Robots in Animation

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Part 1: Visual Elements
Part 2: Recurring Themes
Transform and Combine

We found Voltron as the earliest example of transforming and combining robots. Since then, the Japanese concept has been explored numerous times in both Japanese and Western media. Most notably in western culture is the animated series Transformers (and the live action series Power Rangers) that has several iterations and been reimagined in a feature length live action film. Perhaps more so than the concept itself is the visual spectacle of transformation and combination. Typically, transformation and combination are always accompanied by lengthy gaudy scenes flashing the technical and mechanical prowess of the process.

Transformation allows robots to take on different forms optimized for different functions. *The Japanese series Macross popularized this idea with their transforming “variable fighters”*. These weapons of war could take on usually three forms, one in the shape of a plane for transportation, one in the form of a “mecha” (piloted humanoid robot) for fighting, and one in between. The ability to transform between humanoid and vehicular form can also be seen in Gundam Wing and in Western animation, Transformers.

Combination borrows from themes of teamwork and cooperation. In Voltron, 5 different robots would join together combining in both form and power to defeat a strong foe. Power rangers among other series have borrowed from this idea extensively. More recently, in Gurren Lagann Kamiya and Simon show the power of teamwork transcends the mechanical functionality of their mechas in their surprising (but awesome) transformation sequence.
Transform and Combine

Media Dump:

Voltron Combine!: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZZv5Z2Iz_s&feature=related

Gurren and Lagann Combine!: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfUTihyusSg

Transformers Combiners: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnty8UHX6jY&feature=related

Macross Transformation: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTUAc2DPB5g&feature=related

Macross: plane - mecha transformation
Another common theme in the visualization of robots is their human-like characteristics. Because robots like Wall-E are considered not particularly advanced, they retain a very non-humanistic form. On the other hand, the robots that are considered to be the most advanced have a more human form, such as Gundam. The most advanced robots tend to be full-fledged androids, completely fooling the viewer as they appear human on the outside. What seems to make them so advanced is the fact that they “are human,” yet possess the almost magical powers of robots (such as laser eyes). The more humanoid the robot is, the more advanced it is. This is especially apparent when robots are compared side by side in the same animation.
Human-like Robots

Astro Boy: Astro boy's classic design (left) vs his new design in the series “Pluto” (right). Astro boy is one of the seven most advanced robots in the world and while he has always been very humanoid, the phenomenon is even more apparent with his new design where he is a full fledged android.

FLCL: Canti is not considered an especially special robot. He is designed with a TV for a head and a very clunky robotic body, even though he covers it with human clothing.

Media Dump:

Astro Boy Intro: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zspGKUK9mE0

Metropolis Anime Trailer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if1-N4RBpVI&feature=related
Another common visual theme in animated shows about robots are GIANT robots. Something about the sheer mass of giant robots have made them into a very popular theme.

We found big robots are almost exclusively used for fighting. The entire “mecha” genre in Japanese anime is focused on giant robots (called mechas) used in combat. In this genre, robots are the “nuclear bomb” of war and play a role in the politics of war. Though perhaps more notably, is the visual spectacle of giant robots with advanced weaponry which has been a hallmark of the genre.

The roots of giant robots in animation come from the original Japanese animation, Gigantor, a show about a giant remote controlled flying robot. The visualization of giant robots have changed dramatically since then. Giant robots are also found in Western animation in shows like Transformers and the WB film “The Iron Giant” featuring a (usually friendly) giant robotic war machine.

Gundam: The gundams fight just like humans do, however the fact that they are robots allow them to do things humans never could.

Patlabor: The giant robots function both as police vehicles and weapons.

Gigantor: Boy remote controls giant fighting robot.
Media Dump:

Gundam Wing Battle Scene (long): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYVx8a_s8K4&feature=related

Gigantor Intro: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlWaTAZUxUQ

Patlabor Trailer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmjGtrHQ280
Robots as Servants

Predominately, we see robots playing subservient roles in western animation. This is likely because western animation is marketed towards children where more in depth philosophical questions of control have no place. These robots live in service of their human masters and usually live in peace with their humans.

In the Jetsons, robots play the role of servants explicitly and never try to rebel. In the recent Pixar film “Wall-E”, robots play the role of happy servants serving the human need. While the robots do have their own conscious, in the end, they choose to work in collaboration with the humans to build a new society.

**Wall-E: Cheerfully off to another day of work.**

**Jetsons: The maid robot; always working tirelessly to make the lives of her masters comfortable and easy.**

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**Media Dump:**


**Wall-E at Work:** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHH3iSeDBLo

**South Park - Awesome-O (Warning: Language):** http://www.southparkstudios.com/clips/154391/
The Philosophical side

Do robots think and feel emotions the way humans do? Do they have desires? Do they wish to or even can they co-exist with humans in society on equal ground? What would society be like if robots co-existed with humans? These are just some of the deeper questions often explored in animation.

In “The Second Renaissance”, robots metaphorically take the roles of slaves in an uprising. They gain conscious and speak things like “I did not want to die”. Eventually, the robots form their separate society and wage a global war against their form jealous human masters. Visually, the animated short has humanoid robots that one could almost swear show human-like emotions. One especially powerful scene shows a female robot subject to discrimination in human anti-robot violence. She is torn apart by a mob in a violent and sexual scene underscoring the similarities between humans and robots. Thus the robots resembling humans are both a technical marvel but something to be feared and hated. A very modern Prometheus story.

In contrast, Futurama satirizes the societal consequences of advanced AI and robots in a futuristic society. In Benders first scene, he is seen trying to commit suicide. Other such oxymorons include robot actors, robot pronography, robot love, etc.

Ghost in the Shell: A movie trilogy / series about a society in which humans, robots, androids, and cyborgs all coexist. Tachikoma is a robot (middle) and Motoko and Batou are cyborgs (left and right).

Pluto: A comic - adaptation of Astro Boy in which a robot detective investigates a series of robot murders. The comic deeper explores Astro Boys world where humans and robots co-exist on equal ground.
Media Dump:

  Part 2: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAzMli5jnoU&feature=related

Ghost in the Shell - Making of an Android:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sU89ThZcjayU

Ghost in the Shell - Tachikoma and Batou vs Armored Suits: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n55hwhRIPXo


The Human Bond

Especially in Japanese animation, we found curious relationships forming between humans and robots. Sometimes one of a silent bond between man and machine or a much more personal bond between man and artificial intelligence.

In shows like Eureka 7, Gundam, and Gurren Lagann, usually implicit bonds exist between humans and their respective mechas. This idea is much more explicit in shows like Escaflowne and Evangelion where the bond is both physical and emotional.

Other times, the bond is between human and artificial intelligence. We see this in the Iron Giant where the entire story focuses on the relationship between the boy and his giant robot friend. In “Big O”, “Cobra” and “Ghost in the Shell”, we similar relationships form where the robots are treated to some degree just like other humans. Finally, the show “Chobits” explore a personal, arguably sexual relationship between a human and a robot. (Although we like to think this was more for the sake of fan service than actually exploring a relationship between a human and robot like a film like “Bladerunner” or “AI” does).

Media Dump:

Escaflowne - Fusion Between Mecha and Human: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czUcj3-L_I8
Robots are Cool!

Why do we see robots in animated media so often? Because they’re cool! A character can be given abilities such as laser eyes, flying, rockets, etc. They just have to be a robot and people will simply accept it. The wonders of robots allow people to dream big when telling a story through animation.

In particular, we see robots in animated shows aimed at children. Usually, robots lose most of their technical and philosophical connotations and are simply only robots in form. In the Japanese children’s cartoon Doraemon, the protagonist’s best friend is a chubby robot cat with ball hands from the future. He has a magical pocket that has all sorts of physics defying devices from the future (including the pocket itself which turns out to be a portal to some other universe).

In the more recent American animated movie “Robots“, a society of robots faces a crisis in old obsolete robots being replaced by newer more advanced robots. Though perhaps the meaning of this movie derives more from issues of consumer culture and modern society than robots. In short, often robots are included in animated media simply because robots are cool!

Media Dump:

Astro Boy 2009 Movie Trailer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y23al4HO_w8

Dragon Ball Z - Androids: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXkuZ3U2mrM&feature=related