

**Understanding Animation & Potential Research Avenues**

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ACCAD 6650: The History of Animation

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October 4, 2023

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After reading seven different perspectives on the history and state of animation, I've extended my understanding to the magic and have gained an appreciation for animation theory. Prior to this course, my connection to animation had been in the consumption of pop culture and a micro amount of making 2D and 3D animation. Not once had I considered an in-depth description of the process or the word itself, especially from the mode of theory. I cannot say that I've delved in film theory, so this is an entirely new process for me. My recent academic background is in painting which has considerations of brush strokes, frame, context, and other bits that animation omits from itself. I have another background in architecture, which has many similarities to animation if you consider an animator as a person composing or 'architecting' a sequence. These are aspects I can touch on at another point in time. For this paper, I want to add on to Mark Langer's writing about identity and Bilge Ebiri comments on the aspect of bringing imagination of the viewer back in focus. This portion of the paper will be after seven generalized summaries which are listed next.

### *Toward a Theory of Animation, Edward S. Small and Eugene Levinson, 1989*

In the first paper, Edward S. Small and Eugene Levinson open discourse for a deep study of animation. Conventional film theory had given little thought to live-action's counterpart, despite its simultaneous growth throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though, as fine artists make and take notes on their craft, so had animators. Small and Levinson pull directly from Norman McLaren's studio notes, whom had extensive practical animation experience, to formulate a baseline of what animation is. "THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THIS MACHINE \*Animation is not the act of DRAWINGS-that-move but the art of MOVEMENTS-that-are-drawn. What happens between each frame is much more important than what exists on each frame. \*Animation is therefore the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between the frames." Small and Levinson are careful to note that animation frames themselves are not

animation, and that animation is the movement or illusion between frames, assisted by McLaren. In this, inanimate objects seemingly come to life or partake in a metamorphosis. When just a still, one may see brush strokes and such, but notion of the still or brush strokes are erased when made into an animation.

Further, this paper relates montage to animation, a consideration suggested by theorist Eisenstein. Ultimately, Small and Levinson set a single-frame cinematography definition for animation and layout bridges for live-action film theorists to tag along in building the history of animation.

*What is Animation? Chapter from Animation: Genre and Authorship, Paul Wells, 2002*

Paul Wells challenges Preston Blair's definition of animation that initially provided a solid framework, but ultimately contains shortcomings in describing animation as a drawing and photographic medium. Wells pulls examples of studios using fine art traditions from their own cultures such as Chinese animation using a calligraphic approach and dismantles the hold that American animation has had on the written history. Wells accurately predicts that CGI is making the art of the animator an invisible art as it becomes a regular component to live-action.

Even though Blair's statement on animation falls short, his framework in "creating lifelike movement" is echoed by Richard Taylor and Norman McLaren. This is where Wells begins to craft his own argument for animation as a medium that is stretching the bounds that of which live-action cannot. In this, Wells writes that the animator must complete closure of an invisible art that is illusory to human cognitive processing capability. Unfortunately, this art can be lost on viewers or critics. If viewers able to breakdown the making and art of closure, then viewers may begin to more fully appreciate the animated art form that can affect narrative and visual meaning. Ending the chapter here, Wells prepares the rest of his book to examine the animator as artist and author.

*Animation – What The Heck Is It? Gene Deitch, 2006*

The article by Gene Deitch was not of my favorites. However, it did offer thoughts to chew on. Inside the writing, he quotes Steven Millhauser who poetically describes animation as “[a] death-world with its hidden gift of life”. Using this, Deitch makes the difference between animation and live-action, that being the illusion of action which is given to stills of animation, whereas live-action records action taking place before the camera lens. Deitch then compares animation to music with the analogy of time and rhythm as foundation elements that the maker of animation must consider. Deitch affirms what Small and Levinson write on animation regarding the collection and fluidity of individual frames when put together. He leaves on an optimistic final note declaring animation as an unlimited art and encourages all types of experimentation of the format.

*The Penguins and People Look Great, but Are They Animation, Charles Solomon, 2007*

In the fourth assigned reading, Charles Solomon writes via The New York Times of an evolving animation definition. Solomon reacts to the 21<sup>st</sup> century blurred line between ‘live’-action and animation. The avenues that CGI had opened led to a debate of where these artworks belong in terms of categories. Specifically, the categories that these films fell into were often based on film award events. These events often mis-categorized or held prejudice against animation to be considered worthy of certain awards.

Solomon also asks: "For me the fundamental question is: Do you want the audience to know this world does not exist, or do you want to make it look like the real world and just expand what you can do in live action?" At a time where CGI began to really show off, the question as Solomon puts it, asks of animators, where do we go from here? Animation and live-action begin to blend at this point in time, sometimes so blended that the audience is fully immersed in its believability. For just a moment, us viewers are part of some mixed reality world. Here, the definition of animation is pondered as it breaks into mainstream recognition via the pairing of live-action.

*The End of Animation History, Mark Langer, 2002*

The paper by Langer gave me the chills – I seriously enjoyed his musings. First, Langer proclaims an end to the divide between animation and live-action film history. Importantly, he writes how our conception of live-action is more in question than animation, a reversal of fates. He then walks the line of tying animation with identity.

In this paper, Mark is fighting for predictions of the exact type of world that we live in now, the one with deepfakes and Black Mirror-esque reality bending. The space between simulation/fantasy and reality has shrunk so small to the point that our lives are intertwined with our digital bodies. Movies such as *Fight Club*, *The Matrix*, and *American Beauty* are shared as a glimpse into these linked worlds. Further on, Langer comments on role-playing games detailed qualities and their ability to transport the individual into the world. In doing so, he questions what happens to the human and the world when said human (of civilized life) becomes digital characters with digital communities. Finally, he offers precedents in Donna Haraway, Ken Hittis, Len Manovitch and Scott Bukatman as a starting place for film studies to study this new human condition.

*Is it Real... or Is It Motion Capture? The Battle to Redefine Animation in the Age of Digital Performance,*

Yacov Freedman in 2012

The second to last paper by Yacov Freedman adds onto Charles Solomon's discussion about awards and how technology is shuffling the credits of performers versus animators. It highlights the complexities of motion capture amongst films that utilize the technology. It also touches on motion capture's relation to roto-scoping and the discussion of 'real' animation. To this, I ask what is more impressive: the project/product or the way it was made? Interestingly this mirrors the current conversation of using AI.

(I briefly will connect this work to Langer's paper.) The uncanny valley of motion capture happens once the animation is trying to be life-like. For instance, cut scenes in PlayStation One Final Fantasy games are somehow less cringe than those of Final Fantasy movies, like the one that Mark Langer touches on: *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*. If our digital doppelgänger isn't trying to be us, and instead becomes something in and of itself, then maybe the uncanny goes away. If there isn't a gap, we could become the person in the mirror – just like the evil witch in the story of Snow White.

Most of this paper is written on Robert Zemeckis who was one of the first directors to invest in motion-capture. The question asked of Zemeckis was, is it animation, performance, or visual effect? The author argues that motion capture is a new form of filmmaking and to impose labels on it would limit its potential as a versatile tool. Perhaps it is an issue of the performer and the animator not working together? Back-in-the-day, animators like Winsor McCay would perform with their animation.

*Can Special Effects Be Special Again? Bilge Ebiri, 2018*

In the last article by Bilge Ebiri, Ebiri contrasts filmmakers who use more practical effects versus intense CGI work. He makes the comparison between the likes of Christopher Nolan, who uses minimal effects, and that of James Cameron whose Avatar films couldn't have been nearly completed without CGI. Ebiri implies that CGI has become less special and a crutch for directors to use in the editing process. I agree with him that live-action films using heavy CGI have become stale, and perhaps that is because the directors are more familiar with the making of live-action movies than animated ones. The composers at the end of the film making process are the people that suffer the most as they are on contract from the start without ever knowing how much work they will need to edit.

This paper also discusses the industry's interest and implications in creating photorealistic digital humans. In this paper, he notes the future of digital humans, and that the industry might try to perfect it as far as to 'conquer' death – essentially challenging the meaning of mortality by having the necessary

data to create a 1:1 digital human. This paper had me thinking more critically about the film making pipeline and trying to imagine healthy alternatives.

There is something I want to touch on now that I've completed the seven summaries. This quote from Steve "Spaz" Williams was included in the last article in relation to special effects being not so special: "It has destroyed movie making. The viewer's imagination isn't given a job anymore.". I loved this quote especially as someone who makes retro style pixelated graphics and will explain why next.

### Conclusion

I'll conclude this assignment by returning to Mark Langer's point on identity and the quote by Spaz Williams inserted into Ebiri's article. As we move closer toward a mixed reality, technology will undoubtedly be able to mimic reality. So much of animation is about bringing the 'dead' to 'life', yet much of this does not include ecosystems and is instead hyper focused on a set of (typically human) characters. While social fabric is important, somehow incorporating our identity with the backdrop (ecosystems) should be further investigated. It isn't that ecosystems are static, they are usually slow moving. Makers of pop culture should be careful of the reality presented in animation as it can mirror back onto the understanding of our own reality.

It is technically difficult to create simulations in which every blade of grass physics is accounted for. This is where I lean back on Spaz Williams's point on imagination. In games such as *Dwarf Fortress*, a simulation of a world is created using ASCII characters. The game designers don't ask the player to use their imagination, they just allow for it to happen through the incredible simplicity of world representation. The same could be said of games coming from consoles up until the Nintendo 64. There is just enough information to set a scene, and the rest is left for the viewer to subconsciously render. I'm not sure how, but this technique can and should be employed more often, even if there is initial backlash from viewers.

Moving forward, I will consider writing my final paper on these concluding ideas. I will employ an ecocritical lens to methods of environmental representation through animation. How viewers focus on characters and narrative despite the background noise of environment should lead to an interesting study of technology 'magic' behind the scenes.



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