Persona, celebrity, and the animated object

Animation Studies

Lienors Torre – Persona, Celebrity, and the Animated Object

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The Voice Persona of Animation

When we think of persona and animation, one of the first things that come to mind is the voice-actor, particularly if they are a celebrity. The character Po in, *Kung Fu Panda* (Osborne & Stevenson, 2008) is unmistakably voiced by celebrity actor Jack Black and a great deal of Jack Black's persona is embodied within the animated panda. But also, in an uncanny reversal, some of the character of Po has become amalgamated into the celebrity persona of Jack Black. This was overtly evident in many of his promotional tours for the *Kung Fu Panda* movie franchise – where Jack Black would comically adopt some of Po the panda's actions and mannerisms.

It's clear that our reception of the differing persona of the voice actor and the animated character can be a rather fluid one – particularly when the voice actor is already established in the public's mind. Though some of this might be lost on young children, older audience members will nearly always be aware of the fact that it is Jack Black that is performing the voice of the panda. Occasionally we may forget as we become immersed in on-screen visuals, but then some particularly Jack Black-ism will come through and we will again be reminded of the voice actor's persona.

The Visual Performance

Similarly, in terms of visual performance, there can be an interesting blurring of the concept of persona.

Donald Crafton has described differing ways in which we can view an animated performance. One approach might seem more 'embodied' while the other might seem to be more 'figurative.' A figurative performance will normally seem to feel less like the performance of a 'person' and more cartoon-like. While an 'embodied' animated performance might be interpreted as being a direct extension of the animator herself. (Crafton 2013, p. 23) Most contemporary mainstream animated films tend to showcase a more embodied approach – and we the viewer might truly believe in these performances, accepting them to be very 'human' and presenting an identifiable 'persona.'

This all can become quite complicated, however, when we think of how the character might have been animated by a large team of animators – each animating the character within a different scene, and sometimes another animator might go in and further adjust the animated performance that someone else had already achieved. But the animated acting of a character does not just come from the animator. It can also stem from the actor – particularly in motion-captured performances. The actor, Andy Serkis, who performed Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson, 2001 – 2003), has been known to take much of the credit for Gollum's on screen performance and persona. Yet as others such as Mihaela Mihailova (2016) and Lisa Purse (2013) have pointed out, it was actually a great many people (including a lot of animators) that brought the final Gollum performance onto the screen.

Also, even in more traditional Disney animation, it was common practice to video actors who would perform all of the actions in a scene and then have the animators work directly from these videoed performances. In fact, particularly in the later 2D-drawn animated features such as the feature, *Peter Pan, Return to Neverland* (Cook &

Budd, 2002) – which was animated entirely at the Disney studio in Sydney, Australia – the animators were instructed in many cases to copy the actors performance exactly, down to their most minute facial expressions. A number of these animators became somewhat unhappy with this approach, as it seemed to give them much less creative input than they were accustomed to. So it could be argued that the live-action actor's persona (though anonymous) constituted a significant contribution to the final 'persona' of the animated characters in this animated feature.

In the recent Disney animated feature, *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), there is a noticeable and clear disconnect between some of the character's performances as they transition from one scene to the next. For example, the character Elsa projected a relatively reserved style of movement in most of her scenes, however, in one culminating musical sequence she began to dance and contort her body in very suggestive ways – clearly a different 'persona' was being projected and likely different animators or a different videoed performance were also employed. Such dramatic changes, effectively both add to and complicate the persona of the animated character – particularly if it calls into question the fluctuating sources from which the animated performance may have derived.

The Distributed Persona

Evolving technologies are also complicating our own personas, arguably making them more complex, more distributed and perhaps more 'animated.' For example, we can think of how our individual persona has become much more multifaceted and much more dispersed as a result of the Internet and of social media. Each new posting and each new platform can potentially add new layers of complexity. As a result of a variety of digital algorithms and other factors beyond our control, these elements of our persona can also become radically re-contextualized and even dramatically transformed.

Similarly, in the production of an animated character, not only do elements of the celebrity voice, the celebrity actor, and the input from hordes of animators (perhaps from multiple locals) alter the result, but also computer algorithms and other digital mediations are further enhancing the outcome. A good analogy of how these digital complexities can affect a persona (and an animated visual representation) can be found in the music video clip, "Light it Up" by Major Lazer. (Method Studios, 2016) The film features an ever-changing 3D-animated humanoid dancer who dances and moves in time to the music. Though the style of dance-movement remains constant, the figure changes dramatically from one shot to the next. In some sequences it might look exactly like a human wearing a full body costume, while in others it appears to mutate and disintegrate before our eyes. Sometimes the form appears very real and solid, at other times it appears to be tenuously constructed of complex particle systems. The movement of the figures is derived from a motion-captured dancer, but at the same time the movement is also derived from the physics (algorithms) of the various particles and materials that make up the animated form. While there is always a visible essence of the real-life human dancer, it is radically re-contextualized and it is also continually transformed by the computer algorithms.

Personification & the Persona of Objects

We can also consider how the idea of persona can be applied to objects, though some might find it a bit contentious to consider that an object might have its own persona – one that is presented to or perceived by others. Certainly there are many examples of anthropomorphized objects that are depicted in animation, such as the teacup in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. (Trousdale & Wise, 1991) Such forms do seem to be imbued with a strong human identity – a persona of sorts. But it is also conceivable to explore the idea of identity and even

persona that might be inherent or expressed in real-world objects and then how these might be further amplified or subverted through animation.

There seems to be a growing number of theorists who are suggesting that objects deserve more critical attention and should be elevated beyond mere background clutter or inconsequential and anonymous masses of matter. An object, according to philosopher Graham Harman, is something that "… has a unified reality that is autonomous from its wider context and also from its own pieces." (2011, p.116) We generally recognize an object to be an object, but quite often disregard objects as being just 'things.' However, as Tim Dant points out:

Much more of our daily lives are spent interacting with material objects than interacting with other people. Even when not actually handling them, our contact with objects is often continuous and intimate in comparison with our contact with people (think of the chair you are sitting on and the range of objects in sight, within a short reach that are there, ready for when you need them). (1999, p.15)

Objects are actually at the centre of our existence, and for philosophers like Graham Harman this is strong justification for an 'object orientated philosophy' in which objects are deemed central to the understanding of our very existence. From this perspective, it makes sense that we should imbue objects with greater importance—to give greater theoretical respect to them.

Objects can be considered to be quite complex, for they "are units that both display and conceal a multitude of traits." (Harman 2011, p. 7) In a way, they are like humans in that they outwardly project a limited number of traits and it is these that make up their 'persona.' If additional traits are revealed or added, their persona can alter dramatically. In *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai claims that things assume meaning primarily according to how they move: "it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context." (1986, p. 5)

Persona and Movement

Movement and context can dramatically alter one's persona and our reception of that persona. This can also play a significant role in our interpretation of objects.

Imagine that you are helping a friend hang pictures on her wall and, because she doesn't have a hammer within reach, she picks up a nearby hardcover book and proceeds to pound a nail into the wall. Remarkably, the book performs just like a hammer and effectively drives the nail into the wall. Since it worked so well, your friend proceeds to hammer in all the nails this way – who needs a real hammer when you have a book that behaves like one so well? Anyone watching would be aware that she was using a book (not a hammer) and so its core identity would remain intact. But during those moments of misuse – of nonconventional movements – its projected persona would be most emphatically that of a hammer.

In this regard, we could draw a parallel with the idea of watching a celebrity's animated vocal performance on screen. For example, while watching *Kung Fu Panda* most of us would be well aware that it was Jack Black who was performing the vocals; but because of the animated character's actions, Jack Black is also, and most definitely, *Kung Fu Panda*.

A celebrity's animated persona can involve numerous layers of identity, as it is a "product of intertextuality" where their off-screen lives and "the non-filmic texts of promotion, publicity and criticism" become just as much a part of their image as their on-screen roles. (McDonald 1995, p. 83) In fact, argues David Marshall, "These elements of performance are the professional or producerly elements that are closest to their status as, or at least as conveyors of, cultural commodities." (2010, p. 39) There are different degrees of celebrity status, and therefore these off-

screen personas will affect to varying degrees our reading of a particular star's movie performance. In some cases, such as was the case with Marilyn Monroe; her public persona often greatly overshadowed her character roles. (Dyer 2004, pp. 18-20)

In a similar vein to Marilyn Monroe, who possessed such an extraordinary level of stardom, some objects would also have a very difficult time shaking their core identity. For example, if the book that your picture-hanging friend picked up happened to be an original Gutenberg Bible (c1455), your main focus would be on the fact that she was damaging a priceless treasure, rather than manipulating a hammer-like object.

Stop-Motion Animated Objects

Real-world movement can alter our perception of an objects 'persona.' This 'persona' can be further altered through the use of stop-motion animation (particularly through the growing trend of found-object animation).

Found-object animation normally involves the animation of objects that are employed 'as is' – they have not been modified for their role in the animated film and have been selected (rather than constructed) based on their intrinsic form, colour and texture. A found object could include just about anything – from a rusty nail, to a teacup, or to a child's toy doll. According to Maureen Furniss, "Found materials include everyday items that create a sense of ordinary spaces, which can become extraordinary through the powers of animated motion." (2008, p. 258)

When we watch an animated-object movie, we may be very familiar with the featured object outside of the confines of the film. An animated teacup may point towards the teacup that we used this morning for drinking tea. Since found objects are not constructed for the purpose of the animation, they posses a life outside the realm of any particular animation. But, we all have a special relationship with objects. According to Paul Wells, "The meaning of the [stop-motion] object … is determined by the understanding of how it has absorbed its historic form and function and created the associational climate for the viewer." (1998, p. 91) When we see found objects moving around, we can't help but have a strong response to them as an echo of our own real-life interactions with them.

Similarly, we respond to film celebrities and seem to be extremely interested in their off-screen lives. They take up a great deal of space in the news media, and dominate a lot of conversations – but all the while they remain elusive, causing us always to wish to know more about them. (Ellis 1992, pp. 92-94) In writing about objects, philosopher Graham Harman similarly suggests that though we experience objects all the time, we can never truly and fully know them. "We do not really dwell amidst objects, because they forever surpass our explorations of them, remaining inaccessible to us." (Harman 2005, p. 16) Quite simply, objects are complex things and they elude us both in the physical and in the phenomenological sense.

The animator known as PES is very adept at imbuing stop-motion objects with new 'personas.' For example, in his animated short, *Western Spaghetti* (PES, 2009), a number of household items are used in lieu of food ingredients to animate the creation of an Italian dinner. Pincushions are used as tomatoes, and are made to mash down just as a real tomato would. Pads of yellow paper are sliced as a stick of butter might be, and little sugar candies (candy corns) are used to create the flickering flames on the stovetop. The manner in which these objects move is very convincing – and though all the while we know that the pieces of string are not really grated cheese, and that the rubber bands are not pasta noodles – we still can delight in their remarkable embodiment. In another short animation, *The Deep* (PES, 2010), we see a number of ordinary tools and kitchen utensils made to behave exactly like fish and other underwater creatures. Lengths of chain become waving strands of seaweed, and old keys

become darting schools of fish. And in one scene we see multiple measuring devices (calipers) that are, through the process of replacement animation, made to move and swell up just like jellyfish.

Similar to the experience of watching a celebrity in a movie role, when we watch a found-object animated film we are simultaneously aware of both the physical object's basic identity and the new animated 'persona' that the object projects. When an object is made to move in extraordinary ways through the use of stop-motion animation, then, like the book-hammer, the identifiable object momentarily becomes something else. Animation, in particular, is readily able to do this, because of the unique manner in which inanimate things can be made to move in almost any conceivable manner.

Conclusion

This article has explored some potential common ground between the disciplines of persona studies and of animation studies and it has presented some novel arguments for considering animation, objects and animated objects in terms of having a 'persona.' Because of the often significant role that humans can play in the production of an animated character – ranging from celebrity vocal performances, motion-captured animation and 'embodied' approaches to animation – it seems entirely appropriate to consider animated characters in relation to their persona. Animated objects, though not necessarily relating to human forms can also exude certain levels of 'persona' as they take on new kinds of movement and contexts, and as we continue to expand our own consideration of what an object or animated form can mean to us.

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