

Drawing in to being: Ideation as multimodal thinking

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abstract

This article considers the means by which the short film *Munted* (2011) was brought into being. It discusses drawing and interior dwelling as immersive methodological practices. In so doing, it suggests that multi-modal thought might constitute a communicative process that reaches both into ideation and outwards into the communicative appearance of a multi-layered filmic text.

key words

Contemplative drawing
Skariphasthai
Short film design
Digital and handmade processes
Indwelling as ideation



Munted is an unusual film about a false accusation of pedophilia and its terrible consequences. Set in 1961 in a remote rural New Zealand community, it tells the story of a ten-year old girl and her friendship with a brain damaged artist. It offers a lyrical and brutal account of the cost of rumour and prejudice.

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interior

In the room the light is dim. The clouds on the horizon have folded in against the night and around the table there are moths, blind in their assault on a kerosene lamp. Here, there is the smell of oil and water... the touch of a brush, and the sound of a pencil scratching life into paper.

This is an indwelling; a method used to develop the short film Munted.

the scripted narrative

Munted was constructed and refined through a process of drawing, notation and painting. Drawing a film into being stands in stark contrast to conventional approaches to developing narrative cinema.

Traditionally it is a requirement that the spectrum of visualised material in the writer/director's head must be translated into written language before investors or funding agencies will consider the work. In other words, the merits of an imagined film are assessed on the act of translation into an interim medium.

It is from this ubiquitous practice of forced literalisation that under-critiqued 'truisms' like "If it doesn't work on paper, it won't work in film" have become systems for evaluating what are essentially visual texts that draw their origins from visually imagined narratives.

The assumption that the narrative potential of film can only work if imagery is translated into written language may be in part inherited from the traditions of theatre where written scripts have historically driven performed narratives. However film is not theatre on celluloid. It tells its stories in unique, pictorial ways and few of these engage theatrical conventions beyond an often-dogged implementation of Aristotle's three-act structure and the assumption that all narratives require a written script from which to work.





An early visualisation of Don's cottage that eventually appeared in Munted as a time transition between late afternoon and dusk. In the film, the light in the window was animated so it flickered and a night bird flew across the sky. For drawn transitions like this, over fifty separate paintings were produced and fused with filmed elements. In doing this, the work sought to re-nominate the significance of the handcrafted mark on contemporary storytelling.

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It is useful in this regard to consider for a moment the etymology of the term script. The Latin word *scriptum* means a written text. It refers to the nature of recording in written language and relates to conventions of presenting ideas in a cohesive manner through the construct of writing. However, there is a potentially richer term akin to this word that is of comparable interest. In Greek *Skariphasthai* also means to inscribe but it may be defined as scratching an outline, or sketch.

Skariphasthai suggests to us that meaning might be drawn into being in realms that transcend the limitations of the written word. It supposes an approach to communication that still records, but provides a broader dimension for thinking and construction of narrative. It prescribes an environment where a world imagined in pictures might be processed in pictures and eventually communicated in pictures, without the unnecessary impingement of literal translation. Within this construct, the hand and pencil as realising agents in the act of drawing, may serve as translative tools that operate in a purely iconic mode (closest to the mode in which a film might be imagined). Palasmaa (2009: 17) suggests “the pencil... is a bridge between the imagining mind and the image that appears on the sheet of paper. In the ecstasy of work, the draftsman forgets both his hand and the pencil, and the image emerges as if it were an automatic projection of the imagining mind.” This kind of drawing is a process of pursuit rather than capture. Byron in his 1822 letter to Thomas Moore, said, “...like all imaginative men, I, of course, embody myself with the character while I draw it, but not a moment after the pen is lifted off the paper” (p. 623).

If the imagining mind creates in images and we accept that film uses pictures to communicate meaning, it is useful to consider the potential of methods of ideation and development that operate within iconic modes. If one considers the scripting of a film as *skariphasthai* one might create and refine through a process of drawing. In this approach the designer might engage with levels of indwelling inside the film’s emerging diegesis and this process may lend itself to a deeper contemplation of the visual potentials of a proposed narrative.





drawing as contemplation

Sketching as a method of processing and communicating design ideas has been discussed by a number of writers, (Goel, 1995; Pipes, 1990; Rogers, 2000; Scrivener, 2000). Much of the emphasis of research in the area has focused on what Rogers (2000) considers three primary uses of design drawing. These are concept sketching, presentation drawing, and drawing for manufacture.

However, in the process of immersion one might also engage in a method I would describe as contemplative sketching. This is the deployment of drawing in a slow, reflective process that allows the designer to become immersed in the world of his image. In this approach, thinking becomes dialogic; the designer converses with the drawing and the drawing talks back to him. This talking is generally more nebulous than literal. One talks in tone and weight, emphasis and potential. Ideas are coloured and lit and their parameters are nuanced. Thinking is not constrained by the territorial limitations of words. Images operate with a more flexible grammar and one is able to connect possibilities in very abstract and intangible ways.

This deeper approach to drawing surfaces characters, contexts and narratives. They develop and refine inside a visual world and eventually emerge as constructed beings. Thus, drawing becomes a method of immersing the designer in both the visual feel and the



View video 1: Title sequence

narrative genesis of the film.

drawing as indwelling

The 16th Century the Italian painter Titian reportedly “touched the surface of his paper in order to investigate an elusive world just beyond his reach.” (Taylor, 2008, p.11) In so doing he was reaching into the domain of thought. He was drawn into the world of the mark. Heidegger suggests that what is thought provoking has not yet been thought. He notes that thought turns away from us, and calls us through the draft of its withdrawal (Heidegger, 1999, pp. 369-391). Schön (1983: 159) argues that when sketching, we construct a “virtual world” where “the pace of action can be varied at will. The designer can slow down and think about what he is doing.” This process of “thinking about” aligns somewhat with Polanyi’s concept of “Indwelling” (1967: 17). In this state the thinker is not searching for meaning but dwelling inside an environment where meanings and connections might surface.

Douglass and Moustakas (1985: 47) suggest that this process is marked by “vague and formless wanderings” but eventually there develops “a growing sense of direction and meaning emerges as the perceptions and understandings of the researcher grow and the parameters of the problem



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The title sequence of lillies dying in a jar required twenty-five separate sketches for each second of movement. These drawings were fused with filmed timelapse recordings taken over a two week period.



are recognised.”

For the design of *Munted* I began by dwelling inside the recollection of a story a friend once told me. On a remote farm, as a little girl she had grown up with a man who had Down syndrome. They had become childhood friends. When one night her older brother and his friends, as a drunken prank, terrorised the man then beat him into paralysis, they justified their actions by claiming he was a pervert who had sexually abused her. He hadn't... and she didn't understand (at the time) why he was suddenly taken away.

In developing the story I initially returned to where my friend grew up and began to draw. I sketched the brittleness of bracken, the corrosion of old tank stands, and the smell of summer dust. Later, in the back of Ahuroa (where we eventually filmed the story), I discovered the remnants of an old house and I drove out each weekend to sketch the wild plants and forgotten gardens that marked the residues of lives that had unfolded there.

Upon returning home each night, I unloaded piles of wilted plants onto my table and flipped through my sketchbooks. Then I began to draw in the character of a damaged man. I was not drawing as myself (indeed my painterly style is very different from the works that appear in this film); instead, I was drawing as a fictional character.

Using a process of indwelling I slowly drew into existence the nature and story of another being. This man was a botanical artist. He was intelligent and had a scientist's penchant for detail. However, some years before the film begins he suffered a brain injury as the result of a car accident that killed his wife and children. Accordingly, his work wrestles with grief over the incident.

As I drew I dwelt inside this man. Eventually I replaced the light bulbs in my studio with a kerosene lamp so he might feel more comfortable with the light, scents and sounds that were in the imaginary world that he occupied.

The state of immersion became increasingly sensory to the point that, as the film sought its highest levels of refinement, decisions were made to the story only after driving out to the world where the narrative would be shot and spending hours drawing inside the rooms of the cottage where he would be living.

Through this process of immersion the character of a botanical artist (Don) began to speak. He was strange company because unlike other characters I create, he did not speak with words... (in the film he has largely lost the ability). Instead somewhere between drawing and the fragmented, scribbled notes of his observations, his story began to surface



frost

they said that
winter was over
been bright - peat
ing up and over the
earth. I remember
the woodpile
at them
To get m
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of the down and wou
the loss of the pinecones.
clanny ut I

don't

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it falls down in soft drifts
of black - like snow - like the
I stand in front of
They quest
the confus
the movement of
I tried
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all
white.

er
white on the ground
cloth cold
shrinking into
drawing. You don't
leaves and white at
white from the glare
of winter
ow
one



ere is
and of darkness
the front



Poppy

Seedling

Don's notes weave through his drawings in a scrawled hand that bursts into unpredictable volume. His thoughts are poetic, meandering and introspective. They are also broken. This is in reference to a condition of many brain injuries where ideas cannot be held together in a cohesive manner for any extended period of time.

and connect through a language of nuance and suggestion.

I discovered he was very vulnerable. He was afraid of conflict because he could not hold ideas together long enough to protect himself. Drawing had become his retreat into a simple world that could not hurt him. His friendship with the child in the film was based on this same quest for the safety of innocence.

The process of drawing into being is difficult to describe but Miller (1993: 74), comes close when he observes, "creativity is linked to a state of consciousness where images appear. This is usually a passive state where we are not trying to be creative but are receptive to experience and ideas." In this regard I was not indwelling so I could find definable narrative episodes, instead I was receptively 'listening' inside the drawing of a fictional man's thinking.

However, to the outside world this method was largely hidden. Such approaches do not sit comfortably with conventional paradigms of script development. Image making is supposed to follow a written script, not precede it.

Eventually, having hidden large parts of my process from producers and funding agencies, I presented them with a written script. This was a translation of the final visual story the botanical artist and I had constructed. What they received were anticipated pages of writing in courier 12pt type and a handful of visualisations, shuffled in as 'director's notes'.

Don's paintings were created using only materials available to an isolated man in a remote New Zealand farming district in the early 1960s (the time when the source story occurred). Accordingly, his drawings appeared on sheets of light, unbleached paper in Indian ink, graphite, coloured pencils, watercolours, house paint, grass stains, coffee washes, and rust. When completed, these works were glued roughly onto card so the paper he had stretched in the process of painting, blistered, creased and marked.

These drawings (although not originally intended for use in the film) were eventually to cover the inside of his house. Through this, his home became an outward manifestation of his interior world.







View video 2: Film trailer

crafted marks & digital interfaces

The artworks used in the development of *Munted* were completed over a nine-month period. Although not originally intended for use in the film they contribute something unique to the visually rich texture of its story. Because the process of drawing was so organic I realised while I was working that the idiosyncratic and unpredictable mark of the artist's hand might also be employed as a means of emphasising the painterly innocence of the story. In contemporary short film, special effects are generally manufactured inside the convenience of digital environments. However, these environments carry in their architecture the cognitive blueprint of their software designers. What is promoted as a plethora of options is in fact just that; a set of options. They are not approaches driven from the source of the work but somebody else's styling agents applied to its surface.

Munted is a film that bears the marks of its making. The danger of water corrodes old cars, stains paintings, and ties the death of Don's family to him. Accordingly, the aesthetic of the film is marked with water. Sometimes its stains drift across the surface of his paintings and sometimes they bruise the filmed world around him.

The technique of narrative staining was not achieved via the application of a digital effect. Instead it was created from portions of Don's paintings that were separated and individually animated as discrete elements.

These stains were the *skariphasthai*, the marks of making, pulled forward from the creation of a 'script' and embedded in the film's final treatment. They were the texture of thinking, the unreliable and unstable products of an alternative method of designing film; they were the leakage of method onto the surface of a visual story.

Broadly, the film uses stained drawing to tell Don's side of the story and film to unfold Katrina's version. Initially we are drawn to trust the filmic narrative but eventually we come to realise that it is unreliable. When the alternative tellings intersect, they agitate uncomfortably against each other, but as the story progresses they settle into a more harmonious relationship.

...in closing

Munted premiered in the 2011 Montreal World Film Festival. It went on to official selections in a number of international festivals including the 53rd Bilbao International Film Festival, the 29th Brussels International Film Festival, the 27th Berlin-Interfilm Film Festival, the 18th Regensburg Short film Week, the 2011 Vladivostok International Film Festival, and the 2011 Lucerne International Film Festival. The film won numerous awards including: Best Short Film at the Lucerne International Film Festival, Finalist in the 2011 New Zealand Design Awards, the Jury Award: Special Honour at the 18th Regensburg Short Film Week, and the Audience Award at Zubiak Gexto (Spain).

Although it is a hard-hitting film, its styling is delicately crafted. It was a film generated inside modes of thinking that eventually bled into storytelling. It was conceived through painting, drawing, touch and sound, in a world beyond words.

Through a highly sensitised process, two men reached out to each other. One was the designer and the other, a fictional man. These men are inextricably linked, although one functioned as the creator of the other. In the silence of poorly lit rooms, amid piles of gathered foliage and the scent of paint and linseed oil, they found a story and a way of telling it that sought to contribute something unique and emotionally resonant to the corpus short film narrative.

These paintings are the residue of their conversations.



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bio

Welby Ings is a Professor in Design at AUT University. He holds a Ph.D. in applied narratology and is an elected Fellow of the British Royal Society of Arts. He has published and spoken widely on issues of language, typography, and drawing, and has been a consultant to many international organisations on issues of creativity and learning.

He is also a multi-award winning designer, filmmaker and playwright. In 2006 his short film *Boy* [<http://www.nzonscreen.com/title/boy-2004>] was long-listed for the Academy Awards.

Munted (2011) is his second short film.

