"Beyond the City limits" – a novel approach reaching small-scale forest owners in Austria

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Keywords: engaging; communication; applied art; short videos; making off

Abstract

Raising awareness for managing forests towards climate change among private forest owners is a challenge. Especially when forest owners seem to remain unaddressed by classic information materials or are non-responding to offered consults, field trips or other forms of engagement by public institutions and other participants of the forestry community.

In a lecture named "Beyond the City limits" students of the University of Applied Arts Vienna were asked to bridge this gap and help form a connection between forest owners and the forest community by addressing forest owners with a different approach. As forest owners can be among all kinds of people of a modern society, those not engaged respond poorly to traditional communication formats and may respond well to another type of communication with a different mind-set, language and other media formats instead. Thirty-second nonverbal video clips were created in a seminar of video techniques in a contest format. Art students addressed forest owners in new and artistic ways. This short communication outlines the 'making-of' and describes our lessons learnt.

Text:

Small-scale forest owners are a heterogeneous group, gaining no significant income from forest management and having widely differing interests towards trees and forests and whose values and objectives are becoming more versatile (Weiss et al. 2019; Matilainen et al. 2019). A common European challenge is their alignment with forest policy values, particularly because an increasing forest area is managed by this group (Serbruyns and Luyssaert 2006; Van Herzele and Aarts 2013). Concerns are that non-expert owners of small forests cope

insufficiently with climate change related challenges and ultimately put the integrity of forests at risk, thereby sacrificing multiple ecosystem services.

Forest decision makers often communicates with "ideal-type" forest owners already involved in forest management (Kuipers et al. 2013; Ficko et al. 2019). Due to societal change several owners of small forests have adopted an urban lifestyle and have little skills and knowledge on forestry. They have different occupations and forest management is a spare-time activity or even a burden, competing with other spheres of everyday lives (Ziegenspeck et al. 2004) like housekeeping, care and leisure activities. Only a fraction of these forest owners have economic interests in their holdings (Wiersum et al. 2005) and the majority lacks interest in forest management information (Kuipers et al. 2013). The abundance of excess printed material in archives and storage rooms tells that new ways of communication should be explored. Addressing a new and poorly-defined group of forest owners calls for creative communication channels (Koller and Gaggermeier 2019; Lawrence et al. 2020). Our challenge was to lead owners of small forests towards our information repositories by means of media they find interesting and entertaining.

For this purpose, the Austrian Research Centre for Forests (BFW) wished to think out of the box and to find innovative and original ways of communication. Instead of calling for classic and forestry-oriented communication specialists, the BFW submitted a call for tender to the students of the course "Filmmaking" at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. First the students attended an introductory class where foresters explained the situation. Few students had experience to practical forestry, but many could relate to the topic via relatives and family members. The general objectives of forestry were explained in terms of the need to adapt to climate change, the sustainable use of renewable resources, and the provision of ecosystem services. It was important for the initiators not to frame too much the content or means of the short films in advance. The introduction was intentionally non-technical in order to avoid forestry stereotypes and to give ample room for own emotional approaches towards forestry.

The students were asked to develop a concept covering four criteria: **bridging urban space with forest** and keeping in mind that the video would be **used as a preClip** leading to a website thematically outlined (forest), but not specifically defined (multiple, international use). The video clips will have to be short, with a **maximum of 30 seconds** length and **solely "image- and sound-based",** which means without any written or spoken words as the the visual support should make sense by itself. Time (one semester) and season (late autumn/winter) were other limitations the students had to face.

The workflow was divided in four phases, each phase embedded in its own course:

- Concept development (logline, message, storyboard)
- Camera work and video production (skills)
- Shooting work (at location)
- Postproduction (editing, sound design)

The first phase was crucial for the final results and each student presented and discussed three ideas with the film advisor. The most promising idea was chosen for further development. The students had little experience in making video clips. Thinking in "actions" instead of pictures was a challenge when developing scripts.

The students were asked to produce a logline describing the message of their idea. The logline is a "focus keeper" and should be simple, clear, and recognizable in the storyboard and the final film. A student Francesca Centonze, followed the logline "we cannot stay passive and watch; we need to take action **all together**". In her storyboard a cinema audience got engaged in forest disturbances, they take action together, and arrive at a happy end. In Figure 1 we see a rough description of the shifts from a healthy to a disturbed scenery.
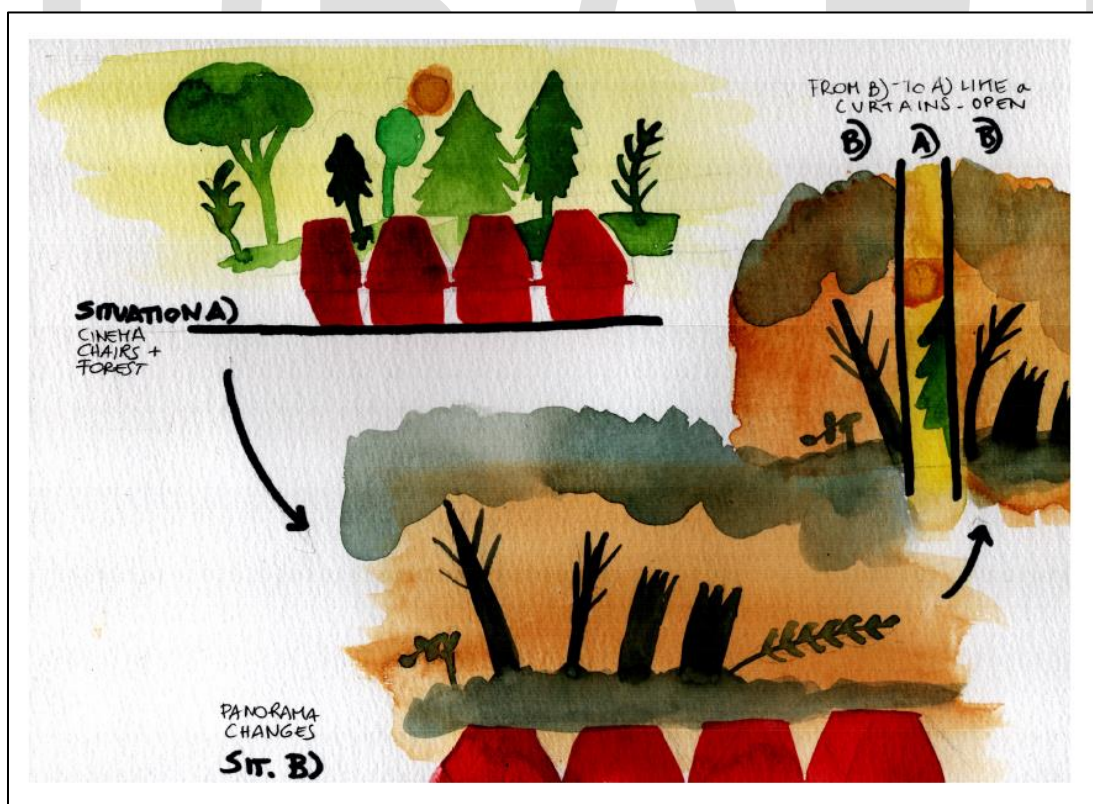

Figure 1 part of Storyboard of "the stage" by Francesca Centonze

A detailed storyboard comprising the most relevant scenes from a camera perspective was presented by Pius Hagenauer in Figure 2.The detailed elaboration of the storyboard was highly instrumental for filming and postproduction.
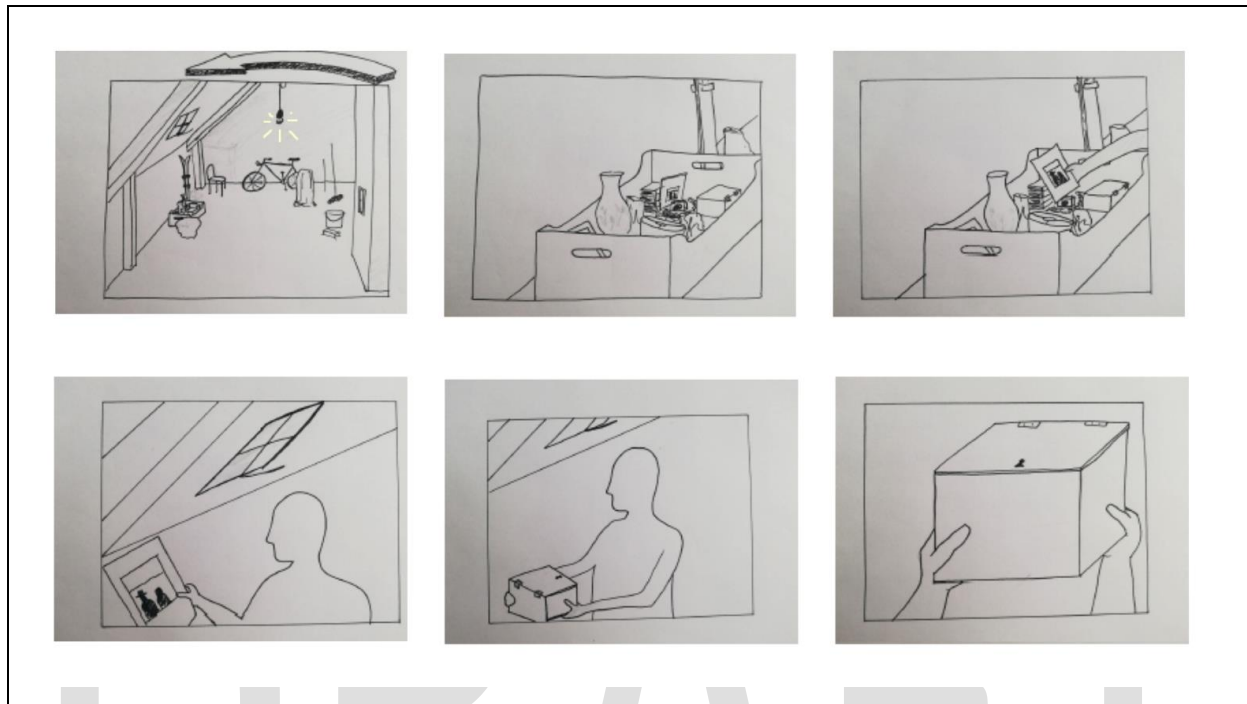

Figure 2 part of storyboard from "Treasure in a box" by Pinus Hagenauer

Concepts and films were presented to an international jury. The six jurors had backgrounds in forest sciences, communications and art. The assessment criteria were novelty and originality of the concept, clarity and relevance of the message (simple, explicit, understandable, applicable, etc.), artistic performance and emotion register (sadness, humour, nostalgia, etc.). Jurors could give their equal votes and by summing up the votes all concepts and films were ranked. Six concepts were chosen for realization and three films got an award.

The three video clips reveal two different approaches: While the films by Pius Hagenauer "Treasure in a box" and "Urban Jungle" by Lena Mair work with abstraction, primarily aiming towards emotions of the viewer, Sara Anzola in "Forest Engine" put her message more directly.

"Treasure in a box" by Pius Hagenauer essentially shows us the opening of a wooden box with memorabilia. As the action takes place in an obviously old, dusty attic, it immediately captivates the viewer. The director catches the viewer skilfully with appropriate cinematic means. A squeaking door before entering is a classic technique to reinforce suspense. A sound of footsteps on stairs and focusing the camera on the feet, as well as the backlight sequences, are precisely calculated in their effect. The short cut back on the face of the proponent, a hint

of a smile when looking at long forgotten photos illustrate the mood of a memory from the past, as well as blowing away the dust before opening the box. The view first into and then through the box into a forest landscape, into which the camera zooms in, is backed up by twittering of birds, which swells in harmonically with the camera movement and guides us from the dark attic into the light endlessness of nature.

The message of the second proposal "Urban Jungle" by Lena Mair, is that "my forest is threatened by fire and bugs, I have to care for it". The video consists in rapid sequences of cuts and shock-like sound effects. Accordingly, the aggressive red dress and lips of the main character is just as central as the incision of visual impulses of movement, which are set against the slow-motion-like movements of the proponent. The film focuses on broken assembly rhythm, which captivates the viewer. This movement contrasts with the essentially static camera setting, as does the cutting in of troubling images (fire, skin). The composition of insects on bare skin and the position of the woman's head rotated by 180 degrees intensify the unpleasant effect and thus the contrast to the final setting, in which plants appear as salvation.

The third animation film "Forest engine" by Sara Anzola focuses on the contrast between machine and nature, whereby the plants remain strikingly animated. The only non-animated objects in the film are human hands, the content of which is also intended to be the decisive part. First the machinery of the forest is not maintained and get stuck, only by human intervention and care the machinery works and threes grow. The tracking shot of the first six seconds is sensational and doesn't have to shy away from comparison with known sequences of this genre. The statement that both the machine and the nature require human intervention is simple yet effective.

The film length of 30 seconds suffices to encapsulate the message into a narrative structure entertaining recipient. The selected format is noticeably longer than advertising clips and fulfil criteria of social media.

All students were foremost committed to their art class such as architecture, media art, industrial design, and visual arts. Their concepts showed individuality. The challenge was to dress the artistic expression in a comprehensive film understandable for a wide audience. The balance between artistic freedom and the audience capacity to make sense of the message without any assistance (not even text) is important, as a wide audience would not get involved in experimental film language. To make the message explicit and clear at a first sight, the ideal film is based on a linear (narrative) structure, causal relationships and a clear end.

The film "Treasure in a box" fulfils most expectation of a linear storyline, catching our attention by nice pictures and good mood. Furthermore, this film reflects the perception of "keeping the tradition" and "not neglect the forest" which are listed by Ficko (2019) as the values most important for traditional forest owner, whereas "Urban Jungle" and "Forest Machine" address the motivations of "maintenance of the forest" in order to support forest health and sustainability which is more important to new forest owners (Ficko 2019).

Since the three artistic films work with different values and approaches and mobilized different emotional registers, each of them is able to address differing target groups in a heterogenic group of forest owners. These artistic film clips aim at stimulating forest owners' awareness about their "forgotten" or "neglected" forests and helps developing a connection again. Working as an eye-catcher, they support building bridges to a website and therefore to an organization. This means closing the gap between forest owner and experts among forestry institutions. To put this idea in use (or to operationalize this idea), the clips have to be seen by a large group of people, this has not yet happened, as creating a product does not necessarily mean implementing the product as well.

The clips can be used in campaigns as eye catcher in various ways: on the screen of an underground train, movie clip before a cinema movie, on social media channels, at conferences in slide presentations. A defined goal, the intended purpose and an evaluation process will be needed to take a look on the impact. As "forest awareness" among private forest owners is not … "marketed" by forestry institutions, evaluations only give an uncertain picture on a real impact inside people's mid. Yet, website visits after campaigning can be observed very well, as well as e.g. newsletter subscribers. With some large campaigns, surveys based on social science should be implemented for high quality evaluation on a very hard to grasp topic like this.

The added-value of mobilizing students instead of forest professional communicator consists in the "fresh air" they impulse to forestry communication, their lack of pre-conceived ideas and their lack of restraint. As they do not seek to deal carefully with the susceptibilities of the customer (the BFW) or to anticipate their expectations, the range of concepts they explore really goes off the beaten track. One difficulty is to make the difference between a pure artistic performance which would miss its target and an original message that shakes and call out the audience in way that would be useful for forestry.

By their liberty, artistic films are able to change our perception and maybe our behaviour. We think these short artistic films made by art students can provide a complementary channel of communication and engagement.

We are now in the second run of the project; a new group of students has presented their concepts. Due to COVID-19 the production of the next films has been prolonged and we expect the premiere to take place in October 2020. In the meantime, the described short moves will be spread on social media.

Acknowledgement

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 Videos: in case the Hyperlinks do not work:

"Treasure in a box": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTIDXPUs5gs

"Urban Jungle": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=goFJooUYMM8 and

"Forest Engine": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6X_0ef-qV30