

INTERVIEW WITH ANDY GLYNNE

Jennifer Serra*

In the last few years we have seen the boundaries of the documentary filmmaking blurry with the production of films that go beyond its more traditional definitions, as we see in the hybrid between documentary and animation film: the animated documentary. The relationship between animation and documentary is not a recent phenomenon, but what we can understand from the growing visibility of films like *Ryan* (Chris Landreth, 2004) and *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) is that animation became more acceptable for the representation of social issues from the world we live. Combining the documentary's assertive narrative with the flexibility of the animation form, animated documentary can turn visible what cannot be captured by the camera or cannot be seen by our eyes, like thoughts and feelings. Moreover, it can penetrate in the subjectivity of the real world or in a mental universe as it is shown in the films of *Animated minds*, a TV series about people with mental health problems directed by Andy Glynne. The show combines the testimony of real people, who went through the experience of having some mental disorder, with an expressive audiovisual construction that gives an interpretation of the statements in both visual and sound layers. Trained as a clinical psychologist, Glynne has made several documentaries that explore issues related to health and mental health being awarded with *Animated minds* because of its theme and its approach. The *Animated minds* project consists of eight short films made in 2003 and in 2008: *Dimensions* (schizophrenia), *The light bulb thing* (bipolar disorder or manic depression); *Fish on a hook* (panic disorder and agoraphobia);

* Doutoranda pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Multimeios da Universidade Estadual de Campinas-UNICAMP - E-mail: jennifer.jserra@gmail.com

Obsessively compulsive (obsessive-compulsive); *Becoming invisible* (eating disorders); *Over and over (and over) again* (obsessive compulsive disorder), *An Alien in the playground* (Asperger Syndrome), *My blood is my tears* (self-mutilation).

On March 2012, Andy Glynne came to Brazil to talk about his experience with *Animated minds* at the *12th International Documentary Conference*, an event associated to *It's All True – International Documentary Film Festival*. Having the theme “The Animated Reality: Animation in Documentary Film”, the conference aimed to present different ways animation can be used to represent real facts and to discuss the nature of the animated documentary. After the closing, Glynne gently agreed to tell us his experience and his considerations about the combination of documentary and animation as it is presented below.

Jennifer Serra - Andy, I would like to ask you some questions about the *Animated minds* project. For a start, I would like to know if this is your first animated documentary project.

Andy Glynne - Yes.

JS - And how did this project begin?

AG - I approached a commissioning editor in the *Channel 4*, which is a British television channel. And I said to her: “I want to make something about mental health, a film, but to try a different approach – namely animation. I was – as a filmmaker – always interested in trying to make films in a way that convey inner experience. The Commissioning Editor at the time, Katie Speight, asked me “Have you ever done animation before?” I said no. She replied: “Ok, me neither. Let's do it, we can do it!” So we took the risk and that is how the *Animated minds* series began.

JS – Where did the idea of doing an animated documentary come from? Were you inspired by another animated documentary?

AG – Probably, yes. I guess I watched a documentary, which was a Swedish documentary, called *Hidden* (David Aronowitsch, Hanna Heilborn and Mats Johansson, 2002). Have you seen it?

JS – Yes, I have.

AG - It was about children in Immigration Centres. And it was just one child talking in conversation with the immigration officer. Beautifully animated. I cannot remember whether I watched that before we came up with *Animated minds* or whether it was at the same time. I remember thinking: “My God, it’s brilliant!” And it was just this child talking about living in an immigration centre, and to keep his anonymity they animated him. I thought it was very impressive. I did think that the film had limitations but I loved the idea. Other than that, my inspirations are more about, you know, art, painting... like Rothko, Jackson Pollock or Jean Dubuffet, and the Naïve Art movement, in which inner experience (and often mental illness) found an expression using the visual form. And when you look at their art it was like, “Wow!”. Just in the picture, just in the painting, there was something that said more than words can ever say; for me at least. And if you can create a marriage between this kind of imagery and the verbal testimonies of people with mental health problems, then maybe you can end up with something – a kind of Gestalt. So the whole thing was an experiment which I had no idea whether it would work or not. And I still don't know!

JS - You worked with a group of animators on this project. Were these animators from *Channel 4*?

AG - No. *Channel 4* doesn't make any programmes itself. The whole production was done through my production company, Mosaic Films. As soon as the first series was commissioned, I interviewed lots of animators and I got them to pitch and do some concepts designs and also to see if the relationship worked and there was a shared understanding and vision.

JS - What about the people who gave their testimonies to the project? I mean, the people with mental health problems. How did you find them?

AG - We did a lot of research. What we did was to speak to people in the hospitals, to the doctors, to my friends who were clinical psychologists and to communities groups, like support groups, in different regions around England. When we found them up it was very easy for them to open their doors and to talk to us because of my background (as a clinical psychologist) and if I didn't have this experience they probably would have gone "No, no, no, no. We don't trust you." And what we did was probably three stages. So Stage One was talking on the phone to a lot of people. Stage two was meeting them. And Stage Three was recording them. And even at Stage Three we used, maybe, 30% of the people we recorded. So let's say we spoke on the phone to one hundred people, met with forty people, interviewed and recorded ten people and used four. You see, sometimes you go into an interview with the sound recordist and you're like... "Ok", after two minutes, five minutes it doesn't work. Either they are nervous or there's something about how they speak that simply doesn't work for the purposes of animation.

JS - Did you interview someone twice for this project?

AG – Not for *Animated minds*. For other things yes, but that's normally because I messed up the audio recording. Normally it was one sitting, which went anywhere from forty minutes to three hours, depending.

JS - Did you have someone else working with you in the interviews?

AG - Yes, sometimes I did sound, sometimes there would be a sound recordist too.

JS - Did the interviewees work with you in the process of making the animations?

AG – Well, I went away and then edited it down to three or four minutes. The editing process took far longer than I realized. I thought it would be very quick but it wasn't. You got a bit there, a sentence there... you got to make a narrative and we took all the “hmmms” and the “aahs” out then we played it back to them, and asked them “Are you happy with this?”. Sometimes they said: “Yes”. Sometimes they said: “No”. But for the “no”, usually... I am trying to think that with the *Animated minds* maybe one person said “No” because they talked about some personal details which they didn't want to go in the film – and we took this out, of course. The next stage was storyboarding. Sometimes we would send the storyboard to these people. With *Animated minds* I don't think we set down and brought back ideas, because a lot of them didn't have any specific visual ideas. There is one film, *Dimensions*, which is about schizophrenia. It wasn't really animation. It was motion graphics. It was difficult because it's very rare for Schizophrenia to involve visual hallucinations, per se, so the question then becomes how the hell do you show that on a film? So I talked to him a lot

because I didn't want to misrepresent him but I filmed most of it. Then Rob Chiu worked with the footage.

JS - Did any of the interviewees tell you about how he or she should be represented in a picture?

AG - No.

JS - So, then, you had freedom to interpret visually every character.

AG - Yes.

JS - Since you have chosen to make an animated film, did this decision change the way you made the interviews?

AG - We recorded all the audio and then I would select the animators. Let's say that we had ten animators that maybe we would work with. Then we did the interviews and ended up with four recordings, four narratives, and I picked out of those ten, four animators. And I assigned them to each film. So for example, this guy, called John, would be really good for animating that film and this girl called Maria would be great animating the film on depression, for example. Then, it's a process of storyboarding. And when the relationship works between documentary director and animator, it's like a marriage. When it works, it's great! When it doesn't – well, its can be very difficult. Because he gives you ideas, you give him ideas and he starts drawing it. Occasionally it doesn't work. Then it's because the animator don't really understand the subject or maybe I don't understand the animator. When that happened it was difficult because I had to direct every single frame. And that was hard.

JS - Did you give ideas about the drawings and how the animators should represent the people?

AG - Both. For sometimes I have an idea. I cannot draw. If you ask me to draw you now, the best I can possible do is like... (draw simple stick figures). That is the best of my drawing. I cannot draw at all. I can visualize. The visualisation has to be inspired by something. Of course, they also come up with ideas because they are very visual... illustrators, animators. But the process of it involves continuous refining.

JS - You said that you can't draw but don't you think that, for the *Animated minds* project, the concept of the visual representation is more important than the drawing itself?

AG – Well yes but I do get very embarrassed coming to festivals like this and being called a “Director”. Because to me... You know, I didn't write scripts. I just edited someone else's voice. I didn't draw it because an animator did it. I feel more like a facilitator or an educator. With the animators, for example, I sat down with them for a long time and I explained them exactly what this person was going through. I would explain what the symptoms are like. I would show them another film. I would give them books to read, helping them make the film and not that I am making the film.

JS - How do you see the relationship between audio – the speeches, the music, the soundtrack – and the visual content in the *Animated minds* films?

AG - At about halfway through the production process we get a composer involved. There is always a composer. We never use library music or anything like that. We start talking to the composer... Again, it's about

education, talking about the problems and what we're trying to create. We show him the storyboard and he goes away and start collecting foley and soundscapes. But also as I said yesterday when Michael Renov was showing the film *His mother's voice* (Dennis Tupicoff, 1997). There is never any music in my films. We have only used music to set context. For example: in the series we are doing, at the moment, about these people from refugees form around the world, there will be a little bit of music, just to set context, but with *Animated minds* there is no music. The audio mix usually results in the music and effects being quite low, compared to the voice itself, which is given prominence. Actually though, there is one film where the music is much higher, *The light bulb thing*; about someone with manic-depression (bi-polar disorder). And when she is high, everything is like the same noise and you see when she is going down the escalators and into the subway (*does a scratchy noise*), everything is kind of really noisy as her sense are so heightened. So these two aspects: one is the music itself, or the music and effects, and the other is the sound design. And it is very important: A, to get it right; and B, to keep it as low as possible compared to the voice. Because the most important thing is the voice.

JS - For you, which is the best way to bring audio and image together in this kind of project?

AG - I think it depends on the film. You know, my problem with the film yesterday (*His mother's voice*) for example was... to me the music invalidated the power of the voice. The testimony of that woman yesterday was so powerful. Why do I need to be manipulated into feeling even more than I already feel? I don't need those guitars and that music because it is so powerful – even more powerful - without. It sounded like too much, it was overkill. But there might be times when you need music. In my case, not.

JS - Now lets talk about animated documentary in general, not only about *Animated minds*. For you, what kind of benefits animation brings to a documentary film?

AG – None! OK, I'm being facetious, and maybe it's better to say "Some". Let me talk about your talk today (at the conference). Or let me go back to the session today because it is very important. It bothers me a lot that people talk about Animated Documentary as some kind of distinct genre. And the reason it bothers me is because I generally don't care whether it is animated documentary or not. What I do care about is whether the subject matter suits the form of a film. If not, why bother? And I think, to me personally, there has to be a manifesto, a kind of rule or set of rules, if you like. A manifesto of filmmaking. The first most important part of my manifesto is narrative and story. The most important part of the film, to me, is that my audience goes into the journey and that they are interested and engaged. If they are not, I don't feel the connection. The second most important part is context. Meaning: that is, has the way I filmed it is authentic to the subject matter. So, there is no point in animating someone going about their daily business just for the sake of it, if the context doesn't make sense. Whereas if someone is talking, if a child is talking about being a soldier in Uganda and how frightening it was to them but we don't want to identify the child, so maybe one can use animation. So, I think: Story and context. And my third and final rule will be: there has to be a contract between the filmmaker and the audience and between the filmmaker and the contributor. The main contract is between the filmmaker and the audience which says: what I'm doing, what I am showing you, even if I am using animation or still photographs or something like that, is till an attempt at conveying to you a truth, I'm still conveying to you "it happened"; the truth of that. And I feel that those three are important conditions of making the film. So, you know, there are beautiful short films like an independent film called *Boogie Woogie Pappa*

(Erik Bäfving, 2002). It is a Swedish film about the filmmaker's father. One day after his father died, he was cleaning up his father bedroom and he found a big box. A box full of those 35mm still camera negatives that hadn't been developed. And he made a film purely using still photographs to tell the story of his father's life. Beautiful! And these films like *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) that uses animation are incredible. And I think as long as you are telling a story that is contextualized for the way you're telling the story and you are doing it in an authentic way, I genuinely don't care whether it is animation or not.

JS – How do you see the future of the relationship between animation and documentary film and especially the future of animated documentary?

AG – It is very difficult for me because my background is in documentary filmmaking. So, the question for me should be how do I see documentary as a form that evolved. If I were an animator it would be a very different answer. So, for me I think documentary is about storytelling about people's real life. That is one definition. Films about buildings and films about animals, they are different. There are loads of different ways of telling those stories. Animation is becoming very important. The problem is when something goes through a trend or a fashion. Everybody is doing it. And I think that, actually, the future of documentary is not just with animation at all – obviously! Games... game are becoming very big. Can we merge the idea of interactive game with a real story? Short films, three minutes films, multi-platform concepts where we become part of the story that is being told – all of these are possible ways in which documentary is evolving. I mean, there are so many directions in which documentary is going, which I think are great and exciting. And animation will play an important part in that. But the problem is that I think animation suits three preconditions. And I talked about these preconditions that when you are representing something

about an experience, when you are telling a story that can not be told because of anonymity or because you are working with children, you know, all these things which I already talked about. The problem is that people are starting to use animation just for the sake of it. An example I gave in my talk, is that a lot of documentary filmmakers pitch ideas to commissioning editors, channels, whatever, they pitch ideas which don't necessarily work over documentary because they are not very visual. And when you pitch it, the commissioning editor at *BBC* or *Channel 4* turns round and says: "Why is it a documentary? Why do you want to make a documentary?" And the answer that most filmmaker's give is: "Because I am a documentary filmmaker". And the commissioning editor turns round and says: "Hang on a second. This seems to be much more of a radio documentary or maybe it is a good book, maybe it is a magazine article because I can't visualize it. I can't see it." Animated documentary films should not include animation just because they like it. There has to have, for me, the strong justification in the answer. And loads of films that I make have nothing to do with animation and never will, because there's simply no need for it.

JS – Andy, thank you very much for your interview.