

Three Ways Of Avoiding Animation

By Richard O'Connor

The art of animation deserves no exceptional affection and I offer it none. Every lecture to undergraduates exhorting them to obsessively devote themselves to the form marks another little black check on the soul. In college I studied history -and loved it. I worked in theatre -and loved it. I'm writing this standing on a crowded subway - and I love it. Cursed intellectual polygamy. History, theatre, moving pictures, the morning F train: records and instruments of change.

Educational programming holds no solemn devotion to the purity of the animation medium. In the business of teaching the alphabet, the children's programmer will pursue any means of conveying ABCs. WGBH, the Public Broadcasting affiliate in Boston, had already contracted us for eight animated bits within a two-episode pilot for an preschool literacy programme called [Between the Lions](#) when they sent over a ninth script. They had seen a music video we made for Nickelodeon, Hockey Monkey, which was a mixture of animation and live action. They liked the energy of Hockey Monkey and imagined [Sloppy Pop](#) animated in the same vein. The song was a first person lyric extolling the letters "O" and "P" and the many words they help form. "Sure this could be animated," we thought, "but wouldn't it be better to have some skinny dude in red tights jump around in a swimming pool of mush?" The humor of "sloppiness" could be best exploited with the human actor.



"Kids Love the Monkey". Made for Nickelodeon's "Ka-Blam!" in 2000, "Hockey Monkey" used undercranked live action, cel animation, a painted cut outs.



"Sloppy Pop" was made in 2001 for Sirius Thinking and WGBH/Boston's "Between the Lions". The Art Deco monolith in the background is the Brooklyn Public Library

Few essential elements distinguish live action from animation production. Live action is early morning. Often a battle against nature, the producer squeezes the most from a day that typically begins before dawn. For me, the shoot really begins the night before in the single-digit hours of darkness at the all night supermarket. Proper food is the backbone of a live shoot: baby carrots and hummus, wheat thins, tortilla chips, small containers of bottled water. After a short nap, pack and triple check the gear. Make sure the batteries are charged. Make sure you've got enough oatmeal.

My strongest memory of the Sloppy Pop shoot is driving to the location around 7:30am suppressing a chuckle at Howard Stern on the radio. That's because shooting live action is awful. A torturous experience pushed into dark mental recesses along with alien abductions and the 2000 election. What horrors could a hypnotist reveal about the shoot for Sloppy Pop? The inability to find the right costumes: happily solved when we found

red Star Trek shirts with matching tights. The first shoot date: rained out. The \$1500 location fee to the Brooklyn Public Library who wouldn't even let us use the bathroom. The giant letters constantly blowing over. The drummer's agent insisting that he was about to "break big" and giving us an incredibly hard time (the line "Ever hear of 'Easy Reader'?" held no sway). The actor playing the cop with his "wide feet" insisting on special shoes. The real on-set rental cop and the corresponding kick back. And slop. Lots of slop.

Animation, on the other hand, is late night. Animators often doddle about until 6.00pm, then work until 1.00am. I gravitate towards animation because I'm a sissy. The pain is spread out over a few months instead of laser pointed into a single day.

Film production usually employs the skills of numerous specialists -actors, cameramen, lighting designers, editors, and on and on. Depending on the project, my studio will work with a number of artists in ever-changing capacities. My associate, Brian O'Connell, and myself are always involved in the creative development and management of a film, very often executing much of the detail work too. Some pieces we execute almost exclusively ourselves -this is generally out of financial consideration. In animation production, we prefer to work with a small pool of animators -the people who create the dozens of pieces of art that appear to move across the screen. To credit the superlative, we most often call on Tissa David, Ed Smith, and Compton for drawn animation. An animator works in unlimited illustration styles. They'll draw something like Superman as easily as they'll draw Mickey Mouse or a New Yorker cartoon. While we like to work with the same animators, we also like to work with different illustrators, or character designers as much as possible. These artists typically create the foundation of a film -the look and the movement. They are supported by a varying number of assistants and production artists who will fill in details, redraw the animation cleaner and in ink, color hundreds of drawings and sequence them all so they playback in time.

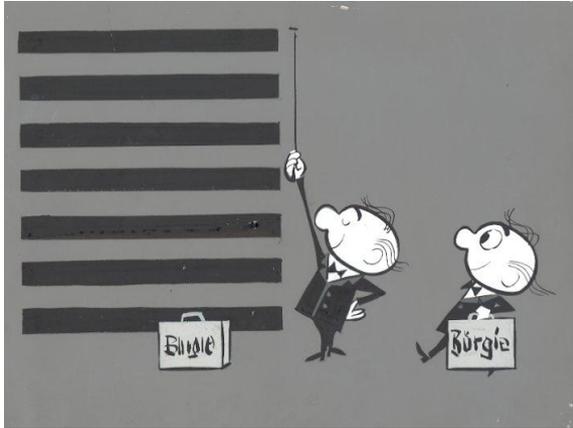
My production team often gets called to incorporate frame-by-frame filmmaking with live action. Many artists get paralyzed by technique. They master a particular style and approach every problem from that perspective. This tendency is reinforced by commercial demands. A director known for comedy, for example, is rarely asked to lead a production of Hamlet. Although it may be commercial suicide, I prefer to allow each script to dictate its own cinematic form. Sometimes the technique is animation- three dimensional, collage, illustrated -sometimes it's live action. Sometimes is an amalgam of both. Paramount Pictures called us to make an ["educational film" to explain all the secrets in The Stepford Wives](#) (Frank Oz, 2004) because of our fluency with live action as well as animation and because we offered narrative and comedic solutions not just technical tricks.

The initial problem -and for a time the only problem -was the look. The goal was to create a piece inspired by the ["duck and cover"](#) films of the 1950s without directly mimicking them. In a subtle übertext, our film was meant to be the product of men whose last encounter with art was in their teen years and who thought their goofy middlebrow creation was film in its highest form. That said, it still needed to be well done. Brian O'Connell, my partner at Asterisk, drew a storyboard based on Paul Rudnick's script. We asked three illustrators to come up with character designs for the Dour Woman, and the Stepford Woman . We presented the boards and designs and waited.

Commercial jobs are typically "triple bid". Contractors ask three production companies to come up with their own approach to the project and their own budgets and schedules. When this is an open process, it's fair. Jobs are awarded based on the best solutions. Sometimes the client already has their mind made up, yet they still make people go through the motions. In this case we were in competition with one other company. So

we waited.

I was in London when Brian called to say we had landed the contract. I happened to buy a disco "Cookie Monster" LP[2] that day in what may have been a celebratory precognition.

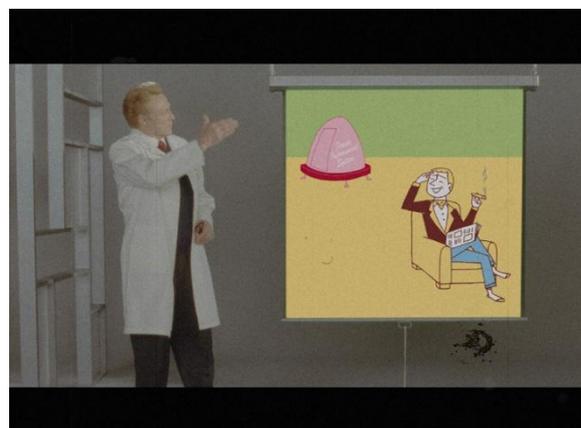
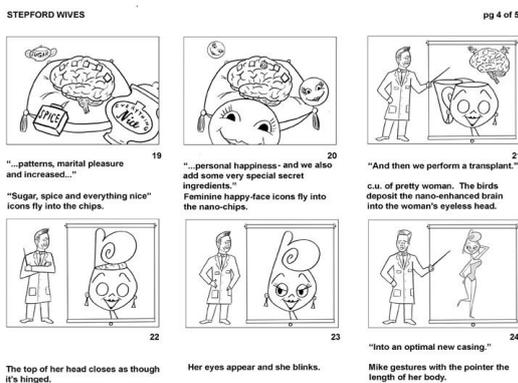


The classic UPA look was used for inspiration, but we chose to avoid outright imitation.

The hard part of this production was already done as far as I was concerned. We had figured out the storyboard and the design, the rest is all process.

Since the sequence involved compositing our animation into a live action set and basing the animation on the live actor[3], the scene was shot before the animator could begin. One of the great benefits (and sometime curse) of being in animation is that people don't really understand what you do. They know it's technical and they know it's creative. On a live set that gets respect. I've been on shoots where the live director will ask my opinion on shots that have nothing to do with animation, the cinematographer will ask about framing, if you think something should be firmly secured to the ground they will stop shooting for half an hour to build a rig. On The Stepford Wives, Frank Oz was exceedingly gracious. I had to get my own coffee, but he respected our opinions, incorporated and expanded on our ideas, and let us down easy when bits of our work couldn't be used.

After the shoot the footage was edited into a stand-alone sequence. We animated based on these shot lengths. The soundtrack was broken down frame by frame on exposure sheets; we made a scene list, photocopied the storyboards and sent everything to New Jersey to our animator, [Doug Compton](#). I've worked with Doug for ten years and only seen him twice. Once for a meeting, the second time he dropped off forty seconds of animation he re-did two days after FedEx lost the original shipment.



Storyboard for original version of Stepford Wives animation

Final frame (the high contrast of this image comes from the file format generated to output to film).

Traditional animation is all process, and the process is simple to understand. When the process is followed, regardless of one's talent or experience, what emerges on film will "work". Time is quantified, the smallest measurable piece is a frame. An animator takes this as the starting point. Film allows 24 glimpses of motion in a single second. A step, a bouncing ball, a rabbit outfoxing a duck -actions that exist in time for 1/60th of a minute are seen by the animator at 1/24th of a second. Each drawing represents frozen time, a fleeting picture that leads only to the next and the next and the next until the end.

There are two important elements to drawn animation. The drawings, and the drawings that aren't there. An image is created, the following image by necessity creates a "space" between the two. That space dictates the speed and character of the motion between the two drawings. A child animator will make infinitesimal variations on an arm reaching across a table, the experienced animator knows to use as few drawings as possible. Doug did the animation, everything's fine. Alexandra Reshanov, a first rate production artist, did the painting and compositing and special effects. I was on the phone a lot, especially to the lab in Los Angeles that scanned the original negative to disk and output our final file sequences to film. This whole process took about four months. Four fairly easy months. Around the twentieth of May I got a call from Leslie Converse, The Stepford Wives' co-producer, "We've been in previews, and everybody loves the cartoon. We're finally getting around to re-working the last reel and we have a few changes we'd like to make for continuity. I'll fax over the pages."

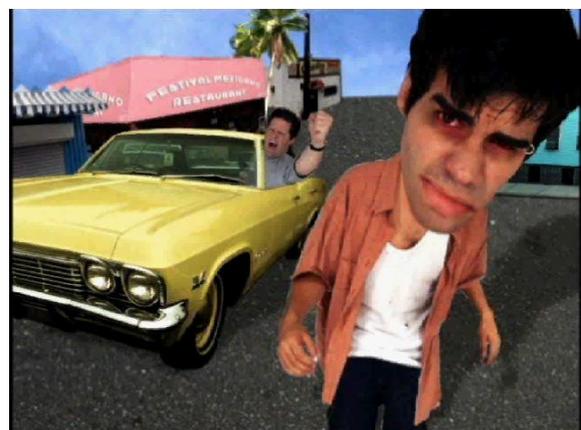
What was done in four fairly easy months was undone in one short phone call and re-done in a well planned span of ten days in order to make it for the film's premiere.

As Doug Compton once said when handing me a package of re-done animation (the first go 'round gone missing in transit), "If FedEx shows up, just use this. It turned out better the second time." While working on The Stepford Wives we began work on public service announcement funded by Citibank. Typically, the studio has several jobs going at once, so when we're bored with one, there's always another to turn to.

The firm that hired us, TMG Public Relations, was drawn to two previous ads we had done in wildly different styles. One was a monochromatic computer generated animation for Kirin Coffee; the other was a busy photo-collage for the U. S. Office of National Drug Control Policy. We used stylistic elements from both creating a photographic character and putting him into an iconic background.



Icon Man for Kirin "Super Coffee"



Photcollage animation commissioned by the Ruido Group for the Office of National

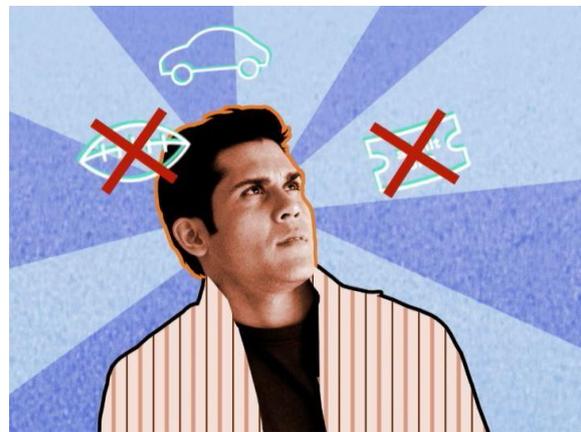
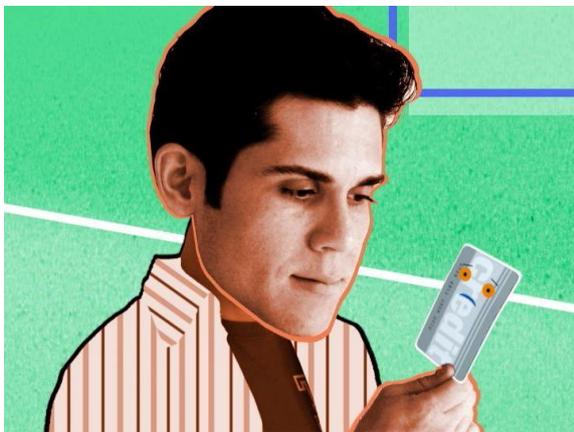
Drug Control Policy.

As always we started with the storyboard. In most performing arts, animation - and even going back to the Attic Tragedy as described in Poetics - narrative is the primary element. There are cases when this is not true, but in television and in advertising it holds in nearly every instance. In work for hire the production company is usually given the script. In this case we were given a script that timed to two and a half minutes for a piece that was supposed to be sixty seconds. We cut the script as much as possible. Brian did a rough storyboard, which Doug made pretty for presentation and we edited the storyboard against our scratch reading of the script to get it close to length.

We cast an actor to photograph. The actor -this is important for photo collage -had training as a dancer. The actor's job on the shoot is to be a puppet, to be like a clay figurine pushed around by the director and photographer. Dancers have body control and can hold in small increments. This isn't essential in a cut-out shoot, but it makes things easier.

The shoot took a short day with a lot of sitting around. We captured the images with a digital camera and loaded them into a laptop so we could be sure we were getting what we wanted. Everything was photographed scene by scene, the way one shoots a live-action film, but with the actor moving in tiny increments with the duration of each gesture timed beforehand. The process of single frame object animation, or pixilation served as the starting point. Collage animation uses photographs in much the same way cel animation uses drawings. Each individual piece is numbered, held for a number of frames, and sometimes reused or taken out of order. The typical pixilation process creates a continuous sequence which is cohesive in its original form as live action camera negative. The photos were roughly sequenced into video, discarding all the unused shots. The keepers were processed and cut into pieces.

At this point we felt it looked a little dull, so we reworked the design making it more Constructivist. Also making it much harder to produce. The original design was a fairly straightforward photo collage. Photographs cut up and pasted back together while retaining their original color and compositional attributes. The new look involved turning the photo monochromatic -a style exemplified in the print work of Rodchenko and the Stenberg Brothers where the monochrome had economic advantages over the four color print process. We also exploited other stylistic tropes of the Constructivists -the bold outline of the character, the combination of the photograph with illustrative elements. In our design we transformed the photographic shirt into an illustrated pattern. These seemingly simple adjustments took around four times as long to execute. No longer could the photographs be used "off-the-rack", so to speak, each had to be specifically stylized in the new fashion.



Constructivist inspired design for Citibank.

Alex Reshanov did most of the work on the Citibank PSA. She designed it and animated most of it. Part of the fun of making animated films is working with brilliant and talented people. Part of the fun of animated filmmaking is moving from style to style and exploring new and varied techniques. In narrative cinema, the means of production should propel the point of the story; sometimes animation is the best method, sometimes live action, sometimes a combination of the two.

[1] In The United States, each Public Broadcasting affiliate is essentially autonomous. They create their own schedules and acquire their own programming. They are supported through charitable contributions from viewers, grants from a Federal agency called the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and through private foundations. The larger stations, such as WGBH in Boston, and WNET in New York, finance original programming –usually in conjunction with private corporations –and license the results to other affiliates through a central headquarters outside of Washington, D. C.

[2] Amongst Frank Oz' many credits is the voice of Sesame Street's Cookie Monster muppet.

[3] An animator has frame by frame control of his acting, whereas the live performer has only general control of his performance. When mixing the two it is customary to film the live actor first, allowing the artist to base the animation on his performance. Typically the footage is printed out frame by frame. The animation is drawn on separate sheet over these prints. Originally, this was done through rigging a single frame projector onto a lightbox or, more often, using an optical film machine known as a Rotoscope to enlarge the film and make photographic prints. Traditionally, the animation is united with the live by a multi-step optical process. The animation is filmed twice, first as a "beauty pass" or fill –the color image; again as a black-and-white "hi-con" or matte. Using an optical film bench, the live action negative is combined with the matte and the fill onto a fourth piece of film –the final composite. This is why the sensitive eye can pick up black edges on optical composites. The layers of film don't always line up. These days, this is mostly done digitally.

Richard O'Connor is a New York based animation producer, critic and teacher. In early 2004 he co-founded [Asterisk](#). He teaches at Parsons School of Design, his ramblings have been published in ASIFA International, Animation World Magazine, and Jane Magazine.