LOTTE REINIGER

Living Shadows: The Art and Technology of the Silhouette Film

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A popular form of animation during the Weimar Republic, the silhouette film was frequently used for both fairy tales and advertisements. Lotte Reiniger (1899–1981), who created one of the first full-length animated films with *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926), was the undisputed master of the form. Whereas most women in the avant-garde had to work in the shadows of male artists (e.g., Bauhaus artist Lore Leudesdorff, who served as Walter Ruttmann's assistant), the silhouette—which had long been identified with women illustrators and print artists such as Käthe Wolff—offered a form in which a filmmaker like Reiniger could gain recognition as the principal author of her own films. In this article, Reiniger discusses the painstaking work of the silhouette animator and argues, like the authors of several other essays in this chapter, for the potential contributions of such experimental forms to the film industry.

There is film and then there is *film*. The difference lies not only in quality or success but also in technology and mode of production. We are still in the early developmental stages of this new medium of expression and have only just made our first attempts to speak in this universally intelligible language of the "living picture"—and already we are confronted by new forms of speech and possibilities for expression.

The normal form of film is the photographic reproduction of a process of movement. With the aid of recording devices, one can capture a large number (twenty to thirty) of individual phases of a normally lit movement on the filmstrip. When one projects these many individual images one after another onto a screen, an exact photographic image of

this movement emerges, as long as one projects exactly the same number of images per second that were recorded. Most films are made this way—documentary reports, expedition films, views of nature, and feature films. The bulk of the work here occurs *before* the filming, which itself takes exactly as long as the process it photographs.

This differs fundamentally from the mode of recording used in so-called *Trick filme* [animated films], my own silhouette films included. When one hears the word *trick,* one thinks, "Ah, there is something more to it!" For of course, there is some "trick" at work. One does not record, as usual, many images one after another but rather only one single image, and between one image and the next lie hours of arduous labor. The task of the animation artist is to evoke impressions of movement without photographing movement. He or she must break up the envisaged movement into small elements. Every individual image is arranged in relation to its predecessor and successor so that it appears, when projected, as one cohesive stream of movement. This mode of work is most similar to that of the composer who breaks up his desired sound into individual notes, painstakingly writing them one at a time.

This mode of work has the advantage that the artist can disregard the otherwise all-powerful laws of gravity and material context—in short, all natural laws that govern natural movement—in his or her sketches. The artist has free rein over his or her shapes and forms—it is precisely this complete reversal of the laws of nature that plays the leading role, for example, in the marvelous American cartoons of Felix the Cat or Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. There, an animal becomes longer, for example, because its front legs move quicker than its hind legs; a train can broaden to accommodate a wider track or contract to pass through a narrow tunnel. The wildest of fantasies need know no limits. Conversely, the greatest effects can be achieved when—as in my films—shadow figures act with such lifelike movements that one completely forgets that they are not real actors.

In my silhouette films, I do not follow the otherwise-common technique of illustrating the individual frames. Instead, following a system tested for years, I use lead and cardboard to construct figures who act on an illuminated surface. From frame to frame, the small black actors are altered in accordance with their intended movements. This is not so bad with individual figures and close-ups. It becomes less pleasant when there are many different actors at the same time. In such cases, it often takes days to produce but a few seconds of film. Here, the clear execution of the various processes is more difficult than the work of movement and recording. People are generally astonished by the volume of handwork, the multitude of images recorded. Yet such is the work of every artist—the pianist, the saxophonist, the painter, and the composer, who writes down his countless individual notes. The most difficult and most important aspect is the mental and emotional concentration, which makes it possible to render visible an idea.

The beauty lies in the unexplored quality of this entire realm. With such work, one new possibility after another reveals itself. Unfortunately, very few artists concern themselves with this new realm of expression. The reasons for this are obvious. First, the work is too expensive—the material and equipment cost a lot of money. Individuals cannot afford such a venture, but the industry has shown little inclination to date in fostering animated film as an independent form. In most cases, the industry uses only the most obvious effects, generally for the purposes of advertising. Stand-alone works are rare. The Americans produce the greatest share with the marvelous animations of Felix the Cat and Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, whose global success proves that pure animation also bears great business potential. The great interest in my works strengthens my resolve to stake further positions in this unexplored field of human expression, with the hope that each new production will help open up one of the most promising realms for film.

Stereoscopic film will create a new art form through the dynamic analysis of space. Color film will give us the possibility of making voices and feelings more powerful with colors. Only experience can tell whether we will be able to proceed from colors as pigments based on the laws of color harmony.

In the film of the future, objects (and colors) will not be static. *It will be an art that, with the fewest technical constraints, will master space as a means of expression,* an art that does not need to negate subjectivism in order to create emotional value, since it masters the mobility and modification of any object.

The binding law behind all the means of expression emerging for this absolute film will be the musicality of space, which will make film into a unified artwork. To avoid any misunderstandings about the concept of musicality, I would like to quote Schopenhauer: "The relation of the colonnade to the plain wall is comparable to that which would exist between a scale ascending at regular intervals, and a tone ascending little by little without gradations from the same depth to the same height, which would produce a mere howl. For in one as in the other the material is the same, and the immense difference results only from the pure separation."[2] What Schopenhauer says about the aesthetics of architecture can also be applied to colors.

The sound film will first be able to develop properly only when the film image has become stereoscopic. *It is impossible to think of language and sound divorced from space.* Up to now, sound waves have only vibrated in the auditorium and have not emanated from the film image, since it still appears to be two-dimensional. Sound negates the illusion of spatial depth that we now experience. Only time can tell how far it will be possible for coming films to present language in the form of sequential sentences; it is difficult to adapt language to the tempo of film. In any case, language will have to align itself to the dynamic of the whole work—using sound, tone, and noise as bridges in the process.

The most radical potential for expression in coming film work will be stereoscopy, if one does not judge it only optically but along the lines I have tried to define here: as part of a collective art that should be included in the will to artistic expression and not merely as designing space in the conventional architectonic sense.

Notes

1. Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama* (1851), slightly modified by Grave. We borrow here the translation in Thomas Tapper and Percy Goetschius, *Essentials in Music History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 297. The original Wagner passage is "der Irrtum in dem Kunstgenre der Oper bestand darin, daß ein Mittel des Ausdruckes (die Musik) zum Zwecke, der Zweck des Ausdruckes (das Drama) aber zum Mittel gemacht war."

2. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* vol. 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), 412.