

## VISUALISATION



# VISION ON

*The visualisation of ideas can dramatically change the way we work and think*

*by Roman Krznaric*

**T**he daily sweat and struggle of writing is my idea of having a good time. I have dedicated more than a decade of my life to it, believing that the written word is the most powerful way to convey the kinds of ideas that can inspire us to rethink our own lives and contribute to social and political change.

At least, that is what I used to believe. About 18 months ago, my faith in the written word was turned on its head when I gave a talk on empathy at RSA House. My lecture was transformed into an RSA Animate called *The Power of Outrospection*, drawn by the extraordinary hand of Andrew Park, founder of animation studio Cognitive.

The RSA Animate series, in which talks by thinkers such as Steven Pinker, Ken Robinson and Barbara Ehrenreich are illustrated in a 10-minute online video, has been an international phenomenon that has revolutionised the world of visual learning, with YouTube views in the tens of millions. I have always found them brilliant, funny, original and thought provoking.

But I never imagined that having my own words and ideas rendered into an animation would have such a profound impact on the way I worked, influencing the shape of my

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ILLUSTRATION: JAMIE JONES/MP ARTS

## “WHAT MATTERS TO ME IS NOT JUST THAT PEOPLE REMEMBER MY IDEAS, BUT THAT THEY TRULY UNDERSTAND THEM”

book, *Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution*, and even making me question my identity as a writer.

I should have realised this might happen, since there is overwhelming evidence that images are a remarkably effective way to communicate complex ideas. This is in part because they are so good at helping us remember information, taking advantage of the huge space given over to the visual cortex in the human brain.

A recent study of the RSA Animate technique by the psychologist Richard Wiseman showed that there is a 15% increase in recall (a massive amount in the science of memory) when someone views an illustrated version of a psychological concept compared with when they watch a talking head conveying the same information. A famous study at the University of Texas found that people remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, and 50% of what they see and hear. Statistics like these should give any writer who is in the business of communicating ideas serious pause for thought.

Of course, what matters to me is not just that people remember my ideas, but that they truly understand them. And this is where RSA Animate is so important. Take a concept like empathy. I could explain that it comes in two forms: affective empathy, where you mirror or share someone’s emotions, and cognitive empathy, where you step into someone else’s shoes and look at the world from their perspective. This might make immediate sense to you, or it might not. But if you really want to get it, have a look at my RSA Animate. There you will find, for instance, a drawing of George Orwell swapping his suit for the clothes of a tramp (with music from the BBC children’s classic *Mr Benn* in the background), then walking into the slums of east London to experience what it was like to live on the streets in the late 1920s, an episode of his life described in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. I think it does more to convey the meaning and importance of cognitive empathy than almost anything I could say or write. And it does so with a sense of humour that I envy, making the idea more memorable and interesting.

This recognition of the power of visualisation has changed me as a writer. For a start, it has influenced my own creative practice: I have come to understand that pictures can help me

think. So, when writing *Empathy*, I turned a whole wall of my attic study into a giant whiteboard and covered it with sketches and diagrams of ideas for the book, creating an explosion of badly drawn stick figures, Venn diagrams and looping arrows. I even attempted to replicate illustrations from my *Power of Outrospection* animation, such as Mr Spock from *Star Trek* trying to empathise with a strange rock creature. My trusty Moleskine notebooks, filled with words scrawled on ruled lines, looked incredibly old-fashioned and linear by comparison.

The way I learn has also been transformed. Now, when I make a trip to my favourite research hideaway, the Upper Reading Room at Oxford’s Bodleian Library, I take headphones with me, since I am just as likely to be watching a video as reading an article in an academic journal.

The main impact of my encounter with visualised ideas, however, has been in how I choose to communicate my own. I have faced up to the fact that the legacy of 500 years of print culture has been to give excessive weight to the written word, and that I need to liberate myself from it. The way I approach things today is that I do not try to ‘write a book’, but rather ‘launch an idea’. This means recognising that people learn in different ways and that I need to tap into our multiple intelligences. So when my book *Empathy* was recently published, it was released alongside videos and podcasts to spread the message in a variety of forms. I launched the online Empathy Library, a digital treasure trove where you can find reviews and ratings not just of books on the theme of empathy, but also feature films, documentaries and video shorts.

My next project, in part inspired by the public response to the RSA Animate, is to found an Empathy Museum, where visitors step into the shoes of people who are different from themselves. It aims to be an immersive sensory experience where you will encounter not just the written word, but also images and sounds, and have conversations and experiences that catapult you into the perspectives of others, just as Orwell experienced.

I still love writing, and plan to spend plenty of hours, even years, sweating and struggling at my keyboard. But now that the door of visualised ideas has opened my mind, there is no turning back. ■