

Craft Notes for ANIMATORS

A Perspective on a 21st Century Career

ED HOOKS



Craft Notes for Animators

“The combination of addressing both storytelling and acting in the context of history is terrific, and very practical. [. . .] Overall I think this is the type of book that would be terrific for aspiring indie animators, and would even help Big Box Studios find the art in their piles of money.”

Professor Ronald Sumner, *Studio & Digital Arts*,
Liberty University

If Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* represented the animation industry’s infancy, Ed Hooks thinks that the current production line of big-budget features is its artistically awkward adolescence. While a well-funded marketing machine can conceal structural flaws, uneven performances and superfluous characters, the importance of crafted storytelling will only grow in importance as animation becomes a broader, more accessible art form.

Craft Notes for Animators analyzes specific films – including *Frozen* and *Inside Out* – to explain the secrets of creating truthful stories and believable characters. It is an essential primer for tomorrow’s industry leaders and animation artists.

Ed Hooks pioneered acting training specifically designed for animators. After a successful 30-year career as an actor and acting teacher, Ed began working with animators in 1996. Since then, he has taught for most major international animation studios and schools, including Walt Disney Animation, Framestore, Ringling College of Art and Design, Bournemouth University, Communication University of China, DreamWorks, Valve Software, EA, Epic, Microsoft, Filmakademie Baden-Wurttemberg, Blizzard and Sony. He has presented several times at SIGGRAPH and GDC and is on the Board of Advisors for FMX in Stuttgart, Germany.



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Ed Hooks

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For Cally

“To get the full value of joy you must have someone to divide it with.”

Mark Twain



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Introduction

This is an acting book – but with a difference. In my first Routledge book, *Acting for Animators* (revised third edition, 2011), I presented all the finite acting techniques necessary for animating a strong performance – that scenes begin in the middle, that emotion tends to lead to physical action, the urgency of having your character pursue a provable objective, the purpose of obstacle-conflict in a scene and so on. All of that is indeed essential knowledge, but it is also true that acting is not a craft that exists in isolation. An animator cannot simply master a bag of acting tricks. It is not enough to get the timing right and to make the characters appear to move naturally. Acting is, at root, an affair of the heart, and it has everything in the world to do with story; if the story is sketchy and the characters are underdeveloped, even the most talented character animator cannot fix it.

This is also a book of opinion, mainly about the state of art in animated feature films. I have done my best to support opinion with facts contemporary and historical, but, at the end of the day, the primary reason for the book is so that I can share with you what I think about the current ebb and flow of feature animation and dispense a little advice about how to navigate the shifting waters.

It should come as no surprise that Disney and a few other big Hollywood movie studios have monetized feature animation. American enterprise is seemingly able to monetize anything, including religious holidays, education, and the evening news. Disney has led the way in turning animated storytelling into feature-length commercials for action-figure toys, the Disney brand, theme parks and a dictionary-long list of licensed merchandise. It also should come as no surprise that governments all around the world are attempting, via tax incentives and occasional direct investment, to get a slice of that rich animation pie. Schools have joined the parade, offering animation training that sometimes amounts to little more than instruction in the care and feeding of animation software.

Animation has never been accorded the critical respect of live action. There are libraries full of scholarly books examining film as an art form, from Sergei Eisenstein's *Film Sense* (1942) to Pauline Kael's *I Lost It at the Movies* (1965), Robert Bresson's *Notes on Cinematography* (1975), Francois Truffaut's wonderful *The Films in My Life* (1985) and Walter Murch's *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing* (1995). Animation, on the other hand, is rarely acknowledged to be an art form, and it has been relegated to the children's corner. Maybe Walt Disney himself is partially to blame because, with Midwestern modesty, he steadfastly refused to think of himself or his now-famous Nine Old Men cartoonists as artists other than in the most literal sense. Walt equated "artist" with more effete term "artiste." "I never called my work an 'art,'" he said. "It's part of show business, the business of building entertainment." It was Walt Disney who first set up the automobile-style assembly-line film production model that is used today by all the major studios, including Pixar and DreamWorks. Rather than starting with an idea that is begging to be a movie, the big studios start with a preannounced release date and a pile of money, resulting in a parade of formulaic movies designed for "the entire family." Director Brad Bird (*The Iron Giant*, *The Incredibles*) put his finger on the matter when, appearing at a 2013 fundraiser for California Institute of the Arts, he asked, "Where's the **Francis Ford Coppola** or the **Alfonso Cuaron** of the field? . . . Why can't there be an *Annie Hall*? . . . Why does it always have to be cute?"¹

Technologically, animation has grown up. Artistically, its growth is stunted. Computer graphics revolutionized the industry, streamlining the assembly line. Until 1965, when Walt Disney financed the California Institute of the Arts, there were no animation schools at all, anywhere in the world. If a young person aspired to a career as an animator – back then, referred to as a "cartoonist" – he or she would sharpen some pencils and start sketching, hoping to later find a working pro who might act as a mentor. After computer graphics (CG) arrived, schools appeared on the international map wholesale, advertising quick and easy entry into a "glamorous, high-paying career." The training consisted – and often still does – of mastering animation software such as Maya. Consequently, the schools have graduated a generation of "animation technicians" rather than "animation artists." An international overabundance of these technicians has led to more and more "outsourcing" and a loss of work in Western countries. Animators in India, Japan and Thailand are paid half

as much as their counterparts in the United States and Great Britain. The status quo frustrates everybody.

Part of the solution for all parties is to start treating animation more as the art form it is and less as a commodity. Animation producers in the Middle and Far East must develop their own original movie ideas instead of trying to copy what Hollywood is doing. Animation producers in the West must make more meaningful movies with lower budgets that are designed for narrower demographic audiences. It is not necessary to spend US\$200 million on an animated feature film, which is typically what the major Hollywood studios spend. Art is a singular activity, the product of one person's mind and personal values. It is not the product of group-think and "brain trusts," as the executives at Pixar suggest. It is emphatically not something to be produced on an assembly line, like so many Toyota Prius automobiles. Hayao Miyazaki, cofounder of Studio Ghibli, is an artist. He is retired now, but, when he was actively making movies, he made one only when he had one to make and had something to say, not when he had a yearly quota to meet or a Wall Street broker to please.

The good news is that, like fragile, pale-green sprouts appearing in a freshly tilled garden, a few serious-minded animated feature films are being produced. They are coming out of Ireland, Israel, Spain, Japan, Brazil and Australia, and their producers struggle to make a profit. They have comparatively modest production budgets and creative financing models and are often coproductions involving animators in more than one country. The United States, which took the lead in developing animation to its current level of technical sophistication, is a notable laggard in adult-themed feature film. *Anomalisa*, a stop-motion film written and codirected by Charlie Kaufman, is an outlier with its story about a lonely man suffering from existential angst. Significantly, it was nominated for an Academy Award in 2016, which indicates that there is a market for such movies.

I am including acting-story analyses of a half-dozen films in this book, beginning with Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and ending with Ari Folman's antiwar *Waltz with Bashir*. A lot of work went into these deconstructions, and I urge you to take advantage of them. DVD copies and Internet downloads of the films are neither difficult nor

expensive to obtain, and you can follow along on a scene-by-scene basis with my notes. The analyses function as a private acting class for you, as I try to explain basic acting theory and how it applies in the real world. I hope you enjoy working on the films with me, and I welcome your feedback. I am online much more than I ought to be and am always happy to hear from individuals who share my passion for animation as an art form.

The time is ripe for change. Hollywood has gone as far as it is going to go creatively and has become a massive merchandising machine. Animation is increasingly international. There are new financing and production models for feature films, new models for videogames and new avenues of distribution. The entire industry is becoming less Hollywood-centric. A new and exciting generation of animation artists is on stage, merely waiting for a role to play. If you count yourself among them, this book is for you.

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Note

1 www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ratatouille-director-brad-bird-wants-417960.

Part 1

Infancy

“The infant learns to dream what is imaginable and to train his expectations on what promises to prove possible.”

Erik Erikson¹

An actor knows that you learn more about a character by looking at what is hidden – at secrets and longings – than by focusing on what is displayed. That is why I have long been interested in Walt Disney, not only for the way he led his animators in pioneering empathetic performance in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* but because of the man himself. Animators today, in the early years of the 21st century, are in an analogous situation to Disney’s in the mid-1930s, the period during which he put *Snow White* into production. Now, as then, the industry has reached a plateau. In the mid-’30s, when the industry was in its infancy, animation was generally thought of as “cartoons,” and everybody knew for certain that cartoons were short in length and were best suited to be curtain raisers for feature-length live-action movies. Today, we have a thriving and immensely profitable feature animation industry, and everybody knows for certain that animated movies are best suited for children and that they make a powerful marketing tool. Then, as now, Walt Disney’s studio selected and played the tune to which the rest of the industry danced. The big difference, of course, is that Walt died in 1966 and is no longer at the helm. The Disney Company today is the North Star of the animation industry, but its priorities have reversed since the time when Walt was running things. He personally placed a strong emphasis on storytelling, and merchandising was a secondary consideration. In 2016, the Disney Company is all about money making, “tent-pole” films, franchises, spinoffs and merchandising. Storytelling, while important, tends toward boilerplate and lacks creative inspiration. For the Disney Company, as well as its imitator studios, animated films have become entertainment widgets, commodity and an essential element in giant commercial enterprises. That is why now, as the industry becomes less Hollywood-centric, more international and transitions into its maturity, it is an opportune

time to revisit its infancy. Walt Disney was not only a pioneer; as it has turned out, he is also a guide.

Many biographical articles, books and filmed documentaries about Walt Disney's life and accomplishments are referenced in the bibliography of this book. They mostly highlight career landmarks, early business struggles, the development of animation itself and his ultimate financial success, but I keep coming back to the fact that he literally signed his movies, putting his name in the title. It wasn't *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*; it was *Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Walt Disney's Pinocchio*. He did this even though he balked at giving screen credit to anybody else, including the animators who made the movies ("I'm sorry that we can't give individual credit, but every subject is the product of a hundred minds. It is purely an organization creation").² Also, the name of the company was changed from Disney Brothers Studio to the Walt Disney Studio in 1926. Given that Walt and his brother Roy were equal partners, this change tends to raise an eyebrow. The net result was that Walt Disney personally placed himself – and himself alone – above the title. What motivated him to accomplish so much? His artistic contributions were Shakespearean in scope.

To the 1950s American public, he was the kindly, good-humored, generous "Uncle Walt" who showed up on television each week, but if you scratch the surface even a little bit, you discover that this persona was largely an act. In fact, he was an often-frazzled workaholic, pushing himself so hard that he experienced at least one full-tilt nervous breakdown, in 1931 ("I guess I was working too hard and worrying too much. I was expecting more from my artists than they were giving me, and all I did all day was pound, pound, pound. Costs were going up; each new picture we finished cost more to make than we had figured it would . . . so I cracked up. I became irritable and I couldn't sleep. I reached a point where I couldn't even talk over the telephone without crying. I was an emotional flap.")³ Walt Disney was the fourth of five children, born in Chicago in 1901 into financially precarious circumstances during an era in American history when there was no social safety net at all – no unemployment insurance or Social Security, no support for families fallen on hard times. His emotionally distant, stern father, Elias, struggled to support the family, trying his hand at a half-dozen different blue-collar professions – machinist on the railroad, construction worker, newspaper

and milk delivery, farmer and carpenter. Elias was politically a socialist, an enthusiastic supporter of Eugene Debs, which is an interesting factoid given that Walt Disney's legacy would one day be footnoted for his extreme right-wing, anti-union, anticommunist political views. Perhaps more significant than anything else, Elias never had much use for cartoons. He didn't consider drawing pictures to be a worthy occupation for a grown man. This raises the question of whether part of Walt's motivation to succeed was a need to please his dad. Walt's mother, Flora, was a mostly silent, long-suffering and mediating figure in the Disney home. A former grammar-school teacher, she did the best she could for her large family, which often lived in homes that had neither indoor heating nor electricity. The Disney house was traditional in every sense: Flora took care of the kids, and Elias brought home the bacon. Their childrearing philosophy was straightforward: "Spare the rod, spoil the child" (Proverbs 13:24). Walt expressed an early interest in cartooning and then, after some early professional fits and starts, migrated to Los Angeles in 1923. In 1925, he and his brother Roy made a \$400 down payment on the Hyperion Avenue plot of land upon which would be built the first Disney Animation Studio. He married Lillian Marie Bounds, one of the ink-and-paint girls in that first Disney Studio, and they raised two daughters, one of whom was adopted. He was a lifelong chain smoker – unfiltered Lucky Strikes mostly – which no doubt hastened his death from lung cancer at age 65 in 1966.

He became the CEO of an industry-defining animation studio, but he was personally not much of an animator. He could not even draw a presentable image of Mickey Mouse! He was a high school dropout who, for all of his ultimate financial success, was never ostentatious. He never lived in a mansion or dressed in expensive suits. He didn't own a yacht or buy his own South Seas island. His one extravagance was the scale-model steam engine he built to ride around in circles in his own backyard. According to one of Disney's most astute biographers, Neal Gabler, even Walt's wife, Lillian, could not understand why the family was so frequently scraping for money. After all, she said, he was the world-famous Walt Disney!⁴ He showed one face to the public – confident, empathetic, good-humored, hard working – but saw quite a different one when he looked in the mirror. And yet, nobody in the history of the United States more precisely enunciated the American character. Walt's values were our values, and the movies he produced were a conduit from him to us.