

SPRING 2002



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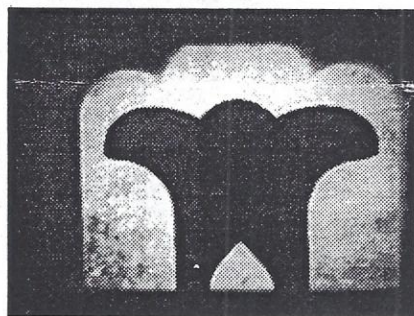
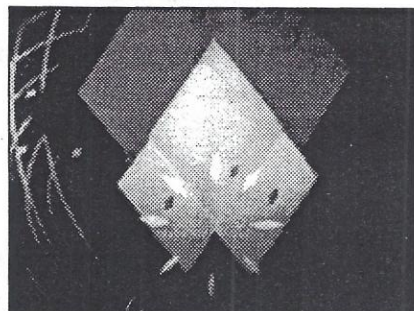
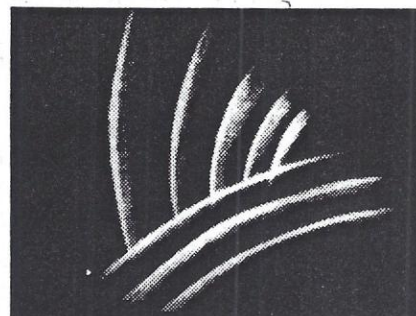
## Cross-Influence in Abstract German Animation of the Silent Era

by Jim Middleton

*Author's note: These notes represent some random comments based on a presentation at the Starved Rock Retreat in April, 2000. There might be a germ of a thesis for some aspiring MFA candidate here, too.*

When exploring the evolution of Animation (with a capital A) as an Art, we need not look far into the development of the genre to fall upon some striking examples. The earliest extant specimens, by their basic nature, were replete with abstraction, and by the mid-1920s, the visuals had coalesced into a screen language that had a distinct Germanic flavor. It is understandable, therefore, that artists shared their enthusiasm and cross-pollinated each other's works. Ultimately, their influence made its way to America, where the styles were adopted to the tastes of not only commercial animation, but narrative cinema as well.

The simple line-drawings of Emile Cohl were a by-product of his Absurdist school of art from the 19th century. *Fantasmagorie* (1906), his first film, blended one dreamlike image into another within its sixty-second screen time. His subsequent films were often stream-of-consciousness rambles that explored drug-induced fantasy (*Le Reve d'un Garcon du cafe*) and odd character juxtapositions (*Le Retapeur-de cervelles*). Later, other



French films such as *Anemic Cinema* or *Ballet Mechanique* tossed in abstract visuals amid unrelated images (hats, bottles, pouting lips, fitful animations of Charlie Chaplin) in an attempt to explore visual technique at the expense of narrative continuity.

In the United States, early films by J. Stuart Blackton at Edison also toyed with abstract imagery, but only as a method of film illusion. *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1907) has some blurred sketches that evolve into les visages grotesques, but that appeared to be less an attempt to

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## Greetings from the President by Jim Middleton

The ASIFA Central retreat and conference is approaching in a few weeks, KAFI in May and as if that isn't enough, there are taxes! Fortunately, software is a valid business expense, not merely a way of life. For those of you on my email spam list, you've already been teased ad nauseam with the door prizes that will be looking for a home at the retreat—and since we're always in the need for space to fill, let's iterate the goods at this juncture.

And note all the ART involved here!

- A 1964 Viennese Weekly ART Calendar. OK, so it's 38 years old, but there are purty pitchers and it represents the year that the Addams Family and the Munsters premiered, It's A Small World debuted at the New York World's Fair, and BASIC ran the IBM system 360, a computer the size of a large upright freezer with all the power of a good calculating wristwatch of today.
- The ART of the New Yorker 1925-1995
- 102 Favorite Paintings by Norman Rockwell
- Jerry Beck's 50 Greatest Cartoons...6 copies!
- An ART Nouveau Coloring Book
- Walt Disney's Animated Characters...2 copies!
- Snow White-- an ART in its Making!
- The Adventures of Aaron, and a load of comic books, both new and "well loved." Aaron Warner, a Battle Creek comic strip artist, ran a taco restaurant in downtown Battle Creek for a year before figuring that it might not be the most logical affiliation for his talents. So he liquidated. He had lots of comic books.
- Rocko's Modern Christmas Video
- A 3-volume set of Simpsons Episodes
- Walt Disney's Bambi ART Book
- Michael Barrier's Hollywood Cartoons -- a hefty book of anecdotes, explored in the last issue of Frame by Frame

• Cartoon Crazys DVD -- the joy of public domain animation now hits mediocre digital transfers! (There's also a copy of R. Crumb's Coffee Table ART Book in the collection, but that's definitely not for the faint of heart.)

Oh! And....and....Volume II of "Animate THIS!" -- yet another collection of public domain musical selections gleaned and cleaned from prehistoric sources (forget vinyl, we're talking SHELLAC here, gang).

Wow! How do these things come to be available? Well, there's a recession on (don't we know THAT) and outlet malls think books are passe. So out they go! I collect 'em, sort 'em, and share 'em. But you've got to make it to the retreat to get 'em! So carpool, hitch, or email yourself to Chicago. I can't take these back with me, and if I leave them in the hands of non-animators it will just herniate the right side of their cerebrums. And that's not a pretty sight.

And then, after THAT, we've got Kalamazoo in May...and Ottawa in October...and before you know it...MORE TAXES!

One more thing, and I'll let our ever-suffering Jennifer try to put this ramble into small enough type to fit...at the retreat, BRING YOUR IDEAS FOR OUR WEB SITE. We're looking at ways to make the site more useful, appealing, and FUN. Have a favorite link? Bring it! Want your registry information updated? Pontificate! Is puce your favorite color? Well, we have therapy for that one...

See you soon!  
Yr hmbl typst,  
Jim Middleton

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#### To join ASIFA/Central:

Send a check (payable in US dollars to ASIFA/Central) to the address on the back of this newsletter.

#### ASIFA/Central Mission Statement ASIFA: Association Internationale du Film d'Animation

*The purpose of ASIFA/Central is to promote the art of animation locally and internationally and to promote communication among animators and between animators and devotees. - adopted 3/92*

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## Stubble Trouble Receives Oscar Nomination for Best Animated Short Film

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*STUBBLE TROUBLE*, the delightful animated film produced by Calabash Animation and directed by animator, Joe Merideth, has been nominated for this year's Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film.

*Stubble Trouble* is the first film to be completed under Calabash Animation's "Animated Shorts Program," in which a story concept is chosen from submissions from the talent group of Calabash Animators to go into production. *Stubble Trouble* has already won a second place for animation at the Palm Springs International Short Film Festival and is nominated for an Annie Award for Best Animated Short Film.

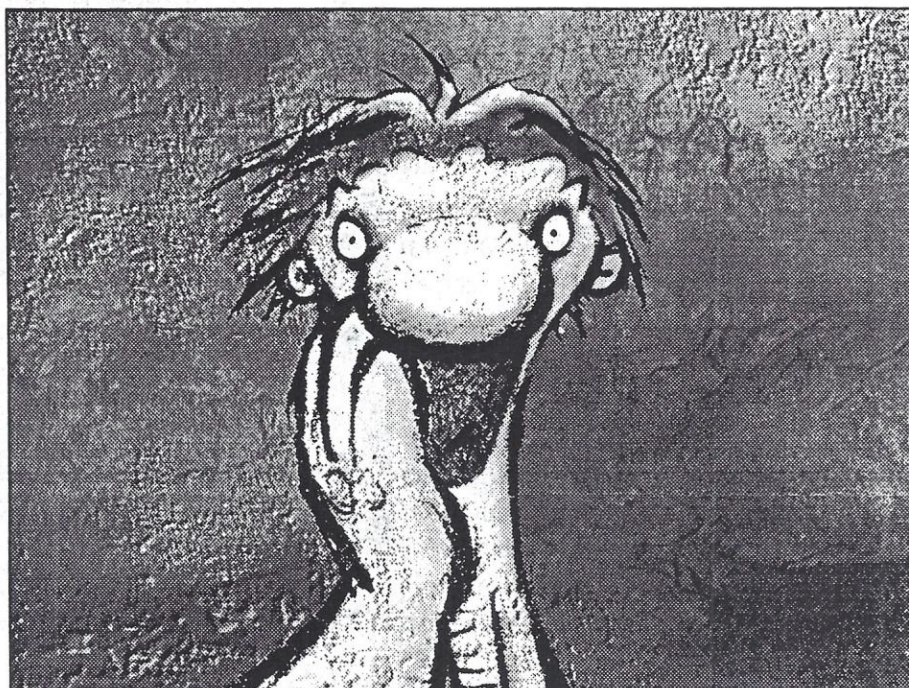
Director Joe Merideth explains the premise of *Stubble Trouble* by saying: "It's the age old story of man's journey to understand and accept himself." The film's hero, Og, fights a losing battle with his hyperactive beard as he pursues love in the Stone Age.

In speaking of *Stubble Trouble's* Oscar nomination, Calabash Animation's founder and director, Ed Newmann said: "At Calabash we never discovered a formula for inspiring the uninspired-- but we've always been happy to nurture and encourage people who are equipped with their own initiative, and Joe Merideth has plenty of that.

Eight years ago, Joe was hired at Calabash as a cel painter. This year he's been nominated for an Academy Award. That journey was fueled entirely by his own persistence and devotion to

excellence. We could not possibly be more proud of him."

Calabash Animation, based in Chicago, is a classical character animation house specializing in cel, computer, clay, cut-paper and sand animation and special effects. In the years



since its inception, Calabash has created two original television specials for the CBS owned and operated stations, produced several children's films for Encyclopedia Britannica, and created hundreds of highly successful TV commercials for products such as Lucky Charms, Trix, HoneyNut Cheerios, Little Caesar's Pizza, Mr. Clean, Keebler Wheatables and others. More information can be found at their website [www.calabashanimation.com](http://www.calabashanimation.com).

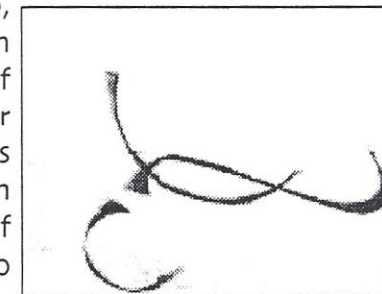
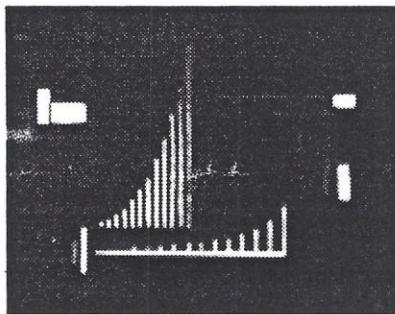
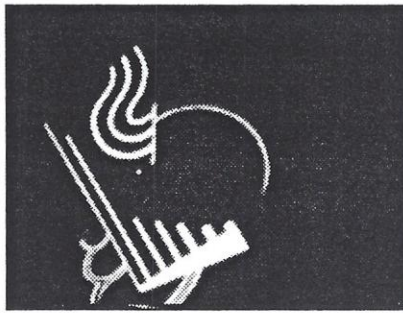
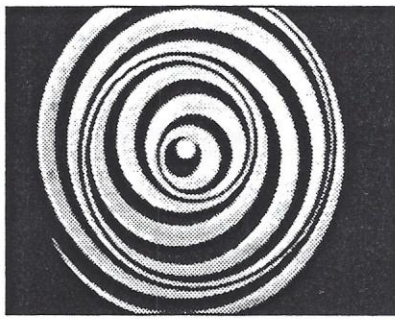
Article courtesy of JANE AYER PUBLIC RELATIONS, INC.



create a visual language than to demonstrate a stop-motion trick. Edison wanted product, not art. Blackton provided the footage.

Back in France, Viking Eggeling died for the cause. His *Diagonal Symphony* was considered by many to be the "first" true abstraction in animation. He spent three or four years on it and died less than three weeks after its first showing in 1925. Hans Richter, his assistant, quickly stepped in and put together *Rhythm 21*, which he claimed he made four years before *Diagonal Symphony*. His other contributions to abstract film also bear a distinct resemblance to Eggeling's work, perhaps influenced by his marriage to the earlier artist's widow. It is also interesting to note that *Diagonal Symphony* exists today only in fragments. Richter also claimed to have invented film trickery for his *Ghosts Before Breakfast* (1928), but these techniques had been in common use since the days of French magician-filmmaker Georges Melies. For all this squabbling, neither's filmwork can be considered the birth of abstraction. That honor should go to Walther Ruttmann.

Ruttmann created *Opus I* in 1922, with hand-colored images and a specially-composed score that was beautifully recreated at an Ottawa film festival in 1988 (and since has been released by Kino as a companion to *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*). Ruttmann worked for UFA and stimulated the animation muse in several contemporaries, namely Oskar Fischinger



and Lotte Reininger. He created the aforementioned documentary *Berlin*, and was integral in the special effects work on Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. He saw sketches by Fischinger and encouraged him into film, bought a wax-slicing machine for effects that Fischinger developed, and had a striking influence on Fischinger's early techniques. He then coordinated the production of Lotte Reininger's *Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926), brought in Fischinger's wax slicing machine for special effects, and the result was the first animated feature film, over a decade before Disney's *Snow White*.

With the coming of sound, Ruttmann chose to stay with narrative film, at one point helping edit *Olympia*. However, Fischinger continued developing his abstract style and technique into the sound era, and most notably, into the Nazi era. Nazis hated abstract art. When Fischinger began winning awards, especially after his Italian premiere of *Komposition im Blau* (1935), he was encouraged to take his "degenerate art" to America (his brother, Hans, remained behind, and before being shipped to the Russian front, managed to complete the final abstract animated film in Germany in 1939).

While in America, Fischinger was teased for producing more children than films, but managed to create a handful of

masterpieces: first, *Allegretto* for Paramount

Abstract German Animation (Middleton) continued on 5



# 10th Annual Midwest Animators Conference

**Friday Apr 26 - Sunday Apr 28, 2002**

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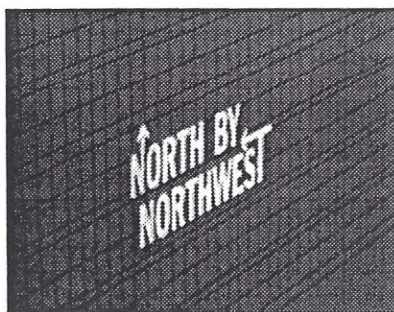
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(who didn't know what to do with  
it), *Optical Poem* for MGM (who,  
with Fred Quimby in charge of  
animation, also didn't know what to  
do with it), and the storyboard for  
the *Toccata* and *Fugue* sequence for  
*Fantasia* at Disney (who didn't  
understand it). *Allegretto* and  
*Optical Poem* survive as testimony

to his ability as both an abstract artist and an  
animator who knew how to make his work  
appeal to a general audience, even if his  
distributors were lost. It took the reissue of  
*Fantasia* in DVD "special edition" for Disney to  
fully acknowledge his contribution—they had  
gone from complete denial in the 1970's to an  
attempt at reconstructing Fischinger's vision for



the DVD release, no doubt due  
to the diligence of John  
Canemaker (whose 1977 *Camera  
Three* retrospective on  
Fischinger had a profound  
influence on your humble  
typist's life).

As Fischinger's output waned in  
the 1950s, a seemingly unlikely resurgence in  
abstract animation appeared in the work of  
Alfred Hitchcock. His opening sequences,  
designed by Saul Bass, for *Vertigo*, *North by  
Northwest*, and *Psycho* all bore striking  
resemblances to films from Walther Ruttmann.  
The swirls of *Vertigo* recalled the silent-era

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studies by Fischinger. The linear work was reminiscent of the opening for *Berlin*. And even the nightmare by Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo* hearkened back to a similarly staged episode in *Metropolis*. There is a possible explanation—during the 1920s, Hitchcock was employed at UFA, first as a title writer, then as an assistant director. He would have been there, learning the basics of his filmmaking craft, while the likes of Ruttmann, Fischinger, and Reininger were creating their own visual vocabulary. Hitchcock, ever the economist and possessed of a long memory, probably learned some of this vocabulary for his own, later use.

- Jim Middleton

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## Legendary animation director and artist Chuck Jones, passes away at 89

Chuck Jones, legendary animation director and artist, best known for his work on the Warner Bros. Classic Looney Tunes cartoon series, died of congestive heart failure on February 22.

Jones made more than 300 animated films, winning three Oscars as director and in 1996 an honorary Oscar for Lifetime Achievement. His most valued award was the honorary life membership from the Directors Guild of America.

Jones helped bring to life many of Warner Bros. most famous characters—Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd and Porky Pig. The list of characters he created himself includes Road Runner, Wile E. Coyote, Marvin the Martian, Pepe Le Pew, Michigan J. Frog and

many others. He also produced, directed and wrote the screenplays for "Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas," a television classic.

He worked with and for directors Tex Avery and Bob Clampett until the early forties when they left the studio, and for the remainder of his years at Warner Bros. he worked in parallel with Directors Freleng and Robert McKimson. He remained at Warner Bros. until the studio was closed in 1962.

Jones also directed the Academy Award winning film, *The Dot and the Line*.

Jones established his own production company, Chuck Jones Enterprises, in 1962 and produced nine half-hour

animation films for television including Rudyard Kipling's *Rikki Tikki Tavi* and *The White Seal*.

In recent years, Jones' work has been honored at film festivals and museums throughout the world, including a one-man retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. His autobiography, *Chuck Amuck*, appeared in 1989, now in its fifth printing.

Two years ago, Jones established the Chuck Jones Foundation, designed to recognize, support and inspire continued excellence in art and the art of classic character animation.

He will be missed.