

Stanislavski's System and Animation

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How well does Stanislavski's system, particularly the ideas of units, objectives, super-objectives and the 'magic if', apply to animation? How does this reflect on the similarities between stage acting and animation, with the focus on providing practical advantages to the latter?

1 Introduction

The purpose behind this study is to try and shed some light on the similarities and distinctions between acting and animating. Also, with particular reference to Stanislavski, to try and translate a small amount of the far greater body of theory of the former into the latter. As yet there has been very little done comparing acting to animation for the purpose of teaching the latter some of the qualities of the former.¹

It is therefore a study composed of two complimentary strands. The greater comparison between acting and animation, and the more specific comparison of the methods used within Stanislavski's 'system' to the practical realities of animation. This is not an exhaustive study of the system, which is far too expansive to do justice within six thousand words. Rather it will look at certain key elements to ascertain whether a further, more detailed study accompanied by practical tests would be beneficial, or whether the similarities are outweighed by the dissimilarities, most likely proving further pursuit of this particular theory fruitless.

The structure of the dissertation goes as follows; after explaining the reasons for approaching the subject, the definition of both the term 'animation' and of Stanislavski's system will be clarified and elaborated on.

¹See Webster, *The Mechanics of Animation* 2005 page 127. He comments that the subject of acting in animation would be a worthy subject for a book, though, "as far as I am aware, no such book written by a leading animator exists . . ." At the time of writing however, he is in the process of personally writing that very book.

Having established the background the aims of the study are revisited with reference to this background.

The main body is split into sections dealing with separate aspects of the system and how well they match animation practice. Firstly, several aspects which would be worth a closer analysis in later studies are touched on in order to demonstrate the breadth of the system's scope. Their inclusion is additionally merited by the nature of this study as a the first step amongst others hopefully derivable from it.

The next section explores the issue of the medium within the system and art as a whole, and how this impacts on the overall applicability of acting theory to animation.

The final section of the body cover ideas which are not only central to the system as a whole, and therefore good samples from which to draw conclusions, but are also particularly appealing due to their emphasis on developing the motivations and mind of the character to be performed. These are units, objectives, super-objectives and 'the magic if'.

The conclusion of the study includes observations on the limitations and potential for further development of the system within animation.

2 A compelling comparison

Perhaps it is worth starting with an explanation of why this particular comparison is especially worth making. Acting is, obviously, a far older trade—or art—than animating and has built up over the centuries a strong body of analytical and tutoring tradition. It also has the virtue of being as directly expressive as an art form as is possible to achieve due to there being no separation at all between the artist and the artist's

medium; his or her own body (Hughes, *TSAA* 1993 p.40).

Animation on the other hand is far younger and more artistically removed. Though now over a hundred and counting (hardly new) it is, still, a technical invention of the late ninetieth century and as such lacks the maturity of theatre. Furthermore, because it is a technical invention which requires the practitioner to learn to manipulate an unnatural medium most of the literature produced for the aid of the student has, by necessity, to concentrate on ‘movement mechanics’, basic physical actions (Webster, *MM* 2005 preface). In other words, training to animate and to act at the same time is the equivalent to training a baby to act.

It is understandable then that acting doesn’t get addressed as thoroughly as it should when there is such potential depth of study within the purely physical. But this lack of acting training leads to not only general similarities between the two disciplines, but to a direct similarity between the formulaic mistakes actors tend to make, which are addressed by Stanislavski, and the normal methods of animating.

3 Considering animation as a whole

What constitutes animation is far broader in scope than what constitutes acting due to the very nature of the two disciplines. Whereas the actor can only express with his own body, an animator has a huge range of materials and mediums to express with. By extension whereas an actor will remain almost exclusively human—with perhaps the occasional animal—an animator’s portfolio can include all sorts of shapes and lines, all manner of creatures great, small and strange.

An animated menu system for a website, for instance, remains an-

imation but bears absolutely no similarities to acting. Therefore it is important to note early on exactly which varieties of animation are being referenced. For the purposes of this study the term 'animation' is meant to mean the creation of a character, whether actually human or not, which expresses human emotions and intentions.

A further set of distinctions which need to be drawn, within the restrictive boundaries of which forms of animation are being referred to, is how being animated in different time frames affects the applicability of the system to the piece. Change in medium is a change in the structure of the filming process; for example, cell animation is frequently drawn back to front, one body part before another; whereas sand-on-glass animation is done strictly from the beginning to the end. The system obviously presumes that the actor cannot move his arms half an hour after he has finished moving his legs to his satisfaction, or do the complex movements at the beginning to get them over and done with. It shall have to be established to what extent the broken time frames inherent in animation affect the system.

In summary then, by understanding the differences between acting and animating, theory can be translated from the former for the benefit of the latter, exposing flaws in animation practices common to the student.² This study is an attempt to establish a foundation for further work; an animation beachhead into theatre, if you like.

²Though it is also possible there are one or two things an actor could learn from a good animator to improve his craft, it is not the intention to translate from animation to acting.

4 Considering Stanislavski's system as a whole

Stanislavski (1863–1938) was a Russian actor and theatre director during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, a time during which the country's theatre was in a somewhat crippled state. In fact, the country *was* a crippled state. Amongst the issues he found himself having to deal with as director was the reality of an entirely untrained, arrogant and frequently drunk company of actors. The situation stimulated his intelligence and artistry for a solution and, over the years, this emerged through a series of papers and notes (H2G2 2005). The system, as it became known, became a trilogy of books as well as being evolved and spread internationally during his lifetime by actors who trained under him.

The reason for paying particular attention to Stanislavski, above other acting theorists, is that he is in many respects the grandfather of the genre. Much of what has been done since, most famously 'Method Acting', has been inspired by his system. This legacy has developed into the bedrock of teaching for many acting institutions; it is "for many, still a first step" (Wisbey, int. Jan 2009). A further reason is the open nature of said system, which was never considered finished or a complete solution (Benedetti, SAI 1982 p.21), but a progressive understanding of the art. Stanislavski did not believe it possible to successfully proscribe a definitive solution or strategy, and it was with this in mind that he insisted his publishers kept the word 'system' in lower case, to avoid suggestion that it was in any way definitive or unchangeable.

This does in one respect make the task of focusing it towards a new medium significantly more unwieldy, no simple bullet pointed summary

adequately portrays the system, for instance (Bernhard, 1983 p.427). However, a prescriptive alternative would not be so accommodating of whatever changes may be needed for animation. Because the system was forever a work in progress it can be progressed.

The theory does not come as one discrete monograph, but through notes taken during his lifetime, much of which he included in the three books he wrote on the subject; *An Actor Prepares*, *Building a Character* and *Creating a Role*. The first dealt primarily with assuming an identity and learning to maintain it, the second on the physical aspects surrounding acting, the third on using both these aspects to extrapolate a personality from a script and play it. These cannot be considered to be the culmination of the system, as such; the other texts still contain elements which aren't to be found within the trilogy. However, for the purposes of this study they contain more than enough of it to give fair idea of the complete picture.

The first and third books, *An Actor Prepares* and *Creating a Role*, will be given greater attention than the second, *Building a Character*, as their content does not deal so heavily with the medium itself. Physical directions aimed at actors still bear relevance to an animator, but only to a limited degree given the wide range of physical realities he may be dealing with, such as clay, drawings, computerised puppetry, all of which have very different peculiarities both from each other and the human body.

There will be important distinctions to be drawn where elements of the system apply to animation with modification, or cannot be directly applied but serve as potential basis for a system specific to animation or for which the change in discipline is irrelevant as it applies equally to

both.

The system was produced during a lifetime of practice and evaluation within an environment conducive to artistic development, over fifty years from his beginning as an actor to where it was left for others to carry on in his stead. It would be supremely arrogant to assume that a similar system for animation could be extrapolated from this purely by analysing it and factoring in the ways in which animation differs; especially considering my personal lack of experience, either as an amateur—as Stanislavski himself was for much of his career—or a professional; either as an auteur or within the animation industry. This dissertation cannot therefore extend to include a practical guide formed from the conclusions drawn within; such a guide would be worthless until the conclusions had been tested and most likely redrawn. It could, however, make recommendations for practical tests which could confirm or deny these conclusions, thus beginning the process of building up a guide. It is with these aims in mind that the following aspects will be analysed.

5 Aspects of the system in brief

One of the main advantages Stanislavski's system has over other theories is the joint insistence of both anonymity—the actor as an individual ceases to be from the point of view of the audience, he becomes wholly the part outwardly—and the insistence on maintaining an amount of distance between oneself and the part inwardly, so that one can observe and evaluate oneself. From the outside, "I no longer exist, but what exists is 'I-the part'" (Hughes, *TSAA* 1993 p.41). An animator is naturally

both. Anonymous, as he's never seen, and removed because he can not ever truly become a piece of paper or a collective set of pixels. The medium maintains both these 'system' necessities. Stanislavski was no admirer of virtuosity for its own sake and, similarly, "though the work is memorable, even unforgettable, the [animator] is often content to remain invisible" (Lord, *MM* 2005 foreword).

Although his legacy is undoubtedly most keenly felt when individual actors come to struggle with realising their roles, his work as a director also reveals a keen aesthete with an eye for set design. For instance, standard practice for the time, in Russia, "[placed] doors for the convenience of actors rather than to create a realistic aesthetic" (*H2G2* 2005). Stanislavski on the other hand, who found this lack of artistic consideration unacceptable, "[would take trips] abroad to buy props and fabrics for costume that would actually fit the play - something unheard of at the time" (*H2G2* 2005). In his mind, naturalistic detail is not there for the audience, but the actors "It will help them get into the spirit of their parts" (Hughes, *TSAA* p.41 1993). There is a case to be made that most of the detail put into animated productions is not appreciable by the audience, but without it the animator would be unaware of how the character should be reacting to the ambiance of the scene.

The point of interest for the actor must be, according to the system, on his side of the footlights; not on in the auditorium, but on stage—hence the focus on natural detail (Stanislavski, *AAP* 1980 p.75). To this extent animation has a natural advantage over the stage due to the remoteness of its 'auditorium' from the animator. There is no need to avoid the distraction known in theatre as "the black hole" (Wisbey, int. Jan 2009) and so the detail serves less purpose in animation. A potential matter

for dispute is whether the audience is required at all for the system to work. Given that Stanislavski expects an actor to play not primarily to the paying public but to the other actors (Hughes, *TSAA* 1993 p43) it seems, at least superficially, unlikely.

6 The medium and the art

One way to assess how good the fit between acting and animation could be is to reverse the situation and, justly assuming both acting and animation to be forms of art, ask how well the system conforms to artistic generalisations. In *Tolstoy, Stanislavski, and the Art of Acting* by Hughes, the relationship between the system and Tolstoy's theory of art are considered. Tolstoy's theory of art makes the primary purpose of art to be the complete transmission of a thought or feeling from the artist to the viewer, without regard to medium, which he considered irrelevant (Tolstoy, *WIA* 1996 ch.5). Hughes points out several apparent flaws with the theory, most of which he says Tolstoy would answer by assuming a great many of what we would consider masterpieces to be unartistic. The subject makes for an intriguing debate, but within the frame work of this study one objection only applies. It is that; by refusing to accept the nature of the medium as significant to the artistry his theory omits almost all of art history and developments, which was, according to Hughes (with reference to Wollheim), driven greatly by the technical problems of portraying certain scenes or expressing certain emotions within certain mediums. That the obstacles presented to, say, a painter trying to achieve realism, inspires him and innumerable fellows to overcome them by pushing on our understanding of perspective and light.

In other words, that the mediums develop separately and do not fit into a theory which does not acknowledge their importance. Hughes does not take this further by questioning the general validity of Tolstoy's theory, merely establishes it as a matter to consider when comparing Stanislavski's system to the theory of art. The problem of the medium can be explained away in the case of Stanislavski because he also, albeit through a different manner, does not refer to the medium as a matter of some importance; he refers to it and the actor as being one entity on stage. Medium and artist are one and the same.

Accordingly, the system is in agreement with much of the theory of art presented in *What is Art?*. Tolstoy, as documented above, points to the complete transmission—or infection as he refers to it—of an artist's thought or feeling to the viewer through, ideally, a shared space. In Stanislavski's words, "the highly charged atmosphere of the theatre draws out a contagious mass emotion. Besides, the spectators hypnotise each other and thus heighten the impact from the stage" (Stanislavski, CR 1981 p.199). "Stanislavski's account of communication agrees with Tolstoy's" (Hughes, TSAA 1993 p.44), paradoxically confusing the situation regarding animation in doing so. By coming into alignment with the theory of art, as Hughes asserts he does by both relying on over simplified relationships between the audience and the performers, the system is both devoid of restrictions on the medium and, despite the initial presumption to the contrary, reliant on the reaction of its audience—something which for good or for bad, the animator never has whilst performing.

7 Units, objectives, super-objectives and ‘the magic if’

Described in detail in *An Actor Prepares* the units, objectives and super-objectives method for coming to terms with the part in the script can be summarised thusly;

When reading through the script the text is broken down for each character, by that character’s actor, into units of action, objectives and super-objectives.

A unit of action is a single event within a scene. So in a conversation where two male friends are discussing the fact that its now snowing for the first time this millennia before moving on through obvious progression to a skiing holiday one of them had last year, there would be two units of action.

The objectives for both men during the first unit may be to restart the conversation after a natural lull; for the second it is an opportunity for one of the men to boast about his skiing prowess, whereas for the other an opportunity to be entertained by some of his friend’s reliably humorous anecdotes.

The super-objective is the underlying reason for these events to occur where they do within the script. For instance the man listening to the skiing anecdotes is a widower. Both he and his friend are trying to maintain a sense of normality some months after the death of his wife. They are pointedly avoiding the subject by deliberately choosing harmless strains of conversations to pursue.

Neither the objective nor the super-objective appear in the script and the actor will not attempt to improvise them into it. They are there to be

kept in mind at all times whilst the scene is being performed so that they might subtly affect how the units are executed. Perhaps so subtly that the super-objective cannot be perceived by the audience, or even fellow actors, until later in the play (Wisbey, int. Jan 2009).

‘The magic if’ was an invention of Stanislavski’s designed to improve an actors understanding of the character to be played. It consists of three parts; drawing from the script a set of ‘given circumstances’, layering these onto one’s own imagination and mentality, and using these circumstances to imagine how you, as the character, would progress from one point in the script to the next; from one set of circumstances to the next.

On first reading the principle would appear simple. However, as Stanislavski discovered himself during the development of his theatrical³ directing career, a problem arises when the actor feels a violently differing reaction to the circumstances than to the reaction of the character as described in the script. The actor has taken the first set of circumstances, applied them to his own imagination and mentality and come out with a conclusion which doesn’t tally.

One way around these problems is, rather than to imagine yourself as the character, to bring up one of a stock of emotional memories. Playing a grieving widower one recalls how one felt on the occasion of the most tragic bereavement remembered from one’s own life and projects the emotions that stem from this remembrance into the role (Wisbey, int.

³Stanislavski was particularly averse to the word ‘theatrical’. Though he translated his system to apply across a great range of styles and forms—including melodramas and operas for example (Lewis, *CR*, 1981 foreword)—he returned always to the style in which he made his name, Realism. The term ‘theatrical’, he felt, implied a lack of realism. Within this study, however, the word should be assumed to signify or suggest no more than the word ‘theatre’; merely to indicate stage plays of no particular type or style.

Jan 2009).

This was greatly developed by, amongst other New Yorker actors in the 'Group Theatre', Lee Strasberg into what is known as 'The Method', or 'Method Acting', after experiencing second hand some early teachings from which would eventually emerge the system. It is indeed a technique which Stanislavski himself tried; but later deprecated in favour of other less draining techniques such as 'the magic if' (Stanislavski, *CR* 1981 ch.2). He found that it involved an often unmanageable level of intensity which went beyond the idea of "becoming the part, but remaining observant of oneself", on several occasions causing hysteria amongst members of the cast. A famous example of this in modern theatre is Daniel Day Lewis, an adherent to The Method, collapsing on stage during a production of Hamlet after believing to have seen the ghost of his own father (Stanford, *EDDL* 2008).⁴

Therefore 'the magic if' goes beyond these basic steps to rather ask of the actor not, "What would you do or think in these circumstances?" but, "What would you have to do or think in these circumstances to arrive at these next, different circumstances?" Returning to the example of the widower once more; whereas originally the actor may not conceive of how this grieving would make him kill himself, he considers the circumstances of the grieving and the circumstances of the impending suicide and fills in the space between with his own internal or external circumstances which would, in his mind, conceivably lead from one state to the next. "A dramatist should possess "sincerity of emotions, feelings that seem true in the given circumstances"" (Stanislavski referencing Pushkin, *AAP* 1980 p.50).

⁴For problems with 'The Method' and *An Actor Prepares* see Hughes, *TSA* 1993 p.42

Once more, as with objectives and super-objectives, the actor does not use these feelings and emotions to add lines to the script on the fly, but he uses the flexibility allowed by stage plays to exercise his imagination. Pauses, physical reactions, the way the body is held; all these and more are stock tools of the trade which allow room for the actor to breath personal and improvisational creativity into the play beyond what is written into the script (Webster, int. Feb 2009).

By contrast most animators are working in far stricter and more industrialised environments. Because of the laboriousness and expense associated with even short animated sequences directors naturally attempt to minimise their risks and outlay by controlling what is put on screen as tightly as possible (Williams, *ASK* 2001 p.334). For this reason the process is far more layered than on stage. The script, once written, is turned into a storyboard which maps out almost all the character actions. This is then evolved into an animatic (or Leica reel)—that is a film reel composed of rough animation and still shots to finalise the timings. Into this the animator must fit his work, often down to a single twenty-fourth of a second. Often, the same character will be animated by several different people—in these circumstances implementation of what individuals believe, from their interpretation of the script, to be the thoughts and feelings of the character could create the appearance of an erratic personality, or even multiple personalities. Therefore, even if the animator were able to employ units, objectives, super-objectives and ‘the magic if’ at all to improve his understanding of the character, its implementation is crippled by the multiple layers of production (Webster, int. Feb 2009).

8 Conclusion

There has been two strands to this study; firstly, with an aim to establish a base for future research, an analysis of a section of Stanislavski's system from an animator's perspective; secondly, as a overarching concern, the greater comparison between acting and animation.

To the former strand of the study; so much of the system is based on the importance of imagination to construct the near perfect analogy between the mentality of the actor and the role (through the 'magic if'), that it defies attempts to pin it down to a particular medium. All one needs is an active imagination to make the fit. Where the problems arise is in the implementation. In a perfect world then, the system would be highly useful. But, given the reality of the animator's job which may deny them the necessary time to implement such verbose, unpredictable and uneconomic directions; not so.

Furthermore, the truth of the matter is that no animator *can ever* dedicate himself totally to developing his acting if he should wish to, because there are always more pressing and tedious technical issues than those found on stage, with which he must grapple. This is, perhaps, the second most debilitating problem associated with applying the system to animation.

The primary must be, without doubt or need for further more thorough analysis, the distance between the artist and the medium; the removal of the artist's natural understanding of the body which will perform to his bidding on which so much of which the system hangs. This is what restrains the animator and frees the actor, what causes animation productions to chain themselves so tightly to the craft at the

expense of the improvised artistry between moments of the script, which is central to true theatre.

Further work translating parts of Stanislavski's system into a form of guide usable by animators should therefore concentrate on character realisation through the script and within the heads of single animators. There does not seem reason to suppose that a definite practical advantage could be gained from the system in day-to-day animation, and so it will not be possible to produce practical 'tests' from it. There can be had, however, a deeper and more personal understanding of an individual role by an individual animator. The subjective nature of this aspect of creation denies the possibility for testing and can only be proven or disproven, by oneself, to oneself. To this extent then, the system has a place within animation, and a training which included elements of it would be preferable to one which ignored acting theory completely.

As for the latter strand, the overarching concern; the unfortunate conclusion must be that animation, as a profession, cannot expect to be capable of realistic performance equal to live acting at its very best. We come back again to the artist and the medium. Essential intimacy has been sacrificed—sold for a technical advantage in achieving the fantastic.

On the other hand, though, animation makes one observe as a necessity of the job. It is impossible to achieve quality figurative animation without observing figures; it is impossible to do truly emotive animation without observing emotions in others. An actor meanwhile has the luxury of a built in set of motions and emotional expressions. Certainly he must dig deep within himself to release these appropriately, but external sources are not necessarily required. In animation the medium itself, or rather its dislocation from the artist, forces one to seek external

sources. Webster holds that this requirement towards dedicated study is enabling; creates the ability to perform roles to skilful, emotional and subtle heights within someone who would be utterly unable to do so in the flesh.

And this is enriching to the performance and incalculably useful for removing from the performance the perception of the performer, leaving only the character and the audience. It is therefore not a clear cut case of theatrical superiority, but a mottled picture which allows some areas where the newer art form, animation, can thrive beyond inspiration from the older art form.

It was emphasised at the start that Stanislavski did not believe the system, or indeed any possible system, to be in anyway definitive. Hence it is fitting to give him the last word, from *An Actor Prepares*;

“Create your own method. Don’t depend slavishly on mine.

Make up something that will work for you!

But keep breaking traditions, I beg you!”

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