

Panel E3

Sala delle Colonne 2

Animation and “Reality”

Carla MacKinnon

Production challenges in animated documentary



This talk will focus on animated documentaries - both documentaries told entirely through animation and those through which animation weaves as a central and crucial component of their storytelling DNA.

I will present some of the findings from my PhD research, focused on the identification of common obstacles to professional animated documentary production. This research has included interviews with and ethnographic observation of practitioners working in the field of animated documentary, as well as market analysis and reflections on my own industry experience.

In recent years, film schools and universities have been prolific in their animated documentary output; a growing number of animated documentary short films are being produced, particularly by animation courses. Increasingly, higher education arts establishments are also offering specific animation documentary course components and academic pathways. These short student films provide content for film festival programmes and a rising number of festivals are offering dedicated animated documentary showcases and awards. The animated documentary form is also popular amongst independent filmmakers working on short, low budget projects supported by small grants and commissions.

In long form and feature length work however, a much lower ratio of animation production is dedicated to documentary storytelling. In broadcast and theatrical environments the animated documentary remains something of a novelty. What happens between production in the ‘para-industry’ arenas of arts universities and DIY filmmaking communities (Caldwell, 2013) and production in ‘the industry’ of film and television, preventing animated documentary from effectively scaling up?

My research suggests that many of the issues faced by filmmakers in the professional production of animated documentary result from the fact that teams are commonly built from practitioners who come from different communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Professional documentary and animation industries each have established production conventions, implicitly understood and adhered to by their communities of practice. However the two forms inhabit very different market positions and have disparate histories and technical requirements – as a result their production processes are dissimilar.

Furthermore, production processes of animated documentary films are not clearly defined or widely agreed upon. Animated documentaries can be scripted, storyboarded and edited before a frame of animation is commissioned, or they can be produced using a parallel process in which the animation team play a key creative role in developing story, aesthetic

and structure. Sometimes a combination of these approaches is applied. There is no tried and tested universal 'road-map' for production in animated documentary.

In animated documentary production, practitioners from a purely documentary background often work with those whose area of expertise is primarily animation and who have little experience of factual production. Each bring experience and assumptions from their own community of practice. As a result, team members may have inadequate understanding of each other's background, professional conventions, etiquette, expectations and restrictions.

Common issues arising from this collision of production cultures in animated documentary include:

- Errors of budgeting, scheduling and post-production planning;
- Errors or misunderstandings relating to crew structures and unclear definition of certain crew roles (such as the animation director);
- Communication barriers in creative collaboration;
- Disparity in professional vocabulary including different interpretations of commonly used words;
- Insufficient knowledge of colleagues' terminology and jargon;
- Inexperience in interpreting work-in-progress outputs such as animatics;
- Insufficient understanding of the requirements of production formats and audiences;
- Occurrences of industry prejudice against animation amongst documentary crews and commissioners.

These issues often result in animated documentary productions exceeding their budgets and schedules, as well as compromising their creative quality. In my talk I will present each of these points, illustrated with specific examples drawn from my research of completed animated documentaries and those in production, as well as projects which were aborted during development or production as a result of the issues encountered.

As long as animated documentary productions have a reputation for exceeding budgets and schedules, they will continue to be perceived by some commissioners and financiers as low value and high risk, and will continue to be difficult to finance and successfully execute. If the animated documentary form is to mature and scale up to its full creative and market potential, practitioners must develop and share strong and resilient production processes. Identifying the common issues which can lead to animated documentary productions going off the rails is crucial if we are to see the form flourish.

Biography

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Carla MacKinnon is a filmmaker and researcher. In 2015 she was awarded a Studentship to complete a practice-based PhD in Animated Documentary at Arts University Bournemouth. She is now in her second year of research, supervised by Professor Paul Ward.

Prior to this Carla completed a Masters in Animation at Royal College of Art and worked as a producer and director of live action and animated shorts. Her Wellcome Trust supported documentary *Devil in the Room* (2013) played at more than 50 festivals, events and conferences worldwide and won the Best Documentary award at Cineglobe Festival, CERN. In 2013 she also co-produced animated short *The Dewberry Empire*, which won awards at Encounters Festival and Bradford Animation Festival and was nominated for a Student Royal Television Society Award.

Her 2015 animation/live art show *Out of Body*, supported by Arts Council England, premiered at the Institute of Contemporary Art before touring to FACT Liverpool, Watershed Bristol, Latitude Festival and Cork Film Festival.

In 2016 her animated documentary gallery installation, *Squeezed by Shadows*, featured in the 'States of Mind: Tracing the Edges of Consciousness' exhibition at London's Wellcome Collection. In 2016 Carla also produced the award-winning short film *Fire*, supported by Film London, which played at over a dozen film festivals internationally.

In 2009 Carla founded Rich Pickings, an events brand bringing researchers together with filmmakers to explore a range of topics through film and discussion. Rich Pickings is currently supported by a Wellcome Trust People Award and has presented more than 25 events across three countries.

Carla has been a juror for festivals including London International Animation Festival, London Short Film Festival and Concorso Short Film Festival. She has been on the animation programming team of BFI London Film Festival, Edinburgh International Film Festival, Cork Film Festival and London Short Film Festival and has programmed special events for many other international film festivals.

Carla tutors MA and BA students at Arts University Bournemouth. She is also a visiting Lecturer on the Animation MA at Royal College of Art and a Contextual Studies Lecturer at Ravensbourne. She is a regular contributor to 'Animated Documentary' blogsite (animateddocs.wordpress.com) and has had reviews and articles published in journals and publications including *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* and *Aesthetica*. Carla has presented her work and research at arts and science conferences as well as in special events at film festivals and galleries.