
Interview: the impact of artificial intelligence on audiovisual creation

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INTERVIEWEE Javier de la Chica — Director of animation and generative AI (Contanimation)

FORMAT Reviewed transcript

| 1. Good afternoon, Javier. Can you tell us what you do?

Hello. I am a director specialising in animation. Right now I specialise in producing and directing audiovisual work made entirely with artificial intelligence; specifically, in animated aesthetics.

| 2. What has your path been to doing what you do now?

I have an atypical profile and an atypical career. I studied animation at a time when doing so meant specialising in one very specific branch of the production process (modelling, rigging, animation or lighting). There are many parts of those crafts I find genuinely interesting, but none of them caught my attention enough to spend an entire life being, say, part of the department that lights an animated film shot by shot.

I got into animation because I wanted to tell stories, good stories, and I discovered that animation is a very tedious craft-and-industrial process, closer to an assembly line than to an artistic profession. So I never specialised in one of those crafts; I decided to put my effort into learning writing and directing. The problem? A studio has 50 animators, 30 lighters, 40 modellers... and only one director and one writer, so finding work was always difficult. And the jobs I did find kept moving further away from anything artistic or creative. I have worked mostly in children's and preschool animation, directing music videos for kids that followed retention statistics rather than a script.

Even so, I kept training in those disciplines, more out of passion than strategy. Meanwhile, as an escape valve to keep myself sane, I wrote my own projects and looked for technical ways to make them. That is how, in 2019, I came across my first AI. Three years later the generative AI market exploded, and today I find myself in a situation where the most disruptive and unexpected technological event in the history of my trade has caught me, almost by accident, with exactly the right profile: director, writer, and with generalist knowledge and judgement across every stage of animation. That is what brought me here.

| 3. What is Contanimation? Can you introduce some of your work?

Contanimation is the label and the studio my colleague Guillermo Miranda and I work under. Today we are an internationally recognised studio in the world of generative AI. We specialise in non-hyperrealistic aesthetics; we say it that way because animation is a technique, and in the case of AI the technique is the same for live action as it is for anime. So it is an aesthetic.

Of our own work, we have eight published pieces, among which *Ausencia* perhaps stands out: an intimate drama with elements of horror, led by an old woman keeping vigil over her husband's body. It is a tribute to several of our favourite directors in Spanish cinema.

Beyond that, we provide services to other film and advertising studios, both in art direction and in full production.

| 4. How do you think the animation world has changed in the last ten years?

Before AI broke into my professional career there had already been several significant events; some positive, some negative, some neutral. I started studying animation twelve years ago, in a context where it was consumed in cinemas and on television. The first big change arrived almost at the start of my studies, and it was the appearance of the platforms, with Netflix leading the way.

At first it felt positive, because it pulled content out of a fixed schedule and an audience curve, letting you address more niche viewers and therefore take more risks. That is how it was at the beginning, but it changed when competition arrived. It is very hard for a viewer to pay for five content platforms a month, so having the best catalogue became vital, and two strategies emerged: competing on volume (the biggest catalogue regardless of quality) and competing on statistics (analysis of trends, fashions, brands and audience retention). Both turned out to be the opposite of a search for originality and quality.

And through all of this, what happened to cinemas? Traditional cinema was forced to split between auteur film — which in animation is absolutely residual — and the big franchises (Marvel, say): films that carried an "event" with them, where going to the cinema became a collective experience.

Something else that emerged in this period is the explosion of children's digital content, mainly on YouTube. It is express content, almost 100% designed to hold attention and generate compulsive consumption; again, nothing creative and not especially ethical either. One positive note, perhaps, is the growth of good free software: tools that gradually helped very small creators make their work independently. The most successful example is probably *Flow*, which won an Oscar. That trend was reaching its peak, very promising and full of hope, at the exact moment AI broke in.

The industry is now going through a period of grief while it waits for news. The leap and the change have been so large that not even the CEOs or the big producers are finding the time to adapt, on top of the unsolvable legal chaos the institutions are in.

Paradoxically, a few of us artists have found in AI a way out: for the first time in our professional lives, we are able to make pieces thinking about the art itself and not about how it will land with a dazed audience so it goes viral and becomes a hit — because, for the first time, the risk of failure is minimal, and that maximises creative potential.

| 5. What do you think has brought us to today's situation?

I think every industrial revolution comes about for similar reasons: the appearance of a new technology or resource capable of automating or speeding up processes, and the snowball it creates across every economic sector. This last one comes from a new resource extracted over the past thirty years, and it is neither coal nor oil: it is data.

The original purpose of classifying and accumulating data was analysis and statistics — understanding how your audience consumes, for example. The twist has been discovering the inverse path: recognising the patterns that data generates, and then replicating them.

6. We have talked about Nassim Nicholas Taleb's black swans. Is this irruption of AI the perfect example of his idea?

Without any doubt, it is the great black swan of our era. And it has been one even for its own creators. AI, to this day, remains incomprehensible even to the people who program it.

In my industry, over the years, I have sat through enormous numbers of talks, meetings and round tables about trends, statistics, software or ten-year strategic projections... Nobody had ever imagined something like this could happen, and nobody was prepared. So for some it has been a devastating tsunami and for others a virgin, fertile land to conquer.

7. In general terms, what is the role of artificial intelligence in audiovisual creation?

AI is involved in almost every process of my audiovisual work: from the initial design to the final finish, taking in music, sound, dialogue and so on. Its use is different on every project, but for me it is a set of tools that, used together, becomes a technique.

Art direction, for example — with some exceptions — I do entirely generatively. The process is remixing and iteration; the right mix of ideas, trial and error are what take you to a result. Iteration is so fast that the process becomes completely instinctive: you are not guided by your manual talent, but by how much the hair on the back of your neck stands up. So a good use of these tools can end up giving you a result that says far more about you than whatever your hand is able to draw.

That work around the *vibe* applies to every process in one way or another. Getting control over the tool is not always easy, because the tool is active and not passive. It is a pencil that also shares its own ideas, and that is magical, because every session becomes a kind of improvised jam that can take you to incredible and unexpected results.

8. How does this affect not only 3D animation but the industry in general: writers, editing, the act of going to a cinema to enjoy a film...?

There is a mantra repeated endlessly about AI: "AI replaces creativity." That is absolutely false, or at least it has been so far. Put optimistically: "AI removes technical barriers." Put pessimistically: "AI replaces the technical roles in a production" — that is, 90% of a production. That much is true, with no softening.

In my case, once the grief was over, I see one optimistic future and one pessimistic one. In the optimistic one, art is democratised and we can make films in teams of five artists, each bringing their experience in one specific area (writing, editing, art, and so on). Like rock bands: producing is affordable and reachable; succeeding or making a living from it is the hard part. That scenario already seems considerably better than the one we had, where only five companies in the world were capable of making films with mega-million sales.

But there is a ghost on the horizon that worries me far more, and it is the drift towards automated content. It is an idea many platforms are chasing: from Netflix to TikTok, they are looking for ways to create automatic content manufactured *ad hoc* for the user. So that if you consume science content on TikTok, your feed continuously generates science pieces; or if you like films with happy endings, an algorithm writes happy endings for you.

That is where I get off. I find that horrible. AI seems fine to me as long as it is at the service of the vision of one or several artists. But if the tendency to create content purely to please statistical test subjects already exists, generative content could be the death of cinema and perhaps of our brains. A kind of infinite, onanistic audiovisual consumption.

9. Do you consider the introduction of AI into audiovisual creation positive, negative, or do you think it cannot be framed in those terms?

Indeed, I think there is an enormous scale of greys. The positives I am clear about: I believe we are going to hear more voices, more content, more niches. More stories and possibly better ones. That is great news.

Negatives: the imminent destruction of several professional sectors (many of which were already a bubble in themselves, and this has only burst them). Dependence on several supercompanies and tech oligarchs; we are not only subscribed to consuming content, but to creating it too. And the mass manufacture of digital rubbish, or *slop* — plus, of course, the death of the image as reliable proof of reality.

If anyone asks me for solutions, I argue for building databases and models funded with public money and public or donated data. It seems to me too important a technology, and one the world is going to depend on too heavily, to be solely in the hands of private companies.

10. Do you feel any blame or judgement from colleagues for specialising in the use of AI for 3D animation?

For one specific part of my industry, I am a traitor and a scab. The quality is not usually questioned, but there is a foolish feeling that positions me as a kind of Prometheus who has stolen the best-kept secrets of artists to sell them to four lizards in Silicon Valley.

On the other hand, a large majority understand my position, or at least observe it with distant curiosity. There are a great many professionals researching AI anonymously and without making noise. That is why it feels very lonely. I get a lot of public frontal rejection and a great deal of discreet support.

11. Is there a line you will not cross in terms of what a client might ask of you with AI?

Setting aside pornography, fake news and so on, my line is the direct copying of a style or an artist. I also would not take part in existing productions that pivot towards directly laying off workers, and beyond that I would need to genuinely fall in love with a project to go back to digital preschool.

But my main line is quality. I do not take on projects that deliberately ignore quality and only want cheap, mass results: *slop*.

12. What stage of development do you think AI is at? Do you think it will reach a limit?

Speaking always about generative audiovisual AI, it is at a very strange moment. In terms of quality it seems to have hit a ceiling: the results are already impressive and very hard to tell apart from human ones.

But it now faces two challenges. The first is control tools: at some point we will need to reduce the randomness of AI to zero, and that requires integration into specialised software. The second is that the model becomes sustainable; generative AI currently lives in a limbo between massive investment and subsidy, which is what makes distributing it publicly economically viable. If that ends, it may well transition to a more exclusive, elitist model.

Curiously, my sense is that the solution to both challenges lies in open source: free, open-code models.

13. Do you think there will be something after AI? Something that displaces it by being better or newer?

It would be very bold to say otherwise, but it is hard to imagine what. Most likely the next generations will evolve in such a way that what is most tangible is the medium rather than the technology. A historical example might be photography: you can imagine technical advances (lenses, size, colour, and so on), but what is far harder to predict is the birth of cinema. Something similar will very probably happen. A technology this disruptive always leads to social and cultural changes which, in turn, lead to new arts, formats and concepts.

14. What do you think your work will look like in twenty years?

In a stable, civilised world where everything stays relatively peaceful, we will move towards a film industry much closer to what the music industry is today. To make a living doing what I do, it will be important to have a name or a brand strong enough to be profitable; if not, it will be a hobby or a second, non-professional job.

15. Do you think the ethical and moral debate around everyday use of AI is valid? For example, in creating videos to spread fake news.

Not only valid. Absolutely necessary and fundamental. A knife is for cutting onions and also for stabbing; I think we have to find a way of defining what is what in the context of AI. The disappearance of the image as proof is a historic tragedy. I do not know the solutions, but I definitely support the debate.

16. Do you think there should be some kind of legislation on the limits of creation with AI?

Absolutely, but that is where we hit the big problem: the global world we live in. The change is so utterly brutal that if one territory legislates more harshly than another, the difference in competitiveness can be gigantic and dangerous. I think AI has to be dealt with globally, with the same seriousness as the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, for example.

17. Do you think the moment will come when it is impossible to tell a product created with AI from one made traditionally?

We are already there. If not 100%, then 95%.

18. What has been the biggest advance in audiovisual creation with AI, the thing that made the difference for the explosion we know today?

If you are asking for the *Citizen Kane* that certifies the validity of an art form, it has not arrived yet. For now it works as a drip: week by week there is a new technological advance, so new narrative possibilities appear that make the previous ones obsolete, and they keep stacking up one after another. But that is the great trigger everyone is looking for: the *Toy Story* that validates CGI, or the *Avatar* that validates motion capture.

19. Do you think this could be a problem for art in some way?

For art it is very good news: it makes us take all the art history we have so far for granted and forces us to rack our brains to find something new. The problem is the industry; of course the industry is going to have serious problems, at least during its transition and adaptation phase. But art is an abstract term that covers Duchamp's urinal, the paintings at Altamira, James Cameron's *Titanic*, the national anthem of Honduras and Maori tattoos. It is so transversal to being human that it is very hard to think anything we invent could be a threat. AI will make previous arts obsolete and drive new art. Like every tool in the history of art.

20. Do you think this breaking of limits in audiovisual creation has consequences for Western society and its day-to-day? For political powers, elections, the way societies are run...

Of course. For better and for worse. Cinema — specifically since Riefenstahl, Eisenstein or Griffith, the very origin of the medium — has always been tied to propaganda. Democratising that medium carries the dangers of the term itself: 'democracy'. Today a neo-Nazi group has the capacity to produce a film of *Avatar*'s quality for the budget they used to spend organising a meeting. This is going to happen, without a doubt.

I think it is important to reinforce and embrace the democratic mechanisms that prevent hate speech, so that the next Mickey Mouse does not arrive with a far-right speech under its arm.

21. What do you think the next ten or twenty years will be like in the audiovisual world and its relationship with AI? If we can do that after talking about Taleb...

Making predictions is, indeed, rolling the dice. Hundreds of AI-made features are going to spring up like mushrooms soon, and most of them will probably be terrible. It will be a matter of time before we reach that *Citizen Kane* that is a critical and commercial success. That first Oscar with AI. That first million-euro brand. I think we will see all of it.

And when the floodgates open, that rock-band system will begin: microplatforms will appear, acting as independent record labels that build their own audiences, alongside Netflix or Amazon making titanic AI

works at the hands of superstars.

English translation of the original Spanish transcript, produced by Contanimation for press use. In case of doubt, the Spanish version is the original.