**Approaching Animation and Animation Studies**

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Animation encompasses an extraordinarily wide-ranging set of techniques and practices and thus constitutes an equally diverse field of study. Because of this diversity, animation presents particular challenges in terms of agreeing on a single definition, and similarly it defies a unified theoretical approach to studying it. This chapter seeks to explore these issues and to outline exactly why animation is difficult to define, and why interdisciplinary theoretical approaches to studying it are necessary. We will outline some of the main ways that we might think about animation, in terms of how (or even whether) it can be defined and what some of its unique features and expressive capacities are. In doing so, this chapter offers an introduction to some of the key theoretical building blocks of animation studies.

**What is Animation?**

What is useful when thinking about animation is to ask oneself, and to continue to ask oneself, some fairly simple questions. For example, ‘what is animation?’, and ‘what can it do?’ ‘How is it different or similar to live-action?’ On the surface these are simple enough questions, but ones that also prove surprisingly elusive. Consider the first question – ‘what is animation?’ One way to approach this is to consider different types of animation and we could try to answer the question by listing many examples and techniques including scratch film, lightning sketches, stop motion, 2D cel animation, 3D computer animation, motion and performance capture. But simply listing different techniques of animation does not help us to define its ontology, or its fundamental nature, beyond basic material terms – i.e. the process and material of its construction.[[1]](#endnote-1) We might instead consider key studios, directors or animators, all of whom have different styles and techniques, for example the stylised realism of Disney and Pixar, the scratch films of Len Lye, the silhouette cut outs of Lotte Reiniger and the sand or ink on glass of Caroline Leaf. Again, however, simply listing those involved in creating animation does not sufficiently provide an understanding of what animation *is*.

If listing techniques, animators or studios does not provide much in the way of answers, then it might help to consider what makes animation different from live-action. Firstly, animation is produced *frame-by-frame* or in computer-animated increments, whereas live-action cinema is filmed in real time. Secondly, animation is entirely *constructed* whereas live action has a ‘profilmic world’ that exists in front of the camera. These two key differences between live-action and animation are at the heart of attempts to define animation.

Philip Denslow, after acknowledging that there is no single definition of animation, writes that ‘[t]he reason we are examining this issue is that no matter what definition you choose, it faces challenges from new developments in the technology used to produce and distribute animation’ (1997: 1). Denslow goes on to outline a number of instances where the uses of various technologies problematise a single definition of animation; Denslow’s examples, where he wonders whether virtual reality or ‘computer generated lifeform simulation’ can be considered animation, are almost certainly accepted as examples of animated texts today (ibid). Unlike Denslow, who is reluctant to settle on one definition of animation, Brian Wells has argued that one definition should be possible and once outlined should be adopted by all in the academic community. For Wells, a series of properties define animation such as movement and ‘aliveness’ (2011), and he also prioritises its construction frame-by-frame. Raz Greenberg is keen to differentiate animation from film, and insists they must be defined separately, arguing that animation can be defined according to the presence or absence of objects when he says ‘an initial definition for the animated text is “the process of movement or change, performed by an artificially-created text-specific object”’ (2011: 6). The construction of movement is key for Greenberg.

Despite Greenberg’s and Wells’ separate attempts to ‘lock down’ a definition of animation these have for the most part not been taken up. This is probably because (despite Brian Wells’ frustration about such arguments) animation is extremely wide-ranging, exists across different media and genres, and is produced with so many different and continually changing technologies, that it is likely that few scholars see much value in having a one-size-fits-all definition. Nichola Dobson takes this view in her *Historical Dictionary of Animation and Cartoons*, suggesting that due to the very ‘fluid nature of the form’ single definitions are problematic (2009: xxxvii-xxxviii). While such definitions have not taken hold, the notion that animation is an entirely *constructed* form has become a central tenet of animation studies.

If we cannot define animation in any one meaningful way, we can consider how we recognise it visually, particularly alongside live-action. It is simple enough to distinguish between the animated and live action components of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988), for example, but sometimes difficult to identify the use of animation techniques to ‘doctor’, alter or enhance live-action images, as is standard in contemporary mainstream commercial Hollywood cinema. An interesting example is the film *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) where a CGI version of Oliver Reed had to be used to finish his scenes as he died during filming. Here, such unprecedented events during filming led to the use of animation to ‘fix’ the problem. In this context, the differences between animation and live-action are often, and increasingly, difficult to discern. Even in 1997, Denslow noted the ‘problem’: that it is increasingly difficult to tell the difference between some examples of animation and live-action, most notably with regard to compositing techniques (1997: 2). The potential confusion between what might be animated and what might be live-action has grown exponentially in the decades since Denslow’s writing. Compositing techniques (the combination of animated images and live-action images into one single image) in particular complicate the *recognition* of animation. While Roger Rabbit is clearly animated and Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins) is clearly live-action, in a special effects-heavy superhero/action film such as *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017), we may not always recognise what elements of the images are traditionally shot on film, or what has been enhanced or altered through animation techniques. Darley would call this a ‘hybrid medium,’ in a similar way to how Mark Langer refers to a ‘collapse of […] boundary’ between live-action and animation (quoted in Darley 2007: 69).

In contemporary cinema this ‘collapse of boundary’ is often apparent. A memorable example is *The Life of Pi* (Ang Lee, 2012)*,* which depicts a tiger in the same diegetic space – a small lifeboat - as Pi; we know that a tiger was not in the same spatial field as Suraj Sharma on filming, and we are aware that this is a case of compositing (whether we are familiar with the term or not). Two things are likely to happen on such viewing: firstly that we might try to understand how such images were achieved (or if we know the techniques involved we will look for evidence of them), and secondly, this does not distract from our enjoyment of the scene because a certain ‘realism’ is achieved (see Mihaelova in this volume). Where we may be distracted is where, for example, animation, without live-action footage, is used to depict the human; *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (Hironobu Sakaguchi & Motonori Sakakibara, 2001) and *Beowulf*’s (Robert Zemeckis, 2007) photorealistic depiction of its characters is distracting. We are aware this it is animation but it is striving too hard to *be* live-action/photo-realistic to the extent that it is unsettling to the viewer (see Sobchack 2006, and Bode in this volume).

Given the lack of consensus on a definition of animation, and the fact that in themselves definitions do not tend to be overly useful (something which most animation scholars agree on), it might be more constructive to consider some of animation’s unique qualities, particularly in relation to what it has the capacity to do visually. All animation techniques share the capacity for plasticity and for depicting life and movement. Indeed, there are two unique properties that have deeply informed the study of animation and could be considered as distinctive qualities of animation: the illusion of life and metamorphosis.

**Animation’s Unique Properties: The Illusion of Life and Metamorphosis**

Esther Leslie argues that ‘[…] animation is understood to be the inputting of life, or the inputting of the illusion of life, into that which is flat or inert or a model or an image’ (2014: 28). This ‘illusion of life’ is a feature that pervades animation studies and is often claimed as central to what animation is.[[2]](#endnote-2) Animation’s illusion of life comes in part from the creation of movement, because movement suggests life as opposed to the stillness of death. Movement in animation, because it is *created* frame-by-frame, is an illusion, unlike in live action film where it is *captured* in/on camera. Indeed, movement is stressed in several authors’ definitions of animation including Norman McLaren’s oft-quoted notion that ‘animation is not the art of drawings that move but the art of movements that are drawn’ (quoted in Furniss 1998: 5). However, the creation of movement does not always entail the illusion of life. While the illusion of life is readily apparent in animation that creates a character, such as Mickey Mouse, who appears ‘alive’ by virtue of his movement, it would be less apparent in abstract animated shapes that are animated to move in time to music, or an animated company logo that may well depict movement without creating any sense of ‘life’. This distinction indicates what is problematic about understanding the ‘illusion of life’ as a central feature of animation: while it is applicable to a huge proportion of animated examples (including all character animation), it is not a property of all animation.

Because animation is completely constructed and produced incrementally, it has the capacity for depicting metamorphoses. Paul Wells defines this as ‘the ability for an image to literally change into another completely different image, for example, through the evolution of the line, the shift in formations of clay, or the manipulation of objects or environments’ and he notes that metamorphoses is ‘unique to the animated form’ (1998: 69). Aylish Wood’s work on animated space (reprinted in this volume) provides a very useful example of how thinking about metamorphosis can illuminate the study of animation (2006). Wood’s arguments are about particular kinds of animation, such as sand and ink on glass, that highlight the fluidity of animation particularly through the ways that space is imagined and produced in the films she analyses. For Wood, because we can see ‘in between’ the frames, and because we can see ‘the sustained metamorphoses of resolving transitions’, space becomes an expressive element in its own right. (2006: 150).

Although Wood is discussing particular kinds of animation, metamorphosis is central to how we might think about animation more generally. It captures the constructed nature of animation in a very visible way; it forces us to think about frame by frame construction or creation of incremental movement as we can see the sand/ink transforming between frames. Metamorphosis also raises the question of how we might engage with such images and their transition from one thing into another; for Wood, the movement of the sand/ink is a further element of the text that the viewer might engage with.

Both metamorphoses and the illusion of life can be thought of in terms of movement, but even this can be considered problematic if applied to all animation. Many examples of animated texts tend to foreground their ‘animatedness’, or medium specificity, and to call attention to themselves through unconventional techniques and uses of technology. For instance, works by experimental animators such as Robert Breer or Jodie Mack that make use of dissimilar images in consecutive frames offer radically different experiences that are not based on the continuity of movement across frames (thus effectively disrupting habitual expectations of animation’s presentation of the illusion of life). Karen Beckman, discussing McLaren’s and Peter Kubelka’s writings on animation, observes that their thoughts reveal that an illusion of movement ‘is not a given in animation’; only visual change between frames is necessary (2014: 3).

**Animation Aesthetics and Spectatorship**

Considering how difficult it is to establish a single definition of animation or even to identify its unique, yet universal, properties, other approaches to the study of animation instead shift the emphasis from the animation itself to the audience by investigating the diverse ways we *perceive* and *experience* it in its multifarious forms. Indeed, examining animation in spectatorial terms opens up opportunities to explore not only what animation *is* but also what it can *do*—what it can *show* us and enable us to *feel.*

One of the greatest philosophical conundrums of moving images in general, and animation in particular, lies in the complex relation between its ontology (what it is in material terms) and our phenomenological engagement with it (how we perceive and experience it). Building on McLaren’s emphasis on the interstices between frames, Keith Broadfoot and Rex Butler note in their contribution to Cholodenko’s *The* *Illusion of Life* that ‘[w]hat we see, but what cannot be seen, is two images and no image—the space between images—at once’ (1991: 271). Animation, as we experience it, is in a constant state of becoming, and when it is arrested for definition or analysis it ceases to be fully what it is whilst in motion. Our access to animation’s illusionistic spectacle is necessarily filtered through our sensorial experience of it. This perceptual paradox is one of the reasons that animation spectatorship is an important aspect of animation studies. As an art form, animation has the potential to produce and manipulate imagery in myriad graphical ways. Thus, studying it often requires taking into consideration the particular ways in which it presents itself, or its formal aesthetics (e.g. the interrelationship between its audio-visual style, technique, medium, etc.). Aspects of spectatorial experience, accounted for by means of aesthetic analysis, often inform broader historical, cultural or conceptual analyses and interpretations of the art form.

Animation as a technical process offers artists extraordinary potential for formal experimentation and expressive freedom. It has a remarkable capacity for imaginative visualisation, and the diversity of experiences that can arise out of that creative potential is part of what makes animation such a fascinating object of study. Throughout its history animation’s capacity to visualise virtually anything has been put to many different uses. Many scholars have remarked on its limitless artistic potential for the creation of fictional worlds and characters, its ability to recreate events or evoke subjective ‘ideas, feelings and sensibilities’ in documentary (Honess Roe 2011: 227), and its aptness for the visualisation of data, concepts and supra-sensible natural phenomena in science and educational films, and much more besides.

When considering the diverse and distinctive experiences that animations offer us, it becomes quite clear that any one universalising theory or description of animation spectatorship will not suffice. Suzanne Buchan writes in her introduction to *Pervasive Animation* that ‘[a]n effective approach to this complexity is to use pluralist and interdisciplinary methods […] and, to develop approaches that take into account the differences between celluloid and digital film experience and the platforms these technologies and techniques use’ (2013: 2).

Animation appeals to the body and the imagination in many ways that are quite different to live-action cinema—even the most ‘invisible’ uses of computer animation, in the form of visual effects discussed above, often offer visual experiences that would be impossible to capture with a straightforward cinematographic process. Although animations often make use of live action filmmaking conventions, they also present their own visual languages that vary enormously across styles, techniques, production contexts, industries, cultures and time periods. Buchan argues that animation often presents its own ‘world’ that provides spectators with certain phenomenological, psychological and affective experiences that are peculiar to it, demanding of spectators a combination of personal interpretation, real-world understanding, and acceptance of the work’s own aesthetic logistics (2006: 25). She writes:

[t]he animation film is utterly unique in its representation of graphic and plastic universes and impossible spaces and in its ‘ability’ to transcend physical laws which govern our experience. It is therefore crucial to our understanding of animation spectatorship to develop and describe our understanding of this particular set of conditions, which in turn can assist an approach to individual films. (2006: 25)

Because spectatorial experience arises from encounters with the particularities of a specific animation and its own ‘set of intricate complexities’ (Buchan 2006: 25), investigations of animation spectatorship tend to focus closely on one work or a small number of works at a time. This offers scholars an opportunity to account not only for the historical, cultural or narrative elements of an animation but also for the different ways in which the particular stylistic, technical and technological features of a given animation achieve their effects and ‘modes of appearing’ (Sobchack 2011: 195). Animations using different styles and techniques will have very different ‘modes of appearing’, which in turn will affect the kinds of experiences they invite. For instance, a scratch animation such as Norman McLaren’s *Blinkity Blank* (1955) that depicts semi-abstract figures that move very rapidly on the shallow surface of a black background in time to a musical soundtrack will elicit different responses than the realist aesthetics of Walt Disney’s *Bambi* (1942), with its use of naturalistic two-dimensional drawn characters moving in relation to detailed painted backgrounds that were shot with a multi-plane camera. These sorts of aesthetic distinctions are equally important in thinking about forms of animation that do not adhere to either short or feature length narrative paradigms. For instance, a two-dimensional motion graphics based animation that aims to convey information rather than a narrative will illicit mental and physiological responses that differ to some degree from those evoked by the immersive spectacle of a live action hybrid like *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009).

Approaching animation spectatorship requires a careful consideration of the way that spectators’ experiences of animation can be theorised. These approaches are often founded on the premise that human beings’ perceptual faculties respond similarly to particular stimuli, and thus certain experiences can be reasonably assumed to be similar amongst spectators of an animated work. Phenomenological approaches to animation in particular attempt to address this issue by describing both the objective and subjective aspects of engaging with a moving image work. By rooting investigations of experience in close formal analyses of the works themselves, they aim to ensure that their descriptions of experience are not overly subjective but rather, as Vivian Sobchack notes, ‘sufficiently comprehensible and resonant to others who might possibly inhabit [them]’ (2009: 438).

Animation scholars use numerous methodologies in their approaches to spectatorship. Scholars including Buchan, Sobchack, Jennifer Barker, Tom Gunning, Aylish Wood and Joanna Bouldin have discussed animation in experiential and/or phenomenological terms. Other scholars such as Torben Grodal (2009) and Dan Torre (2017) have used cognitive theory to interrogate the experiences of animation spectatorship. These and other scholars have addressed the experiential perception of space and ‘spatial transformation’ (Wood 2006: 133), movement and metamorphosis that are unique to animated moving images. Their works discuss a variety of different material and technological types of animation. Bouldin, for instance, focuses on the relationship between spectators and animated bodies in cartoons, noting that ‘animation extends the possibilities of the viewers’ embodied responses’ (2000: 63). Barker has argued for the tactile appeal of hyperreal computer animations like *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) (2009: 46), and Sobchack describes the unusual sensations evoked by viewing computer-generated morphs (2000: 132). Buchan, in her study of the Quay Brothers’ puppet animations, analyses the twofold status of object animation, concentrating on the way that it ‘represents a different “world” for the spectator, something between “*a* world,” created with the animation technique, and “*the* world” in its use of real objects and not representational drawings’ (2006: 21).

Consideration of our embodied responses to movement is integral to this line of enquiry. In his essay ‘Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality’, Gunning works with the film theories of André Bazin and Christian Metz to shift focus away from the photographic index as a marker of realism and onto cinematic motion as a primary impetus for embodied engagement or identification (2007: 38). He thus introduces a theory of cinematic realism that makes room within film studies for a consideration of animation’s ability to offer an ‘impression of reality’ (2007: 45). Gunning stresses the important role that movement plays in rendering animations and films ‘believable’ (2007: 45). He accounts for the physiological appeal of many forms of animation (2007: 38) by examining how both recorded and animated movement engages spectators’ bodies, evokes their ‘participation’ in the seen movement and offers ‘a sense of perceptual richness or immediate involvement in the image’ (2007: 42). These ideas help refine our understanding of what is happening, for instance, when we become immersed in an animated spectacle. As he points out, this interest in the physiological appeal of animated motion is not new but was present in the writings of classical film theorists such as Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac and Sergei Eisenstein (2007: 37). For instance, Eisenstein’s writings on Disney in the 1940s demonstrate a fascination with the animated art form’s ability to evoke certain synaesthetic, empathetic, and ecstatic sensations through watching images move in time. He describes his well-known notion of ‘plasmaticness’—the temporal, metamorphosing elasticity of animated bodies, objects and spaces—partly in terms of its profound effects on spectators’ bodies (1988: 27).

There has been a somewhat limiting tendency in animation studies to focus on spectatorial experiences of representational forms of animation (e.g. cartoon animation, narrative computer animation, and stop motion puppet animation). This is in part because we are able to relate to figurative types of animation and animated characters because they resemble aspects of the real world enough for us to ‘project our somatic knowledge of the world’ onto them so that they ‘can make “sense” to us’ (Bouldin 2000: 60-61). However, this theorisation of animation spectatorship does not apply as easily to forms of experimental animation whose primary aims are not to represent or mimic aspects of reality (Buchan 2006: 21). For instance, abstract animation often denies easy sensory assimilation based on recognizable bodies, spaces, or states of affairs and calls for a distinct kind of approach to sensory and cognitive intelligibility (Husbands 2018). Other types of experimental animation present different perceptual and conceptual challenges (see Taberham in this volume).

Thinking about what animation can do and the way it can make us feel requires approaches that consider the radically different ways in which animations engage the imagination and the body. They also highlight the fact that the diversity of animation is one of its most prominent features and a variety of interdisciplinary approaches are therefore needed in the field. The differing ways in which animation might engage us raises some compelling questions about our preconceptions of what animation is, and how it has been discussed or defined, requiring us to continue to find new ways of understanding it. As a thoroughly wide-ranging set of techniques, forms, practices and aesthetics, animation deserves the multitudinous approaches on which much of animation studies thrives.

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1. Whereas much of film theory’s early enquiry coalesced around issues of ontology, and in particular the unique relationship between film and reality (see for example, Bazin 1967), Animation Studies has lacked such a singular theoretical enquiry. This is probably due to the fact that animation is not ‘indexical’ in the way that film is (i.e. it lacks the direct causal relationship between reality and image). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. To the extent that this term has given title to Johnston and Thomas’ 1981 behind the scenes book about Disney animation as well as two books on animation theory edited by Alan Cholodenko (1991 and 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)