

# Introduction

## *Queer Animation, The Motion of Illusion: A Primer for the Study of Queer Animated Images*

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At the heart of animation is movement, or, at least, the illusion of motion. The narratives and characters inside animated media often emerge out of the corporeal motion of fictional bodies. From Mickey Mouse to the Smurfs and Sailor Moon, animated fictional characters in fantastical bodies become not only possible, but alive as they “move.”

The composition of visual movement therefore represents a core aspect of animation theory and practice. Specialized technologies, like the cel and its artificial depth, the multiplanar camera and its illusions of z-axis motion, montage techniques inspired by live-action cinema, and the simulated movements of contemporary animation software, have been crafted to make animation possible and have, in turn, left their indelible marks on the medium itself. Accordingly, many scholarly interventions about animation interrogate visual representations emerging out of technologically specific approaches to the expression of movement. As early as 1926, E.G. Lutz attributed the humour of animated motion to its likeness to the motion of machines in an increasingly modernized world. These concerns live on in contemporary scholarship, where (to name just a few instances) Thomas Lamarre (2009) discusses the reinvention of visual perception in Japanese limited animation, while Deborah Levitt (2018) questions how animation participates in discourses about the representation of life(liness) in late neoliberal and biopolitical

frameworks. Yan Du’s recent insight on Chinese animation history (2019) also extends the meaning of “movement” to the transnational circulation of animated film and images: the animation of fictional bodies transforms an art form to a cultural and social movement that we can also locate in local, regional, and global fandoms and audiences.

Much has been said about animation as the illusion of motion—we are interested in animation as the *motion of illusion*. If the illusion of motion is wrapped up in the form of animation as simulated kinesthetic motion, then we would like to think of the motion of illusion as the cultural, political, and aesthetic movements that arise out of animation and its illusions, including bodies, worlds, spaces, etc. With the technologically and historically contingent role of animation established in existing scholarship, we aim to inquire what specific directions this animated motion and its complex embodied mobilities can (and often do) take. How do the technologies of animated movement permit approaches beyond close readings of animated stories? What theoretical and ideological leaps toward praxis do the manic, frantic, and pell-mell motions of illusion that are animation make? We aim at a medium-specific reading where the forms of animation encounter the composition of movement, and how this encounter becomes movement itself. While we have our own ideas of what this latter movement can, might, and often does look like,

we don't want to limit definitions of practices, so we have gathered examples from academics, fans, and practitioners to make an intervention into this space. A queer theory of animation cannot flourish in an academic space where the study and mobilization of queer animation is purely philosophical. In short, our approach to queer media forms required alternate frameworks and forms of knowledge. This was necessary given the lack of literature on the subject, while avoiding gatekeeping in this nascent field through our own contribution.

In this context, this special issue examines one direction of animation and its mobilities that is politically and ideologically charged, but sorely neglected: the animation (in both the noun *and* nominalization of that term) of the queer. We aim to examine, then, how LGBTQ+ movements queer the fictional mobility of bodies within, between, and outside animated media. We want to interrogate the expressions, production practices, and eventual communities that emerge from queer motions. While scholars have given attention to the industrial (Johnson 2013) and marketing (Steinberg 2012) levels of animation's media ecologies, spotlighting the LGBTQ+ media ecologies emerging out of animated images allows us to explore the effects of animation's queer theorizing on marginalized communities with real needs. By mobilizing the term "queer movement," we invite a reflection about alternative techniques of animation, underground modes of media production, and LGBTQ+ practitioners. In doing so, our goal is to draw potential perspectives to include queer animated media inside of animated media histories, and revisit our academic frameworks in the field of animation studies. How do LGBTQ+ communities appropriate the specificities of animated media? How do animation practices support the emergence of social and political movements from within, between, and outside media production spaces? What impact can mobile bodies animated by a queer motion sustain on quotidian struggles? Is it possible to discuss intersectional issues of race, indigeneity and disability within these queer movements? With an expansive definition of animated movement in mind, however, we aim to extend these considerations about movement and animation to a wider range of cultural production. The expression and

representation of animated movement is negotiated differently across a vast spectrum of animated media commodities that includes comics, video games, GIFs, music videos, and even franchising cinematic universes, each of these media spaces uniquely animating queerness.

In recent years, animated media have become the source to build environments of media franchises both from an industrial (Jenkins 2006) and marketing (Steinberg 2012) perspectives. Our approach responds to the steady increase of studies of LGBTQ+ representation in animation and popular culture since 2010. From queer readings (Halberstram 2011), to media histories (McLelland, et al. 2015), and queer media makers (such as bisexual, non-binary creator Rebecca Sugar and other queer animators like Noelle Stevenson, Dana Terrace, and Chris Nee), animation production has become a vital site for the study, performance, and persistence of queer media practices. Although much conversation has been devoted to queer readings of texts in transmedia movements, the people, circuits, and techniques of queer animated media production have attracted significantly less attention. By focusing less on the queering of texts and more on the "politics of queer movement," we intend to grasp the convergence of, 1. diverse techniques of queer animation in and across multiple media platforms, 2. means of mobile LGBTQ+ image production both amateur and industrial, and 3. social agendas in queer communities using the motion of images to negotiate their representation and place in society. Producing movement in, across, and outside of media extends the synchronization of images to networks of commodities, territories, and peoples. Although an important amount of scholarship tends to address this question as the "queering of texts," we see this approach foreclosing the possibility that these texts already contained queer movements within themselves, and we therefore seek another point of view coming directly from the creation of movements. In other words, queerness can be found not just at the level of narrative, but in the very production of animated images themselves. This issue seeks to bring critical attention to such production.

The intervention we aim to make with this special issue comes at a moment when both the

need and demand for more attention to queer animation are high. Animation studies as a field has been forced to reconcile with this problem through a recent self-assessment. In May 2019, on the Society for Animation Studies mailing list, a call for resources on queer animation led the community to find such resources were few and far between. This issue proposes to help address this scholarly gap in the literature through peer reviewed essays, artworks, experimental short form writing, and more to encourage growth in this area. This issue's epistemology is not only one of theory, but also of form. We embrace queer forms of scholarship (such as zines and research creation) as a means to address this gap in literature. In other words, this is not just content about queer creators and media, it also engages in queer forms (in terms of academia).

As North American scholarship on queer animation has generally been sparse, we want to take time constructing an intellectual history here. For the sake of brevity, this genealogy is concerned with publications that engage with the material production of queer animation with attention towards the visual composition of characters and space.

To begin, Sean Griffin was one of the first to work in this critical intersection of queerness and animation. In "Pronoun Trouble: The 'Queerness' of Animation," Griffin (1994) weaves between the animation of Disney, Fleischer, and Looney Tunes (to name a few) to give a general history of queer moments in animation, thinking through them with the then recent queer theory of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Paul Wells' *Understanding Animation* (1998) similarly briefly addresses the queer performativity of animation, noting the potentials of gender fluidity of animation that throws into question the strict binaries of gender and sexuality in flux.

Jack Halberstam examines animation through a queer lens in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), with the most salient contribution being, however brief, the idea of the animated self, gesturing to how the production of animated bodies creates new forms of queer representation. Likewise, Emma Jane's piece "Gunter's a Woman?!"—Doing and Undoing Gender in Cartoon Network's *Adventure Time*" (2015) examines how *Adventure Time* (2010–2018) creates gender fluidity not only

through narrative but production elements such as character design as well.

Most recent scholarship has focused on *Steven Universe* (2013–2020), an animated television program that has significantly opened up critical theory on queerness and animation, and as a result helped produce work to help fill this critical gap in scholarship. Eli Dunn's "Steven Universe, Fusion Magic, and the Queer Cartoon Carnavalesque" (2016) and Eli Boonin-Vail's "Queer Proteus: Towards A Theory Of The Animated Child" (2019) examine *Steven Universe* in its vision of trans identities and its ability to envision queer childhoods respectively, each concerned in their own way with queer embodiment. Kevin Cooley, Jacqueline Ristola, and Jake Pitre's essays in the recent book collection *Representation in Steven Universe* (Ziegler and Richards 2020) are also recent contributions to the field. Pitre's essay asks how *Steven Universe's* play with queer embodiment translates into activity and identity within the fandom. Ristola traces the transnational influence of Ikuhara Kunihiko on queer embodiment in *Steven Universe* through his anime adaptations of *Sailor Moon* (1992–1997) and *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1997). And finally, Cooley gives language to queer animated embodiment's "tracing by effacing," or how cartoon bodies like *Steven Universe* use visual absence to obscure heteronormative semiotics.

This gap in academic literature also appears in Japanese scholarship, where the recent movements of manga historiography have questioned the place of queer representations in the history of girls' and women's manga. If the work of Ishida Minori (2008) started a conversation about the pervasive limits between gay subcultures and the girls' manga revolution in the 70s, little literature has tried to analyze their complex relation. Ishida's account of the origins of slash fictions explores the various media roots (including gay novels, cinema, and photography) of the animation techniques specific to girls' manga in the 70s starting with the invention of inner monologue (see Ôtsuka 2007). If manga is often discussed as a cinematographic media similar to a storyboard, the work of Hata (2012) discussed the proximity of girls' manga with illustrated poems and eventual other subcultural expressions in magazines. More research on animation techniques

in Japan should therefore start from the testimony of female manga artists like Takemiya Keiko (2016) and Hagio Moto (2014) who stated that their inspirations for the reinvention of girls' manga emerged from subcultural and pornographic magazines like *Barazoku* (see Ito 2010). The place of illustrated poems within the history of female manga and queer movements represents in particular a new perspective on animated media histories.

In this issue, this theme is tackled in Edo and Fabrissou's visual essay, looking back at the stakes and potentiality of illustrations and stillness within a queer anime history. Their approach echoes Pearl Moeko's autobiographical account of slash romances and their relationship to gay manga. These pieces should be read before Julie Brousseau's essay "SO MANY FEELS-!," which articulates the pioneering works by Mori Naoko (2010, 2012) with the online production of Anime Music Videos. In light of Mori's highlight of the intersection of Japanese feminist theory with the wide spectrum of pornographic manga techniques since the 70s, we argue that a transition needs to be addressed in our academic discourses about manga expression and its relation to queer movements in medias like anime and video games. Studies of amateur manga and fan cultures in Japan often stress the queer aspect of manga pornography (Galbraith 2019) as well as the stigma attributed by male communities of fans (otaku) as deficient masculinities. As manga critics have celebrated the legacy of Tezuka Osamu as the godly origin of manga and anime, the integration of girls' manga into this history has raised multiple questions about the hybrid origins of manga montage (*komawari*, see Gô 2005) and the often dismissed genres and communities that has participated to these histories (see Iwashita 2013). The pieces we have collected in this issue contribute to this effort to look, first, at the outside of masculine techniques of animation devoted to pure corporeal motion, and second, at the intersections between different approaches of gendered motions in manga, anime and video games.

Indeed, this special issue of *Synoptique* finds itself making the moves that Edo and Fabrissou make here: working with equal diligence to fill the wide gaps that have been left behind by a transnational scholarly community that has not yet exam-

ined the queerness of animation thoroughly, and to dust off and display those moments of queer creation (both scholarly and creative) that live between and within those gaps. Further than simply revisiting the fields of animation studies and manga history, however, these questions also collaborate with recent works in fan studies and transnational cultural movements. This includes the work of Alvaro Hernandez Hernandez and Hirai (2015) on the translocal reappropriation of fanzine cultures to the brilliant edited collection by James Welker on the transnational sociopolitical movements generated by Boy's Love (slash manga, *BL ga hiraku tobira*, 2019), and the ethnographic research of Tom Baudinette (2017) on the transformations of queer representations into accidental activist action. Replacing the subcultural gay and lesbian magazines in the history of manga, anime and video games transcends the partial rearticulation of the expressions of animated media in Japan: it opens the door to questions about the representation of subjectivity in popular media and its application inside of grassroots struggles across the globe.

This special issue analyzes queer animation in all of its forms, and through a plurality of multimedia analyses that put visual and material rhetoric to good use. In line with their queer subject matter, each entry represents one node of a spectrum of word-image relations, materials, mediums, and varying visual embodiments. Together, they confound assumptions of what scholarship *should* be. Grace Van Ness's "Once More, With Feeling!" and Kyler Chittick's "Family Guy's Queer Child" track the queer embodiments of the animated image from online spaces for user-made pornographic .GIFs to the corporate televised animation of the usually-maligned *Family Guy* (1999–present). Van Ness contributes to a critical media genealogy of early motion picture objects, using the mutoscope as the basis to engage in research creation and produce a theory based on making .GIFs. Chittick's analysis of *Family Guy* moves well beyond the queering of normative texts, and instead analyzes the deferment of the heteronormative growth and conditioning of the child (and its relationship with animation) in the figure of Stewie. Together, their work traces queer animation from its most grassroots incarnations to its perhaps surprising traction



in corporate industrial spaces with no progressive agenda. In the thought pieces section, which contains provocative pieces of short form writing, Julie Brousseau analyzes user-made slash fan videos of popular mainstream shonen anime; Gina Prat Lilly examines the relationship between embodied labor and the animated porn GIF; and Mark Hollis tracks the fluctuations of animated bodies and their inherent challenge to traditional notions of gender fixed onto specific bodies.

In the Artwork section, comic strips, photocomics, zines, animations, and multimedia experiments tap into the logic of the image to analyze queer animation in places where the classic prose essay cannot reach. Offering a new kind of essay for readers tired of stilted academic prose, Edmond “Edo” Ernest dit Alban’s “Sexy Stillness” (featuring Fabrissou’s commentary and artwork) uses a lively stream-of-consciousness and a deliberate spatial arrangement to examine the connective tissue between Japanese visual media and queerness. Sasha Sanders’ “(Be)coming Out in Comics” makes use of the natural ambiguities and formal complexities of navigating comics pages to lay out a visualized epistemology of the closet. Similarly, Evelyn Ramiel’s *Flip Flappers* zine meditates on the construction of the yuri narrative through gesture (complicating the notion of “baiting” along the way). While Xavier Éloïse Gorgol Steimetz’s *Morgenglanze* uses constant transformation to animate an avian being morphing back and forth from bird to human (elegantly confounding gender configurations in its constant flux), Kevin Cooley’s “Bungle in the Jungle,” starring Moxie Mutt and Caribou Krubb, addresses the queerness of the cartoon human-animal divide with wire-armature felt figures and photocomics, rendering the textures of queerness within old Warner Bros. cartoons touchable. With an intimate prose, Pearl Moeko’s autobiographical take on the queering power of girls’ comics in Japan brings often dismissed personal histories into our discussion.

Finally, in an attempt to flesh out a more comprehensive collection of resources for scholars looking to contribute to the cause of queer animation studies, our reviews sections cover a wide ecology of queer spectacles. It includes reviews of relevant monographs (*Boy’s Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous*

*Idols; Queer Nostalgia in Cinema and Pop Culture; Animated Personalities; and more*), and mixed-media cultural criticism on queer visual culture (*So Pretty/Very Rotten*). But, in this spirit of working toward this wider ecology of queer spectacles, the review section also covers animation and film festivals (Les Sommets du cinéma d’animation, Compte rendu du colloque Télévision queer, and the 46<sup>th</sup> Concordia Film Festival), performance art (“Arca and Jesse Kanda Live at the Roundhouse”), and adjacent books that may inform queer interventions into animation.

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