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**Output Title: American Gothic: Chaos, Anachronism and
Modernity in Eyvind Earle's *Sleeping Beauty***

Output type: Conference Paper

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**Event Location: PCA/ACA National Conference, Animation
(Silverman and Chanthanakone) division, New Orleans**

Date: 3rd April, 2015

Official url: www.laurencefiggis.co.uk/corprateday/american-gothic/

Laurence Figgis

American Gothic: Chaos, Anachronism and Modernity in Eyvind Earle's *Sleeping Beauty*

The philosopher of anachronism, Jeremy Tambling, has argued that what is 'postponed' appears as anachronistic. Drawing a metaphor from the world of modern travel, he writes that jet-lag (*décalage horaire* or 'time-gap' in French) 'places one time (that of the body) inside another [time], literally postpones it' (Tambling, 2010: 16). The Beauty in Charles Perrault's famous story for children, published in 1697 – the first of its kind to be called *La Belle au Bois Dormant* ('The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood'), is herself an anachronism, a body 'postponed' – a figure from the ancient past recalled to life. And the Prince, who helps her to rise, is struck with embarrassment. For, though she is fully dressed (and quite magnificently), she is dressed just like his great-grandmother - in the fashion of a century before - and wears a 'point-band' peeping over her collar (Perrault, 1992: 89).

The great disappointment of the Disney film is the absence from the narrative of this time-convulsive aspect. The lovers are acquainted, in this version, prior to the inception of the evil curse that puts Aurora (the Sleeping Beauty) to sleep; and the hero rides to the rescue much more promptly than his textual counterpart (of whom the Beauty was justified in complaining: 'is it you my Prince, ... you have waited a great while') (Perrault, 1992: 88).

Though the idea of time lost and the idea of time regained are absent from the film story, the *feeling* of time-displaced is present by visual inference - indeed, for contemporary viewers, schooled in the retro chic of *Mad Men*, the fifties graphics scream as loud as all the gothic accoutrements. The look of the film was largely the responsibility of Eyvind Earle, the painter and illustrator (and sometime greetings-card designer) who single-handedly authored many of the elaborate production backgrounds used in the finished film.

Disney's somewhat over-zealous regard for Earle's decoratively-modern graphic oeuvre was symptomatic of his own vexed relationship with the modernity of animation. Since the

beginning of his career Disney had alternated between a superficial embrace and an anxious repudiation of abstract or reductionist modernist aesthetics. He saw himself, above all, as beholden, to the mainstream artistic tastes of his ‘public’ and had earlier invoked ‘the constitutional privilege of every American to become cultured’ or, as he put it, ‘to just grow up like Donald Duck’ as they chose (qtd. Watts, 1995: 102). Beneath this prima-facie democratising ethos, there lurked a pernicious anti-intellectualism, a hostile resistance of the challenge to accepted values posed by radical formal experiment. As Disney confessed to a magazine journalist, some months before his death: ‘I’ve always had a nightmare. I dream that one of my pictures has ended up in an art theatre. And I wake up shaking’ (qtd. Schickel, 1997: 39).

Disney’s aesthetic career is thus apt to be conceived in terms of a struggle against modernism; a struggle to repress the primitivist vitality inherent in his own medium. The struggle succeeds of course, to the extent that Richard Schickel, writing in 1968, was able to proclaim Disney’s legacy a masterpiece of capitalism not of art (see Schickel, 1997: 18). But the precise visual character of this vulgar mercenary style changes according to public taste and shifting perceptions of ‘the modern’ in American design culture.

By the 1950s, modernism as a style had been widely accepted and commodified. The mid-century vogue, driven by the post-war consumer boom and by advances in materials and fabrication technology, by the increased influence of design reformists, and by a collective desire (in the aftermath of the Second World War) to reject the past in favour of a utopian futurism, was heterogeneous in its look and philosophy. It might incorporate such wide-ranging aspects as the return to handcraftsmanship, the geometric machine-style, or the organic/ biomorphous silhouette. Linking these diverse permutations of the ‘new’ was a prevailing aspiration to liberate design aesthetics from the stagnating influence of the previous century. As the editors of *Interiors* magazine proclaimed in 1948: ‘We do not approve... of a Georgian dining room, no matter how beautifully reproduced, on the 32nd floor of a skyscraper hotel’ (qtd. Marcus, 1998: 7).

The makers of commercial animated films would be quick to take advantage of the modern sensibility infecting all areas of the graphic and applied arts. But the need to keep pace with contemporary fashion, jarred with Disney’s thrall to nostalgia (the retro-fetish of the Disney

brand). For *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Earle conducted research into fourteenth- and fifteenth-century European tapestries, paintings and illuminated manuscripts, drawing on a wide range of early-renaissance and primitive-gothic sources – Dürer, Bruegel, Van Eyck, Botticelli, the *Trés Riches Heures du Jean Duc Du Berry*, *The Unicorn* and *Multiflower Tapestries* as well as Persian miniatures and Japanese prints.

But why Medieval? Perrault's story is full of references to the baroque French culture of his day, and many illustrators since have favoured a late-mannerist or rococo setting. The story came under pre-Raphaelite influence, for example in Edward Burne-Jones's celebrated murals made for Buscot Park in Oxfordshire between 1870 and 1890. Earle's concept is, then, doubly anachronistic; and borrows heavily from the earlier retrospective tradition. But his version of the gothic style went far beyond the nineteenth-century medievalist paradigm with its 'truth-to-nature' ideals. John Hench, another artist who worked on the film, thought the pre-renaissance works (with their lack of spatial depth and modelling) would translate well into animated cartoons. As Hench put it, the images in fifteenth-century tapestries 'have crisp edges,' and the planes are scarcely defined, 'except by a kind of superimposition for distance rather than linear perspective' (qtd. Barrier, 1999: 557). There is an implication then that Earle arrives at modern pictorial form partly by imitating the medieval style.

Indeed, his compositional preference for verticals, horizontals and angles (as opposed to curvature) is reminiscent both of the primitive technique of his gothic forbears *and* the so-called 'machine' aesthetic of mid-century-modern architecture and product design. In the woodland settings for the film, grass verges and foliage are squeezed into implausibly sharp prismatic or rectilinear masses. This effect reverses the histrionic conceits of Art Nouveau, where flowing contours of moving liquids or plant-forms are deployed to mitigate and fetishise industrial materials; in Earle's designs for *Sleeping Beauty*, the hard-edged qualities of industrially manufactured objects are displaced onto nature itself.

But - to return to the theme of anachronism - here we have an instance of temporal disorder that reverses the usual account of the term. Earle's simulation of history is not flawed by some irregular detail (like the clock in *Julius Caesar*) but fated to impurity because the originary image of the past so closely resembles the design of the present - the medieval

tapestries *already* look like mid-century-modern cartoons (as the Disney artists were quick to recognise).

The literary-critic Joseph Luzzi has recently proposed that certain examples of anachronism in fiction can collapse the boundaries between the work's 'internal means of reference' and its external (historical) context (Luzzi, 2013: 70). Applying a similar thesis to the medium of animated film, we might ask: what is the meaning of this collapse when *modernism* has been accepted as the aesthetic and cultural norm?

The mid-century modern was itself a genre structured by anachronism, by *décalage horaire*, and by time lagging behind, since it brought to late-flower the ideas and practices of an earlier more radical aesthetic phase. Post-war design culture was heavily informed by the European experiments of the previous decades, by the Bauhaus and International Style in architecture, by Matisse's elaboration of the picture plane, and by Surrealist painting and sculpture. In other words the 'new' aesthetic relied on forms and ideas that were already 'historic' when they came to popular fruition; novelty lay with the inventive pastiche and juxtaposition of these diverse avant-gardes and in the exaggeration of their forms for ornamental and rhetorical effect. In the process, the visionary-socialist principles of modernism were diluted and detoured. Contrary to the progressive design theories of Adolph Loos or Le Corbusier, in which ornament had been rejected for its hysterical irrationalism, its debased bourgeois character and lack of hygiene, the expansionist logic of post-war capitalism required that products be sought in abundance, that form should consequently *exceed* function and that the acquisitive ideal should manifest itself as a raging superfluity of things and images.

The cluttered ambience of the mid-century style can be read retrospectively as a scene of disorder and impermanence, of temporal confusion and aesthetic and ideological uncertainty. Post-war culture 'was fraught with anxiety,' as the architecture historian Robin Schuldenfrei has argued, whether occasioned by the 'accelerated, if partial, liberalisation of social mores,' or the shadow of the Cold War and the ever-present nuclear threat (Schuldenfrei, 2012: xi).

In addressing these protean matters of taste and form to the *Sleeping Beauty*'s morbidly conservative rhetoric of gender, we might ask to what extent these contradictions are resolved in the apparent triumph of rationalist order over a seductive 'chaos' of pastiche. Certainly the idea of chaos in the film (implicitly gendered as female and embodied in the spectacle of forests, flames, hair, thorny tendrils, glowing particles of dust and other like phenomena) is itself the subject of rigorous ornamental principles (of distortion, pattern, angularity, symmetry and repetition). As Luzzi would argue, the 'rhetoric of anachronism' resists 'isolation or separation' from the historical discourse in which it participates, and neither Earle nor Disney could help but be subject to the anxieties of their time (Luzzi, 2013: 70-1).

Indeed it is during her final transformation (into a dragon), that the evil fairy, Maleficent, unleashes one of the film's most potent and sinister anachronisms; in Earle's sketch of this episode and in its final version on screen, the conflagrations that briefly surround her resemble an atomic cloud.

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