

Unconventional animation techniques

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Abstract

In the lecture¹ that gave origin to this article, optional animation techniques have been introduced as a suggestion to extend the set of current methods in animation training, based on digital technologies, both to produce an image and to capture it into a sequence of frames. Some of these animation techniques have been explored by authors, such as Emile Cohl who used chalkboard and cutouts, Grant Munro and Norman McLaren whom invented pixilation, Blu well known by his graffiti and wall painting animation, William Kentridge who animated charcoal and pastel drawings on the same sheet of paper, or even the Quay Brother's animation of lifeless things and discarded objects. These practices rely on processes less dependent on computer software and more compelling from the standpoint of aesthetic and of communication possibilities, besides being achievable with limited resources.

Critical concepts: Conventional / Unconventional

As they develop and structure, animation procedures are becoming increasingly dependent on digital technologies as these usually offer lower budget facilities and resources to cinema, audiovisual and games production. This technological context established new dominant technical solutions, which replaced the old standards based on image capture, both in industry and in training programs that teach job skills and provide professionals to mainstream production.

The standardization of strategies happened at the expense of the gesture of the hand associated with the manipulation of different materials. These, which include 'cell animation', the former dominant industrial animation process until the advent of computer animation, are turning out to be commonly known as 'traditional animation techniques' and are being gradually dismissed from the set of technical possibilities commonly offered to

¹ *Informanimation 2013*, University of Sassari, Alghero, Italy, 15 June 2013.

animation or motion design students. As a consequence, 'traditional animation techniques' are becoming 'unconventional animation techniques'.

'Conventional' and 'unconventional' are relational concepts. As a relational concept, 'unconventional' signifies minor in its marginal position to dominant. 'Conventional' is that which is made according with specific rules and sanctioned by conventions.

'Dominant', as it becomes conventional, tends to uniformity. Procedures crystallise into basic normative standards, both for professionals and students. Standards always seem to be unquestionable from inside, as they are interpreted as 'normal', the 'norm'.

It is only when a grammar, a set of 'rules', is established that counter movements call for a different approach. Their proposals are sometimes described as experimental.

Although the purpose of this text is not to investigate the meanings, value and uses of the term 'experimental', it is useful to recall some of what has been declared about it. In the following passage, Cecile Starr and Robert Russett establish a positive correlation between 'creative animation' and 'innovation', a negative correlation between 'stagnation' and 'innovation', and a proximity yet with differentiation concerning 'experimental' and 'exploratory' (1988:7):

“While all creative animation has elements of innovation, without which it would simply stagnate, experimental animation as we use the term is sometimes purely exploratory.”

Teaching standards and grammars to creative students

Mainstream animation doesn't pretend to be an art form, obviously. It is the commercial product of business industries and it obeys to modes and values that concur to mass production and mass communication. It needs to be fed with proficient professionals; consolidated production, distribution and exhibition structures; and box office revenues. It contributes to define our culture however.

Mainstream production, which is contextual and business-driven, cannot take risks held outside the budget, namely less reasonable, budget unjustified production strategies. Therefore, it cannot engage into unspecified experiments to exploit materials and forms. The existence of such exploratory approaches would then clearly indicate a business-driven intention to find new ways to improve production or to connect with audience. The desire for an alternative grammar could emerge as a solution for differentiation. In this context, exploratory procedures could be taken as intended strategy towards innovation.

We have already witnessed such examples in the past, and they opened the door of opportunity for many animators. During the 80s and 90s, both MTV Music Television (USA and EU) and Channel 4 (UK) broadcasted and funded independent animation production as a corporate strategy to build perceived value by their audience. Much of which was considered experimental and artistic.

At that time animation was still captured on film stock. Studies at film, art and design schools that had animation departments, were pushing students into the world of film grants and teaching, and the animators working at the studios usually had no formal education and came from a tradition of apprenticeship. At that time women were still relegated to ink and paint jobs in animation, and facilities and resources were expensive and, in general, exclusive property of production companies. Before digital, independent animation was mostly confined as 'amateur,' and had to accept organisation from above.

MTV and Channel 4 initiatives were seminal and helped to build a paradigm in media and film. They established that the audience's perception can radically alter the real-world value of a product or service.

In May 2012, American business magazine *Forbes*, declares a new "Era of Design" in which "design-oriented businesses are winning" (Swann 2012). According to a very recent publication concerning Communication Design, the opportunities created for the industries by this new socioeconomic era would require professionals with entirely new skills:

"The ability to analyze, understand, clarify, and define is as important as the ability to visually style and aesthetically judge. These designers need to be able to collaborate across disciplines and not be restricted to particular medias. By working in both the digital and physical environments, they are able to create narratives that frame zeitgeist and initiate culture." (Yates, Price, 2015:7)

The authors also note that "Unfortunately (...) the new skill sets required are not always being addressed in a formal context" by education (2015:7).

Consequently, this new "design-oriented businesses" would need a 'different kind' of professionals: more flexible and able to ingeniously approach conventions and normative procedures, i.e. to innovate through intelligence whenever companies need to change the perceived value of services and products.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996:2-3):

"When a semiotic mode plays a dominant role in public communication its use will inevitably be constrained by rules enforced through education, for instance, and

through all kinds of written and unwritten social sanctions. Only a small elite of experimenters is allowed to break them – after all, breaking rules remains necessary to keep the possibility of change open.”

Apparently, by confronting the quotations above, we would expect schools to instruct students to follow rules and grammars and, at the same time, teach them how to review, question and break these same rules. And that in order to train them to become proficient professionals as needed. Therefore the purpose of these innovative curricula would be neither to form artists nor provide to a “small elite of experimenters” but to continue to equip students adequately.

The only way that that seems possible is by acquainting students with critical analysis through the intimate non-mediated experience of formal elements, articulations of procedures, and available resources of all kind. Basically, it would mean to instruct students into an attitude.

Unconventional animation practices as a curriculum strategy

The construction of communication modes always depends upon available forms and processes. When the borders of communication are not inspected by education systems and mass media, sign-makers just use the forms they regard as apt for the expression of meaning in any medium in which they can make signs. Although, in the case of animation, these modes are made available by technologies, and this as much in the case of pencil and paper as in the case of CGI (computer generated imagery). Consequently, in order to understand the composition strategies of discourse in animation, it is equally necessary to comprehend and integrate the technology that supports and conforms the technical procedures at the moment they are made necessary and that contributes to the establishment of standards, as the abstraction of those procedures. This is obviously the role of schools.

Material animation is complex, as it emerges at the intersection of thought and practices from numerous disciplines. It deploys a multiplicity of signifying systems that need to be efficiently articulated into discourse by students and professionals: motion composition, which depends upon human perception of apparent motion; graphic communication; staging and acting; narrative structuring; filmic languages; synchronization between sound and actions; and continuity / discontinuity ratio in duration. Different devices, including flipbooks, might support the final expression of these different semiotic modes, as we need to consider that practices and techniques also vary according technology and are evolving.

The offer of optional traditional animation practices within curricula, both to produce an image and to capture it into a sequence of frames, could become an efficient strategy to integrate current dominant production methods into a more conscious cognitive unity of discourse composition modes in animation.

Some of these animation techniques have been explored by authors, such as Emile Cohl who used chalkboard and cutouts, Grant Munro and Norman McLaren whom invented pixilation, Blu well known by his graffiti and wall painting animation, William Kentridge who animated charcoal and pastel drawings on the same sheet of paper, or even the Quay Brothers' animation of lifeless things and discarded objects. These practices rely on processes less dependent on computer software and more compelling from the standpoint of aesthetic and of communication possibilities, besides being achievable with limited resources.

Traditional animation techniques, hand drawing included, allows a continuity of meaning through the direct knowledge and manipulation of the functions, made possible by the intimate understanding and visiomotor integration of gestures. These practices compel an approach onto the investigation of the essential mechanisms of motion perception rooted in pre-cinema past. They encourage experimentation, spontaneity and play, as ground for critical study and inquisitive disposition. In a certain way, they allow to cognitively touch the devices and languages that animation is built upon as they focus primarily on materials and into the articulation of forms and successive tasks within process.

Before the digital era, handicraft animation practices were mostly used in author animation as an alternative to industrial (cell) processes, as they would allow a closer, less mediated, intimate relationship between animator and animation. Norman McLaren was also very aware of that both as technical guidance to his work and as creative circumstance:

“To sum up, the conception and execution of most of my work for the National Film Board has probably depended on four things:

(1) Attempting to keep at a minimum the technical mechanism standing between my conception and the finished work.

(2) Handling personally the mechanisms that do remain, in as intimate a way as a painter his painting, or a violinist his violin.

(3) Making the very limitations of these mechanisms, when brought in touch with the theme, the growing point for visual ideas.

(4) Making sure of a chance for improvising at the moment of shooting or drawing.”
(McLaren 1948:52-53)

Concluding remarks

We are moving into an era of hybrid audiovisual practices and culture. If schools are to equip students adequately for this new communication condition, the curricula will have to involve computer technology and its reluctance to subvert protocol, central as it is to our mass communication landscape, as all other known technologies and related forms and techniques as an open set of creative possibilities, even though these practices are turning out to be unconventional and primitive by the current standards.

At the end of their studies, animation students must be able to cognitively integrate, explore and manage the range of available and evolving forms and modes, and their uses and values, all through the knowledge of their characteristics, potentialities and history behind.

This paper sought out to demonstrate that the way to innovate in animation is also the way to better understand its nature and to explore and cognitively integrate the communication complex possibilities contained within the animated sequence.

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