Chapter 11

The Handmade Trace in Motion Graphics: Hand-Drawn Animation, Hybrid Workflows, and the Aesthetics of Authenticity

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Abstract

The renewed visibility of hand-drawn animation and handmade trace within contemporary motion graphics is often read as a nostalgic revival or a passing design trend. This chapter reframes that visibility as a deliberate design strategy that inscribes the human body's gesture, imperfection, and temporal labour onto the surface of the work under post-digital conditions. The argument unfolds in four stages. First, the title sequences of Saul Bass, Pablo Ferro, and Robert Brownjohn demonstrate that the handmade trace is not a recent invention but a longstanding strand within the field's historical repertoire. Second, the aesthetic mechanism of this trace is theorised through the concepts of line, gesture, boiling, autographic mark, and workmanship of risk. The transfer of David Pye's distinction between workmanship of risk and workmanship of certainty to frame-by-frame animation, together with an extension of Nelson Goodman's autographic/allographic distinction from work identity towards the bodily record of the making process, constitutes the theoretical core of this mechanism. Third, the aesthetic homogenisation produced by software templates and the broader post-digital condition explain why this mechanism acquires renewed value today. Finally, the cases of Giant Ant/Rover, Canva, and Blinkink/Burberry illustrate how the handmade trace materialises in contemporary hybrid workflows across five layers (surface, line, movement, physical production, and meaning) at varying intensities. The chapter reads the handmade trace neither as pure resistance nor as pure nostalgia, arguing that this trace produces not aura but an authenticity effect; through Pye's concept of travesty and Hannah Frank's critique of anonymous labour, it also exposes the risk of commodification inherent in this strategy. The handmade trace is not a residue superseded by digitalisation; it is a persistent aesthetic problem reproduced in new forms as digitalisation deepens.

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1. The Re-Emergence of the Handmade Trace within the Smooth Digital Surface

Contemporary motion graphics increasingly turns the surface into a place where production is either hidden or made visible. Across current festival programmes and online platforms, these two choices now appear side by side. A visual identity produced for a technology brand's developer conference[1] marks one pole of this tension: typographic elements are staged within a smooth three-dimensional space, gradients and vector forms flow with controlled precision, and the making process no longer remains legible as a value in the image. Within the same space of circulation, a promotional campaign by a platform known for its digital design tools[2] moves in the opposite direction: handmade puppets, textile textures, the subtle tremors of stop-motion, and surface imperfections deliberately left within the frame produce an altogether different world of movement. Here the trace of the hand, the resistance of the material, and the temporal weight of production are deliberately kept in view. One work absorbs production into the smoothness of the image; the other makes production itself part of the design. Their coexistence turns the motion graphics surface into a site where production is either concealed or made visible.

The tension should not be reduced to individual style. The design industry has begun to give this condition a vocabulary of its own: a discourse has emerged that revalues imperfection, craft, and human labour.[3] Such expressions do not provide a theoretical explanation in themselves; rather, they indicate that the industry increasingly recognises the tension between the smooth digital surface and the handmade trace as a design problem that requires articulation. At a moment when flawless-looking motion has become ever more accessible through software templates and ready-made assets, the renewed force of the handmade trace calls for explanation as an aesthetic problem. Understanding this tension requires moving beyond the language of trends and reading together debates that have often developed separately: motion graphics, animation theory, craft theory, and post-digital aesthetics.

Motion graphics scholarship does not fully account for this tension on its own. It registers the handmade trace but rarely interrogates it as an aesthetic mechanism. Krasner (2013) maps the field's broad relations with film, television, interactive media, and animation, situating handmade techniques within its historical inventory; stop-motion, cut-out, and freehand drawing appear as elements of that repertoire. Stone and Wahlin (2018) frame motion design as an interdisciplinary field extending across typography, interface, data visualisation, and brand narrative; the handmade trace forms one dimension

of this expansion, yet it is not treated as a problem in its own right. In both lines of inquiry, the handmade trace is acknowledged, but its operation as a mechanism that produces an authenticity effect and renders bodily gesture legible under post-digital conditions remains unexamined.

Animation theory engages more closely with the mechanism's dimensions of line, movement, and process. Work in this field understands the line not simply as a visible form but as a bodily action that leaves a trace: drawing is a performance that leaves behind an autographic record (Hosea, 2010); the tremor of frame-by-frame animation is the surfacing of process (Torre, 2015); the line is energy and transformation rather than stable form (Sobchack, 2008). Yet these discussions often remain within the domains of experimental animation or classical cartoon production. Today, however, the handmade trace is no longer solely an internal concern of experimental animation; it circulates through brand videos, title sequences, social media campaigns, and interface-oriented motion graphics. A third strand, craft theory and post-digital aesthetics, offers powerful conceptual tools for explaining the renewed value of imperfection and manual labour in digital culture. Chief among these are Pye's (1968) distinction between workmanship of risk and workmanship of certainty, and Cramer's (2015) account of the post-digital condition as a disenchantment with the digital. Yet these concepts belong primarily to broader debates in craft and media aesthetics rather than to motion graphics theory itself; their transfer into motion graphics is part of the conceptual operation this chapter undertakes.

What remains underdeveloped is a sustained conversation among these fields about why the handmade trace has regained value in contemporary motion graphics. This fragmentation risks reducing the role of the handmade trace to matters of taste, trend, or nostalgia, when what is at stake is an aesthetic mechanism. This mechanism concerns not only what the handmade trace looks like but what it allows the viewer to sense about production, the body, and labour. The task, then, is not simply to place these discussions side by side but to transfer key concepts from craft theory and the ontology of art, above all Pye's workmanship of risk and Goodman's autographic/allographic distinction, into the field of motion graphics and contemporary animation.

I argue that the renewed visibility of hand-drawn animation in contemporary motion graphics is not a nostalgic return. Rather, it names a deliberate design strategy that inscribes the trace, gesture, imperfection, and temporal labour of the human body onto the surface of the work under post-digital conditions. The word "deliberate" is crucial here. What is at stake is not technical inadequacy or a romantic longing for the past, but a choice to make the visible trace of

making legible in tension with the smoothness norm of the digital production environment. The choice operates as an aesthetic mechanism: the tremor of the line, the imperfection of the frame, and the texture of the surface lead the viewer to sense the presence of bodily labour, and this sensation produces an authenticity effect. This chapter reads the handmade trace as neither pure resistance nor pure nostalgia, and acknowledges that this strategy carries its own internal tension: deliberate imperfection is sometimes the product of genuine workmanship of risk and sometimes a simulation of the kind Pye (1968) criticised as a travesty of rough workmanship. The handmade trace is best understood as a strategic aesthetic position structured by this tension, one that gains renewed force under the conditions of digital circulation.

The argument begins with a historical reminder: the title sequences of Bass, Ferro, and Brownjohn demonstrate that the handmade trace was not later added to motion graphics as a fashion; it is part of the field's historical repertoire. On this foundation, the aesthetic mechanism of the handmade trace is analysed through the concepts of line, gesture, imperfection, boiling, workmanship of risk, and autographic mark. Once this mechanism has been established, the conditions of post-digital value and contemporary hybrid workflows explain why it becomes newly valuable under current digital conditions.

For this reason, procedural and rule-based production systems are not the central object of the discussion. Procedural production generates form through algorithmic rules and parameter spaces. Following the autographic/allographic distinction that Hosea (2019) discusses in the context of animation and that extends back to Goodman (1968), procedural production is closer to the allographic side. The focus here is the autographic trace: a record that carries the mark of a particular body's contact with a particular material within a particular span of time. These two regimes of production generate aesthetic traces at different levels: one through the logic of rule, parameter, and variation, the other through bodily contact, gesture, and surface inscription. Understanding one does not require excluding the other; yet dissolving both into the same conceptual framework weakens the specificity of each. Procedural production will therefore return only in a limited way, when the digital imitation of the handmade trace comes under discussion.

2. Historical Memory: Title Sequences, Graphic Gesture, and the Handmade Trace

The renewed visibility of the handmade trace in contemporary motion graphics is not a recent invention, but the reactivation of a strand already

embedded in the field's history. Although the term motion graphics gained wide currency in the age of digital software, its visual and material lineage extends well beyond software-based practice. Such continuity is legible in Krasner's (2013) mapping of the field: abstract animation experiments, pinscreen techniques, and scratching directly onto film form part of the pre-digital visual and material ancestry of motion graphics. What these practices share is that the direct contact between hand and material remains visible on the surface of the work. Betancourt (2019) names this transfer avant-pop, borrowing Larry McCaffery's term for the blending of avant-garde aesthetics and techniques with the priorities of commercial accessibility. The concept clarifies how the handmade gesture did not remain confined to the experimental domain, but acquired a new function within commercial cinema and design. For Betancourt, Saul Bass occupies a pivotal position in this cinematic transfer, fusing Swiss graphic design, the legacy of abstract animation, and handmade graphic intervention within title design. Seen from this angle, the manual trace in contemporary motion graphics is not a momentary reaction to the current digital aesthetic. It is the field's pre-software memory acquiring fresh meaning under new conditions.

Bass's title sequences make this transfer especially apparent. They intervene, through graphic gesture, in the polished visual norms of their moment. The refined production aesthetic of Hollywood and the rational ordering principle of Swiss typography together constituted the prevailing standard of visual polish. Bass inserted a bodily trace into this regime: he transformed the title sequence from a technical information card shown before the film into a graphic intervention that established the film's thematic threshold (Bass & Kirkham, 2011). In *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), irregularly cut paper shapes move across the screen; their angular, asymmetric forms evoke veins and syringes, appearing within the title sequence's conventional information-giving function as a rough, bodily graphic gesture. In *Carmen Jones* (1954), a rose outline rises within a red flame at the centre of a black frame, condensing the character's passion into a single graphic sign. In *Bunny Lake Is Missing* (1965), torn black paper produces irregular forms; the typography beneath rests on a grid, yet the title itself is set in slightly crooked, hand-pressed block letters. In all three cases, the handmade trace functions less as decoration than as a means of thematic condensation, compressing the film's theme onto the graphic surface of the title sequence before the narrative has even begun. The irregularity of the cut-out forms, the ragged edge of the paper, and the tremor of the hand-drawn lettering are deliberate choices against polished visual order, choices that inscribe a bodily trace within the functional surface of the title sequence.

If Bass transformed graphic form into the film's thematic threshold, Pablo Ferro and Robert Brownjohn turned typography into a bodily, temporal, and physical event. Their shared move was to detach the letter from its role as a neutral carrier of information and bind it to time, movement, and bodily gesture. Ferro's title sequence for *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) is built on hand-drawn title cards. The lines are irregular, the letters tremble, and their sizes and alignments are asymmetric. As Betancourt (2019) observes, this hand-drawn typography departs sharply from the title sequences of its contemporaries. When the trembling, distorted letters are combined with live-action footage, they produce a layer of commentary; the imperfect line functions as a deliberate, ironic gesture rather than a formal weakness. Brownjohn's title sequence for *From Russia with Love* (1963) pursues an altogether different strategy. Brownjohn projects the title lettering onto a dancer; the letters stretch, warp, and become illegible along the body's curves. As Brownie (2014) describes, the dancer's movement deforms the typography, and the text becomes readable again only when the dancer withdraws and the lettering falls onto a flat surface. Brownjohn termed this process building in space (King, 2005). The shared contribution of Ferro and Brownjohn is the transformation of typography from a static sign into a performative gesture. Typography is no longer merely a sign to be read; it becomes a graphic event that enters into contact with bodily movement and acquires performative value.

The title sequence became one of the earliest and most productive sites for experimenting with handmade gestures within motion graphics. Straw (2010) characterises it as an architectural threshold, while Stanitzek (2009) defines it as a paratext. The title sequence is positioned between the narrative world and the sphere of making, generating a divided attention between diegetic and extra-diegetic information. That threshold position makes it open to experimentation with graphic gesture, typographic disruption, and material traces, without binding it fully to the realistic continuity of the narrative. Precisely within this liminal zone, designers could test handmade gesture, typographic intervention, and graphic boldness. A lineage running from Bass through Ferro and Brownjohn to Kyle Cooper's *Se7en* (1995) demonstrates that the handmade trace constitutes a graphic strategy of considerable continuity within the history of motion graphics. In Cooper's title sequence for *Se7en*, scratched film surface, notebook pages, handwriting, and corrupted typography transform the handmade trace into the graphic texture of psychological disturbance. Yet knowing this history does not explain why the trace carries such powerful aesthetic force. To understand the mechanism of the handmade trace, it is necessary to move from history to theory.

3. Aesthetic Mechanism: Line, Gesture, Imperfection, and the Autographic Trace

In motion graphics, the line cannot be understood merely as a formal element. The handmade trace concerns not what the line looks like but how it is produced. Sobchack (2008) defines the line as a structure that does not exist in the real world and can live only in the form of graphic representation. The line is not a stable form; when set in motion, it becomes a creative force intensified by energy, transformation, and visible contingency. In a subsequent study, Sobchack (2009) deepens this idea: the imperfect, trembling movement in animation reminds the viewer how much effort it takes simply to exist. Ingold (2007) ties this thinking to the body. In Paul Klee's well-known formulation, the line goes out for a walk. For Ingold, drawing is not an image but the trace of a gesture, and every gesture embodies a particular duration. Ingold develops this dynamism through the concept of ductus: the pen or brush converts the kinetic quality of the hand's movement into a flow of material, so that the ductus of the hand passes into the pencil's mark on the page. To imagine an animator tracing a line on a lightbox is to ground this abstract discussion in practice: each stroke is the temporal record of a particular body's gesture at a particular moment.

If the line is the trace of a gesture, then the act of drawing is itself a performance. Hosea (2010) distinguishes drawing from static representation. Drawing is increasingly understood as the record of a performance, the residue of an action, the trace of the artist's bodily presence. Hand-drawn animation is a physical activity in which the animator's body makes contact with a surface and leaves a mark behind. For Hosea, these marks powerfully index the bodily presence and individual subjectivity of the moment of production. The distinction between autographic and allographic originates in Goodman (1968), who defines a work as autographic when even its most perfect copy can be distinguished from a forgery, and as allographic when any correct execution counts as a genuine instance of the work. Hosea (2010, 2019) carries this distinction into the fields of drawing and animation. Insofar as a hand-drawn mark carries the record of a particular bodily movement and a particular moment of production, it may be thought of as an autographic mark. This usage extends Goodman's distinction, originally concerned with the identity conditions of the work, towards the bodily record of the production process, because what determines the aesthetic effect in motion graphics is not the unique identity of the work but the production regime from which the movement emerges. The autographic quality lies not in the uniqueness of the work but in the legibility of the moment of bodily production. Drawing with a Wacom tablet and a digital pen can likewise record the bodily gesture; yet

this record is not a directly material residue, like graphite on paper, but a trace re-encoded by the software through data of pressure, speed, and coordinates. Marks (2011) extends this discussion in the context of calligraphic animation. Letters set into animation behave for a moment like figures, then collapse into the faintest of signs; when they break their bounds and turn into figures and movements, the viewer empathises with these transformations. For Marks, calligraphic animation shifts the focus of documentation from representation to performance, from the trace of the past to the promise of the future. Here the line is no longer merely a form but a living record of the moment of becoming. A similar typographic motion can be produced in a compositing environment through a preset or a reusable animation system; because such movement operates through predefined parameters and replicable rules rather than bodily gesture, it approaches the allographic side. A hand-drawn gesture, by contrast, carries the trace of a particular bodily movement. The decisive factor is not resemblance but the regime of production within which the movement emerges.

The mark that the line produces as bodily gesture becomes visible in frame-by-frame animation in a distinctive way: as tremor, or boiling. Torre (2015) defines boiling as the vibration effect that arises when an original drawing is copied multiple times by hand and the resulting frames are played in sequence. The millimetric differences between each copy produce a trembling, seething quality even in a motionless image. In Torre's formulation, the boiling image presents a form ceaselessly in flux. Movement is limited to the tremor of lines, yet precisely this limitation foregrounds the drawing process itself. Boiling visually exposes the fact that repetition is never exact repetition; it sustains the dynamic condition of the drawing's existence. Frank (2019) approaches this process from another angle. When the illusion of animation is halted and examined frame by frame, the enormous labour behind the movement becomes legible. Pause at any single frame of a hand-drawn animation: stray brushstrokes, loose hairs, and sometimes the oily fingerprints of the workers who handled the image become visible. These marks are indexical evidence of the presence of the studio's inkers and painters. Frank issues an important caution here. This human trace is not always the signature of a free artist. In animation studios it is the record of anonymous labour: workers whose names never appeared in the credits, who spent hours at the lightbox copying, tracing, and copying again. Boiling is the variation born from the copying of the line; the fingerprints and physical residues are the surface record of the cel. The two operate at different levels, yet both are the indelible trace of labour. The tremor is at once an aesthetic effect and an archive of labour.

The relationship between imperfection and labour also operates as a deliberate aesthetic strategy. Husbands (2019) defines sloppy craft as the animator's deliberate foregrounding of imperfect, unfinished, or rough-looking techniques against the polished surface aesthetic of commercial 3D animation. Rather than an aesthetic of effortlessness, this approach renders visible the intensive labour of the individual artist. The deliberately imperfect application of techniques such as modelling, shading, anti-aliasing, or incomplete rendering often comes to define an artist's personal style, functioning as a subversive intervention against industrial forms. Kirkland (2019) examines the same logic in a different context. In the animated series *Charlie and Lola*, characters are drawn with irregular lines that recall the inexperienced marks of a felt-tip pen, and colour fields are rough and imperfect, as if scrawled with crayon. For Kirkland, this amateur appearance is in reality a crafty strategy, one that conceals its digital production and is embedded within capital-driven corporate cultures of making. The apparent simplicity, naivety, and amateurism constitute a deliberate performance that contradicts the status of professional products. These examples suggest that a similar logic persists in contemporary branded motion graphics, where rough lines, raw surfaces, and a deliberate sense of amateurism can be read as more than a formal preference: a strategy that recodes the value of production. Yet to explain why deliberate imperfection produces an aesthetic effect at all, it is necessary to return to the dimension of risk within the production process.

The fact that hand-drawn animation feels different from digital automation is closely linked to this dimension of risk. Pye (1968) draws a distinction between two kinds of workmanship. In workmanship of risk, the quality of the result is continuously at risk throughout the making process. Every brushstroke, every pencil line, every cut can ruin the work accomplished up to that point; the outcome depends on the maker's attention, skill, and judgement in the moment. In workmanship of certainty, the result is determined by the system before production begins, and departing from the machine's standard is difficult. Pye's distinction transfers directly to frame-by-frame animation. In hand-drawn animation, every frame is the materialisation of workmanship of risk. As the animator draws each frame, they bear the responsibility of maintaining consistency with the previous frame while simultaneously advancing the movement. At every stroke, the result is at risk.

In the history of industrial animation, the established means of reducing this risk has been the clean-up stage, the repeated refinement, correction, and standardisation of the line with professional tools. Yet the more thorough the clean-up, the more the line acquires an industrial appearance and loses its organic tremor. As Frank (2019, pp. 88, 142) demonstrates, this refinement

work was carried out in large part by anonymous women workers throughout studio history. Frank describes this labour as low-paid, relatively deskilled, and offering limited prospects for advancement, linking it to a broader history of women's labour extending back to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Yet even as clean-up aimed at smoothing, it could not entirely silence the traces of the tired worker's body. The fingerprints and oily smudges remaining on the acetate cels are the indelible bodily evidence of this anonymous labour. Two distinct labour functions diverge here: in-between drawing and painting produce variation and leave traces, while clean-up aims to standardise yet cannot fully silence the body. Automated in-betweening, by contrast, is a digital production regime that approaches workmanship of certainty. The software calculates the movement between two keyframes through parameters, curves, and interpolation logic set by the artist. Risk does not vanish entirely, but it shifts from the bodily reconstruction of the line in each instance to the governance of parameters and mathematical calculation. The tremor, boiling, and small inconsistencies in hand-drawn animation are the traces that this risk leaves on the surface. Even when the viewer does not consciously analyse these traces, they sense that the result was not guaranteed, that they are facing the residue of a bodily process. The distinctive affective force of the handmade trace arises precisely from this sensible residue of risk left on the surface. A caution is necessary here, however. Pye (1968, p. 81) draws a sharp distinction between rough workmanship and its travesty. Genuine rough workmanship consists of the unavoidable imperfections that arise from the craftsperson's acceptance of risk. A travesty of rough workmanship is the industrial imitation of imperfection applied after the fact to machine-produced surfaces. Pye criticises this imitation as a degradation of craft. This distinction will sit at the centre of the discussion of authenticity that follows.

The drawn trace may thus be defined as an autographic record of bodily contact left on the surface. Hosea (2019) positions this record against digital reproducibility. Once transferred to a digital environment, this record can be scanned, duplicated, edited, and even imitated. The value of the handmade trace therefore lies not in its being absolutely irreproducible but in its appearing to the viewer as the residue of a particular moment of making. The handmade trace thus produces not an essence but an authenticity effect within digital circulation. The real question is when this effect operates as a genuine record of craft and when it functions merely as a stylised performance of roughness.

The handmade trace, then, emerges not as a mere visual style but as a multilayered aesthetic mechanism constituted by the relations among line, gesture, autographic record, tremor, labour, and risk. The line is the trace of a gesture rather than a form (Ingold, 2007; Sobchack, 2008, 2009). The act

of drawing is a performative record that leaves behind an autographic mark (Hosea, 2010, 2019). Boiling in frame-by-frame animation is a tremor that exposes the process itself (Torre, 2015). The reason hand-drawn animation feels different is that the viewer senses the trace of workmanship of risk; the aesthetic power of imperfection arises not from imperfection itself but from its relationship to the production process, labour, and risk. Schonig (2025, p. 36) extends this mechanism through the concept of laborious aesthetics. Examining the Spider-Verse films, works that are not hand-drawn animation in the traditional sense but computer animation restyled through hand-drawn, comic-book, and single-frame effects, Schonig argues that such techniques draw attention to the labour-intensive nature of animation and produce an impression of creative abundance. Yet Schonig also shows that this visibility carries a risk of romanticisation: making labour aesthetically visible can produce a comforting illusion of industrial self-reflexivity that in fact conceals the actual conditions of production. This warning converges directly with Frank's critique of anonymous labour and lays the ground for the discussion of authenticity. The essential question, however, remains: why has this mechanism acquired such value precisely now, under post-digital conditions?

4. Post-Digital Value: Authenticity, Templatisation, and the Human Trace

When Nicholas Negroponte declared in 1998 that the digital revolution was over (as cited in Cascone, 2000), he was suggesting that digital technology should no longer be thought of as a revolutionary novelty but as a normalised condition. Cascone (2000) takes this declaration as a starting point for defining a post-digital aesthetics. The errors and glitches of digital technology had given rise to a new artistic material; system crashes, aliasing, and data corruption became instruments for exploring the boundary zones beyond software's normal operation. Yet the aesthetics of failure that Cascone describes belongs to the internal malfunctions of the digital itself. The handmade trace that concerns this chapter is not an internal malfunction of the digital system but a visible record of bodily gesture and the production process on the surface. The two are not the same phenomenon, but they share common ground: the questioning of perfection's normative status. Cramer (2015) situates this condition within a broader framework. The post-digital designates a state in which the rupture produced by digital information technology has already taken place and the concept of the cybernetic system has entered crisis. As Berry and Dieter (2015) observe, this condition entails a shift from an obsessive enthusiasm for new media towards a wider spectrum of feeling that includes unease, fatigue, and disillusionment. The post-digital is not a return to the

analogue. It is an aesthetic condition in which imperfection, error, and the trace of the hand are rediscovered from within the digital.

Under this condition, motion graphics production faces a pronounced tendency towards visual homogenisation. This tendency is not merely a product of market dynamics; it is also a structural consequence of the software itself. Hosea (2019, p. 36) observes that commercial design software makes certain choices appear natural and easy to execute while concealing other possibilities, and that off-the-shelf software carries with it a set of implicit automatisms that standardise production. Berry and Dieter (2015, p. 10) place this standardisation within a wider frame, arguing that corporatised information aesthetics produces interface surfaces that tend towards a space devoid of meaning and a kitsch, banal uniformity. Software templates, asset libraries, and automated animation tools have carried this automatism into the field of motion graphics. Such accessibility represents a gain for the democratisation of motion design, yet the widespread use of the same tools also carries the risk of producing outputs that closely resemble one another. In recent years the design industry has begun to name this tension in its own language: a discourse has emerged that repositions craft as a marker of distinction, imperfection as a deliberate choice, and human labour as an antidote to the polished visual language of artificial intelligence.[4] The discourse is not a theoretical framework but a symptom; it registers, through the industry's own vocabulary of unease, a threshold at which smoothness has begun to lose its status as a measure of quality. Chan (2026) takes this threshold a step further and names its mechanism: in an environment where anyone can produce a polished image within minutes, polish loses its distinguishing power and therefore its value, while the handmade trace becomes a trust signal. These two registers occupy different planes: the trend headlines of industry reports record a sector mood and should be read as discursive indicators rather than academic evidence; Chan's observation analyses the loss of value that underlies that mood. Homogenisation is therefore not merely a theoretical assumption but a practical tension felt within the fabric of production.

How to read this tension, however, is far from simple. The craft trace does not always carry resistance. Sometimes it can work in the opposite direction: a commercial strategy. Hosea (2019, p. 33) lays bare this double nature with considerable sharpness. On one hand, handmade animation is a physical activity in which the animator's body makes contact with a surface and leaves behind indexical marks that confirm individual subjectivity. On the other hand, Hosea examines the John Lewis Christmas advertisements, in which the deployment of bygone craft skills serves nothing beyond spectacle; the superfluous labour is itself the show, and the laborious, careful production process becomes

part of the marketing strategy. Hosea's warning is unequivocal: working by hand is in itself no guarantee of value or critical force, and dissent can be crafted as readily by digital means as by manual ones. Kirkland (2019) examines this tension through the example of *Charlie and Lola*, where a crafty handmade appearance conceals its digital production and is embedded within corporate production cultures. At this point Pye's distinction between rough workmanship and its travesty re-enters the discussion. Not every imperfection automatically carries authenticity. The value of the handmade trace arises not from imperfection itself but from the relationship that this imperfection maintains with the production process. The difference between imperfection born of genuine workmanship of risk and roughness appended after the fact makes it possible to discuss the authenticity effect in critical terms.

Benjamin's (2008) concept of aura is frequently invoked in this discussion, yet it must be handled with care. Benjamin (2008) did not mourn the loss of aura. As Furuhata (2014) demonstrates, Benjamin understood technical reproduction as the liberation of art from ritual and as an expansion of the field of play. Hosea (2019, p. 32) criticises the attitude that automatically regards the handmade as more artistic, observing that it rests on a romantic image of the solitary maker working by hand, a holdover from an earlier moment that treated the artwork as the singular material expression of an individual mind. To deploy the concept of aura in the context of contemporary motion graphics with nostalgic conservatism would therefore be misleading. The more operative concept in this context is not aura but the authenticity effect. The handmade trace does not restore aura in the digital environment, yet it produces a powerful effect that leads the viewer to sense that they are facing the residue of a bodily production process.

This discussion also necessarily displaces the simple binary between digital and analogue. To bind the handmade trace exclusively to analogue materials and traditional tools narrows the issue. McCullough (1996) argues that digital interfaces, too, can offer a manipulable materiality and a sense of manual control; the more intuitive interfaces and virtual tool sets of 3D animation software can provide the artist with a process experience closely resembling that of traditional craft. In McCullough's formulation, computer software can approximate the traditional craft experience in which the practitioner continuously persuades a material. Adamson (2007) carries this idea further. Craft is not a fixed set of objects; it is an approach, an attitude, a habit of action. Craft exists only in motion. It is not a classification of objects, institutions, or persons but a way of doing things. Sennett (2008) observes that it would be misleading to regard craftsmanship as a way of life that ended with industrial society. Craftsmanship names a lasting and fundamental human

impulse: the desire to do a job well for its own sake. For Sennett, Western civilisation has experienced a deep-seated difficulty in connecting hand and head, a disconnection that becomes especially pronounced when technologies such as computer-aided design weaken the intuitive, bodily modes of learning that develop through drawing by hand. The issue, therefore, is not whether the medium is digital or analogue. It is the distinction between automated commercial aesthetics and human agency that carries risk, decision, and bodily trace within the production process. The distinction does not contradict the autographic/allographic framework established earlier; it complements it. The earlier distinction operates between bodily trace and parametric production. The distinction here operates between a craft ethos and automated production. A drawing made in Procreate is produced in a digital environment, yet if it carries bodily gesture it approaches the autographic trace. An After Effects template, conversely, approaches allographic production regardless of whether it uses analogue material. The decisive factor is not the tool but whether the making process leaves a bodily trace.

The value of the handmade trace today cannot be explained as a longing for the analogue or as pure resistance to the digital. That value arises from the fact that within the smoothed conditions of digital production, trace, labour, imperfection, and bodily agency have once again become distinguishing qualities. The post-digital condition has prepared the ground for this renewed distinctiveness (Cascone, 2000; Cramer, 2015). Template-based production and visual homogenisation have increased the differentiating power of the handmade trace. Yet at the same time the craft trace leads a double life, functioning both as a genuine record of craft and as a strategic performance of roughness (Hosea, 2019; Kirkland, 2019). What is at stake is not the return of aura but the reproduction of the authenticity effect. And digital production can itself approach craft, insofar as it carries bodily decision, attention, and process knowledge (Adamson, 2007; McCullough, 1996; Sennett, 2008). The handmade trace is a strategy that lives within the tension itself, under the conditions of digital production.

5. Hybrid Strategy: The Handmade Trace in Contemporary Motion Graphics

In contemporary motion graphics production, the relationship between the handmade trace and the digital tool is not one of opposition but of layering. The handmade trace is produced in drawing applications or directly on physical materials such as paper, puppets, or textiles. Compositing tools then time, layer, colour, and combine this trace with typographic and visual-effects elements. The compositing environment functions as the digital assembly space through

which the trace is carried onto the motion graphics surface. Short-form social media and branded content, in particular, is often produced by small teams or individual artists. Hand drawing provides these workflows with a high degree of formal flexibility for organic transformations that would be more laborious to construct with vector or three-dimensional tools. Frame-by-frame animation drawn on paper and scanned into a digital timeline, or hand-drawn layers superimposed on live-action footage through rotoscoping, are routine workflows in current production. As Álvarez Sarrat and Lorenzo Hernández (2013) demonstrate, the computer has not destroyed handmade processes but re-animated them. Hybridisation repositions the handmade trace within the conditions of digital production and circulation.

The repositioning becomes visible in contemporary motion graphics across three distinct contexts: a service brand, a digital platform, and luxury fashion. These examples have been selected not for their popularity but as paradigmatic cases through which the mechanisms of line, gesture, imperfection, and workmanship of risk manifest in different settings. The aim is not to construct a representative sample but to think through how deliberate imperfection produces different authenticity effects in each of these three contexts.

Giant Ant's To My Hooman campaign for Rover (2023–2025) illustrates the operation of deliberate imperfection within commercial motion graphics. The campaign's line style has been consciously designed to give the impression of an inexperienced hand. Founding creative director Matt McCain emphasises that the raw, simplified look of hand drawing helps capture the pet's point of view; what the animators call a beginner's hand reduces the pet's world to only the things that matter (McCain, 2023). Giant Ant describes the process as the enjoyable challenge of doing a great job of doing a bad job (Giant Ant, 2023). The campaign's deliberately simplified animation, intentionally misspelled typography, and child voiceover together form a strategy the studio terms radical empathy. The line is kept deliberately imperfect; this imperfection is not technical inadequacy but an aesthetic strategy chosen to evoke the mind of a pet.

Canva's 2026 Wild Design campaign displays a different dynamic. That a platform associated with digital design tools and artificial intelligence should choose handmade puppets, textile textures, and stop-motion aesthetics for its own promotion materialises the post-digital authenticity tension. DUDE partner Lorenzo Picchiotti explains that choosing stop-motion in 2026 is in itself a statement, and that craft needed to be at the centre of the campaign (Creative Bloq, 2026). A digital platform thus invests the handmade trace with the values of accessibility, warmth, and human touch.

Blinkink's winter 2025 campaign for Burberry represents the most material form of the handmade trace. Directed by Daniel Quirke and produced in collaboration with the London Embroidery Studio, the campaign transforms 120 embroidered and cross-stitched frames into in-camera animation. Quirke observes that the subtle imperfections arising from human touch and craft add a warmth and humanity against sterile perfection (The Drum, 2025). The textile visual language carries traditional craft into the context of luxury fashion. As a concrete reflection of the industry's craft-as-luxury discourse, the handmade trace here functions not merely as warmth or intimacy but as a vehicle of brand differentiation and luxury positioning.

Read together, these examples demonstrate that the handmade trace does not carry a single meaning. The same trace may operate in one context as a performance of amateurism, in another as a feeling of accessibility, and in yet another as luxury and craft value. Yet the critical question raised earlier must also be put to these cases: which constitutes genuine workmanship of risk in Pye's sense, and which is a travesty? The three cases form a spectrum. In the Burberry campaign, 120 physical embroidery frames are the product of an irreversible labour process; the case may therefore be read as the example closest to workmanship of risk. Giant Ant's deliberate imperfection is produced digitally yet evokes a bodily production process, generating an effect of workmanship of risk situated within the digital. Canva's humanisation of itself as a digital platform through handmade puppets is the clearest example of the strategic production of the authenticity effect. Goodspeed's (2026) warning is pertinent here: polished computer-produced work can now be confused with AI output, a situation that may turn the handmade appearance into what seems the safer marker of authenticity for designers and brands. The aesthetic preference for the handmade does not always arise from a commitment to craft; it may equally arise from the fact that digital polish has become identified with artificial intelligence. These examples demonstrate the power of the handmade trace as much as they carry the risk of commodification.

These cases suggest that contemporary motion graphics does not return to the analogue in any pure sense. The manual trace is made visible across different layers and at different degrees of intensity. To understand these degrees of intensity, it is necessary to distinguish the five layers at which the handmade trace becomes visible in motion graphics. It operates not as a single technique but as a strategy that appears at varying intensities across the layers of surface, line, movement, physical production, and meaning. The first layer, surface, includes paper texture, film grain, paint splatter, or scanned material overlaid on the digital image. The surface layer does not move, yet it lends the image a tactile quality. The second layer, line, encompasses trembling

contours, boiling edges, and hand-drawn typography. In the line layer, the handmade trace is directly embedded within the movement. The third layer is movement itself. Low frame rates, frame-by-frame timing, or the tremors of stop-motion inscribe a bodily trace into the rhythm of motion. The fourth layer, physical production, involves puppets, embroidered frames, physical sets, and real materials. Here the trace arises primarily from physical production and is subsequently integrated into the digital workflow. The fifth and final layer is meaning. The same imperfection produces different values in different contexts: in the Rover campaign, a trembling line evokes childlike intimacy and the pet's gaze; in Canva's handmade puppets, the same trace produces accessibility and human warmth; in Burberry's embroidery frames, it acquires meaning as luxury and craft heritage. These five layers are not independent of one another. In one project only the surface layer may be handmade; in another, line and movement layers may work together; in yet another, all five layers may be interwoven.

The same trembling-line appearance can also be imitated through procedural noise effects. Procedural production enters the discussion here only in the context of the imitation of the handmade trace. Procedural tremor typically generates randomness within an algorithmic regularity, whereas hand-drawn tremor, with its variations of pressure, speed, hesitation, and repetition, produces the impression of a more bodily rhythm. This difference invites a reconsideration of Pye's distinction between rough workmanship and its travesty in digital terms. The current value of the handmade trace lies not in pure analogue production but in the point at which it enters the workflow, the intensity with which it appears, and the meaning it is made to carry.

Conclusion

The turn towards the handmade trace in contemporary motion graphics cannot be explained as a passing trend or a longing for the past. This renewed visibility marks the reactivation of a strand already present in the field's historical memory, now acquiring renewed function under new digital conditions. Aesthetically, it operates through a mechanism that can be analysed through the concepts of line, gesture, imperfection, tremor, workmanship of risk, and autographic mark. It gains value under post-digital conditions because the normalisation of the digital, the homogenising effect of template-based production, and the search for authenticity provide this mechanism with a new context. In current production it materialises not as purely analogue or purely digital, but in layered and calibrated forms within hybrid workflows. The handmade trace is a deliberate design strategy operating at the intersection

of historical memory, aesthetic mechanism, post-digital value, and hybrid workflow.

This chapter has treated the handmade trace not as a value to be defended but as an aesthetic mechanism to be explained. The fundamental question that remains is therefore this: where is the boundary drawn between a genuine record of craft and a stylised performance of roughness? Frank's warning resonates here as well: the handmade trace was once the invisible record of anonymous labour; today the same trace can become a tool of differentiation for luxury brands. This question remains open. Yet just as digital painting has not eliminated traditional watercolour, and just as digital modelling has not rendered the knowledge of carving by hand obsolete, algorithmic motion graphics does not abolish the aesthetic value of the handmade trace. The value of the handmade trace arises not from its carrying an essence that cannot be algorithmically imitated, but from the fact that each attempt at imitation brings the difference in production back to the viewer's attention. An algorithm can simulate the tremor of the line, the roughness of the texture, or the stutter of the frame. Yet this simulation is not equivalent to a regime of production in which bodily gesture, workmanship of risk, and temporal labour are made perceptible to the viewer. As smoothness and algorithmic imitation become more widespread, traces that carry bodily risk, material contact, and temporal labour become more distinctive. The handmade trace is not a residue superseded by digitalisation; it is a persistent aesthetic problem reproduced in new forms as digitalisation deepens.

Notes

[1] Google I/O 2025 developer conference visual identity. The brand iconography and typographic elements are reconfigured within a dynamic three-dimensional space, adding depth and motion to Google's colour system. See Wes Cockx, "Google I/O 2025," Behance, 2025.

[2] Canva, Wild Design campaign, 2026. In promoting itself, the digital design platform adopts a stop-motion and handmade puppet aesthetic. See Creative Bloq, "Canva Uses Handcrafted Animation to Challenge Polished Design Culture," 2026; Roastbrief, "Crumbs, Craft and Creativity Take Flight in Handmade Canva Campaign," 2026.

[3] For the industry's own vocabulary around this tendency, see note 4. Envato's 2026 motion design report defines handmade animation as a counterweight to generative sameness.

[4] For this discourse, see Envato, "11 Motion Design Trends for 2026," 2026; Graphic Design Junction, "2026 Graphic Design Trends," 2025; May, T.

(2025), "Texture, Warmth and Tactile Rebellion," Creative Bloq (for Graham Sykes's "anti-AI crafting" concept); Canva, "'Imperfect by Design': 2026 Design Trends," 2025. In Canva's report, searches for DIY and collage elements on the platform rose by 90 per cent and lo-fi aesthetic searches increased by 527 per cent. In a survey of one thousand creatives in the United States and Brazil, 80 per cent described 2026 as the year they reclaimed creative control, while 77 per cent characterised artificial intelligence as an essential partner.

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