

# Introduction:

## Animation as semiosis and as meaning

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This special issue of *Punctum* examines the semiotics of animation, a dynamic and interdisciplinary field that intersects art, technology, and culture. From its early origins with Émile Reynaud's *Théâtre Optique*<sup>1</sup> in 1889 to contemporary applications of artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR), animation has evolved into a medium that reflects and shapes cultural values. Animation's ability to encompass diverse techniques and styles, from traditional hand-drawn imagery to immersive digital environments, underlines its flexibility and central role in contemporary audiovisual culture.

Animation draws upon various techniques and styles to construct its unique language. Representatives of the Zagreb animation school emphasize that animation creates meaning through a unique vocabulary unavailable to live-action filmmakers. They assert that to animate is to "give life and soul to a design, not through the copying but through the transformation of reality" (Holloway 1972: 9). John Halas similarly stresses that animation's significance lies "not [in] how things look, but what they mean" (Hoffer 1981: 3). These insights underscore animation's semiotic potential, distinguishing it from other forms of audiovisual art.

Moreover, Giannalberto Bendazzi's historical observations reveal how animation's definitions have shifted. Between 1895 and 1910, 'animated' referred to what is now recognized as 'live action.' Bendazzi concludes that "animation is everything people have called animation in different historical periods" (Bendazzi 2020: 1), situating animation within its

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<sup>1</sup> Giannalberto Bendazzi credits Claude Emile Reynaud as the true inventor of cinema with his *Theatre Optique* (1889) – six years before the Lumiere brothers' *Cinematographe* (Bendazzi 1994: 6).

cultural and social contexts. This perspective is particularly relevant today, as AI-generated moving images provoke new questions about animation's boundaries and its role in meaning-making.

Animation's versatility and creative potential have led scholars to redefine its relationship with other forms of visual media. Alan Cholodenko, for example, describes animation as an "overarching category" (Cholodenko 2022: 3) encompassing all moving images, such as cinema and digital games. In his view, animation is the foundational process through which all motion-based visual content is created, challenging the conventional perception of cinema as distinct from animation. According to Cholodenko, cinema has historically marginalized its animated origins, yet animation remains the essential mechanism underpinning the entire field of moving images. This perspective reframes animation as not merely a subset of cinema but as its progenitor.

Similarly, Lev Manovich asserts that digital cinema represents a "return to animation" (Manovich 1995). Unlike traditional film, where motion is captured photographically, digital cinema involves constructing movement frame by frame, echoing the methods of early animators. This reorientation disrupts the classical notion of indexicality – the idea that film is inherently tied to the real world – positioning animation as the defining process in creating contemporary visual media. As Paul Wells famously remarked, animation is "the omnipresent pictorial form of the modern era" and arguably "the most important creative form of the twenty-first century" (Wells 2002:1).

## Animation as a semiotic system

At its core, animation is a complex semiotic system that encodes and communicates meaning. Norman McLaren emphasized the importance of movement in animation, asserting that "what happens between each frame is much more important than what exists on each frame" (McLaren cited in Furniss 2007: 5). This focus on transitions and transformations through frame-to-frame movement emphasizes animation's unique capacity to convey narratives, emotions, and abstract concepts.

Semiotics provides essential tools for analyzing animation, enabling scholars to access its multilayered meanings, codes, and themes and reveal how it constructs meaning across different media and contexts. For instance, semiotics can unveil how animation reflects and challenges societal norms, analyze character design and movement, and decode its rich intertextual references.

As mentioned above, animation's role extends beyond traditional cinema, permeating television, video games, advertising, and digital platforms. Its versatility allows it to merge with live-action footage, as seen in hybrid films, or create immersive experiences in virtual reality. Each medium brings its own semiotic conventions, shaping how animation is produced and perceived.

## Technological and cultural transformations

The turn of the twenty-first century marked a significant shift in animation's aesthetics and themes, driven by radical technological advances such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI). These innovations have expanded animation's creative possibilities while presenting new challenges for meaning-making and communication. AI, for example, has introduced algorithmic processes that redefine authorship and creativity, prompting questions about the boundaries between human and machine-generated semiosis.

Moreover, animation's cultural significance has grown as it adapts to contemporary cultural trends. This adaptability reinforces its status in what Katsaridou describes as the "chameleon" of moving images, capable of replicating and reinterpreting any visual style (Katsaridou 2025: 324).

## The semiotics of animation: bridging theory and practice

Despite its growing prominence, the semiotics of animation remains a relatively new academic field. This special issue seeks to strengthen the ties between animation studies and semiotics, contributing to the ongoing discourse by addressing its theoretical, cultural, and experimental dimensions. By examining animation through a semiotic perspective, the articles in this collection demonstrate its ability to construct meaning, challenge societal norms, and innovate.

The works featured in this special issue offer novel insights into animation as a medium that bridges artistic expression and technological advancement. They explore fundamental concepts, propose new theoretical frameworks, and analyze animation's role in conveying meaning across various cultural and historical contexts. Together, they reflect the richness of animation as a semiotic medium and its potential to redefine boundaries in contemporary media landscapes.

The first article, **Enzo D'Armenio's** *Kinetic Images: A Genealogy of Visual Media Based on the Concept of Movement*, offers a theoretical framework for understanding the evolution of visual media through their treatment of movement. D'Armenio identifies three stages in this genealogy: fixative image-movement, where photography stabilizes motion using techniques like motion blur and panning; representative image-movement, associated with early cinema's ability to construct narratives through thematic movements; and diagrammatic image-movement, illustrated by interactive media such as video games and virtual reality, where user actions translate into virtual motion. Introducing the concept of "kinetic anachronisms," D'Armenio explores how

earlier forms of visual motion resurface and adapt in contemporary digital environments. By bridging media archaeology with semiotics, the article emphasizes movement as a foundational element in visual media's technical and expressive evolution.

Following this, **Raz Greenberg's** article, *With Strings Attached: Barthes' 'On Bunraku' from Thunderbirds to Japanese Robot Animated Shows*, examines the influence of Japanese puppet theater (Bunraku) on animation and its connection to British and Japanese media traditions. The article explores Roland Barthes' observations on the fragmented performance of Bunraku puppetry and applies these ideas to Japanese robot animation and Gerry Anderson's *Thunderbirds*. Greenberg analyzes how these works emphasize the "parts" of their animated or mechanized figures, breaking conventional notions of totality and realism in performance. The study highlights how cultural and technological contexts shape narrative and visual design by comparing the aesthetic strategies of Japanese robot shows and Anderson's productions. Greenberg's work situates these media forms within a broader discussion of performance, semiotics, and the evolution of animated storytelling across different cultures.

Extending the discussion into the field of abstract animation, **Jussi Pekka Holopainen, Xuqin Sun and Max Hattler's** article, *A Semiotic Framework for Understanding Abstract Animations*, introduces a theoretical approach to interpreting non-narrative animations. Drawing on predictive processing, embodied simulation, and conceptual metaphor theory, the authors propose a framework for understanding how viewers construct meaning from abstract visual and auditory elements. The article examines how these animations engage cognitive and sensory processes, allowing audiences to interpret complex ideas or emotions without relying on traditional narrative structures. Through examples and theoretical insights, the authors underline the role of abstract animation as a medium for exploring imaginative and conceptual possibilities, expanding the semiotic dimensions of animated storytelling. This study situates abstract animation within a broader intellectual and artistic landscape, emphasizing its potential to create new forms of visual communication and meaning-making.

The theme of experimentation continues in **Pegah Izadian's** article, *A Kaleidoscopic View: Studying Diverse Aspects of Experimental Animation*, frames experimental animation as a kaleidoscopic medium, integrating diverse techniques, styles, and concepts into a dynamic and ever-evolving art form. The article explores how experimental animators push boundaries by employing unconventional materials, innovative methods, and emerging technologies. Izadian categorizes these approaches to emphasize their ability to challenge traditional narrative structures and visual conventions, emphasizing the fluidity and adaptability of experimental animation.

By situating the discussion within historical and technological contexts, the article highlights the role of experimentation in expanding animation's expressive possibilities and its potential to create new forms of meaning and aesthetic experience. Using the kaleidoscope as a metaphor, Izadian captures this unique cinematic practice's multidimensional and interconnected nature.

**María Lorenzo Hernández's** article, *Midjourney, Jodorowsky, and the End of Reality. Artificial Intelligence as an Animating Technology* examines the role of artificial intelligence in reshaping visual media and challenging traditional boundaries between imagination and reality. Using AI-generated simulations such as *Jodorowsky's Tron* as a case study, the article explores how contemporary tools like Midjourney create hyper-realistic visualizations of speculative cinematic works. Lorenzo Hernández reflects on the implications of AI in transforming animation from a tool of artistic expression into a medium that redefines reality itself. Drawing on theoretical insights, the study connects AI's potential for creating 'impossible pasts' with larger questions about authorship, creativity, and the cultural significance of visual media in the digital age. By underscoring the convergence of animation and artificial intelligence, Lorenzo Hernández positions these technologies as pivotal in reshaping our understanding of storytelling and media production.

Moving to video game animation, **Arianna Maiorani** and **Jason Hawreliak's** article, *Animating Gender Representation: A Kinesemiotic Analysis of Video Game Characters*, investigates how animated characters in video games convey gendered identities through movement and visual design. Using kinesemiotics – a framework that examines the semiotics of body motion and gestures – the authors analyze how character animations reflect and reinforce cultural stereotypes or challenge traditional gender norms. The article explores examples from popular video games, focusing on how bodily performance and visual style contribute to the construction of gender within interactive digital narratives. Maiorani and Hawreliak demonstrate the nuanced relationship between animation, cultural codes, and player perception, situating video game character design as a key site for examining contemporary representations of gender in media.

Shifting to historical contexts, **Alexandra Milyakina** and **Maarja Ojamaa's** article, *Soviet Estonian Animation and Its Educational Applications*, examines the use of animation as a pedagogical tool in Soviet-era Estonia. The authors analyze how animated films were used to convey educational content, focusing on the interplay between ideological messaging and creative storytelling. The article focuses on how animators navigated the constraints of Soviet cultural policies while crafting works that engaged



young audiences with imaginative visuals and didactic narratives. By studying specific examples, the authors reveal how these animations balanced aesthetic innovation with their educational mandate, fostering a unique semiotic environment. The study underscores the role of animation as a medium for both ideological dissemination and cultural enrichment, situating Soviet Estonian animation within the broader context of educational media and artistic experimentation.

**John Reid Perkins-Buzo's** article, *Animation and Artificial Intelligence: Cartoons and the Eclipse of Semiosis*, examines the impact of artificial intelligence on the production and interpretation of animation. The study explores how AI-driven tools, such as generative algorithms, reshape the creative process, challenging traditional notions of human authorship and meaning-making in animation. Perkins-Buzo discusses the concept of 'mechanosemiosis,' where machines rather than humans create signs, and considers its implications for cultural and artistic practices. By analyzing examples of AI-assisted animation, the article questions how automation influences the semiotic richness of the medium and whether it risks diminishing the human-centered narratives that have historically defined animation. The work provides a critical perspective on the evolving relationship between technology, creativity, and the cultural significance of animated media.

Continuing with technology's influence on animation, **Lila S. Roussel's** article, *The Animation Medium in the Realm of Vocaloid: A Multidimensional Semiotic Overview*, examines how animation interacts with the Vocaloid phenomenon, a digital music platform where virtual idols are created and brought to life. Roussel explores the semiotic layers of this unique cultural landscape, focusing on how animation functions as a medium that bridges technology, subcultural aesthetics, and participatory creativity. The study showcases the interplay between user-generated content, fan practices, and the technological affordances that enable the Vocaloid ecosystem. The article underlines animation's role in fostering collective creativity and shaping subcultural expressions by analyzing the visual and narrative strategies used to construct Vocaloid identities. Roussel positions Vocaloid animation as a site where traditional notions of authorship, creativity, and media production are continuously redefined.

**Marc Russo's** article, *Shared Cartoon Style in CG Animation to Maximize Empathy*, examines character design principles in computer-generated (CG) animation, focusing on the balance between realism and stylization – an approach known as the 'Pixar Peak.' The study explores how visual features, such as exaggerated proportions and expressions, are crafted to evoke empathy and emotional engagement from audiences. By analyzing examples of character designs, Russo demonstrates how these

elements draw on shared cultural and visual codes to create a strong connection between animated characters and viewers. The article underlines how CG animation merges abstraction and realism, using semiotic tools to enhance storytelling and audience interaction. Russo's analysis emphasizes the communicative power of animation, showcasing its potential to resonate across diverse audiences while maintaining a carefully constructed visual language.

Concluding the issue, **Kevin Sandler's** article, *Full-bodied Puppetry and Bubblegum Pop: US Saturday Morning Television and Kellogg's Presents the Banana Splits Adventure Hour*, investigates the intersections of puppetry, animation, and popular culture in 1960s American television. Using *The Banana Splits Adventure Hour* as a case study, Sandler explores how this program blended live-action puppetry with animation and musical performances to cater to children while embedding broader commercial and cultural strategies. The article examines how the show's playful aesthetic and hybrid media format engaged young viewers and promoted branded products, mainly through its connection to Kellogg's cereal marketing. By situating the series within its historical and industrial context, Sandler reveals how animation and puppetry were leveraged to address evolving consumer culture and television programming trends. The analysis shows the broader implications of such hybrid forms in shaping media, marketing, and audience engagement during this period.

## Conclusions

The articles in this special issue collectively highlight animation's multifaceted nature as a complex semiotic medium. As explored across these contributions, animation negotiates boundaries between the historical and the contemporary, the experimental and the conventional, the abstract and the narrative. It demonstrates the power to engage with interactivity, abstraction, and emotional resonance while challenging norms and opening new paths in media and representation.

The interdisciplinary approaches presented emphasize the centrality of semiotics in understanding animation. By offering methodologies for analysis, semiotics provides the tools to understand how animation communicates, innovates, and transforms. Through this light, animation is more than an art form or a collection of techniques; it is also an evolving mode of communication.

We hope this collection inspires further engagement with the semiotics of animation, fosters dialogue across disciplines, and encourages further exploration of the intersections of media, culture, and technology. As animation continues to evolve, its study will remain central to this endeavor.

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