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Whose Performance Is It Anyway? Andy Serkis Deserves Better

Barry Weiss · Thursday, February 23rd, 2012

The Oscar Ballots are in and we all await the big day on Sunday.

But why were some accomplishments nominated in one category, while virtually the same accomplishment was ignored in two other categories? I am talking about the work of the incredible actor Andy Serkis in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* and *The Adventures of Tintin*. Mr. Serkis created the characters of the heroic drunken, Captain Haddock in *Tintin* and that of Caesar, the hyper intelligent ape in *Rise*, using virtually the same techniques both artistically and technically. Or did he?

We've arrived at the moment when performance capture blends with motion capture, and they become virtually indistinguishable from animation.

In the early days of *Final Fantasy* and *The Polar Express* actors would create motion that was captured for animators to use as a basis for the animator to ultimately create the acting performance of the character. The data collected from the live action actor was largely used as "hi-tech" reference. This technique was called performance capture.

Flash forward to the present day. The technology, as pushed by the industry, particularly by James Cameron and WETA Digital (Peter Jackson's company), has created a large blurry gray area when it comes time to define whether a performance was actually created by the live-action actor or by the animator using a frame by frame technique, manipulating the data produced by the actor into the animator's performance. The basic question being: Who is really responsible for the emotion and the acting choices for the characters – the actor or the animator?

Here is where it gets interesting. Both Mr. Serkis' performances of Captain Haddock and Caesar were done using virtually the exact same technology and both supervised by Joe Letteri who is nominated for Best Visual Effects for his work on *Rise*! Joe and the incredible team at WETA (who have been developing this technology beginning with the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy through *Avatar*, and now on *The Hobbit*) captured Serkis' nuanced facial performance as Caesar, and then they manipulated that data into the final form of the characters that we see. *Rise* was nominated as a *live-action film*.

Yet the Animation branch of the Academy, after much debate, declared *The Adventures of Tintin* eligible as an *animated film* based on the current rules that a film is considered animated "in which movement and characters' performances are created using a frame-by-frame technique." Motion capture by itself is not an animation technique. The branch effectively saying that the characters' performance in *The Adventures of Tintin* directed by Steven Spielberg was created by animators "using a frame-by-frame technique."



At the same time 20th Century Fox waged a very impressive, informative and expensive campaign to secure a Best Supporting (live action) Actor nomination for Mr. Serkis! Fox argued that Caesar was performed by Serkis, but affectively hidden by digital makeup – no different than the performance by John Hurt who was nominated as Best Actor in *The Elephant Man*. Hurt was never really seen in the film. He was hidden by the amazing practical makeup created by Chris Tucker. According to Fox’s ad campaign, Serkis’ performance was the same, effectively hidden by “digital makeup.” Expensive full page ads ran featuring transparent overlays loudly proclaimed that “now is the time” for Serkis to be nominated as best supporting actor.

So as far as Academy campaigns go, two diametrically opposed definitions of the same technique were used to secure eligibility and a hoped-for nomination for Serkis in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, and *The Adventures of Tintin* for animated feature! Can they both be right? Very possibly. Yet a win by *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* for visual effects on Sunday, which ironically (or very consciously) does not include Serkis among the four nominees) will inevitably cause a closer look at the definition of animated features and another re-write of the rules.

Or we may just have to take a page from a ruling by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in 1964. Stewart, in his opinion in the obscenity case of *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964), wrote in his short concurrence that “hard-core pornography” was hard to define, but that “I know it when I see it.”

Images: Andy Serkis as Caesar and Captain Haddock.

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