

ANIMATION AS ACTING AND THE REDEFINITION OF ANIMATION PEDAGOGY THROUGH EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Vera SURĂȚEL,

“Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University of Chișinău

The article examines the fundamental relationship between animation and emotional intelligence, proposing a reinterpretation of animation pedagogy through the integration of acting into the animator's training process. Starting from the idea that animation constructs an emotional reality through invented forms, the study argues that the credibility of an animated character depends on the coherence of intention and on the animator's ability to understand and translate inner states into gesture, rhythm, and design. The theoretical-analytical approach, based on the works of Ollie Johnston, Frank Thomas, Ed Hooks, and Don Bluth, explores the role of empathy, observation, nonverbal language, and self-awareness in shaping the character's visual identity. The study suggests that integrating emotional intelligence into animation education may contribute to developing the animator as an actor conscious of movement and dramatic meaning, reaffirming animation as an art of emotion and interpretation.

Keywords: *animation, acting for animation, emotional intelligence, animation pedagogy, cinematic language, empathy, character design.*

ANIMAȚIA CA ACTORIE ȘI REDEFINIREA PEDAGOGIEI ANIMAȚIEI PRIN INTELIGENȚA EMOȚIONALĂ

Articolul examinează relația fundamentală dintre animație și inteligența emoțională, propunând o reinterpretare a pedagogiei animației prin integrarea actoriei în procesul de formare a animatorului. Pornind de la ideea că animația construiește o realitate emoțională prin forme inventate, studiul argumentează că credibilitatea personajului animat depinde de coerența intenției și de capacitatea animatorului de a înțelege și traduce stările interioare în gest, ritm și design. Analiza teoretico-analitică, bazată pe lucrările lui Ollie Johnston, Frank Thomas, Ed Hooks și Don Bluth explorează rolul empatiei, observației, limbajului non-verbal și autocunoașterea în contextul de creare a identității vizuale a personajului. Studiul sugerează că integrarea inteligenței emoționale în educația animației poate contribui la dezvoltarea animatorului ca actor conștient al mișcării și al sensului dramatic, reafirmând animația ca artă a emoției și a interpretării.

Cuvinte-cheie: *animație, actorie pentru animație, inteligența emoțională, pedagogia animației, limbaj cinematografic, empatie, designul personajului.*

Introduction

Animation surprises with its unexpected power. Often, fiction films or documentaries are the audiovisual works that convince through their presence and execution, especially because they reflect images familiar to the human eye. In contrast, animation proposes a different type of imagery, drawings that only hint at a real form. For this reason, animation does not promise immediate visual conviction from the start, but rather requires the viewer's openness to perceive diverse artistic languages. Nevertheless, animation remains memorable and capable of leaving an emotional mark on the viewer. At the same time, a certain confusion remains for some viewers: by what means does animation manage to hold our attention, even though its form may inspire mistrust in its ability to reflect the visual reality of human existence?

The hypothesis of this article is grounded in the surprising power of moving drawings to emotionally affect the viewer through the arrangement of colors and forms created from memory and associated with shapes familiar to the human eye. These forms, figures, and spaces awaken dormant emotions in the viewer, sometimes unexpectedly, and contribute to the formation of new, yet lasting, emotional connections between the spectator and the narrative of the work.

Yuri Norstein, in his work “Snow on the Grass”, (2005), appears visibly surprised by the fact that animated film is a monstrous art [4, p. 7], although this realization is no longer new to him. Its existence must

be composed from scratch, from the very first line drawn on a blank sheet of paper to the final sound in the soundtrack. Everything is constructed from nothing so that it may conform as precisely and personally as possible to the author's intention. In this lies the monstrosity of this art form. Perhaps, for this reason, the surprise is even greater when the spectator, without immediately realizing it at a cognitive level, is struck by the emotions generated within them after watching drawn forms that are technically fictitious or, stereotypically speaking, considered childish and naive that they are often dismissed or, unfortunately, ignored.

Of course, this ignorant attitude is a matter of perception and of the way we perceive and relate to others, with regrettable effects and repercussions. Although this is not the central topic of the article, it touches on the very point that gives rise to its hypothesis, according to which emotion can transform the unreal into the reality of the observer.

In other words, *Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas*, in the “bible” of animation, “*The Illusion of Life*”, (1981), confirm that animation and the visual arts succeed in leaving an emotional mark on the spectator, even though their forms and colors are entirely invented from scratch. It is precisely this contrast that remains significant within the viewer: how a reality that is created, rather than found, can generate a profoundly real experience [3, p. 19]. This contrast can be unsettling, especially for a sensitive viewer, yet it can also suggest that the affective dimension is key to understanding and connecting with the human experience. Affective resonance may become both a path toward truth and a map of manipulation. In any case, the authors emphasize that emotion is the main factor that makes the contact between a living being and a stone possible [3, p. 15].

In this context, the pedagogy of animation cannot ignore this counterpoint of terms and therefore cannot exclude emotion as an instrument of study in deepening the practice of animation and the telling of a story. In other words, we may admit that the animator becomes an actor with a pencil, or with a mouse, a tablet, the frame itself, while the animated frame becomes his breath. Our aim is to understand what a character feels, why it moves in a particular way and, above all, what inner force compels it to move even when it appears to remain still.

We begin from the observation that animation, as a living artistic organism, does not start at the line drawn on the page, but at the first beat of the tension created between intention and action. Movement is merely the visible consequence of an invisible state. This perspective compels us to view animation not as a mere technique, but as a fully developed form of acting, organically integrated into cinematic language. From this point, our understanding of the animator's education inevitably expands, and emotional intelligence, considered in relation to the stages of creation, study, and even reception, can no longer be postponed.

Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas (1981) explain that the spectator should not merely see a hand being raised. The viewer must understand the desire behind that movement. The character must think before acting, and we must be able to perceive this intimate moment. The authors emphasize the primary purpose of any form of art, namely to convey a state of being, rather than to demonstrate skill or technical excellence.

According to the authors, the spectator, no matter how little aware they may be of it, or how complex and concealed their reaction might appear in certain cases, always responds emotionally, even if they may insist, out of a reflex of self-protection, that their response is purely intellectual. This occurs because art communicates directly with the affective dimension of human experience. For this reason, animation possesses a kind of magical power to evoke emotions, even though it may appear harmless or not to be taken seriously, merely colors and forms arranged on a sheet of paper [3, p. 15].

The text also draws attention to the responsibility of the animator as creator. The animator does not remain merely a technical draftsman; rather, they become an actor who must understand the intentions, conflicts, and emotions of the character in order to convey them through gesture, rhythm, and expression even before spoken language emerges [3, p. 15-16].

Ed Hooks, in his work “*Acting for Animators*”, (2003), presents the reasoning that demonstrates that animation is, in essence, a form of acting that can be even more complex than stage performance. The author draws a parallel between the actor and the figure of the shaman in ancient tribal societies, who created and wore masks, transformed himself, and invoked spirits in order to help the community survive.

This association suggests that acting is not merely entertainment, but a ritualistic and social act in which the actor creates the emotional foundation of a collective experience. The actor speaks to the “tribe,” that is, the audience. Thus, the actor must have something to say, because the audience expects direction. This is where the “theatrical contract” begins [2, p. 11].

By comparison, Ed Hooks (2003) points out that the animator lives through a similar dialogic experience, yet one that is far more meticulous, to the point that the same moment must be reconstructed countless times, frame by frame. The animation author must understand emotion in depth and then reproduce it consistently, with precision and conscious control. While a stage actor does not need to think about their eyebrows, because simply feeling the emotion and intention is enough to allow it to settle naturally in the face, the animator, by contrast, must think through every movement of the eyebrows and the way they appear in the drawing composition, so that, through them, another layer of meaning and interpretation of the character’s narrative and emotion can be communicated. For this reason, acting in animation can be even more difficult. It demands not only the lived experience of the moment, but also detailed analysis, repetition, and the fixation of emotion over time [2, p. 12-14].

This article develops a line of reasoning that aims to demonstrate the fundamental connection between the art of animation and emotional intelligence, which becomes a key instrument in the pedagogy of animation.

Methodological Framework: Phenomenological, Aesthetic, and Pedagogical Analysis

The present research employs an interdisciplinary theoretical-analytical methodology, based on the study of specialized literature in the fields of the psychology of emotion, acting theory, and animation pedagogy. The analysis is complemented by pedagogical reflection on the teaching practice of the course “Animation Techniques and Acting for Animation,” exploring the relationship between intention, movement, and emotional intelligence in the construction of the animated character, drawing on the studies of animator-authors *Ed Hooks, Don Bluth, Ollie Johnston, and Frank Thomas*.

Before a character takes a step, it must first have a thought. Movement does not originate in the joints, but in intention. If a character walks toward an apple, the goal is not “to walk,” but rather “I am hungry,” and this hunger determines the rhythm, direction, and energy of the steps. In animation, intention precedes action, while reaction often becomes more revealing than the initial gesture. The way a character responds to surprise, fear, or joy reveals its true dramatic nature, transforming the gesture into a visible form of thought [1].

This relationship between intention and movement is expressed through precise bodily instruments: internal rhythm, timing, weight, and counterpoint. If the character does not “feel” the weight of its own body or of the objects it interacts with, the illusion breaks and the movement becomes mechanical. Weight is not only physical but also psychological: a sad character appears heavy and burdened, while a character in love seems to float. Likewise, the speed of a head turn may reveal surprise, arrogance, or melancholy, while the contradiction between gesture and expression, when the body says one thing and the face another, becomes a sign of inner tension. These details constitute the subtle language of emotional intelligence in acting. Thus, animation is not merely a succession of correct movements, but a conscious organization of intention, reaction, gesture, and energy into a coherent language [3].

These insights and reflections, grounded in the extensive experience of the animators mentioned above, inevitably lead to a fundamental pedagogical question: what inner tools must the animator develop in order to construct movements that are authentic in meaning? The answer lies in the domain of emotional intelligence. Empathy allows entry into the inner world of the character, observation provides the material for gesture, nonverbal language translates emotion into cinematic expression, and self-awareness grants authenticity to the performance. Together, these capacities transform animation from a technical practice into a form of acting and provide the fundamental reference points for a pedagogy of animation oriented toward a deeper understanding of the relationship between emotion and movement, creator and spectator [2].

The concept of self-awareness constitutes the starting point of acting in animation. An animator cannot convincingly portray a character’s anger or joy without first recognizing these states within their own body,

in the rhythm of breathing or in the tension of gesture. At the same time, the character must be constructed on the basis of a clear intention: it does not simply “run,” but rather “hurries,” and it does not merely “remain still,” but “pursues a goal.”

Building upon the foundational principles of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Ed Hooks asserts that authentic acting is rooted in the belief that character and thought are the two primary „natural causes” of human action. He posits that since we essentially „live to act,” the craft of performance must move beyond mere movement to focus on the deep-seated connections between an internal mental process and its resulting physical expression. By prioritizing the dynamics of action over simple aesthetics, Hooks suggests that a performer, much like the characters envisioned by Walt Disney, only truly succeeds when their outward behavior is a direct, motivated consequence of their inner life [2, p. 20].

Taking a step further, within the stages of production, character design itself is not merely a decorative exercise, but a visible extension of the character’s inner state. Form, line, and color become carriers of emotional meaning, and design begins to communicate even before the character moves or “performs.” In this context, concepts such as lines of force, the emotional silhouette, and the color of feelings function as dramatic instruments rather than simple aesthetic choices [2].

As Don Bluth emphasizes in his work “*The Art of Animation Drawing*”, 2004, the psychology of forms is essential in the construction of a character, and design must reflect personality. Rounded lines suggest friendliness, kindness, and vulnerability, while sharp lines or triangular forms convey danger, agitation, or rigid determination. Character traits and the level of emotional intelligence are reflected in the shape of the body, posture, and clothing. For example, a character who is “withdrawn,” with low social awareness, may be drawn hunched over, with shoulders pulled inward and clothing that conceals them, as a kind of visual protection from the outside world. In this way, design becomes the character’s first act of acting: an emotional promise made to the spectator before the story even begins. The spectator “reads” these signals instinctively, before any explicit action takes place [1, p. 66].

Findings and Interpretations

Starting from the need to redefine the pedagogy of animation through the integration of acting and emotional intelligence, this article proposes, as a methodological solution, the exercise “The Map of Emotions,” conceived as a training tool for young animators. Inspired by the principles of acting for animation formulated by Ed Hooks and by the concepts concerning the psychology of forms discussed by Don Bluth, the exercise aims to transform inner emotion into visual and cinematic construction. It is structured in three successive stages: identifying the emotion and the way it manifests in the body, creating an initial sketch that translates emotional intention into the design of the character, and finally placing the character within a cinematic context in which the emotion intensifies into action [1; 2].

The application of the exercise “The Map of Emotions” highlights the decisive role of emotional intelligence in the construction of the animated character. Its structure promises artistic coherence on the part of the student, who develops the ability to first describe how the emotion is felt within their own body. Subsequently, they are able to construct movement that is more coherent and more dramatically motivated, with character design functioning as a visible extension of the identified inner state. The exercise emphasizes that empathy and self-awareness are not abstract concepts, but practical tools that enable the animator to transform intention into a readable gesture and that gesture into cinematic expression.

At the same time, “The Map of Emotions” functions as a method of integrating observation and non-verbal language into the pedagogical process. Placing the character within a frame that amplifies the emotional state highlights the relationship between emotion, design, and mise-en-scène. Such framing may appear as solitude in a wide shot, tension in a close-up, or conflict expressed through counterpoint in body language. As a result, students construct clearer emotional arcs and come to understand that credible animation does not depend solely on the technical correctness of movement, but on the emotional coherence of intention. The exercise can thus be proposed as a central pedagogical tool in training the animator as an actor, confirming the hypothesis that animation becomes more expressive when it is grounded in emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

The pedagogical proposal formulated in this article, namely the exercise “The Map of Emotions,” is not intended to be a definitive method, but rather a starting point for a pedagogy that shifts the emphasis from execution to understanding. It suggests that the training of the animator should begin not with software or technique, but with the recognition of emotion, the observation of the body, and the construction of dramatic intention. Within such a pedagogical framework, character design becomes the first act of acting, movement becomes the consequence of an inner conflict, and editing becomes the visible organization of an emotional transformation.

In the end, animation preserves its mystery: it remains a “monstrous” art not because it is excessive, but because it compels the creator to construct a world out of nothing and to charge it with human truth. Within this world, the spectator does not seek the realism of forms, but the sincerity of emotion. And if the pedagogy of animation succeeds in cultivating this sincerity, then the animator will no longer be merely a technician of movement, but an author capable of creating living presence from drawing, from light, and from time.

Bibliography:

1. BLUTH, D. *The Art of Animation Drawing*. Animation Press, p. 66, 2004.
2. HOOKS, E. *Acting for Animators*. A complete Guide to Performance Animation, p. 11-20, 2003.
3. JOHNSTON, O., THOMAS, F. *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation*. Disney Editions, p. 15-19, 1981.
4. NORSTEIN, Y. *Snow on the Grass*. VGIK, p. 7, 2005.

Data about author:

Vera SURĂȚEL, PhD Student, “Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University of Chisinau, Republic of Moldova.

ORCID: 0009-0009-1689-4612

E-mail: verasuratel@gmail.com

Presented: 28.02.2026

Reviewed: 30.04.2026

Accepted for publication: 20.05.2026