

With a philosopher's eye: A 'naïve' look at animation

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ABSTRACT: Animation has never been a subject that has attracted much interest from philosophers, except perhaps from a very few interested in the philosophy of film or perhaps in visual aesthetics. Aspects of philosophical thinking may well be relevant to animation, however, and animators and theorists of animation have certainly shown an interest in philosophy: most often in time, movement, and process. But it is one thing to draw on philosophy in working within a field, and another thing to try to think philosophically about that field. In this admittedly naive view of animation – naive because it comes from philosophy to animation rather than the other way around – I intend to explore some of the philosophical issues that animation may be thought to raise. In part, that means exploring the relevance of animation to philosophy as much as of philosophy to animation.

On first viewing Martin Scorsese's 2011 movie, *Hugo*, based on Brian Selznick's illustrated novel *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* from 2007, I was struck by the way it drew together themes from both animation and film. Although clearly a homage to the early history of cinema, and a celebration of the wonder and enchantment of film, *Hugo* is no less an homage to, and celebration of, *animation*. Indeed, the film could be viewed as coming close to an endorsement of the claim by some animation theorists that film has its *origins* in animation, while demonstrating that this is also where film is surely heading back. In *Hugo*, the beginning of film is drawn together with its contemporary endpoint, and at the same time, is thereby drawn into an intimate engagement with animation in all its variety.

Scorsese's movie includes a range of quite specific animation references and techniques, from stop-motion and flip-book animation, time-lapse, morphing, and transition, the use of miniatures and, inevitably, computer generated graphics. But the movie is also replete with other forms of animation, perhaps most obviously in the form of the automaton, the truly animated 'machine', who is a central focus for much of the early part of the movie, as well as in the constant presence of other forms of clockwork machines and mechanisms from the station clock Hugo himself tends, to the toys in Meliès' small shop, to the old-fashioned film projector itself. Here animation, even the animation exhibited by a clockwork mouse, appears as something wondrous and magical – a connection reinforced by the magic tricks, especially card tricks (that themselves evoke a certain mode of animation, of movement, of appearance and disappearance), that are also part of Meliès' stock-in-trade.

The breadth of animation that appears in Scorsese's movie, and that is also exhibited, if to a lesser extent, in Selznick's original book, is indicative of the fact that, although animation does have a special relationship with film, it is not restricted to the cinematic alone. Indeed, as Scorsese's film also shows, animation is not only a means of enabling the presentation of what might be thought as the fantastical and dream-like, as are so many of Meliès' own cinematic creations, but animation

also plays a role in the everyday world, both in enabling that world through the machines and mechanisms that are ubiquitous throughout it, but also through enabling us to see into and explore the reality of that world, and the possibilities it contains. In this respect, animation itself functions as a machine that enables such seeing, as well as encompassing various animational devices or contrivances – various animational ‘machines’.

In this respect, Scorcese's use of computer animation and computer graphics, to take one salient example, belongs to a domain of animation practice that is not exclusive to the cinema or even to the entertainment industry. The same animation and graphic techniques that are deployed in a movie such as *Hugo*, as well as in computer gaming, have also taken on a huge role in, amongst other areas, design and architectural practice, in education, and in training and simulation environments, as well as in heritage and curatorial contexts. The ‘animation machine’ is thus capable of diverse instantiations.

Animation is literally a "making move", and it is this that underpins the enormous variety in animated form and practice. Of course, just as not every occurrence of marks – even those marks that seem to fit a recognised language – count as a meaningful text, neither does just any occurrence of movements count as animation. Animation is a form of unitary movement, where the unity of the movement reflects the unity of that which moves. This unity has two aspects to it.

The first aspect is the unity that derives from the way in which the animated figure relates to a larger 'animational' context. That is, the character of the animated figure *as animated* depends on the way the figure appears in relation to other such figures, and a larger socio-cultural framework, a framework in which animation appears *as animation*. The presence of the animator alone does not determine this. This is because the character of the animator *as animator* is dependent on the same animational context. This reflects the more generally holistic constitution of the 'artifactual' and the contentful: artefactuality and content both depend on their locatedness within a larger horizontal context that encompasses agents, objects (including artefacts), and world.¹

The second and perhaps more immediate sense in which animation is a form of unitary movement is a sense that attaches to the character of the movement as such, and so concerns the unity of that very movement. In this latter respect, the movement of an animated cartoon figure counts *as animation* because of the way in which the movement of the figure is related to the unity of its parts. The figure moves as one, which means that the different parts of the figure move in a way that is partially determined by the movements of the other parts. This is so even though the cartoon figure, a moving figure whose movement is present only in the figure *as seen*, moves as a result of a causal process that is based in the successive projection of images onto a screen and, prior to that, in image construction and design undertaken by an animator. Even in cases of what might be understood as 'abstract' animation, where no obvious figurative elements are present, still the animation can be said to have a unity that belongs to it.

The sort of animation at issue here can be counterposed to the movement that belongs, not to what is immediately seen to move, but to something that is itself seen to move *in the movement that is immediately presented* – as the movement of the wind is seen in the movement of the leaves, or

¹ See my discussion of this issue in eg. 'The weave of meaning: holism and contextuality', *Language and Communication* 22 (2002), pp.403-19.

even as the movement of the puppeteer is seen in the movement of the marionette. The difference at issue here might be understood as a difference in the *locus* of movement – which is not the same as the question about the *cause* of movement – but it can also be understood as a difference in the relation between the movement that causes and the movement that appears. The cause of movement in the case of the marionette or the leaves is what is more or less immediately apparent in the moving of the marionette or the leaves (even though we can, and often do, dissociate the one from the other). One might characterise the two forms of movement that appear here, and of which the first is properly 'animation', in terms of the notion of transformation. In the case of the leaves or the marionette, the movement that appears has the same form, even when the movement is exaggerated or diminished, as the movement that is the cause. Thus the leaves move as the wind moves, and the marionette moves, more or less in congruity, with the body of the puppeteer. In the case of the animated figure, however, the movement of the figure does not directly replicate or mirror the movement that is its cause, and so one might say that whereas the movement of the marionette is unified in its relation to the movement of the puppeteer, the movement of the animated figure is unified in relation to the movement of the figure itself. Taking note of the idea of a transformation in movement that is operative here, coupled with the idea that such transformation requires something akin to a device that accomplishes such transformation and that stands between the movements that cause and the movements that appear, one can say that this is just what is at issue in the idea of animation as a 'machine' — namely a device or contrivance that achieves some effect. What is achieved is a making move that is also a transformation of and in movement.

It is worth noting that something like this analysis can also be applied, not only to visual animation, but also to animation in sound, for instance, to the acoustic animations of Norman McLaren. These involve the production of sound through markings made directly onto film. The sounds are movements, and one finds the same transformation of one form of movement into another – the movements that produce the sounds, McLaren's markings, are transformed, through their projection, into sounds which have a character of their own, and, one might argue, a movement that belongs to them.

The difference between animation and mere movement is thus a difference found *both* in the way the animated figure appears within an 'animational' context *and* in the unity that belongs to the movement of the figure that is animated. On this basis, I would claim that it is *movement* that is at the heart of animation as such. Moreover, the movement that is at issue is not merely the *illusion* of movement either, but its *reality*. Even the cartoon image can properly be said to move – and it is indeed *the image* that moves, with the movement located in the image and belonging to it – which is one reason why, as I argued above, the image can be said to be animated.

The original Latin term from the word 'animation' and its cognates derive, *anima*, usually translated as 'soul', originally had associations of air, wind, or breath, as does the Greek *anemos*, from which *anima* comes (a term meaning 'wind'), as well as the Greek term *psyche*, of which *anima* is the Latin translation, and which is translated into English as 'soul', but also as 'mind', but which also refers to that creature that floats on the air, the 'butterfly'. Here the focus on the 'aerey', on breath and wind, should be understood, not in terms that treat these as *metaphors* for 'life', or for that which is the basis of life, namely the soul, but more literally as referring to a pervading capacity for movement that is characteristically exemplified in the movement of air, and which is itself the basis for the

understanding of life – the latter thus being understood as a certain fundamental capacity for *movement*.

The focus on movement ought to be absolutely central in any attempt to think seriously about animation – and it seems to me implicit in the idea of the ‘animation machine’ that is our theme. Indeed, I would argue that movement is a much more important notion here than are many of the other concepts that often tend to figure in discussions within animation theory – whether they be, not just ‘life’, but ‘process’, or even ‘time’ – and that the prioritisation of these other notions can obscure the understanding of movement itself, and so also of animation. This is an issue to which I shall return, but first, I want to consider the way the focus on movement allows us to reconstruct a certain history, or perhaps prehistory, of animation and even animation ‘theory’ — a history that stretches back, in the case of European thought and culture, to the Greeks.

If animation is indeed a ‘making move’, and with the emphasis on the ‘making’ here (on what the Greeks termed *techne* understood as a form of *poiesis*), on a certain *art* of movement, then animation can be said to begin, naturally enough, with the gods, and especially with Hephaestus, who in his workshop fashioned ‘self-moving machines’ or automata of brass, silver, and gold. Yet it is perhaps Daedalus, the Athenian master craftsman who used his art in the service of the Cretan King Minos, who should warrant most attention as the one who stands closest to the very beginnings of animation, at least to its mythic European origins, since it is Daedalus who is the first mortal credited with the creation of statues that had the power of movement. Thus, in the 4th Century, the Greek rhetorician Callistratus compared the work of the sculptor Praxiteles to that of Daedalus, writing that “as I gazed on this work of art, the belief came over me that Daidalos had indeed wrought a dancing group in motion and had bestowed sensation upon gold.”² Aristotle reports Daedalus as having constructed a wooden figure of Aphrodite that was moved by quicksilver within it.³

It is Aristotle, in fact, who provides us with what may be viewed as the very first writing on animation, perhaps the first work in animation theory, namely the treatise *De Motu Animalium* – *On Animal Movement*. This small book, which draws on ideas which Aristotle also sets out in other works, notably *De Anima* and *De Partibus Animalium*, focuses specifically on the nature of movement or *kinesis* (which can also refer to change in a broader sense). Aristotle argues that motion is impossible in that which lacks differentiation, and that in anything that moves there must be at least two parts, one of which is active and the other passive, as well as a resisting surface outside of that which moves, and which, relative to what moves, is itself unmoved. The account Aristotle gives of motion, which also leads from an examination of animal motion to that of the heavens, is significant from the point of view of animation in that it provides a structural analysis of movement and its preconditions, while also connecting movement directly to the understanding of the unity of bodies (or of ‘figures’, understood in a very general sense), and more specifically of living bodies, and their relation to their surroundings. There is an echo of Aristotle’s discussion in my earlier comments about the nature of animation. Moreover, the general claim that motion requires differentiation can be seen to underpin more recent discussions of animation in terms of notions, typically derived from writers such as Deleuze (but, I would argue, already elaborated in Heidegger), in terms of *difference*, or better, of *difference and identity*.

² Callistratus, *Descriptions 3* (trans. Fairbanks). Stories of marvellous automata abound in the Greek world, and can also be found in many other cultures from the Chinese to the Arabic.

³ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 1.3.9

The concern with movement, both its analysis and the art of its production, is a preoccupation that extends from Aristotle right through ancient and classical thought, into the medieval period, the Renaissance, the early modern, and so to the present – and that also extends, of course, well beyond Europe. It is a concern often manifest, at least so far as the production of movement is concerned, with the construction of machines or automata – from the brazen talking head that was supposedly employed by a range of figures including Pope Sylvester II, Roger Bacon, and Albertus Magnus, to the air and water-powered contrivances devised by Hero of Alexandria, the thaumaturgical devices of such as John Dee, including his flying beetle, and the wide range of mechanical wonders that proliferated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of which the chess-playing mechanical Turk (actually a fake) was perhaps the most famous, but that also took on a particular sophistication in, among other examples, the architectural works of Salomon de Caus.

The production of movement in images is not absent from this history – although drawn, the portrayal of movement in Neolithic cave paintings is sometimes taken as the beginnings of animation, while the production of zoetropic animation seem to be evident in ancient China and perhaps ancient Iran. Nevertheless, it is not properly until the late and nineteenth and early twentieth century, with the invention of cinematography, in particular, that animation in images comes into its own, and the reason for this is simply that, apart from relatively simple devices such as the zoetrope, the transformation of movement that is evident in the moving image requires a different and more developed form of animation machinery than do automata and similar contrivances.

Much of this story will be familiar to those of you who have looked even briefly at the historical background to contemporary animation, but what I want I want to emphasis here is the way this history not only constitutes animation as part of a well-established inquiry into the nature and art of production of movement – a discipline that might also be called *kinematics* had the term not already been appropriated by the natural sciences (arising as a translation from the French *cinématique* invented by André-Marie Ampère, in the early nineteenth century, to refer, not to anything to do with film, but to a branch of classical mechanics) – but also the way in which it is precisely around movement that this history is indeed constituted. It is thus not time, or process, or life, or any other such concept that is central here, even though these may also be implicated in one way or another, but movement, *kinesis*.

It might be thought that this emphasis on movement is already well established within contemporary understandings of animation, and that whether we focus specifically on movement or treat of it through some related concept makes little difference to the understanding of animation as such. Indeed, it might even be argued that movement itself requires elucidation, and that this is precisely what is enabled by the understanding of movement in terms of other concepts. I am not opposed to such elucidation, but what I would insist on is the need for any analysis always to retain a clear sense of that which is the proper object for analysis. What often happens, when one concept is analysed in terms of another, is actually the overshadowing of the first in favour of the latter. This seems to me to be a feature of much contemporary discussion of animation in which movement recedes into the background in favour of other more privileged notions.

In arguing for a focus on movement in the way that I have done here, I imagine that I may be thought to have revealed myself as indeed possessed of just the sort of naiveté to which my title

alludes – that I have overlooked the radically destabilising and critical potential that animation carries within it; that I remain stuck within an old-fashioned mode of thinking that cannot shrug off its metaphysical prejudices. In fact, the approach that underpins the 'naïve' thinking about animation on which I have begun here is a thinking that is grounded in a tradition of phenomenological, hermeneutic, or as I would prefer to put it, *topological* analysis. One of the key presupposition of such thinking, which in some respects may be thought to possess its own naïveté, is that it can begin only by taking seriously the autonomy of its object – by retaining a clear focus on the things themselves, on the subject matter that draws one into dialogue with one's interlocutors, on the situation in which one is engaged (here, in fact, is one form of the naïveté, if one wishes to call it that, referred to in my title). On this basis, what determines one's thinking is the subject matter that originally calls for thinking, and what surely calls for such thinking in the case of animation is a certain forms of movement, and the nature of that movement.

It seems to me that this approach, which may itself be understood as naïve in a certain sense, leads to a way of thinking of animation that, as I have already noted, may well lead to a different set of concepts as taking precedence in the thinking of animation. Movement, certainly, must be primary here, and yet in taking movement as the proper end of animation, meaning both that at which it is directed and that out of which it arises, then movement cannot be understood as just a matter of time or process. This is actually one of the points that I think can be taken from Aristotle's *De Motu* – that work directs attention to the way movement is connected with the unitary character of the figure that moves and its relation to the background against which it moves. This cannot be understood in purely temporal terms, but is also essentially *spatial*. In this respect, a closer focus on movement ought to also lead to a closer concern with the spatial character of animation, and the animated figure, and to its internal as well as external relatedness.

For me, this account feeds into a larger critique of what I have elsewhere referred to as the 'temporalist prejudice' in contemporary, and more broadly modern, thought. That prejudice tends to a reading of phenomena, and not just in specific domains such as animation theory, as primarily to be construed in terms of their character as given in terms of process, duration, or succession. The difficulty is that such notions implicitly treat the spatial, and with it notions of state, extension, and simultaneity, as secondary. In fact, neither of these sets of notions makes sense without the other, and each implies the other. My sometimes polemical take on this is to say that there is no such thing as either time or space, at least not understood independently of one other, and instead to insist on both as given only within the encompassing structure of place or topos.

This seems an especially important point in relation to animation, since the centrality of movement in animation brings with it an emphasis on the proper frame within which movement occurs – indeed, movement, as Newton as well as Aristotle tell us, is always relative to a context of movement, or as I would put it, movement, at least so far as animation is concerned, is always spatio-temporally, that is to say, topologically, determined and defined. Although I don't have time to go into the full implications of this approach here,⁴ what that means is precisely that one takes the moving figure as primary, but that one must also attend to the proper horizon within which that moving figure is placed. A topological analysis also places emphasis on surface – on what is given

⁴ But see, eg, Malpas, *Place and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) or Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006)

rather than what lies beneath, even though what is given may often be occluded or hidden. To think animation topologically is to think animation in a way that not only takes the moving figure as primary, but also attempts to analyse that figure in terms of its own appearance and mode of appearance, its own 'surfaces', as well as in its multiple relations within the topos of the appearance.

The topological approach that I have suggested here, and the very focus on movement that comes with it, means that animation, as I noted above, is not co-extensive with film. There is a sense in which film appears within animation inasmuch as film presents itself as a mode of movement that also appears by means of movement. There is also a sense in which film extends beyond the scope of animation inasmuch as film also encompasses, for instance, forms of dramatic performance, of plot and character, and of cinematographic technique that do not belong, at least not in the same way, to animation alone. In addition, animation may itself appear as partially encompassed within film, just inasmuch as animation can be viewed as itself a form of movement that is indeed instantiated in and through film, and so may be subject, as film, to much the same sorts of critical interrogation as other cinematic styles, forms, and genres.

This idea of the relation between film and animation as an untidy and pluralistic one, in which each may be seen, in different ways, to encompass the other, seems not only to be true to the subject matter at issue, but also to conform with what is more typically true of the way different domains and concepts actually do relate. There is seldom the sort of tidiness or the sort of overarching conceptual hegemony that is so often claimed. In this respect, my reference to Scorsese's *Hugo* is useful in exhibiting the character of animation, in its relation to film, as both encompassed and encompassing. In like fashion, Scorsese's movie also exhibits the breadth of compass of film itself, as well as the manner in which what film shows and draws upon goes beyond the bounds of film alone.

If the focus on movement is indeed taken to be central to animation, with the consequence that animation is not to be viewed as restricted to or even as co-extensive with film, then we should be wary of taking cinematic animation as a paradigmatic of animation as such. Yet even when the extension of animation beyond film is acknowledged, still there seems a powerful tendency to do just this, and to focus the investigation of animation on cinematic animation or indeed to take cinematic animation as the paradigm. One consequence of this is that it seems commonplace to distinguish, even if usually implicitly, movement from image. Such a distinction is evident, for instance, in the idea that animation is based, not in the image as such, but in the movement between otherwise static images. It is a view apparently supported by the fact that cinematic animation operates through the succession of images, through their rapid replacement or superpositioning, even, it is sometimes said, through that which lies "between" images. The appearance of the image *as moving* is thus often taken, on this account, as in fact an illusory appearance – the image itself does not move, and the real movement lies elsewhere, in the movement of frames, or perhaps more originally, in the movement of the camera, the model, the animator's hand and eye, or the calculations of the computer.

Even were we to take this distinction as relevant only to cinematic animation, and so, contrary to the widespread tendency, as not as telling us anything about animation as such, still it is a distinction with which, on the face of it, we ought to take issue. As I argued earlier, what one sees in animation, no less in film than in automata and other moving devices, is not the illusion, but the reality of movement, and that what moves in the case of cinematic animation is indeed the image (although

not only that). The fact that the process that gives rise to the moving image includes operations upon images that do not themselves move is not relevant to the moving character of the image that appears in animation. Indeed, that there is a difference between the movement that gives rise to the movement of the image (which in this case involves, crucially, the fact that the images on which animation operates need not themselves move) and the movement of the image, is actually essential to the possibility that what is at issue is indeed a case of animation. That this is so follows directly from the account of animation I sketched earlier according to which animation always involves a transformation, rather than merely a replication of movement or its immediate transference. The moving image – the animated image – is thus not an illusion. The image has a movement that belongs to it, even though the movement does not originate with the image that moves (it is not "self-moving" in the Aristotelian sense). In fact, although on the one hand there does seem to be a certain mode of animation theory that does treat the movement of the image as illusory, there is also a vast body of animation theory that, simply in virtue of its focus on animation *as film*, implicitly treats animated film on a par with live-action film, and so implicitly treats the movement of the animated image as belonging to the animated image no less than it belongs to the live-action image.

One might also observe that there is probably a closer relation between the image that moves through the super-positioning of images, and the single image that contains a form of movement within it in virtue of the manner of its depiction (the sort of 'animation' that is sometimes taken to be exemplified in its earliest form in prehistoric cave painting). Here the movement is given by the inclusion in the image of the components necessary for movement – a differentiation of components against a differentiated, and relatively unmoving (at least as depicted), background. In fact, the discussion of movement in the single image, whether or not we think of it as 'animation' (and there are reasons in my own analysis here that suggest we should not), seems to me to offer interesting points of comparison for the study of animation as it occurs in the cinematic image, and there are significant structural differences between the two. Moreover, in both cases, it seems to me, one can properly speak about a movement that belongs to the image even if the techniques and processes by which this is achieved are different.

The animation machine is essentially a machine characterised by movement and the transformation of movement. Understanding that machine is a matter of understanding the character of movement, including the means by which it is generated, transformed, and by which it appears. This involves more than treating of the animated image alone, just as it involves more than looking just to film as the paradigmatic instance of animation – the automaton is one example of this. In the 18th Century, de La Mettrie talked famously of *l'Homme Machine*, Man the Machine. In this he partly echoed Aristotle in *De Motu* who compared animal movement to the movements of puppets and automata. If we take seriously the idea of animation as indeed a "making move", a making that also involves understanding, then animation may also be viewed as a way of investigating movement as such. Animation could then be viewed not only as an art and a practice, but also a form of conceptual or experimental inquiry – one directed not at film, or texts, or 'theory', but at movement itself. Moreover, the notion of movement that appears here is not one that is that which is the result of any purely reductive analysis, but rather that with and from which any analysis of animation, or animation itself, must surely begin.