

ANIMATION DOCUMENTARIES AND REALITY CROSS- BOUNDARIES

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Abstract

Filmmakers aim to deliver some emotional and aesthetic coin to their works, which makes it possible that the boundaries between fiction and documentary genres could be diluted artistically.

The documentary is a recognized genre in film studies that is considered to move on one side of the boundary between fact and fiction. Michael Rabiger defends the objectivity and fairness of documentaries due to the expectation of the viewer to accept the photographic image as true (Rabiger, 1998, p. 6). Bill Nichols reinforces this idea evoking that the documentaries that best witness a certain theme are those in which filmmakers “don’t interfere”, classifying them as “observational documentaries”, as the examples from the images captured in World War II or the political TV news (Nichols, 1991, p. 38).

Therefore, the challenge that we propose aims to relate the documentary live action characteristics with the animated images, where the veracity is just an animation reflection. To better illustrate the curious fusion of animation and documentary image, we will examine several emergent examples of this new “film genre”.

Keywords: *Animation, Documentary, Reality, Masks*

Introduction

Filmmakers aim to deliver some emotional and aesthetic coin to their works, which makes it possible that the boundaries between the fiction and documentary genres could be diluted artistically. "Where is the border nowadays?", Sergio Wolff asks (Wolf, 2010, p. 17).

The documentary is a film genre, apparently based on textual cinematographic frames, and does not commonly merge with the freedom of visual communication expressed through animation. With its extensive scientific publication, the documentary is a recognised genre in film studies and is validly considered as the defined boundary between fact and fiction. Michael Rabiger defends the objectivity and fairness of documentaries due to the expectation of the viewer to accept the photographic image as true (Rabiger, 1998, p. 6). According to Rabiger, documentaries in a journalistic style should be fair and factual, thus avoiding ambiguity in representation. Bill Nichols reinforces this idea, stating that the documentaries that best witness a certain theme are those in which filmmakers "don't interfere," and classifying them as "observational documentaries," such as those of the images captured in World War II or the political TV news (Nichols, 1991, p. 38).

However, Vivian Sobchack states that rather than this historical perspective,

documentary "designates a particular *subjective relation* to an objective cinematic or televisual text. In other words, documentary is less a *thing* than an *experience*" (Sobchack, 1999, p. 241). According to Sobchack, since every spectator is an interpreting agent, the documentary is an experience of the cinema, which means that it is full of subjectivism.

If the emergence of films that blur or ignore the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction is being constructed with visual effects and animation techniques, the challenge that we propose aims to relate live-action documentary characteristics to animated images, where the veracity is just an animation reflection. To better illustrate the curious fusion of animation and the documentary image, we will examine several emergent examples of this new "film genre."

Animation of apparent realities

In recent years we've seen a further exploration of documentary animation, which is evidenced by the emerging submissions of the genre to film and animation festivals. As these submitted and selected films are based on a mix of animation, which is traditionally an inventive and "children's" genre, and documented facts, the nature of these features seems to confront the viewer's perception of "the truth" presented in these animated documentaries. The relationship between the narrative of

which it is an abstraction or mimesis of reality occurs along a very thin line, and the animation seems to be an excellent medium to dilute it.

Maureen Furniss illustrates this continuum between abstraction and mimesis with reference to the "documentary" *Sleep* (Andy Warhol, 1965) at one end, midway through with *The Three Caballeros* (Disney, 1944), and at the other end with *Circles* (Oskar Fischinger, 1933) (Furniss, 1998, p. 5). It is worth mentioning that it is now easier to shorten this distance between the photographic image and the illustration in production through the digital techniques of image manipulation, which help to multiply the examples of cartoon documentaries and this curious fusion of reality (the document-image) and its abstraction (the animated image).

The viewer's relationship with the veracity of the content may not be very different whether it is an animated documentary or a real picture, which could help to reinforce the idea that besides the different visual approaches, the immersion of spectatorship in this filmic genre will be similar. When animated documentaries present memories, stories about characters, or historical events, we cannot dissociate them from a reality just because the representation is graphical and manipulated by animators. *Guantanamo Bay: The Hunger Strikes* (Sherbet, 2013) is an animated documentary presented

with the warning "contains scenes some viewers might find disturbing." Based on testimonies from five Guantanamo prisoners, the drawn images do not detract from the dramatic weight of how the subjects were treated, which gives the animated representation of the documentary content some peculiarities:

I believe that the use of iconographic images impacts the viewer in a way in which live action cannot. The images are personal and "friendly." We are willing to receive animated images without putting up any barriers, opening ourselves to a powerful and potentially emotional experience (Sofian, 2005, p. 7).

Sheila Sofian recognises significant differences in the animated documentary from the live action image due to the fact that animated images are based on fictional forms that remediate a "friendly or childhood" tradition. Sofian points out how spectators experience the imagination of the animated form through an emotional and familiar involvement with the moving drawings. For instance, the couple John and Faith Hubley recorded the voices of their daughters to accompany animated short stories such as *Moonbird* (1959). In this example, we can verify that the fiction of a child's imaginative world merges with real sounds through the visual interpretation of the animators. It is animated documentary content that presents two children playing in a garden. Surely it would not

have the same impact if it was produced as a liveaction documentary. Surely it would be missing all the fantasy that the cartoon offers to the moving image, instead distracting the spectator with photographic elements represented in the images, and, therefore, surely there would be a lower possibility of the viewer associating with this childhood theme.

Similarly, in *A Journey to Cape Verde*, José Miguel Ribeiro uses his own voice to describe his "disconnection experience." *A Journey to Cape Verde* was born from a personal experience in which the animator intended to free up all daily life networks to connect with an unknown space, venturing to *Ilha do Sal* without any other particular destination. Thus, by using real characters' voices, José Miguel Ribeiro tried to achieve a more accurate and honest documentary of his own experience, even if the non-actor sound recordings could expose some weaknesses in the "animation product."

Further, Denis Tupicoff has used recordings of non-fiction voices in *His Mother's Voice* (1997), specifically that of a mother who tells of how her son was murdered. In this work, Tupicoff opted to use the technical process of rotoscoping, which allow us to analyse some interesting particularities that appear when animation documentaries explore real-life drama. Rotoscoping speeds up the animation process due to its characteristics of being based on drawings executed

over filmic frames (already imbued with movement). As the motion of the represented forms is drawn over movements that really happened, the visual appearance of moving drawings presents "something based on the Real," which is of interest for this work.

Rotoscoping images (imbuing frames with life)

Cinema evokes the emotional involvement of the spectators in a very close way to everyday experiences by being a device made of mimetic links. Christian Metz indicates that the reason why the film manages to create the connection between art and the public comes from this impression of reality that is conveyed in movies and that makes the audience emotionally involved with the projected images and sounds (Metz, 1991, p. 5). Despite the unrealistic nature of many film characters, narratives embody emotional connections with spectators, revealing the real potential of these illusions. The impression of motion presented in movies is one of the simplest and most concrete examples of how viewers interpret credibility in the appearance of the represented forms. The movement is understood as real, similarly to the interpretation of displacement of an object in a picture or image. Because a camera is a replication mechanism, the viewer accepts images as credible, which makes for an interesting analysis of how the animated documentary relates live action

with the animated image, as well as how the spectator interprets what is real from what is fiction.

Waltz with Bashir (Ari Folman, 2008) is an interesting example of how rotoscoping was explored graphically to keep the documentary style, but without losing its characteristic of being an artistic work of animation, where the graphical representation must be noteworthy as an innovation. The imperfection of the animated rotoscoped drawings can be an aesthetic orientation, giving them a visual highlight and demarcating them from other projects where the representation should be more detailed and precise. Yoni Goodman criticises the irrefragable aspect of the film *Jungle Book 2* (Disney, 2003), indicating that all forms are so well aligned that they become static and uninteresting (Kriger, 2012, pp. 4–5). According to the animator, one of his favourite films is the original *Jungle Book* (Disney, 1967), due to the presented ink textures and the vivid expression of irregular tracing throughout the animation that gives apparent life to the drawings. Elsewhere, in *Madagascar, Carnet de Voyage* (2009) Bastien Dubois used mocap and rotoscoping techniques but blurred the life-like look through several manual compositing and post-production processes. The short *Snack and Drink* (Bob Sabiston, 2000) is another good example of rotoscope animation, showing how it could be used as a tool of expression and not just a simple visual rendering or fast

production process. The fragmentations of shapes, colours, and captured camera angles were explored visually in order to eliminate formal continuities and in turn to underline the particular disruption of the autistic child's worldview.

Thus, Karen Beckman points out how animation and documentary could relate to each other (Beckman, 2011, p. 260). When animation and documentary are linked in one project some issues arise immediately, such as questions about how the animated forms should be analysed according to the principles of documentary verisimilitude. It is also true that a camcorder can capture movements, but the projection of those images results from a very diverse collection of image manipulation that generates a new motion. Despite the technical differences, cinema and animation produce virtual motion pictures based on recorded images or drawings.

It is relevant to discuss the nature of documentary, film, or animated images to analyse this emergent new genre that is the animated documentary. André Bazin has referred to the film as the art of spatial reality in the way the photographic image exposes the spaces represented mechanically without direct human intervention, but we also have to recognise that any photographic capture process is directly manipulated through the cameraman, such as the light characteristic of the scene, camera angle,

and framing. We accept, however, that the photographic image has a degree of verisimilitude with Real that is far superior to the painted or animated, but, as accepted by Bazin, realism is an artificial function that emerges from the viewer's belief and therefore the author refers to cinema as a higher medium than the photograph to represent "the real" (Bazin, 1992, p. 21).

The cameraman records a particular reality, generating every possible kind of interpretation of the represented event. We see what the camera sees, but also what the cameraman wants us to see (Spence & Navarro, 2011, p. 188). Images can always be associated with the truth or Real, but your credibility will always be debatable, as can be illustrated by the fictional narratives of *cinéma-vérité*.

But something looks really different in animated documentaries: the presence of the animator is more intense than that of the director in a live-action documentary. The documentary image always shows the intervention of the director's decisions, in the way the camera frames the real world and also becomes a fictional form. The animation, on the other hand, appears to provide something new to this sort due to the expression of the drawing and its relationship with the way animated characters thrill the viewer. The idea we want to emphasise is that this particular connection between animation (a free activity) with the real-

istic representation (full of constraints) expands new possibilities for communication. *Never Like the First Time* (Jonas Odell, 2006) is an example of this. The reports of personal experiences of different characters in this film were illustrated by the free interpretation of Jonas Odell. The graphical compositions do not have a visual continuity; each narrated event has its own style according to the represented experiences. The composition of the animated movements and elements results in a style that is commonly used in commercial proposes, such as motion graphics titles and ads, or in animations with a strong graphic influence (more visually oriented). We can illustrate this idea with the short *Snack and Drink*. Bob Sabiston, when interviewing an autistic child in a coffee shop in Austin, noticed that the boy had a particular way of perceiving colours in the environment, which led him to try playing with this idea through coloured drawing and animation forms in constant disruption. As we should underline here, the technical representation of the animation relates directly to the state of the character, which shows the direct link and intimate relationship between the animation and the characters, objects, or space represented.

The animation lends a very interesting specificity to the documentary: animated motion. It is not “just the interaction” between the narrative and the spectator that includes the message that we carry

on after watching a movie, but also the literal movement of the forms, colours, and shapes that occur within the image. Generally, the documentary filmmaker is looking to build a particular representation based on real moments, but when we are faced with animated documentaries, we experience a strange realm of content that fuses authentic information with the imagination through drawings.¹ It is also important to point out that the animated documentary reveals the animation technique, drawing, or graphic aesthetics created by a particular artist (the animator), whereas it is not too common in live-action documentaries to notice the presence of the director.

Masked characters in the documentary

We would like to confront these characteristics of animation and live-action documentaries with the examples of *Z32* (Avi Mograbi, 2008) and *Hidden* (David Aronowitsch, Hanna Heilborn, and Mats Johansson, 2002). For safety reasons, the main characters' faces have been blurred, which enhances the viewer's connection with the social issue that is portrayed by the fragility of their lives. At the end of *Z32*, the blurred face of a former soldier disappears and his figure is apparently revealed. However, we find out later that in fact it is a manipulated image and not the true face of the soldier. Our perception of the real figure is again confronted through this masking

post-production effect of representation. “These unclear boundaries reveal the instability of what we may deem ‘reality,’ which can be interpreted as relating to different realities and their contradictions” (Ehrlich, 2011). Ehrlich underlines the importance of animation characteristics, such as the freedom of visual representation, the novelty of the genre and spectacle, and the childish aesthetics, in masking some information that normally remains visible in live-action documentaries in order to produce a new way of representing special messages with “spectatorial effects.”

Hidden is another emotive example in which we could understand this idea from Nea Ehrlich quite well, because the CGI elements that represent characters allow spectatorship to be linked to the child's voice and the aspect of the kitten in the drawings. The entire documentary films and animates a scene in an immigration office during a conversation between an eight-year-old child and an interviewer. It is a fantastic example of a low-budget film, where the message is so clear over the voices: the visual aspect of the family's characters and the big, expressive eyes of the child and his two-year-old brother.

Given these examples, it is less important to evaluate the difference between the narrative truth in a live-action documentary and an animated documentary. However, we believe that any technical

interference in representation may distract the viewer's attention from the proposed narrative; that is, cases in which the graphic expression of animation overrides the relevance of the argument. This is a very interesting feature of the visual effects and animation, which encourage the content production of impossible shots that are normally not captured by camera. In the example of *Ryan* (Chris Landreth, 1994), the characters present a strange morphology with fragmented surfaces due to narrative issues (personal traumas), which surely would be impossible to represent without animation and visual effect processes. This is one of the particularities of animation, namely the expression of authorship in the represented images through the "animator's hand," adding a special aesthetic value to the product: the art of the animated image. In *Sisyphus* (Marcell Jankovics, 1974) or in *Britannia* (Joanna Quinn, 1994) we can be immersed by the force of the living forms, shapes, and characters, and maybe forget the other beauties of the documentary such as the script.

Never Like the First Time (Jonas Odell, 2006) is a good example of how the viewer can relate to the events documented through an aesthetic-oriented work of animation. This documentary presents the narrated testimonials from people that report intimate moments of their personal lives (loss of virginity), but without obeying any visual continuity

in the represented moments. The first character is represented by digital cut-outs in a three-dimensional space, while the rest come in different styles, colours, or graphical styles. In a humorous mood, the theme of the first animation is introduced through a character who looks like Buddy Holly, which is certainly the free interpretation of Odell of the rock and roll party where the real character had their first experience. In the second example, the visual appearance clearly reflects the cold content narrated by the female character. According to the report, the character carefully planned and rehearsed the moment with a lot of concern, but in the end it was very poor moment that had little emotion involved. Odell chose to use photographic images for the representation of scenarios and to animate the silhouettes of characters. The use of photo calendars, cold scenarios, and representations with few details of the figures (outline strokes) reinforces the idea of a failed experiment. This graphic style guides the perception of the viewer, manipulating it, to accentuate the narrative that Odell wants to transmit, despite the documentary nature of this animation.

In the third example, the dark tones expose the violence of the represented action. As the character has been raped, the faces are not fully drawn, increasing the uncanny effect of the images. In addition, Odell used many subjective points of view, projecting the frightening

idea of the violation and the perspective of the character's drunken state. As we have mentioned before, this animation strategy invites the viewer to participate creatively in the narrative, imagining the real characters behind the represented characters and voices. This characteristic is one of the natures of cinema, but in animation we are invited to imagine any event or involved characters due to the abstract or graphical representation of the animated forms. In live-action documentaries the real characters are represented without any mask, and the involvement of the spectator looks different than it does in animated documentaries. Perhaps this feature helps to distinguish the creative possibilities of documentaries in live-action or in animation. While the photographic image of a given character is a visual representation of it, the drawn image will always have to be compared and interpreted by each spectator.

Extreme collages of the various graphical elements that Odell uses contrast with traditional animated films in which fluid movements are related to the purposes of the narrative. The mood of a character can be transmitted by the way they move and interact with other elements of the composition. Traditionally, the character's design is developed in animation according to their psychological profile, which is demonstrated by their aspect, through the way they move, or from their metamorphic transformations. As we

can see in *A Journey to Cape Verde*, the space and the main character are in a complex relationship of metamorphosis to reinforce the narrative orientation of this animated documentary. In contrast to Jonas Odell, José Miguel Ribeiro uses the rules of animation to create fluid movements in which the character boundaries are totally mixed with space and time, evoking the special poetics of animated motion. This is a very important issue that distinguishes the animation from live-action: in *A Journey to Cape Verde* it is easy to understand how the visual space viscerally interferes in the action. This type of narrative approach is not common in cinema, although there are some examples such as *L'Anglaise et le Duc* (Eric Rohmer, 2001) or, in some aspects, *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen, 1985).

Conclusion

The aim of this work is to establish links between the documentary and its nearest counterpart in animation. Although there are several connections concerning these two creative media, their relationship is unclear due to their own forms and representations: the photographic and the drawn image. The biggest difference seems to arise due to the fact that animated documentaries reveal the animator's presence in a more intense way than a documentary director is in live-action documentaries. The animator interferes directly in the visual rep-

resentation, creating animated compositions of the narrative, while in traditional live-action documentary the presence of the director is blurred by the photographic aspect of the film.

It is also true that any live-action documentary reflects the direct intervention of its director in the sense that every camera shot creates a new frame of the real world and, therefore, generates new fictional content. But animation seems to provide something new to this genre: the drawing renders with a particular character's style promote interaction with the spectator and evoke is creative availability to accept the narrative represented in a "childish" animated way. "Like masks that 'give face' or illustrate the abstract, animation is similar to verbal language and differs from photography by its freedom of representation that is not limited by physicality" (Ehrlich, 2011).

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(Endnotes)

- ¹ This is not a particular case of animation, because the same can happen with live action; *Bibilografia* (Miguel Manso and Joao Manso, 2013) is a good example of a work in which some characters describe their experiences while others, such as those of the poet António Poppe, emerge from “an unrealistic space,” adding some fiction to this documentary.