

## **Animating Theory and Practice: Critical Media Literacy in the Post-Secondary Classroom**

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Since the proliferation of digital media in the 1990s, the Arts and Humanities have undergone a sea change. Many post-secondary Humanities educators (myself included) have been trained in traditional methods of archival research, textual analysis, and historical and theoretical exegesis. However, students today inhabit a digital media environment that requires radically different research methods and skills. The rapid spread of digital cameras, smartphones, go pros, and tablets has put the means of media production into the pockets of a generation of youth. As a result, there has been a rise in students who are adept at using media technologies to make and comment on videos in general life, but may lack the skills to read visual texts critically or assess them for accuracy (Consandine et al 2009; Oblinger and Oblinger 2005). Humanities educators, on the other hand, have strong critical skills, but may lack the training and technical ability to effectively integrate new technologies into their pedagogical practice. In 2009, Considine et al argued that “The result [of limited media use in the classroom] is a failure to build a bridge between the technological world Millennials live in and the classrooms we expect them to learn in” (473). In 2017, when “alternative facts” and “fake news” are the buzzwords of the day, it is more important than ever to bridge the gap and ensure strong critical media literacy skills among post-secondary students and educators alike. Media literacy, as defined by scholars in the Digital Humanities, includes not only being able to decode, interpret, and judge texts, but also to encode, create, and disseminate them (Duncan 2005, Hobbs 1997, Mayer 2009, McPherson 2009 ). *Critical* media literacy adds to this the ability to recognize bias, to reconsider one’s own received notions, to understand the underlying ideologies that shape how information is presented, and to address the role of “multicultural and social difference” in media texts (Kellner and Share 2005, 370). As such,

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developing critical media literacy means fostering both traditional skills in visual analysis *and* strong digital media production skills at the faculty and student levels.

In this paper, I will introduce a project designed to promote critical media literacy among students and faculty in the discipline of Film Studies using customized digitally animated videos. While live-action videography may also be used, animation has several benefits that outweigh its inherently time-consuming and work-intensive nature. First, it is a relatively inexpensive format, as it requires no sets, costumes, actors, or even cameras, just basic office supplies and/or





time, such as stirring exhortations to defend the American way, heroic warplane imagery, and a martial

Scholars have examined the ways in which animated propaganda films from various countries differed in content, rhetoric, and visual style due to the distinctive national ideologies that guided the filmmakers (Annett 2014, Dower 1986, Roffat 2005). But overall, a cartoon can be identified as propagandistic by the way in which it puts forward messages using visual and auditory techniques that reduce the opportunity for critical thought. These techniques include binary “Us vs. Them” oppositions, stereotype and caricature, and unreflexive use of the medium, such as glossing over hypocrisy and asserting information in an authoritarian manner, with no sources cited and no room for questions or discussion. These problematic techniques should be discussed with amateur animators early on to make sure everyone is aware of the impacts of propaganda, both in its time and today.

As an alternate example, I would like to present a more recent educational short that also distinguishes between two psychological concepts, but does so without a propagandistic emphasis on binary thinking, stereotyping, or authoritarianism. This short film animates an excerpt from a TED Talk by University of Houston research professor Brené Brown, who works on the concept of empathy. It is titled simply “[Brene Brown on Empathy](#).” It was produced by the British studio RSA Animates, a division of the British Royal Society of Arts, and was released on the RSA’s YouTube channel in 2013.

Like “Reason and Emotion,” this film begins with two distinct psychological concepts, empathy and sympathy, and aims to show why one is preferable to the other using a combination of voice-over narration and anthropomorphic characters in this case, anim



useful example of a digitally-animated educational video which promotes understanding of a particular topic in a visually appealing way, without heavy-handed propagandizing.

That said, “Brené Brown on Empathy” displays a much higher level of technical proficiency and polish than the average educator could produce with no budget for use in a single class. In order to demonstrate how an amateur animator might approach a similar project, I would like to turn now to the pilot project which was conducted at my own institution in Canada.

### **Case Study: Intro**

“[Annett’s Familiar Quotations](#)” is a short animated video which I produced as a pilot project in the summer of 2015, under the mentorship of independent visual/recording artist Jenny Breukelman at the Gulf Islands Film and Television School in British Columbia. I had no prior filmmaking experience and only one week to complete the film from concept to screening. I received a Special Initiative grant of 850.00 from the Office of Research Services at Wilfrid Laurier University for tuition and travel from Toronto to Vancouver. Once there, I used my own DSLR camera for shooting video and photography. GIFTS provided access to computers with the Adobe Creative Suite of software, including Flash and After Effects for digital animation and Premiere for video editing, which were the primary programs used. Since I wanted to make a project that used both digital and analog techniques, GIFTS also provided an old-fashioned

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monuments (Flaten 2008), having trainee teachers in practicums make “Slowmation” slide shows for their elementary school students (Hoban 2005, Vratulis, Clarke, Hoban, and Erickson 2011), and having children themselves create “explanatory animations”: simple digital animations that illustrate concepts such as Solfeggio (the do-re-mi scale) in music (Jacobs and Robin 2016, Mayer 2009). That said, the majority of work done on using animation for education in the Digital Humanities is focused on primary and secondary school



The “Familiar Quotations” title and the concept of cataloging characters and techniques was inspired by a copy of the book *Animating the American Scene* that I saw in an antiques shop the day before making the film. While all the “quotations” are drawn from commercial American animation due to the constraints of time and considerations of audience, no one style or studio is privileged above the others as the “pinnacle of achievement.” The purpose of the film was rather to encourage students to recognize the distinction between familiar animation *characters*, seen as stars that simply exist and act in films, and the techniques of animated filmmaking that inform how images of characters are *created*, what they can do, and why they are depicted as such. Helping students get past the habit of accepting animated characters as given and move toward questioning what technologies and ideologies underlie the images was the first step in promoting critical media literacy. Later lectures in the course addressed topics such as propaganda animation and cross-cultu

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throughout the term, such as metamorphosis or silent-era animation. Basically, their animations had to have some kind of critical content that demonstrated what they had learned in the class.

FS 270 is a popular elective course for non- majors with little to no filmmaking experience, so the Animation Assignment was an optional project, ensuring that there was no bias in assignment types that would unjustly favour the more experienced students from Laurier's Film Production option. All students had the choice of either doing the Animation Assignment or writing three short personal response papers (called a "Film Journal") about films viewed throughout the term. To help students who wanted to make a film but had no production experience, I held an extracurricular animation workshop over the Reading Week break in which I taught the basics of character design, storyboarding, and animating simple movements such as bouncing balls and walking stick figures using activities gathered from professional animation guidebooks (e.g. Jones 2007, Laybourne 1998, Williams 2001). Materials from the workshop were also posted online for students who couldn't attend in person.

In terms of evaluation, the grade for the assignment was weighted equally between theory and practice, with 50% of the mark awarded for the artist's statement and 50% for the technical proficiency and creativity of the film. The top ten highest-marked films were screened in an in-class "Film Festival" in the final week of term, giving students the opportunity to view and discuss each other's work. The assignment was worth 15% of the final course grade, so it did not replace a formal analytical essay. Rather, it complemented and enhanced established pedagogical methods in Film Studies.

**Results:** At the end of the Winter 2016 term, I was able to record some quantitative and qualitative measures of the project's success. Most tellingly, 47 out of 59 students, or 80% of the class, chose to create an animated short film rather than write traditional response papers. Of the students who made films, 95% passed the assignment by completing a short film at least 30 seconds long that reflected animation theory or history. Some students opted to use analog animation techniques ranging

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