

Still from Spin | MAX HATTLER

## SYNC:

### Circular adventures in animation

MAX HATTLER

I was never all that much into film, which for a long time I only knew as narrative, live-action drama. Nor was I interested in animation, which I had only experienced as 'cartoons' – drawn funny films. I came to film in a roundabout way, through an interest in visual arts, design aesthetics, and the time-based media of sound and music. Perceiving these disciplines as disparate, it took me a while to realise that I had to combine them through the medium of animation film. Discovering the works

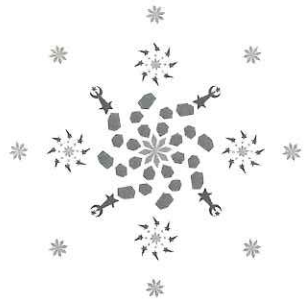
#### FEATURING

*Loops*

*Cycles*

*Patterns*

*Heaven and hell*

Still from *Collision* (Max Hattler / Royal College of Art)

of avant-garde animators such as Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann and Viking Eggeling was an eye-opener. These were people who, in the 1920s, approached the new medium of film as an extension of abstract painting and music – rather than as an extension of theatre and the novel, which is how it came to be perceived through the dominance of the live-action film championed by Hollywood.

The 1920s have therefore played an important role in the development of my work. The early abstract animators showed me that film does not have to be narrative or figurative, and that it does not have to follow a linear progression through a beginning, a middle and an end; that it can instead be structured more like music, through visual and time patterns, rhythms and loops. In my films and live audio-visual performances, I try to explore the relationships between sound, music and the moving image. I am very interested in abstraction and abstractedness. Not so much pure abstraction but rather an aesthetic that comes out of ideas of repetition, shapes, texture, patterning and symmetry. This can open up an alternative space in which meaning is suggested, rather than fixed; in which inbuilt ambivalence and ambiguity help construct more open-ended narratives, which engage the viewer in a different way.

My Royal College of Art graduation film *Collision* (2005) explores graphic art as metaphor. By discarding traditional storytelling, it presents a marriage of image and sound to produce a kaleidoscopic take on our turbulent political situation. The aim of the film is to be subtle and bold at the same time, and to mesmerise the viewer with symbols that are detached from their established context and applied in the service of an alternative reality. The basics of *Collision* are constituted by the colours and shapes of flags. The green of Islam is contrasted with the American (and British) red and blue. However, red is also the colour of Arab nationalism while white features in the flags of all parties involved. All this is

mixed again with the graphic patterns that are central to the heritage and identity of these cultures, American quilts on the one side and Islamic patterns on the other. Rather than focusing on differences, the film points out similarities across these cultures, symbolised by their cultural iconography. While the film follows a clear narrative structure, it is at the same time open to interpretation. The film ends with a sequence in which all the colours collide and create intricate morphing kaleidoscopic patterns to the sound of gunshots and fireworks. The reading is open-ended: cultural carnage or carnival of cultures.

Another noteworthy aspect of patterning and symmetries is that they are directly and universally perceived as beautiful. In *Collision*, this creates an interesting tension. The viewer is instantly pulled into the work through its aesthetics, while the narrative only unfolds progressively. As the narrative impact hits the hardest, the audience is already hypnotised, unable to escape. For me, this is also a comment on the aestheticisation of violence and the mediatisation of war, its packaging into palatable portions, attractively served as evening entertainment.

My short film *Spin* (2010) develops some of these ideas, focusing on what Siegfried Kracauer in 1927 termed ‘mass ornament’ – the patterning of individuals into ‘indissoluble (...) units whose movements are mathematical demonstrations’.<sup>1</sup> Set around the time when Kracauer made this statement, *Spin* takes inspiration from Busby Berkeley’s escapist Hollywood musical vision as much as from communist parades and Leni Riefenstahl’s fascist fantasia. In *Spin*, toy soldiers – from the past and present – are coerced into visual patterns to play out a conflict-as-spectacle. Sides are irrelevant; it’s just one big party for everyone. The boundaries between violence and entertainment are blurred, as troops become troupes become troops become troupes. While this is not strictly abstract work, it makes its point through an act of visual and conceptual abstraction. And while the references are historical, the questions the work poses

*Spin takes  
inspiration  
from Busby  
Berkeley as  
much as from  
communist  
parades*

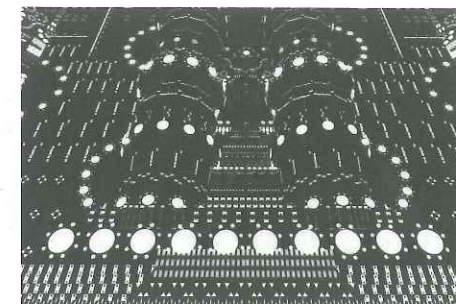
<sup>1</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, ‘The Mass Ornament’, in Barbara Correll and Jack Zipes, *New German Critique*, No. 5 (Spring 1975), p.67-76.



are as burning as always. The ending here is much less ambiguous than in *Collision*. For the film to bring its message home, the end needed to be final: death for everyone, albeit in mass ornamental fashion. Having said that, *Spin* can also be seen as a loop, a never-ending cycle of destruction.

Not all of my work is as political, or as narrative. In 2008, I directed the experimental short film *Aanaatt* to the music of Japanese electronica artist Jemapur, with additional animation by Noriko Okaku. This retro-futuristic stop-motion film is situated somewhere between abstraction and realism, between constructivist design and the manual-analogue creation of space through continuously shifting displacements, reflections and reconfigurations. One influence, mainly in terms of technique and movement, was Slavko Vorkapić's *Abstract Experiment in Kodachrome* (c.1940), a stop-motion film in which multi-coloured wooden building blocks create a series of simple patterns and graphic shapes. Constructivism and the work of Bauhaus master László Moholy-Nagy served as visual references for the overall layout of the film. Another more tentative Bauhaus link exists through the actual objects used in *Aanaatt*. The majority of these objects come from the *omnium-gatherum* of Hans (Nick) Roericht, Design Professor Emeritus at the Berlin University of the Arts, and a graduate of the former Ulm School of Design, direct progeny of the Bauhaus. *Aanaatt* was described by Darryl Clifton as a "machine-aestheticized" vision [that] harks back to a more innocent age, when modernist ideals and a belief in the curative potential of technology influenced the work of filmmakers like Dziga Vertov and Hans Richter.<sup>2</sup> While this is true, the film is also a response to the recent wave of motion graphics works that so heavily rely on the curative potential of digital technology, forgetting about the beauty and believability of analogue media. *Aanaatt* was aptly featured in onedotzero's 2009 Craftwork programme, the digital film festival's first-ever screening dedicated to 'post-digital' works. *Aanaatt* was largely created in sequence and without

storyboard, developing over a period of three weeks of constant shooting. External factors such as weather, time of day, availability of resources and accidents were allowed to become part of and shape the film. While there is a certain dramatic development, the film fundamentally describes a continuum, a circular state rather than a narrative.



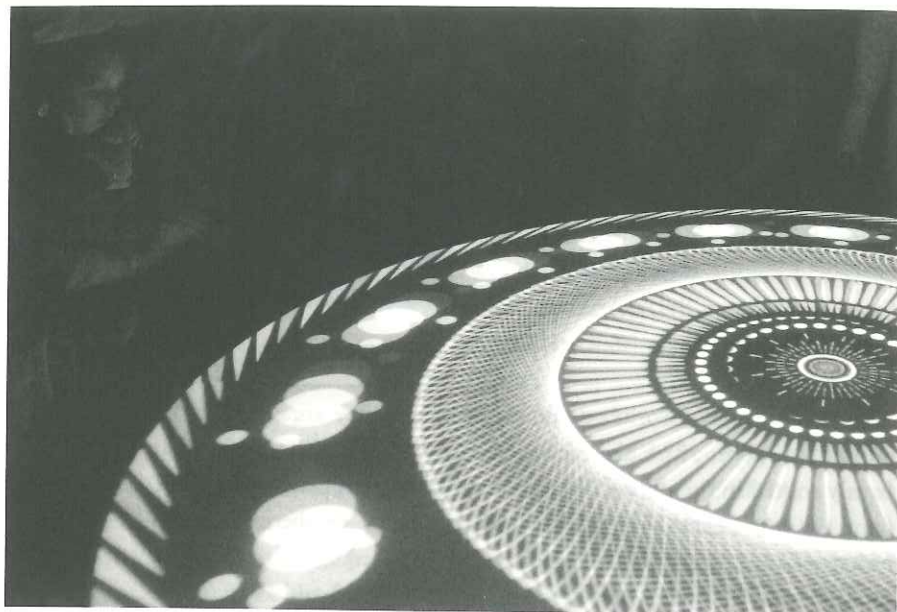
Still from 1923, aka Heaven  
(Max Hattler / The Animation Workshop)

My most recent works go one step further: they are continuous animation loops. *1923*, aka *Heaven*, and *1925*, aka *Hell* (2010), are firmly rooted in the digital. Their inspiration though, again, comes from the pre-digital 1920s. Both loops are based on the intricately patterned paintings of French outsider artist Augustin Lesage, more precisely on two of his paintings made in 1923 and 1925, both called *A Symbolic Composition of the Spiritual World*. Satisfying my appetite for patterning and abstraction, as well as the abstraction of ideas, Lesage's work proved to be a rewarding starting point for an exploration of ideas around beauty, spirituality, eternity, and the cyclic nature of time. Created as an installation, the two loops are played continuously on two opposing walls in a blacked-out room, offering two simultaneous, differing visions of the spiritual world. As they inhabit the same physical space, their sounds and emanating light merge and overlap to create an immersive environment.

I directed the two loops during just five days in February 2010 at the Animation Workshop in Viborg, Denmark, where they were produced by a crew of excellent student animators and computer graphics artists. The Animation Workshop had set 'The Outsider' as a theme to work to. I decided to look at outsider art for inspiration and I came across Augustin Lesage. I was immediately hooked by his obsession with symmetry and repetition, combined with his spiritualist understanding of art. Lesage, a coal miner who picked up painting after an inner voice told him to do so, claimed never to have painted except under the explicit guidance of spirits, among

2 Darryl Clifton, 'Animation's Brave New Worlds', in *Varoom*, No. 12 (Spring 2010), p.20-25.





*Sync, installation view (Max Hattler / Pavlov E-Lab)*

184 them Leonardo da Vinci and Apollonius of Tyana. Being partial to patterns and mirroring myself, I liked the idea of transposing his vision of the spiritual world into a contemporary moving image context – updated through the lens of pop-cultural and art-historic references – using sound, image and movement to try and heighten the sense of the spiritual, while adhering to Lesage's parameters of symmetry. The idea of a loop made perfect sense both in terms of a *tableau vivant* as well as an endless cycle – eternity – implicit in Lesage's spiritual vision.

With all my work, I tend to feel my way from a generally nebulous starting point to the finished piece. Since making animated films is a slow process, I prefer not to storyboard but to keep things open-ended and let them develop organically. Storyboarding locks down much of the film's development before production has even begun – you become a slave to your own creation. So for this project my aim was to do the same while working with around 10 students split into two groups. I gave each group one of the Lesage paintings and a set

of instructions, and asked them not to discuss with the other group. I really wanted to develop two very different takes on Lesage with them. Lesage's 1923 painting has a hint of perspective, so it seemed natural to follow that lead and develop it into a forever ascending loop. We worked out a way of mapping moving 2D animations onto the 3D geometry created by the students. This enabled us to translate Lesage's vision into a futuristic, meditative, uplifting loop reminiscent at once of Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis* and the psychedelic films of computer animation pioneer John Whitney, but also of *Tron* (1982) and DMT hallucinations – hence the alternative title *Heaven*. For 1925, we started out by cutting up sections of Lesage's painting and layering them as a series of consecutive walls. It seemed logical to develop his patterns into moving parts and mechanisms, and doors through which the viewer must pass. 1925 ended up in a much darker place, a forever repeating spiritual world somewhere between C.G. Jung and H.R. Giger, ancient Egyptian tombs and the *Tomb Raider* (1996) video game – hence the alternative title *Hell*.

With my latest work, an abstract floor-projection animation installation, I tried to push the idea of circularity yet further. *Sync* (2010) is the result of a collaboration with Pavlov E-Lab, Dutch theoretical physicist Eric Bergshoeff and American chronobiologist Martha Merrow. As well as a being a single-shot film and a continuous loop, *Sync* is also circular in shape, taking the form of a large mesmerising mandala. It is modelled on the zoetrope ('wheel of life' in Greek), an optical device that produces the illusion of movement from a rapid circular succession of static images. The narrative and animation of the whole film are in fact produced by just one gigantic virtual disc, a single image spinning at 7400 degrees per second, which the camera continuously zooms out of. In an attempt at visualising all possible time scales from subatomic Planck time to the lifespan of the universe itself, the film is based on the idea that there is an underlying unchanging synchronisation at the centre of everything; a sync that was decided at the very beginning of time. Everything follows from it, everything is ruled by it: all time, all physics, all life. And all animation. ■