Surreal Animation: Integration of Surrealism in Animation

Introduction

The world of art has been one of the most celebrated through various ages of human civilizations. It forms a hefty part of human history and even helps provide insight into historical events. The renaissance period that is an integral part of European history tells tales of human civilization at the time, not only giving insight on how the society was like but also showing how their thoughts were modeled (Smirnova 2015). The artistic works of Medieval times paint a picture of the civilization at the time. Through creative works, the authorities, belief systems, and economic structures can be denoted. However, art requires inspiration more than it does a skilled hand. Inspiration results from a movement or a way of thought that influences both the themes and illustrations of artwork (Smirnova 2015). One of the most intriguing art movements in modern times is surrealism. It is a movement that nurtures art beyond reality in a positive approach.

Its precursor, Dadaism, nurtured concepts beyond reality, but it tended to be more negate. Surrealism has grown through the decades and survived through some of history's most catastrophic times. It arose in the 1920s and therefore survived through the second world war (Smirnova 2015). The fact that it did not acknowledge the boundaries of reality meant it was free to present a real situation in an unreal manner yet carrying the same weight in meaning. Surrealism has found use in many areas, including paintwork, architecture, and fashion, and design alongside other sectors. Of interest to this paper will be the integration of surrealism to the art of animation. The animation is a technique that involves the utilization of drawings and photographs to create an illusion of movement and hence generating visual movement. It is one of the most flexible forms of moving pictures because of the freedom to develop unrealistic features and give them life by movement and a voice (Smirnova 2015). Through these films, animals, houses, cars, trees, or anything at all can talk, walk, or even eat. Mystical creatures can be created and made to appear real. All these are unrealistic traits, and therefore they lie within the realm of surrealism.

Surrealism in Animation

History of Animation

Animation media was restricted to children in the dawn of the 21st century. However, in the later years of the first decade of the 21st century, it has found a following among adults. However, regardless of the fan-base, scholars have always studied it with utmost interest and seriousness (Harper & Stone 2007). When it was incorporated into electronic media, it became one of the most widely used forms of the film due to its ability to maneuver physical barriers. The United States popularised the art, but as with most things, they did not create it. The United States military used companies such as Warner Brothers and Disney to create animated films that demonstrated its military might at the prime of the second world war (Harper & Stone 2007). However, the military and the relatively easy access to television sets only contributed to providing resources. The development of themes and the art itself can be traced to Europe and Asia, respectively. Europeans were socially sophisticated people, and therefore developing

ideas that illustrated this sophistication was relatively easy. Animated works have their origin in ancient China and Japan, where instruments such as the zoetrope were first seen. Belgian physicist named Joseph Plateau invented a device called the Phenakistiscope (Harper & Stone 2007).

Integration of Surrealism in Animation

The King and the Mockingbird

The Phenakistiscope and Zoetrope were both characterized by a series of drawings made on paper that were then placed on the device. The device had background illumination and a wheel system that allowed the images to be seen in a pattern that told a story or showed progress. The wheel system spins to create the illusion of a motion picture (Zipes, Greenhill & Magnus-Johnston 2015). These were the earliest forms of motion pictures, and they were not electronic. The first film to depict aspects of surrealism was made in France, and it was titled The King and the Mockingbird. The film was made in the years after the second world war and contained an impressive level of surrealism (Zipes et al., 2015).

For a start, the king's castle was surreal in the sense that it was built on a tree-like platform. Its entire base seemed to sit on a surface area so small, and yet it remained stable amid all the commotion. Here there were traces of architectural surrealism because such a castle would defy the laws of gravity and consequently, physics. The most oblivious surreal depiction in the film was the mockingbird itself (Zipes et al., 2015). The bird is not even the focus of the film, but it plays the role of the narrator. In the beginning, the bird tells the audience that the film is all real, and yet anyone of sane mind knew it was not real. If anything, it was not just borderline impossible; it was sheer impossible.

The film involved two characters, a lady and a gentleman who were on paintings. They fell in love with each other and hence ended up exiting their pictures to meet. The King is not happy with this arrangement and seeks to prevent it from going through. He steals a horse of a sculpture of a knight that was one of his collections and goes into painting the prevent the romantic arrangement (Zipes et al., 2015). The mockingbird, on the other hand, condemns the king for killing his wife and abducting his son, who is captured in a cage. The occurrences of the film are bizarre and impossible in real life, which gives them a surreal aspect. A desire to have animals speaking and active paintings and sculptures were only achieved through animated films because they were simply drawings and photographs brought to life. Anything could hence be brought to life regardless of how dead it is perceived to be.

The film was directed by France's best animator at the time, Paul Grimault (Zipes et al., 2015). Paul had his own animation company called Les Gemeaux, that he used to create the animation. The production of the film was lengthy and involved well over 100 animators and suffered two major financial crises. However, the film was eventually released in the year 1953 on May 19th in France (Zipes et al., 2015). It was based on a story created by Hans Christian Andersen with music from Woiciech Kilar and Joseph Kosma. It gained popularity, primarily due to the controversy of whom the King represented due to his stunning appearance. He was easily confused with Hitler and Richard Nixon, who were both controversial leaders though one more than the other. In the times following its release, the film was nominated and won the Louis Delluc Prize for Best Film (Zipes et al., 2015).

Destino

Surrealists of the movement and art have shown a high degree of collaboration with other fields that find inspiration from surrealism. Well-known surrealists such as Salvador Dali, who worked as an artist, collaborated with both surreal fashion designers and animators to integrate their works. Salvador Dali was particularly a peculiar case because, for him, surrealism was a lifestyle rather than a career (Bossert 2017). He attributed his decisions and their outcomes to surrealism and therefore found it amusing to integrate it into other fields. The most famous surreal fashion designer of all time, Elsa Schiaparelli, an Italian designer, worked alongside Salvador to create some of the first fashion designs inspired by surrealism. Salvador's passion for working with other artists in other disciplines led him to work with the most famous animator of all time, Walt Disney. Through this collaboration, they created a short animated film that was produced in the year 2003 with Dominique Monféry as the director (Bossert 2017). The film was titled Destino, and Dali wrote the screenplay in collaboration with others such as John Hench and Donald W. Ernst. The work on the film began in the early years of the sixth decade in the 20th century but was completed in the third year of the 21st century long after the deaths of both Salvador and Walt Disney (Bossert 2017). However, the surreal nature of the film was still brought out throughout the entire length of the six-minute piece of art.

It depicts a young naked lady at the start of the film who appears to be in a desert set up. She approached from a distance and got closer when a colossal pyramidal structure comes into view—the lady dances around and on the fabric that has a man carved into it. The masculine figure appears restrained to the pyramid (Bossert 2017). She dances on and acquires clothing but loses it to a hand that protrudes from an eye. This is yet another depiction of surrealism, where it is unrealistic for a hand to protrude from an eye. The lady falls fall into a shell that falls further down. On the floor, she sees the shadow of a bell that is shaped like a dress. She fits into the shadow and finds that it would make a fitting dress. She then dives into the shadow that splashes like a pool of water, but it fits into a dress. The lady continues to dance on, but then the film shits to depict the masculine figure escaping from his restraints on the pyramid (Bossert 2017). The film was only six minutes long, but numerous features of surrealism characterized it. At one point towards the end, the lady's head turns into a baseball, which is struck by the man and lands on a baseball mitt. The mitt then turns into a soft cloth in the arms of the man. All events depicted in the film are surreal and are practically impossible. They range from a figurine coming to life, hands protruding from eyes, eyes without a body or head, a lady dressing a shadow, and a head-turning into a baseball (Bossert 2017). The message within the short film was complex and lay deep under the layers of surreal depictions. It is not clear what the message was, which implies it to be a subject to interpretation.

Influences of Surrealism

In many studies surrounding surrealism, it is often viewed from the vantage point of being the influencer. However, Surrealism itself as a movement has many sources of inspiration that inspire its fundamental principles. Surrealism found its very first inspiration from studies in psychology revolving around consciousness (Freud 1919). It was a movement that allowed people to express that which existed in their sub-conscious freely. This included dreams which often depict unrealistic events, creatures, and structures. This level of freedom awarded to artists was the first influencer for the surrealism movement to develop. This inspiration was based on scientific papers conducted by Sigmund Freud (Freud 1919). However, his writings

influenced the works of the founder of surrealism by André Breton in 1924 in poetry. Surrealism is, however, a hybrid that is structured to be more inclusive, especially for unrealistic positive ideas. There had been a movement in existence that was composed of unrealistic concepts, but it was majorly negated.

The surreal movement was the precursor of surrealism, Dadaism. As such, Dada was also a significant influencer of surrealism but less inclusive of positive ideologies (Pikkov 2013). Unlike Dada, surrealism aimed to inspire a revolution targeted against the restraints caused by rational thinking that was a consequence of adherence to rules within the society. Such practices were hence regarded as oppressive to a surreal mind. However, surrealism still observed a keen consultation with intellect, art, and literature to inspire surreal creativity (Pikkov 2013). All inspiration for surrealism was geared towards freeing the mind from all restrictions of thought. The consequence was, therefore, to hand artists the freedom to create their art regardless of how unrealistic it appeared to be. The more unrealistic it was, the more surreal it was. As a movement, it was the holy grail for the artist because it allowed them to live free and create some of the most valuable artworks to this day. The fact that it had inspiration from a scientific background meant that the artist had more than just inspiration; they had a backup (Pikkov 2013). At the time, science was much appreciated, and therefore having science on your side made you nothing short of a winner.

Creating a surreal film is not an easy task regardless of animation, giving artists the freedom to free their creativity. In surreal fashion design, the designers had to consult with surreal artists to come up with some of their most magnificent and eye-catching designs. This same pattern was seen between Walt Disney and Salvador Dali with the creation of Destino. Designs for clothes were based on artistic drawings of surreal dresses, which made it easier. Creating a surreal design from the bottom up for a designer is a tiresome task. With artists, it is easier since they simply express their thoughts onto canvas. Animation also tends to follow the same pattern. Surreal animators have often relied on surreal writings to create their stories and make films. The book Aladdin is one such example. The book was written in the year 1973 by Adam Oehlenschläger. The book was a folk tale and was written in Arabic. Eventually, the book became an inspiration for the Disney animated film under the same title right after Disney republished it in 1992 (Pikkov 2013). The film involves several surreal events such as a magic lamp with a genie within and a flying mat. Genies are mythical creatures, but regardless they are beyond the realm of reality, and hence they qualify as surreal. Surreal filmmakers, like all other surrealists, do not draw boundaries between the inanimate and the alive worlds.

One indirect influencer of surrealism was economics in general. Arts only earn if the audience appreciates the work. As such, the artists had to create something entirely new to appeal to the demand of the audience. Early animators such as Winsor McCay made comic books which were later developed into films (Pikkov 2013). His Comics tended to depict aspects of surrealism to satisfy the audience. He included these surreal features through nurturing anxiety, a hostile atmosphere, congregating objects in illogical juxtapositions, and continuously threatening mechanical devices. All these features can be seen in Winsor McCay’s art nouveau (Pikkov 2013). Many artists of the 21st century who are pioneers in animation are advocates of surrealism. Some of them include Such as Ladislas Starevich, James Stuart Blackton, and Émile Cohl. During the interwar period, several animations displayed heavy elements of Dadaism and surrealism. Most of these animations were by Walter Ruttmann, Viking, and OskarFishinger (Pikkov 2013). Their inspiration was a drive to create something new that will provide a unique experience for their audience. Novels and other forms of writing are a

significant source of animated surrealism, but they do not always influence it directly. In the early days of the surreal movement, many authors sprang who created inspirational pieces that inspired man animation makers. Some of these authors include Giuseppe Arcimboldi, Marquis de Sade, Alfred Jarry, and Hieronymus Bosch (Pikkov 2013).

Characteristics of Surreal Animation

According to Jan Švankmajer, surrealism is everything except art. It depicts world views, ideologies, psychology, and even philosophy (Owen 2011). Surrealism is an independent entity that does not influence any assumptions, and therefore its animations are invested into surreal elements as well. Some of these elements that form the basis for the traits of surrealism are irrationality, imagination, mystery, and anti-gravity. One of the unique characteristics of surrealist practices in animation is the technique of collage, which is depicted through cutouts. Roger Cardinal claims that the goal of animated films is designed to eradicate normal perception and suppress the environments that foster rational thought. T this respect, all animation films tend to have a surreal element within that is in line with irrationality (Wells 2002). All animations aim to generate an illusion (Pikkov 2010). The format used in cartoons continuously drove the concept of illusions to imply something weird and awkward that only represented itself (Norris 2007). Animations, in general therefore have many features that are typical to surrealism, but they cannot be regarded and are not regarded as surreal from a broad vantage point. The identification of what makes an animated film to be termed as a surreal piece hence becomes a point of focus. The implication, therefore, is that there is or should be a measure to determine the degree of surrealism expressed in an animated film.

Conclusion

Animated surrealism has been an area that has been left mostly under-researched over the years. Despite having well-established names in both surrealism and animation collaborating to produce materials, this area seems to have attracted little attention. Surrealism is a broad subject. It is, without a doubt, more extensive than the subject of animation from an academic or research approach. Their might is, however, colossal, especially with their forces combined, and their influence spreads roots to each other. They might have been neglected in research, but that has not prevented their collaboration. Salvador Dali and Walt Disney disregarded the barriers and continued to work together and produce a masterpiece of surreal animation. The King and the Mockingbird triggered people to wonder about what was real and what was not. It portrayed characters with a pinch of similarity to real-life people, both physically and their personality considered. Modern animators have sought inspiration from a variety of places but majorly from written materials. The degree of collaboration among surreal artists is incomparable to a few others. It has managed to maneuver through the various types of disciplines and found equal use in all of them. Even better, it has inspired the artists in these disciplines to collaborate and produce different versions of the same masterpiece. The neglect in research on surreal animation should stop by researchers taking on projects within this area. Surrealism will continue to spread its influence and foster collaboration. The least that can be done is to put effort towards understanding how, why, and when it is doing that. As it nears closing a century since its birth, it is vital to get insight on the activities on the old baby.