Drawn: on Zachary Lieberman's work
By Jane de Almeida

Zachary Lieberman is part of the same spiritual family of George Méliès, Orson Welles and William Kentridge. Still young and a little balder than all of them, Zachary, when presenting his works, always begins showing his ID with a photo of a few years ago. In the old picture he appears with a long hair and tries to convince us that is hair was lost in the years working in the subversion of vectorial computing systems such as the software Flash, to create new manners of moving the image. It makes semantic sense, but is makes still more formal sense. His inspiration for the work Drawn are the Lightning Sketches. Exactly a hundred years ago, after working with Edison, the Briton J.S. Blackton started working with frames filmed one by one, drawing in chalk on a slate and adding a small detail to the drawing in each filmed frame, thus inventing the animation technique. Humorous Phases of Funny Faces is the name of that first animated cartoon, and Zachary Lieberman's hair might have been removed, at each stage of his very humorous life, by James Blackton's hands.

Drawn is an awesome machine. Of course, it is easy to understand why people have so much fun with it, children and adults. Everything seems so entertaining, everyone makes magic with his or her own hands and doesn't need to buy the beginner's kit. There is something naïve à la Méliès, without the inconvenience of his kitsch universe, because it is charming without the baroquist excess of physical matter in the framing, as in Méliès. Both in Drawn with a multimedia projector, and in its previous version with a overhead projector, there is a concern with the color of the inks – almost always one, and close to black -, with the use of the paintbrush, besides the assumption that people draw their most primary and childish scribbles. The result is very close to Blackton's chalk, expressing the manual line of drawing, and not the "colorito", to remind an old opposition in art. Drawn, before everything, frees itself from the preconceived vectorialization of animation softwares with the use of Processing and C++, a free software that can be downloaded from the internet and presents an alternative that recaptures the human gesture.

Automatism and improvisation: trickery

In films that use the camera as a machine to reproduce reality, a certain automatism is guaranteed by means of the frame's photography. Following Stanley Cavell's argument, the movie camera, being a machine that captures the world automatically, without human effort, mechanically assures us, spectators, our resignation, because our presence does not witness a present act, but something that has happened and that is just absorbed by us[1]. In the arts universe, the machines of reality reproduction are the nodal point of a problem that in fact is quite earlier: that which refers to the human, to the impromptu, and that which is mechanical, automatic. To subvert machines is, so to speak, considered the artists' role, because it is necessary to free what is produced from the referent's confinement. By the way, the problem placed by the modern artist is that his role is no longer to produce a new instance of art, but a new medium within it. The very automatism of reality-reproduction machines is a new medium to be used, subverted and modeled on account of the work. Orson Welles, in F for Fake, clearly presents his version of automatism driven by the artist's hands and intelligence. Images of different and distant places are put together, building the film he intends to build. Both in the sequences of drivers appreciating Oja Kodar, and in the illuminated sketch on the woman-who-cheated-Picasso-who-cheated-art. From reality, Welles has just the woman who escapes him, Kodar, and

himself. In that film, Welles recalls his origins and makes a tribute to trick films, remembering the Robert-Houdin theater, where Méliès began in illusionism, assuming, besides his performatic character, his fascination and obstinacy before the machine that reproduces but forges reality.

Taking the risk of deepening an injustice regarding the division between Georges Méliès's and the Lumière brothers' movies, maybe there really is another division: between films with real people, which come from photography, and animated movies. Lacking body and soul, animation presents its "incorporeal creatures of a world deprived of sex and death", as Stanley Cavell says[2]. Precisely, "animation" comes from anima, an artificial effort to restore soul to that body that one may throw against a wall, to squeeze, in a sadomasochistic way, according to Adorno and Horkheimer[3]. Soul, that in Greek is anima, is the immaterial being that is united to the body that serves as its temporary wrapping, and which belongs just to the human species. Logically, in that sense, to "animate" drawings is a perverse task, that serves before anything else to remind us of our own souls.

Aware of that perspective, William Kentridge animates his drawings provoking "hiccups", as Rosalind Krauss says in her article "The Rock': William Kentridge's drawing for projection", because he uses a few drawings that are erased and refilmed to build a scene, thus obstructing the natural time of projection. Krauss also remembers another element in Kentridge's work: the gravity of his characters' weight contradicts in a given moment the disturbing lightness of animated beings[4]. But Kentridge himself shows how he controls the camera movements, inspired by Georges Méliès' control in showing a "forced dexterity". Three of his works are tributes to the French film director: Journey to the Moon, Eight Fragments for Georges Méliès and Day for night, all of them from 2003. The last one was made of ant trails filmed in negative and with reverse mixing, which were used as a kind of galaxy in his Journey to the moon. If Méliès needed to have a great control of the frames' movement with a 24 frames/second camera to film more slowly, and then make them look in the right tempo, Kentridge had to keep one hand free to make the drawings and the other one with a charcoal pencil to erase them, and to film everything in 1/8 to 1/12 of the normal time, what he calls "a catatonic and mortal march". That physical control that he insists on reminding us is the human mark in the process[5].

All of them are "tricky men", people who at the same time deceive us, but who want to show that the machine doesn't dominate them. All of them would envy Zachary Lieberman. His machine frees the drawings we make from their confinement to paper, makes them have their own life, to move at our touch. In that sense, the machine's automation that assured our resignation before what had already happened, if it exists, is no longer detectable. That is, considering that Lieberman's programming, as any other programming, has its own automatism.

Neocontrol through interactivity

One may consider that the very fact of the interactivity proposed by a machine is already an attempt of de-automating the processes. The spectator not only draws, as he moves his own lines. One shouldn't call "spectator" that being who also uses the hands, but something like "interactor" or "participant", as he has been frequently designated. In spite of the seemingly inevitable use of interactivity in technological creations after the computer, the matter of automatism is still present, because the processes are programmed to the reactive action of the receiver. In that sense, the machine's automatism seems to have been transferred to the receiver, who reacts almost as a robot before the proposals of computing machines. It doesn't seem to result a bit in a new posture of that being as a subject and a citizen, conscious of his role, such as the old Marxists had wanted. Other reflections, that wouldn't fit in this space, could be made concerning interactivity: the interactivity neocontrol system, the new relation of a mass psychology, subjectivation by means of always-the-same etc. Therefore, I believe that is not precisely the most significant aspect of Drawn, but rather the possibility of creating the image's movement with the human line itself. After all, what one has constructed is an instrument. An instrument for creation, but that can also be used as a mere illustration machine for lectures and didactic shows in the Power Point lineage, reducing its creative potential.

From the computer perspective, Drawn, with the use of Processing and C++, represents a new freedom in the ability to create drawings, to modify them and to animate them without having to use strict software, either by means of the metaphoric relationship between mouse and paintbrush, or by preset vectors that command movement. From the reflexive creation perspective, Drawn joins an important tradition that refers to the drawing line and its representations, and also to questions of technique, of technology and of reproducibility put by that tradition, as well as engraving, for example. From the field of image in movement, maybe Drawn is really the fourth generation of a lineage that begins with Blackton (and Méliès), which later on, conscious of technology, can use it as an instrument, here represented by Welles in F for Fake (but could be Eisenstein, Vertov, Godard and some others), and, finally, to film drawings, like Kendtrige, who, more than the former, brings questions to be made to Drawn.

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Notes

1) Stanley Cavell, in *The world viewed.* Enlarged edition. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1979. pp. 26.
2) Stanley Cavell, op.cit., pp. 171.
3) Theodor Adorno and Horkheimer (2000). "A indústria cultural", in Luiz Costa Lima. *Teoria da Cultura de Massa,* São Paulo, Paz e Terra.
4) According to Rosalind Krauss, Kentridge managed to do, with only 20 drawings, erased and redrawn, eight minutes of film. In "The Rock': William Kentridge's drawings for projection", in *October*, Vol. 92, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2000, pp.3-35.
5) William Kentridge. "Journey to the moon' and '7 fragments for Georges Méliès' including 'Day for night'", in *William Kentridge*. Catalog of Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea. Milan, Skira Editore, 2003. pp. 190-193.