

The Function of Backgrounds in Animated Films

*Notes for Lecture given at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art by Michael Hirsh.
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Character and Context: How we read foregrounds and backgrounds

Quality of background information.

It is tempting to make a comparison with live action film sets when discussing backgrounds, but backgrounds are nearer to theatre scenery painting than cinema set construction. However, it may be useful to consider the background artist's job as being parallel to a combination of several jobs in live action. The background painter is a mixture of the art director, the carpenters and plasterers, the scenery painters, the lighting cameraman, the set dresser, and the props department.

Compared to the foreground, background information operates on a lower level of consciousness for the audience. It is generally static, or slow moving. It is visually rich compared to the stylistically limited foreground information, and conveys comparatively generalised impressions rather than specific, high resolution images.¹ Whilst the foreground images are "hard", the backgrounds supply "soft" qualities of film experience.

Backgrounds provide the audience with certain "mechanical" functions of the story being told on screen:

- A context.
- A sense of place.
- A sense of time.
- A setting.

The backgrounds also supply emotional and atmospheric cues to the audience, which we'll deal with at the end.

Character is Context

The context in which we see a character perform helps us to define, or identify that character.

Imagine an artist's studio. A fine artist's studio might be littered with canvases in various stages of completion, with paint splattered trolleys covered in squeezed tubes of colour. Jars and cans containing brushes might lie around among the rags and bottles. Perhaps a folio might lean against an easel in the corner. Now, imagine that the studio

¹ There are exceptions, of course, such as backgrounds that are rendered in a flat cel painting style, or are merely colour cards.

door handle turns, and the door starts to open. Do you have an image of what the person coming in might look like?

Another artist's studio: This time, it's neat and tidy. There's a large drawing board with parallel motion, and fixed to it is a fluorescent desk lamp. A small steel trolley holds an array of technical pens and sharpened pencils. To one side, there is another desk with a grey office chair. On the desk sits a large monitor and a keyboard, and the shelves above them contain neat arrays of software manuals and typography books. The door opens. What might this person be like? What sort of clothes might he have on? Imagine the same studio, but tweak a few details. It's night time now. There is a whacky screen saver on the monitor, and a lurid pink Godzilla toy on top. A lava lamp glows on the desk next to a telephone disguised as a '55 Chevrolet convertible. The door opens once again. Picture the person about to enter, and how she might be dressed.

These simple exercises underline the extent to which character is defined by context, and to a degree, how characters define their context. This relationship is easy to examine in the real world.

Try and remember the last time you met a friend or colleague outside of their habitual environment, in a bar, say, and concentrate on the tiny moment of surprise you experienced as you tried, subconsciously, to accommodate that person into the new context.

This surprise is the result of your expectations regarding context (or background), determining whom you might see in a particular place or time, being momentarily upset. If you ever find yourself saying to someone in an unexpected place: "What are you doing here?", then you have illustrated perfectly to yourself the interdependence of character and background. Our expectations of a person, or of a place, work like this the whole time in real life, and equally so in films, even though neither the settings nor the characters are familiar to us.

The disparity between what we expect to see and what is shown to us instead is a gap in our view of the world that is frequently exploited by film makers. It is the stock-in-trade of many film comedy scenes, and horror scenes too.

A Sense of Place

All stories take place somewhere, and the background's main job is to supply information about that place.

Defining the location is the most basic function of the background, although it frequently carries subtle extra layers of information that can creep under the audience's awareness.

Backgrounds often use symbolic description of a place that will satisfy viewer's expectations very swiftly. A background only needs to provide a very few visual clues for the audience to understand what sort of place is being depicted. They'll quickly fill in the rest.

A background painting of a location differs in many ways from a landscape painting of the same location because it has several different jobs to do:

- It is part of a sequence of paintings, so each individual background need not tell the audience all that there is to know about a particular location. This descriptive job can be shared by several paintings.
- It does not necessarily convey the painter's own personal feelings about a location, but reflects the character's emotional state, as well as other feelings the film maker wants the audience to have about a location.
- A background painting tends to describe what the viewer expects to see in any object, rather than an exact description of a particular, unique object. It uses a general descriptive visual language to do this.

The viewer has only a very limited time to take on board the information contained in a background, which governs the degree of detail that can be included.

The level of information about the location differs within a scene, and depends on the background's place in a sequence of shots, and on the foreground action.

An Establishing Shot emphasises the principal features of objects within the location, which need to be described accurately for reasons of plot. It is usually designed to make a memorable impact.

Subsequent backgrounds in the same scene do not need to draw the viewer's attention to details of objects to the same degree. They act more as reminders of the location's relationship with the characters, and help to sustain continuity, time of day, and atmosphere while the story unfolds. These types of backgrounds are designed to have a less intense impact on the viewer.

Even a background that is stripped down to its most basic components can be successful especially if it carries an extra emotional or atmospheric information content on top of its minimal topographical description.

The basic components need to include just enough information for the audience to not get confused, nor lose continuity when the film cuts between shots

The minimalism of a background's content is a matter of design, really: Sometimes this is an economic decision and sometimes a stylistic decision, sometimes it's a mixture of the two.

A Sense of Time

Part of the language of film is the ability to compress and expand time within its narrative length. In an animated film this task can be performed by both the foreground characters and the backgrounds.

More often than not it is the background which tells the audience about shifts in time, as well as more mundane time of day information, although the characters can do the same thing.

The background can convey shifts of time by the use of mixes between two differently lit backgrounds, or two matching backgrounds that differ in details, such as decay or growth or other visual devices representing the passage of time. Two or more different paintings must be painted for such a transition scene. (This is called a Matched Mix.)

The background will always convey a sense of the time of day that makes sense within the scene. Time of day information is usually more emphasised in the opening and closing shots of a scene. As with location details, this information recedes in importance once it has been established, because the audience does not need constant reminders once the scene has been set up.

A setting

Backgrounds provide a sense of setting by helping to suspend the audience's disbelief. An audience knows from the start of an animated film that they are about to be presented with a pretend universe, and it is the task of the backgrounds to establish what kind of universe this is, and maintain its believability all the way through the film. The audience must be swiftly drawn in to the painted illusion, and held there without puzzlement or questioning for up to two hours.

The characters need to look as though they belong in the setting that is created for them, through appropriate styling and art direction. The human eye is very quick to perceive if there is 'something wrong' with a character's setting, so the background paintings must be consistent with the unravelling of the story and not prick the bubble of belief that contains it.

Background paintings must also remind the audience about the depth of space and the scale of objects within it so as to sustain credibility.

This sense of 'setting' supplies the audience with ideas about the dramatic content of a shot or scene, as well. Look at a background from a film with the character cel levels removed, and there should be a clear sense that the characters are missing. Like an empty stage set before the actors make their entrances, successful staging will heighten the audience's response to the action about to happen. They will be ready for the next part of the emotional rollercoaster ride.

These emotional components of backgrounds will be dealt with in the next section.

Emotional Qualities of Backgrounds

Backgrounds help the viewers to make sense of who the characters are, where they are, and what they are doing. Alongside these functions, backgrounds can also provide emotional cues about: 1) Atmosphere, and: 2) Mood.

These emotional cues are delivered in an almost subconscious way, in that the audience does not have to focus on them too much while they are concentrating hard on the character's actions. That said, these elements provide a high degree of visual and emotional satisfaction to an audience watching a film, especially in the case of longer films.

Atmosphere

Atmosphere is an extra layer of information about a location, which suggests to an audience how they might feel about events about to take place there. The quality of atmosphere can be finely controlled through changes in composition, tonality, lighting or colour. Any of these elements can be changed in a painting, with a resulting change in atmosphere, and a similar change in the way the audience feels about events.

This atmospheric quality of backgrounds is a powerful lever in the hands of good storytellers, and caution must be used in how it is applied throughout the course of an animated film. Over-used, it can dull the audience's sensibility to the story, and become tiring. Think of using atmosphere as though it were the modulation marks in an orchestral score. If a long piece of music were played fortissimo throughout, the audience would quickly become restless, bored and exhausted. To quote the screenwriting guru Robert McKee: "There are no rules in film making - only sins, and the cardinal sin of film making is dullness."

Mood

Often, backgrounds are painted with only one 'emotional brushstroke' that simply mirrors the character's emotional state. Call this a 'global' approach to the emotional design of the shot. However, it is easy to imagine situations where the character's inner state might be in contrast to the surroundings. This is a 'local mood', or personal atmosphere, which projects the character's inner state onto a part of the background, and can be used to offer the audience insights into the character's intimate feelings within a shot or series of shots.