

Japanese Animation: Statue-esque people

The production of animation in Japan is similar to traditional western animation, using cels and background paintings. A cel is a clear sheet of cellulose, similar to transparent acetate sheets or the sort of things you use on overhead projectors. By drawing outlines on the top of a cel and painting colors at the bottom of a cel, animators can exchange, move and overlay opaque, colored objects over other elements in a scene. Behind the multiple layers of cels is a single background painting that, for the most part, will remain unchanged (but may move) over the period of an entire scene.

Japanese TV animations, until recently, are low-budget enterprises. Cels are expensive, but a low count of cels in a scene translates to either jerky motion or no motion at all. Japanese animators use tricks to maximize the use of every cel, and as the industry matures, many of these tricks turn into distinctive anime 'styles' that both directors and viewers come to appreciate and expect. When comparing western and Japanese animation, the approaches to animating dialogue vary greatly. The amount of movement during dialogue is normally a point of contention between western and Japanese studios working on joint projects and different styles are easily observable to audiences.

Western shows, inheriting from the clownish animation styles of Chuck Jones and Walt Disney, prefer to have the bodies of characters emphasizing the dialogue. Thus, large physical gestures demonstrate emotion, pain, laughter, etc. Given the long tradition in theatrical 'short subjects', western animations retain high cel per second counts while minimizing feature length and characters per scene. Furthermore, in a large theatre with typically poor sound, actions need to help emphasize words to allow the audience to figure out the dialogue.

On the other hand, Japanese animation has its roots in TV broadcast, instilling a 25-minute time maximum *and* minimum in the production process. Thus, animators must carefully manage cel counts in order to stretch them to the time limit. Furthermore, formalized Asian body language (bowing, grasping of fists, hands behind back) is not conducive to random body movement. Thus, body movements are often goal-directed (walking, picking things up, turning on a switch) or posed in specific positions to reveal the state of minds rather than the force of words. Viewers can also turn up TV sound as much as necessary, so dialogue comes through clearly in most situations.

The presentation of dialogue also affects the method of recording dialogue, which in turn affects the animation of characters. Western directors typically record the voices first, then animate to synchronize with the words. This makes it easier to match mouths and gestures to dialogue, but the process is considerably more time-consuming when compared to having the animators draw first, then using flexible human actors to match the onscreen characters. This latter process is exactly the technique used in most Japanese animation studios. The process is inexact and makes it almost impossible to match the voices with the animation. Anime characters thus have the 'flapping mouth' where the opening and closing of mouths indicate *who* is talking, but has little connection with the actual dialogue. This also ends up with great savings on the cel count.


Japanese Animation: Sweat drops and mushrooms

Certain iconic symbols have found their way into mainstream anime, while remaining relatively rare in western animation. Peculiar, expressionistic objects such as massive sweat drops, outlined mushrooms and facial lines appear and disappear in order to emphasize certain emotions in the narrative. A great deal of these symbols are inherited from Japanese manga (comic book) conventions, and some particular symbols find heavy rotation in anime as they require very few extra cels.

The first symbol that most people notice upon their introduction to anime are the huge, opaque sweat drops that appear on characters' heads. As in western cartoons such as Peanuts (that use sweat drops as little, profuse beads), the sweat drop usually connotes some anxiety. The cause of giant drop anxiety, however, is not the same as little droplet anxiety. Little droplets usually signify mortal danger, stage fright or physical exertion, whereas giant drops often used in 'anxiety by association'. The character with the sweat drop is usually embarrassed to be in a certain place, or to be associated with someone, or may be dumbfounded by someone else's cluelessness. In most cases, characters sweat giant drops on behalf of someone else or something that should be embarrassed, but is too oblivious to be ashamed of their looks or behavior. *

The 'mushroom' is really a small puff of air, exhaled from a sighing character. The symbol seems inspired by word balloons (also emanating from people's mouths), real balloons (as light as air) and puffs of breath in winter. Simplified into a single outline, manga and anime artists have settled into using a 'mushroom' shape for 'sighing breath'. This particular convention is more useful in manga than on anime — in the latter case, it is possible to directly animate sighs with a drop of the head, or by just having the voice actor sigh. However, the mushroom is common in anime and has recently evolved in helping convey a different emotion — the exasperated gasp. Some characters are too refined to spit (mostly humorous female characters), so they instead let out a little angry cough, punctuated by a short-lived mushroom.

In long shots or in particularly humorous moments, the mushroom is relatively simple to animate. Like the sweat drop, it is a single moving cel and easily helps stretch a sequence by a second or more. Directors can easily use old sweat drop and mushroom cels repeatedly in their production, as it is hard to tell one sweat drop from another.

A third symbol resembles a group of four brackets on someone's forehead.  These lines represent the bulging veins of an angry or frustrated character. Unlike the use of the previous symbols, animators usually add these lines to the actual cel of the character. Closed eyes (seething anger), spirals for eyes (blind fury) and wild hair can heighten the effect. These same lines may also appear on the back of fists, in order to emphasize the tightness of clenching. However, due to the cartoon-like look of the lines, as with all the other symbols mentioned, animators usually reserve the effect for comic situations.

* I have seen animators draw sweat drops on inanimate objects too, particularly when nearby anthropomorphic or human characters are outstandingly oblivious. Robots can also sweat drops.

Japanese Animation: Expressionistic backgrounds

“Backgrounds can be another valuable tool for indicating invisible ideas, particularly the world of emotions. Even when there is little or no distortion of the characters in a given scene, a distorted or expressionistic background will usually affect our ‘reading’ of characters’ inner states.”

“Certain patterns can produce an almost physiological effect in the viewer, but for some reason, readers will ascribe those feelings, not to themselves but to the characters they identify with. Such internal effects are, of course, best suited to stories about internal matters. When a story hinges more on characterization than cold plot, there may not be a lot to show externally, but the landscape of the characters’ minds can be quite a sight!” *

Although western animators may use reasonably expressive backgrounds to set the mood for their shows, most backgrounds in western animations have roots in some kind of story world reality (e.g. gloomy Gotham City skyline). Inheriting from the manga tradition, Japanese animations frequently dispense with realistic backgrounds in certain scenes, replacing them with an unrealistic but recognizable landscape of abstract lines, vivid colors and polygonal shapes. Occasionally, fires and flames or tornado-speed winds may also occupy the background with little effect on the objects and people on the real world.

As noted in the first two paragraphs, the backgrounds in illustrated comics can emphasize the internal emotions of characters. However, in animation, the voice actors already lend an emotional quality to the characters, so in many cases, the backgrounds are actually meant to *overemphasize*, lending a campy or comic feel to overemotional characters. This is particularly the case in comedies and romantic dramas. In addition, the sudden removal of an expressionistic background can bring characters rudely back into the ‘real’ world.

However, expressionistic backgrounds can also be serious stuff, depending on the situation. While an animated expressionistic background may be over-the-top, static expressionistic backgrounds may heighten the tension in a scene without turning it into comedy. Japanese animators are willing to play with color and shape of story world backgrounds in order to achieve subtle expressionistic effects (turning the world monochromatic, drawing crowds with staring, empty eyes). Fight sequences, in particular, may use complex expressionistic backgrounds too effectively convey the rage of the characters involved.

Note that the fire/bubble/lightning/golden backgrounds of Sailormoon transform and attack sequences are not purely expressionistic. To a certain degree, they actually do affect the characters in obvious (they transform) and subtle ways (Sailorvenus’ hair blows in the same direction as her stars). Similarly, certain running or jumping characters may have their backgrounds reduced to a mass of lines. While the intent is obviously to emphasize the feeling of speed, the lines also represent the story world background moving so quickly as to be blurred, and thus are connected to the characters’ actions.

* *Understanding Comics, the Invisible Art* — Scott McCloud, 1993. If you have not read it, read it.

Japanese Animation: Repeated sequences

A great deal of cel savings, of course, comes from repeated sequences. Once animators have recorded a minute or two of animation to film or tape, it is a trivial matter to duplicate those minutes at various moments in the show. Although the use of such sequences is usually obvious, the situations and effects of repeated sequences can vary greatly within even a single show.

Like opening and closing animations, most Japanese animations repeat the *eyecatch* from episode to episode. The eyecatch is a brief fixed animation as a prelude and postlude to the commercial break. Such sequences are rarely relevant to the plot of the story, but feature the characters and maintain the mood of the story. A magical anime may have an eyecatch with lots of sparkles and light effects, a romantic anime may use hearts and group photos. In the *Tenchi Muyo!* comic anime, the eyecatch sequences highlight the kabuki and noh theatrical traditions that the anime draws extensively from.

Animators pay close attention to sequences that have to occur in every episode (the use of the most powerful weapon, the transforming of a robot, the magical-girl make-up). As such sequences highlight the regular characters or technical design, they become a signature effect for a show. With unique, identifying soundtracks, catchy yells and the best animation in the entire episode, fans watch for and expect to see such sequences.

Sailormoon's own attacks and transforms vary from season to season, maintaining a theme for each season * while treating fans to new animation for every new season. After directors establish a repeated-sequence formula (or any formula), they can spice up occasional shows by interspersing new animation as cutaways to the repeated sequence (such as enemy reactions to a transform). Animators can also entertain by having repeated sequences occasionally 'go wrong', or by being innovative with the editing of multiple sequences (such as the Sailor Team group-transform).

Occasionally, animators create repeated sequences for single episodes. The multiple camera pan is normally associated with extremely beautiful or extremely violent moments. This is not too different from the live-action movie technique of filming a single explosion from multiple angles in order to enhance the size of the explosion. Animators also repeat unique monster-of-the-day attacks for cel savings.

It is difficult to work repeated sequences into the narrative. In psychological thrillers or magical shows, the characters may actually experience the same events again, as is the case in the US film *Groundhog Day*. Directors may also re-cap scenes from previous shows or from earlier in the episode to remind audiences of past events or to depict a character recollecting earlier moments. As with soap operas, and taking into account the once-a-week schedules of most anime shows, these sequences help reestablish viewers into the continuity and allow those who missed episodes to catch up with the narrative.

* Sailormoon S seems to be the 'spinning around' season. Note how the animators maintain the theme in the opening credits.