Reviewed by Tien-Tien Jong

Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics

by Ryan Pierson.
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$120.00 hardcover; $46.95 paper; also available in e-book.

After he is ostracized by the kids at school and shushed by his busy father, the titular boy wonder of United Production of America's (UPA) *Gerald McBoing-Boing* (Robert Cannon, 1950) walks up a frighteningly pendulous staircase—depicted for us as a flat, saw-like path receding sharply into the top left frame. How can viewers explain what it is that we are seeing in this moment, when the stairs never change in perspective as Gerald advances upward, even during a simulated camera track-in? How can we better describe the sensations of movement in animated films that are ostensibly created frame by frame, thus defying our perceptual habits for watching movies and making sense of the movements we see on-screen? And what political possibilities open for us once we begin to think about animated motion beyond the isolated actions of cartoon characters and focus instead on the figures and forces that animate the image? Ryan Pierson tackles these issues in his new book on figural and abstract animation, a far-ranging analytical work that blends philosophical aesthetics with animation history. In doing so, *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics* generates new frameworks for studying historical receptions of modernism, cinematic motion, and the possibilities for talking about and viewing animated films.

Methodologically, *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics* draws from and expands upon the contributions to animation studies previously made by Donald Crafton, Vivian Sobchack, Dan Bashara, and Tom Gunning.[1]

1   See, for example, Donald Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Vivian Sobchack, "Animation and Automation, or, the Incredible Effortfulness of Being," *Screen* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 375–391; Dan Bashara, *Cartoon Vision: UPA Ani-*

These theoretical inheritances are evident in the book's deep engagements with the psychology and phenomenology of perception and its interest in finding affinities between popular and avant-garde cultural spheres. Pierson also follows Stanley Cavell's approach to film theory as "a lens with which to view a world."[2] Each chapter of the book is dedicated to careful, historically contextualized study of a single animation concept or technique. Pierson's main theoretical intervention is the examination of how each choice of an animation technique aligns with possible ways of (re)organizing and navigating one's place and relations within the world. Style here stands in for a way of seeing the world differently, and perceptual shifts are key to Pierson's approach to studying the medium: "animation techniques offer not only *pictures* of change but ways of *thinking through* change."[3] When Pierson asserts that "we can use style to think about animated movements as experiments in the possibilities of sensory organization," the act of studying techniques for executing and animating a world becomes infused for the reader with an unexpected purpose: the political, social, momentary, and complex project of living.[4]

Chapter 1, "Soft Edges," explores techniques for animating atmospheres, clouds, smoke, and flames, focusing on animations that have emphasized the looseness between figure and ground, in which either can be activated unpredictably. The discussion in this chapter takes as its main case study the 1933 film *A Night on Bald Mountain* (Claire Parker and Alexandre Alexeieff), an unparalleled achievement in animation made using the highly labor-intensive and impressionistic pinscreen method. A stretched canvas perforated with 500,000 movable pins, the pinscreen allowed for the creation of strikingly textured images through careful manipulations of light and shadow. "With this technique," Pierson observes, "Alexeieff and Parker deliberately avoided one of the central pleasures of animated cartoons up to that point: the movement and transformation of the *line*."[5] He links the powerful, uncanny affect of *A Night on Bald Mountain* to the haziness of the pinscreen's soft edges and half-tones, which, he argues, invoke the embodied sensation of exposure "to extreme temperatures, to radiation, to the public, to effects—to collective events, in other words."[6] What is so ambitious about Pierson's method is precisely this connection between a formal device and the political or existential levels of significance its analysis allows us to see: "Once our boundaries are made porous, we may be arranged in new ways and in new connections with our environments. Exposure thus makes for one way of opening ourselves to change."[7] Through this analysis, *A Night on Bald*

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mation and Postwar Aesthetics_ (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); and Tom Gunning, "Animating the Instant: The Secret Symmetry between Animation and Photography," in *Animating Film Theory*, ed. Karen Beckman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

2 Ryan Pierson, *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.

3 Pierson, 13.

4 Pierson, 4.

5 Pierson, 16.

6 Pierson, 39.

7 Pierson, 17.

Mountain becomes a newly rich environment for thinking about the power of disruptive change and transformation.

Chapter 2, "Walk Cycles," takes as its main text Norman McLaren and Grant Munro's stop-motion film *Canon* (1964), originally produced as an educational short to demonstrate the principles of musical canon for the National Film Board of Canada. Using this example, Pierson shows us how the basic cartooning device of the walk cycle—in which a series of drawings representing the steps in a simple action are looped—can be used to create complexity out of deadening repetition and put to the service of facilitating greater understanding of how larger systems work. By layering the movements of four "walking" blocks as they travel along a preordained chessboard path, *Canon* surprises viewers by suggesting new centers of movement as the system grows in complexity. Pierson demonstrates how the dynamism of *Canon*'s use of the walk cycle shifts viewers' attention from single objects or figures to recognizing the relations between and among them: "it is the entire picture before us, the entire system of interlocking parts, that is spontaneous and lively."[8] The system ultimately collapses at the film's conclusion, an event viewers may interpret as exhaustion but also as an invitation to consider other ways that the parts of a whole can be organized in more sustainable and rejuvenating relations to one another.

Chapter 3, "Perspectival Movement," is a virtuosic section of the book that impressively engages with Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies, the early cinematic genre of the "phantom ride," Disney's multiplane camera, and the midcentury cartoons of UPA to think about how the impression of camera movement within the space of an animated world can necessitate shifts in our understanding of its structural possibilities. Pierson considers the divergent and rich examples of simulated movement offered by *Blinkity Blank* (Norman McLaren, 1955) and *The Metamorphosis of Mr. Samsa* (Caroline Leaf, 1977) to develop this argument. Both of these animations, which feature sudden shifts into the z-axis and metamorphosing camera effects that subvert our assumptions about what counts as a figure versus fore- or background, radicalize the notion of how space can be represented and what animation can make it do. By disorienting the viewer so much that figuration itself is bypassed, these films explore the relations between camera movement and revolution in the social or structural sense—or "a movement within a world that seems to change the configuration of that world."[9]

Any study of animation and movement would be incomplete without a section on the alternately abject and beautiful practice of rotoscoping, and Pierson devotes chapter 4 to this technique. This final chapter is also where the friction between underlying figures and forces and the drawn line (initially introduced in relation to half-tones in chapter 1) returns as a formal question of interest. Pierson brings together American rotoscoping styles as varied as those practiced by Ralph Bakshi, Mary Beams, Robert Breer, and Disney studio animators to examine the differences viewers may experience between traditional "by outline" and freehand "by through-line" models for

8   Pierson, 70.
9   Pierson, 84.

animating from live-action footage. To elucidate these differences, Pierson turns to the concept of plasmaticness, which "seeks to retain a body but without its constraints of weight or structure or finitude." Thinking about the distance between a traced line and its underlying footage, Pierson draws an analogy between the plasmatic figure and the sentimental subject who "seeks love without sacrifice . . . the gratification of relations without the responsibility."[10] More courageous is an unsentimental view of love that resists idealization and embraces difference, even at the risk of being oneself transformed in the process. Pierson scrutinizes details from Beams's wonderfully peculiar *Going Home Sketchbook* (1975) to articulate this idea of how the rigid specificity of rotoscoping may also invoke an artist's openness to seeing, working with, and loving what is already there.

Chapter 4 ends with a sustained discussion of love as an animating force for change in the world. The concept of relationality here connects to the idea of seeing larger collectivities and connections articulated in chapter 2's theorization of walk cycles. Given these themes, one cannot help but feel that the topic of collaborations between animators or creative partnerships remains undertheorized, especially in a book so dedicated to understanding how animated images are made and what particular production techniques afford. Chapter 1 implicitly presents *A Night on Bald Mountain* as Alexeieff's brainchild, for instance, even though it was his collaborator and second wife, Claire Parker, who engineered and patented the pinscreen technique. (Parker built on work started by Alexeieff's first wife, Alexandra Grinevskya, whose own labor is too seldom relayed by animation scholars in the story of the pinscreen's invention.) The second chapter likewise leaves Grant Munro's contributions to *Canon* underexamined, despite his substantial collaborations with McLaren over the course of both men's careers. By focusing on the more eminent figures of Alexeieff and McLaren over Parker, Grinevskya, and Munro—not to mention John over Faith Hubley—Pierson largely follows the legacy of how these films have been received and passed down to us by predecessors in the field of animation studies. But when we lapse into auteurist habits, we lose an opportunity to better understand the complexity of creative partnership, as demonstrated by the necessity and pleasure of (so-called) "independent" animators relying on the capabilities and interventions of another person. Thus, one wishes Pierson would push us to think more about love as it relates to the validation and recognition of creative and intimate partnerships within the animation process.

The intrinsic difficulty of describing movement remains a generative problem throughout Pierson's survey of different techniques and animators. A great strength of Pierson's writing that helps him through this daunting task is his teacherly instinct for anticipating questions and reader hesitations. As a resource for inquiry-based learning, *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics* is a highly rewarding text to work through with students (with the added stylistic benefit of never sounding like a literal textbook)—so I discovered while teaching excerpts from the book in an introductory undergraduate film studies course this past fall. Pierson skillfully encircles his

10 Pierson, 137.

theoretical problems with successive questions, patiently guiding readers to see what makes these seemingly small films so remarkable and unexpected. Beyond their elegance, his descriptions of animation also function as serious attempts to generate better descriptive prose for articulating exactly what it is that we are seeing when we watch moving images.[11]

　　Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics will be not only influential for scholars and students of animation studies, modernist art, or midcentury experimental filmmaking but also a resource for all those interested in larger questions about cinematic motion and its relations to realism; the work (and play) of reality testing as it applies to the animated image; and the shapes of our own awkward, yet potentially revolutionary, movements through the world. As an alternative to what Suzanne Buchan has called "the inarticulate 'mmm . . .' that is often the response to what we see on screen," *Figure and Force in Animation Aesthetics* fascinates and elevates the discourse and perceptual possibilities for how we may continue to watch, study, and think about abstract and animated films.[12]

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11　In addition to the descriptions of animation examples within the book, Pierson also created four brief video essays (one corresponding to each main chapter) to illustrate his analysis and to give readers a sample of the main films discussed. These videos are available on the book's companion website, hosted by Oxford University Press (https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780190949761/res/) and on the author's personal website (https://www.ryan-pierson.com/book).
12　Suzanne Buchan, "The Animated Spectator: Watching the Quay Brothers' 'Worlds,'" in *Animated "Worlds,"* ed. Suzanne Buchan (Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey Publishing, 2006), 36.