

The AFI DOCS Interview: PICTURE CHARACTER With Director Martha Shane

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

PICTURE CHARACTER plays as part of the Spectrum program at AFI DOCS at the AFI Silver Theatre in Silver Spring, MD on Saturday, June 22 and at the Landmark E Street Cinema in Washington DC on Sunday, June 23. Director Martha Shane in attendance. Buy tickets to the screening here.



PICTURE CHARACTER is fun, informative and shows that these ideograms are anything but simple. Following the proposals of 3 groups who seek approval from Unicode Consortium for new emojis, the film explores many important questions. Are emojis a new language? Who decides whether a new emoji gets added to the universal lexicon? And how do we tell our stories using these pictures? With emojis, representation matters.

Ian Cheney is an EmmyÂ®-nominated and Peabody Award-winning documentary filmmaker. PICTURE CHARACTER is his eighth feature-length documentary. His past films include KING CORN, THE GREENING OF SOUTHIE, TRUCK FARM, THE CITY DARK, THE SEARCH FOR GENERAL TSO,

BLUESPACE, THE SMOG OF THE SEA, THE MOST UNKNOWN and THIRTEEN WAYS. A former Knight Science Journalism fellow at MIT, he has also produced short films for the New York Times, the Guardian and The Atlantic. Since 2015, he has been an adjunct professor at Yale.

Martha Shane is an Emmy AwardÂ®-winning documentary filmmaker. Her directorial debut AFTER TILLER premiered in the U.S. Documentary Competition at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival and won the EmmyÂ® for Best Documentary. Martha produced and co-wrote the award-winning documentary FROM THIS DAY FORWARD, which was theatrically released by Argot Pictures and broadcast on POV. In addition to directing and producing, Martha is an editor whose recent credits include 11/8/16, ACORN AND THE FIRESTORM and PERSONAL STATEMENT. We talked to her about her new film, PICTURE CHARACTER, that she co-directed with Ian Cheney.



Director Martha Shane

AFI: What led you to become a documentary filmmaker?

I studied film as an undergraduate at Wesleyan University and was lucky enough to spend four years reveling in the films of Hitchcock, Claire Denis, Hong Sang-Soo, Alan Berliner, and many other incredible filmmakers. After college, I wanted to be a fiction film editor, so that was initially what I decided to pursue. But, shortly after graduating from college, I got a job transcribing for a documentary, and from then on, I was hooked. I ended up producing and co-directing that film, and Iâ??ve been working in documentary ever since.

AFI: What inspired you to tell this narrative?

Sometime around 2012 when I first added the emoji keyboard to my phone, I had a week-long text exchange that was comprised exclusively of emoji. It was hilarious to see how much *could* be communicated with this limited set of icons and also where the communication broke down. Though I didnâ??t immediately realize it when I signed on to direct this movie, I think the questions generated from that experience are what initially drew me to the project. I was interested in the possibilities and limitations of a language of digital symbols, and yet the film ultimately evolved far beyond those initial questions.

AFI: How did you discover and work with the subjects in your film?

Jenny 8. Lee, our producer, became increasingly immersed in the world of emoji and Unicode during the period that we were making this film. She would send us cryptic texts about different emoji that were coming down the pipe, and, if we were intrigued, we would follow up, arranging calls on the phone or over Skype with the potential participants. The first time I spoke with Rayouf Alhumedhi, the teenage creator of the hijab emoji back in 2016, I was blown away by how eloquently she argued her case for the hijab emoji, and she ended up being the first person whose story we followed for the film.



Rayouf Alhumedhi, creator of the hijab emoji, in Vienna. (photo credit: Lucy Martens)

AFI: What was a particular challenge you faced while making the film?

Access to the Unicode Consortium was the biggest challenge, but, luckily, we went into the filmmaking process knowing that would be the case. The decisions about which emoji to add to the set each year are made in closed-door meetings of the Consortium, and we were banned from filming inside those meetings, or even filming the short presentations that our main subjects made to the Consortium.

Ultimately, we were able to interview several members of the Consortium, who were surprisingly candid with us about their experiences working on emoji and about the complicated decisions they face.

AFI: What do you hope audiences take away after screening your film?

I hope people will look a little bit more closely at the emoji on their phones and will think more about the stories behind the apps, platforms and devices that have become such an important part of our daily lives. It makes the experience of using the Hijab emoji or the T-rex or the Face with Raised Eyebrow more fun and meaningful if you know the story behind it. And, more broadly, especially given the way that digital platforms and devices increasingly shape real world politics and peopleâ??s lives, itâ??s important that we understand whoâ??s building these technologies and what principles guide their decisions.

AFI: Why is Washington, DC a great location to screen your film?

Weâ??re excited to screen in Washington, DC because itâ??s such a diverse, international city and because itâ??s where many policies are set that affect questions central to our film, including how to increase diversity in the tech world, and who should organize and regulate the worldâ??s most popular digital communication platforms.

Buy tickets to PICTURE CHARACTER here.



* Featured Photo: Rayouf Alhumedhi, creator of the hijab emoji, in Vienna. (photo credit: Lucy Martens)

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