

FAITHFULLY ANIMATING THE TRUTH *SOME EXPERIENCES OF A WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE*

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Abstract

For over four decades I have been part of a women's film collective, Leeds Animation Workshop, set up to make films about social issues. As a founder member, I have had some level of involvement with all the Workshop's 40 or so films. During this period we have employed a variety of techniques, including fully-painted cel, 3D, mixed media, and cut-outs; but the focus of our collective work remains, as it always has been, on using animation to raise awareness, and to provoke questions and discussion of social issues.

This paper consists of a practitioner's reflections, on the use of animation for documentary and on our collective working practice.

Keywords: *Animation, collective, radical, women, feminist, documentary, practitioner*

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This is not a formal academic paper, but some reflections, from a practitioner's point of view, on attempts to document the world through the medium of animation.

For over four decades I have been part of a women's film collective, Leeds Animation Workshop, set up to make films about social issues. As a founder member, I have had some level of involvement with all the Workshop's 40 or so films.

The films are varied in style, but they are all about real issues. For a long time, we did not think of them as documentaries, and when first asked about this, we used to dismiss the idea. But eventually we realised that the definition of documentary film has changed, and we now include our work in that category.

Those of us who set up the Workshop in 1978 were all in our twenties or early thirties. A handful of young women in the north of England, we came together through women's liberation groups, and through an eagerness to communicate by means of animated film.

We were members of the post-war generation, overwhelmingly alienated from our parents and the lives they were leading. Their inability to talk about the traumas they experienced during the war years, and our inability to understand them, had created a gulf between us. All we knew was that the past was evil, the present was restrictive, and the future needed to be different.

They called us the baby-boomers. Instinctively we distrusted anyone over 35. We wanted to change the world.

Our small group was of its time. In common with around half a dozen other radical film workshops that were emerging at this period, we wanted to work collectively, without a boss; to overturn stereotypes; to share roles and skills.

There were one or two problems with this plan.

Firstly, we didn't know anybody who'd tried this before. Most of us had no experience or training in animation or film-making, or even taking proper photographs. Prior to 1980, the only camera most of us had seen was a Kodak Brownie.

Secondly, we didn't have any experience or training in running a company. However, we had learned some practical ways of working collectively, from the women's movement, and, to a lesser extent, the peace movement. Since we were all women, interested in current affairs, who had reached adulthood during the 1970s, each of us had been active in multiple women's organisations. Being in consciousness-raising groups had taught us how important it was for everyone to be listened to, and how to make sure everyone could express their opinion. So at least that was a start.

The founder members of the Workshop had previously been part of Leeds Nursery Film Group, a project with the aim of making an animated resource about pre-school education. "Who Needs Nurseries? - We Do!" (1978) was designed chiefly to help women's groups and nursery campaigns to spread their message. Once it was finished, some of us decided to carry on animating, and set up a new group (Fig. 1).



Figure 1

The name we chose, Leeds Animation Workshop, reflected an attachment to the location, to the medium, and to the non-hierarchical way we intended to work. Forty years later, all these commitments remain: although naturally, within the group, working practices and individual roles have evolved over time, and artistic approaches and materials have varied considerably.

The first film we made after establishing the Workshop was in response to new legislation about health and safety at work. Like the nursery film, this was made on cel, using a basic version of classic studio methods. A couple of us gave birth during the production, and did some of the work at home (Fig. 2).

We found that traditional cel animation can be combined with looking after very small babies – they sleep a lot, and even if they are awake, by putting them in a sling or a baby bouncer you can get a few cels painted and laid out to dry. Once they learn to crawl, of course it gets more difficult.

“Risky Business” (1980) was based on extensive research into factory conditions, working practices, scientific studies and union policies; it is concerned with the reality of working people’s lives. We read books and articles, and interviewed workers and union representatives from various industries in

Yorkshire, and at the Trades Union Congress in London. We also drew on personal experiences of factory work, of union activism, and of training trade union representatives.

The characters were designed in the style of newspaper cartoons such as Andy Capp, and the backgrounds reflect the grimy reality of Northern cities and workplaces. To record the voice of the main character, we employed a local woman who spoke with a Leeds accent. She was enthusiastic, but had no acting experience. Occasionally, to make it easier, we invited her to rephrase the script into words she might have used herself. The recording and sound editing took a long time, but we felt it was important to have an authentic Yorkshire voice on the soundtrack.

Some aspects of the film are surreal: machines come to life, chemical fumes turn into serpents that strangle the workers breathing them in, and the dust is embodied as a suffocating monster. But the otherwise familiar imagery, realistic settings, and genuine working-class voices, give the film at least some of the impact of a documentary (Fig.3).

It wore its heart on its sleeve, but “Risky Business” was designed primarily to convey information. Our next project was more emotive. Basing its title on the government pamphlet



Figure 2



Figure 3

"Protect and Survive," which was delivered to every UK household in 1980, "Pretend You'll Survive" (1981) was intended to be a resource for the anti-nuclear movement. It, too, was based on substantial research, into the effects of radiation, the processes and dangers of the nuclear industry, and the impact of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It arose from our political involvement in CND and END - the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and European Nuclear Disarmament - and from our experiences of life during the Cold War, when "the Bomb" was an imminent threat of which we were acutely aware (Fig. 4).

This film, which has no dialogue, was the first in which we ventured to be experimental, both visually, and with sound. It features a mocking cartoon chorus-line of arms traders and generals performing a song and dance routine, interspersed with a storyline that includes fragments of the real world: images from magazines, pages torn from the government pamphlet, and photographs of human embryos fatally damaged by radioactive fallout from the nuclear bombs in Japan.

"Pretend You'll Survive" was made on a shoestring, completed with the help of small donations from CND groups and other well-wishers. When at last it was finished we took the cutting copy as usual to Studio Film Labs in London to be processed, and on the way, showed it to Clare Kitson, who

was programming animation at the London Film Festival. She included it in the festival screening of "outstanding British animated films of the year," and thus helped to bring about a change in our fortunes.

Soon afterwards, the British Film Institute (BFI) funded our next project; and also, through the Housing the Cinema Fund, granted us £7000 - enough to buy a little house in Leeds, in which to make it (Fig. 5).



Figure 4



Figure 5

"Give Us A Smile," (1983), like all our other early films, was fully painted on cel – a technique that can help to achieve smooth and fast-moving animation, but it entails a laborious and slow-moving production process (Fig. 6).

We would spend months and years tracing and painting cels at adjacent desks, and debating all aspects of whichever film we were working on: the style, the politics, the message. Our discussions were fuelled by, and fed into, wider debates being held around the country and internationally, within the women's movement and other radical movements, within our generation. For years we had been reading – and at times contributing to – political analysis, in feminist publications, such as "Spare Rib" and numerous others, and in the alternative newspapers and newsletters that flourished all over the country during the 70s and 80s; and while we worked we educated ourselves, shared experiences, and developed ideas.

"Give Us A Smile," about sexism and violence against women, and "Crops and Robbers," about racism and global exploitation, were both produced during the 1980s, emerging from these years of study and debate. Both were especially challenging productions for us, as they included live action sequences. We had to learn a lot of new skills – working on location, using different cameras, sync sound. To integrate

the live shots with the animation, we framed them very tightly, composing them like drawings – and sometimes turned a live action frame, or a photograph, into a painting that would start to animate – which used to take weeks, in those days before digital technology (Fig. 7).

Both these films were made during a six-year period when we had revenue funding, based on a programme of work including not only production, but also distribution, education and exhibition. Under the auspices of the union-supported Film Workshops Declaration, we and three other film workshops were funded on this basis by the BFI, and a couple of dozen more by the new Channel 4. This funding was designed to maintain us as something more than a small independent film company: we were a regional resource, and part of a national network.

But by the end of the 1980s, that had all changed. The structure of funding for independent film throughout the country had altered. We could now apply for grants only on a project-by-project basis: everything had to be timetabled, itemised and budgeted. By the start of the 90s, whenever our group started a new production, everybody chose, or was allotted, a specific area of work – characters, or backgrounds, or script, storyboard, animation – and soon we more or less settled into these specialist roles.



Figure 6

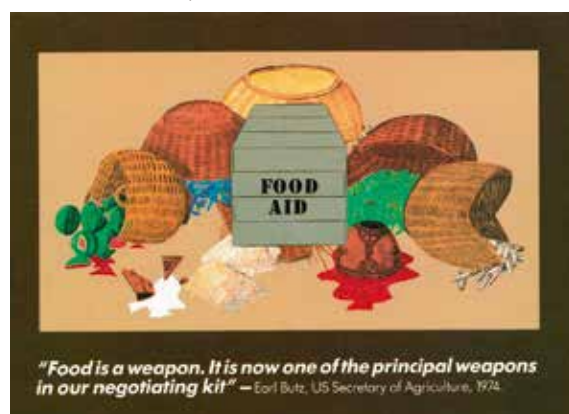


Figure 7

Our production methods had changed too. We rarely used cel any more: from 1990 we were animating with cut-outs most of the time. As a result, the process was much faster and more streamlined, but the animation, the action on screen, tended to be more slow-moving.

Now, rather than spending weeks working together on the same scene and discussing it as we went along, we would all be doing different things, often in different rooms. From this point on there was less time, and less space, for collective discussion and open-ended experiments.

When the opportunity arose, however, we were, and are still, open to trying new ideas, and different styles (Fig. 8). And then as now, notwithstanding specialised roles, we continued to work collectively. Every script and storyboard, as well as being shown or sent out for comments to numerous consultants, is scrutinised in detail by the whole group before going into production.

Each film takes shape according to what it is about and what it needs to do. Some of our films have drawn exclusively on fantasy for their narratives and imagery (Fig.9); a few have been experimental in form; others have been set in down-to-earth kitchen-sink reality (Fig.10); but most use elements of surrealism, in addition to the visual magic of animation itself.



Figure 8



Figure 9

There has been a series based on fairytales, reaching back

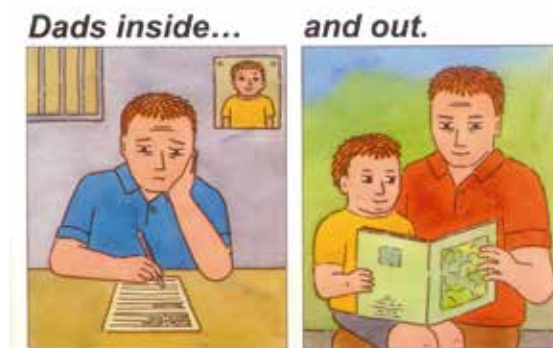


Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

into traditional stories to find the source of some deep-rooted



Figure 13

prejudices, and attempting to subvert them (Fig.11). Other films, designed for different audiences, have tried to reflect the subject matter as clearly and faithfully as possible (Fig.12).

Over the years the debates have continued, covering countless aspects of animation, and issues of representation. "Is this a positive image of a woman?" was a recurring question. Times have moved on: this guidance by Preston Blair was published in 1980 (Fig.13).

Ten years later, still in the pre-postfeminist era, at a time when typically feminists did not wear make-up, one image, much discussed at the storyboard stage, was eventually allowed to remain, because, as the character puts on her lipstick it draws attention to the fact that her blood pressure is going up (Fig.14).

With every film, we continue to spend time checking research subjects, storylines, cast lists, and character designs, to eliminate as far as possible any sexism, racism, homophobia, or other form of discrimination. As much as ever, discussions in recent years have included questions of accessibility: the importance of giving a voice to people who are not usually heard, and including those who are literally not able to speak (Fig.15).

To this day, the debates carry on. We continue to investigate real issues and situations, apply filters of design and structure, then repeatedly alter our plans in response to technical problems or other unforeseen factors.

Working practices continue to evolve. Recently we have been using new techniques in combination with old materials, and found that applying watercolour to paper, directly under the rostrum camera, compares well with computer-generated imagery in terms of speed. Furthermore, from an animator's point of view, the work is more enjoyable. [<http://www.leeds-animation.org.uk/films/12/>].



Figure 14



Figure 15

All serious documentary makers enter into the lives of the people they are documenting. But animation takes such a long time... So, we study our subjects and their situation, and then go back to the studio and reflect on it at leisure. Wordsworth said poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." We would not claim of course that our films are poems, but I think that poetry and animation, as opposed to live action, have some things in common. Like poetry, animation is intense; concentrated; stylised; focussed; mediated through art. And, sometimes, it is able to express a more truthful version of reality.

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