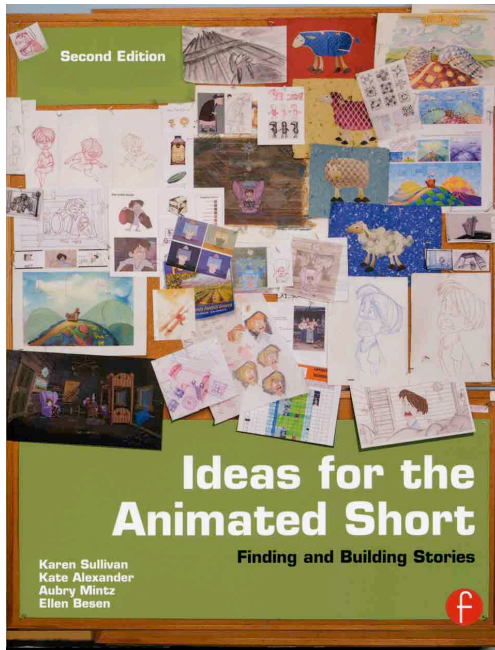
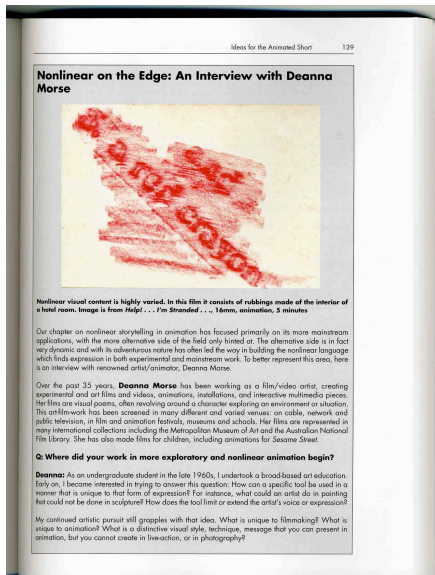


Nonlinear on the Edge: An Interview with Deanna Morse



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Nonlinear visual content is highly varied. In this film it consists of rubbings made of the interior of a hotel room. Image is from Help! ... I'm Stranded..., 16mm animation, 5 minutes.

Our chapter on nonlinear storytelling in animation has focused primarily on its more mainstream applications, with the more alternative side of the field only hinted at. The alternative side is in fact very dynamic and with its adventurous nature has often led the way in building the nonlinear language which finds expression in both experimental and mainstream work. To better represent this area, here is an interview with renowned artist/ animator, Deanna Morse.

Over the past 35 years, **Deanna Morse** has been working as a film/video artist, creating experimental and art films and videos, animations, installations and interactive media pieces. Her films are visual poems, often revolving around a character exploring an environment or situation. This art-film-work has been screened in many different and varied venues: on cable, network and public television, in film and animation festivals, museums and schools. Her films are represented in many international collections including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Australian National Film Library. She has also made films for children, including animations for *Sesame Street*.

Q. Where did your work in more exploratory and nonlinear animation begin?

Deanna: As an undergraduate student in the late 1960s, I undertook a broad based art education. Early on, I became interested in trying to answer this question: How can a specific tool be used in a manner that is unique to that form of expression? For instance, what could an artist do in painting that could not be done in sculpture? How does the tool limit or extend the artist's voice or expression?

My continued artistic pursuit still grapples with that idea. What is unique to filmmaking? What is unique to animation? What is a distinctive visual style, technique, message that you can present in animation, but you cannot create in live-action, or in photography?

Q. Your past work includes such inventive pieces as Help! I'm Stranded... in which you survive a potentially boring night unexpectedly stuck in less than ideal tourist accommodations with only a pad of paper and a red crayon by creating rubbings of everything in your motel room: hangers, bathroom tiles and all. What are you currently working on?

Deanna: My current work as an animation artist involves shooting thousands of images of nature. I use my camera as the palette to record the subtle differences of shape, color, light and tone. I have an awareness of the frame before, the frame now, and the frame after. Then, I edit the material together, often rearranging the information in those frames, to create a juxtaposition of shots that emphasize their similarity and differences.

I am basically drawn to new technologies. I am interested in how using different techniques, different media, affects the message, and affects my process.

Q: Can you describe your process?

Deanna: My process always has two paths. I experiment, making “animated sketches” which can be drawn or could be created with the camera (like time lapse). I do a lot of this work, like exercising. If a series of sketches begin to have some resonance for me, I continue in that direction, and build a film around them. At the same time, I always have some broad concepts that I research. That research feeds my sketch work, but it may or may not be evident to the viewer when the film is completed.

For instance, my current project involves animating tree bark. My current research is around these themes: the benefits of directly experiencing the natural world, how cultures honor growth and decay (like Japanese *wabi-sabi*), how forms and patterns in nature repeat, and what it means to shed skin. This research will go in several different directions before the film is complete. It is part of what feeds the project, keeps me inspired.

Q. Does your work have any relationship to narrative animation and if so, what?

Deanna: An effective element of narrative structure work is how the audience identifies with the characters. Sometimes the character knows something, and the audience is trying to figure out what they know. Sometimes the audience knows something that the character doesn't, and they anticipate when the character will get it. If the audience and the character are too much in sync, things get boring – the tension of either being ahead or behind the character is one quality that keeps us involved.

In non-narrative or non-linear films, this can happen, too. I try to work for this – to have the audience engaged in a similar manner. For instance, I create a pattern of image and sound relationships (like in my film *Help! I'm Stranded...*) and when I feel that I have cemented that connection – I break it. Or I build a visual structure (*Breathing Room*) where we start inside, go outside, then come back inside. That book-ending structure sends a message to the audience that we are coming to the end of the film – when the windows close, and the music changes, I have often heard an audible sigh from the audience. That is satisfying to me.

I incorporate narrative elements, like book-ending, pacing, rhythm, rising and falling action. I apply those structures (or rules) to my non-narrative work. I try to show that, as a filmmaker I have carefully made choices, that I am in control of the film. I do this through careful editing, structure and change, and through my counterpoint editing and layering with music or sound effects.

Q. What are some of the driving force behind your work?

Deanna: I always hope that the audience will be aware of things outside the frame, of the moments before and after. I heard that Kurosawa said, at 84 years old, that he was just beginning to understand how movies work. I am on that same journey. Trying to understand how movies work, what is central to the language of film, and how we can extend it, make it surprising, re-invent it, make it sing.

As an artist/ animator, I find something magical in that space between the frames. My technique of creating films a frame at a time, by analyzing the underlying visual structure, is a methodical manner of generating imagery. It allows me to play with visual creation, with time, with space. The result is akin to a jazz riff. There is an energy that is revealed by animating similar and dissimilar shapes, colors, and forms, and then playing them at “normal” film speed. It’s not the actual shapes on an individual video frame that build meaning, but the differences in shape - between the frames - that creates the energy. This animation concept continues to enchant me. It drives my current film work.

Q. Given all this, what factors make your current work unique?

Deanna: My recent video work examines nature through the lens of time. Light sweeps across a lawn, a bird dances with a berry in slow motion, flowers erupt in a riot of color, and the seasons change and transform within a single space. These video poems amplify moments and gestures that are not always visible to the naked eye. My videos consider our relationship to the spaces and environments we inhabit. Common surroundings of the natural world are elevated in importance as they are reanimated and presented through media in new ways.

Audiences have told me that this recent work makes them look at nature more closely. Several people have commented on how vibrant and alive the landscape becomes through my lens. The animation technique that I invented for shooting multiples of flowers makes the still environments pulsate with energy.

Many artists have used nature as their inspiration. What makes my work unique is my form. By taking the familiar, and reanimating it, using the lens of time to build a visual rhythm, those familiar elements are elevated in importance, and help to set a public agenda of concern for balance in our natural and managed landscapes. Change only happens through increased public awareness. Art will help drive that awareness and push that change.

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