

สตอปโมชันในวัฒนธรรมสมัยนิยม: กรณีศึกษาการสร้างสรรค์ ซีรีส์ 'Rilakkuma and Kaoru'

Stop Motion in Popular Culture: a Case Study in Series Production of 'Rilakkuma and Kaoru'

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความสตอปโมชันในวัฒนธรรมสมัยนิยมฉบับนี้ มีจุดมุ่งหมายเพื่อศึกษาความนิยมของสตอปโมชัน ในช่วงปลายศตวรรษที่ 20 จนถึงต้นศตวรรษที่ 21 โดยมุ่งเน้นไปยังอิทธิพล การนับเป็นปัจเจกตัวตนในประเภทย่อยของอนิเมชัน ผลกระทบของการปรับเปลี่ยนไปในการรับสื่อ ตลอดจนการดำรงอยู่ของสตอปโมชันในสื่อร่วมสมัย บทความนี้ จะวิเคราะห์แนวคิดริเริ่ม และวิธีการสร้างสรรค์สตอปโมชันซีรีส์ 'Rilakkuma and Kaoru' ซึ่งเผยแพร่บนสื่อสตรีมมิ่งออนไลน์ยักษ์ใหญ่อย่าง Netflix โดยจำแนกถึงรายละเอียดของการสร้างสรรค์ผลงานด้วยเทคนิคอนิเมชันสมัยใหม่ ซึ่งมีส่วนช่วยให้สตอปโมชันยังคงอยู่ได้บนสื่อวัฒนธรรมสมัยนิยมร่วมสมัย

คำสำคัญ: สตอปโมชัน / ประเภทสื่อ / วัฒนธรรมสมัยนิยม / เทคนิคอนิเมชัน

Abstract

Stop motion in popular culture aims to study the popularity of stop motion over the late 20th century until early 21st century with focuses on its influence, its identity as a sub-genre of animation, the affects in the shift of media reception as well as how stop motion can find its place in contemporary media. The article analyses the inception and production of the stop motion series 'Rilakkuma and Kaoru' that is available on the giant streaming service Netflix. Detailing the production of this series that shows the utilisation of modern animation techniques that helps stop motion to remain relevant to the contemporary pop culture.

Keywords: Stop Motion /Media Genre /Popular Culture / Animation Technique

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Inspiration

Stop motion is a classic production technique that has been around as long as the beginning of the film era. The technique of taking consecutive frames of inanimate object and move it a little in each consecutive frame has been used in numerous mediums, from lavish Hollywood production, short films, television commercials and more. The practice is regarded as classic yet tedious and the resulting works are appreciated with utmost respect in the industry. In early twenty first century, specifically the 2000's to present (2019), the author wishes to take a look at the impact of the stop motion in the popular culture and how it has survived and thrived thus far. Autor is trying to determine the key factors in various stop motion pieces that helps propels it to remain relevance to the industry. The case studies in this article includes, Rilakkuma and Kaoru (2019), and web-based platform shorts from various channels.

Objectives

1. To study the history of stop motion in popular culture and its identity as a sub-genre of animation
2. To understand the production of Netflix's Rilakkuma and Kaoru (リラックマとカオルさん Rirakkuma to Kaoru-san, 2019) and its impact

Stop motion in popular culture over time

Stop motion and Hollywood feature film have been a familiar companion since the beginning, where stop motion is utilized to animate the inanimate objects often to purport movements as if it is filled with life. Hollywood films such as King Kong (1933), Jason and the Argonauts (1963), Clash of the Titans (1981), Terminator (1984) Robocop (1987) and many more utilized the stop motion to bring its monsters, mythological creatures or murderous robots to life. Stop motion is considered one of the key parts of visual special effect techniques in the motion pictures.

The biggest turning point in its popularity was the production of Jurassic Park (1993), although the computer generated imagery (CGI) has been introduced in earlier film, it is Jurassic Park that has cemented the fact from the refined techniques used that CGI can be 'realistic' to the point that, the director, Stephen Spielberg has the stop motion animators team who were working on the realistic dinosaurs turn their focus to train in usage of computer input devices and software instead, as shown in figure 1. It was a move that killed stop motion for that movie (Tippet, 2015). From that point on, most subsequent Hollywood blockbusters and major production opted to use CGI over the practical effects such as stop motion.



Figure 1: CGI Process for Jurassic Park (1993, Universal Pictures)

Outside of the special effects area, stop motion has been used as animation techniques to tell short stories in children's television programme, for example, The Magic Roundabout (1965-1977), Clangers (1969-1972) etc. and these stop motion in children's television programmes has been well received by its viewers, part of the reason, the author believed, is due to medium to low framerate that create semi-stutter motion which children can easily follows, nothing too fast-moving to interrupt the pacing. The author finds the framerate used in these children's program were around 8-12 frames per seconds, mainly due to the cost of production as it is mainly analogue, using film to shoot the programme.

In conjunction to the decline of stop motion as special effects, a unique film was released in that same year as Jurassic Park, which could arguably introduced stop motion as a full feature-length film as well as popularized the stop motion to newer, younger audience, that film was no other than A Nightmare Before Christmas (1993) with its distinctive art style and direction. Stop motion then became a well-respected craft that has been replicated by different artists, filmmakers and amateur enthusiasts alike.

Stop motion as a genre

At this point, the popular culture began to recognise stop motion as part of a sub-genre of animation. The author finds that to identify a genre of a media, it must follow some distinctive iterations of one or more certain characteristics, for example, noir detective films usually are set in urban city like New York with distinctive darker tone, in story and in its lighting, a western will have its characters dressed in leather chaps with

saloon and overall orange film tone, etc. This typing of genre becomes unusable when the film has a cross-genre occurrences, what genre a film will be when a western has a singing scene, does it then become a musical? or when romantic film lead is murdered, would the subsequent parts become a detective mystery, etc. Thus it may be more understandable to identify the genre with aesthetic commodities, demanding at least a degree of novelty and differences from one to another (Neale, 2005) as well as intertextual relay taken from another media or concepts.

What constitute stop motion as a genre then? The author finds that if we break down the production of each type of animation, we will be able to distinguish the main characteristics that supports stop motion as a sub-genre of animation.

	Stop Motion	2D Animation	3D Animation
What is being used to animate?	objects i.e. clay, puppets, people (pixilation) etc.	drawings or characters, props and background	3D models of characters, objects and background
Framerates used (in frames per second)	8, 12, 24, and rarely 30	12, 24, 30	24, 30, 60
Number of frames shot before motion. ("on one", one frame is shot then motion changes, "on two", two frames are shot before change)	- on twos, for most stop motion where objects are moved every two frames taken - on ones, for when camera also moves or with actions that requires precision.	on twos	on ones

From the table that the author has listed, there are key characteristics that overlapped with other types of animations, however, the usage of objects to animate, coupled with how the stop motion was shot i.e. on twos with lower number in framerates seem to be the key in identifying the unique charms of stop motion that distinguishes itself from other forms of animation.

Digital Accessibility

When digital cameras gained widespread popularity around early 2000s-2010s professional photographers and enthusiasts alike quickly transitioned from analogue as the quality of images produced gradually improved to the level that rival its counterparts. The main perks for digital camera over film was the ability to view the photo immediately after the shutter is released and images can be erased just as fast as it is produced. These two perks alone helped stop motion animators tremendously, reducing amount

of time for the production coupled with the rise of video editing software in consumer market that also quickly edit the frames together faster than ever. The Television show 'Robot Chicken' which premiered on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim in February 2005 was a 100% stop motion sketch show which is produced with digital cameras. The show gathers a cult following with series of comedic shorts mocking popular culture referencing multiple franchises using their toy lines, figurines, dolls, etc. coupled with clay animation. One of the techniques utilised was the paper cut-outs into different mouth shapes that match the words that each character speaks, as shown in figure 2.



Figure 2: Robot Chicken, the two sketches utilising Barbie and Ken dolls.
(2005, Warner Bros.)

Right around the booming popularity of digital camera, its technology has advanced to the point where manufacturers of mobile phones started to put digital camera on them, at first, the sensors were small and the images produced from them were not of high quality up until around 2007 with introduction of the iPhone by Apple, since then, mobile phone photos began to improve steadily. Also, at that same time, social media platforms began to become widespread amongst netizens i.e. Facebook, myspace, as well as the online video sites like YouTube.

Finding its niche in social media

With the power of photography becoming accessible via digital cameras, smartphones with pre-installed digital cameras, and platforms that give out a space for stop motion creators whether the professional ones or the amateurs dabbling in the craft, has help gathered followings which accumulated into a niche of its own that appreciate the craft of stop motion. Stop motion animation shorts were much welcomed in social media platforms, due to its runtime that is digestible enough. Music video became a complementary match for stop motion, which helps perpetuating their own recognition through sharing in social media. Notable examples of this include, the 2009 Grammy Award

Nominated, Oren Lavie with the music video for Her Morning Elegance that received over 30 million views on YouTube since it was released back in January 2009. The music video featured a form of stop motion called pixilation in which a real live actors or actresses is used to perform the movements. In this stop motion it is filmed as a top down view onto the bed of the main protagonist, as shown in figure 3. The viral popularity has spiked the Google Search term 'stop motion' from upon its release in January 2009 then gained widespread fame on YouTube and again in February 2009 which coincides with Grammy Awards Nomination announcement.



Figure 3: Oren Lavie's Her Morning Elegance (2009, Oren Lavie)

Another notable example of stop motion music video is Against the Grain by Hudson and Troop released in November 2011 featuring colour pencils as metaphors of childhood artistic efforts. The stop motion animation as shown in figure 4, was created by the artist Dropbear, also known as Jonathan Chong. The music video was featured on the video site Vimeo as a staff pick featurette and has been viewed 1.4 million times on that platform alone.



Figure 4: Hudson and Troop's Against the Grain, stop motion by Dropbear (2011, Dropbear)

A new platform

Streaming service have gained popularity over the years as internet connectivity of population soars. The main contender for this service is Netflix who has made the big shift from DVD sales and rentals to a full internet-based subscription streaming in 2010 and also established itself as a content-production platform as well with making its own Netflix Originals production. Netflix Originals usually consisted of three types, either the show is produced or co-produced by Netflix with a third-party or created by third-party and distributed solely on Netflix. As Netflix looks to expand the library of shows offered on the platform with various forms of entertainment, whether in films, documentaries, animations etc. it has become a viable platform for stop motion. Although there has been a stop motion that is commissioned as a promotional material for its own original documentary, *Daughters of Destiny*, as shown in figure 5, the first ever full stop motion animation as a series is *Rilakkuma and Kaoru*.



Figure 5: The promotional clip 'Daughters of Destiny | Preetha's Poem' (2017, Netflix)

Rilakkuma and Kaoru (*リラックマとカオルさん* *Rirakkuma to Kaoru-san*, 2019)

The show was pitched by San-X, the owner of the titular character *Rilakkuma* to Netflix which gave greenlit in 2017. The series consists of 13 episodes with around 11 minutes each. It is produced by Dwarf Studio in Japan who specialises in stop motion animation and has produced various works across the board such as *Domo-kun*, a commercial for the game *Yoshi's Woolly World* and more. The story presented as a slice-of-life that revolves around *Kaoru*, a typical Japanese office worker struggling with everyday life, as shown in figure 6, along with her 'roommates' *Rilakkuma*, *Korilakkuma* and *Kiioritori*.



Figure 6: Designs of Kaoru and final model used in production (2019, Netflix)

Production

Rilakkuma and Kaoru began its production in 2017 with 7 months of filming where up to 10 seconds of footage can be produced in a single day for one animator. There were 220,000 frames that were shot in total throughout the production. The production utilises modern animation techniques such as rigging to help stabilise the character when animating as well as green-screen for various scenes that would be composited together in post-production. The writer of the show, Naoko Oigami stated that she felt she could be more creative with this work, she could send him (Rilakkuma) to go dancing into space with snowmen, as shown in figure 8 and 9, which is something that only stop motion animation could do. The screenplay that is vivid with imagination enabled the director, Masahito Kobayashi, to see clearly what should be done, making things easier.



Figure 7: Production crew utilising modern animation technique of rigging (2019, Netflix)



Figure 8: Rilakkuma and Kaoru detailed storyboard of the dance with snowmen (2019, Netflix)



Figure 9: Rilakkuma in pre-composited shot and after post-production (2019, Netflix)

The production of Rilakkuma and Kaoru also utilises a specific stop motion software to aid in capturing the frames as shown in figure 10, that software is named Dragonframe. Dragonframe has been a famous stop motion production software that is already popular amongst stop motion animation creators. It has been used for multiple short films as well as in big budget film production teams such as Laika Studio who produced *Coraline*, *Paranorman*, *Kubo and the Two Strings*, *Missing Link* etc. The software has many features that aids stop motion animator, one notable feature includes onion skin overlays of previous frame superimposed to the current live view feed, which enable the animator to see which element of the frame to be moved in the following frame before pressing capture.



Figure 10: Production crew using the Dragonframe Stop motion software (2019, Netflix)

The amount of details that went into production is staggering, every lighting angle mimicking natural sunlight as shown in figure 11, every prop, whether big or small, every nuances of facial characters were meticulously created (figure 12). All efforts shown in this production has made Rilakkuma and Kaoru a uniquely spectacular series to watch and enjoy.



Figure 11: The lighting quality Rilakkuma and Kaoru(2019, Netflix)



Figure 12: The intricate details of various size props in Rilakkuma and Kaoru (2019, Netflix)

Reception

Rilakkuma and Kaoru received an overall positive review when it was released in May 2019. Most people find the stop motion to be endearing with vibrant and detailed visuals. The titular character, Rilakkuma is already an established franchise and recognizable in Asian countries, with this series it has hoped to branch out to a broader audience. The parent company who holds the rights to Rilakkuma, San-X, has made the right decision to opt for a stop motion over 2D animation in which the character originates from. The unique charm of stop motion created with dolls that gives it a life in aesthetically pleasing animation frames that allow the audience to be able to feel the huggable characters have certainly resonated with many people that have seen the show.

Conclusion

The author finds that even though stop motion as part of visual effects in Hollywood productions has declined to the point of near extinction, stop motion as an art form continues to thrive in contemporary platform of video sharing, social media and streaming service all of which were widely supported by its fans. Stop motion can be considered part of a sub-genre of animation with its own unique identifiable charms of certain animation aesthetic that can be described as timeless. Stop motion techniques also evolves over time and embraces special effects techniques such as green screen and motion rigging to produce even more spectacular scenes. The author believes that stop motion can still remain a part of pop culture history for a long time to come.

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