

Burglars Best Steal is an animation in which a burglar steals things for his girlfriend in order to get the best gift for her. Spoiler alert: The “best steal” is the dog, not the jewel.

I used the conventional elements of storytelling—imagery, composition, and plot—to tell a visual story without dialogue or sound.

Josiah

The Story of Annie May Shawn

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Foreword

Before you plunge into this publication, I would prefer to let you know that storytelling is super hard. It takes years to be able to do it in a way that everyone can understand. To begin you must first conceive of a story that evokes people can relate to but isn't so fantasy that no one even knows what's going on. The reason why Tolkien is so great at telling stories is because he was able to make us sympathize and empathize with a bunch of made up characters. You must be able to show realism in fiction. However this paper isn't about building a story, but rather telling a story, which I know that anyone reading this has had trouble retelling a joke or story to someone, screwing up the entire thing. Great visual storytelling requires taking into account a lot of factors in order to convey a certain mood or feeling.

The story of Annie May Shawn is a story about how story is told. Animation in film was originally used to show what cannot be shown in a movie. It had more of an ability to suspend belief and imagination because the world wasn't bound by what was capable in the real world.

"If you can dream it, you can do it." - Walt Disney

Introduction

In history, oral storytelling was the way that information was passed down. We learned from what we heard. But, it was not long before people began to write it down. Once we had books people began to focus on the aesthetic of story and on picture that accompanied it. From there on we would be the pictures that dictated the story.

We are imaginative creatures, everything that we experience is information that must be processed in your brain. Our senses are the receptors and our brains are like a little tv in our head telling us what is going on outside. Visual storytelling is simple someone else's imagination, the way they see or envision a story made into a way that all can see and understand. There are many ways to tell a story. Film and animation are by far the most popular and appealing. But why? What makes visual storytelling more interesting than a book in some ways? **Why is visual storytelling better when we use tools such as color composition?**

Main Roles in Story

Roles of Story

Story structure is the most fundamental aspect of any animation. It doesn't even matter how complex the story is, the structure must flow and be able to be read easily without being predictable even if it's a simple short or an abstract sound and color piece that has no objective imagery. What makes structure great is a story with an intention that allows the viewer to follow the story if and only if they can follow the underlying structure.

There are five components to any story that will make it complete and fulfill for the viewer: strong plot, human themes, interesting conflict, relatable characters, and a sense of a new journey. We will return to these themes later but the most indispensable part of any animated movie is the creator's ability to utilize the art. It's important that one understands that animation is not held to the same constraints as a live-action film. Anyone who decides to enter the endeavor of creating an animation short as I am should suspend reality, use the most of their imagination, and make the most of the art. Animation is flexible and can bend to any reality you choose once you know what you want to tell your audience and have a strong structure. It's up to you, the artist, create worlds, defy gravity, flip from factual to fantasy. If the film turns out to be a live action film done in animation, it won't make the venture of animating worth your while, but may actually make it dry and flat.

Roles of Motion

In order for the artist to understand the capabilities of their animation, they must first address that way in which the animation moves. Or, in simpler terms the style of the animation. This may seem simple, but actually is a much larger feature of any animation because it is, in some way, it is the language that the story is spoken in. Wise choice in style can ennoble one's ability to tell the story. For example, Solidarités International and BDDP Unlimited's PSA "Water Ink" (2012) was a video promoting the importance of the need for clean water in third-world countries. The animation was very simple yet equally effective as it utilizes painting with clear water and then dropping blips of ink into these water paintings to actively show the image

whilst simultaneously show the action of polluting water which advances the narrative of the issue. In addition, this film successfully utilizes the importance of harmony with each motion done in accord with the music results in more compelling visual aesthetics.

*“Motion envelopes the spirit of a film, I always start there. It is the best way **move** an audience ” - A quote by Russian film maker, Moev Mient*

Roles of Color

A good story is only made great by how well you are able to tell it visually. One way to do this is through great uses of color. In order to understand color, you must understand light. What is light? Light is a natural vessel that stimulates sight and allows us to see form and color. It is without a doubt, an essential aspect of our sight which is the sense that humans are most reliant on. How can what we see tell us more How can we use it to tell a story?

When it comes to film, color has always been the most important role cinema and the most desired. Color is symbolic and has the ability to tell us so much more and deeper than any sound could. Before our modern color full-color film techniques director's would tint their films. This tinting was able to color in a certain portion of any black and white film. At first, it was used as a way to add pop to a film or capture the imagination. It was dreamlike and beautiful with influences that came from Escapism. Escapism is the tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy. However, soon color was found that it can be used to tell so much more. D.W. Griffith used tinting on the entire film and in return obtained a two-toned effect that he would use to differentiate scenes and periods of time. Filmmakers soon learned that Besides differentiating, color can be used to evoke emotion. Benjamin Christensen figured out our inherent psychological reactions to certain colors color. Film that was tinted red mad people feel more on edge and tense while blue had the effect of calmness and serenity. Tinting was taken further as a direct product of this discovery.

In the film Greed by Eric Von Stroheim, when the main character wins the lottery, rapacity becomes a key theme in the narrative, represented by the color yellow. This film is a perfect example of using simple color techniques in order to tell the story with another dimension. The main character's obsession with money was connected to yellow in that every time the director wanted to convey wealth or money the film would be tinted with the same gold. However, the tint was also able to tell the emotional state of the character. As the character's greed grew larger, the more the yellow would consume the film. By the end of the film the screen was completely yellow.

The experience of visual storytelling changed completely when filmmakers created the three-strip color technique allowing movies to capture the full range of color. For the first time, artists had the ability to display all color freely and naturally. This freedom of color was used to for its natural aesthetic, and as a device to symbolize place, time, character perspective and atmosphere. It was a natural means to a larger, more immersive ends, that was still practically the same as before. Artists started paying attention to color schemes and moods. Despite this advancement, old techniques such as tinting never went away, but merely evolved to be so much more subtle yet equally if not more effective. Tinting done correctly would give a film feelings

from cold and empty to gritty and dangerous. Artists found that some colors affect people more profoundly and were great devices to represent any symbol. The same way red could be used to show blood and hate, the same color could be used to show love and sex. It doesn't really matter what its preconceived notions are as long as you associate it with the character or feeling you want.

*“Colour is important, don't take it **lightly**” - Quote by color theorist and artist, Kal Loore.*

Roles of Composition

Before color, all there was the only form. The black and white shapes on the flat tiny world. Composition played and still plays the most important role in cinema. Composition is the arrangement of subjects in the image. It controls what we see and what we don't see and more importantly how we see or don't see those subjects. The primary goal of any great cinematography is to tell the viewer what to look at, but more important, how the artist decides to show the viewer. In telling us where to look how can it be used symbolically to tell or enhance a story? The three most common compositional tools such, the rule of thirds, golden ratio, and triangular composition all stem from traditional areas of art and have been proven successful in history as aesthetically pleasing. Composition shows not only this but also is used to tell the story. A great shot may be aesthetically pleasing, correctly framed and executed, while the right shot can tell the story in one frame by using cinematography to as not only device to tell the story in a subtle way. Once artists stopped fighting over good cinematography versus bad cinematography and instead focusing on the cinematography that best suits the film, were we able to tell stories better in the film. Filmmakers found certain compositional traits that easily symbolized themes such that red symbolizes emotion. Crooked angles proved well in horror and captivating the unnatural or wide angles used to show epics well. Eventually, they found a whole sleuth of influencers to take into account when constructing a shot that was as follows: geometry, diagonals, framing, focus, eye-line of subjects, subjects lose to light, guiding lines and scale. All of these formed the way that composition is thought of today.

*“You can tell if composition is great if the **frame works**” - Quote by french director, Gutz Paezing*

Roles of Harmony

The best story is born from an amalgamation of all of these factors that are not only all present but is made perfect when they complement each other in a way that ties the aesthetic and the concept together. All of this takes a lot of thought and several hours spent refining the story as a whole in order to synthesize elements that can fit together and make a cohesive movie.

*“Harmony is like electrical wiring, it only works when all the elements are in **a cord**” - Quote by Ugandan film critic, Ward King Asswon.*

What goes noticed and unnoticed

All of these roles of a story, motion, color, composition and harmony have many deciding factors in determining the mood or tone of the film. In storytelling, a lot of these factors go unnoticed to the average viewer yet a just as important to the rest of the movie and still heavily contribute to the film as a whole. These are what I call the film modifiers, or the “fine tune” of a film. They determine the feel of the movie. Changing them in any movie can break the illusion or in a way, kill the vibe. Just imagine watching a horror movie that is shot in the same way as a RomCom, whether you think that movie has the potential to be good or not, artists must understand that once the Rom Com modifiers were added, it became a completely different movie. In fact, this is actually really popular right now in the world film. You may be used to seeing realistic or serious takes on originally more comical and light-hearted fairy tales or graphic novels. In the case of the live-action film Maleficent, a live-action adaptation of Sleeping Beauty, producers simply took the story, changed the structure, the colors, the type of motion, and the compositional traits while still maintaining a bit of the original glory of the original, such as the hat the evil queen adorns. The better an artist can use these modifiers the more real and immersive the story will seem

Color Modifiers

There are three main color modifiers that greatly affect the way color is perceived in an animation. These modifiers are hue, saturation, and brightness.

- Saturation dictates the purity of a color
- The hue refers to the actual color.
- The brightness or value of a color controls how dark a color is or how light a color is.

Color directly affects the way that we feel because we have an innate psychological response to any given color. If you change one of these, you can completely shift the feeling of a film. Producers figured this out early on in color film and began working with color schemes and fixed ways to use color in their film.

The types of scheme are split into two subgroups which are accordance and discord. Accordance schemes are simple such as monochromatic, analogous, complementary and triadic. Monochromatic uses only hue of color whilst caging the brightness and saturation. Analogous is 4 or more consecutive colors on the color wheel. Complementary is made of colors that are opposite of each other on the color wheel. Finally, triadic colors are exactly one third apart from each other on the color wheel. All these uses in color cause any shot to look balanced.

When a color is added to a balanced scheme the artist can get color discord which acts as a resting place for the eye at times but is really proficient in leading the eye to the focal point of the shot. We as humans easily can discern that which does not fit in, which is why it's best to lead the eye.

Beyond setting the mood in a film, color can be used a device to tell the story itself, if you look at color in two categories, such as Associative and Transitional. Associative is the color that you equate a character or idea too. The color can simply reflect the main outlook or mood of the character or can be used as an indicator to signify the character's presence and influence.

Some colors, such as red, may be used to signify a recurring theme of blood and violence, as that is a common representation of the color. But, these colors are not limited to our social constructs of what they mean. For example in *The Godfather* orange is synonymous with death so the viewer is reminded of that theme each time orange is shown because of its attachment with death established throughout the movie.

Just as important, the change of a significant color is transitional and symbolized the growth or change in that character in some way, which in turn furthers the story. In the movie *The Last Emperor*, the main character is primarily shown with red as a symbol of his naivety but as the story progresses and he becomes more mature and aware, his associative color changes from red to orange to yellow and finally to green. Also, note that this change is analogous which suggests a gradually shift and growth instead of a more sporadic change it was to change from red to green to orange and then yellow. In effect, when, used in harmony with story structure the readability to the viewer will be better

In film, color can be used to express anything you want it to regardless of the psychological norms that are typically expressed with those colors. Smart usage of them can allow the viewer to more easily follow the story on a more subconscious level.

Framing and Control

Framing and control focus on telling what is important to the view and why through compositional modifiers. In composition, there are several specific ways to get the viewer to focus on certain objects. The best way is to frame the subject within a frame. Framing within a frame not only isolates the subject but also can tell you about the story as well. Windows and doors are by far the most natural and easy frames to use in a shot but great cinematography uses more of the environment to signify the importance of the frame and the character.

The usage of the noose as a frame is ingenious because it not only puts focus on the subject but also hints at the character's impending threats.

Control, on the other hand, is quite different. Control is in charge of the subjects positions within the frame. The position of subjects tells you which subject is more important in the story. There are two types of control, artificial control, and primal control. Artificial control is given to the subject that controls the aesthetic and is where we should be looking while primal control is given to the subject that holds more importance in that moment of story. The best way to give primal control to a subject is to make it bigger within the frame.

“The size of an object in a frame should equal its importance in the story.” -Alfred Hitchcock

For example if a subject is in the middle of the screen then, it is almost always given artificial control, but imagine that subject is holding a gun that appears larger in the frame from the perspective it was shot from, that gun is given primal control for that scene until another subject takes it even if the first subject no longer in artificial control.

Human themes

One of the major flaws of western entertainment and some Japanese animation is that characters are not made to be multidimensional and human. Many times the characters are

perfect and display an array of generic emotions with one attribute that defines them. For example, a bad guy wants to do “bad things”, because he's bad and the good guy wants to do good things, thus the good guy wants to defeat the bad guy and the good guy wins. But why is the bad guy bad and is there a possibility that his intentions were good. Maybe the good guy isn't so good and the resolve does not come is a conquering of the opposing force but rather growing past it.

A great example of an animator who takes humanizing characters very seriously is Hayao Miyazaki. Miyazaki understands the importance of being able to reflect one's own emotions onto any character in the story in order for us to feel as though the characters are real. A critique that he had on lego movie, is that it move way too fast, there is a constant wave of subterfuge and stimulus for the viewer all the time and it does not allow the audience to pause and just understand the character at all in the movie. All of the characters are dumbed down to their most basic element and requires no work for anyone to be interpreted while Miyazaki takes into account every little detail and more importantly the imperfections of a character. These details range from a few quiet seconds of watching the character tie their shoes or attempt to grab something across from them with their feet. In terms of Miyazaki's character Porco Rosso, all of his little quirks show his laziness and pride, two qualities that are mostly negative but when add to the protagonist we are able to understand him a little more. Moreover, there is not one antagonist in the Miyazaki universe that is in some way pure evil or does not have redeeming qualities. This attention to the character and how the audience perceives the character can deep the story altogether.

Conclusion

In conclusion I feel that the purpose of tools and techniques that enhance visual storytelling is to cut through the brains wall of reason and realism to the part of feeling and emotion. Techniques such as these are subtle and subliminal yet effective because we in turn follow, feel, understand the story just by seeing it. It becomes easier to display and better to look at.

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