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The Ontology of Performance in Stop Animation

Kawamoto's *House of Flame* and Švankmajer's *The Fall of the House of Usher*

Judy clubs Punch with a mallet. Jack the Pumpkin King decides to take Santa's place one Christmas. Gumby foils the Blockheads' plans, yet again. In each of these cases, we as the audience focus our attention on the moving figures, finding pleasure in the characters and stories. Yet, though we focus our imaginative attention upon Jack dancing through Halloweentown, we are always aware of the animator and the fact that these engrossing figures are inanimate objects. So who is the performer? When we discuss performance in an animated film, are we talking about the animated figure? The animator? Do films without anthropomorphized characters contain performances? In live action films, it is quite easy to center a discussion of cinematic performance on the actor and never feel compelled to consider the role the audience plays in co-creating the performance. I do not mean to suggest that film spectatorship is not a wide and rich field, but that very often when assessing "performance," we specifically refer to actors and dancers. However, since the animated figure does not move itself, the nature of performance becomes more complicated. In the animated film, we must take the audience into consideration to determine how performance is constituted.

Through a juxtaposition of two stop animated films - Kihachiro Kawamoto's *House of Flame* (*Kataku*; 1979) and Jan Švankmajer's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (*Zánik domu Usheru*; 1981) - I will explore the ontology of the puppet animation performance, especially as it relates to the audience's understanding of the figure as character. I chose to focus on these films for a few reasons. Firstly, both animators draw techniques and inspiration from stage puppetry, a medium whose performance has been examined extensively, and in fact, we shall see that scholarly writings on stage puppetry and puppet animation share many premises. Additionally, both Kawamoto's and Švankmajer's films are narrative shorts that adapt stories familiar to many in their audience. Despite these similarities, though, *House of Flame* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* differ in ways that make for useful juxtaposition. In *House of Flame*, Kawamoto visually renders the story through humanesque puppets - that is, puppets with bodies and faces made to represent human figures, though these figures are highly stylized. While on the other hand, Švankmajer retells Poe's story through the performance of objects and spaces, omitting human figures altogether.

Defining "Performance"

However, before delving into our study, we should begin with a preliminary definition of the term "performance." First, performance theorist Richard Bauman conceives verbal performance in terms of "responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence" (1984, p. 11). So for him, to perform is to perform *for someone*, someone who recognizes the performance to be such and might possibly pass judgment as to its competence. Further, Deborah Kapchan writes: "To perform is to carry something into effect - whether it be a story, an identity, an artistic artifact, a historical memory, or an ethnography" (1995, p. 479). The important idea here is this "carrying into effect," that performance is an action in the process of realization. Dell Hymes would call this "emergence," a term he uses to distinguish between "everyday behavior" and actions recognized as performances (Hymes, 1975). Emergence combines the carrying into effect

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of the performance with responsibility to an audience, occurring precisely when the performer and audience come together to co-create meaning. For the cinema, this means emergence occurs when the film and audience are co-present, or in other words, when the film is projected.

Further, films “key” (to borrow a term from Erving Goffman) fictional performance in a number of different ways. First, the opening titles often contain cast-members’ names, cueing us into the fact that the people in the story are characters played by people whose “real names” (and thus “real identities”) are altogether different. For example, when we see Robert DeNiro’s name in the credits of *Taxi Driver*, we know the character he plays, Travis, does not represent DeNiro in his everyday life.¹ Secondly, fictional films often share certain formal properties that indicate to the audience that they are not documentaries, especially in Western filmmaking. These properties include tightly edited shot-reverse-shot sequences, the filmic subjects’ apparent unawareness of the camera, and predetermined narrative trajectories.² Finally, extra-filmic features frame the onscreen performance as such. With rare exception, the audience is informed “what kind of film” they are going to see before they even walk into the theater or rent the DVD. Movie posters, television advertisements, and conversations with friends tell us the genre of a movie, and as long as the film originates within a familiar culture, we will be familiar with the genre tradition the film is in dialogue with. For example, a television advertisement for the latest Wes Craven film might proclaim, “‘The scariest villain since Freddy Kruger!’ says Rolling Stone.” By telling the audience the villain is scary and the film originates from Wes Craven (along with any number of visual cues contained within the ad), we can deduce it is part of the horror genre, and thus a performance constructed for audience enjoyment.

For the animated film, this keying is even more pronounced because of the presence of the animated figure. We know if the character is hand-drawn, the action onscreen cannot be literal. We know the puppet is not *actually* alive, performing this dance. It is manipulated by a human to give it the appearance of literal action. In many forms of stop motion animation, we watch a three-dimensional object, so that the performance carries a paradoxical indexicality: the puppet tangibly exists outside the film, but its movement does not.

House of Flame - Motivation and Embodiment

Adapted from a Noh play entitled *The Seeker’s Mound* (*Motomezuka*; see Sharp, 2007), Kawamoto’s *House of Flame* tells the story of a male traveler in search of a mystical landmark called “the Seeker’s Mound.” During his search, he encounters a maiden who relates a tragic lovers’ tale that leads to a pious young woman’s imprisonment in a purgatory-esque house of flames. Though many elements of *House of Flame* will necessarily be specific to the cultural tradition within which Kawamoto worked - for example, the design of the puppets, the narration style, and the story itself - this short film provides an entry into examining the general nature of stop puppet animation.

In this film, as in other stop animations, the puppets mark themselves as characters primarily through the apparent performance of motivated, expressive gestures. In one sequence, we watch the pious young maiden fret over her choice of suitors. She looks from the poet’s proclamation of love on the left to the warrior’s on the right, then brings a hand to her forehead, palm out,

¹ Although, sometimes actors are cast for their real-life semblance to a character, blurring the lines between the identity of the actor and his character.

² Of course, realizing these tendencies exist, many filmmakers have actively worked to complicate definitions of fiction and documentary. Films such as *David Holzman’s Diary* (Jim McBride, 1967) appropriate formal conventions of documentary into their fictional films, and Werner Herzog borrows techniques from fiction films to help achieve what he terms “ecstatic truth” within his documentaries.

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expressing her worry through that small gesture. When she tilts her head forward and covers her face with her hands, we recognize this movement as one of inner pain. Following bunraku and noh convention, Kawamoto frequently utilizes such minimalist movements, yet the movements his figures do make say a great deal. Moreover, gestures communicate something quite important to the viewer, though the viewer rarely consciously acknowledges it. This is that the animated character possesses agency. As Adam Kendon points out about bodily actions: “to the extent that they are thought not to be under voluntary control, they are not regarded as gesture” (1992, p. 179). So, when the pious young maiden brings the back of her hand to her forehead, we watch with the understanding that she *intends* to bring her hand to her face, thus facilitating the audience’s identification with her as a subject of the film.

Moreover, wrapped up in this idea of agency is the complimentary notion of motivation. Movement theorist Rudolf Laban opens his book *Mastery of Movement* by writing: “Man moves in order to satisfy a need. He aims by his movement at something of value to him” (1971, p. 1). In other words, something motivates the action of the movement, whether that be a reaction to internal desire or external stimuli. Generally, we are adept at interpreting the motivations behind actions of others within our own culture because we share a code of movement. As part of creating and maintaining the illusion of a puppet’s life, a puppeteer demonstrates that the puppet shares in a code of movement, which often means dwelling on movements that are banal when performed by human subjects in their daily lives. As A.C. Scott writes in his book about bunraku theatre: “In everyday life, no one stops to think about the dramatic significance of his ordinary actions, but on the puppet stage they are important in providing an understanding of behavior” (1963, p. 80-81). The illusion of intention and motivation is the site where a consideration of acting becomes important.

In his famous but puzzling essay, “The Puppet Theatre,” playwright Heinrich von Kleist muses on artistry of the puppeteer, relating his skill to that of the actor. The man to whom von Kleist speaks in the essay even proposes that a greater subtlety of movement is achievable with the puppet than with the actor because of the limitations weight has upon the actor’s movements (1997, p. 412). This characterization is mirrored by Paul Wells in writing about the animated figure in film: “The animator must essentially use the techniques employed by the actor to project the specificities of character through the mechanistic process of the animation itself” (1998, p. 104). In other words, the animator must determine the appropriate movement to express the desired action and emotion. How does a body move when sad? What sequence of movements does an accidental fall have? The puppeteer must be hyper-aware of the minutiae of movement in order to effectively manipulate the figures he animates, and it is quite common for those writing about puppetry to speak of the puppeteer as an actor.³ As we can see from the example from von Kleist, this conception of the animator began with puppet theatre and has carried over into animation studies.

However, the apparent intentionality of movement in the onscreen figure is the end goal of the animator’s efforts. If the animator is the actor, he is one who displaces his performance to construct the life of objects for the audience’s benefit. When the camera lingers for several seconds upon the walking feet of the male traveler during the opening and closing sequences of *House of Flame*, these carefully constructed steps convey a path for the character – a journey – making the “artificial” seem more “real.”

³ c.f. A. C. Scott’s *The Puppet Theatre of Japan* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1963) where he writes: “The puppeteer is an actor, an artist who must portray a variety of human emotions arising from a dramatic situation” (p. 33).

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This tension between artificial and real, between the puppet as an object and the puppet as subject of a story, is a familiar conundrum in scholarship on both stop animation and puppet theatre. For example, Steve Tillis coined the term “double-vision” to describe the mental process of audiences as they viewed puppet theatre (Tillis, 1992). Similarly, animation scholar Suzanne Buchan writes: “While viewing animation, the spectator executes shifts between hypothetical, real and interior mental worlds” (2004, p. 118). Significant for the current study is that both Tillis and Buchan assign a certain kind of agency to the audience in their theories. We, as viewers of animated films, actively participate in the construction of onscreen events, accepting the illusion of movement and life, and – as Bordwell and others have noted – mentally piecing together and anticipating the story through visual and audio cues we have learned to decipher (Bordwell, 1986), and that we want to decipher. As Erving Goffman phrases it, “We willingly sought out the circumstances in which we could be temporarily deceived or at least kept in the dark in brief, transformed into collaborators in unreality” (1986, p. 136).

What we must remember, then, is that during the film, our behavior toward the onscreen action implies that the puppet fully *embodies* the character with which we identify. The puppet moves like the pious young maiden, so the puppet *is* the pious young maiden. Anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong notably theorized the affective power of objects while studying African sculpture, demonstrating how our relationships to certain objects imbue them with subjecthood. He writes: “Such things are not, at base, symbols of something else...they *are* whatever they are” (1981, p. 5). This embodiment comes about in part due to the reason the figures are created. As Goffman points out in *Frame Analysis*, a division exists between the identity of the actor and the identity of the character she plays (1986, p. 128), but no such division exists for the puppet. It is created, one could say, to become itself. The tragic young maiden trapped in the house of flames has no identity outside of that film. She simply is that maiden, brought to life through the technological process of stop animation. Again, Armstrong notes that such an object “is distinguished among ordinary things because it is an end-in-itself, and it *is* for one chief integral reason: namely, that the work is self-constituting” (1981, p. 30). While he specifically refers to objects of worship, we could easily map this idea onto the animated figure.

Narrative animation is framed similarly to other fiction films. Standard cinematic cues such as title sequences key the world of the film as self-contained; the movements of animated figures demand that we regard them as the performers; and we readily participate in the illusion.

However, as I mentioned in the introduction, Švankmajer’s film, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, does not tell its story through anthropomorphized figures (figures made to look more human by giving them hands, eyes, limbs, etc.), but through objects and spaces. So now we should ask, how do such animated objects elicit our participation in the narrative?

***The Fall of the House of Usher* – Figured Objects as Characters**

Adapted from the Poe story of the same name, *The Fall of the House of Usher* demonstrates a link between the cinematic and the tactile by allowing the expressive textures of surfaces perform the ill-fated story of Roderick Usher and his sister Madeline inside their family home. Now, if a tension exists between object and subject in the body of the humanesque puppet, it must be exasperated within the object qua object of Švankmajer’s films. Can the viewer identify with a house, chair or coffin as she identifies with a marionette?

With such a film, the creative agency of the audience becomes more apparent. The seemingly obvious links between the camera’s gaze and the protagonist, between narration and events onscreen, are highlighted when we must rely on the formal structure of narrative depleted of

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some of its traditional content. We know to associate the chair with the character of Roderick Usher and the coffin with Madeline because Švankmajer employs standard techniques we have learned to understand through countless other fiction films. The most basic of these is focusing the camera on the object being talked about in the voice over narration. For example the first time we see the chair, the narrator speaks in detail about the changed countenance of Roderick Usher. He tells us of his friend's "liquid" and "luminous" eyes, his "delicate" nose, and his "pallid" lips, all while the camera inspects a carved, wooden chair in tight close-up. This pairing of word and image is so simple, so direct, and yet so effective in its suggestion for how we should interpret the surfaces throughout the film. The chair *embodies* Roderick because the camera behaves as if it is Roderick, cueing the audience to form an identification with the chair as this character. As Murray Smith and others have noted when writing on film identification, the camera encourages us to form alignments by following certain characters, with close-ups allowing us access to the gestures and expressions that facilitate our bond with them (Smith, 1995). So, when the camera pours over the chair's surface, it invites us to partake in the intimacy and identify with the chair qua Roderick Usher.

The chair further comes to embody its character by moving in a manner that corresponds to its role in the narrative. When the narrator tells us of Madeline's return from her tomb, the chair abruptly turns toward the door and begins swaying, mirroring the verbal description of Roderick's reaction. Later in this sequence, the chair collapses backwards and breaks in pieces, reiterating the simultaneous final death of the siblings. Animation gives the chair mobility, and thus agency, further asking us to respond to it as a character acting in the film. As Švankmajer says in his own film manifesto: "Animation isn't about making inanimate objects move, it is about bringing them to life" (2006, p. 72). We, the audience of the animated film, willingly accept our role in bringing objects to life, seeking out their fantastical performances and actively decoding the image.

Still, though *The Fall of the House of Usher* does work to construct objects as characters, we also find that Švankmajer inscribes himself into the film through one of the more abstract emotive objects, the dancing clay. The clay jumps out of the swamp onto the floor of the house just as the narrator begins reading the narrative poem, "The Haunted Palace." This is a recounting of a poem spoken by Roderick in a rare, lucid moment. The performance of the clay that accompanies these words is quite ambiguous, with the abstractness of the changing forms leaving open the interpretive possibilities. For our current discussion, one of the most important characteristics of this sequence is the visible impression of the animator's hand upon the clay. Švankmajer animated this particular sequence himself (Hames, 1995, p. 98), so the handprints we see represent his physical impression upon the film. Outside the credit sequences, audiences are rarely confronted with the existence of the animator. His existence is disavowed by a medium intent on maintaining the illusion of reality within its worlds. This encourages the audience to identify with the animated figures directly instead of the person imbuing them with life. This means when we literally see the imprint of the animator's hand on the screen, the identification process must change. Švankmajer inscribes himself as a performer within the film. Interestingly, though, because the clay sequence was still animated frame-by-frame, Švankmajer's proxy performance combines the ontologies outlined above for the animator's and puppet's performances. That is to say, the movements of his impressions onto the clay that we see projected onscreen do not directly correspond to the actual movements his body performed during the production process. We see the lines of two invisible fingers tracing a path through the clay in a continuous movement, but when this path was created, Švankmajer did not perform a continuous movement.

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He pressed upon the clay slightly; photographed a frame or two; pressed the clay again; photographed another frame; and repeated this process about 20 more times to create a second's worth of that path. The film still only displays the appearance of a performance with no profilmic existence. So even though this sequence makes us more aware of the animator as one performing, we cannot form a direct identification with his performing body. His impression exists, but his body must remain invisible for the sake of the fluidity of that impression. Barry Purves' formulation of the animator as performer seems particularly appropriate here. He writes, "The essential quality [for the stop animator] to have is not so much that of a performer. . .but it's having a performer's sensibilities" (2008, p. 194). The animator does not herself dance, but must have the dancer's understanding of movement to effectively construct the puppet's performance.

Conclusion and Further Implications

When we place such weight on the audience in an analysis of performance as we have above, the resulting implication is that in the animated film, the ontology of performance is appearance. After all, performance is rendered frame by frame, giving it no profilmic existence, and the audience engages most directly with the action it sees onscreen. We know that an animator created this film through some technical process, but unless she interjects herself into the film, we need not acknowledge it in our interaction with the narrative, just as we need not acknowledge the material conditions of the human actor's cinematic performance. The latter has implications for cinematic performance more generally, because as we know, cinematic performance is always mediated and constructed in various ways (from editing to the disparity between 2-D film image and 3-D reality). For the film audience, the art object is not the studio performance we never witness. It is not even the filmstrip itself, but the shadow of that strip cast onto a blank screen. The viewer does not watch the film move through the projector, but instead turns her back on the projector in favor of the intangible *appearance* of the object lit up in front of her. 

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