

Panel G2

Sala delle Colonne 1

Narration and Voice in Animation

Jorgelina Orfila

Yes, It Moves ...and It Talks: An Analysis of Voice in *Anomalisa* (2015)



“Wait, Wait...” are the first words Minnie Mouse—voiced by Walt Disney—utters in *Steamboat Willie* (1928), a milestone in the history of animation’s transition to sound. Most scholarship on Disney’s early animations has focused on the fantastic effects and expressive interaction of music and sound with graphic images. Less has been said about the use of voice to support and enhance cartoon narrative. The addition of voice and speech furthered a more realistic application of sound technology, one that foreshadowed the ‘illusion-of-life’ aesthetic that would characterize future studio’s productions and made possible its first full-length animated feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, nine years later. By then, Disney was using sound as “a naturalizing influence, helping to ground even the most outlandish visual ideas in a real world, rather than a fantastic context” (Telotte). American animation studios’ progressive subjection of the graphic ingenuity and expressive power of the image to the cinematic narrative, contributed to establish animation as a sub-category of film.

As a storytelling and visual style, classical Hollywood cinema (1917-1960) established a hierarchical arrangement of image and sound where aural perception complemented the visuals and both were at the service of narration. As a fundamental ingredient of the aesthetic of realistic verisimilitude fostered by this style, sound contributed to the suspension of disbelief effect that transported audiences into imaginary filmic worlds. Until recently, film and animation studies centered on the analysis of visual images and tended to disregard the importance of sound and voice in both mediums. This tendency corresponds with our culture’s tradition of privileging image over sound.

This presentation focuses on sound in animation in the 21st century, a time when well-known filmmakers such as Wes Anderson are turning to animation for their productions and when postfilmic cinema responds to the ontological shift brought about by digital technology by reflecting on its own conditions of production (Stewart). The paper considers the role of the voice in *Anomalisa* (2015), a stop motion animation feature film directed and produced by Charlie Kaufman and Duke Johnson. This study, which is informed by the growing scholarship on the importance of voice in film, is part of a larger research project that, by concentrating on the ontological roles of sound/voice and image in animation, explores the nature of this artistic practice and reconsiders the historical relation of animation and cinema.

Based on a Charlie Kaufmann 2005 sound play—staged readings that refer back to radio plays—*Anomalisa*’s visuals were structured around the recording of the play by the three actors who had performed it on stage. The plot follows Michael, a self-help author who has come to perceive all the voices except his as the same male voice. During a business trip Michael is struck by hearing a woman’s voice (*Anomalisa*’s) and initiates an affair with her. The author’s message about the human condition in modern life is mostly conveyed through the relationship between voice and image.

The animators wanted to “suspend disbelief” by making the puppets’ appearance and their movements very naturalistic— the film includes nudity and sex scenes—but also wanted to remind the viewers, with specific facial traits, that the characters are puppets. As the film reflects Michael’s aural perception of the world, there are only three voices: Michael’s, Anomalisa’s and that of all the other characters (the actor was not allowed to change his voice to adapt to the different individuals). Because the effect is anchored on the materiality of the voices (their sound) and not on what the characters say (speech), the audience gradually realizes that characters who look different share the same voice. Concurrently, the public sees Michael from the camera’s objective point of view (except for one scene, the camera follows his actions). As a result, the sound compels the audience to empathize with Michael’s psychological and existential drama while the visuals inhibit the suspension of disbelief: Michael and the rest of the characters are puppets.

The voice-image relation in *Anomalisa* pries open the convention of realistic verisimilitude that has been central to live film and animation since the early 20th century. *Anomalisa* constitutes a perfect case study for a reflection on the ontological role of sound and image in animation and therefore on the nature of animation.

Biography

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Dr. Jorgelina Orfila, currently an Associate Professor in the School of Art at Texas Tech University, earned undergraduate degrees in art history in Argentina. From 1997 to 1999, she was a Lampadia Fellow in the Department of French Paintings at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. In 2007, she earned a Ph.D. in art history from the University of Maryland. Dr. Orfila specializes in the historiography of modern art history and the history of animation. Together with Dr. Francisco Ortega, she is working on a book project that will examine the intersections of animation and modern and contemporary art. Her research centers on the role of the voice in animation.

In 2017 Dr. Orfila will chair the session “Modern and Contemporary Art History through the Lenses of Animation” at the *Association of Art Historians 2017 Annual Conference and Art Bookfair*, Loughborough University, Loughborough, U.K. Among Dr. Orfila’s latest publications are: “John Rewald’s transatlantic scholarship: A forgotten chapter in the art history of modern art,” *Journal of Art Historiography*. 11,900 words. Forthcoming January 2017, and “On Art History and Meta-Images: Art Reproductions, Site Photographs, and Cézanne’s Art,” in Claus Clüver, Matthijs Engelberts, and Véronique Plesch (Eds.), *L’Imaginaire: texte et image / The Imaginary: Word and Image*. Word and Image Interactions 8. Amsterdam and New York: Brill/Rodopi, 2015, 303-316.