

EXCUSE ME, WHO ARE YOU...AND DO YOU SPEAK ANIMESE?:

THE DISTINCTIVE LANGUAGE OF ANIMATION

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*“Animated films [function] as an ‘Other’ within a production practice dominated by live action films...embodying the irrational, the exotic, the hyper-real.”*¹

Eric Smoodin

Animation is derived from the Latin term *animare*, meaning ‘to give life to’; animated film is created by the illusion of movement over time using various techniques, effectively animation infuses the inanimate with ‘spirit’.² Animation has particular ways of telling stories using image, sound, and narrative, separating itself from live-action and other mediums, possessing its own vocabulary so to speak. This essay will discuss this distinctive language used for telling stories whilst frequently making reference to the theories of animation professor Paul Wells, who has covered fields relevant to this enquiry. In addition to this, two case-studies will be presented: the 1997 Japanese film *Perfect Blue* (**Fig.01**), directed by Satoshi Kon; and *Dimensions of Dialogue*, created in 1982 by Czech surrealist animator, Jan Švankmajer. *Dimensions of Dialogue* is an animated short split into three separate parts; this essay will focus primarily on the first segment of the film titled *Exhaustive Discussion* (**Fig.02**), and in that respect, particular scenes and segments of *Perfect Blue* will be drawn in as examples although the film will be considered as a whole.

¹ Smoodin, Eric quoted in Napier, Susan J., *Anime from Akira to Howl’s Moving Castle*, New York: Palgrave, 2000, p. 292

² Wells, Paul, *Understanding Animation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998 p. 10



(Fig.01) Mima.
Perfect Blue, 1997. [Film] Satoshi
Kon, Japan: Madhouse Inc



(Fig.02) *Exhaustive Discussion*.
Dimensions of Dialogue, 1982. [Film] Jan Švankmajer,
Czechoslovakia: Krátký Film Praha.

Sourced from - Hames, Peter, ed. *The Cinema of Jan Švankmajer: Dark Alchemy*, London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2008, p. 77

Evidence of early animation can be traced as far back as 70 BC, where hand-drawn moving images were supposedly projected onto screen; in the sixteenth century, the primitive form of animation developed with the *flipbook* and later with the creation of the *Zoetrope* in 1834.³ By the late 1890s, the establishment of the comic strip brought about the initial grounding of animation's aesthetic language; comic strips displayed a set of characters, continuous narration and progression of action from left to right.⁴ Animation along with its visual vocabulary would continue to grow from its infant stage and become more eminent with films such as *The Enchanted Drawing*, created in 1900 by J. Stuart Blackton, *Little Nemo in Slumberland* by Winsor McCay in 1911, and *Gertie the Dinosaur* in 1914, also by Winsor McCay.⁵

Russian film-maker, Sergei Eisenstein admired the 'freedom of expression' articulated through animated film: the rejection of definite form, challenging social

³ Wells, Paul, *Understanding Animation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998 pp. 11-12

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-15

order, the use of *metamorphosis* and the ability to assume any shape and volume. Eisenstein labelled this condition, *plasmaticness*, which he identified in the early works of the renowned Walt Disney, predominantly the *Silly Symphonies* (1929-1939). Eisenstein's view emphasised animation as a distinctive language of expression.⁶ However with this being said, Disney's later works, such as *Bambi* (1942), insisted on verisimilitude in narratives, contexts, and characters, establishing an *orthodox* hyper-realist styling. Disney was adamant on having his animated figures move like real figures, this insistence on realism refuted what Eisenstein believed to be the intrinsic vocabulary of the medium by inhibiting its expressive possibilities.⁷ This movement would soon become the predominant language of animation, although in opposition *experimental* animation would still continue to thrive.⁸ Paul Wells in his writings is also similarly critical of Disney in his move towards hyper-realism, and argues that all animation that follow Disney's dominating mode of vocabulary are merely a *reaction* to Disney; and rather that American animation is built up of a history of responses to Disney's usurpation of the form during 1933 to 1941.⁹ According to Wells, contemporary animation in America is not visionary but rather the language of projection and sublimation.¹⁰

In the 1998 book by Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, he specifies two extremes of animation: animation following the mode of Disney's hyper-realist form - which he categorises as *orthodox*, and its antithetical equivalent as *experimental* - which frequently strives for an opposite effect. Anything that falls in-between these

⁶ Wells, Paul, *Animation & America*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, p. 41

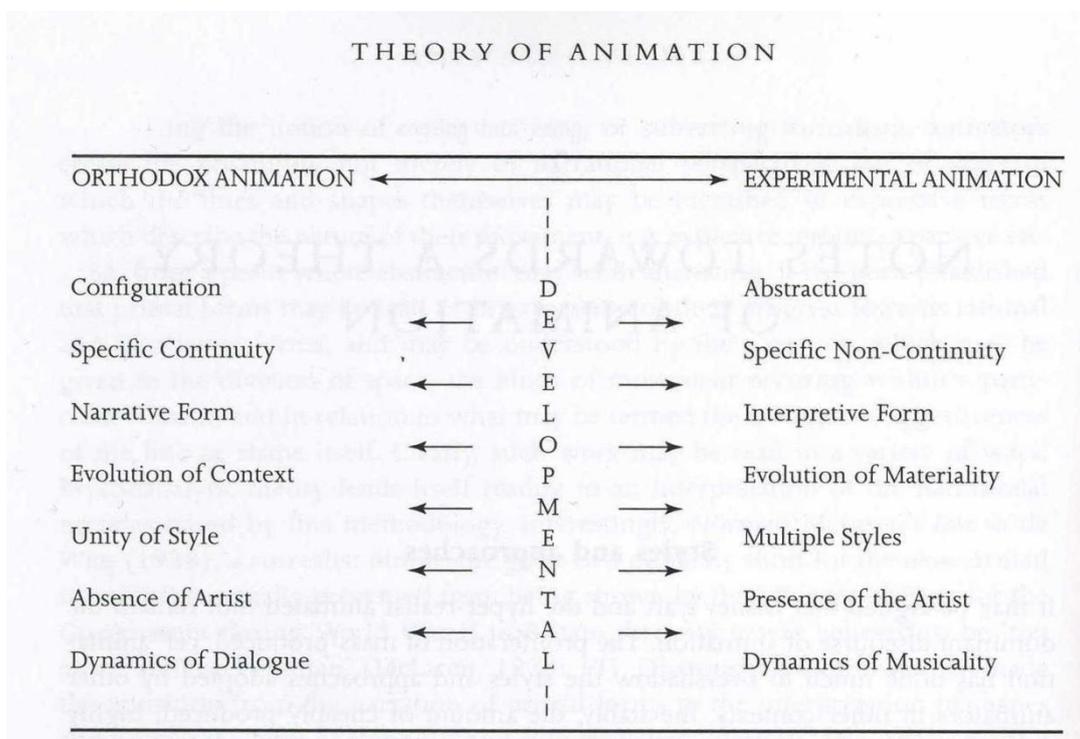
⁷ Wells, Paul, *Understanding Animation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998 pp. 35-36, pp. 23-25

⁸ Wells, Paul, *Animation: Genre and Authorship*, London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2002, pp. 4-9

⁹ Wells, Paul, *Animation & America*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002, p. 45

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9

two categories would be regarded as *developmental* using this model (Fig.03).¹¹ It is evident from this idea that animation is a medium which is capable of telling stories in a variety of ways. The idea of a ‘story’ can therefore be understood as a sequence of events taking place over a period of time; events can be presented in a multiplicity of ways in animation, to convey different meaning and/or emotion while utilising distinctive characteristics of animated narrative such as metamorphosis, fabrication, associative relations, sound, symbol, and metaphor.¹²



(Fig.03)

Sourced from - Wells, Paul, *Understanding Animation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, p. 36

Orthodox animation generally refers to animation that effectively seems more conventional and marketable than its counterpart. With more iconic depictions of characters, objects, and location, it describes the sort of animation you could usually expect to see on television or in the cinema.

¹¹ Wells, Paul, *Understanding Animation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998 pp. 35-36

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 68

Criteria for Orthodox Animation:¹³

Configuration: Figures/Characters which are identifiable as forms we understand, e.g. people and animals.

Specific Continuity: Logical narrative continuity i.e. character and context remain consistent throughout.

Narrative Form: A 'story' established by the specific continuity of creating a situation, problematising it, and ultimately resolving it.

Evolution of Context/ Absence of Artist: Content prioritised over construction: prioritised narrative, character, and style; rarely privileging the significance of their creation and creator.

Unity of Style: Mode of construction remains visually consistent.

Dynamics of Dialogue: Characters often defined by key aspects of dialogue.

On the other hand, experimental animation typically presents us with representations and scenarios which are more symbolic and arbitrary, where the meaning often has to be interpreted by the viewer.

Criteria for Experimental Animation:¹⁴

Abstraction: Abstract representation of forms we recognise, resisting orthodox configuration.

Specific Non-Continuity: Rejection of logical and linear continuity, and prioritising the illogical, irrational, and/or multiple continuities.

Interpretive Form: Audiences are required to interpret the work on their own terms or terms predetermined by the artist.

Evolution of Materiality: Concentration paid to the construction of the piece; audiences are made aware of the materials used in its creation.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 36-39

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 43-46

Multiple Styles: Combination and mixing different modes of animation.

Presence of the Artist: Individual expression of artist, drawing attention to the relationship between the artist and the work.

Dynamics of Musicality: Strong relationship between music and animation.

Other than the fact that *Perfect Blue* was made over a decade after *Dimensions of Dialogue*, the two films are very different both in content and contextually, this is largely due to their cultural and social background. Thus it is important to discuss the context of these films since animation is inevitably a culturally determined language. Japanese anime descends from Japanese comic books (manga); and manga are descendants of historical Japanese artwork, such as the *Chojugiga* (twelfth-century ‘Animal Satire Scrolls’), *Kibyōshi* (‘yellow-jacket’ picture books from the *Edo* period) and woodblock prints (1600-1867).¹⁵ The physical form of modern day manga however came from the West, when Japan began trading with America and Europe in the late nineteenth century; as a result, Japanese cartoonists began adapting a more Westernised art style.¹⁶ This early American influence on Japan could constitute as a reason why majority of anime seem to fall under the orthodox category. In contrast, Czechoslovakia has been known as one of the main European countries for modernism and the avant-garde. The country’s reaction against realism led to continual experimentation and subsequently extreme valuation of the ‘unorthodox’.¹⁷ Significantly, Czechoslovakia recalls a long tradition of marionette theatre, puppet animation, and stop-motion techniques distinguishable in the works of Czech animators such as Jan Švankmajer and Jiri Barta.¹⁸

¹⁵ Schodt, Frederik L., *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*, California: Stone Bridge Press, 1996, pp. 21-22, 49-50.

¹⁶ McCarthy, Helen, *500 Heroes & Villains*, London: Collins & Brown, 2006, p. 11

¹⁷ Hames, Peter, ed. *The Cinema of Jan Švankmajer: Dark Alchemy*, London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2008, p. 8

¹⁸ Wells, Paul, *Animation: Genre and Authorship*, London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2002, p. 2

The story in *Perfect Blue* is formulated by orthodox narrative form with an establishment of characters and a situation at the beginning, a problem which develops, and a resolution presented at the end. The film centres around our female protagonist, Mima Kirigoe, who leaves the limelight from being a beloved, innocent pop idol to pursue her acting career by starring in a controversial television drama called *Double Bind*. The problem arises when Mima learns she is being stalked via a fan website which shares accurate personal information on her. The situation worsens as the ex-pop star begins to face identity disorder: after reluctantly performing in a raunchy rape scene as part of the drama show, her doppelganger gradually manifests, who claims to still be a pop idol. Consequently, dead bodies of men involved in the change of her image begin to pile up one after the other. Mima gradually falls deeper into a schizophrenic whirlpool unable to distinguish reality from dream, and to the credit of director Satoshi Kon - we as the audience are also faced with the same difficulty of making this distinction.¹⁹ The problem is ultimately resolved as we find the double manifested from a possessed Rumi Hidaka, Mima's manager, who at end is placed in what appears to be a mental asylum and the film comes to an end with Mima confirming that she is "the real thing."

The sequence of these events however does not remain faithful to specific linear continuity; rather the film diverges to follow specific non-continuity especially nearing the end. Effectively, the film seems fragmented as scenes edit from location to location without warning, with reality and dream interweaving and merging until left virtually indistinguishable. Kon sophisticatedly renders fantasy and actuality on the same plane, subjectively he does not treat the two as separate entities with both equally carrying the narrative forward. Kon believed that audiences are too familiar

¹⁹ Drazen, Patrick, *Anime Explosion: The What? Why? & Wow! Of Japanese Animation*, California: Stone Bridge Press, 2003, p. 181

with being able to make the distinction between the two in film, thus he deliberately broke the pattern of continuity, hence creating another level of storytelling.²⁰ To add to the complexity of this mode of storytelling, there is yet a third layer of narration with the scenes from the appropriately named *Double Bind*, which also become entwined with Mima's dream and reality e.g. Mima's character in the show, Yoko, is diagnosed with 'dissociative identity disorder'.²¹ In effect this third layer of narration from *Double Bind* acts as an associative link between Mima's fantasy and reality. To emphasise Mima's state of disorder, Kon often employs jump cuts, form edits, and concept edits which aid the sense of confusion; this style of cinematography however is apparent throughout the film and not exclusive to the large segment of the story with multi-layered narration. This porous line between illusion and materiality in *Perfect Blue* prove to be perfect candidates for exploration within the animated medium.²²

Perfect Blue stays loyal to the hyper-realist practice of animation. In fact it pushes the boundary further in some aspects: three-dimensional characters, complex plotting, and the fascination with playing with cinematic codes informed by Kon's intrigue with storytelling; all of which, as *Time Asia* (2003) notes, "expand the boundaries of the animated medium."²³ In fact, audiences have often scrutinized the film as animation for its close resemblance to an actual live-action thriller.²⁴ This similarity could be due to the fact that *Perfect Blue* was originally intended to be shot as a live-action movie, but this did not come to fruition with the idea ultimately falling

²⁰ Mes, Tom, 'Midnight Eye Interview with Satoshi Kon', *Midnight Eye*. November 2001, http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/satoshi_kon.shtml, accessed 6 December 2009

²¹ Rickards, Meg, 'Screening Interiority: Drawing on the Animated Dreams of Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue*', no publication name given, 2006, p. 6, sourced from- http://nass.murdoch.edu.au/docs/m_rickards.pdf, accessed 6 December 2009

²² Brown, Steven T., *Cinema Anime*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 24

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 23-24

through.²⁵ However, it could be argued that *Perfect Blue* as a live-action picture would not have been as successful or effective; animation enhances the surrealist nature of the film, allowing the creator, the director Satoshi Kon in this case, to be more expressive. Additionally, the use of animation has made it psychologically harder to decipher how much of what the ‘camera’ shows is real and how much is imagination.²⁶ The fact that an animation is so closely experienced as a live-action movie is one of the reasons why *Perfect Blue* makes for an intriguing topic; if it were a live-action film, it is likely it would have gotten lost amidst similar films.

Perfect Blue does not satisfy every criterion for orthodox animation, however overall it still falls under the orthodox category as it resists being too developmental, let alone being considered as an experimental animation. *Perfect Blue* utilises orthodox configuration with highly iconic depictions of locations and human characters that are defined by their behaviour, action, and dialogue. There is a unity of style alongside with the prioritisation of content, character, and narrative over construction. This leads to a sense of the artist being absent to a certain degree. This being said, *Perfect Blue* still manages to differentiate itself from conventional anime which tend to be unquestionably orthodox, often with narratives falling into the science fiction, action, and comic romance genres, which contain more simple depictions of humans who typically possess large glaring eyes, pointed noses, and multi-coloured hair.²⁷

In direct contrast, Švankmajer’s *Exhaustive Discussion* presents the audience with more abstract forms; although it is not difficult to recognise these forms as

²⁵ Mes, Tom, ‘Midnight Eye Interview with Satoshi Kon’, *Midnight Eye*. November 2001, http://www.midnighteye.com/interviews/satoshi_kon.shtml, accessed 2 December 2009

²⁶ Patten, Fred, *Watching Anime, Reading Manga: 25 Years of Essays and Reviews*, California: Stone Bridge Press, 2004, p. 368

²⁷ Napier, Susan J., ‘“Excuse Me, Who Are You?”: Performance, the Gaze, and the Female in the Works of Kon Satoshi,’ in Brown, Steven T., ed. *Cinema Anime*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 24

representations of human heads, they undoubtedly remain arbitrary and symbolic. The ‘story’ of *Exhaustive Discussion* is free for interpretation by the viewer although there is a suggested allegorical reading. On the surface the audience bears witness to what seems like a variation of the popular game *rock, paper, scissors*: three heads composed from different objects, in the style of Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo (**Fig.04**), confront one another in profile to commence physical battle. The latter devours the former and regurgitates a newly fragmented version of the decomposed head; this cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction works to reflect the process of animation and continues between the three heads until each is ‘finely chopped’ enough that at last they become nothing more than clay. The sequence ends with an endless cycle; each clay head ‘vomits out’ another identical clay bust which goes on to form yet another identical head and so on.²⁸ With *Exhaustive Discussion*, Švankmajer implements a very different mode of storytelling from that used by Kon; rejecting the notion of a plot in favour of symbolic and metaphoric meanings which are distinguishing characteristics of animation.²⁹



(Fig.04)

Giuseppe Arcimboldo (Italy), *Vertumnus (Portrait of Rudolf II)*, 1590. 70.5 x 57.5 cm (27 3/4 x 22 5/8 in.), oil on panel.

²⁸ Cardinal, Roger, ‘Thinking Through Things: The Presence of Objects in the Early Films of Jan Svankmajer,’ in Hames, Peter, ed. *The Cinema of Jan Svankmajer: Dark Alchemy*, London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2008, pp. 77-78

²⁹ Wells, Paul, *Understanding Animation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998 p. 68

The three heads are composed of fruit and vegetable; various metal objects; and office stationary, each can be read as metaphors for: nature, industrialism and bureaucracy respectively. In terms of *rock, paper, scissors*: the metallic head is rock, the fruit head represents scissors, and the office stationary head would be regarded as paper. Using this, *Exhaustive Discussion* can be interpreted as industrialism destroying nature, bureaucracy overwhelming the industrial process but ends up itself challenged by the forces of nature.³⁰

The construction of *Exhaustive Discussion* is apparent within the film itself, and the stop-motion technique used is frequently exercised by Švankmajer in his work. Švankmajer refrains from limiting himself by ‘giving life to’ a wide array of objects within his animations e.g. stuffed toys, food, found objects etc. He believes that “objects are more alive than people, more permanent and more expressive.”³¹ The malleability of clay, the texture of textiles, and the strength of sonorous metals become the narrative vehicles driving Švankmajer’s work and serve as an example of fabrication (expression of materiality), another distinctive characteristic of three dimensional animation for creating stories through rediscovered and redefined discourses.³² With the ideal that animation is supposed to suppress the categories of normal perception and annihilate rationality, Švankmajer is able to spontaneously ‘spring’ inert objects into action regardless of the fact that we know the object has no actual life force.³³ Furthermore, *Exhaustive Discussion* and the whole of *Dimensions of Dialogue* for that matter, integrate the concept of metamorphosis into the actual

³⁰ Wells, Paul, ‘*Body Consciousness in the Films of Jan Svankmajer*’, in Pilling, Jayne, ed. *A Reader in Animation Studies*, Australia: John Libbey & Company Ltd, 1997, pp. 178-179

³¹ Wells, Paul, *Understanding Animation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998 p. 90

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91

³³ Cardinal, Roger, ‘*Thinking Through Things: The Presence of Objects in the Early Films of Jan Švankmajer*,’ in Hames, Peter, ed. *The Cinema of Jan Švankmajer: Dark Alchemy*, London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2008, p. 78

story itself; this draws attention to metamorphosis as a device for construction as well as storytelling in animation.

Despite being titled *Dimensions of Dialogue*, unsurprisingly there is no dialogue in the film, rather the dialogue is yet again conveyed metaphorically through the interaction between two subjects. In this way Švankmajer gives little to no priority to the notion of character, but instead uses them for symbolic meaning to silently ‘speak’ the narrative.³⁴ There are strong relationships between music, image, and narrative, resulting in a sophisticated form of rhythmical montage with the deployment of leitmotifs. Each head in *Exhaustive Discussion* has its own theme: the paper composed head has a droning, low-pitched theme whereas the fruit composed head possesses a more harmonious, high-pitched melody. The music works subliminally to attach negative connotations with the paper head and more positive connotations with the fruit and vegetable head. When the conflict begins, there is discord in the music reflecting the butchering on screen. Švankmajer often uses unusual montage techniques which can be considered as part of his authorial signature: the use of big close-ups on specific objects devouring each other is juxtaposed against full shots of the heads in profile, emphasising the exaggerated sounds especially upon close-up.³⁵ These ‘noises’ allow the audience to effectively ‘hear’ the texture of the objects: the crushing of the lettuce, the clattering of the pots, the clapping of wood, etc.

This analysis of *Exhaustive Discussion* evidently shows that it lies opposite from *Perfect Blue* on the table illustrated in **Fig.03**, by maintaining the qualities of an experimental animation. Similar to other of Švankmajer’s work, *Exhaustive*

³⁴ Wells, Paul, ‘*Body Consciousness in the Films of Jan Švankmajer*’, in Pilling, Jayne, ed. *A Reader in Animation Studies*, Australia: John Libbey & Company Ltd, 1997, p. 178

³⁵ Uhde, Jan, ‘*Jan Švankmajer: The Prodigious Animator from Prague*’, *Kinema*, 2008, <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=363&feature>, accessed 28 November 2009

Discussion does prove that there is presence of the artist more clearly than *Perfect Blue*: due to how the story is told disregarding narrative structure, concentration on the mode of construction alongside with fabrication, and with more symbolic and metaphorical elements embedded in the animation. That is not to say there is no presence of the artist whatsoever within *Perfect Blue*, from the nature of the story and through the visuals it is noticeable that *Perfect Blue* is distinctly a Satoshi Kon film. Looking at Kon's other works such as *Millennium Actress* and *Paprika*, there is an obvious unity of style. Both *Millennium Actress* and *Paprika* also have layers of narrative woven together, and the female protagonists in both films bear close visual resemblance to Mima (**Fig.05**). Additionally, *Paprika* continues with the theme of dream and reality, by presenting us with surreal dreamscapes. Steve Schneider suggested, "animation is probably the ultimate auteurist cinema," the idea of the auteur is key in defining the distinctive language of animation with the mode and expression of storytelling varying from each animation practitioner.³⁶

(Fig.05)
Paprika, 2006. [Film] Satoshi Kon, Japan:
Madhouse Inc.



In conclusion, the distinct language of animation used to tell stories is evidently defined by multiple characteristics. The language of animation remains particularly expressive with Modernist credentials: enunciating *difference* and

³⁶ Schneider, Steve, 1988 quoted in Wells, Paul, *Animation: Genre and Authorship*, London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2002, p. 11

otherness while employing storytelling devices such as metamorphosis, sound, metaphors, symbols etc.³⁷ With two opposing extremes of animation, orthodox and experimental, the way in which these devices are used to tell a story vary tremendously as highlighted by the case studies.

It has been argued by some film historians, such as William Moritz, that true animation is in abstract form, this can be counter-argued by the fact that animation in essence means ‘to give life to’; in many ways orthodox animation achieves this more believably with further emphasis placed on the notion of character, configuration, and importantly movement - which will always remain a key defining element in animation.³⁸

Animation is an articulate language used to repress rationality; experimental animation can arguably achieve this more effectively with its abstract nature, however this same concept also applies for orthodox animation. In a *Roadrunner* animation we can see Wile E. Coyote blown to bits with dynamite and next flattened by anvils, but at no point do we question how this anthropomorphic creature is able to survive such punishment. We accept that he is rendered indestructible by rejecting logic and understanding the language of conventional cartoon, which generates humour from arbitrary representations of comic violence.

Ultimately, animation remains a culturally determined vocabulary, interpreted and applied differently by individual authors - hence as of consequence, practically all animation inevitably carry some form of authorial signature or/and ‘studio style’. This investigation can be taken further by considering animation form other parts of the globe, to explore how the language of animation is used differently.

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³⁷ Wells, Paul, *Understanding Animation*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998 p. 21

³⁸ Wells, Paul, *Animation: Genre and Authorship*, London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2002, p. 6

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(Fig.05):

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