Defining Animation - A Proposal

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"Art is everything that Mankind calls art," wrote Dino Formaggio in the introduction of *L'arte come idea e come esperienza*[1], "this is not – as some might think – a simple opening line, but rather, it might possibly be the only acceptable and verifiable definition of the concept of art." I will begin by anticipating the conclusions of this brief study to suggest that the definition of animation[2] be formulated by paraphrasing the approach of the Milanese academic, and maybe with an ulterior accent on the time element to which he dedicated the paragraphs following this affirmation. (He analyzed visual art thoroughly and therefore it is understood that, if one wants to categorize, animation is a subfamily in the larger family of visual art).

Consequently: "Animation is everything that people have called animation in the different historical periods."

I have taken the liberty to update the original language because, as a historian, I find myself particularly aware of the rapid variations in word meanings resulting from changes in mentality and – above all – in technology, which have taken place over the years and which I have witnessed in part.

It is important to note that between about 1895 and 1910 the term *animated* was applied to things that today are called *live action*, which we often group in a distinctly different category. At that time, "animated photography" was the common term, and a

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[1] Dino Formaggio, *L'arte come idea e come esperienza*. Milan: Mondadori 1981, p. 11.

[2] I prefer this term instead of animated films for reasons that will become clearer later on.

little later the equally rudimental phrases *moving picture* or *motion picture* came into use.

Animated cartoon became official only after the first book on the subject was published[3]. After that, a glance at the theater programs issued from 1925 to 1939 by the London Film Society (one of the first and most prestigious film clubs in the world) is enough to realize that in the first half of the last century the idea of animation did not extend to the abstract films of Ruttmann, Fischinger or Richter. Their works were instead considered experimental, and grouped with others that in our time are known as live action avant-garde films. Furthermore, the word *animation* did not exist as a noun – it was only used as an adjective with the "cartoon": *animated cartoon* (as used previously).

Later, in 1949, in his influential and very much studied work *Der Film. Werden und Wesen einer neuen Kunst[4]*, the theorist Béla Balász separated the two concepts by writing about "absolute" and "abstract" films in chapter XIV and "animated drawings" along with optical effects in chapter XV.

As far as popular opinion is concerned, most of moviegoers and even some of the cinema scholars continued for decades to think of animated works as a movie "genre", like westerns, space operas, war pictures, and so on. Some still think this way.[5]

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[3] E.G. Lutz, Animated Cartoons. How They are Made, Their Origin and Development. New York: Scribner´s 1920.

[4] Béla Balász, Der Film. Werden und Wesen einer neuen Kunst. Wien: Globus 1949.

[5] On September 11, 2003 the American doctoral student Shana Heinricy wrote a message to the internet discussion group of the "Animation Journal List" to ask for clarification. She said that the professors advising her for her PhD (!) thesis were making her call animation a "film genre" and she voiced her doubts in regard. The scholar Maureen Furniss, coordinator of the group, answered sarcastically that if animation is a genre then so is live action cinema.

The noun *animation* began to be used by French specialists in the 1950s, when an international cultural movement was consolidated between Paris and Cannes that attributed a specific meaning to this form of art.

The movement also objected to the dominant interpretation of the term, both in aesthetic and economical terms, popular due to the works of Walt Disney starting in 1928 (with the short film *Steamboat Willie* starring Mickey Mouse) and even more so in 1937 (with the feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*).

In 1960, in the lakefront city of Annecy in Savoy, the world's first "Festival International du film d'animation" was held.

This movement set the stage for the birth in 1962 of the Association international du film d'animation (ASIFA), a sort of UN for directors, producers and researchers in the sector. The preamble[6] of its statute gave the first official definition: "[While live action cinema] proceeds towards a mechanical analysis, through photography, of occurrences similar to those that shall be presented on the screen, animation cinema creates the occurrences using instruments different from those used for automatic registration. In animated films, the occurrences take place for the first time on the screen."

The second statute was adopted in 1980. After 18 years of viewing works produced with the most diverse forms of image manipulation, it became understood that the original definition was overly dependent on the traditional concept of animated drawings.

Another definition was selected, using a negative format: "Any cinematographic production that is not a simple recording of real life in 24 photograms per second is defined as animation." At the time of writing, even these words are losing their meaning with the advent of digital techniques that are erasing the very concepts of cinematography, photogram, filming.

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[6] http://asifa.net/asifa-wp/about/asifa-statutes/

At this point, it is necessary to try to identify some tangible element, without however bringing ourselves to ask whether a *specific animation concept* exists (in the same way that decades ago, during the quest to attribute a notion of art to film making, people began asking if there was a *specific film concept*).

If we took this approach, we would risk turning many theorists' or artists' "poetics" into a categorical "aesthetic". We would have to take sides for everything, wanting to obtain a lowest common denominator of the case histories instead of getting to the theoretical level. Moreover, once again, we would risk exposing the words to the aging process that deteriorates meaning through the passing of time and historical events.

This task needs to be dealt with, though, in order to begin participating in that generalized feeling that leads animators to perceive certain films as *their own*. In other words (in reference to the definition stated at the beginning) we need to begin to understand which elements have caused people in different time periods to call certain things "animation".

First, I'll try to clear the field of the misunderstanding that animation is movie genre.

A genre has a reason to exist inside a certain form of expression. For example, in prose literature, there are several genres: legal thrillers, adventure, romance, science fiction, etc. In painting, we have portraits, landscapes, still life, abstract, etc. And live action films can be classified, as already stated, as westerns, soap operas, war pictures, etc.

"Genre" is a difficult concept for many, but in extremely simple terms, it could merely be based on a deal between the manufacturer and the user. On the guarantee for the user, that is, that this specific product will satisfy some of his specific requests.

To clarify, if you want horses, wide open spaces and shootouts, choose a western. If you like to be scared, go for a horror film. Genres are known for being repetitive – and therefore reassuring. Quite the reverse, films by top name directors are innovative by nature. (However, we should not deny it has happened several times that a creative

director with a stronger influence or a stroke of luck make an important film defined within a genre).

Getting back to the subject, if one loves animated thrillers (a genre) and finds himself watching a classic film, he will probably be disappointed. Those who love Disney musicals like *Beauty and the Beast* have a strong possibility of being confused by an abstract film. Bugs Bunny's pie-in-the-face antics clash with the humor of Eastern Europe during the Communist era.

Therefore, many genres exist within animation. This is a good starting point for introducing it not a genre or macro-genre, but as a separate style of filmmaking, a brother to live action cinema.[7]

When filmmaking began, in the last two decades of the 1800s, the practical application was based on the principle of bombarding the spectator with a series of still frame slides. Cinematographers and projector technicians knew that when static images are presented in sequence at a velocity of over 16-18 frames per second, the human eye perceives them as a fluid image. With a series of very rapid stop-and-go techniques, the camera photographed the successive phases of the actions that took place before it. The projector used the same procedure to present the images to the public. That was the system utilized to "write the movement" ("cinematography" = kinéma + graphéin in Ancient Greek).

The crank on the movie projector was turned by hand, and so the operator had an almost physical relationship with the film and its sequences. It wasn't hard to understand that, once the projection speed became standard, several "effects" became possible in the filming phase. One of these "effects" consisted in taking photograms one by one (stop motion) instead of using continuous movement, and changing the position

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[7] Here, in order to once and for all eliminate the clichés, I insist that though there is a rather substantial number of an animated production destined for children, it would be a grave error to catalogue animation as an art form for children alone.

of the object during the pause that the filmmaker allowed between one frame and the next. During projection, the object seemed to come to life.

This "effect" allowed for the development of a language. Through the single photogram technique, it was possible to invent types of movement that don't exist naturally, and in that way conquer the fourth dimension (time) after the two dimensions of painting and the three of sculpture.

This is what we mean intimately by animation: not so much the attribution of motion but the attribution of a soul (or a personality) to objects, forms or shapes (even abstract) that are otherwise lifeless.

The language of animation was historically connected to the entertainment industry in a wide sense.

It was first channeled into the production-distribution-projection industry for public entertainment businesses (cinemas); then it went into television and then internet. Of course, it is correct to use the terms animated film, animated cartoon, animated short film, animated feature, animated TV series or animated genre film (comedy, horror, western, etc.).

A question arises, though. When it becomes possible to attribute a personality to otherwise inert things through the use of technologies different from traditional filmmaking, can those products also be called animation?

A famous example tells us that yes, they can.

Between 1892 and 1900, the Frenchman Emile Reynaud showed his *Pantomimes Lumineuses* to a paying audience at the Musée Grévin. The production presented brief comedy skits of drawings that came to life and action thanks to an instrument (not a movie camera) that he had invented, the Théâtre Optique. Specialists in animation have never had any doubts about including Reynaud among the pioneers of their art.

The language of animation shares many characteristics with its close relative, live action cinema. Let's look at two of these attributes: 1) its ability to give life to works of narrative and non-narrative natures and 2) its audiovisual characteristics.

Number one. The psychological component of believability is hazy in animation, while in live action it is fundamental. In live action, the realness of the actors and settings and the public's ability to identify with the scene is crucial to the film's timing. The spectator has no doubts that the action on the screen takes the same amount of time it would in real life for real events, and his involvement in the personal drama on the screen allows him to not get bored if there are cases of prolonged close-ups, monologues, or dialogues in or out of the field.[8] Narration is favored. In a way, we could say that live action cinema is comparable to prose in literature.

With animation, the public has to deal with drawn or painted images, models or digital images. In other words, things that are not real. Emotional identification is more difficult, even though over time it has become easier because younger generations grew up with this form of entertainment and the use of symbols is commonplace in everyday situations. Narration is not excluded, as we can see from the existence of a large number of long films, but it is more difficult because the concept is based on stylized film content that the spectator must accept and interiorize. There are many very short works in which elliptical and symbolic languages are dominant, and so there is a certain liking to poetry – literature in verse – which also includes longer works but is at its best in short form, allusive, full of analogies.

Let's go back to the assumption that the base of animation is the attribution of a soul (or a personality) to objects, forms or shapes (even abstract) that are otherwise lifeless; in other words, that the base of animation is the creation of movements and the choreography of shapes.

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[8] For an in-depth analysis of this concept, see Midhat Ajanovic, Animacija i realizam. Zagreb: Hrvatski filmski savez 2004).

If this was all there is to it, we could say that it is just a specialized section of kinetic fine art.

Number two. The other half of the question (especially the non-narrative aspect) lies in the soundtrack. It's not painting – it's music. The animation language is exquisitely audio-visual. In the opinion of this specialist operating inside the sector, it is the most audio-visual of audiovisual languages.

Animated forms, figures and characters have always had a close connection with music and sound in general. Musicians that work with animation have experimented from the Thirties with the most revolutionary techniques. Music and noises and voices and sound effects have almost always been included together in the soundtrack, and thought to be of equal importance by musicians, who often made headway in this particular field prior to and better than their counterparts in traditional music.

If there are doubts about the sound/vision synergy, we could try a simple experiment: show any short film from the Golden Age of Hollywood without the soundtrack (for example, an episode of Tom & Jerry or Wile E. Coyote & the Roadrunner). We would see that the work would lose its weight and meaning without the sound. If this is the case with mass production and industry, the elite works would be absolutely devastated: for example *Strojenie instrumentòw* (*Tuning the instruments*, 2000) from the polish director Jerzy Kucia, a film that intertwines sound and images in an inextricable way.

Given the examples above, it would be superficial to think that we have touched on all of the numerous nuances and feelings that make up the idea that each person working in this sector attributes to the matter at hand.

The outer margins, in particular, are always in movement. Should we consider (or not) the old adage, "If this scene can be filmed live, it isn't necessary to draw it."? Is time-lapse photography (the technique that allows us to watch a flower bloom in seconds) a category of animation or not? What about virtual reality (used in flight simulators for student pilots)? How should we define the numerous touch-up operations that post-production technology makes it possible to do on images in films like *Titanic or Lord of*

the Rings? Where it is possible to animate in real time, like it is possible to act in real time, do we have animation or do we have a puppeteering art instead?

In essence, and I apologize for the intellectual gibberish, the conclusion that we have reached is this: we can explore the phenomena of this particular creative branch of art until we touch on a categorical quality, but without actually giving it a precise collocation. Now – to draw conclusions and get to the point – we need to recall the definition made in opening: "Animation is everything that people have called animation in the different historical periods."

This is not tautological, as it could seem. It isn't because it refers to an element that is outside the realm of pure words. It refers to the attitudes maintained throughout the various time periods by specialists in the sector from all over the world – diverse in culture and political and social conditions, but in agreement in their opinions.

This tells us that a language called animation exists as an autonomous form of art, with its own role and space. This also tells us that animation has its own place in history, just like any other relevant human activity.

In addition, this definition has the virtue of blocking the temptation to do intellectual gymnastics while splitting hairs in hopes of grasping the profound essence of the concept.

Many years' worth of experience in the field, in addition to a lesser amount of time spent in the library, have convinced this author that definitions are necessary and useful, on the condition that they do not spark intricate debates. Pure discussion often hinders the comprehension of life and/or creative works.

This study should be therefore taken as a non-dogmatic preamble to the actual work of the human sciences specialist -which consists exactly in achieving that very comprehension.

Cited films:

Steamboat Willie (Walt Disney, 1928), *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937), *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale, Kirk Wise, 1991), *Tuning the Instruments* (Strojenie instrumentow; Jerzy Kucia, 2000), *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), *Lord of the Rings trilogy* (Peter Jackson, 2001/2/3).