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Birgitta Hosea

TV 2.0

Animation Readership/Authorship on the Internet

Introduction

Traditional platforms for animation, such as broadcast television or cinema, are rapidly becoming obsolete as a new type of spectator demands more choice, the ability to interact with animated content and access to global distribution for their own user-generated work. Audiences are no longer satisfied with receiving a top down distribution of content from traditional cinema or broadcasters. Internet technologies are emerging to address this demand for active spectatorship and enable communities of interest to evolve their own alternative distribution methods.

Viewing animation online has become increasingly accessible with the mass adoption of broadband and the emergence of new file formats. TV 2.0 is an amalgamation of Internet technologies that combine video on demand with the social networking capabilities of Web 2.0. In the age of TV 2.0, the role of the viewer has increased in complexity with new possibilities for active interaction and intervention with the content displayed. This new audience seeks a form of spectatorship that can extend beyond the passive recipients of programming distributed by elite broadcasters. TV 2.0 on the Internet has changed both methods of distribution and traditional patterns for the viewing of animation. However, any potential for democratic participation in the visual culture of moving images that this could entail may be a brief historic moment before the assimilation and control of active readership by mainstream corporate culture.

This paper examines case studies of animated TV 2.0, specifically the use of the technology at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. By examining the nature of the spectator experience, the outcomes of TV 2.0 and its potential developments, this paper will demonstrate the scope for animation beyond traditional broadcasting.

TV 2.0 and patterns of spectatorship



Fig. 1 – © Birgitta Hosea 2008

are emerging to meet new demands from consumers for greater choice and interactivity. TV 2.0 refers to a hybrid of conventional broadcast television, the ubiquitous Flash video format and the

For the last few years, bandwidth issues and the confusing proliferation of file formats have constrained the growth of animation on the Internet (Wehn 2005 p.13). However, the development of digital technology such as the relentless annual increase in computer processing power, the mass adoption of broadband, greater efficiency in video compression algorithms and the near-universality of the Flash player have all combined to facilitate the viewing of animation on the Internet. TV 2.0 is a set of Internet technologies that are

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Web 2.0 standards, which enable increased interactivity such as social networking, blogging and streamlined processes to post user generated content. TV 2.0 is changing traditional patterns of viewing and distributing animation.

Historically, in the West major film studios and broadcasters performed the role of gatekeepers, controlling access to the production and distribution of most mainstream animated content. In other parts of the world, access to the means of production and distribution has been controlled by ruling political parties (Wu & Fore 2005, Mjolsness 2005). The complex and expensive technical processes involved in animation were not traditionally available to the general public, being only accessible to a limited number of skilled practitioners. Global cinema or television distribution is expensive and, therefore, distribution is usually offered to safe products that can guarantee a return on investments. The independent festival circuit, while opening its doors to a wider pool of practitioners than the mainstream, still has its gatekeepers in the form of funders, curators and programmers. These factors have combined to restrict access to both the means of animation production and the means of distribution.

Traditional mainstream classic narrative animation texts sought to involve the spectator through a process of identification with the animated character portrayed on screen. Often criticised as a passive position, it could be argued that the identification process requires spectator involvement in the production of meaning. Writing on performance in the *Poetics*, Aristotle states that an actor portrays a character through an imitation “of actions and of life”. In the performance of tragedy this ‘imitation’ arouses in the audience empathy and strong feelings of “fear and pity”. These feelings that are aroused purge the spectator of excess emotions and, thus, engender a state of “pleasurable relief” or catharsis. Naturalistic animation aims for emotional engagement with the character, whereas comic animation involves different processes. Aristotle saw comedy as an “imitation of inferior people”, indeed “the laughable is a species of what is disgraceful” (Aristotle 1996). Therefore, in Aristotelian terms, comedy can be seen as an encounter with the taboo that reinforces the moral codes of the spectator.

In order to be engaged, to feel these emotions of fear, pity or moral superiority, the viewer is required to evaluate the character being portrayed through the lens of her own lived experience; to compare what is seen performed with what she already knows. In other words, that which is seen on stage or screen is a projection of the self.

This concept of the viewer animating the viewed through a projection of her own embodied experience is developed by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. In attempt to analyse the unique ontology of photography, he adopted a phenomenological methodology in the observation of his own direct experience as a viewer. Rather than being a passive recipient of the photograph’s essential meaning, he concluded that the photographs that moved him were those in which he participated, “...suddenly a specific photograph reaches me: it animates me, and I animate it. So that is how I must name the attraction which makes it exist: animation.” (Barthes, 2000 p.20). The photograph was brought to life by his viewing. Similarly, an animated character is only brought to life in the eye of the beholder.

Although there is clearly some contribution from the individual viewer to the identification process, traditional forms of narrative have often been considered a passive experience of escapist pleasure and strategies developed to create active spectators. Bertolt Brecht, for example, sought to create a new type of theatre in which the spectator would not be manipulated by emotion, but roused to action through critical reason. Following on from Brecht, strategies of distanciation have long been a feature of experimental film practice. Intriguing and complex characters, such as those created by the Quays, defy linear comparison with lived experience. Yet however avant-

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garde the film and however critical the range of mental processes that the viewer experiences, from their seat in a darkened cinema they cannot directly physically intervene with or change the images on the screen before them.

Post-cinema, new audio-visual technologies have changed our relationship to moving images. The introduction of television introduced a degree of control over the viewing experience. It became possible to change channels or select the on/off button. With the advent of VHS it became possible to pause, rewind and fast-forward the viewing experience. The introduction of DVD led to a further enhancement of image quality, in particular the quality of the pause, which, in VHS technology, had stuttered between video fields.

Laura Mulvey (2007) argues that this technologically enhanced pause has created a new form of possessive or pensive spectatorship in which the frame can be contemplated in detail and endlessly held as the spectator desires to consume and possess the ephemeral image. DVD has introduced a degree of control in which to hold, caress or scrutinise the image, but this remains a playback technology in which **direct** intervention with the animation is not possible through the controls of the DVD player.

The arrival of VHS and new edit suites in the 1980s allowed artists to build on traditions of political collage and directly intervene with broadcast material. Scratch video was a new edit based form of practice at the borderline between artists' film and an area rapidly being reclaimed as expanded animation. Although Nam June Paik had been experimenting with video technology since the 1960s, it wasn't until the arrival of new equipment like the Sony Series V in the mid 1980s that British artists began to develop an aesthetic movement based on the video edit. According to George Barber (1990), the term "scratch video" was coined in 1984 by Pat Sweeney influenced by New York hip-hop artists like Grandmaster Flash.

Scratch video artists like Barber recorded source material from broadcast television and rhythmically edited multiple copies of the images to produce video art resonating with political satire. In his film *Branson* (1984), for example, Barber rhythmically edited together a series of 'ums' and 'ers': those speech impediments usually omitted from broadcast interviews. Reminiscent of modernist photomontage such as that by the Dadaist, Hannah Höch, who re-appropriated and re-assembled images from mainstream media such as illustrated newspapers, books and magazines; in scratch video image sources were appropriated and re-assembled in a direct intervention with material that had been broadcast. These rhythmic visuals were more at home in the nightclub than the art establishment.

The development of digital technology has allowed consumers to access edit suite tools that were once the preserve of a small group of skilled technicians. Digital non-linear editing has profoundly changed the relationship of the viewer to the animation or film that they are viewing. The experience of spectatorship is no longer that of consumption. Through ripping DVDs and downloading clips from the Internet, the viewer can finally possess the image and can also alter the image, re-edit and re-distribute it in new forms and combinations.

Traditions of re-appropriation that can be traced from film montage and political collage through to scratch video continue online on sites such as Jib Jab. Internet users also directly intervene with 'official' video and animation content in the form of 'mashups'. Reminiscent of scratch video, the user will take broadcast, cinematic or games content out of its original context and re-edit it. Examples online include footage from the *Final Fantasy* game re-animated and edited into a parody of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* video (moondawg 2007) and *Finding Nemo* footage re-cut to the soundtrack of the *Crash* trailer (Knight 2007). Another usage of re-

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appropriated and re-animated footage occurs with the phenomenon of visual pitching in which filmmakers cut up old films and re-present them as an illustration of a new film that they would like to make (myvisualpitch.com 2008). Online viewers are able to download, re-appropriate and re-distribute images, hacking and re-assembling the imagery of corporate culture, altering its context and disrupting the original meaning.

Online animation consumers also obsessively collect and share their knowledge about animation. YouTube, one of the most popular websites in the world, is an ever expanding archive holding out a promise of endless fulfilment in bite sized chunks. Animation fans upload rare and censored material such as banned *Betty Boop* cartoons or scenes from the stop motion doll epic *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (Todd Haynes, 1987). Large institutions are following suit. The BFI and the National Gallery are both putting parts of their archives on YouTube.

The citizen journalist has become a familiar feature of mainstream TV news coverage, contributing mobile phone and home video footage of breaking news stories. The riots at the opening of a new IKEA store in North London in 2005 happened so spontaneously that they were exclusively captured on the mobile phones of onlookers and this footage was used in the TV news coverage. The advent of TV 2.0, however, means more than broadcasters accepting non-broadcast standard media that is created by the general public. Bloggers, vloggers and YouTube users are able to post their own political stories that are neither covered nor sanctioned by the mainstream media such as the homophobic murder of Lawrence King (Hudson, 2008). The general public have been enabled to show their own films directly to a global audience on the Internet without the permission of a broadcasting authority. Thus, the means of production and distribution are taken into the hands of the audience.

An earlier usage of animation online was for marketing purposes – to create an audience for cinema and television releases (Wehn 2005 p.24). Contemporary technology, however, is engendering an active viewer able to generate and distribute her own content for an online audience. The means of animation production itself is now more accessible. Software such as Flash, stop-motion freeware and consumer DV cameras have enabled a wave of 'lo-fi' animation created on home computers and distributed via Internet based networks. Online culture and the accessibility of Flash software have coincided with generational movements of cultural re-definition to create mass interest in Internet animation in countries such as China (Wu & Fore 2005). As well as contributing to the development of new visual aesthetics, new methods of creating animation have also led to the development of hybrid forms such as algorithmic animation, interactive animation, machinima and mashup.

In addition to creating their own content, hacking images from the mainstream and setting up their own distribution networks, these new active online spectators are also building their own critical communities. Communities of viewers are created on YouTube channels through lists of 'friends' that subscribe to them and can offer feedback through comments and ratings. Being a 'friend' registers an ongoing personal interest in an Internet TV channel, blog or web page. It



Fig. 2 – © Birgitta Hosea 2008

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makes the viewer visible, albeit obscured by a pseudonym or avatar. The process of being 'friends' demonstrates commitment in a field dominated by the short attention span. It also enables peer review and feedback. Other sites allow subscription by RSS feed, which automatically relays new developments on a site.

The citizen broadcaster is also the citizen critic blogging about, commenting on and rating items seen. This communal criticism results in judgement by wiki, by the mass audience. The level of criticism may tend to be shallow, yet this fundamentally challenges the traditional notion of broadcaster or film studio as gatekeeper of distribution and the traditional critic as gatekeeper of quality.

This new audience does not only interact with animation in order to play games online, but also distributes their own user-generated material, creates archives and reference libraries of bookmarks on del.ici.ous, peer reviews, subscribes and criticises. Reminiscent of the 1970s do-it-yourself punk aesthetic, TV 2.0 allows viewers to distribute their own content for free, to build alternative distribution models based on networks between communities of interest and to critically interact with the content viewed.

Case studies at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London

Central Saint Martins has striven to utilise social networking and TV 2.0 to facilitate reflective practice and to develop virtual communities of creative practitioners who peer review and comment on each other's work.

Blogging is a reflective process used on the Character Animation course at Central Saint Martins as a pedagogical strategy. An alternative to sketchbooks, blogging provides a method to document the development process involved in the creation of animation. Originally, the students were asked to keep reflective sketchbooks, because the course philosophy is to assess students on their progress and development as well as the final product in the form of a finished animation. The blogs were originally intended to document the process behind their final films that were created in conjunction with the National Gallery's *Transcriptions* project. The initiative behind the use of blogging came from the students as many of them were already keeping blogs. Students post works in progress on their blogs: animatics, sketches, mood boards, versions of character designs, storyboards, rough drafts and other animation development work. Their blogs display linked animations that they have posted on sites such as Vimeo or You Tube.

Re-mediating the sketchbook, the blog becomes more than a digital archive of personal and creative development. Networks of friends that have subscribed to the blogs progressively add comments and these networks have grown from personal contacts to include interested professionals providing detailed technical feedback. The National Gallery created an online portal to both the films and the blogs, which has ensured an audience beyond the classroom.

Another web based initiative originating from the Innovation Centre at Central Saint Martins is Fifzine. The name derives from an amalgamation of Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame and the word 'magazine'. It is a social networking site for the creative community, yet unlike a site such as Facebook, this is not a place for holiday photographs, but for creative practice in the form of a portfolio. It is free to join and open to all creatives, who can each have their own portfolio page featuring examples of writing, audio, still or moving image work, illustrations and animations. These portfolios can have 'friends' and comments and feedback are invited.

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The Fifzine Minutes section is a showcase gallery with exposure time determined by users of the site. All the work is guaranteed exposure for twenty-four hours, and in a homage to Andy Warhol, after then each user's vote gives fifteen minutes more exposure for a piece of work. 'Sticky content' in the form of a changing magazine section and regular competitions attracts users to the site. Although it is still in BETA, it has already attracted thousands of people, including the animation company Bermuda Shorts, to set up a portfolio page and recruitment agencies use it to source new talent.

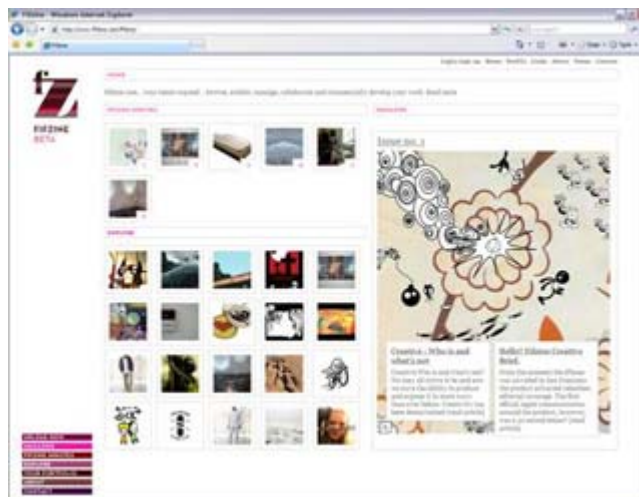


Fig. 3 – © www.fifzine.com 2007

These case studies demonstrate how Internet users are posting their own work, exercising choice over their viewing and inviting peer review. Utilising social networking as a pedagogical strategy allows the work of animation students to reach a potential global audience beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom.

Active readership and assimilation

According to the theory of remediation, an emerging form will incorporate forms that preceded it. As the Internet evolves a unique identity, web designers have used a series of metaphors from older media to display animated content. The new is understood through the lens of the past. User interface metaphors include the gallery, the sketchbook, the newspaper, the 'zine, the portfolio and, now, the TV channel. As people turn away from watching television towards the Internet, a change in advertising is also becoming apparent. There are confident predictions that within one year online advertising will have overtaken the market share currently occupied by broadcast (McCashey, 2008). Online companies such as Blip TV use the language of democracy and accessibility in order to generate advertising revenue from the citizen broadcasters.

“A new class of entertainment is emerging that is being made by the people without the support of billion-dollar multinationals. Our mission is to support these people by taking care of all the problems a budding videoblogger, podcaster or Internet TV producer tends to run into. We'll take care of the servers, the software, the workflow, the advertising and the distribution. We leave you free to focus on creativity... You deserve to make money from your hard work. That's why blip.tv works with as many video ad networks as possible to make you money. If you have a hit show we'll use our own sales force to sell a sponsorship. We share everything we make for you 50/50.”
(Blip TV 2008)

Although there are currently hundreds of sites competing for our attention as Internet TV viewers or creators, a comparison with the history of film or animation, in which many small studios and companies were taken over and incorporated into a few major corporations; could indicate that a few major corporations will end up dominating the Internet. Another parallel is with the plethora of small independent record labels set up during the punk era of the 1970's and early 1980's that were gradually assimilated into a few major record labels. In a climate of corporate take-over, restricting the amount of creators and distributors ensures maximised profit margins for the few that survive. Advertisers are continually seeking new methods of capturing and controlling our viewing and shopping patterns. The restriction of our viewing to fewer

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portals would enable a more effective distribution of advertising messages. Consumers are reassured by a gatekeeper associated with an established brand – such as the BBC’s iPlayer – as opposed to confronting the vastness of choice thrown up by the seemingly limitless territories of a Google search. Lev Manovich states that the next stage in the evolution of digital media is “the need for new technologies to store, organize, and efficiently access” the unprecedented amount of information now available to us (2001 p.35). Could a desire for ease of access to content lead to a monopoly by portals that make choices on our behalf, that become the new gatekeepers?

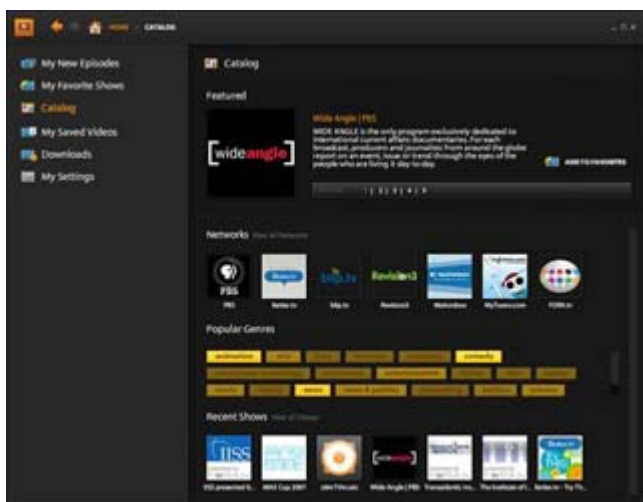


Fig. 4 – © Adobe Media Player BETA 2007

A vast catalogue of content is available for download or viewing online in full screen and the software can make recommendations about programmes that it thinks you might want to watch. Although content from traditional broadcasters will be shown, it will be possible for the general public to submit user generated content to the catalogue for free, if it does not contain advertising.

The response of traditional broadcasters to changes in viewing patterns has been to seek to accommodate them. Advertisers, in particular, have always appropriated new forms of expression in the rapacious search for the latest youth trends. George Barber (1990) described the appropriation of the style and grammar of artists’ scratch art video by the commercial sector in the 1980s for a renewal of broadcast television. Youth and Music programming, in particular, adopted the visual language and editing style of the scratch video scene using artists as the “unpaid R & D department of big business” (Barber, 1990 p.120). Since then, pop videos, idents and opening title sequences are now the site of experimental moving image practice once limited to the avant-garde.

Similarly, contemporary broadcast and cinema content providers – the traditional gatekeepers of the moving image - seek to incorporate the new active forms of spectatorship in order to renew their models of broadcast and distribution. The BBC has launched the iPlayer, which allows Internet users to access broadcast content from the last seven days on demand for free. In addition, they aim to harness the potential of user-generated content and discover new talent through their web site.

Warner Bros have a cartoon mashup competition website where you are permitted to re-edit their footage, giving them even more mileage from classic cartoons. Radical forms of re-appropriation, such as mash-up, are themselves re-appropriated for marketing purposes. Addictive TV, the VJ artists, was officially sanctioned by the film studio to distribute their Antonio Banderas mashup due to its value as viral advertising.

Next generation software, like Adobe Media Player, which is currently in BETA, aim to become the primary method of viewing Internet TV. This software will allow the user increased choice and customization of their own viewing experience with fully integrated advertising. Free to download and using the same peer-to-peer technology pioneered by Internet pirates, the software will show high quality legal content for free. As the content will be free, it will be financed by transparent adverts that can float above the video content. Advertising can also take the form of clickable hotspots embedded in the video files that could link to advertiser’s information. A vast

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Television itself has adopted the use and language of user-generated content. Broadcast television channels now feature YouTube inspired 'youth' programmes showing the most popular video clips from the Internet and undermining any possibility for a counter culture in opposition to the mainstream.

Conclusion

New Internet technology has resulted in an active form of spectatorship. As patterns of viewing change, the online spectator now combines the roles of reader, author, archivist, distributor and critic. This active engagement with the text extends Brecht's notion of creating a spectator who would be roused to action rather than pacified by emotion. No longer a passive recipient or 'fan', through the use of digital technology on the Internet, the audience have taken over the means of production, criticism and distribution.

The case study of the projects at Central Saint Martins has demonstrated how animation and TV 2.0 can be used to enhance not only the teaching experience but also the creative processes. Whereas in the past animation students would only have had limited access to distribution through the festival circuit, they are now able to distribute their films globally online. They post not only finished projects, but also their working processes through reflective blogs that invite feedback and peer review through social networking. This can aid their educational development and at the same time widens their potential audience.

Online culture and the mass consumption of digital technology are frequently referred to as part of a democratisation of visual culture (Wehn 2005 p.5). A familiar counter argument asserts that this is not the case, because access to digital culture is not universal. A technocracy is seen to be emerging in which a digital divide exists between those with access to computers and the knowledge of how to use them and those who do not. Indeed, technology is far from neutral and evolves in ways that privilege a quick profit rather than a commitment to a democratic equality of access. In the future, it could be more profitable to restrict choice and access than to continue with the freedoms that are currently enjoyed. Indeed, any radical or truly democratic possibilities for active reader/authors could be seen as being slowly eroded by the emergence of new gatekeepers from mainstream corporate culture.

It is important then to study and document, not only the aesthetics of new forms of animation that are distributed on the Internet (Wehn 2005, Wu & Fore 2005, Mjolsness 2005), but also the fundamental changes in patterns of spectatorship as evidenced in 'fan' communities, social networking, alternative patterns of distribution, pedagogic models and wiki – criticism, before the freedoms and accessibility that are currently afforded on the Internet are restricted by the emergence of technological cartels. 

Birgitta Hosea is Course Director of Character Animation at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London. This paper was presented at the PCA/ACA Annual Conference, San Francisco, March 2008.

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