These animations helped explain the complexity of Russia's Olympic doping for 2018 Oscar-winning documentary Icarus

US design and animation company ODD New York created animations for the Oscar winning documentary *Icarus.* Produced by filmmaker Bryan Fogel, the film explores Russia's 2014 Sochi Olympics doping testing scandal. The animations for the film provided a visual representation of Russia's sophisticated plot to undermine the system and rig the Olympic sports doping testing.

The scandal meant Russia was banned from this year's Winter Olympic games in PyeongChang by the world anti-doping agency (WADA). *Icarus* originally set out to explore how sports doping testing can be rigged, but it transformed into something much bigger when Grigory Rodchenkov (the former director of the Sochi anti doping laboratory in Moscow) revealed his own involvement and incriminating evidence of Russia's participation in the scandal from 2014, claiming Russia president Vladimir Putin was aware of the existence of the Russia doping system.

That's why ODD's animations became a fundamental tool for visualising lab information. To understand how Russia managed to pull of its vast operation, an inside look into the architecture of the laboratory that Grigory oversaw was a crucial part of the *Icarus* narrative. It all had to be completely accurate as well – including a secret room and fake socket where samples were passed. ODD NY wove together a mix of literal imagery, metaphorical imagery and data-related

imagery (for example, blueprints, documents) that flowed into one visual language. See ODD New York's animation montage for *Icarus* below.

[embedded content]

The film was released at the beginning of 2017, and went on to win the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. To create illustrations for the film, ODD executive creative director Gary Breslin was only given a napkin that Grigory used to quickly "scribble a diagram of the lab moments before his protective relocation". You can see this below.

Gary led a team from ODD New York. All animations were created by multiple animators using Adobe After Effects and Cinema 4D. We ask Gary and his team how it created detailed animation and illustrations for Icarus from the simple diagram.

Miriam Harris: Congrats on the Oscar win for *Icarus*! Were you surprised?

Gary Breslin: "Thanks! We knew it had a good chance once it got nominated, but we were obviously elated when it won. The film checked all the marks for the Academy. It's topical, it uncovered a major scandal that resulted in Russia being banned from the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, and it was superbly executed by Bryan Fogel."

MH: How did ODD NY come to create the animations for *Icarus*?

GB: "I was actually on vacation in Los Angeles in June of 2016 and ran into a friend who was cutting the film. This chance run-in sparked the conversation about the documentary's need for graphics. Bryan Fogel shared one of the early rough cuts with us and we immediately knew that what he had uncovered was going to shock the world."



MH: What did the initial brief involve?

GB: “There wasn’t so much a brief as there was a very early rough cut from which one could begin to see how design and animation would fit in, from storytelling, branding and communication perspectives.

“Whenever we work on a documentary, we like to start by thinking big picture: What is the personality of this documentary? What look and feel we can bring to it? So we made a deck that illustrated everything from colour palette, font choice, and potential logos, to ideas on the more narrative sections where animation would fill in the missing puzzle pieces.

“As always, documentaries are a moving target, so we start making things as the edit is continually being sculpted and the process turns into a working dialogue between us and the editors, until eventually – after many, many months – we step over the finish line.”



MH: How much room was there for creative freedom?

GB: “Bryan and his team were great to work with and were quite open to what we could bring to the project. In the third act, for example, we needed to use animation to visualise a critical part of the story showing what happened behind-the-scenes in the Sochi lab. We started by just writing descriptions of what the action could be. I wanted to have a mix of literal imagery, metaphorical imagery and data-related imagery (for example, blueprints, documents) that all flowed together into one visual language. This would be a major part of our overall visual vocabulary. Writing isn’t the easiest way to necessarily communicate this, but I wanted to pitch concepts before we started storyboarding. In the case of the writing, the boards, and then the pre-visual, there was a lot of back-and-forth before finally settling on what you see in the final film.



“One of the more difficult things was the need for everything to be accurate as possible versus how much information there was available. We knew that everyone would see what we did, so we didn’t want to make any mistakes that could be potentially called out. The architecture of the lab, the secret room, the fake socket where the samples were passed – we wanted to make sure all was totally accurate.”



MH: How much did you know about Russia's sports doping scandal before this project?

GB: "Truthfully, we didn't know anything about Russia's involvement with rigging sports doping testing for the Sochi Olympics. *The New York Times* had just broken the story a month prior, so we were learning about the extent of the meticulously planned doping ploy as it was unfolding in the media. We made sure to read all available information on the subject, as accuracy was critical. Between the information that was available and the information Bryan uncovered in the documentary, we were well informed."

MH: How did you decide on the overall aesthetic of the animations?

GB: "We wanted to create an aesthetic that spoke to the international intrigue that emerged from the story. After all, [Russia's secret service] the KGB (now the FSB) was involved in the conspiracy, as was the International Olympic Committee – this was a cloak and dagger story on a global scale. Instead of the overused Constructivist look, there was a Soviet, more bureaucratic aesthetic that we found compelling. So we wanted to create a visual vocabulary made of these kinds of elements. There was also the sports angle to consider. For example, the yellow colour was a not-so-subtle nod to Lance Armstrong."



MH: Why were animated sequences vital for this documentary?

GB: “The animated sequences were vital because key parts of the story were told strictly through Grigory’s voice-over with few supporting visuals. The animations gave a complete visual representation of Russia’s sophisticated plot to undermine the system and rig the Olympic sports doping testing. The animated sequences allowed the viewer an insider point of view into the secret plan.”



MH: Was a balance needed between visualising facts and storytelling elements?

GB: “Yes, that’s exactly right. Sometimes facts were exactly what needed to be visualised, other times we were trying to visualise things that were a bit more broad or conceptual – sometimes both at the same time. Neither we, nor the director, wanted to do re-enactment type stuff, so we strove to create a visual system that could move fluidly between both of these levels of information.”

MH: What does it mean to shed light on the issue of sport doping?

GB: “It means a lot to our team to be a part of such a major moment in history. Hopefully, eyes were opened and fair play among all athletes is taken much more seriously moving forward.”

https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/motion-graphics/these-animations-helped-explain-complexity-of-russias-olympic-doping-for-2018-oscar-winning-documentary-icarus/