

Visual interpretation: Intent and response

By Leo Sandberg

ARTISTIC RESEARCH

VISUAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract

This paper explores artistic interpretation of a script to its visual expression and estetic representation and meaning.

The purpose is to reflect on the topic, and to enhance our understanding of how an interpretation from written intention to visual representation can form.

The aritstic production used in this artistic research is an animated feature film for children 10+ and the character design of its lead female character.

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Premise

Intent to form

A challenge of many visual endeavours is interpretation. How can a concept, in its context, be visually (re)presented? How is the interpreter – the artist, the designer – to convey the intellectual idea of the concept in its context – the script, the design – to the audience/user so the intellectual idea comes across emotionally? In film script writing one way is through dramatization (McDonald, 2005, 36). And in arts/design? If the audience “doesn’t get it” – whatever it is that needs to be conveyed – then said design has failed its purpose: to move, awe, inform, inspire afterthought or reaction/action in user design. When the work fails to communicate – the vision, the original intent, the function, the script – it becomes self indulgent. Art/design/craft for the sake of art/design/craft.

Another problem is that many designs are too cliché, too banal, predictable or literal. On the verge of boring if they are too clear and concise in their visual representation. Especially for an experienced audience like children who are already over-exposed to media. Even more so in the commercial applied arts professional field, where many times the visual communication has to be fast and therefore clear. The ideas and their solutions may also be cliché if the interpreter has been working for decades interpreting the same themes. The visual solutions get old fast and lead to audience apathy – boredom – even if they might still be commercially valid; “more of the same, yet different” (Snyder, 2005) .

This is why intent/interpretation is important. Forevolution and development. Or is this just reactionary to what we have, where we are and where we’ve been? To much of the same? Does each generation simply need to learn the same lessons? Through the same concepts – to love and be loved, sex, hunger, protect loved ones? Primal needs, explored through art? The same lessons learnt through our experimental experience that is art (in its widest definition)? The public exploring empowerment of their own lives, all humans being more alike than different?

Perhaps a deeper scrutiny of reading and understanding of scripts is desired to secure the concept’s original intent into meaningful metaphors and visual representations? Or an artist might choose not to over intellectualize the task at hand. Using what they have, what they know to create what they need. And that’s what ends up for the audience/user to experience. Up front and instinctive. Nothing more, nothing less. Yet firmly founded in everything that particular person brings to the creative act.

But what then? Is that it? No reflection? No perfection? “Does this really mean/show what was intended?” If intent was explored in depth and understood, even documented, the metaphors could be explored, refined and finally defined more accurately for the audience/user. By studying the text before the visual development, considering why one chooses one design solution before another, one could inspire a more viable solution to a visual endeavour.

Method

Associative writing as reflection

Through the course *Artistic Research Processes* associative, reflective writing was investigated to see if it could inform creative decisions during an animated film production. To develop visual interpretations, metaphors and semiotics. To explore and refine and maybe even develop a new method to drive ideas before a design process begins.

Associative, reflecting writing is writing one hour every day without editing what's written or going to be written. Free, subconscious writing, from within. (Rappaport, 2012). Let what has been created in the process and what is to be created in the process inform the subconscious writing, letting everything inform the text, fluidly. Writing in an associative, reflective way allowed learnt behaviours and given norms to be questioned, opening up new ideas and exploration.

Associative writing is usually not part of the art process. It takes into consideration what has been created and the source script, its demands and the film's context. Which can lead to new interpretations and new designs.

Formatting text

There is no text without form. Text is form. What is written is just as vital as how it is written. Every word carries its own story, and means something specific. So too how the text appears. How this text you are reading now looks is vital in contrast and intent to what you are about to read on

the following pages and how that looks. Without the formatting it would lose part of its meaning. This is visual expression – *the concept in its context through form*, by graphic design.

The absence of a subjective voice in this research text was intentional as the following interview is subjective. Therefore this research text surrounding the interview is formulated as objectively as possible. For literal contrast and characterization.

Film script formatting was chosen for this paper because the work itself is a film script (literal interpretation). The context is film production in process. A script that is both being written and designed as this research was undertaken. Which was vital for both texts, as they informed one another during the work. But the process and the (art)work itself might not be vital to the research result. And shouldn't always have to be, to be research.

The dialogue form was chosen not only because it is an established, validated format for artistic research writing (Grillner 2000) but because it suits this material extra well. Dialogue form of writing can coherently carry multiple point of views through a text, making dialogue form writing a very potent writing format for artistic research within theatre and film.

LANGUAGE CHOICE

This text is in English for a wider international audience and research context.

THE INTERVIEW

INTERIOR, ACTORS GUILD, PARIS

An ARTISTIC RESEARCHER has invited, and will moderate, four guests in an interview. They settle into leather chairs, center stage.

They are invited to discuss designing the character EMMA for a new animated feature film. To the researchers help he has the WRITER who is making a note in the margin of his film script. The writer not only constructed Emma but also her whole reality and her story. The CHARACTER DESIGNER is also invited, commissioned to design Emma. The character designer owns the dilemma of interpreting Emma into a visual representation in the film, which is the subject matter for this research. Together with a character animator (to be cast) their work will be the visual performance of Emma onscreen. Add the voice actor (also not cast yet) and Emma's embodiment will be complete in the final film. Present is EMMA, the 13 year old in the film. Restless and fidgety she glares suspiciously at the others. She's not interested in being here at all.

ARTISTIC RESEARCHER

Welcome! I'm very glad that you could make it. Please make yourselves comfortable. I would like to open up with a question to the writer: why is Emma the way she is in the story?

WRITER

I think you first have to establish your intent with your art. Once you know your intent with your (art) work then you can become specific in the creative act.

ARTISTIC RESEARCHER

Some would argue that there is no intent, only audience response. But ok, let's start with your intent as the writer of the story.

WRITER

How I want my audience to respond on an emotional level *is* my artistic intent. It is also a homage to a childhood inspiration. So there's romantic nostalgia behind all this. Escapism. Childhood escapism as it were. Imaginary worlds, imaginary friends, that sort of thing.

CHARACTER DESIGNER

Emotional response.. (takes note).

WRITER

Absolutely. The theme and its form is completely updated, contemporary. That nostalgia will never come across in the final film. But I'll admit that that is a source of my original inspiration to create this piece. Emma, specifically, is heavily inspired by people and events I've observed, not self experienced but in very close proximity. Some of her aspects are based on what happen, others are completely inspired and fictional

events, maybe a 30/70 mix. For example Emma was a boy in the beginning. But that was too far away from the contemporary gender discussion in Sweden. So now she's a girl.

CHARACTER DESIGNER

Which explains the early designs.

WRITER

Exactly. Story-wise, which was your original question, Emma is a construct to one of the themes of the film – love. Specifically believing that one isn't loved to learn that one is loved. That theme was more interesting when Emma was a boy because we seldom talk about love in context of boys growing up. Anyways, if theme *is* character, and character *is* story (McDonald, 2005) then Emma is absolutely subject to the structural requirements of the story – a saga of transformation (Snyder 2009).

EMMA

Excuse me, I'm right here. Don't talk about me as if I'm not here! (to the artistic researcher)
If I'm not real to my creators, if they don't believe in me, how can the audience believe in me? If the audience can't believe in me how can they care about what happens to me or the story?

The character designer starts sketching small gesture studies of Emma as she talks, fidgets. Her

gestures are introverted, animated, sharp and aggressive. Small bursts of energy. Elbows in, wrists angled, talking with the shoulders then with her hands, hitting her hips or jabbing out her chin to accent what she says.

WRITER

Emma is a dramatic tool for the characterization of the film's theme(s); a construct of imagination. A characterization for sharing my views on and to our coeval world. A vessel for getting a point across. Which in turn is another intent.

EMMA

(to writer)
Hey stupid! I'm me, I'll do as I damn well please! A dramatic construction, my ass. I'm real. I might only be a kid, but I'm not stupid!
(to the researcher)
My shrink told me I'm in self denial to protect myself. You believe that: my stupid mom took me to a shrink because she thought something was wrong with me! She should see a shrink!

WRITER

Emma can't face her fear, that she is not loved, due to abandonment issues from her dad and trust issues towards her mom. So Emma rejects the whole world, before the whole world can reject her. But through her change, due to this particular story, she learns that she is loved.

When Emma changes, she becomes empowered and changes her own world. And that is the story, her story.

ARTISTIC RESEARCHER

And if the audience can't believe in the characters and their story how can you have an audience response? How do you show all this?

CHARACTER DESIGNER

Character design is the art of first impressions. A design can be based in aesthetic grounds alone or it can have meaning. Trust your artistic vision or explore it through keywords and visual development and research, finding the form. The better you understand the intent and *the why* (Koroly, 2012) something is in the script the more clear, accurate metaphors and visual cues you can create to express that *why* visually. And so the audience will respond to the piece more accurately and engaged because they have a chance of understanding it because meaning was designed into it in the first place.

I'm challenged to interpret Emma visually without spreading prejudices. Emma's design and the film's stylistic form take shape simply by drawing her. Because during that process the style of the film is being defined as well. Film script function (dramaturgy, theme, characterization and so on) to filmic form – design + style. The film is visually being defined

as everything is drawn. It's that simple: what you see is what you get. Nothing more, nothing less. Predicting the audience response to that drawing, that design, is tricky.

ARTISTIC RESEARCHER

Vision or exploration... Audience response... So all you can do is your job?

CHARACTER DESIGNER

Sometimes the theme and form are found early on. Other times it takes the production to find the film's form. But yes, the creative act, your job is finding and expressing your vision, the written theme to visual theme. It's specific, uniquely yours. Self expression as opposed to the reproduction of nature (Ackerman, 2011). We're no longer portraying nature but self expression is your individual vision, observation of the world (du Rées, 2012).

This becomes a problem when a movie is committee driven, trying to fit into a commercial market. Instead of being a creator driven cinema, work of art (Soderbergh 2012).

WRITER

The self experienced isn't important. Its not even interesting. It might lend the art a little credibility but only artists would be so self

centric as to believe that the self experience is crucial to their work. The writer and the artist need to step out of the way for what art needs to be. Just like the actor needs to step out of the way of what the role needs to be. But the open, honest meeting and exchange between the artist and the world is important (du Rées, 2012), instead of the self experienced.

ARTISTIC RESEARCH

Opening up and observing the world...

EMMA

If I'm the character it has to be my story. I am who I chose to be, not what you or the world makes me out be. The theme is my change, my transformation. My story.

WRITER

Only as an instrument for the theme! Theme *is* character! Theme beats logic (MacDonald, 2005). If I am true to your desires the needs of the story will be secondary to your actions and their consequences. And the story could suffer for it.

EMMA

So instead I have to suffer for your story to work?

WRITER

If change is to resonate with the audience, always! You suffer for the audience to respond, engage and emote. If the story is to

convey the rational idea emotionally to the audience, through dramatization, then yes! (McDonald, 2005, 36). This is not a documentary. It's fiction. To illustrate a point through telling a story. Characterization lets the audience relate to the intellectual idea of the story emotionally. (McDonald, 2005, 40).

EMMA

I came first. Not the story.

ARTISTIC RESEARCHER

Which brings us to the theme of the story? We are all loved and important, and make the world?

WRITER

That's Emma's theme, her character arc.

EMMA

So no matter what I want I will need to learn this?

WRITER

Yes. That's the point of your story. We all need to know that we are loved, important. That my writer's opinion.

CHARACTER DESIGNER

So Emma has to go from believing that she is unloved to knowing that she is loved? That's your intent with her character arc?

EMMA

Stop talking about me like I'm not here!

CHARACTER DESIGNER

Sorry...

WRITER

Precisely, and nothing else. That's the journey the audience is there for. And the theme should be as primal as possible to make the story resonate (Snyder, 2005).

ARTISTIC RESEARCHER

So to show that intent, that theme, one could be literal or symbolic, metaphoric.

CHARACTER DESIGNER

The more literal the design is the wider an audience can relate to it. But the work will also be easier to criticize as appealing to the market, main stream. The more intellectual, conceptual the design perhaps higher, more intellectual or educated audience you need? Picasso for example. Balancing the two is tricky.

WRITER

The filmic form – design+style – needs to show Emma's transformation, the story. How Emma changes and then changes her own world. That journey is what the audience is there to see (Snyder 2005). And how you show this depends on who you are showing it to.

ARTISTIC RESEARCHER

Alright, that makes sense. So we have the concept, your theme, within this story. Now how can you show all that through the character design?

CHARACTER DESIGNER

Let's forget about film technicalities for a second. And the market requirements.

How can you say anything important if you don't know who you are talking to? How can you talk to someone if you don't know their language? You also have to know how to express yourself in your chosen medium and media. The better your grammar is the more accurate and nuanced you can be with your words/art. Every word, every symbol carries its own story, its own metaphor, its own meaning for each audience member, which they will hopefully, emotionally, respond to.

WRITER

Yes! Considering form as meaning is vital (Kyrklund, 1988, 180) both in text and in the arts!

CHARACTER DESIGNER

Design with this in mind and those first character sketches should be firmly founded in the intent of the theme. With skill – research, training, practice, experience, etc – the artist can then tweak the design, choosing more accurate words, more accurate visual metaphors and cues, to communicate that original intent with. So you don't lose the intent (function) in the design (form). And so you don't lose the audience and their response. Pushing the audiences' visual buttons, as it were.

ARTISTIC RESEARCHER

Could it be in the meeting of ideas, inspiration and intent that the design and style is found, created, developed? Where form is created for audience response?

WRITER

And through self expression.
Even so for the writer.

ARTISTIC RESEARCHER

So this could be a common creative foundation? Music, sculpting etc?

CHARACTER DESIGNER

Perhaps. Seeing is different than being told. African proverb.
(MacDonald, 2005)

EMMA

What you are saying/showing with my design?

CHARACTER DESIGNER

If the form is the message (Kyrklund, 1988, 180). What is the meaning of the aesthetical expression? Even its meta meaning if you want. The audiences meeting with the film, with the character design? What will the audience fill it with? If Emma is a chalice to be filled with the blood of the audience? What will their response be to Emma? Can the change of

unloved/loved be shown so the audience respond to it emotionally? How? How has that been shown through history? Contemporary? What is my self expression of that theme? What is the intended audiences references to that theme?

ARTISTIC RESEARCHER

And even as it is defined it has changed meaning because it was defined... (Rosengren, 2011)

WRITER

Honesty to self expression is vital because it's too easy to trend spot and follow market trends. Trend sensitivity is a contemporary sickness. As is self expression.

CHARACTER DESIGNER

What is the dramatic intention of this detail, in this story? If we can understand that then we can explore other ideas that could show that concept, in that context.

WRITER

And by doing so we could find new visual cues, new filmic forms to show those dramatic functions, to create an audience response. New artistic interpretations might be created to communicate intellectual ideas emotionally, visually to the audience through artistic innovation rather reproduction.

Reflective afterthoughts

Reflective writing along side the practical development of an animated feature film for kids 10+ was very informative and insightful. Many worries and second guessing of ideas and designs fell by the side as the writing informed the decisions. The reason for making one choice over another became clearer and sparked new inspiration that informed both the film script and the next design. A catalyst ignited between the two texts: the film script and the research text.

This artistic, reflective, associative writing lead to communication and meaning - visual art theory, theatre theory, film theory. A journey that has given a lot of insight to questions and artistic dilemmas already addressed by many others. Like the simple, yet eternal theatre question: what was first - character or story?

Maybe this research can help you couple your intent – written, analytical or artistic – to visual interpretation, visual expression, representation. But perhaps artistic intent is futile. If all there is to visual meaning is meta meaning and the audience response then artistic intent is futile. Hermerén, 1969, p. 11 writes: “Many works of art are created to achieve something but that doesn’t mean that art can be defined (merely) in terms of intent and effect.” And further on: “is the artist aware of the possibilities of different normal responses from normal people, in a normal situation?”

A few considerations surfaced during this research. They are arranged in order of priority to the current production, not that this order nor the current production necessarily has any relevance to the research result itself.

Know the audience

Consider who the art is addressing. Example: Feature animation for children 10+. There is no point in talking to children in an adult, formal, academic way as they won’t understand a thing. Why would you write in a high brow, intellectual form to children? Address children so they understand even difficult subject matters, yet taking children seriously. Don’t compromise the story telling and production design just because you have preconceived ideas about the target group. It won’t work, because the subject matter will be out of context for the audience. And so the design might be out of context as well. The audience response will be off even before the art has met its audience.

Fight prejudice

The purpose of stories (art?) is to fight prejudices, not to reenforce and spread them. (Rosengren, 2011, p. 59). To this end we can affect how we form an opinion about people ourselves, based on aesthetic expression and its meaning (Kyrklund, 1987). This relates to archetypes, stereotypes, caricatures, and clichés as well. Working in commercial, applied arts this is extra vital because children are easily influenced. Example in point: the grumpy teen girl, the greedy jew, the murderous arab, the sneaky asian, snobby Britt, daft red neck etc. This also applies to (character) design. Example: after the film Godfather was released real criminals started to act, dress and move like Don Corleone. Applied, commercial art affecting street fashion and subcultures, creating real

stereotypes, clichés and prejudices. Which in turn are brought back into commercial, popular culture, spreading the prejudices further. What is said with this design? What is the meta meaning for the intended audience? Create the design, then ask: is this fighting prejudice or is this spreading, reinforcing prejudice?

Subjective matters, ethics

We can show and say anything with art, but that doesn't mean we should. Even if no subject matter is off limits. Art has no rules (yet plenty of context). It is how we show and what we say with our art that is the breaking point of ethics and prejudice. What will your comment be through your art, consciously or subconsciously? Just because you can do something does it mean you should? What are you saying? What is the audience seeing? What are they taking away with them through their meeting with your art? Is there art and responsibility? Ethics happen between people. Perhaps one could consider the objective point of view and the subjective point of view presented through the (art)work before releasing it on the world.

Aesthetic meaning

Some would argue that aesthetic meaning, and even artistic intent, is unattainable because meaning itself is in perpetual redefinition (Heed, 2002, p.106 on Jacques Derrida's deconstructivism applied to theatre theory). On top of that Jacques Lacan would claim artistic intent is useless because the subjectivity is also always sliding (Heed, 2002, 106 on Jacques Lacan applied to theatre theory). Is artistic intent useless? Is everything based in the audience response, in their own metameaning? If the artist creates nothing in the piece, will each individual in audience still create their own meaning when they meet the piece?

Conclusion

Through this research a conclusion is that we have artistic responsibility and intent with what we create. Artistic intent and context can be a historic, contextual time stamp that helps us triangulate humanity's development through art history. It's difficult to challenge if an artist had or had no intent with their work. Did Jesus have a conscious or subconscious intent with his life's work? Did Einstein when he discovered $E=MC^2$? Does intent matter for the research result? For the artwork? For the audience? Some argue that it can be vital to know who is saying what, when and why. And that the art itself is vital to provide the research context and source to the research result.



At the research presentation 2013.06.09. How did the audience respond to the (art)work and its intent?

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