# An Interview with Nina Paley

Jeff Fletcher

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Nina Paley is an independent filmmaker and artist who recently made waves in the animation world with her 72-minute feature animation "*Sita Sings the Blues*". In a phone interview with Ms. Paley that took place on Saturday, February 13th, 2010, Ms. Paley discusses some of her work and her ideas about Free Culture and Copyleft:

**Jeffrey Fletcher:** *Good afternoon, Ms. Paley. It is a pleasure to speak with you today.*

**Nina Paley:** Thank you. Thank you for spreading the word.

**JF:** *Tomorrow is Valentine's Day--what a great time to watch "The Greatest Breakup Story Ever Told"! Most of the readers of this interview probably know you most from your feature film "Sita Sings the Blues". It's been about two years since it has been released--*

**NP:** Well, not released, but since it had its festival premiere. It actually wasn't released until a year after that. It was in limbo.

**JF:** *Oh, yes, got it. Well what has your experience been with its reception/impact/criticism up to this point?*

**NP:** (Laughs) That's the whole interview in one question! My experience has been varied. The response has been very positive; the whole adventure has far exceeded my expectations. I am happier, more optimistic and excited about life than I ever thought I would be. All the trials and tribulations of the film's first year, including learning how illegal it was, and my various frustrating experiences with the world of independent film distribution brought me to *Free Culture*, and that is amazing.

**JF:** *A lot of students are blown away by the quality of story and imagery in the film, but when they find out that it was written/produced/directed/edited by one person it is even more astounding. Can you share with us how you came to realize that you could create this film essentially by yourself?*

**NP:** Yeah. It seemed possible. I mean, I've made short films by myself, and I thought, well this will be like making a lot of short-films, or making one very long short-film. And there's no, you know, there's no physical reason why this can't be done. So let me just try to do it. And I did. And now a lot more filmmakers are doing this. Its possible now because the technology is so, you know...the prices have come down so much and the power that any individual has to create media is hugely greater than it was just a few years ago.

**JF:** *Right. So mostly you're working in FLASH, but you actually have done stop-motion before? I think your first film was "Love Is"...*

**NP:** Yeah. Stop-motion clay, and I also did scratching and painting, and actual film, you know--direct animation. And I did some paper tests early on, and cut-out stuff when I was in my early teens, like actual physical cut-outs.

**JF:** *So even before you were doing comic strips you were actually experimenting with animation?*

**NP:** Yes, when I was either twelve or thirteen I borrowed this great camera belonging to my next door neighbor, and I played with that for two or three years, and then I gave up because there wasn't a real way to grow, in central Illinois in the early 80's if you were a girl.

**JF:** *So you pretty much taught yourself animation?*

**NP:** Yeah, I pretty much have. I certainly didn't study it at school. I used books, and I also...when I need to learn something that's not in books, I'm willing to approach people and ask them questions.

**JF:** *Is animation primarily what you do now? Or do you like to work in different types of media?*

**NP:** I still think of myself as an artist. I'm an artist who... I seem to be using animation a lot. I'm writing a lot now, I'm thinking a lot. But animation, or let's just say short-films, are a pretty effective medium in a world where attention is very limited. So I have ideas I want people to pay some attention to, and so I consider what is the best delivery method for these ideas, and in my skill set that's still animation.

**JF:** *I just watched "All Creative Work is Derivative"...*

**NP:** --Great!

**JF:** *...from the posting on your Facebook page. I find it fascinating that you have found how similar works of art from different times and places can be to each other. We're seeing a dance that took centuries in the making! Can you tell us about this work, and how you came upon this revelation?*

**NP:** Yes. I certainly knew that these works...I knew that lots of historical works influenced each other, and the project--the "*Minute-Memes*"--the message for this particular one is that all creative work builds on what came before. And I went to the Met Museum as a starting point because I had seen so many examples of that there before. And I brought a camera, a new low-light camera--another example of

how the price of technology is going down--makes more works possible for individuals to make that wouldn't have been possible in the past. Anyway, I just went and took the photos, looking for similarities, and thought 'Hey--maybe I could animate a single movement with every frame being from a different piece of art.' And I did! It was an experiment. I was like, 'Can I do this? Why yes! Yes, I can!' And I'm sure that I or someone else could do much, much better with that particular technique, and it's very recently that I finished it and I'm still thinking about it. Like 'Ooh, what if I go to the Rubin Museum and take a whole bunch of pictures from there? One from this place, and one from that place? What if I just go to a particular genre of art where everything is really similar? I bet I could do some cool stuff.' So I'm still thinking about this. I animated the last time I had this idea. I knew there were similarities there, and I wanted to express that. And I'm an animator and that's how it came out.

**JF:** *In the music world, we sometimes see artists taking other artists to court because one feels that the other has stolen from him musically. Some of my music teachers have pointed out how ridiculous this is because, in essence, we are all borrowing from each other, and from the history of art and music--*

**NP:** Let me stop you right there. That is awesome that your music teachers say that, because until very recently, everyone in college was taught that it's all stealing. So kudos to your music teachers for recognizing that. That's a new thing.

**JF:** *Is this similar to what you see happening in the visual art world?*

**NP:** Yeah, it's been happening in the visual art world forever. I'm sitting here reading Richard Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*, where he wrote about memes. He is one of the first people who wrote about memes. Memes are like genes--they're living things, and they grow through imitation. That's how they spread. That's how they live. That's how culture lives. We've gone insane. We've gone insane the last hundred years with our crazy, court-mandated rules about intellectual property. It's a world gone mad.

**JF:** *For those who have not watched "The Revolution will be Animated," or your "Questioncopyright.org" interview, can you explain the principles of Free Culture and Copyleft?*

**NP:** Well, *Copyleft*...everything is Copyrighted in most of the world, especially the United States, by default. So you don't have to register Copyrights. If I wipe my butt, or blow my nose into a Kleenex, that is automatically 'Copyright-Me'. And whether or not I register it, if you blow your nose into a Kleenex and it looks like mine, then I can sue you for Copyright infringement. So if one wants people to share one's work without fear of being fined or jailed, one has to go to great measures to let people know that the work is sharable, because otherwise we're just going to assume that it belongs to somebody. And a *Copyleft* license explicitly permits, legally permits what people will do with the work anyway, which is: copy it, share it, remix it, build on it...you know, replicate it, which is how culture grows. Unfortunately, one has to be very explicit, but that's okay because we've made that, by default, illegal in our society. *Copyleft*, in particular, is a license that says 'Do anything you want with "*Sita Sings the Blues*" except Copyright it, except prohibit other people from doing the same with your work.' That's what makes it *Copyleft*. There are other free licenses that aren't *Copyleft*--You can dedicate something to the public domain, which allows all of those freedoms. It's just that if somebody builds on it and then wants to lock up the resulting work, they can do that as well. And there's some debate as to which type of license is more free in a Copyright world. It's not like we've resolved that. The debate goes on. But anyway, that's just *Copyleft*. So that means that anybody that works with this or builds on it also must use a *Copyleft* license. And *Free Culture* just really means 'culture without the restrictions or prohibitions of Copyright. The license is also an attribution license. So technically, people are required to attribute the source to me, which is ironic because I'm not required to attribute my sources--my sources being Valmiki's Ramayana, this influence and that influence. But attribution is pretty important these days for artists...much more than ownership. Attribution comes pretty naturally from the audience. People are not interested in lying about who made "*Sita Sings the Blues.*" They know that I made it. So it's not like I really need to use this license to enforce a proper attribution. It's like a social norm when people do that.

**JF:** *I liked the point you made in an article that Copyrighting, instead of protecting the artist, can hinder the artist, as in the case of Annette Hanshaw (the singer who's songs were used in "Sita Sings the Blues"), and how you are going the opposite way so that you won't become obscured.*

**NP:** Well, she herself is dead. But if you look at her work mimetically...like these are memes, and memes--like other living things, want to survive and reproduce--then yes, Copyright is not a good survival strategy for a meme (laughs).

**JF:** *I'm taking a Media Industries and Cultures of Production class at UCLA, and I've watched documentaries with high-salaried executives explaining that the media business is a democracy, and that what gets produced and shown is what is demanded by the audience. I've also read the "Cult of Originality" from your blog, and in part of it you discuss this subject. There's a part where you say 'If something is on TV, it's because some TV executive like it, not because you liked it.' Could you expand upon that point?*

**NP:** Well, our past one hundred years of Media is a gate-keeper system. I suppose it's analogous to democracy like American democracy, which is supposed to be the will of the people. But it's mediated through advertising and politicians, and lots and lots of money. So we end up with this populace that's quite dissatisfied with the rulers that supposedly represent them. But there remains the fiction of democracy in American politics, and I suppose that kind of democracy exists in Big Media as well (laughs). It's a gate-keeper system. The artist, until very recently, couldn't really connect directly with their audience through mass media because mass media was mediated by these generally powerful corporations, because the media was so expensive, because the technology was so expensive. Now, as I was saying with this low-light camera, it's accessible to more and more people, and the channels of distribution have genuinely been democratized. I mean, the fact that anybody can access a work and replicate it on their own computer--that's a huge game-changer. And that much more closely fulfills the ideals of democracy, and it allows artists to connect directly to audiences without going through a gate-keeper that decides what is and is not made. So it is cute that the executives are saying it's a kind of democracy--the same way that it's cute that

politicians say that. But there are better alternatives now, and there are much more democratic alternatives now.

**JF:** *One of the problems students still face is, you know, if you want to get rights to music you have to pay a lot of money that students normally don't have. So I guess there's a kind of gate-keeping in that way, too. You have to be kind of wealthy to get your exact vision out there the way you want it.*

**NP:** Yes, not only that, but that really is anti-competitive, because you'll notice that the corporations that control all the music are the same corporations that control the studios and the television networks. So they effectively control all shared cultural heritage, which means that the only entities that can afford to build on shared cultural heritage are them. And it effectively locks out ordinary people from participating in that media.

**JF:** *I think you made a point once when you said that this kind of scares students into fearing music?*

**NP:** Yeah, to be afraid of using music. The process of clearing this stuff is nightmarish, having gone through it myself. And it's really getting to a point where a lot of people have to choose between obeying the law or making art. You know: Obey the law, or obey your muse--what's it gonna be?' And I've heard some real horror stories from students about what their educational institutions do for the sake of Copyright protection. There seems to be a crisis happening, because the laws are just so untenable now, and they're so contrary to what educational institutions are supposed to do. And that's not just true of film students trying to use music--it's true of any student trying to get access to the information in textbooks. I mean, the cost of textbooks is ridiculous. But educators can't share the information in the textbooks without violating Copyright. And students can't afford it. And they keep changing the textbooks. You can't sell used textbooks -- they make sure they're out of date. The system is really harming educational institutions in a lot of ways.

**JF:** *You were a teacher once before--are you still teaching?*

**NP:** Yes, I was an adjunct faculty at Parsons. Technically I don't know if my Parsons ID card still works--I'm definitely not teaching this semester. The last couple of years I was teaching visual storytelling, and before that I taught FLASH for film and video.

**JF:** *Do you think there could be a class for what you've been learning about in how to deal with industries?*

**NP:** I would love to! This is what I love to talk about. And it's really exciting because it's almost getting to like revolutionary times on campuses (laughs), and its also interdisciplinary and on everybody's mind. And not just students--it's on the artist's minds. Like, how do we thrive with all the changes that are going on, and how do you make money? So yeah, I'd love to. More than that, I love being a visiting speaker and talking to anyone who's interested (laughs). My story, which even a few months ago was so new and unbelievable--'What, you gave away your film for free, and yet you're making more money than you have the other way? How is it possible?!' So it seems like if I show up in person and testify 'Yes, yes this actually happened!', that's useful somehow. But more and more people are doing this, so hopefully it will become less of a novelty and just an acceptable option.

**JF:** *What is next for you? Are there any more feature-films in the future?*

**NP:** More "*Minute-Memes*" for now, which is not to say that they won't be folded into a feature. Maybe they will. But I'm just thinking of them as short-films for the time being.

**JF:** *Who are the artists that you like? Animators?*

**NP:** Well, some of my favorite animated features are *Allegro Non Troppo* by Bruno Bozzetto--have you seen that?

**JF:** *Yes.*

**NP:** And have you seen *The Yellow Submarine*?

**JF:** *Yes.*

**NP:** Great! My students at Parsons the last several years have not seen *The Yellow Submarine.*

**JF:** *Oh really? It might be a generational thing.*

**NP:** Yeah--here's a Copyright story for you. When I was growing up, *The Yellow Submarine* was on TV once a year. And the reason it was on TV is that it was a flop at the box office when it was first released. And so it was considered to not be valuable. So it was just some affordable thing in circulation for TV stations. And the result was that lots of people saw it, and lots of people fell in love with it, me being among them. And then, I guess in the late 90's, whoever owns it discovered that it was valuable, and they re-released it and then locked it up again--or they locked it up for the first time. Then they were like 'Oh, this is valuable so we can't be letting people just broadcast it.' And now you can't get it! Now you can't see it in theaters, it's not on TV, and the DVD is out of print because it's valuable. And when I say 'valuable', I mean that with a bit of sarcasm. And the result is that class after class, year after year of young people are not seeing this film.

**JF:** *One of my classmates told me that they're going to remake "The Yellow Submarine."*

**NP:** Jesus Christ....Yeah. Ugh, Zemeckis. It's gonna be a Robert Zemeckis Mo-cap 3D thing.

**JF:** *Oh my god.*

**NP:** (laughs)

**JF:** *(laughs)*

**NP:** But it's democratic, though!

**JF:** *Exactly! One last question...for animators who want to create independent films and be a little more on the outside like you have been, and still support themselves--could you give some advice?*

**NP:** Well, I'm doing fine now, but I have to say that my life was mostly hand-to-mouth. It's not that I wanted that or liked it. But it just seemed to have been a consequence of living the artist's life that I chose, where I put my own muse ahead of job security. And that is not at all unique to me. That has been a lot of artists from throughout history. There's a reason that artists are called 'starving artists', and if you're really committed to your vision, and your vision is in any way unusual--as it should be--there's just no guarantees about money. And I was willing to live very poor for a very long time, and I would do it again. And I guess that's my advice. There's no magic way to make money doing this. It's a decision one makes about their life. It's kind of like deciding to be a monk and to live on the rice that people put into your rice bowl. There's a really good book called "*The Gift*" by Lewis Hyde that talks about lots of things. (laughs) It's kind of hard to explain this book, but I was reassured after reading it because like most people, I was raised to have a job and have job security, and make financial security more of a priority than I did. But I see that a lot of artists--that's not really compatible with the making of art for many people. It's complicated. It is a complicated issue. And I'll also say that just merely freeing one's work is not like an instant key to success. It's just the removal of an obstacle to success. So I see Copyrighting my work is an obstacle to it being successful, but just no Copyrighting it, or just Copylefting it, is not going to mean that I'll get money from it. It just means that it's likelier that I'll get money.

**JF:** *Thank you so much for your time, Nina.*

**NP:** Well thank you so much for listening, and spreading my ideas!