NOTES TOWARDS THE USE OF A DOCUMENTARY APPROACH IN THE TEACHING OF ANIMATION

PEDRO SERRAZINA
UNIVERSIDADE LUSÓFONA DE HUMANIDADES E TECNOLOGIAS

Abstract

Since its early days, animation film has always reflected its cultural context at the time of creation. Nevertheless, it is still widely perceived as kid's entertainment.

Reflecting on practical examples and teaching methodologies, this text argues for a practice of animation which, by adhering to documentary strategies, engages with real issues, leaving behind the traditional Disney/anime/fantasy/game-inspired references that frame most of the animation students' intentions at the beginning of their path.

Rather than a matter of technique, and regardless of the much debated issue of realism, this text suggests that a teaching framed by a documentary approach, bringing questions of identity and social perspective to the core of the practice, reinforces animation as a thoughtful and participative role in the contemporary moving image debate.

Keywords: animation, documentary approach, teaching, identity, social perspective

Context

From its early days, the animated film has always reflected its cultural context. Like other art forms, animation production echoes what is going on at the time of creation. It is easy to find examples of this, both in features and shorts, in mainstream or in less well known films, helping us trace a continuous thread from the commencement of the animation industry to present times.

From its beginnings in the 20th century, cartoons paid "homage to the machine", reflecting a fascination with the mechanical age and the change of rhythm during the industrialization of western society (Klein, 1993, pp. 75-80). Benchmark films like McCay's *Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918), Disney's *Plane Crazy* (1928) (with its reference to Lindberg's transatlantic flight), the World War II propaganda shorts (from both sides of the trenches), *Animal Farm* (1954) by Halas and Batchelor, Bakshi's *Fritz the Cat* (1972), and plenty of others, can be easily called upon to exemplify how animation served as a visual reflection of unfolding historical events.

Recent examples, from *Persepolis* (2007), *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) and mainstream American series (like *The Simpsons* or *American Dad*), to independent shorts (like *What Barry Says*, 2004, by Simon Robson), or even the Guardian newspaper-sponsored Guantanamo shorts (*Hunger Strikes*, 2013, by Jonathan Hodgson; *Guantanamo Diary*, 2015, by Laurence Topham)[1], continue and affirm animation practice as an agent of commentary upon social and cultural developments.

Another important area that has tackled social issues has been notoriously addressed by Jayne Pilling in *Women and Animation: A Compendium* (Pilling, 1992). The association between independent animation and female expression has a long tradition of addressing real social issues (also see Ward, 2005, p. 84).

It is also important to identify another trend in animation practice: the documentation of the directors' history (Landreth's short film *Ryan*, 2004, is an example here) and of the practice itself.[2]

In *Documentary, The Margins of Reality*, Ward argues that "'documentary' must now be seen as a range of strategies in a variety of media" (Ward, 2005, p. 82). The author includes animation within that range but warns us that it "represents one of the clearest challenges to simplistic models of what documentary is and can be. [...] The frame by frame production process means [...] that it cannot adequately represent the real – which should be one of the defining features of documentary" (Ward, 2005, p. 85).

Ward makes use of several historically relevant definitions that are of help to us:

Grierson defined documentary practice as the "creative interpretation of reality," Corner used the expression "the art of record," and Winston suggested "claiming the real" was a main characteristic (Ward, 2005, p. 6). These attempts at encapsulating its essence, place dealing with reality at the hear of documentary film making.

Not many of the animation films referred to so far in this article can be considered, even within the broadest of terms, to fall within the documentary canon. But the definitions above can be applied to all of them: in those examples, animation reflects its times and draws upon reality to create subject matter. From that perspective, it is undeniable that a documentary approach informs aspects of its practice.

Case study: *The Blackout*

Sharron Mirsky's *The Blackout* (2013)[3] is a short animation film that addresses a two day power blackout that affected a large area of Ontario, leaving more than 50 million people without electricity.[4]
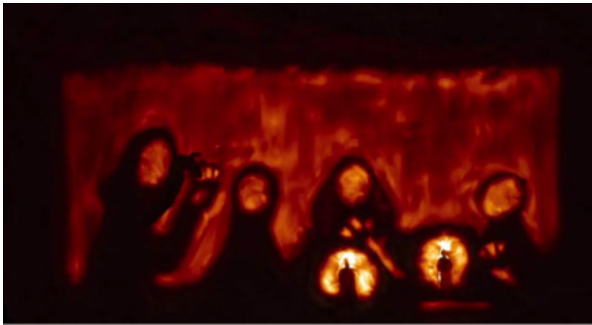
The Blackout (2013), by Sharron Mirsky.

Mirsky makes use of documentary strategies, interviewing Toronto inhabitants and using city soundscapes, together with animation to generate and combine both an eyewitness reporting and a visually poetic interpretation of the experience.

The rewarding outcome evokes the feeling of what it was like to be there, highlighting the powerful increase in human interaction against the fragility of the infrastructure that normally binds society. As one of the characters/interviewees says during the film, we understand and

feel how "people came together" due to the momentary collapse of organized city life, something we take for granted.

The film attempts not only to record a specific event and its consequences on a social level, but also to visually inter-

pret the reality of what took place during those two days. Its strength comes from the way the solid basis in real, lived experience, is further enhanced through moments of poetic and animated liberty.

Animation and the real

Examples like this clearly emphasize a powerful characteristic in animation: a preoccupation with reality and human nature, and its creators' availability to record and comment on real events.

From that perspective one could align this kind of filmmaking within a broad documentary practice but, doing so, we are faced with one of the questions that underlines documentary appraisal and its veracity, thus summarised by Ward: "how to deal with and understand something that quite clearly is attempting to represent reality (or some part of reality), but as it does so, uses specific aesthetic devices. A commonsense [sic] suggestion is that the aesthetics somehow distort or change the reality being represented" (Ward, 2005, p. 6).

In practical terms, does a film like *The Blackout* attempt to visually document the city, place and people, *exactly* as they were at the time of the power failure? No. But does such a film attempt to document the reality experienced by some of those that were there, how they felt, not only as individuals, but as part of a community that reacted in a specific way to an unexpected ordeal? By all means yes.

Without wanting to be dragged into the argument about the ontology of documentary and its practice, I use this film as a reference because I am interested in what it exemplifies, its implications in terms of the practice and teaching of animation.

The underlying question will persist: Can animation, a visual art form in which all its elements are "manufactured," be considered as documentary? The question is especially pertinent if we only consider documentary as a factual representation of events unfolding in real time and space - As if behind the camera we could have a mechanical being, not manipulating or interfering with the event that it registers.

Many others have better questioned and addressed the issue of documentary veracity. But my intention is to suggest a different debate: the use of a documentary approach brings essential questions to animation teaching and practice development that I find relevant. It introduces a way to lead students to question their own boundaries and limits; to question their own lifestyle and personal experience, and to bring that to the work.

Such approach can generate a practice that is more challenging and engaged with the real, questioning preconceptions of their social surroundings, while at the same time widening their perception of what animation practice can really be, beyond the traditional Disney/anime/fantasy/game inspired clichés.

Case study: Animaidstone

During my tenure as animation course leader at UCA Maidstone we organised a conference event, AniMaidstone (2009): sponsored by a combination of academic (the University for the Creative Arts and its Animation Arts course) and local institutions (Maidstone Housing Trust, Kent County Council, MediaTree and Maidstone Borough Council), the project highlighted animation's potential for social commentary and reinforcement of local identity and community.

The event combined a one day international conference with guest speakers, practitioners and scholars, and a practical project, in which 2nd year BA students produced 4 hybrid live action-animation documentaries, addressing community groups and their issues.

As described by an online article on the University for the Creative Arts website:

> "Students were given the opportunity to work with Maidstone Housing trust tenants including young families, over 60s, disabled groups and youth clubs, to create short films on social in-

tervention and reinforcement of cultural identity, highlighting local issues. The project also gave community groups a chance to tell their stories and celebrate the fantastic work of volunteers and support workers."[5]

The whole project was launched with a master class by documentary filmmaker Kim Hopkins, who had worked with BBC World on *Women in the Front Line* and *Nurses on the Front Line*.[6] The students involved were divided in 4 teams. Each team (of 5 students) was mentored by a single filmmaker (Candy Guard, Anna Orchard, Lucy Sullivan, and Stephen Brown) during their weekly meetings with the community groups.

For five weeks the student teams met and worked with their allocated communities to produce films about social groups that were, in one way or another, at the margins of society. In practical terms, the students felt this was their toughest project so far: by being put face to face with real situations, uncomfortable subjects and people of different ages and life experiences, the project challenged them and placed them completely out of their comfort zone.
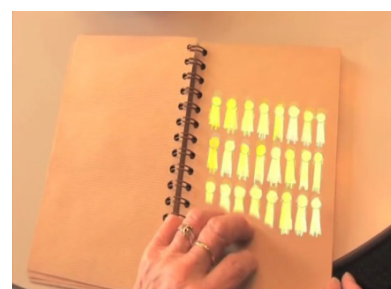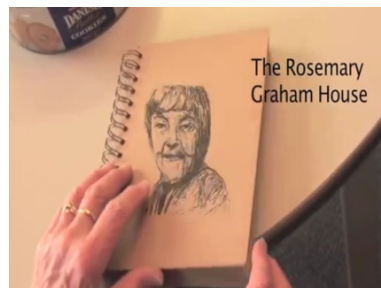
Full House (2009), by Bennett, Jouppila, Joseph and Wen, one of the AniMaidstone animation/documentaries, available on: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEsTYiE7nV4 (Link accessed on the 8th of December 2015)

During the process of creating these films, they dealt with realities they would not normally face or even consider as a subject for animation, and had to find solutions for very straightforward problems: for example, some of the interviewees simply did not want to be shown on film.

As such, their methods and understanding of the animation process were put into question: They discovered through practice new strategies to communicate ideas and that animation is not simply a tool to create imaginary landscapes where fantasy worlds unfold.

The films were screened publicly at the Hazlitt theatre, in the heart of Maidstone's city centre, celebrating a shared experience. But, more than bringing together two different sides of Maidstone, the academia and the community (during both the process and the screening event), the successful result was also expressed on a pedagogical level: the students experienced that animation can also be a tool to better understand the world and to mediate between the real and a personal view of reality.

Practice at Universidade Lusófona

One of the questions I ask my students every year is *why* do they want to do animation. More importantly, why do they want to do animation *now*, in this day and age?

Despite the geographical, organizational and cultural differences between teaching in London and its outskirts or in Lisbon, the answers are predictable: "I want to tell a story," "…to give life to characters," "… to create a universe"…

But, as I write this, I go back to the texts handed in by my students only a week ago and confirm that, aside from the expected desire to "make things move" and to "tell stories," most of the 15 students of my latest class also include in their reply, in some form or another, that they want "to communicate," "to share a personal experience" or "show a view of the world."

Maybe this is due to my own suggestions and guidance; maybe I orientate them towards this kind of subject matter and naturally, by doing that, I frame their practice. But the goal is clear: The intention is to exercise and open their practice to the world out there; to counter the romantic view of the animator working alone for hours and hours in his/her individual film; to place them within a wider, real context, engaging with and reacting to real people, in opposition to a pervasive way of working and socializing that is increasingly happening within computer mediated environments.

One of the units I have been running in the past few years puts a documentary approach at the core of animation practice: I invite a guest artist (a creative practitioner from one form of media or another) to come and talk to the class. So far we have had musicians, an illustrator, a director/musician/graphic novel artist… The choice has been to bring in people who are current, contemporary professionals. The artists present and discuss their work with the students, and the whole conversation is recorded.

Students filming the members of Dead Combo, an alternative folk-rock music duo (2014).
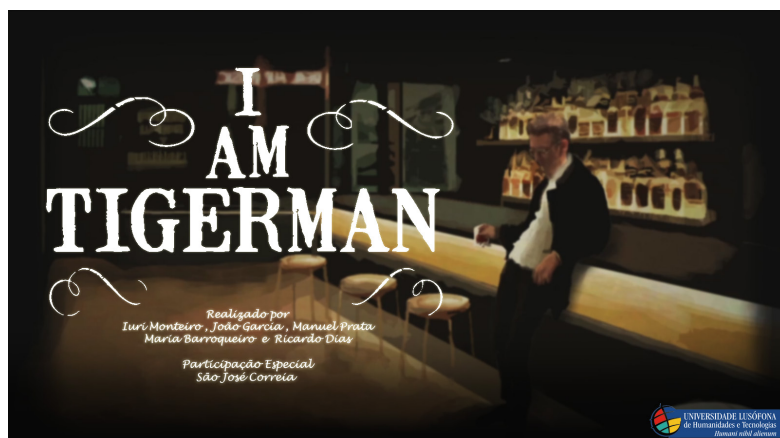
I am Tigerman, based on the music and persona of the one-man band The Legendary Tigerman (2013).

Students with composer/jazz musician/ *Pizzaboy and Dog Mendonça* graphic novel author Filipe Melo (2015)

The brief requires the students to identify and edit some part of the conversation that is inspiring to them and, based on that, to develop a concept that justifies the combination of live action footage with a chosen animation technique. The final result should be a short film, a visual "portrait" of the guests' work and their persona (never a music video: an immediate/easy solution for the students, especially if the guest is a musician).

This assignment implies a kind of reportage approach, and has the advantage of putting the students to work with an existing "story," avoiding the distraction of creating a narrative from scratch (something they can learn in other units). They start their work with material that is already relevant and inspiring, and therefore need "only" to develop a personal strategy to accomplish the task.
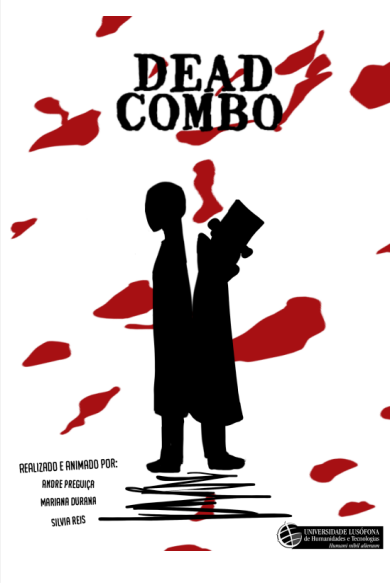
Posters for the films produced with Dead Combo and illustrator Alex Gozblau (2013).

This process allows them to focus on the actual usage of animation as a tool to engage with the real and steers them away from the clichéd idea that animation is mainly a form of escapist entertainment.

At a time when animation can be seen on almost any device or visual platform, it seems important that the industry and its practitioners continue to consciously consider its role: For too long animation has been widely seen as kids' entertainment. Newcomers to the practice should be taught/reminded of an historical tradition that reflects on current/social events.

Similarly, at a time when "old fashioned" and mainstream cinema seems to be at a creative dead-end (and looks for animation and the digital to reinvent itself), it is important to keep establishing animation as a relevant, contemporary art form: an art form that drives its own narrative and is not simply content to be a facilitator of yet more of the visual clutter that is so ubiquitous in this day and age.

Arguably, this can only be achieved through meaningful content. More than ever, I believe, it is necessary that animation reinforces its connection with contemporary life.

In projects like the ones described above, the students' main tasks are, as well as developing a unique visual approach, to discover a personal way to deal with the real while taking ownership of their subject. These discoveries have the potential to change the students' understanding of what animation can actually be.

Conclusion

This kind of approach does not follow strict documentary rules – in fact, I am not concerned about defining with the students, whether or not the results they achieve are documentaries; I am not concerned by the form or perception of

animation documentary, but mainly at how the process required allows the students to think more for themselves rather than mimic a style or trend.

This process carries within itself a line of questioning that is very close to Grierson's definition of documentary. But the discussion about the legitimacy of animated documentary[7], although relevant, is left for another context.

However, I do agree with Honess Roe when, in her article published in this same journal, she proposes that "a more "360-degree" consideration of animated documentary might enrich our understanding and future study of the form." Like other film makers, animation directors do not want to be restrained by the technical or formal definitions of what they are actually trying to produce. As Honess Roe suggests, "one of the reasons [...] that John Grierson's 1933 definition of documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality' has had such longevity is because it is broad church - it allows for a wide variety of aesthetic and practical approaches to making nonfiction."[8]

Such a wide view of the form(s) is encouraging and exciting: It seems obvious to me, as an animation director, that this cross-fertilization and the use of a documentary approach bring something of importance to the discussion of contemporary animation. Rather than a matter of technique, regardless of the "amount of realism" involved, such approach and its research, bring questions of identity and social perspective to the core of the practice. And, by doing so, animation reclaims a thoughtful, intervening and participative role in the contemporary moving image debate.

Bibliography:

Honess Roe, A. (2013)*. Animated documentary.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Honess Roe, A. (2016), Against animated documentary?, *International Journal of Film and Media Arts. 1*(1), [20-27].

Klein, N. (1993). *7 Minutes, The life and death of the American animated cartoon*. London: Verso.

Pilling, J. (1992). *Women and animation, a compendium*. London: BFI Publishing.

Rozenkrantz, J. (2011). Colourful claims: towards a theory of animated documentary. *Film International, 6*. Available from: http://filmint.nu/?p=1809.

Ward, P, (2005). *Documentary, the margins of reality*. London: Wallflower Press.

Ward, P. (2008). Animated realities: the animated film, documentary, realism. *Reconstruction: Studies in contemporary culture, 8(*2). Available from: http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/082/ward.shtml.

Notes

1 Links to both films, accessed on 7 December 2015:

   http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/oct/11/guantanamo-bay-hunger-strikes-video-animation

   http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2015/jan/20/guantanamo-diary-video

2 Complementary to this, it should also be referred the growing awareness within the animation industry for the need to document its own practice. Paul Wells' recent series of documentaries, for the Animation Academy at Loughborough University, addresses a growing preoccupation of animation practitioners and scholars in preserving its own history and body of work.

3 On December 1st, 2015, Sharron Mirsky's film could be seen here: https://vimeo.com/54821094

4 According to Time magazine "more than 50 million people had lost power in parts of Ontario and eight U.S. states." http://science.time.com/2013/08/13/ten-years-after-the-great-blackout-the-grid-is-stronger-but-vulnerable-to-extreme-weather/ (accessed on: 1 December 2015).

5 http://ucreative2.ucreative.ac.uk/article/24098/Maidstone-hosts-film-festival-exploring-cultural-identity#.VmBaHXbh-CUk (accessed on: 4 December 2015)

6 http://kentfilmoffice.co.uk/2009/02/bbc-documentary-film-maker-launches-animaidstone-2009/ (accessed on: 4 December 2015)

7 See Rozenkrantz: *Colourful Claims: Towards a theory of animated documentary,* in Film International, 6 May 2011. Available from: http://filmint.nu/?p=1809 (accessed: 6.12.2015)

8 See Honess Roe: "Against Animated Documentary?" [20-27], in this number of the *International Journal of Film and Media Arts.*