

The actor's body in the age of digital technology:

The salience of the voice

Ishida Minori

Trans. Jaqueline Berndt

Due to the so-called “cinematic technique” developed by Tezuka Osamu, cinema, or film, has been constantly referenced by manga studies. In his monograph *Manga and Film: A Theory of Panel and Time* [*Manga to eiga: Koma to jikan no riron*] (2014), Miwa Kentarō, for example, diligently collects the previous discourse on “manga and film,” and based on that, he suggests to seek the particularity of manga – as pursued by manga studies so far in contrast to film (i.e. the “variability of the frame”) – not in medium specificity, but style. Noteworthy enough, Miwa references the essay of an advocate of live-action film in that regard, namely André Bazin’s “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945). The use of this essay, which highlights the difference between painting/drawing and photography, may indicate why Miwa never foregrounds animation, although he touches upon it throughout his excellent study.

The fact that the proximity between manga/comics and animation, which share the “drawn body,” is discussed less than the proximity between manga and film stems, among other things, from the positioning of animation within film studies. Neither the legacy of Hollywood Cinema that grew into a global cultural industry during the first half of the 20th century and established itself stylistically as the classic fiction film, nor the legitimacy of film studies, that had emerged from literary studies in American academia and become a domain of the humanities by the late 1970s, can be overlooked in that regard. Animation, however, has just been a minor faction within film studies, despite the fact that Émile Reynaud’s moving picture show, the so-called *Théâtre Optique* (1889), preceded the public admission-paid cinematograph screening by the Brothers Lumière (1895), and also the fact that animation, as represented by Disney, acquired an industrial scale which was in no way inferior to that of the live-action fiction film.

But today, the essence of cinema, or film, as a medium is being shaken as never before, and film studies faces the need to revise research methods leaning on conventional live-action. This paper addresses one aspect of the change which film – as one of comics/manga’s references – is showing now, from the perspective of contemporary visual culture.

Fusion of live-action fiction film and animation

Due to the evolution of digital technology since the late 1990s, image and sound have become equalized as digital data and remarkably easy to manage. As a result, the barriers which had induced the specificity of each medium in the first place, dissolved, giving rise to a condition which is rightly called the “post-medium” era. For me, who has been engaged in contemporary visual culture, especially film studies, one of the most interesting changes effected by digital technology is the fusion between live-action film and animation. As already mentioned, until recently, these two domains have been strictly separated, not only with regard to production but also reception and even research environment. Let’s first recapitulate where the differences of the two have been found.

One of the causes for treating and researching them separately is the difference between photography and drawing. While photographs require a real world that exists prior to the set-up of the camera, drawings are created out of nothing. The first are rooted in the real world, the latter aren’t. Due to the difference in their ontological condition, the first is tied to the real world, sometimes in a conflict-laden way. And according to Bazin, these images exceed human subjectivity insofar as they are generated by an optical tool, the camera. Drawings, on the other hand, are the result of free human creativity. This difference has also affected their reception; to put it boldly, the former has been supposed to belong to the domain of adults, the latter to that of children.

But now, due to the refinement of CGI, live-action film and animation are approximating each other, to the extent of convergence, and the site where the fusion of both domains progresses most noticeably is the actor’s body. The series of *The Lord of the Rings* (dir. Peter Jackson), released from 2001 onwards, featured Gollum, a creature generated by Motion Capture. This technology makes it possible to move a character’s visual surface by means of data taken from records of an actor’s performance. As a result, the movements of the actual body and the character drawings intermingle.

Lev Manovich has pointed out, that due to the changes induced by digital technology, it is obvious now that animation has been oppressed as a minor faction, although live-action film is just one kind of moving – literally “animated” – images. In other words, because of digital technology, the difference between photographs and drawings is invalidated; live-action fiction film and animation become equalized as mediums that both show movement.

The case of the actor Andy Serkis——The face of the star

So, how is movement presented to the viewer by the moving images of the digital era? I shall focus on one example, Andy Serkis, whose success as an actor is linked to Motion Capture.

Having made his screen debut in the late 1990s, he had remained a no-name until the role of Gollum. After his success in that role, he played the protagonists in *King Kong* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2005), *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (dir. Rupert Wyatt, 2011), and *The Adventures of Tintin* (dir. Steven Spielberg,

2011), assuming all it needs to be rightly called a “star.” But the most interesting thing about this “star” is that in all his roles he is wearing the character’s CGI. Even the face which viewers can see in close-up, is the character’s face – which may or may not resemble his own.

With the actor’s face filling the whole screen, the live-action fiction film created the privileged leading actor, the “star;” his or her face became the target of the viewer’s gaze. Furthermore, close-ups of the star’s face play not only an important function in the narration, but give rise to many more meanings, as they connect with social and historical backgrounds.

For example, one of the earliest stars of Hollywood Cinema, Lillian Gish, transduced the heritage of 19th-century theatre to cinema, when the close-up of her as an innocent girl persecuted by a bad guy constructed the melodramatic climax. With respect to postwar Japanese cinema, Sada Keiji, a representative actor of the 1950s, is very interesting. In the film *Kimi no na wa* [*Your name ...*] (dir. Oba Hideo, 1953-54), which captured everybody’s heart at the time, the close-up of his face appears first in profile. Then, sensing the gaze of the female character who stares at him, he looks back at her. Affirming the woman’s desire with his response to her gaze on screen, Sada received enthusiastic audience support as a star who embodied Japan’s postwar democracy.

But we shouldn’t forget that the face of the star may also occasionally interfere with smooth and efficient storytelling. As is widely known, close-ups of Marlene Dietrich’s beautiful face not rarely brought the narration to a halt in Josef von Sternberg’s movies, because her face had become a fetish for both the viewer and the director.

Extracting motion and emotion

In light of the live-action fiction film’s twofold engagement with the star’s face, the heterogeneity of an “invisible” leading actor generated by Motion Capture surely stands out. In reality, the visually absent star has opened up a new phase in live-action fiction film: Erasing the actor’s visual actuality, Motion Capture extracts the movements of her or his body, ranging from big actions like showing, running and flying to delicate moves of the facial muscles. Let’s take *King Kong* with Serkis in the title role as an example. The minute motions of King Kong’s facial muscles, occasionally shown in close-ups, relate his emotional attachment to the heroine, and the painful sadness of the gorilla moves the viewer. By chipping off the visual side of the actor’s face, the traces of his movement become the extract of the character’s pure emotion.

The construction of a voice-based stardom

It goes without saying that it defies being a star – whose trade mark is the face – if the actor’s face served only as the character’s wirepuller (*kuroko*). After all, the extraction of emotions by Motion Capture sacrifices the visual actuality of the actor himself. But remarkably enough, Serkis has been received as a star, while hiding in the shadow of the character and serving him. This was made possible by his voice.

For the role of Gollum, Serkis was first auditioned as a voice actor. But the production crew was so deeply impressed by his performance that they put him in as an actor. Actually, Gollum has much more

dialogue than the other characters; he is speaking almost incessantly. And because he has a dual personality, Serkis has to play two roles at once, changing the hue of his voice. As a result, Serkis' voice performance together with the movements extracted by Motion Capture become Gollum's pivot. In the *Planet of the Apes* series, the voice is also indispensable, as the node of the narrative is the process in which the chimpanzee Cesar learns to speak.

What Serkis has achieved through performing such non-human characters is to represent himself through his voice. And he has had opportunities to perform Gollum and Cesar also apart from the actual films, namely in TV shows and at fan meetings, where he communicates with the audience. By doing so, he reappropriates the character and constructs, or confirms, his star persona. Thus, it is no coincidence at all that Captain Haddock, upon his first appearance in *The Adventures of Tintin*, can be heard before he is actually visible.

“Voice” and star

The fact that a visually absent actor, who brings movement into the narration solely through the character's countenance, re-connects to the character by means of his “voice” – this has been latent in live-action fiction film, but not apparent. Since Serkis, however, stars who disappear behind a character have established their presence through “voice;” in other words, it has become an established method to claim one's star status via “voice.”

For example, in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2013), Benedict Cumberbatch plays a giant dragon, and in the DVD's bonus material, the director and members of the staff rave of his fascinating voice performance. At fan meetings he delights his followers by voicing the dragon.

The ontological difference between photographs and drawings isn't an issue anymore. Much more interesting is the fact, that the same digital technology which has dissolved that difference, brings the actor's voice to the fore. In regard to the relation between invisible body and voice, that is, stars whose fame is founded on voice, animation and in particular the stardom of voice actors as fostered in Japan's TV anime have to be considered. Due to new technologies, Hollywood Cinema and anime – which have been thought of as worlds apart – approach each other, last but not least concerning the ways in which the actor's body is represented and received.

A final word

In view of the restructuring of the moving-image field, the question arises which stance film studies should take. One direction could be the cross-referencing between research on live-action fiction film and animation. At the same time, we should neither overlook what neighbouring fields have to say about film. Recently, there has been a number of art historical publications which bring to mind the linkages between

art history and film studies, for example, Okada Atsushi's monograph *Film is like painting: Still, motion, time* [*Eiga wa kaiga no yōni: seishi, undō, jikan*] (2015), which approaches the live-action fiction film from the perspective of art-historical devices and notions, such as mirror, shadow (chiaroscuro), and tableau vivant. Anyhow, the task we face is the deepening and sharpening of the term "moving images" in its transversality, or transdisciplinarity.

References

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