartoons. Just a little food for thought.

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