

Beware of Talking Heads

Scriptwriting for animation

More and more animation features are being developed in Europe, often in co-production. This year the European Film Academy established a new award category: the EFA Animated Feature Film. A good moment for a seminar on Scriptwriting for Animation. Cinekid invited filmmakers Karsten Kiilerich (Denmark) and Aaron Springer (United States) to share their experiences on developing a scenario for respectively *The Ugly Duckling and Me* (2006) and *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (2004). With interesting insights plus do's and don'ts.

Too much dialogue is one of the most common mistakes in scenarios for animation. What you end up with is talking heads. Not very entertaining and certainly a waste of all the possibilities animation offers. Moderator Paul Wells (Director of the Animation Academy Loughborough University), who has given workshops in scriptwriting all over the world, often uses exercises in which he forbids the participants to use dialogue. They have to tell their story through performance, action, the use of environment, colour and all the other means that are available in animation. Participants discover how much can be expressed without using dialogue and the storyboarding process is incorporated in the process of writing.

An important conclusion this seminar brought to the fore is that writers should try to visualize their ideas right from the start, something they usually don't do. Give the storyboard artists something to work with: how do two characters that don't like each other behave? Are they trying to hit each other or are they chasing each other around the table? Writers often expect the storyboard artist to come up with all the crazy ideas, is the experience of Karsten Kiilerich, who is, in addition to being screenwriter and director, also a producer. But if it's not already in the context of the script, that will probably not happen. And if they do think up their own stuff, he warns, they basically write a new script.

According to Aaron Springer, storyboard artist himself, producers often think the work is done after the script is written, that everything is already figured out and only has to be transformed into pictures. But the storyboard is not an illustration of a script, as some people imagine, it is another step in the visualisation of a final narrative. Storyboarding is the stage where the actual picture is created, according to Springer.

Crucial in the making of animation is that the movie is already structured before it is really made. Animating is so extremely expensive and time consuming that a rough version is made in advance. The storyboard drawings are edited in real time with the voices and sometimes the soundtrack on top. Springer showed a few of the 'animatics' of *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (2004) that can also be found on the DVD. As expected they were very similar to how the sequences finally made it into the film. Springer says the animatics were used as another writing tool; they made changes on the run, redrawing half the movie on their laps to make sure that sequences fitted in with the rest of the film and really were funny.

Show it, don't tell

A member of the audience wants to know if dialogue from the script is thrown away. Yes. Kiilerich sometimes even tears up the whole script. The editing happens when the script format is transformed into a storyboard, adds Springer. When he gets a page full of dialogue he often just picks any line that comes into his head and lets the rest of the conversation go. Often a number of lines communicate the same idea, so you can leave them out. Someone in the audience suggests that in scenarios for live action a lot of extra dialogue is also skipped, because actors can personify sentences like: I am really pissed now. These sentences are meant as background information for the director. Springer thinks this might be true, but still for him the best rule in storytelling is always: show it, don't tell it. According to Springer less dialogue puts the viewer in the place of the

character more effectively because they're forced to follow the character's train of thought. Watching is a little more active; it is easier to get into the head of the character than when one is just listening.

Karsten Kiilerich agrees: it is stronger to substitute some parts of the dialogue by actions that explain the way the character deals with a certain situation. After all, in animation there are no star actors like Robert de Niro; the characters are flat and the animators have to make them come alive. The Walt Disney Studios started doing this by making sure that all the actions of the characters are driven by a thought process and by emotion. This way the character seems to have a mind of its own instead of being moved around by the animator.

Moderator Paul Wells mentions that Disney always felt that comedy or action should come out of the character's relationship to a situation. Whereas Warner Brothers (who produced the *Looney Tunes* and *Merry Melodies* with Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and Tweety) felt that a character was able to create a gag and that the situation would support the nature of the gag. Springer didn't really know this. Interesting, he thinks. The rule he always applies is: story is character - it's not what they do, it's how they do it.

Most animation characters have a dominant characteristic, Wells continues. Donald Duck, who is all about frustration, is a good example. If he is going to clean a clock, the clock is going to fight back and all of Donald's frustration comes out. That's is the big advantage of having more screening time, Kiilerich points out. Writers get to know their characters better and can ask themselves: what will this character do here? Then the stories sort of write themselves.

A discussion about the difference between animation and live action starts after Kiilerich shows a scene from *Ugly Duckling*. Kiilerich agrees that the story is realistic and might be done in live action, although the imagery and the visual language are pure animation. Springer agrees with a remark by someone in the audience that kids just love non-human characters: "Psychologically it is easier to relate to a duck than to an actor." Paul Wells adds that a big difference with live action is that in animation human characteristics are subscribed to objects, environments and animals. And embedded in the way the film looks. Narrative is not just about the plot or the dialogue or the mode of storytelling. It is what is actually narrated in the design and the visuals.

Wells thinks the use of animals, toys and objects in children's works in general enables filmmakers to circumvent cultural, religious and social taboos by portraying alternative worlds or other perspectives that may help rethinking the socialised world. In recent years he thinks this has resulted in an increasing appreciation of animation for its history not only as entertainment, but also as something that carries important cultural and social messages.

True to the basic plot

But it's a long and windy road to realise a film. It is a very strong force that brings ideas to the screen, Kiilerich thinks. Sometimes it takes two, three years of hard labour to even have anybody listen to you. Even worse, sometimes you have to acknowledge after five years of putting your soul into it that you've fallen in love with the wrong story and it's not going to work. So: be very sure the initial idea is strong enough before you start the project, he urges everyone.

Kiilerich knew right away that an adaptation of *The Ugly Duckling*, one of the best-known fairytales by Hans Christian Andersen, could work. The duckling was a likeable character the audience could relate to. Only: it couldn't walk around alone for 75 minutes. Kiilerich and co-director Michael Hegner decided to give him a companion. A rat, so the audience would understand right away he is not to be trusted. Ratzö creates a lot of problems for the duckling and that is what you need: characters that overcome all sorts of obstacles and reach success at the end. Most stories are sort of like this, Kiilerich thinks. And indeed, *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* follows a similar pattern.

Both filmmakers come to the conclusion that it is important to stay true to the basic plot. Kiilerich and Hegner wanted to complicate things; add a car chase or something to put life into the story. They came up with outrageous storylines. For example, a swan that tried to pitch the story to a female producer in a bar. He wanted to play the role of the duckling himself and was also in love

with her on top of that. Much time was wasted, but it probably was necessary to get to the core of things. After getting suggestions from different people and working with an Irish writer, they came up with the basic plot: Rizzo leaves the city, runs into an egg, the egg hatches and the duckling thinks Rizzo is his mother. The rat hates to be a substitute parent but comes up with a plan for the duckling: he wants to put Ugly on a carnival stage as the ugliest duckling in the world. On their journey to the carnival Rizzo also makes an internal journey. In the end Ugly realises Rizzo, who feels guilty about his actions, is a fraud. But when he turns into a swan, the two become friends again.

For a good comparison Aaron Springer talks mostly about the *SpongeBob* feature. With two other storyboard artists from the TV series (Kent Osborne and Paul Tibitt), he was part of the writing team for the movie. Of course Stephen Hillenburg (creator of the series and director of the movie) was involved, as well as Derek Drymon (creative director) and Tim Hill (writer). The six of them developed the film sitting together in a room for months. For the series, a group of writers generate ideas that go as treatments to two storyboard artists (or sometimes one). They then pitch an idea to a group of people, including someone from the network. Series and movie are therefore both group efforts.

For the movie there was no script at all. Their starting point was that Stephen Hillenburg wanted to send SpongeBob and his best friend Patrick on a quest. They had to come up with a story for a feature film that didn't feel like they just strung together three episodes – although some critics said it felt like that. They looked at the work of, for example, Joseph Campbell, who step by step describes the similar paths followed by heroes in modern culture. They decided the two heroes had to save Bikini Bottom.

For months on end they tried to figure out how to weave all the ideas of the series into a feature. They watched some road movies, like *Dumb and Dumber*. At the same time there was this huge cast of characters which the public expects to see as well. They would just sit there and think out different scenarios: what happens if Squidward goes with them? They had for example the idea that he was frozen and they had to carry him around in a big block of ice during the whole movie. The problem was that it was a distraction from the nature of the movie: the friendship between these two guys and the general theme that it is okay to be a kid. As said before; you always have to go back to the theme. In the end they decided that Plankton was taking control of the town, and they introduced some new characters that also posed a threat.

For Springer it is important that animators are present in the script development process. They have to make a scene entertaining. Kiilerich's advice is to think during the writing process like an animator or director would think, and get some feedback from people who know the animation process.

This seminar took place on Tuesday 20 October. A Cinekid co-production with, and made possible by the support of, the Netherlands Institute for Animation Film (NIAf) and the Netherlands Film and Television Academy (NFTA).

Short biographies of the speakers:

Karsten Kiilerich is co-founder of A. Film A/S, Scandinavia's largest animation company. He has produced, written and directed animation for several different formats. He was also a co-writer of the scripts for the features *Help! I'm a Fish* (2000) and *Terkel in Trouble* (2004). With Stefan Fjeldmark he co-directed the Oscar-nominated *When Life Departs* (1997), a short documentary that uses sound fragments of interviews with children about their perception of death. Their ideas are illustrated with quite simple monochrome drawings. According to Kiilerich the children did most of the work in concept development.

Aaron Springer has worked for at least 15 years in animation. He started his career at Spümcø, the studio of *Ren and Stimpy* creator John Kricfalusi. Together they worked on a music video for *I Miss*

You by Björk. Shortly after that, through a friend, he came into contact with Stephen Hillenburg, who had just got a green light at the network for *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Some little comics Springer had done in his free time did the trick: Hillenburg hired him as one of the storyboard artists. Since the three first seasons Springer has worked on and off on the series, and has developed his own shorts. His series *Periwinkle – Around the World* (2008) was screened at this year's Cinekid.

Moderator **Paul Wells** is Director of the Animation Academy Loughborough University. He has published extensively on animation, amongst others the book *Scriptwriting*, and has given scriptwriting for animation workshops all over the world.