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Moving beyond the limits of language: autobiographical narrative in animation shorts

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The Narrative Practitioner

Developing Excellence in Research, Education and Practice

The International Journal of Narrative Practice



International Journal of Narrative Practice (IJNP)

Introduction

This new journal is an eclectic publication that draws on different uses of narratives in research, education and practice. As such, it is not confined to any one area or discipline. Submissions from practitioners and academics in any discipline are encouraged and it is planned to have guest editors and single theme issues. The publication will come out four times a year (Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter) and the first and second issues will be devoted to presentations and papers from the 2nd. International Narrative practitioner Conference, held at Glyndŵr University in June 2008.

The journal will initially be published as an online journal but it is planned to develop it as an academic journal, published in hard copy.

Vision

Much of human life is conducted through narrative accounts of events and experiences. Many of our social institutions are comprised almost entirely of opportunities for telling and re-telling stories, for sharing the narratives that constitute our lives. We have all had experience of relating to and living vicariously inside the stories that are told by others, whether they are stories about their own lives or stories of the kind that we encounter in literature and film, that writers create, using elements of their experience. Narratives, therefore offer a method of teaching and communicating with one another about professional matters.

The aims of the journal are:

To engage participants in a multidisciplinary dialogue around the use of narratives in research education and practice

To facilitate ongoing collaboration in the development of narrative communities

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The Narrative Practitioner

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The International Journal of Narrative Practice (IJNP)

Welcome and Introduction

I want to welcome you to the first issue of our new journal, The International Journal of Narrative Practice (IJNP). The journal is for anyone, in any context, who uses narratives in any way. We welcome narratives from fields as diverse as the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Philosophy and Ethics as well as from professionals in any area. The first issue is the beginning of an ongoing conversation, which we hope you will join with. The journal will come out four times a year corresponding to Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter issues (see Notes for contributors).

This issue comes out just as the 3rd.International Conference takes place at Keele University, UK. It promises to be a very exciting event with a variety of workshops, art exhibitions, performances, presentations, music and storytelling. Next year's conference will take place in North Wales at Glyndŵr University in June 2010. We hope you will join us (www.thenarrativepractitioner.co.uk).

There are a variety of interesting ways of using narratives and this is reflected in this issue. Papers in this issue were presented at the 2nd. International Conference on Narratives at Glyndŵr University in June 2008. I hope you enjoy this first issue and that it motivates you to engage with the community of narrative practitioners.

Alex Carson (Chief Executive Editor)

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‘Moving beyond the limits of language’ Autobiographical narrative in animation shorts. Yvonne Eckersley

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I intend to examine how selected animators have interpreted autobiographical themes through the medium of animation. For the purpose of this paper I will be looking at five animated shorts by different artists, which vary in length from four to fifteen minutes. They are largely ‘labours of love’, (indeed one is a student degree film), having brought little financial reward for the artists who made them and whose main audience is that of the animation festival plus occasional airings on TV.

The main areas under analysis will be autobiographical themes, narrative structures, visualisation as well as the motivation of each artist in making their film. I am particularly interested in whether therapeutic benefit to the artist might provide a motivation, both in terms of the animation production process and the desire to communicate a personal truth.

Autobiographical themes

The main themes in animation autobiography relate either to observation and the everyday or involve some aspect of memory. More often than not the memories are associated with powerful emotional events, such as childbirth or trauma.

I will look at animators whose films have been triggered by episodic memories and consider how a personal trauma or extreme emotion can be the starting point for a film.

Narrative structure

The animation artist is in the fortunate position of having an almost infinite array of narrative strategies at their disposal. The whole of the vocabulary of film language and editing devices available to the live action filmmaker also apply to animation, however the animator has many others that the live-action filmmaker does not. In his book ‘Understanding Animation’, Paul Wells describes how metamorphosis and the dynamics of dialogue or musicality can form the basis of a narrative structure for an animated film. He explains how the soundtrack plays a vital role in a film, tempering the mood and atmosphere and offering the audience the vocabulary to decode and draw meaning from the film.

Moreover, Wells derives his own terms, for example fabrication and penetration to describe approaches the animator can take to express a narrative.

He sums up this potential:

‘Animation is, after all a distinctive film form which offers to the adaptation process a unique vocabulary of expression unavailable to the live-action filmmaker’(Wells P. 1999, p199)

Visualisation

I will analyse how colour and graphic style relate to the theme and serve to fulfil the intention of the artist.

Motivation

I will analyse the artists motivation in making their autobiographical animations and how a desire to communicate and inform mingles with elements of personal therapy.

The' Uncanniness of the familiar'

The inspiration of the everyday as a theme seems to have emerged in avant-garde film of the 1950's and 60's. Avant-garde film shares a lot with independent animation, being largely in the format of the short and may even be constructed on a frame by frame level.

In his paper *Avant-Gardens* – Scott MacDonald looks at the work of avant-garde women-film makers during the 1960's. Though these autobiographical films were shot in live action the filmmakers like Marie Menken, Marjorie Keller and Carolee Schneemann experimented with editing and painted the filmstrip, etched into the emulsion with a razor blade and a toothbrush, bleached portions and batiked it in order to evoke the psychological meaning behind their films, which related directly to their everyday lives and experiences. Gardens and intimate relationships provided the raw material for their films.

In Marjorie Keller's 'The Answering Furrow' 'Keller evokes ancient European spiritual and aesthetic traditions and is centred around her father's vegetable garden in York-town Heights, New York .

'Most obviously all the films I've discussed are defiantly unpretentious, and part of their defiance involves the film makers' choices to honour domestic spaces and aspects of domestic dailiness considered too mundane or too 'personal' for big-budget melodrama and even for most documentary and avant-garde cinema
(MacDonald S. 2005,)

Because of their mode of construction, (frame by frame) certainly many of the above films could fall in to the category of animation and their themes have been followed up by animators.

'Growing' – Alison Hempstock – 1994 Running time 5"

Theme

Gardening, and cycles of nature form the theme for Alison Hempstock's animation, 'Growing'. It represents a year in the cultivation of a garden. The artist takes us on a close-up journey in which we see in detail the growth of plants. The images are derived from the animators close observation of her garden and the processes of gardening. This gives the subject matter a drama and intensity, which is not normally associated with gardening.

Narrative Structure

There is great beauty in the simple structure of this film. It begins with the gardener (Hempstock's partner) preparing the soil. We focus on his repetitive actions, raking, digging, planting and finally watering the seeds. We then focus in to extreme close-up on the actual growth of the plants. This is sped up and accompanied by the exaggerated sounds of seedlings pushing up through the soil and leaves unfurling. This cacophony of growth culminates in the dramatic bursting forth of flower heads of every description. The pace returns to normal with the appearance of the gardener's hands and his discovery of the vegetables, ripe for harvesting. We see them being collected and a ceremonial handing over of a large marrow, (presumably to the filmmaker). The final sequence shows the gardener once more preparing the soil ready for the next season of growth.

This film demonstrates how effective animation can be at condensing time. A whole year's growth takes place in the space of five minutes. There is no dialogue or music. The beautifully simple soundtrack is made up of the natural sounds of a town garden and exaggerated Foley sound for the growth sequences.

Visualisation

The close focus observation, coupled with the technique, each image (12 per second) hand coloured with oil pastel crayons give this film an intimacy and intensity rarely seen. The film grew out of oil pastel observations of the artist's garden in a sketchbook. An observational sketchbook has been the starting point for many personal animated films. This kind of direct observation from life can draw the audience's attention to the subtlety in colour, texture and movement in an environment engaging them on a subliminal, emotional level.

Motivation

'Growing' was commissioned by Channel 4, following an artist's residency at the museum of the moving image. The film draws the audience's attention to the inherent beauty and abstraction, colour and composition of everyday locations and activities.

After this film Alison continued with her observational autobiographic theme with 'Bath', which also features her partner. The subtle beauty in the colours and movement of the water, contrast with skin-tones and are abstracted by the artists eye.

'films about the everyday allow us to see what psychological significance might lie in apparently innocuous behaviour such as folding clothes, enabling us to experience what Cavell has labelled in other contexts as the 'uncanniness of the familiar' (Klevan A.2000, p62)

'Daddy's little bit of Dresden China' – Karen Watson 1988 Running time 15"

'The stories told with the full richness of a life, and are seen as making sense and giving meaning to deeply disturbing experiences'
(Plummer,2006, p244)

Theme

Karen Watson really stretches the potential of the animated form to communicate the deeply distressing emotions associated with child molestation.

In this brave autobiographical short Watson represents herself by a feather puppet with a small vase for a head. The metaphor continues with her mother being constructed from model food and kitchen utensils and her father of sharp metal with scalpel like scraps or razor-blades for a mouth. Photographic collage and drawn sequences convey the disturbing narrative. In a cruel irony Watson's experience is narrated in the form of a fairy story.

Watson narrates the film herself in a haunting voiceover, *'It happens in so many families, and no-one ever talks about it.'*

Narrative Structure

This film incorporates a number of different narrative structures. Symbolism and metaphor combine with fabrication. Fabrication is a term used by Paul Wells to describe how inanimate objects and components can be brought to life through the process of animation. An audience can engage with a 3D model animated puppet on a more fundamental and emotional level than they would if presented with the people they represent. We are not distracted by a need to make value judgements on appearance and the true nature of the character can be revealed by the choice of materials and their construction. Hence we see the vulnerability of the figure representing the child in her construction of feathers with a small vase for a head. In all her figures Watson has dispensed with eyes, usually seen as a vital feature for expressing character, yet this doesn't detract from their believability. The soundtrack provides the dominant narrative strategy with the artist's narration holding together the story, which might otherwise appear disjointed due to the variety of techniques employed.

Visualisation

Model animation, simplified drawn animation, collage and photograph all combine to give this film its bold aesthetic. This combining of techniques is evident in the work of a number of animators of this period and this eclectic approach has been described by some as inherently feminist. The late 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a number of women animators in the UK and North America producing work, which reflected their lives and the lives of women in general. This included the overtly feminist work of The Leeds Animation Workshop angered by the tradition of sexist imagery in much animation and Vera Neubauer's experimental, mixed media animation. Later work has taken feminism for granted and focussed more on subjective experience often allied to personal autobiography.

'As novelist Jeanette Winterson has commented, for women with a talent for art and an interest in film, animation offers both a challenge and a safe place'. A challenge for because of the unlimited potential for expression (and self expression), and a safe place because it can offer a private place in which to experiment.' (Pilling J. 1992, p6)

Rather than feel restricted to traditional cel animation women developed the confidence to explore the moving image in unconventional media such as collage, cut-out and object animation which meant that they could produce their vision single-handedly in the same spirit that Lotte Reiniger produced the first ever animated feature, 'The Adventures of Prince Achmed' from cut-out silhouette puppets.

'Women... care more about variety than men and variety connects to fragmentation and to the autobiographical aspect (of their work), too, as a sort of defiance.' (Lippard L. p67)

Films described as feminist, dealing specifically with what it means to be a woman became almost a genre of their own in the 1980s and 90s and from a sociological point of view form what could be described as a collective consciousness of women's experience. As mentioned above such films are characterised by a greater experiment with visual language and modes of expression than the mainstream of the time.

'Many women deal more openly with feelings, with their own and with others, and as a movement, feminist art tends to be more humanistic than formal.' Pilling Reader p73

Motivation

This was made as a student Degree film.

'For me, 'Daddy's Little Bit of Dresden china' acted as a form of therapy, enabling me to express feelings I could not have expressed otherwise. Feelings I didn't have words for, and forbidden feelings such as anger. The process of making the film helped me to come to terms in some ways with what had happened to me as a child and locate certain patterns of behaviour in my adult life that were destructive.

The final image is of the shattered china vase. It is the child who is damaged and broken through such an experience and this can only be stopped when society offers encouragement and support to people who have to live in silence because of the ignorance of others. Sexual abuse is a political, as well as a personal issue.' Karen Watson (Pilling J. 1992, p97)

Karen Watson went on to make another animated film about anorexia, which was also autobiographical.

Theme

"Alright, I give you the runt. But you take care of it, and you kill it in one year", This was the bargain made between the young Andreas and his uncle. Initially an act of compassion to save the tiny rabbit from suffocation, as the time of the rabbit's demise draws near the small boy is forced to turn his thoughts to the terrible act he must perform.

The Runt is the last of a trilogy of films by Hykade, which begins with 'We Lived in Grass', a film, which though not strictly autobiographical is based on childhood observations in his home-town in Bavaria. All three films in his trilogy deal with the way young boys in the area are inducted into a sexist creed by their fathers.

'I've been brought up with a very anti-feminine point of view. I mean Women's Lib was there, but not in Bavaria.'

This oppressive upbringing might well be responsible for the high suicide rate in this *'right-wing, conservative, depressing area.'*

The film chronicles a sort of rites of passage for the young boy in which he is stripped of his compassion and brutalised into killing. Whilst the child is given no choice or opportunity to opt out of killing, his father also seems uneasy with the situation. The uncle character is clearly portrayed as the villain of the piece and is drawn differently to the small and slightly built Andreas and his father, being huge with a large square head. His father is portrayed as a sympathetic character, sharing in the boys' marvel at the birth of the rabbits at the start of the film and is seen tending to the rabbits' needs whereas the uncle only seems interested in killing them.

The stylised characters, with simplified, uncluttered backgrounds in a limited colour palette help us to focus on the very essence of the memory.

The vast bullying form of the uncle first looms into view as the father and son watch with wonder the birth of the rabbits.

The placing of the rabbit skin on the boy's head at the end of the film is a clear sign that the gruesome rite of passage is completed.

It is not surprising that this traumatic memory should form the basis of an animated film in Hykade's adulthood.

The dialogue gives us a clear narration of the story and is explicit. I do however feel that the images are so clear and symbolic and the visual narrative so powerful that they would work without the words.

Is this film evidence of an animator using the medium as a form of self-help therapy or is it merely a case of drawing on past experience as interesting subject matter with which to engage an audience?

Narrative Structure

The narrative structure is refreshingly simple and follows chronologically. An acoustic guitar and percussion track are accompanied with natural sounds of the countryside to provide the soundtrack. The only voices are those of the boy and the uncle. Time is condensed in the sequence where we see the boy playing with his rabbit and each time we return to him the rabbit has grown. This sequence serves to cement the bond between the boy and his pet.

Visualisation

Like a person's perceptual experience of the present environment, recollective experience of past events can at best be only an incomplete and stylised model of the apprehended reality.
(Tulving E. 1985)

The hand drawn black outlined and simplified, stylised figures ensure we are not distracted by unnecessary detail. The environments are similarly simplified. Even the table and stools on which the characters sit have been reduced to simple lines.

This economy is also reflected in the animation, with the twitching of the rabbits noses making them appear more alive than the people in some scenes.

The colour palette is restricted mainly to warm yellows and browns and has the rich texture of oil pastel. The boy's rabbit provides a counterpoint of vivid blue.

It's wonderful the way his memory has stripped the image bare of all unnecessary detail.

Motivation

'In 2001 I did a drawing of myself watching my uncle killing rabbits – an image I remembered from my childhood. A few years later I went through my sketchbooks, discovered the image again and it really hit me inside. At the same time the subject connected to the past. The idea of killing rabbits to eat them seemed to be centuries old. I felt the subject connected a personal story to a collective myth.' (Hykade from an interview with Chris Robinson)

At the 2006 Bradford animation festival Hykade discussed his attempts to understand the sadistic behaviour of his uncle and how talking to him recently he seemed to have mellowed and had this to say about his fervour for killing animals, *'It's not the same anymore, there is no pleasure in it for me now.'*

While there is little doubt that the experience was traumatic for Hykade as a child there is also a need to make sense of his uncle's sadistic behaviour.

'Small Treasures' – Sarah Watt 1995 Running time 15 minutes

Theme

Although much of her work has its origin in autobiography and personal experience Sarah Watt prides herself on her research and uses this to make her work more universal and meaningful by referring to the shared experience.

'Our first baby died during birth, which was, you know, pretty traumatic. Small Treasures is about a pregnancy, written in diary form, sort of, follows a pregnancy through, and it's about a baby that dies, doesn't make it through the birth, which is a fairly common thing, horribly common still, that women go through and I, made it sort of, autobiographical in a way, but I kind of universalised it. I've looked at a whole lot of stories of women that have been through, or, you know, people that have been through the same thing and made a hybrid story, cause at the time I really felt it was unspoken about and although things had improved, it was still something a bit under the bed, you know, shove your emotions under the bed and get back out and have another baby and it's a lot harder than that, it's a lot harder on relationships. It's a real death and I wanted to make a film about that, yeah, but not a depressing one, I hope.'

Sarah Watt

Narrative Structure

The film structure is in some ways influenced by live-action film.

We begin with a first person narrative of a woman walking on a beach reminiscing about how she first found out she was pregnant when she was at the beach. This scene is inter-cut with a series of flashbacks to different memories from her pregnancy and the birth of her baby who was stillborn. Sarah Watts has made about eight animated films and in 2006 produced 'Look both ways' a live action feature with animated inserts.

Although much of the films structure is reminiscent of live-action, animation comes into its own through the rich colour and beautiful painterly texture.

Metamorphosis is applied as an editing device, moving us creatively from one scene to another for example where a gull is transformed into the image of the woman on a hospital bed. Moreover a

montage of nightmarish images, morph into each other in the sequence leading up to the moment when the woman learns that her baby has died.

Visualisation

The film is visualised in painted backgrounds with paint and crayon on cel. There is a beauty and richness to the choice of colours and textures, which may well have been inspired by the strong Australian light. Recognisable images move in and out of abstraction. A painterly quality is maintained throughout and there is a refreshing absence of the strong black outline which characterises much mainstream animation.

There is a seductive quality to this feast of colour and texture, which draws and engages the audience in this moving narrative.

Motivation

'I probably make films that are autobiographical more because I think they make better stories because they're real and therefore more likely to, sort of touch other people and pull other people into the story and into the drama, that it would help me as some kind of therapy. When I go and see films or look at paintings, I want to be moved and touched and usually its coming from something personal in the artist so that's probably why I raid my own life to make films.' Sarah Watt

I can identify a lot with Sarah Watt's motivation for making 'Small Treasures'. I also wanted to express something more universal about childbirth and in 1995 made an animation, 'Birthday' It features three births, two are those of my own children the third is based on a storyboard of my animator friend Strinda Davies. Happily all three resulted in live births. Even though the outcome was positive I wanted to show the births exclusively from the mother's point of view. I was often irritated by live action-films, which seemed to objectify and control the woman giving birth rather than acknowledge her role as birth giver. I wanted to celebrate this role even when the woman had issues with the way the birth was handled.

My motivation for making this film was in some ways similar to Sarah's in that I felt that the whole experience of birth was shrouded in secrecy or reduced to cliché rather than being seen for the rich area of human experience and endeavour that it is.

'Brush the teddy's toes' – Yvonne Eckersley 2003 Running time 4"

Theme

This film tells the story of Louis, a boy with developmental difficulties and follows his family's search to find help for him. The title comes from a comment made by a paediatrician trying to assess his level of understanding. It seemed that by asking such a bizarre question he was already being assigned an identity outside normality. This was emphasised by his sister who commented, *'but you usually brush hair, not toes'*.

Narrative Structure

With 'Brush the teddy's toes', I wanted to achieve what Paul Wells, in his book 'Understanding Animation', describes as penetration.

'One of the outstanding advantages of the animated film is its power of penetration. The internal workings of an organism can easily be shown in this medium. The depth of a man's soul is more than a phrase to the animator: it can also be a picture.' – Halas and Batchelor, 1949 (Wells P. 1998, p122)

The soundtrack is structural to the piece. The beginning is deliberately disorientating and fragmented mirroring the visuals and is distorted to try to convey the feeling of senses not tuned in

to the brain. The film progresses, the images becoming more readable and the soundtrack more conventional, reflecting the improvements in the boy's ability to make more sense of his environment. Metamorphosis is used as a structural device to transist from one scene to another.

Visualisation

The technique involved two levels of animation, pen on paper and food colouring on watercolour paper, layered together in Première.

Some of Louis' drawings were used as inspiration and combine with the animators drawn observations from life.

A simple colour palette of largely warm colours, oranges, reds, and warm greens, is used to convey an optimistic mood with purple applied in scenes where sadness dominates.

The line drawings are slightly mis-registered creating an individual aesthetic which seems to fit the theme of discord.

Motivation

Making this film was certainly therapeutic for the animator. It helped to take stock of the family's efforts to both come to terms with their son's disability and their status as a disabled family. It also acknowledges the struggle to find useful therapies and the strain the repetitive nature such programmes can put on the family. The intended audience was other families struggling with similar circumstances so it was a surprise when S4C saw that it had a wider appeal and funded the film. The animator finds the creative production processes inherently therapeutic in themselves.

Autobiographical themes in independent animation

Autobiography makes trouble: it is difficult to define as a distinct genre, on the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary (Marcus 1994). This kind of disruptive interdisciplinarity, the challenging of traditional boundaries and definitions, has also been central to the feminist project, especially as articulated in Women's Studies, and autobiography provides a meeting place for many different kinds of feminist approach.

(Tess Cosslett 2000)

The films discussed are, I believe, intentionally or not inherently feminist and many of the terms above used by Cosslett in linking autobiography to feminism might also be applied to them and in a wider sense to independent animation. They are interdisciplinary, bringing together sound and a variety of media and techniques, challenge traditional boundaries whilst providing a meeting place for many different kinds of feminist approach. The use of sound or music without voice to convey narrative has been seen as a more feminist approach than more traditional forms of script or narration.

Scott McDonald has this to say in defence of personal autobiographic and domestic themes, as legitimate subject matter for film:

'We cannot live outside a domestic sphere and that therefore, given the inevitability of the domestic, surely it is progressive to model ways of cinematically exploring and revealing the domestic without reducing it to sterile metaphors in the service of either patriarchy or justifiable feminist fury. (Scott MacDonald, 2005, p233)

Narrative structures in the films discussed.

An animated film can condense material so that an image can operate simultaneously as a retrieval of image forms, as a deployment of (sometimes highly personal) symbolism and metaphor, and can provide incidence of penetration.’ (Wells P. 1999, P201)

The films discussed each employ several of the forms mentioned in the above quote by Paul Wells and each gives us a very individual, highly personal point of view. Although the overall narrative strategies vary from film to film they all provide some degree of penetration, and invite the audience to enter their internal world and share their perceived experience.

Visualisation

The highly visual and individual aesthetics of the films are refreshingly different from each other and give just some examples of the wealth of media and visual codes that are available to the animator. They are free to evolve and adapt their imagery from an unlimited variety of sources such as painting techniques or found objects and apply them to express their ‘inner necessity’.

‘For the truth claim that animation visualises the essence of truth, other than filming a truthful event. It is similar to the difference between a caricature and a photograph. ...While photography can be distractive or misleading, drawn images tend to focussed on topic. This is also connected to the economic nature of drawn images such as in characatures: it does not require many words to describe what it is about’. Hee Holmen, Aalborg University Esbjerg

The therapeutic potential of producing animated autobiography

In ‘Documents of Life 2 Ken Plummer describes how in the Social Sciences there has been considerable interest in life stories and their therapeutic role.

One of the striking new turns in the uses of life histories and narratives has been their development within medicine and therapy. Of course, ever since Freud and earlier, the focus upon understanding the dynamics of an individual case or life has always been a prime concern.’ Plummer

From many angles – illness narratives, trauma and abuse narratives, coming out narratives, aging and reminiscence narratives – the power of the story to hold together a potentially fragile life starts to be seen’ (Plummer K. 2006, p243)

Karen Watson and Sarah Watt both recognise the therapeutic potential of producing autobiographical animation. Sarah describes the type of person she believes is more likely to want to express them-selves through animation as
‘a weird mix of being very creative and very dull and able to embrace routine’

The animation process consists of numerous different tasks requiring differing levels of concentration.

‘Small Treasures is 15 minutes long and is 12 drawings per second so it was an incredible amount of work but I love it with animation because you have days when you’re really creative and you really want to paint something gorgeous and so you can paint a background or you can get the feeling of movement and then you have days when you just

want to sit there and do really boring work like just the craft of it. It's like knitting, you know, you just colour in and listen to story tapes and music, its great. Sarah Watt

All of the films I have selected set out to engage an audience and reveal a personal truth. This might be simply to draw attention to the miraculous nature of the everyday, as in 'Growing'. More often than not this truth is not just a personal one but relates to a collective truth as in the other films. Theatre pioneer, Augusto Boal has expressed how the opportunity to tell ones own truth is in itself therapeutic to the individual.

'The political potential of a personal story is grounded not in particular subject matter but rather in storytelling's capacity to position even the least powerful individual in the proactive, subject position, For personal story draws on the authority of experience; everyone is an expert on his or her own life.' (Jan Cohen-Cruz, 2006, p103)

In 2006 Melanie Hani, animation lecturer at Sunderland University worked on an animation project with a group of adults and children who had been recently bereaved. This project formed the basis of her Masters Degree in Animation. In her publication "Made with love" she draws some interesting conclusions regarding the therapeutic potential of animation as a process. The participants clearly benefited from the opportunity to share their stories of loss with each other as well as communicating them to a wider audience via an exhibition featuring the animated shorts they produced.

On a neurological level Hani believes that the processes involved in producing animation effectively stimulate the frontal lobes, believed *'to play an important role in the mediation of depression'* and who's main function appears to be *'thought and concentration on problems'*, (Austin T.A. 2006) Hani lists the functions of the frontal lobes, including motor function, problem solving, spontaneity, memory, language, initiation, judgement, and maps these quite convincingly onto the various processes involved in the animation produced by the group.

Although it falls into the related field of experimental film and not animation it is worth mentioning here American artist's Anne Robertson's "Five Year Diary". For over 20 years, Robertson chronicled her experience of bi-polar depression and covered frequent stays in hospital.

'Filmmaking 'has been not only the central activity of her life, but one of her most effective means for managing the ravages of her disability: filming, editing and showing her films has become a celluloid lifeline, providing coherence and continuity amidst the demands of the sometimes self-destructive voices she hears'. (McDonald S. 2005 P224)

As a form of therapy animated autobiography is in its early days and we have a lot to discover about its possible benefits to the individual. Moreover it is unclear to what extent the desire to communicate and share our personal truth with an audience contributes to the therapeutic process as a whole. It seems reasonable to assume however, that animation, with its interdisciplinarity and many eclectic approaches is particularly well placed to evoke deep emotions and plum different levels of consciousness, making it an exceptional medium for expressing autobiographical narrative.

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