

Animation Practice, Process & Production

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EDITORIAL

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From ‘Sunnyside’ to ‘soccer’: reading up on animation

Welcome to *Animation Practice, Process, Production*, hereafter colloquially known as ‘AP3’. It is a journal dedicated to the analysis and critique of animation as a creative endeavour, exploring all the aspects of what it takes to make animated films, and engaging with all the roles and functions of various kinds of ‘practitioner’ involved in the construction, execution and use of animation. The journal has been developed to achieve two fundamental things. First, to give scholars and practitioners a clear and obvious context by which they can publish and present materials thinking about and discussing the creative process in animation; and second, to develop new methods by which this might be achieved. The latter objective is in response to many animation film-makers and teachers of practice, who do not necessarily feel that their work, and how they wish to express themselves about it, accords with the standard ‘language’ of critical theories or the rhetorics of analysis that customarily represent the outcome of their labours. While the journal will still embrace and enjoy what might be called the traditional academic essay, it is hoped that it will employ other methods and approaches,

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which work as models of intelligent engagement and academic rigour, while privileging the visual, the discussion-in-progress, and crucially, the embedded questions, problems, issues and ideas that are the codes and conventions of expression informing practice, process and production.

Like many people – well, some anyway – I am currently reading a number of books at the same time, for various purposes and pleasures. I have my early morning book, Glenn David Gold's *Sunnyside*, exploring the mythologies of early Hollywood through the lens of Charlie Chaplin and the affects of the First World War; my dip-in-on-the-station-platform book, an esoteric conversation between Youssef Ishaghpour and a seemingly recalcitrant and pithy Jean-Luc Godard about his *Histoires du Cinema* (1988); my fancy-a-bit-of-reading-on-the-train-or-plane book, Denis Dutton's Darwinist reading of the 'Art Impulse' in creative practitioners; my between-tutorials book, Robert Cumming's *Art Explained*, an annotated analysis of major paintings; my early evening better-get-some-more-research-done book, Birgit Beumers, Victor Bocharov and David Robinson's exemplary collection on the extraordinary classical ballet master-stop-motion animator, Alexander Shiryaev; and my night owl book, *Why England Lose*, Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski's exploration of a number of pressing issues in contemporary football ('soccer' for the Americans). For the purposes of this journal, there is considerable serendipity in this confluence of texts. All, in their own ways, attempt to get at the heart of what it is to actually practice something; the actual psychological and intellectual motivations, the physical and material actions, and emotional drives and repercussions of what it is to create. Historical (counterfactual) fiction, interview-led conversation, scientific method, visual analysis, archival research, statistics and sociological speculation, these books offer different 'languages' by which to engage with the context, expression, intellectual enquiry and social and cultural impact of the very act of 'doing' something creative. (And if you don't count football as creative, you obviously haven't seen Barcelona play.) This address and analysis of 'practice' is long embedded in many areas of the fine arts, but it is less developed and advanced in Animation Studies. The idea behind this journal, then, is to find some pertinent methods, approaches and (visual) languages to readily engage with and reveal animation practice. There is considerable risk in this, as Animation Studies is now undeniably established, and has created a wide and varied theoretical terrain, which has given it critical veracity and validity. With each new postgraduate working at the cutting edge of the form, historians worldwide reclaiming indigenous cultures of animation, and cross-disciplinary scholarship increasing, there is now an extensive and growing literature, extending the boundaries of a still underwritten and undervalued form of creative expression. While this is welcome, and vital to the healthy development in any discipline, there is now a sense that 'theory' is in some way becoming distanced from the very practice it purports to address, and equally, may not be especially pertinent to young creative scholars whose primary concern is to make things. My mantra over the years, though, has been 'no theory without practice, no practice without theory, and no progress without history', and I still hold by it as the underpinning principle of this venture, and the foundation in encouraging a range of engagements with animation as a form.

It will be the task of this journal to identify and align theory and practice, finding as many ways as possible to best express how the creative process and production works in animation. The books above already suggest some possibilities. There are so many different ways to share knowledge and skills, and some people express their perspectives better through talking, or through engaging with visual materials, or expressing views about, and through, artefacts. Equally, some want to try and express something intelligent and imaginative without the pressures of having to extensively reference the literature in a field, or embrace the latest trends in critical theory and application. There are dangers in this, of course, in that many important points for consideration might be missed, certain defining principles not taken into account, and crucially, significant arguments ignored. That may be the risk, though, worth taking if other perspectives, arguments and values emerge from thinking about the intrinsic aspects of practice, particularly in relation to reflection upon process, approaches to problem solving, and the way in which concepts and ideas are translated and sometimes transformed as they are presented in other idioms. At their extremes, theory might refuse practice, and practice might refuse theory, but fundamentally this is about privileging one way of thinking and representing ideas, rather than recognizing the fact that theoretical ideas are always present in production, and creative practice is always at the heart of prompting significant theoretical principles. This may be about the particular personalities who choose to define their identities on the bases of such separation, or indeed, the academy, the marketplace or a working context, which insists upon schism and difference for the purposes of clarity, category or commerce. While this is all understandable, perhaps even inevitable, it can create hierarchies, which sometimes demote practice and its outcomes as a model of thinking. Technical processes, for example, are not necessarily thought of as intrinsically theoretical, but surely that is entirely what they are, both before and as they function as applied outcomes, yet they suffer from being consigned to the view that they do not operate as models of conceptual or creative thinking. The 'How To' manuals are, somehow, not 'theory'. The 'applied outcomes' merely the consequences of using tools. As Disney Pixar's John Lasseter has oft remarked: 'the art challenges the technology and the technology inspires the art', and clearly, operates as an indicator of the intrinsic relationship between art-making in animation and its technical processes, each informed by the desire for creative and conceptual solutions. It is hoped that this journal will simultaneously articulate how animation art has been achieved, but through the use of any number of the 'languages' by which this might be expressed. This should be pertinent to any constituency of person involved with, or interested in, animation.

It is a common complaint in recent times that every publication about animation constantly asks 'What is animation?', even though we have over 100 years of its history, production, dissemination and exhibition. This has largely been prompted by the use and impact of digital tools, which have affected the technical processes by which moving-image practice is now principally conducted. If it was comparatively straightforward to say of the analogue era that animation was

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effectively made through a frame-by-frame process of construction; an act of image-making in which the image was completely created and constructed, and *then* recorded, rather than merely being the act of photographically recording material actuality and performance, then in the digital era this has been considerably problematized. Even though it was always the case that *all* moving images, animation or live action, were 'constructed' in some way, the digital era has merely increased the degree of 'constructedness', and in doing so, redirected the scholars and thinkers about such matters to think that this much more resembles 'animation' than traditional models of live action. All moving images are manipulated in some way; animation in its myriad forms is the most convenient name for this. For Brian Wells, though, writing in this edition, this is too open and laissez-faire, and a source of frustration. Wells believes that the definition of 'animation' should not be such a contradictory and contested thing, and that the field of Animation Studies should agree its terms. This may be viewed as correct, idealistic or naïve, but as an established practitioner, Wells's view became important to me, not least because it was part of a recent, ongoing and sometimes rancorous online debate, but because it meant that he felt he could not participate in this field. In this first edition, Wells has written up his perspective, bravely stepping forward with a definition of animation. I should apologize to Brian straight away, in the sense that I am sure it might be contested in future editions; indeed, master animator Piotr Dumala's personal essay looking at the relationship between live action and animation implicitly suggests some of the first differences of opinion. Two practitioners: two ways of thinking about animation. I suspect that for every practitioner there might be an individual perspective because it seems to me that most people involved in animation recognize that it is more than a technical process, and fundamentally concerned with a certain kind of thinking, one seemingly bound up with memory and emotional intelligence. Ultimately, it seems, whether viewed as 'frame-by-frame', 'manipulated moving image', 'pro-filmic' or 'pre-filmic', animation is a state of mind ready to find application.

This is immediately evident in three examples from practitioners looking to situate their work in new contexts and perspectives. Maarten Isaäk de Heer exploits the benefit of 4K technology to create a single *mise-en-scène* with multiple animated narratives embedded within it, suitable for exterior installation contexts, and large-scale electronic 'poster' display. His image appears on the cover of this initial issue as a recognition of animation as a form for 'world-building' – animators essentially create alternative and singular 'worlds', even if they have some resemblance to the material one we live in. Animation is especially pertinent to the construction of internal mindsets and spaces – dreams, nightmares, fantasies, memories, thought processes – or interior constructions – organs, mechanisms, blueprints, conceptual diagrams and maps. But equally, it can create any environment, material, mythical or mathematical, and determine architectural infrastructures and unimaginable vistas. Animation sometimes facilitates the meeting place of the interior and exterior. Rose Bond creates animation narratives that function as personal experimental films but

are essentially created for site-specific installation, and benefit from the ways in which the imagery becomes pertinent to the particular architectural environment in which the work is exhibited and displayed. This both reinvents animation cinema at the formal level but also in relation to its anticipated delivery apparatus and context. A more specifically technical approach to this idea occurs in Neil Henderson's experiments with time-based recording and photographic processes – without doubt, in this instance, a serious challenge to Wells's definition of animation. Henderson plays with the notion of metamorphosis and image manipulation but looks to the processing of the image itself as the act of animation.

In essence, it is perhaps no surprise that the independent film-makers cited above are seeking to experiment and create distinctive personal visions, but their approach is no different to more mainstream activity in animation in seeking to facilitate work in animation as a consequence of problem solving and finding creative solutions. The film '9', a mainstream feature, supported and encouraged by no less a figure than Tim Burton, is a good example of a project in which Shane Acker, the director, started out as an independent student film-maker, influenced by the stop-motion aesthetics of the Quay twins and the Lauenstein brothers, who decided that he wanted to take these influences first into a computer-generated short-form animation and then to feature length. Production manager Matthew Teevan writes about the production process here as an act of problem solving and, thereafter, Acker himself describes the creative development of the piece and its outcomes. It is important to stress, then, that in the presentation of these first articles in *AP3*, I want to try and break down more established distinctions; here, for example, between the idea of the 'experimental' in the independent and commercial sectors. Animation has a long history of the experimental and the commercial often being one and the same. This is clearly evidenced in television advertising since its inception, where commercials often function as experimental films; or in Disney's 'Silly Symphonies' or Pixar's 'Shorts', which are clearly exploring ideas and techniques in what would later be seminal features – *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Toy Story* (1995). '9' is ultimately a film seeking to find a place between the more obviously 'personal' features like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2008) or Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2009), and the mainstream features of Pixar, Dreamworks, Blue Sky or Sony Imageworks, seeking to reconcile the personal and experimental with the popular and generic.

As the title of *AP3* indicates, 'process' is a key preoccupation of its outlook, as this is often the particular aspect of animation that defines its distinctiveness, and marks out individuals and studios with specific styles and outcomes, as a consequence. In a comparison both of process and presentation, Alice Gambrell writes about the 'pleasures' of the 3D stop-motion animation process, with particular reference to the Tim Burton/Henry Selick *Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), while Czech master animator, Jiri Barta, provides a visual essay illustrating the process of making his 3D stop-motion film, *Into the Attic* (2010). A number of interesting issues emerge from this, not least ideas

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about the labour-intensive nature of the form and its inherent self-reflexive language of expression. At the heart of this work, though, is a fundamental commitment to materials, and the desire to engage with textures and tactility, as well as the practice of performing through other physical artefacts. With software available in which the animator can now sculpt freely in virtual materials, with the in-built sense of haptic control, and increasing sophistication in manipulating avatars, the choice of working in traditional 3D stop-motion forms is obviously connected with the idea that something distinctive is still produced, and that the relationship between the animator and the materials is able to afford particular creative pleasures and achievement. Indeed, such work is also ideologically and economically charged, since it constitutes resistance to a possible creative hegemony in computer-generated imagery, and though once thought to be more expensive than CGI, is now for the most part just as cost effective. There is little doubt, though, that in the contemporary era, what puppet animation maintains is the strongest evidence of a link to a European tradition of material performance and production. *Fantastic Mr Fox* (2009), directed by Wes Anderson, for example, preferred an old-school, seemingly 'low-rent' approach to the animation in the film, which recalls Jiri Trnka and Ladislav Starewich, rather than the gothic styling of Selick and Burton, or even the British comic aesthetics of Nick Park. Barta himself best represents the long-revered Czech tradition of marionette and puppet shows, and the experimental forms of 3D stop motion with a range of objects like gloves and less malleable wooden figures. Another of the Czech masters, Jan Svankmajer, has insisted that these objects and materials are imbued with past life and singular narratives, and it is the job of the animator to retrieve them. This is merely one example of the way that history, and the documents and forms that come to represent historical evidence, service animation in the present day, and prompt its future.

British-based artist, Let Me Feel Your Finger First (LMFYFF), toys with this idea by taking the less politically correct and ideologically sound aspects of the American animated cartoon and passing them through the filter of ironic reconstruction. As attempts are made to in some way withdraw cartoons like Bob Clampett's *Coal Black and De Sebben Dwarfs* (1942) from the canon of animated films, and to marginalize what may be viewed as unacceptable representation in relation to race, ethnicity, gender and identity, it is crucial to recognize these films as 'of their time', and as historically significant in their political and artistic assumptions. It is this concept that informs LMFYFF's reworking of racist tropes through his own practice, testing the boundaries of representational form, the supposed freedoms of artistic engagement and the complex tensions and limits of expression, especially when using different forms of humour. Comedy naturally breaches rules, pokes fun at conventions, and temporarily up-turns the world, but in doing so can be as offensive and reactionary as it is potentially cathartic and insightful. LMFYFF's essay and practice engage with this dilemma.

A far bigger dilemma and challenge for animation, though, is in the recovery of its histories and forms through the conservation of its process and production artefacts. It is already the case that

conventional live-action cinema has lost so many of its earliest examples, and many films since have also been lost to irrecoverable deterioration of nitrate stock, poorly stored and badly treated reels, and a myriad of other preservation problems. This is exacerbated further in the case of animation, because any amount of its production materials – art work, storyboards, puppets, sets, etc. – have also been lost, as well as many important early films, which would inevitably change and revise the extant histories of the form. The fact, too, that animation has largely been made in the short form, and marginalized as less significant than mainstream feature films or documentaries, compounds this error. Significant work has been done in recent years, though, to engage with the distinctiveness of animation as a form within the archive sector worldwide, and to research its particular challenges and needs. Mette Peters and Peter Bosma at the Netherlands Institute for Animation Film write here about these specific issues in their own practice as historians and archivists in the development of a Dutch animation collection. This is important work for any number of reasons, not least because it speaks to both a national and an international agenda about preserving heritage through animated film and its production artefacts, but also because it foregrounds the work of researchers, historians, scholars and archivists as 'practitioners' in animation in their own right. Though this is not a conventional view of the 'practitioner' in its creative sense, it is vital to understand that the animation field accommodates all these roles and figures as people who provide important intervention in the promotion, status and continuing exploration of the form as a discipline, and as a process and practice that must be maintained and better understood. Peters and Bosma demonstrate why this is so, and their work constitutes a first example of *AP3*'s commitment to archiving and its related fields as significant 'practice', and which will find ready address in future issues.

A final word, then. I have been fortunate in my working life to work in many areas – film, television, radio and theatre; nurseries, schools, colleges and universities – and with many people – artists, actors, administrators, technicians, teachers, scholars, pupils, students – but I have come to value the animation community worldwide, both in the academy and the professional arena, for its openness, generosity of spirit and sheer creative talent. I very much want *AP3* to reflect this, and welcome everyone working in this area to continue to reveal and revere the practice, process and production of animation – still for me, the art of the heart.

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