Form

excerpted from Animation Unlimited, Liz Faber and Helen Walters

Form explores the motion and graphic techniques that have been used in animation and how these have often led to the creation of a more abstract type of film. Animators are often wildly inventive with the tools they have at their disposal. Alexander Alexeieff and Claire Parker's The Nose (1963) was produced using their own unique animation technique, the pinscreen. The duo achieved a three-dimensional effect by pushing pins in and out of a screen to create variations in tone, from black to white to gray.

Filmmaker Jules Engel similarly used form to explore the use of animation as a visual language. He describes his work as 'art in motion', conveying ideas and emotion through form and colour, as featured in Train Landscape (1974). Erica Russell's Triangle (1994) is also an exploration of art in motion. In this film three human figure, locked in an eternal triangle, are wonderfully captured through the use of stencils.

Paul Glabicki however, plays with the very nature of form itself, taking recognizable objects from everyday life and reducing them to the minimum geometric components, before reconstructing them again. In Full Moon (2001) he uses this approach to explore an 'imaginary universe of art, nature, beauty, poetry and science'. Collective Insertsilence also toy with the definition of form: 'Aug 16th (2001) was the result of a desire to 'play animaiton as if it were music', explains one half of the partnership, James Patterson.

Many animators have explored 'direct' filmmaking, working directly on to filmstock to construct their work. Direct films can be made by marking, scratching, exposing and painting the film. For Mothlight (1963) Stan Brakhage actually pressed dead moths and grasses between sheets of film. Len Lyes's film Color Cry (1952) was created byx applying and then exposing stencils and other objects directly on to the film.

Perhaps most ambitious of all are the animators who have sought to use computers and mathematics to construct their films and break new ground.

One such acclaimed director is Ed Emshwiller, whose Sunstone (1979) was the first, painterly, digital computer-graphics film. Sunstone also features the first ever three-dimensional object on film, a cube rotating in space. This was accomplished several years before commercially viable 3D computer hardware and software systems became available.

John Stehura worked on a mainframe computer, which didn't even have a screen, to generate his psychedelic classic Cibernetik 5.3 (1960-65). For Stehura, the excitement lay in not knowing what was going to come out of the machine. 'I wanted to see if I could create some semblance of a mind,' he explains. 'Our own imagination is frequently limited, usually greatly influenced by our memories, consequently easily anticipated, while machine, when designed to be cognitive, can greatly expand our vision, even our technical understanding and ultimately extend our own personal horizons.' Similarly, American animation director Karl Sims uses the computer to create outcome he himself would never have imagined.

Japanese animator Yoichuro Kawaguchi takes this yet further. Using computer to create his films, such as Eggy (1991), he attempts to give human intelligence to abstract form. He constructs his films from a cyberspace in which virtual creatures evolve and die. To do this he created a computer program called Growth Model based on growth algorithms. Should Kawaguchi succeed in adding intelligence to these forms, he beeives that the resulting interaction will fundamentally change our appreciation and experience of art and of animation itself.

Animators included in this section of the book:

Len Lye
Alexeieff and Parker
Stan Brakhage
John Stehura
Jules Engel
Ed Ershwiller
Karl Sims
Yoichiro Kawaguchi
Erica Russell
Insertsilence
Paul Glabicki