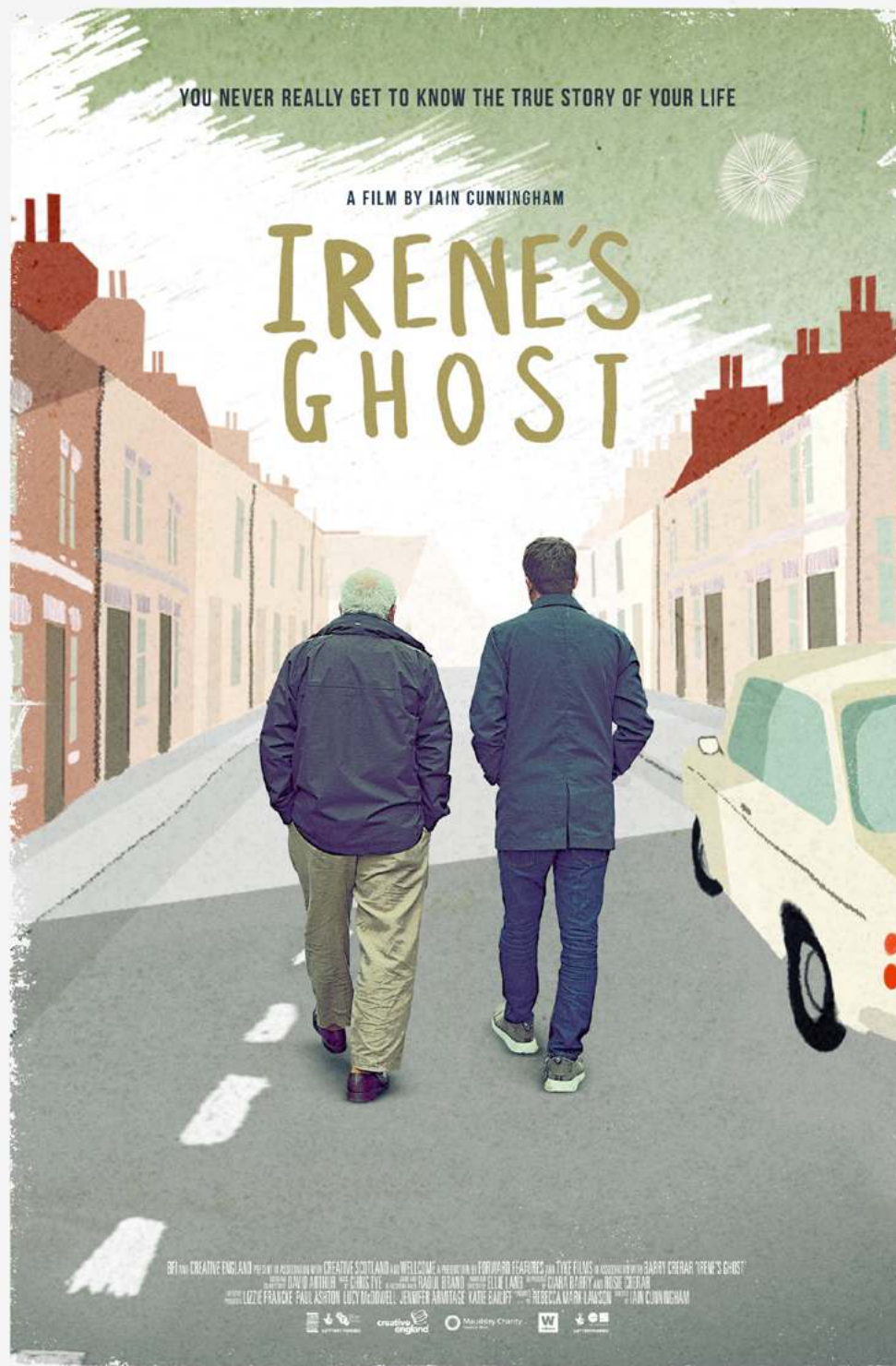




IRENE'S GHOST





Type of output:
Digital/Visual
Media
(Animation)

by
Ellie Land

Left: Film Poster
Photo credit: *Coffee and Cigarettes*

CONTENTS



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

SUMMARY	4
TIMELINE	5-7
RESEARCH CHALLENGE	8
CONTEXT	9-10
METHODS AND PROCESSES	11-17
DISSEMINATION	18-23
REFERENCES	24-25
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	26

SUMMARY

Irene's Ghost (2018) is an award-winning part-animated feature documentary examining memory and trauma associated with the loss of a parent. As an extended body of practice-based research and collaborative enquiry, the project developed novel working practices for multidisciplinary teams in digital storytelling.

The research considered how animation design can translate autobiographical material and memories, and how drawing can be used to create emotive narratives that uphold positive representations of mental health. The research also tested how transitions between animation and documentary spaces could be a narrative device.

The scope for animation as a representational device in documentary filmmaking was explored in the collaboration between Land and Director, Iain Cunningham. *Irene's Ghost*, as an animated film, is freed from the 'indexical bind' (Nichols) of other forms of narrative documentary media. The challenge within this process was to maintain the strength of what animation can do within the context of a multidisciplinary approach.

The project drew upon feminist research methodologies and links to co-design methods by offering a radical approach designed to dismantle the hierarchal screen production standard whereby an edit is 'locked down'. The resulting 'open edit' becomes a methodology for collaboration and a space to facilitate dialogue and experimentation.

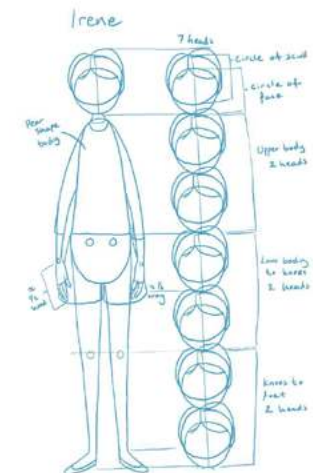
Irene's Ghost has been screened over 100 times in the UK and internationally, distribution secured by Sky Documentaries and on VOD. It was nominated for a BIFA Discovery Award 2018 and has won five awards including Best Animation at the Royal Television Society Awards 2020. The outcomes and the iterative processes of the research have been shared through conference presentations and live Q&A's.

The project was funded by the BFI £120,000(2015), the Wellcome Trust £10,000 (2015), Creative England £100,000 (2016), and Creative Scotland £50,000 (2017).

30% of the total funds secured were attributed to the research.

Listed as one of the Guardian's Best Films of 2019

[The Guardian 2019](#)



Right: The Wedding Concept Art

Photo credit: Ellie Land

Far right: Irene's breakdown

Photo credit: Brinck & Land

TIMELINE

2014	2015- 2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<p>SUMMER Ellie Land and Iain Cunningham meet. Iain Cunningham secures Wellcome Small Grant in Public Engagement to develop <i>Irene's Ghost</i>.</p> <p>Ellie Land and Iain Cunningham make a teaser trailer with a short animated clip insert.</p> <p>AUTUMN The film concept is pitched at Sheffield DocFest using the teaser trailer. Funding is awarded by the BFI.</p>	<p>2015 Iain Cunningham films the live action parts of the documentary.</p> <p>Land starts working on the animated segments, and develops the co-design approach, using memory collage and animatics.</p> <p>Land works with a team of animators to visualise the outcomes from the co-design phase.</p> <p>2016 Land develops the open edit approach.</p> <p>Cunningham continues to edit the live action parts of the film.</p>	<p>Cunningham and Mark Lawson secure further funding from Creative England and Creative Scotland.</p> <p>Land and Cunningham continue the open edit approach and revisit previous scenes. Further co-design ensues (Phase 2).</p> <p>Land works with a team of animators to visualise the outcomes from the second co-design phase.</p>	<p>Cunningham finishes the live action edit. Land finishes the animation segments. The film is completed.</p> <p>2018 –Nomination British Independent Award Discovery Award.</p>	<p>The film is screened competitively, internationally at film festivals.</p> <p>UK Tour commences.</p> <p>The Film wins awards: Best Feature Aesthetica Film Festival York, Best Feature Film Stock 19 London, Best Documentary Scottish Mental Health and Arts Festival Glasgow.</p> <p>Land presents a paper on the research outcomes at the 32nd Society for Animation Studies Lisbon, Portugal.</p>	<p>The film wins further awards: Best non-broadcast factual, Royal Television Society Awards, North East England, Best Animation, Royal Television Society Awards, North East England.</p> <p>Film is acquired by Sky Documentaries and screens throughout 2020.</p>

Irene's Ghost Trailer. Credit Iain Cunningham
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqAM8rjVQiU>

Link to the film with password:
<https://vimeo.com/252853902>

Password: *thistle*

Please note; the film is password protected due to compliance with numerous distribution deal contracts. Please do not share the link and the password further than for viewing purposes for the REF.

Below: Irene's Ghost (Film still)



RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The research sought to investigate:

- How can multidisciplinary creative teams navigate the challenges of animated documentary production?

During the enquiry the following questions evolved:

- How does animation design translate sensitive autobiographical material and memories?
- How can drawing create emotional visual narratives to enhance the positive representation of mental health?
- How can transitions between photographed and animated film spaces be a narrative device?

To address these questions Land experimented with animation design processes and collaborative methods. The visual result was achieved working with a team of animators and a post-production team.



Above: Iain Cunningham &
Ellie Land 2019

Photo credit: Iain Cunningham

Right: Irene at window (film still)

Photo credit: Ellie Land



CONTEXT

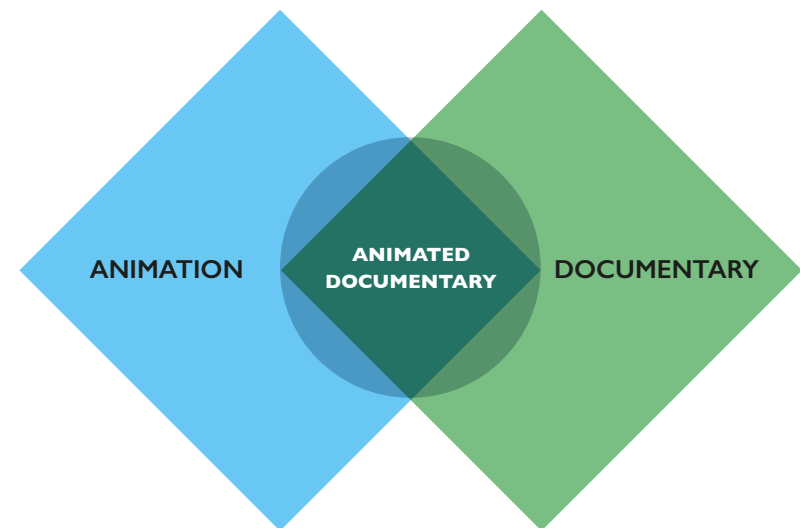
Land is an international award-winning animation practitioner and is renowned globally for her creative treatment of difficult subjects. Her work is screened internationally at film festivals and exhibited in galleries. Land is at the forefront of animated documentary practice and is regularly invited to speak on panels and be jury at film festivals.

Irene's Ghost builds on areas of Land's previous research such as the representation of mental health, the materiality of memory and trauma in animation, and drawing for narrative and co-creation methods. The research represents a significant shift in Land's practice. It is her first long-form narrative and the first time she has worked with live-action documentary and collaborated with a live-action director. The research has drawn Land to investigate further how feminist methodologies are informing her practice.

The research contributes to debates relating to co-design, collaborative enquiry, co-creation and multidisciplinary team approaches in filmmaking. It advances emerging debates in how animation and live action practitioners co-exist in documentary production. There has been a long tradition of using animated segments in live-action documentary, usually relegating animation as marginal or 'other' to it; making use of the 'graphic expository mode' (Hight, 2008) or 'mimetic substitution' (Honess Roe, 2017). In disrupting these traditional production methods, Land expands the representational capacity of animation by adjusting the perceptual boundaries between animation and live-action. The research is placed at the forefront of contemporary debates about multi-disciplinary creative approaches to animated documentary production (Honess Roe 2013, 2017, Moore 2018, Wells 1997).

Land is the co-convenor of the *Animation Practice as Research* symposium for the *Society for Animation Studies* and she is on the editorial board for the peer reviewed journal *Animation Practice, Production and Process*.

She is also the co-creator of Animateddocumentary.com. Her most recent film, *Bathroom Privileges*, has been nominated for the AHRC Research in Film Awards 2020.



Above: Disciplines Venn Diagram

Right:
Q&A *Animated Documentary*
Open City Docs Festival
London UK 2019.
Photo credit: OCDfest



METHODS AND PROCESSES

Method 1 - Memory Collage and Co-design Methods

Land and Cunningham had independent ideas on how to visually represent each scene in the story. Using the co-design method of collage, and with Cunningham as the 'expert of his own experience,' they devised a format called 'memory collage.' This gave the team a neutral space away from the drive of live-action to share the potentials of the project and enable Land to pinpoint a visual direction.



Above: Example of memory collage
for the scene *Book and skate*

Photo credit: Ellie Land

Method 2 – Animatics

Land introduced animatics to Cunningham. Animatics are used widely in industry and research. They are an animation specific method that communicate production elements such as narrative, design and sound in a simplified format. These are crucial in a production scenario as they enable teams to understand the vision of the director, without involving large amounts of resource. Creating the animatics deepened the conversation between Land and Cunningham and facilitated knowledge exchange for other stakeholders to be involved.



Right: Example of the wedding scene.
Showing the animatic process above
and also the final render below

Photo credit: Ellie Land

Process 1: The Open Edit

Land developed a new approach to narrative construction. Typically, in hybrid productions live-action elements are 'locked in place' on a timeline in editing software. This is then handed to the animation team to animate around the live-action, thus placing the live-action in an elevated position to which the animation has to respond, inhibiting opportunity for experimentation in the latter. Land and Cunningham kept the process flexible and open in order to facilitate experimentation between the animation and the live-action, with a 'live edit' scenario.

Crucially, Cunningham allowed Land to edit his work and Land allowed Cunningham to edit her work. This trust between the two producers enabled a more seamless transition between live-action and animated worlds.

To further engender this, Land created animatics that could be edited in various ways to make decisions on the best edit outcome for the film. This was an iterative cycle, versions of edits were passed between Land and Cunningham with each able to make adjustments until they both agreed on the outcome.

Below:

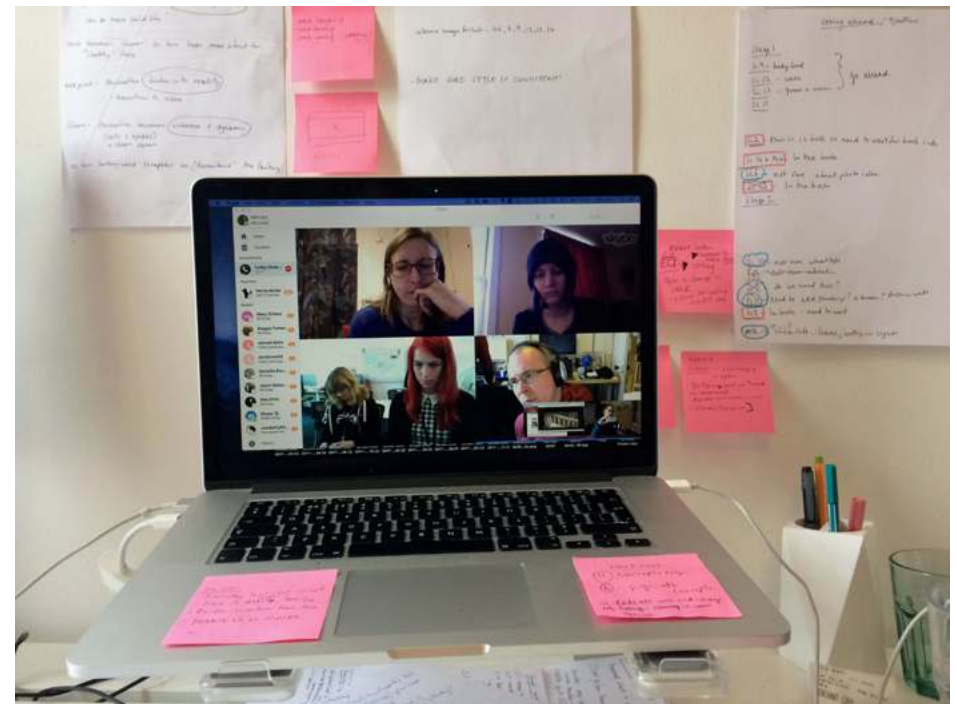
Example of the scene Willington Street,
showing the live action and animation
in transition

Photo credit: Land & Cunningham



Process 2: International Team Work

Once Land had a definitive design in mind and the narrative sequence had been agreed through the animatic process, she worked with a team of animators and compositors to fully realise the final images. Land chose Photoshop and TV Paint as the most suitable animation production solution. The animation segments are composited together with the live-action in software called After Effects and Fusion. The software enabled Land to utilise 3D space to bring the elements together. The animation production team were spread out geographically across Europe and they communicated via Skype and Google Drive. Integral to this process was an understanding of how teams work remotely. Land encouraged the team to work effectively by utilising the following protocols: listening to and understanding the practice of each other, sharing knowledge, and identifying and celebrating each individual artists' contribution.



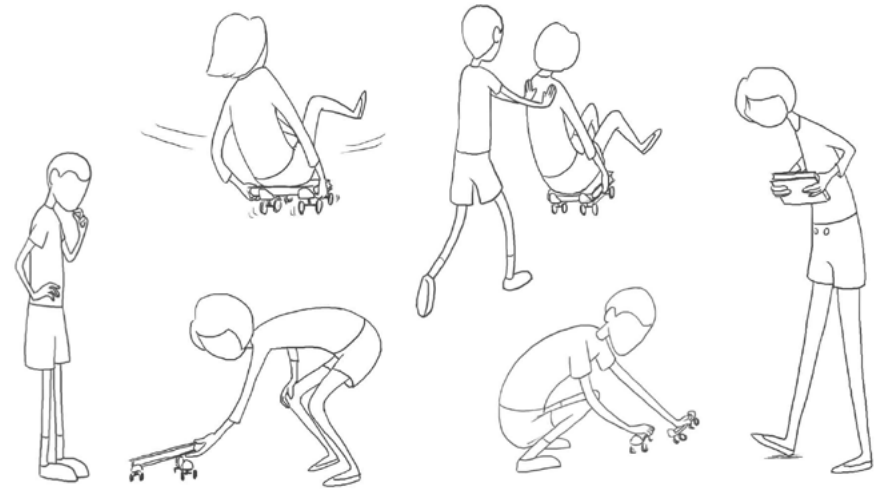
Above: Team meeting on Skype 2017

Photo credit: Ellie Land

Process 3: Digital Drawing

The animation is created with digital 2D drawn images. Land drew directly into the computer using a Wacom tablet. Land's drawing style in digital form echoes the techniques used in traditional drawing practices. Textures, sketchy lines and the feeling of paper were included through the choice of brushes used and the application of digital textures. Photoshop and TV Paint were utilised as these are the best digital tools for handling textures.

This was a new process for Land to develop as there were stylistic choices that could only be rendered digitally.



Above right: *Book and Skate*
Digital Clean up
Photo credit: Paulina Brinck



Below right: Irene and Don Design
Wedding Outfits
Photo credit: Ellie Land

Left: Irene Design
Photo credit: Land & Brinck



Process 4: Digital Mapping

In the final version of the film, animation floods the 'real world' (live action) as a way of visualising less concrete ideas, such as Cunningham's memories and dreams. These moments are also known as 'transitions' when we are 'transitioning' from the photographed reality to the internal reality of Cunningham.

This posed a complex problem, as visually the live action utilises 3D space, and this conflicts with the 2D methods Land used in Photoshop. This could result in the animated elements looking 'stuck on top' of the live action, and not part of the scene visually. Land wanted to embed the animation into the scene.

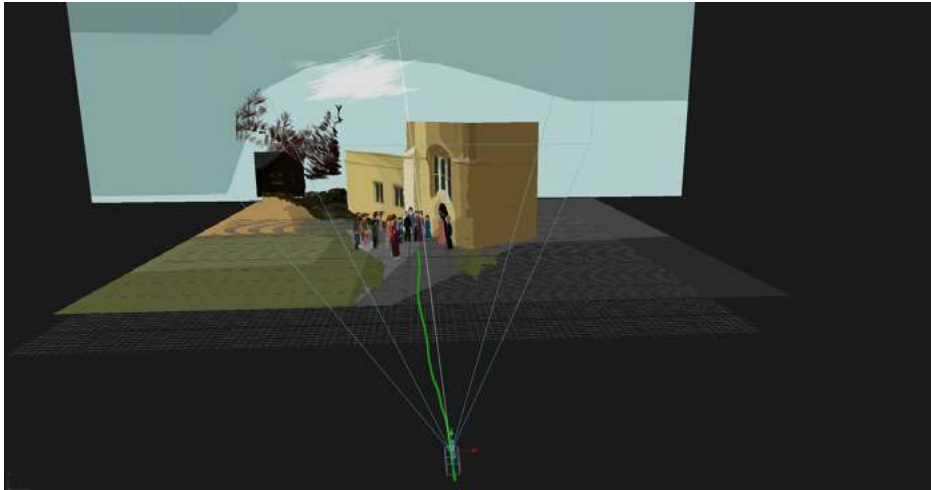
To remedy this Land's 2D artwork needed to possess a feel of 3D space or mimic the look of 3D space to blend into the live action world.

Land worked with compositing artist, Loday Gonpo. One example to discuss is the wedding scene in the film. The camera pulls out of the animated wedding scene, which slowly erases to reveal the same church in live action, but now modern day and empty. They experimented with 3D mapping of 2D drawing, by recreating the 3D shot by building shapes that mimic real life and then projecting the 2D images onto the shapes. Gonpo added a camera move that copied the live action camera move.

Below:

This is a node tree, it maps out the layers of artwork connect together.

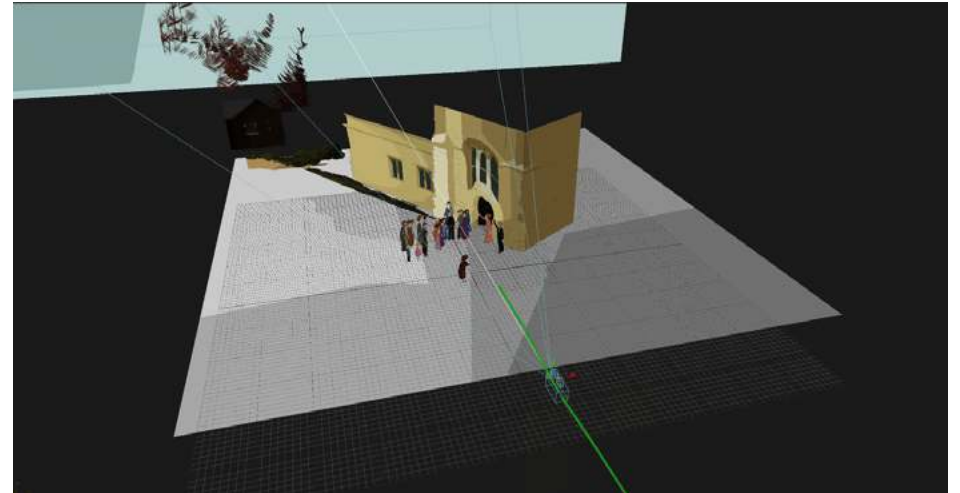
Photo credit: Loday Gonpo



Below:

This shot shows you how the layers are placed.

Photo credit: Gonpo & Land



Below and right:

This is what the shot looks like when we see the view of the camera.

Photo credit: Gonpo & Land



DISSEMINATION

Feature length Film

80 mins, colour. Digital and Film

VIEWING FIGURES APPROX. 30,000 (Land estimate across all venues)
(to May 2020)

Awards

- 2020 Winner, [Best non-broadcast factual, Royal Television Society Awards](#), North East England.
- 2020 Winner, [Best Animation, Royal Television Society Awards](#), North East England.
- 2019 Winner, [Best Feature, Aesthetica Film Festival](#), York
- 2019 Winner, [Best Feature, Film Stock 19](#), London.
- 2019 Winner, Best Documentary, Scottish Mental Health and Arts Festival.
- 2018 Nomination [British Independent Award Discovery Award](#).
- 2018 Nominated for a BIFA Discovery Award, which stated “*the creative use of animation and documentary to be significant example*” of this genre.

Broadcast

- [SKY Documentaries](#) UK and Ireland June 22nd 2020, September 23rd 2020

Conference paper (Double-blind peer reviewed)

Land, E., (2019). ‘Place as catalyst for a Critical Discourse and Collaborative Language for Animated Documentary,’ *Society for Animation Studies* Lisbon, Portugal.

Screenings

- September 2018 Dinnard Film Festival France (Peer reviewed)
- October 2018 London BFI Film Festival and Q&A (Peer reviewed)
- February 2019 Glasgow International Film Festival (Peer reviewed)
- February 2019 Ciné O’Clock, Villeurbanne France (Peer reviewed)
- March 2019 Borderlines film festival (Peer reviewed)
- March 2019 Foyle Film Festival Ireland (Peer reviewed)
- April 2019 Full Frame Film Festival Durham USA (Peer reviewed)
- May 2019 Scottish mental health festival Glasgow (Peer reviewed)
- July 2019 Skibbereen Arts festival Ireland (Peer reviewed)

UK cinema tour starting in May – September 2019

- Bertha Doc House, London + Q&A x 8 screenings
- Glasgow Film Theatre, Glasgow + Q&A
- Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle + Q&A x 3 screenings
- Home, Manchester + Q&A x 4 screenings
- Strand Arts Centre, Belfast + Q&A
- Midland Arts Centre, Birmingham + Q&A
- Film house, Edinburgh + Q&A
- Curzon Soho, London + Q&A
- Abbey Theatre, Nuneaton x2 + Q&A
- The Dukes, Lancaster x2 screenings + Q&A
- Macrobert Arts Centre, Stirling
- Phoenix Leicester + Q&A
- Curzon Oxford + Q&A
- Watershed Bristol x 3 screenings
- Square Chapel, Halifax
- Showroom, Sheffield + Q&A
- Hyde Park Picture House Leeds + Q&A
- The Broadway, Letchworth + Q&A
- The Poly, Falmouth
- Broadway, Nottingham + Q&A
- Storyhouse Chester
- Colwall Village Hall, Colwall (Flix in the Stix)

Funding and Partners

The project was funded by the BFI £120,000(2015), the Wellcome Trust £10,000 (2015), Creative England £100,000 (2016) and Creative Scotland £50,000 (2017). 30% of the total funds secured were attributed to the research.

The film team collaborated with Dr Alain Gregoire. An NHS specialist consultant specialising in mother and baby psychiatry and founder of [Maternal Mental Health Alliance](#).

Below: British Independent
Film Awards 2019
Photo credit: BIFA



Below: RTS Awards 2020
Photo credit: RTS awards



Reviews

Listed as one of the Guardian's Best Films of 2019

[The Guardian 2019](#)

“Everyone knows what Larkin wrote about parents (“They fuck you up”), but Cunningham focuses on the second line of the poem: “They may not mean to.” There’s an acceptance here that almost everyone is doing the best they can. It’s a slight film, yet profound.”

[The Guardian 2019](#)

“The distorted, abstract subjectivity of Cunningham’s memory is vividly realised by animator Ellie Land, with occasional segues into footage of Cunningham’s infant daughter injecting Irene’s story with gentle optimism. In all, Irene’s Ghost is an affecting, honest observation of how grief can rip families apart – and make them whole again.”

★★★★

[The Up and Coming - Andrew Murray](#)

“What really makes Irene’s Ghost stand out is the incorporation of short animated sequences that fill in for flashbacks. The minimalistic style not only invokes the childhood imagination of a young Cunningham, but their vibrancy and general childlike innocence is used to echo the rose-tinted nostalgia of the happy memories we have – and the ones we create for ourselves. And when the film touches on tougher memories, the animation style provides a whole new meaning to these moments through heart-breaking and even disturbing imagery.

Irene’s Ghost is an incredibly personal and utterly powerful journey of discovery that revolves around uncovering the tragic story of a lost relative; yet it’s much more than this. It’s a profound examination of the power of memory on how what we remember not only shapes how we think of the past, but how we see ourselves in the present. We won’t be forgetting Irene’s Ghost anytime soon.”

4/5 stars

[Rhys Handley Room with a View](#)

Below:

Iain and Don 1976 (film still)

Photo credit: Ellie Land



REFERENCES

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Honess Roe, B. (2017) 'Interjections and Connections: The Critical Potential of Animated Segments in Live Action Documentary Animation' *Animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, 12 (3), 272-286.

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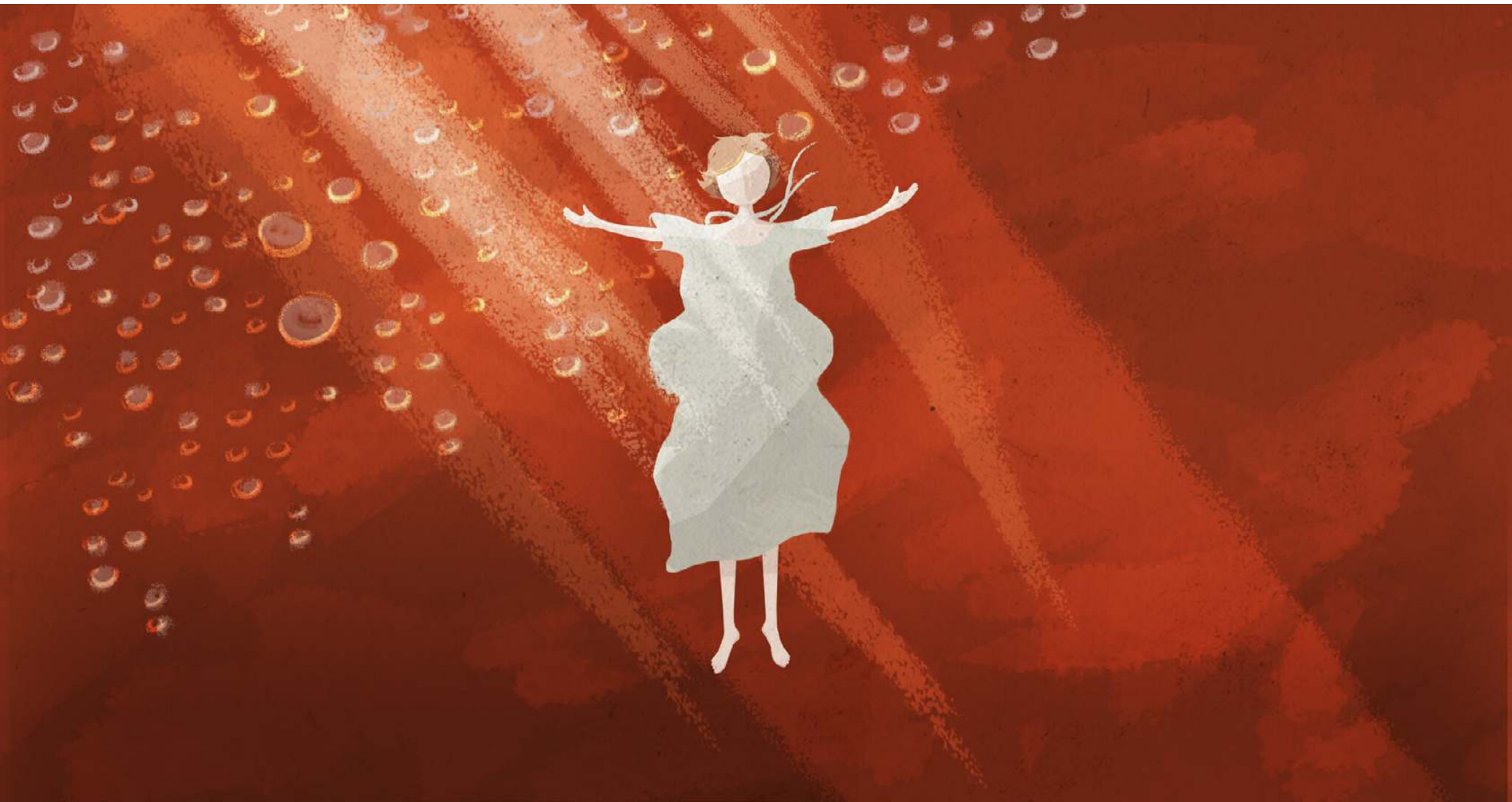
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Above: Irene's fate (film still)

Photo credit: Ellie Land



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Iain Cunningham - Project conceiver and Director of the Live Action

Becky Mark Lawson – Project Producer

Funders:

BFI

Wellcome

Creative England

Creative Scotland

Right: Irene & Iain Cunningham,
1976.

Photo credit: Iain Cunningham



