
TEACHING ANIMATION AND THE UNIVERSE

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In Kafka's story *Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor* (1915), a lonely aging man finds himself one day in a strange situation: two small celluloid blue striped balls are jumping up and down, side by side, on the parquet in his room. Especially annoying for him is the fact that they insist on doing that behind his back.

After some unsuccessful trials to get rid of them, Blumfeld has an idea: He will fall back on his bed, and since the balls insist on remaining always behind his back, he will crash them.

But then, another thought occurs to him: what if the crashed balls simply go on jumping?

"No," he answers his own question — or maybe it is Kafka's voice, answering for him, "even the unusual must have its limits."

What is common to all animated creations, in all their countless forms, is that they all deal, this way or another, with creating a universe. *As* in the real universe, also the animated one seems at first to be infinite: a borderless place, where everything is possible. But this first impression is deceiving: actually every universe has its own set of invisible, yet unbreakable, rules. Such rules, as we have all learned from science — as well as from the Bible — are actually what separate a meaningful universe from chaos. They can be either simple or complex, but their existence is inevitable.

Every animation filmmaker comes during his career upon the paradox that rules and limitations actually stimulate creativity, rather than reducing it. Such limitations help defining the animated universe and its borders, thus, many times enabling a greater creative freedom than without them. Often, the stricter the limitations are, the more creative freedom they enable.

Based on this notion, I initiated in HFF-Potsdam¹ — the film school where I teach — a course with the title: *Design for Animation*. "Design" in this case refers not only to form, but also to concept, narrative, timing and Dramatic structure; in other words: to the entire animated universe.

In that course, which aims at the first year's students, a series of short exercises is given, each one having its own set of rules and strict limitations. Using only a limited palette of cinematic means, the students produce each time a mini-film, which, in spite of its small scale, contains already all the components of a larger film: concept, narrative, design and direction.

Still, having to follow imposed rules, the students are prevented from using the language they are accustomed to, a language, which they might too soon consider as their artistic language. Exactly because of the artificial nature of the limitations, the students find themselves exploring new, unfamiliar grounds.

Here are some examples for such exercises:

- Making a film using only a single sheet of white paper.
 - Creating a defined atmosphere, using only black and white abstract forms.
 - Making a narrative film using only one picture.
 - Making a film, in which the main subject is absent.
- After doing a series of such exercises, the

students can return to their own world, having already the experience of a traveler. That experience enriches and sometime even transforms their artistic world.

This practice, however, doesn't have to be limited only to beginners' exercises. It could be successfully implied also on later personal pieces — as I myself tend to do in my own films.

Usually, after the first year of basic animation studies, the students go on making more ambitious projects, in which they usually invest long months, sometimes years. Sooner or later, they all come to the point where the real creative work is already behind them, and what is left now is the production of their vision, trying to optimize its artistic and technical quality. As a result, inevitably, the freshness and innovativeness, which often characterize the first year, make room for a tedious and repetitious work, unavoidable in the case of animation, but seldom satisfying the student's creative urge.

In order to refresh these innovativeness and creativity, I created a workshop: *Animation unplugged*. During this workshop, the students make short personal films within the time frame of four days. Here, the same principles are being practiced as in the basic course: the students are given clearly defined parameters, as well as a strict deadline, and the paradox works again: often their creativity in that workshop equals or even exceeds the one of their more elaborated projects.

Here is an example to such an assignment: on the first hour of the first day, the participants get a list of words, to which they write their free personal associations. These associations are used later as material from which they develop their personal stories. The process of story deve-

loping takes in this case only a few hours, after which they already get into production. An important component of the given task, in addition to the free associations, is the defining of a conflict. There are different ways to do it, but in any case, once the participants define their conflicts, they usually manage to make up good stories within a surprisingly short time.

Here, the power of strict limitation proves itself again, and often this highly intensive experience makes the students rediscover their spontaneity and creativity.

This *multi-universe* attitude is integrated further in the broader concept of the animation department in the HFF, enabling a large variety of approaches to animation filmmaking. The fruits of this attitude can be already seen in the further projects done by the school's graduates, such as the studio *Talking Animals* in Berlin. This young studio manages to successfully bring this open approach to animation into the market, and is rapidly becoming a significant force in the German animation scene.

Here lies maybe the answer to a question that is often being asked referring to animation teaching: should animation be taught as a profession or as an art form?

My view is that there is no contradiction between the two. On the contrary: not only that creativity and originality can influence the market and reshape its needs, but also creativity itself is often a desired product: the present revolution in animation in techniques, presentation platforms and economical models, has led to an increasing need for creative contents.

Therefore, the strategy I believe schools should use, is to ignore to a certain extent what seems to be actual trends in the animation

market, and let the students follow as much as possible their own personal artistic and spiritual tendencies. The exercises and limitations, which I integrate in my lessons, aim at this purpose too: to help the students shape their own world, making it as personal and true as possible.

That leads to the other paradox, which stands in the base of animation teaching: if a film school aspires to establish the economic success of the animation medium in its country, it should encourage exactly the *spiritual* or “non practical” sides of it: free imagination, originality, and personal expression. This is the energy that enables the complex animated organism to grow and eventually give fruit.

...In the following morning, still lying on his back, Blumfeld wakes up. The balls are still there, behind his back; and they are still jumping. But, they were not crushed; they simply went under his bed.

Their solution was simple, creative, and still made complete sense. Isn't it what animation is about?



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Endnotes

1 Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen “Konrad Wolf”, Potsdam-Babelsberg, Germany.

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