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Book review: Drawing Insight - Communicating Development Through Animation

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GREENE, Joyce & REBER, Deborah (eds) (1996)
Drawing Insight - Communicating Development Through Animation, Southbound Sdn Bhd., Penang Malaysia.
ISBN 983-9054-14-7

Reviewed by David Blackall

Using case studies, *Drawing Insight* is best described as a stimulator and provider of ideas for the process and design of animated film and video. Potential animators and those interested in animation's communicative powers are granted a delightful journey through many aspects of film animation and its place as a universally understood communication tool. The book's contributors, from a range of cultural backgrounds, have successfully shown the importance of animation in global communication, particularly in relation to the role UNICEF plays in providing information about health and social issues to marginalised communities.

The Editors' Preface illustrates how animation can be an important catalyst in community education around aspects of survival, child development, community health, nutrition and the need for communities to be informed about child abuse. "UNICEF first used animation for advocacy purposes in the late 1960s. But it wasn't until we used animation at community viewing centres in Nepal in the mid-1980s that we discovered how well the medium got vital information across to literate and non-literate audiences."

The first chapter, *Animation's Recent Past* by Charles Solomon provides an historical overview and so gives some currency to animation as a film genre. In the beginning there was magic. The viewers who bolted at the image of a moving train projected by the Lumiere Brothers in 1895, regarded the first experiments in film animation, beginning with J. Stuart Blackton's *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (1906), as magic, or something akin to it. The supernatural image of animation was reinforced by the use of stop-motion techniques to create such eerie effects as a loaf of bread slicing itself with a saw in the popular live action film, *The Haunted House* (1907).

Informing international communities about social issues is a challenging process. Viewers from a range of languages and cultures may all arrive at different meanings after watching a video. Educators have found well intended information to be insulting

to one culture while enlightening to another. Unless a film or video has power in its actors' performances and a universality in its script's language, audiences might be found reading different meanings into the actor's body language or misinterpreting scene changes. Animated characters allow messages to be focused; their simplification of dialogue and body language provides deliberate action and thus concentrates meaning in the intended messages.

The A4-sized *Drawing Insight* is packed with informative diagrams, processing charts, color photographs and video stills. It shows that through universally understood actions, animation concentrates and exaggerates - so that social messages can be broadcast over a wider range of languages and cultures with greater clarity in meaning.

The book's main information base has been drawn from various community-animation case studies from around the globe. *Kids Deserve To Be Heard*, *The Hiroshima Experience*, *A Grassroots Approach to Social Interactivism*, *Street Kids International* are descriptive chapter titles, which by their own focus, look at the power that animation bestows on messages designed to communicate social and health issues to global audiences.

Formative Research in the Meena (SE Asia) Communication Initiative by Mira Aghi, discusses the importance of community empowerment through stimulation and interaction that occurs out of the filmmaking process itself or after community viewings. The author notes:

"... the animated film and other materials can be used through the mass media for advocacy and awareness-raising, and at community level as a tool for promoting dialogue and interactive learning. As a term, empowerment has lost its force and precision of meaning through over-usage. However, there is a general agreement that information alone cannot empower people to take action. The concept of empowerment involves a process of growth and development in learners, and leads to deliberate efforts by learners to transform the circumstances of their lives."

While *Drawing Insight* makes mention of the new technologies found in computers to design and present animation, it has not offered the reader the obvious and whole picture. Like it or not - hands on film-animation purist and computer buff alike; the reality will see community groups around the world, accessing computers and animation software and providing themselves with connections to the Internet (World Wide Web). Important social issues will be widely produced and accessed through digital technologies rather than by the resources of film and video alone.

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Domestic digital-video cameras are now precise and effective in many of the functions that only the film camera could perform. Digital-video quality coupled with its availability, empowers many communities, giving voice through video making and animation and providing the option of distribution via the Internet.

While new technologies provide empowering opportunities that need discussing, to start to describe them in one book runs the risk of ending up with a digital technology and software manual. *Drawing Insight* might have done well to include more of the digital revolution in its animation case studies, while retaining its integrity and superb representation of specific community-tailored and empowering animation. ●

HAMELINK, Cees J (1994)

Trends in World Communication, Southbound Sdn Bhd,
Penang, Malaysia. 168 pages. ISBN: 983-9054-06-6

Reviewed by Ahmad Murad Merican

If ever the majority of the world's populations sit in conference to discuss global communication, the organizer would probably be bombarded with a litany of questions, all of which may sound like: "Have we been invited?" Hamelink's view of contemporary discourses on the state of global communications runs counter to conventional wisdom, describing it as a metaphor which is "attractive, lucid, simple, and wrong".

As seen in most of his writings, Hamelink is much an activist as well as a scholar conscious of movements and problems in society. Given the state of the present global communication environment Hamelink's book is a valuable study in analyzing the current agenda of culture, identity and democracy all of which impinge upon the information and communication order.

Hamelink is chiefly concerned with human rights in relation to the disempowering processes of world communication. The process "operates through censorship, deceit, victimization and information glut. The withholding and distorting of information obstructs people's independent formation of opinion and undermines people's capacity to control decisions that affect their