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MOTION PAINTING: 'ABSTRACT' ANIMATION AS AN ART FORM

Lorettann Devlin Gascard*

Abstract—The fundamental aesthetic nature of the 'abstract' animated film is analysed within the structures of art theory and film theory. By setting the formal vocabulary of 'abstract' painting into cinematic motion, the form finds itself in a functional dilemma. On the one hand, the spatial ambiguities offered by 'abstract' images go far in compensating for painting's lack of movement, and thus there is no need to add the kinetics of cinema. On the other hand, cinema technically allows images to move, and so the compensation offered by 'abstraction' becomes inoperable. However, the fact remains that certain 'abstract' animations offer a unique expression through which the viewer can visually experience a non-measurable, non-causal and non-sequential sense of time duration. In the article this quality is termed 'temporal ambiguity'. How this expression occurs in animations such as Harry Smith's 'Early Abstraction No. 3', Werner Graeff's 'Film Partitur (Composition 1/22)' and Jules Engel's 'Train Landscape' is described. Animations by Oskar Fischinger, Douglass Crockwell and Dwinelle Grant are also discussed.

When first encountered, the idea of animating 'abstract' images usually raises reactions of surprise and enthusiasm—surprise, that such a possibility at all exists and that it has been around almost as long as 'abstract' painting itself; enthusiasm, that this art form holds panacean promise for all that ails modern painting. Such reactions often culminate with questions: Why hasn't such a good idea been more widely practiced and given greater exposure? Why hasn't motion painting virtually replaced painting as we know it?

However, after becoming acquainted with the form in practice, reactions often range from benign neglect to disenchantment, or even dismissal of it as white noise or moving wallpaper. One of the most sober reactions came from Rudolph Arnheim, who described 'abstract' animations as "a museum's collections of venerable curiosities" [1]. The aptness of his epithet lies in its underlining the oddness of the form's nature both in theory and practice, without tossing it aside with 'kitsch' forms like 3-D, water organs and the like. Yet no matter how questionable the overall results of 'abstract' animations may be, they form a chapter of twentieth-century art which refuses to be closed. For the idea of making 'abstract' images and non-objective forms that move continues to tantalize artists and entice viewers.

What still draws artists to the form no doubt involves the same propellant which caused the originators of the animated 'abstract' film to come up with the idea in the first place—a general sense that this expression is utterly appropriate to our age of accelerated movement, reflecting a 'kinetic urge'. It is obvious that cinema responded to this by offering artists the technical means of making their pictures move. The element of movement could now be added to the painter's stock of tools along with line, shape, color, etc.

It is less conspicuous, however, that painting had been developing toward a dynamic response within its own non-kinetic frame. In fact, many aspects of painting's stylistic conventions grew from the artists' need to visually energize their static images. As E. H. Gombrich tells us in his *Art and Illusion*, painting in general has relied on ambiguities (be they formal, spatial or thematic) to compensate for its lack of movement. This works in the following way: When faced with conflicting or multiple readings engendered by ambiguities, the viewer becomes engaged in a perceptual/conceptual shifting back and

forth between these various, possible readings, because we cannot hold more than one reading at the same time. However rapidly we may shift from one reading to another or however well we remember the previous reading while viewing the next, we find that each reading or, say, interpretation is mutually exclusive of the other. We cannot see both sides, as it were, of an ambiguity at the same time, and here is where the quality of movement in painting comes into play. It is primarily with this convention that artists have traditionally made their paintings 'come to life'.

By indicating a narrative, representational forms in a painting can give our reading direction, and we come to more or less settle on one interpretation. The gap, so to speak, created by the ambiguities is narrowed by the presence of such narrative cues. However, when a non-representational or a non-objective vocabulary is introduced, we find that one reading cannot be more correct or reasonable than the other, because we have little or no experience against which we can test such readings. Such images, then, remain unsolvable, unstable or as Gombrich would have it "overtly ambiguous" [2]. We only have to try to determine which of Albers' squares, for example, is advancing and which is receding to realize how tangible this is. We find ourselves in the midst of spatial tensions and ambiguities as we shift from one square to the next and find that all readings, though conflicting with one another, are correct. The more engaged we become and the longer we play at this, the more intensive the effect and the more lively the painting becomes. By setting non-objective forms in motion, the 'abstract' animation responds twice to the kinetic urge—with the technical answer offered by cinema and the aesthetic answer offered by the extreme ambiguity of non-representationalism.

Hans Richter saw "the problems of modern art (leading directly to film)" [3]. One also wonders to what extent the discovery of cinema influenced the nature and problems of modern art (in the way that photography contributed to the invention of impressionism). Indeed painting and cinema have tended to cross paths, theoretically augmenting each other's developments. So considered, their natures seem intertwined. However, in practice, as we have seen, painting has directed itself toward finding the means of solving its own problems, and as we know, cinema has turned to the photographed image in motion for its resolutions. 'Abstract' animation is the exception that brings these two forms together—painting and cinema. As simple and elementary as this sounds, it has its functional snags.

To illustrate: Choose a representational painting and try to imagine it in animation. (It may be painterly or linear; contain

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closed or open forms; offer a theme requiring action or quietude; be as strictly formal as a Japanese woodcut or as expressionistic as a Van Gogh.) We soon find that if we focus our attention on moving the image, what we end up imagining basically resembles 'live' cinema. The effect is not unlike the moment in which Toulouse-Lautrec's dancer turns into Gene Kelly in 'An American in Paris'. On the other hand, should we concentrate on the form, color and line being moved, our 'linear animation' will at best resemble a fairly serious-looking cartoon. At its worst it will seem laughable. We do not seem to be able to maintain the nature of the image and animate it as well. This might be partially due to the fact that, given the numerous repetitions required by film animation technique, it would be impossible to hold the painter's fluency of line and form. However, it seems doubtful that this could solely account for our inability to even conjure the image in motion. Such incompatibility between representational painting and motion suggests an intrinsic functional impediment.

As we consider painting from the perspective of the Film Age—to use Arnold Hauser's term—we may automatically infer that the quality of movement offered by painting is somehow second-rate. Would a pre-film age theorist have suggested that painting's ambiguities compensate [*sic*] for its lack [*sic*] of movement, as Gombrich has done? We may tend to ignore that painting relies on its non-kinetic nature for its dynamism; that it is expressive because of its static quality, not in spite of it. Be it a figure, a bowl of fruit or a sundown, the painter composes with the intention of dynamic stability, and this is the permanence that we have come to expect of painting. Do we really want to know what Vermeer's figure does after she finishes reading the letter? And so it would seem that representational painting and cinematic motion are at cross purposes. So much so that the form of representational motion painting is literally unimaginable. Why then is non-representational motion painting, 'abstract' animation, not only easy to imagine, but moreover, sounds like such a wonderful idea?

For one thing, as we know, the presence of narrative cues enables us to zero in on one reading or interpretation of a representational painting, although ambiguities are coincident. On the other hand, the ambiguities experienced with an 'abstract' image are, as pointed out, unsolvable. Because of this, we seem to assume a certain freedom of interpretation when faced with an 'abstraction'. In addition, the 'overt ambiguity' of such images can lend them an extreme dynamism or quality of movement, making them seem kindred to kinetics, on the verge of moving. This further adds to the apparent feasibility of 'abstract' animation. But what actually happens when non-objective forms move?

We can best approach this question with the example of a simple design of a red circle in the center of a white plane. As long as the design is immobile, it is ambiguous—we may read the circle as being a hole in the white plane or a form layered over a white ground. It is impossible to decide which reading is more appropriate once we have recognized both possibilities. However, the moment that the red circle moves, it must be read as the 'figure' and, therefore, in front of the white area [4]. The element of movement has served to formulate and define space. An interesting aside to this is that the introduction of narrative cues in static images has a very similar effect on our interpretation of their forms. To return to the red circle: If we add narrative cues such as a stem-like line and leaves to its top, two things happen. Our thematic reading of the form is given direction (we can no longer interpret the circle as, say, a setting sun—it must now be read as an apple or cherry), and the circle, by being defined as a figure or object, is given spatial definition as well.

In this way, the element of movement and the narrative cue are functionally related. Both narrow down the possible

readings of an image, and both define space. We can take this a step further: For as the element of movement defines space, it also tends to imply a narrative! One often experiences this effect in the 'abstract' animated film. Shapes, forms, colors and lines seem to act and react, to take on a life of their own.

There are various ways in which this can happen. The image can be presented within the reference of its 'becoming' or evolving. In Oskar Fischinger's 'Motion Painting No. 1' [5], one has the sense of compositional units being placed next to one another or layered over one another leading toward some resulting end image. William Moritz has described these forms as "actors in a complex being which modulates and transforms itself right before our eyes" and suggests the interpretation that "there are elements of an archetypal pattern—childhood, through initiation to maturity..." [6]. Once animated, shapes and forms may seem to be dancing or scurrying about as occurs during a number of moments in Fischinger's 'Black and White Studies' [7] (see Fig. 1) and the sequence using pill-like shapes in Douglass Crockwell's 'Glen Falls Sequence' [8]. Another possibility is that the image takes on a clockwork-like character as forms seem to react to each other's impulses, as do the bars, lines and shapes in Dwinell Grant's 'Composition 5' [9, 10].

The approach of the above animations is one of spatial definition leading to narrative implication. That is, the original artistic function of non-objectivity and statement of 'abstraction' is reversed by the addition of cinematic movement. It is perhaps for this reason that we find so many examples of 'abstract' animation disappointing. At any rate, the notion begins to surface that setting 'abstract' images in motion is not such a sure bet after all—its aesthetic sum is not necessarily even equal to the parts of its expression.

It still remains, however, that certain 'abstract' animations, sometimes only moments of such, offer an expression which captivates us—commanding our attention in the dramatic manner unique to cinema and consuming our aesthetic sense with the energy and character of the 'abstract' statement. In such animations, the element of movement continues to function by defining, formulating and articulating space, and yet we find little or no narrative being implied.

For example, in Harry Smith's 'Early Abstraction No. 3' [11] (see Fig. 2), soft-edged squares and circles move in and out of space, exchange position and overlap within a quivering expressionist composition. We experience movement without performance.

Though less well known, Werner Graeff's 'Film Partitur (Composition I/22)' [12] is equally impressive. The animation opens with a blue square appearing in the center of the left half of the screen. It remains there, immobile, for three-quarters of a second and then disappears. At this instance, a red square appears on the center of the right half of the screen, and it too remains for three-quarters of a second. As it disappears, the blue square returns in its original place. Variations on this theme continue throughout the film, as a constructivist play of spatial equilibrium and tension is presented through an elegantly timed use of afterimage effects on the stability of a black ground. Each square appears long enough to be optically absorbed so that when it is removed its afterimage remains momentarily. As the next square appears, we find ourselves trying to establish a spatial relationship between the apparent and the actual squares. Here we encounter change without development. With both of these films, we would be hard put to read a narrative into their goings-on.

In the case of Jules Engel's 'Train Landscape' [13] (see Fig. 3), we are confronted with something a bit different. With his descriptive title and supporting soundtrack, Engel intentionally implies a narrative (a device reminiscent of Barnett Newman's use of such titles)—a passing landscape as seen through the window of a moving train. However, after the first minute or so, we forget the narrative as we become whole-heartedly involved

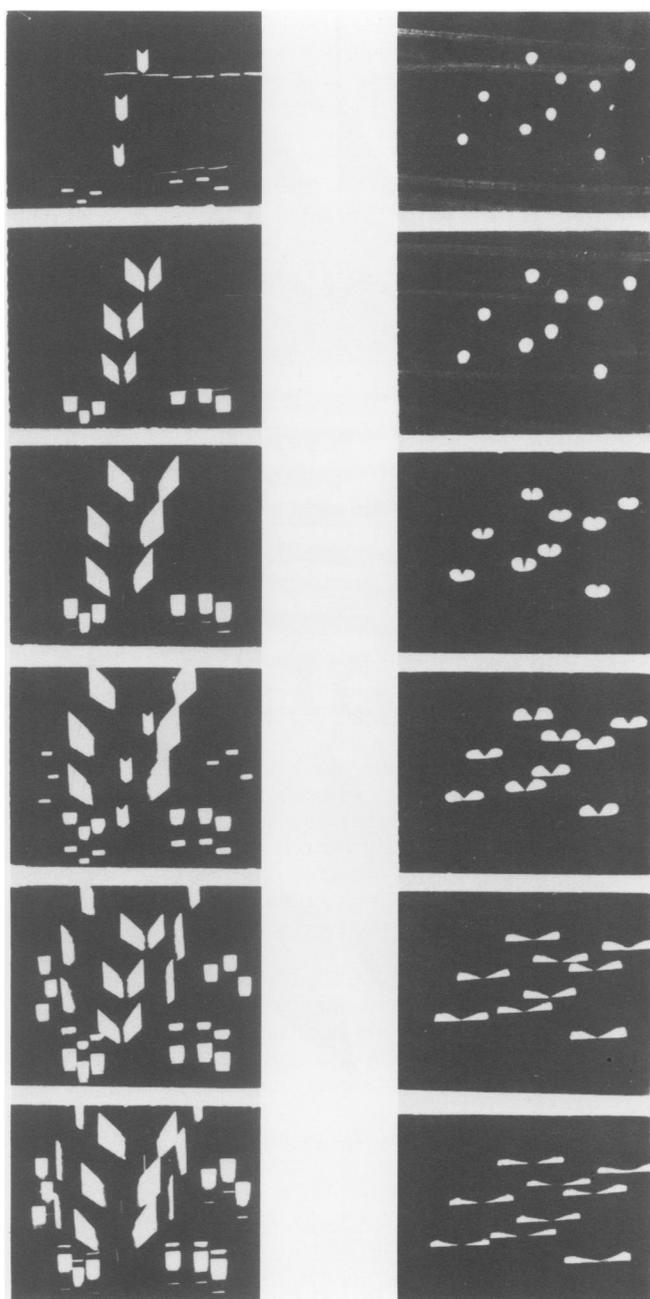


Fig. 1. Oskar Fischinger, 'Study No. 8', animated film, black and white, sound, 1931. Courtesy of Mrs. Elfriede Fischinger.

with the energy of the optical statement being scrolled out before us. Any conscious narrative implication on Engel's part is suppressed as his animation offers us energy without outcome.

What all three films have managed to do is to translate stylistic expressions of non-kinetic art into cinematic convention. More specifically, it would appear that what was spatial in painting has become temporal when animated.

The multiple readings offered by ambiguities in painting are independent of one another in that they cannot be consumed simultaneously, and this implies that we must read such images in units of time duration. In 'abstract' animations, in which the element of movement does not serve to imply a narrative, images follow one another, but are independent of each other.

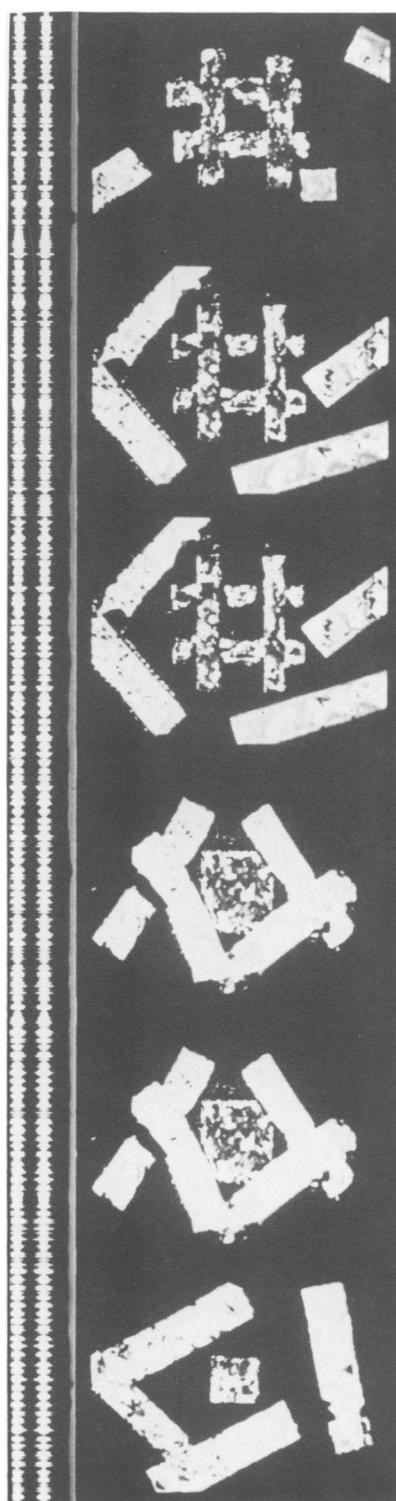


Fig. 2. Harry Smith, 'Early Abstraction No. 3', direct animation, color, sound, between 1939 and 1946. Courtesy of Anthology Film Archives.

The visual presentation does not build toward anything and so we are faced with uncertainty on a temporal axis, what we might call temporal ambiguity. Trying to keep in mind what images we have already seen is as inconsequential as trying to project what is going to happen next, and so clocks and sundials and the concept of 'time marching on' are of no use to us.

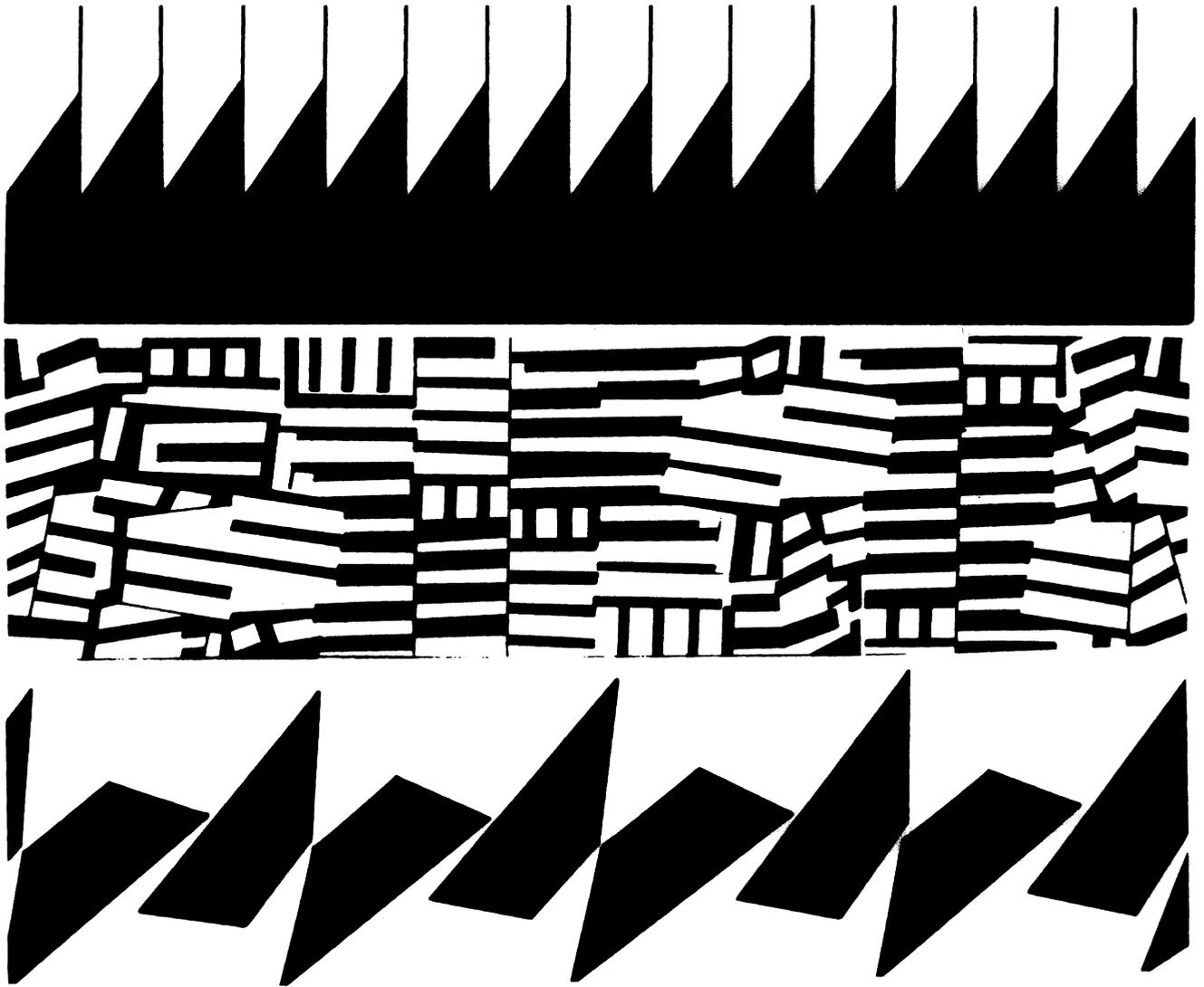


Fig. 3. Jules Engel, 'Train Landscape', animated film, color/sound, 1974–75. Courtesy of Jules Engel.

We know that temporal manipulation is central to the expressive potential of cinema. Rudolf Arnheim has described the "absence of the space–time continuum" in film; Erwin Panofsky defined the "unique and specific possibilities" of film as being the "dynamization of space" and, accordingly, the "spatialization of time". Arnold Hauser observed that "the new concept of time, whose basic element is simultaneity and whose nature consists in the spatialization of the temporal element, is expressed in no other genre so impressively as in this youngest art (film)" [14].

These terms and comments refer to 'live' cinema in which bits of photographed forms in photographed sequential movement make up the director's 'material'. "(By) combining them ... the director builds up his own 'filmic' time and 'filmic' space" according to Vsevolod Pudovkin [15]. 'Abstract' animation takes this principle of cinema to an extreme. For the material is usually non-objective, drawn or painted images—as opposed to photographed bits of 'reality'. As an animation, film 'editing' may occur from frame to frame, as in the case of Robert Breer's technique of placing totally different images on each successive frame [16]; or the framed boundaries on the celluloid may be completely ignored in the way that Len Lye chose to scratch a continuous line along the length of the film strip. With such

extreme formal and technical possibilities, the 'filmic' time of the 'abstract' animation maintains a non-objective character, approaching a non-causal, non-sequential and non-measurable time much in the sense of Henri Bergson's 'durée réelle' [17]. This not only indicates where the expressive core of the 'abstract' animation is to be found, it also establishes a significant relationship between 'abstract' painting proper and 'abstract' motion painting: As spatially ambiguous non-kinetic images alter rational (representational) space and in doing so enter into the articulation of time, temporally ambiguous animated images alter rational time as their element of movement articulates space.

The form of 'abstract' animation has kept up with the technical advances made by cinema in general, but after more than sixty years it is still floundering for its aesthetic identity. It has usually been treated as something of an illegitimate child of painting, a long-lost cousin of cinema, or a hybrid of both. It is, however, a form of its own. So, it is unthinkable that it poses a threat to painting; it cannot make mediocre painting better by adding its kinetic element; it is not of a greater aesthetic significance than 'live' cinema. However, its potential to translate the spatiality of 'abstract' painting into a temporal expression is unique to its nature.

Although one is hard put to join with those few loyalists who insist that a boom lies in the future of 'abstract' animation, it seems more than conceivable that if viewed with some ground-going clarity, the form might well find its noble, albeit modest, place among artistic visual expressions. And then it would have a foundation on which to develop.

NOTES

1. R. Arnheim, 'Art Today and the Film', *The College Art Journal* 25, 242 (1966).
2. E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Rev. Ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969) pp. 5 ff., re. "duck and hare"; p. 217, re. Manet; p. 236, re. "ambiguity"; p. 286, re. "abstract art".
3. H. Richter, 'The Film as an Original Art Form', *Crossroads to the Cinema*, ed. D. Brode (Boston: Holbrook Pr., 1975) p. 274. (orig. in *The College Art Journal*, Winter 1950-51).
4. K. Dunker, 'Induced Motion', *A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology*, ed. W. D. Ellis, pp. 161 ff., as interpreted by R. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974) p. 380.
5. Made in 1947; 10 min., color/sound.
6. W. Moritz, 'The Films of Oskar Fischinger', *Film Culture*, No. 58, p. 37 (1974).
7. Oskar Fischinger made 13 black and white studies (animations) between 1921 and 1932.
8. Made in 1946; 4 min., color/silent.
9. Made in 1949; 3 min., color/silent.
10. For further examples, see L. Devlin Gascard, *Non-Narrative Animation as an Art Form* (West Berlin: Freie Universität (dissertation), 1979) pp. 57 ff.
11. Made between 1939 and 1946; 10 min., color/sound.
12. Realized in 1977 (conceived of in 1922); 3 min., color/silent.
13. Made between 1974 and 1975; 5 min., color/sound.
14. R. Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971) pp. 20 ff.; E. Panofsky 'Style and Medium in Motion Pictures', *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. G. Mast and M. Cohen (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) p. 154. (orig. in *Critique*, 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1947); A. Hauser, *A Social History of Art*, Vol. 4, Naturalism, Impressionism, The Film Age (New York: Random House, Inc., n.d.) p. 239.
15. V.I. Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting*, trans. and annotated by I. Montagu (London: Vision Press, 1950) p. 86.
16. Although Robert Breer includes in his animations narrative images (photographs, newspapers, clippings, etc.), his single frame technique obscures their narrative nature. This use of cinematic movement is so extreme as to bring about an effect opposite to those 'abstract' animations in which a narrative is implied although non-objective forms are used.
17. See H. Bergson, *Durée et simultanéité—A propos de la théorie d'Einstein* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1922) pp. 105 ff.