

HAS FEMMINISM FAILED THE BRITISH ANIMATION INDUSTRY?

By Sarah Ann Kennedy

Before joining academia, I worked in the British Animation industry for twenty years in a variety of roles including writer, director and voice artist working on projects such as Crapston Villas, Peppa Pig and Pond Life. This paper has been developed as part of an on going research project drawn from primary research interviews with other women that work in the British animation industry and relates to the increase number of female students in Art & Design HE education in the UK and what future they face.

Marge, Sophie and Fatso from Crapston Villas



This paper looks at the past, and present roles that women have within the British animation industry and elucidates significant changes by interviewing key women from the industry between the late sixties to the present day. These women include:

Claire Kitson – Commissioned animation for C4 between 1989 – 1999
Sarah Mulloch – Animation producer currently at MacKinnon and Saunders
Candy Guard - Animation director, writer and illustrator, creator of 'Pond Life'.
Emma Calder – Animation director , set up Pearly Oyster Films
Joanna Quinn – Animation director, owner of Beryl Productions.
Ruth Lingford – Animation director, professor at Harvard.
Sarah Cox – Animation director, co owner of 'Arthurcox' productions.
Dotti Colvin – CGI animator, lead animator at Hibbert Ralph
An Vrombaut – Animation director, creator of '64 Zoo Lane' BBC.

Looking back the Animation industry in Britain it has come a long way since the late sixties, when it was disseminated in tiny bits across the TV in the form of public information films, commercials or the odd children's cartoon. Most work impersonated our American cousins. A concern which was expressed in Britain in the 1950's with the launch of commercial television and has been a recurring theme even today in particular in relation to the purchasing of non-British animation for children's television.

The launch of Channel 4 in the late eighties made a huge impact on UK animation with it's remit to commission innovation and home grown talent.

Claire Kitson, commissioning editor for Animation at Channel 4 between 1989 – 1999, was responsible for changing the face of British Animation during this time. Claire started her career in the sixties with no 'big game plan' and fell into animation by accident. She seemed to think that wearing short skirts and being presentable was what open doors for her at that time. She said there were of course huge disadvantages to being a woman then, but that men loved having 'pretty little things around them' and she took full advantage of that. Claire said that she had no role models because you weren't encouraged to, you just didn't think you could have it all. She never thought she would end up having the career she did. She had a degree in French, and ended up translating the odd animated film for John Halas. She said her lucky break came in 1970 when John Halas asked her to accompany him as an executive assistant to a festival in Romania and while she was there, she was offered a job in Los Angeles putting together animation programmes. Claire said that she wasn't very good at planning her career but she was very good at recognizing an opportunity so although she didn't have any real experience or knowledge of animation at that point, she accepted the offer. It was a very steep learning curve and the fact that she mucked up her visa was a blessing in disguise. She had to return to England to sort it out and whilst she was here she was sent by a film festival called Filmex to all the European festivals to scout for films. This proved to be invaluable on her return to the states. Claire had a good idea of what films were being made in both Europe and America at this time and she recalled that there were 'absolutely no films by women'. Claire went on to commission numerous women during her time at Channel 4, although she always claims she wasn't intentionally making any kind of statement.

In the seventies, there was a global recession caused by the 1973 oil crisis and even though commercials were thin on the ground, British animation started to get an identity of its own. In 1971 Gillian Lacey was funded by Hallas and Batchelor to make 'Up' and Bob Godfrey was the first British Animator to win an Oscar in 1975 with Great. British counter culture was breaking into mainstream TV with directors like Ken Loach directing the 'Wednesday play' and Ken Russell making experimental arts documentaries. Politically the general feel of the era was that everyone should have a voice whether they were a woman, black or came from a different class – something that still matters in the UK even today. Animation was influenced just like any other cultural activity and British animators started to develop their own 'voice' and style. Sarah Mulloch, who is currently producing for McKinnon and Saunders, remembers joining Oscar Grillo's Dragon Productions in 1976 as a personal assistant and although there were a lot of women working at the company they were all working in paint and trace department apart from one other woman who was also a personal assistant. All the directors, producers and managers were men and this was indicative of most of the industry at this time. Sarah said she also didn't have any 'big plan' to become a producer at that point, she just happen to have a boss who was 'more interested in the lunches' so she was often left to hold the fort and therefore she learnt about the process of animation from having to 'muck in'. Sarah has gone on to produce for some of the great animator such as Richard Williams, Aardmans and finally McKinnon and Saunders. Sarah remembers across the industry in

the mid seventies, most women worked in the art department or as production assistants or as assistants to directors. It was very rare to get a woman in any other field. There were however some exceptions, in 1974, Alison de Vere directed *Café Bar* which went on to win various awards on the International Festival circuit, and the Leeds Animation Workshop was set up by five women including Gillian Lacey to make a film about the lack of pre school nursery's. Leeds Animation Workshop still makes films today about sensitive, social and feminist issues and is funded by Leeds City Council.

Stripper from 'Girls Night Out.'



In the eighties the Animation industry seemed to change radically. Abundant funding from both Channel 4 and BBC for young, innovative as well established film makers meant the profile of British Animation was raised considerably. Channel 4 was set up in 1982 with the remit to concentrate on making innovate television. Funding by ITV made this possible and commissioners began to think more about ideas and artistic expression than ratings. Animation was commissioned as an art form and films like Joanna Quinns, *'Girls Night Out.'* was created. *'Girls Night Out'* is the tale of Beryl, a very ordinary working class factory worker who goes out for a night out with her other female work 'mates'. Unbeknown to her dreary husband, who is more interested in the TV than Beryl - Beryl is off to see a male stripper. It's a raucous affair with all the women screaming and shouting and ends with Beryl stripping the stripper of his g-string and his pride. A film that confronts a variety of issues like voyeurism and the male gaze, and highlights female camaraderie.

In the late eighties there was a new White Paper published about the future of C4 which laid out that Channel four had to become more viable and Michael Grade was given the task of steering this competitive and more commercial ship. Luckily animation didn't seem to be affected by this, Claire Kitson felt it was a cheap way for Michael Grade to be seen to be flying the flag for innovation and not 'dumbing' down the Channel to appeal to advertisers. Animation was relatively cheap to make and British Animation was now taken seriously because it was winning awards at major Animation Festivals. Both men and women were commissioned to make personal creative visions and British animation began to see the birth of various auteurs with distinctive and original styles. Animation courses sprung up around the country spewing out these young film makers and up until the millennium, the idea of 'making your own film' was simply the norm and something most animation students strived to do.



Beryl in 'Body Beautiful'

Sandra Law in her 1994 paper, 'Putting themselves in the picture' stated 'With the entrance of more women into the field of animation as independent filmmakers, who have creative control over their subject matter, there has been a burgeoning of the types of female images available to audiences.' (Ed. Piling. 1997, 67) Candy Guard, myself, Ruth Lingford, Joanna Quinn and Emma Calder were just some of the women working actively in animation around this time telling stories from a female perspective: Joanna Quinn's work showed positive yet realistic women with all the lumps and bumps fighting against the constraints set on them by a patriarchal society. 'Body Beautiful' tells the story of Beryl who enters a body beautiful competition against Vince the local male ego. Vince is convinced that everyone is in love with him even Beryl. Beryl finally resist the urge to get fit and proudly dances around in all her over weight glory and wins.

Ruth Lingford's work is often thought of as 'feel bad', exploring themes such as female aggression, war and sexual desire, death and motherhood. Emma Calder's film Springfield who's main protagonist is half woman half vacuum cleaner takes a witty look at themes of alienation and loss whilst Candy Guard's films are intelligent well observed comedies about women and the everyday. Films like 'Moanalogue' are a humourous well observed snippet of conversation showing her characters inability to be satisfied with anything. A modern day phenomenon and witty illustration of this human condition.

Three cleanettes Springfield



On the surface, the story so far seems like a simple progression of women in the workplace and Sandra Law's prediction of an abundance of images of women in animation a given. However after talking to these women, another story seems to be emerging, Emma Calder started working in animation in

1983 as a director after graduating from the RCA and went on to start her own company 'Pearly Oyster Films'. Both Emma and Candy were the new generation of post feminist women who expected to have a career but in retrospect didn't feel they had enough confidence to plan it properly. Emma felt there were lots of opportunities for everyone in the 1980's and it was taken for granted that if you were good you would get some directing work. Although Emma found work as a director immediately after leaving college she did experience some old fashioned attitudes. 'Producers taking you out to lunch because you thought you had a working relationship with them and then they start talking about your tits!' or 'Turning up at the labs as a director with a load of blokes from the team and everyone just thinks you are the PR or something.'

During the eighties and nineties Candy didn't feel that she experienced any prejudice. Candy left college and shortly afterwards got a commission with Scarlet TV, a female run production company who made a magazine program for Channel 4. Candy went on to make some shorts for Welsh Channel 4 and then to write and direct Pond Life, an animated sitcom

ITV withdrew it's support of Channel 4 at the end of the eighties and the successors to Michael Grade didn't follow his strategy for supporting art films so funding for independent animation diminished to almost nothing. Animate is the only scheme left for animators and artists to apply to and the competition is stiff. Graduate animation students today expect to find work on commercial projects and not to be discovered as an artist or auteur with ground breaking ideas. The industry and the opportunities have changed and with that, the type of person who wants to work in it. Ruth Lingford, has since chosen to work as an animation professor at Harvard which allows her to continue her own practice. It's the perfect job for Ruth giving her the space and support to explore her ideas. Ruth wishes in some ways that she had been more commercial but felt she wasn't pushy enough. 'The guy who curated Mirrorball at Edinburgh was very unwilling to acknowledge my part in Shynola's Eye for an Eye video, and said that he didn't think women made good music videos'

Emma Calder is still running her company Pearly Oyster but has turned her creative energies to writing, designing and illustrating children's books for various publishers including Bloomsbury Press and Thames and Hudson. Emma felt disappointed by her experience in the animation industry and is happier in her current pursuit. Emma's company is currently employing just herself but previously it had 3 male directors.

Candy Guard, is currently writing illustrated books for Penguin Books even though she is signed to Sherbet Animation Company as a director she is only ever offered work in her own style. Sherbet has twenty three directors signed to it's books and eight of them are women. There are two producers, one is a woman and the other women in the company distribute films. Candy feels resentful that she isn't offered 'jobbing' directing and wishes she was better at pushing herself in a 'boosy' way. She feels that men are better at saying they great even when they are not, where as girls are more self critical

and modest. The 'boosy' pub culture that surrounds the world of animation and the distribution of jobs doesn't help. In Britain animation jobs are rarely advertised and most people get jobs through contacts. In fact in retrospect she now realizes that the glut of new female run TV companies in the eighties was actually beneficial to her. At the time she resented it.

None of these women have felt forced out of the animation industry but have actively sought out other ways of exploring their ideas. The current nature of the funding criteria for independent films makes it difficult to get funding

In the eighties, Joanna Quinn set up production company 'Beryl Productions' to make her own films - she currently works on commercials to fund her these films. Joanna has always been open about the subject of her work which is to show positive yet realistic images of women, and even though she is determined to promote women, her company still employs mainly men. Joanna has actively sought out women but again they are few and far between. Joanna has one or two in the art department, a director that she sometime uses and a compositor. Both the producers are men but the studio manager is a woman. Joanna finds the commercial work easy but uninspiring. Most of the ideas are clichéd and mainstream but sometimes she has some input and this can be rewarding e.g She was sent a brief to create a character design of a male business man on a flight as he came up with an idea. Joanna found the subject matter so uninspiring that she persuaded the ad men to change the man to a woman. She based the design on a real women, Melissa Edmunds who invented some latex covers for cups to stop toddlers spilling their drink. What a better place for her to invent this than on a bumpy flight! The ad company loved the idea and went with it. Recently things seem to have changed though and Joanna's view point is being rejected for more mainstream predicable ideas. Joanna says she feels quite powerful in her everyday working life but when she has to operate in the world of commercials she still comes up against some old fashioned attitudes particularly recently since the recession.



Charmin Advert. Joanna Quinn

Dotti Colvin is a jobbing CGI animator who is currently lead animator with Hibbert Ralph. She started her career in the nineties. She wasn't part of these college animation graduates who arrived in the industry with a film under their arm. She started as a runner in the mid nineties and by the end of the nineties she saw her opportunity and managed to persuade animation company Loose Moose to set up a CGI department to support their flourishing stop motion department. Loose Moose paid her a low salary at no real risk to

them, and let her 'have a go.' CGI was still relatively new so it wasn't taken very seriously. Dotti managed to surprise everyone. She learned Maya as well as how to animate and the new CGI department began to flourish. CGI animation was still relatively new so companies were open to ideas. Loose Moose currently employs nine directors, three of which are women.

Dotti feels that the industry is male dominated, particularly CGI but she has never experienced any prejudice, she has worked hard and proved herself. She is currently lead CGI animator at Hibbert Ralph and would like to employ more female animators but again there don't seem to be many. She says that the 'techy' environment suits her although she is aware that the 'blokey pub culture' surrounding the industry means she has to be careful if she goes to the pub after work, not to give the wrong impression. Again Dotti is the only female CGI animator working at Hibbert Ralph. There are seven directors working at Hibbert Ralph, none are women.

An Vrombaut who wrote and directed 64 Zoo Lane, a pre school series for the BBC has never felt any prejudice against her because she is a woman but feels that the world of animation is dominated by young people. An first worked in animation before her children were born but decided to concentrate on writing and illustrating books after her second child was born. She only turned to animation again when her children were 7 and 9 years old. An. She feels many animators move on to new pastures when they reach their mid-thirties and this is even more true for women. "I know of 2 female animators who set up garden design businesses. I myself have worked in both animation and publishing and animation is without a doubt the more stressful occupation and so less compatible with family life.' When asked about the ratio of men to women on the production of 64 Zoo Lane, the majority of animators were men and the production staff were mainly women. An created the series and then directed it with three men.

Kilt from A Time and A Time



Sarah Cox set up Arthurcox in 2002 with fellow animator Sally Arthur. She has worked consistently since 1995 as a commercials director whilst simultaneously making her own films and producing. The company is run by Sarah and has women doing jobs such as executive producer, producer, and

festival organizer. There are nine directors working at Arthurcox, and three of them are women.

Sarah has experienced some patronizing comments from men during her career but feels this is par for the course. Sarah Cox seems to balance running a company, with jobbing animation and also finding time to make her own work. Sarah recalls that when she started work there were a lot of women in the animation industry, especially in the art department, where women have traditionally lived. There were also some inspirational women directors like Sue Young.

Comparing and contrasting the career paths of these key women in the animation profession through the decades provides some interesting insights into the industry. In the past the very idea of women working in the industry was unheard of it. Feminism in the seventies meant that more women were getting involved but not in particularly powerful or influential roles. Towards the end of the seventies women were starting to break into areas such as directing and producing but again it was an exception. Leeds animation workshop was particularly strident with it's feminist ideology and positive role models for women. In the eighties, positive discrimination and new TV channels such as C4 with it's exciting remit meant that new ideas and fresh ways of thinking were encouraged. Women were taking charge, power dressing was fashionable and feminism seemed old fashioned and out of date. As far as that generation of women were concerned, feminism was for extremist man hating lesbians not for 'go getting' career women who wanted it all – career, relationship, and children. During the nineties women in creative roles flourished but as the funding fell away, the world of animation in Britain became more commercial. Women's involvement in the key creative positions started to fall away. Claire Kitson recalls that when Channel 4 became too difficult a place to work, she had no desire to work there anymore. Could this be the reason why fewer female graduates are getting key creative roles than men? It's just too difficult.

After questioning a number of academic lecturers about the male to female ratio on animation courses round the country it became evident that it was quite evenly split between male and female students on most animation courses - unless, the animation course was specifically 3D CGI when it was predominantly boys. What is stopping women from becoming directors and lead animators even when there are companies run by women who are actively seeking out women for these roles? Why is it that women animation directors are still the exception? Why is that more boys are drawn to studying 3D CGI than women? Why is it that a women has only just won an Oscar for best live action director? Why is it that most women want to work as producers and not directors? Is there a simple explanation? Are men from Mars and women from Venus? Is it simply our conditioning or something inherent in our nature? Is it the way we are educated? Do women's brains absorb information differently to men and is film making one of those skills that women are destined to fail at? Or is it quite simply that we still live in a sexist society that makes it quite hard for a women to achieve her full creative potential? At this stage in the game I would have thought that there would be

a more equal split between men and women animation directors. What ever the reason, there is a distinctive lack of women animation directors in Britain today compared to the late eighties and early nineties even though there are equal numbers of men and women on most animation courses. This paper doesn't answer why this has happened it just opens up a discussion and highlights the fact that it is happening and is an on going piece of research.

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