What Do We Talk about When We Talk About Animation

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Abstract
What if performance is no longer the dominant trope for understanding the mediated self? What if animation is as or more important as a trope? This essay explores what questions scholars would ask if they were to begin with animation as the starting point.

Keywords
performance, animation, personal connections, Facebook, avatars

A few years ago, I was interviewing many people who had used media at some point while navigating the highly charged task of breaking up. I wanted to know what I could learn about the social assumptions built into different technologies by studying how people use technologies designed for connection to do precisely what these technologies were not designed for—to disconnect from others. When I began this research, I had a tacit model in mind of how breakup conversations took place. I thought it involved two people talking to each other, ideally face-to-face. The more stories I collected, the more I realized how wrong I was. First, breakups took place over many different conversations, and involved quite a bit of media switching. Breakup conversations were often very social activities, with friends’ and families’ opinions and perspectives getting solicited and woven into the conversations between the two people breaking up. In actual practice, the very words that people exchanged by text or email or Facebook during the course of a breakup might be co-authored with friends. Admittedly, I was mainly talking to those around me who were breaking up fast and furiously—undergraduates between 18 and 22. Readers might think that as people age, breakup utterances increasingly become authored only by the speaker. But that overlooks the common roles lawyers and friends in fact play as breakups start to involve shared resources and shared dependents. Faced with these practices, I increasingly found performance a less than adequate framework for understanding the work that went into ending a relationship, which nowadays invariably involves many media, and considerable audience interaction.

This led me to wonder, “what if performance is not the most productive lens for analyzing contemporary media practices these days?” What if animation opens up a whole new terrain for understanding media practices and media ideologies that performance leaves opaque? I am not the only one in my home discipline to wonder this. Anthropologists of media are increasingly taking animation as a starting point of analysis to ask a differently framed set of questions about selves, bodies, objects, audiences, labor, and what it means to be alive. These scholars have been inspired by Teri Silvio’s (2011) article, “Animation: The New Performance?” in which Silvio asks whether animation is a better trope than performance for understanding the relationship between selves and contemporary capitalism at this historical moment.

What does animation offer as a lens? To explain, let me compare the models that shape how scholars think about performance and animation. When one turns to performance, one tends to imagine an actor performing on a stage, that is, a character inhabited by a strategic self speaking a text or choosing from a socially agreed upon repertoire. Silvio argues that this encourages analysts to focus on a key set of questions. What distinguishes the actor from the character and what constitutes the gap between actor and character? What is the difference between being scripted or improvising, and how does this difference affect social interactions? Is the actor simply repeating an already established repertoire or is the actor changing this repertoire in the moment of performance? In other words, is a given performance social reproduction or social transformation? (Silvio, 2011, p. 424) Many of these questions sound nonsensical when asked of an

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animated character. No one asks what distinguishes a community of creators from the character(s) they produce, or if an animated character rings true or is spontaneous.

Animation has at its core a unified character created by inks, colorists, voice artists, scriptwriters, and so on. Unlike how many colloquially think about performance, where a good performance is the sole responsibility of the actor, the audience plays a significant role in contributing to the efficacy of the half-empty animated character. Characters are often drawn and written as compilations of conventionalized markers, merely implying details and nuance, which encourages the audience to project an affective connection and various social complexities onto the character. That is to say, many have shared a media ideology that while the audience appreciates a performed character, the audience co-creates an animated character. If one analyzes animation, one asks a different set of questions than one asks of performance. Because an animated character is a unified being created by many, one might ask, how are unity and multiplicity intertwined? What kind of labor is involved in giving the impression of unity? What is the difference or boundaries between manipulation and free will—between acting because of the agency of another or many and acting out of one’s own agency? What is the relationship between the body and the soul, or between materiality and that which enables the material form to move?

Not all of these questions have been equally helpful for me when I write about how people manage the online labor of breaking up. Different media, or combinations of media, will present media-specific social quandaries both to their users and to their analysts. What I personally have found productive about beginning with animation is that it leads me to think in new ways about the labor of animating social media profiles. I analyze Facebook profiles not as online performances of an offline self, with the attending aforementioned questions. Rather, I see a Facebook profile as an animated self, with a community of Facebook associates, computer programmers, and so on joining together to help fashion an appearance of a unified character out of a pastiche of many people’s actions and utterances (Manning & Gershon, 2013). Under the animation rubric, the labor of many need not be mystified in the same way as it is for a performed self (for an actor after all needs make-up artists, scriptwriters, and so on to perform, yet this is often forgotten under the performance rubric). In addition, animation allows one to analyze community or audience interactions more easily—performance has a tendency to encourage scholars to focus on one-to-one or self/other relationships.

Silvio is not suggesting that performance has no relevance anymore. Rather, she is arguing that the increasing domination of animation alters performance, just as email transformed letters, changing the social tasks that letters were used for and people’s beliefs about how letters affected the messages they conveyed. Performance is still good to think with, but perhaps it can no longer be understood on its own. Performance now could be analyzed in terms of what animation is and is not, and vice versa. The contemporary analyst’s task is to understand when and how animation dominates as a trope now that so many people are constantly interacting with animated characters, animated bodies, and animated profiles.

Turning to animation allows analysts to ask new questions about people’s mediated experiences, or even to unpack what a mediated experience is in the first place. If one thinks about this in the context of virtual worlds, one might wonder what it means to be human in a setting where the evidence of one’s humanity is not measured by physical appearance or biological processes, but by how one is controlled (Manning & Gershon, 2013). Or one might explore how people’s notions of labor change when being a persuasive self or an employable self involves coordinating so many different processes to present a coherent and unified character. Or one might start asking how people experience and think about bodies and voices when, from the standpoint of animation, bodies and voices are another media, not necessarily more authentic or privileged than a carved puppet or a coded avatar. Animation, in short, provides a new analytical purchase, introducing new questions for all types of social media.

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