

Humanexus: A cinematic journey from cave scrawls to Twitter

By Sam Watermeier



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Humanexus opens with an earthy form of expression — mysterious drawings scratched on cave walls. What follows is an exhilarating 12-minute free-fall through the evolution of human communication — an animated look at the invention and impact of printing, radio, film, television, the Internet, etc.

The film is essentially what producer Katy Börner specializes in as a professor at IU — information visualization. For the project, she collaborated with animator Ying-Fang Shen and composer Norbert Herber.

You can see *Humanexus* for free Monday, Sept. 8, 7 p.m. at [IU Cinema](#), where it will be followed by a panel discussion with Börner, Herber, and Shen.

Shen, a former IU School of Fine Arts associate, and Herber, an IU Department of Telecommunications senior lecturer and sound artist and musician, talked with me about the development of *Humanexus*.

NUVO: The latter part of the film reminded me of Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples' "public screen theory" — the idea of people and their public and private information being swept up in the sea of new media.

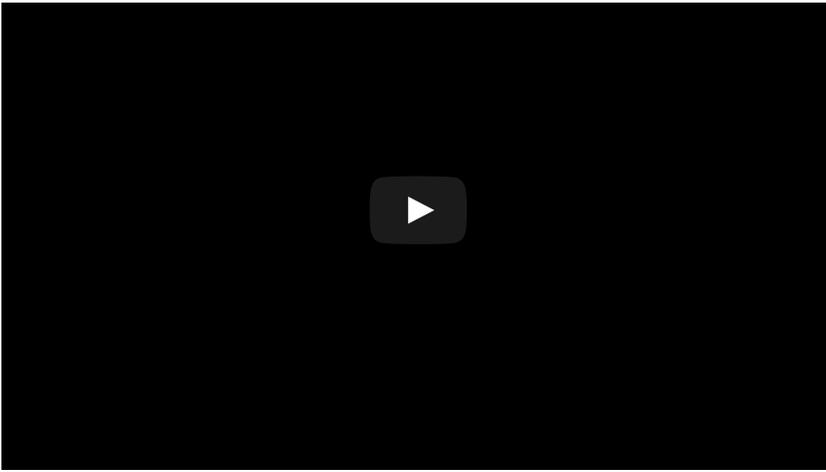
Humanexus visualizes that idea at one point, showing people swimming up to the surface of that media sea and gasping for air, seemingly yearning for more natural, organic forms of expression or ways of experiencing the world.

Norbert Herber: I'm only familiar with the [public screen theory article](#) after finding it online and reading a little. One quote that really resonates with the film is, "The public screen images a complex world of opportunities and dangers." In *Humanexus*, we show three possible futures. Two of these futures highlight potential dangers and one the nascent opportunities in contemporary and future media and communication technologies.

In terms of the people swept up in the sea of media, what about someone who "broadcasts" their life in Facebook or Twitter? Reverse engineer the stream and shoot a film. Is it interesting? What sort of narrative or impression do we get from the details of their culinary adventures and vacations? The cynical part of me is exhausted (gasping for air) just thinking about it, but I suspect something very interesting could come out of a process like this. *Humanexus* explores the tension between the all-consuming seductiveness and transformative potential of communication technologies.

NUVO: The visuals and music have an organic, human quality, which provides a contrast to the more inhuman forms of communication explored in the film. How did the visual and aural style of this film develop?

Ying-Fang Shen: The topic seemed very broad to me at first. So, as a visual storyteller, I tried to narrow it down by putting more emphasis on the changes of one aspect of communication. My first thoughts were: How could people communicate even very simple ideas without verbal language? What was it like when there wasn't a system yet? Then, I thought of mysterious cave paintings, and how people nowadays respond to them. Since the story starts at the Stone Age, cave paintings become my first inspiration and influenced the visual style of the rest part. I chose to progress the story with the changes of media.



Herber: Many sound effects had to convey a universal quality. It was important to Ying-Fang that no one person or event make reference to a specific person, place, or historical occasion. I tried to be very specific at first (using a sound effect for EVERY event that made a sound) and it did not work. It was almost as if the animation style rejected it! I used a sparse number of sound effects to punctuate the larger arcs in the story but did it in a more musical way, or brought out elements from the music track and treated them more as sound design elements.

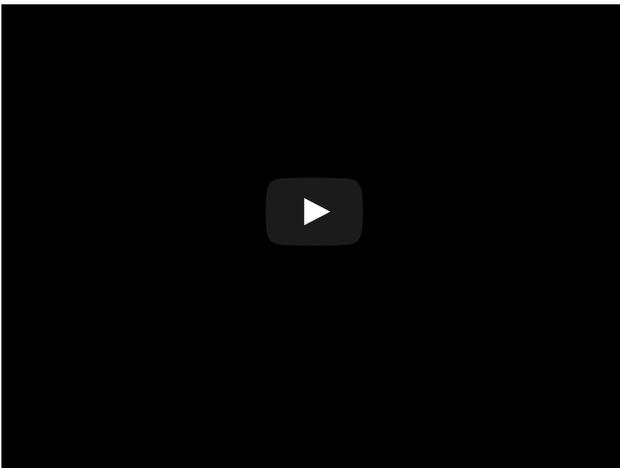
20th century sound effects were important due to the general noisiness of that century. In the film this starts at the industrial revolution and continues through cable TV and the era of 24-hour news. Early on it was apparent to me that this phenomenal din should be treated differently than other sections of the film. In some ways it makes me think of a technological adolescence, where we had to be loud and crass in order to come to terms with these new technologies and start to develop an understanding of what they can mean once they are integrated into our lives.

NUVO: It's ironic that, after watching a film which seems to call for more genuine, natural communication in the world, I'm speaking to you from behind a computer screen. What do you hope people will think about or say behind their computer or cell phone screens after seeing this film?

Herber: Today is the first time since the movie was finished that the three of us will meet in person. The entire project was done via Skype, email, phone, and text messages. We live in a world where this sort of communication is possible and embrace the potential of each medium.

We aren't calling for any specific type of communication. We hope that people will be moved to question their personal use of communication technology and reflect on how it impacts their life.

Shen: In the old times, when the telephone was not even popular, people relied a lot on in-person communication. They would go knocking a friend's door without hesitation. Nowadays, cell phone, e-mail, instant messengers make communication more efficient. However, has interpersonal intimacy really deepened and improved? Or has it become even harder?



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