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Absence, Excess and Epistemological Expansion: Towards a framework for the study of animated documentary

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Bio

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Abstract

This article gives an overview of the history of animated documentary, both in terms of the form itself and how it has been studied. It then goes on to suggest a new way of thinking about animated documentary, in terms of the way the animation functions in the texts by way of asking what the animation does that the live-action alternative could not.

Three functions are suggested: mimetic substitution; non-mimetic substitution; and evocation. The suggestion is that by thinking about animated documentary in this way we can see how animation has broadened and deepened documentary's epistemological project by opening it up to subject matters that previously eluded live-action film.

Key Words

Animation

Documentary

Animated documentary

Walking with Dinosaurs

The Sinking of the Lusitania

Creature Comforts

Documentary modes

Epistemology

Realism

Mimesis

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The marriage of animation and documentary may seem like an odd union, a matching of opposites, complicated by their different approaches to representing our experiences of the world. The former conjures up thoughts of comedy, children's entertainment and fantasy; the latter carries with it (often misplaced) assumptions of seriousness, rhetoric and evidence. The long history, however, of the hybridisation of animation and documentary, one that stretches back to the earliest days of the moving image, would suggest that, as in many things in life, opposites can attract in a meaningful way. Animation, for example, has long been used in non-fictional contexts to illustrate, clarify and emphasise. The past twenty to thirty years, however, have seen an increase in the production of what has become known as the 'animated documentary'. As well as frequently appearing in the line-up of animation and documentary festivals worldwide, feature-length animated documentaries have received mainstream theatrical releases (*Chicago 10* in 2007 and *Waltz With Bashir* in 2008) and digital animation has been a staple of primetime television documentary series since prehistory was brought back to life by the BBC in *Walking With Dinosaurs* (1999).

Despite this long shared history, to be explored in more detail below, the cross-pollination of animation and documentary has been relatively neglected by documentary studies. This neglect is rooted in several possible causes. Animated documentaries are most often made by those who are animators first and documentary-makers second. That is, by filmmakers trained in the craft and art of animation and who have chosen to turn their attention to non-fiction subject matter. As such, animated documentaries might be argued to fit more easily into the animation canon (of both films and scholarly literature). Furthermore, there is little question that animated documentaries are animated films. There is, however, potential debate as to whether animation is an acceptable mode of representation for documentary.

Bill Nichols (1994: 29) comments in *Blurred Boundaries* that the documentary is “dependent on the specificity of its images for authenticity.” The authenticity of a documentary and the power of its claim to be such a type of film are deeply linked to notions of realism and the idea that documentary images bear evidence of events that actually happened, by virtue of the indexical relationship between image and reality. Animation presents problems for this documentary ontology and, as such, animated documentaries do not fit easily into the received wisdom of what a documentary is. Anecdotally, I can attest to this. A frequent response to mention of animated documentaries – ‘Does such a thing exist? – is founded on the widely held assumptions regarding what a documentary should look like and what sorts of images it should contain. The presumption goes that documentaries should be observational, unobtrusive, bear witness to actual events, contain interviews, and, even, be objective.ⁱ

In fact, it could be argued that documentary does not, and never has, fully upheld these characteristics. John Grierson’s definition of documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality” has demonstrated longevity through seventy years of flux and change in the boundaries of documentary (1933: 8). The attraction lies, in part, in the broadness of this definition. It is easy to meld it to the user’s requirements and it is applicable to such a large range of approaches and styles that it has proved resilient to aesthetic, ideological and technological developments in documentary making. It is, for example, equally as applicable to the non-interventional films of the 1960s Direct Cinema filmmakers, as to Errol Morris’s interviews and stylized re-enactments and, indeed, to animated documentary.

There is a promise in this Griersonian definition, however, as well as in the colloquial understanding of documentary, that these sorts of films should be about the events, experiences and people that exist in the actual world. As Nichols suggests, documentaries “address *the* world in which we live rather than *a* world imagined by the filmmaker” (2001: xi). Nichols and Grierson help us think of animation as a viable means of documentary expression. After all, if Grierson’s definition allows re-enactment, why not too animation as a way of creatively treating actuality? And thinking of a distinction between *the* world and *a* world helps us differentiate between animation that is nonfictional and that which is based on make-believe.

Animation is no less complex a term to define than documentary. Norman McLaren's definition of animation as "not the art of drawings that move but the art of movements that are drawn" is as attractive in its broadness as his one-time mentor Grierson's definition of documentary (quoted in Furniss, 1998: 5). For this project, however, we might take our lead from Charles Solomon, who identifies two key factors inherent to animation. That is, that "the imagery is recorded frame-by-frame" and "the illusion of motion is created, rather than recorded" (quoted in Furniss, 1998: 5). These ideas, of frame-by-frame manipulation and the construction of an illusion of motion, are ones that apply to both handmade and digitally produced animation. Furthermore, they encompass the broad range of techniques and styles that can be considered animation including cel animation, puppet animation, claymation, three-dimensional computer generated animation, and so on.

Mindful of the above, I would suggest that an audiovisual work (produced digitally, filmed, or scratched on celluloid)ⁱⁱ could be considered an animated documentary if it: has been recorded or created frame-by-frame; is about *the* world rather than *a* world wholly imagined by its creator; and, finally, has been presented as a documentary by its producers and/or received as a documentary by audiences, festivals, or critics. This last criterion is significant as it helps us differentiate two aesthetically similar films that may be motivated by different intentions by their respective producers, or received in different ways by audiences. It also helps to narrow the field; advertising, scientific, educational and public service films, arenas in which animation is frequently utilized, fall beyond what I would consider an animated documentary because they are neither intended, nor received as documentaries.

This essay is intended to contribute to a deeper and more nuanced examination of animated documentary by exploring the theoretical foundations and framework for such work. I contend that while animation may at first seem to threaten the documentary project by destabilising its claim on the real, that the opposite is the case. Rather than questioning the epistemological viability of documentary, as has been done by some authors, I propose that animation broadens and deepens the range of what we can learn from documentaries. One way it does this is by showing us aspects of life that are impossible to film in live action. Ancient history, distant planets and forgotten memories

are just some of the unseeable aspects of reality that animation manifests for the documentary viewer. Animation goes beyond, however, just visualizing unfilmable events. Animation invites us to imagine, to put something of ourselves into what we see on screen, to make connections between non-realist images and reality. Animation enriches documentary and our experience of viewing it. Animation is, quite simply, doing something that the conventional live-action material of documentary cannot. I suggest that this is a fruitful way to think about the animated documentary – to consider how the animation functions in the documentary context. This is not a case of attempting to crowbar animated documentary into existing ways of thinking about the documentary, again something that has been suggested by some critics, but a way of thinking about the unique epistemological potential of the animated documentary in itself. This exploration of the functionality of animation in animated documentary will be contextualised by a brief look at the history of animated documentary as well as the way they have been conceptualised in the scholarly literature.

Animation and Documentary's Shared History

Rather than re-hashing a history of animated documentary, much of which has been covered in the existing literature (Del Gaudio, Patrick, Strøm and Wells), this section aims to point out some significant tendencies in the early intersections between animation and documentary, as well as suggest a turning point towards the development of the animated documentary as a form in its own right. It would be tempting to trace a neat linear history that takes us teleologically from the early examples discussed above to the more recent ones to be explored below. However, the genesis of the animated documentary reveals a more convoluted trajectory. In *Remediation*, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin cite the Foucaultian concept of genealogy in making a connection between new and old media technologies and practices. They seek out 'historical affiliations or resonances and not origins,' adapting genealogy to relationships of power to 'formal relations within and among media' (1999: 21 n.1). Thomas Elsaesser, on the other hand, rejects the concept of genealogy altogether in favour of the notion of archaeology in his examination of the relationship between new media and the early cinema. He tells us:

an archaeology is the opposite of genealogy: the latter tries to trace back a continuous line of descent from the present to the past, the former knows that only the presumption of discontinuity and the synecdoche of the fragment can hope to give a present access to its past. (2006: 18)

Elsaessar maps film history as a network, rather than ‘discrete units,’ and as such, he draws attention to Foucault’s (2008: 6) claim that history is not continuous, but is rather a process of breaks, mutations and transformations.

Just as Bolter, Grusin, and Elsaessar point to the folly of examining new media technologies as discrete from the history of cinema and visual arts, so too would one fall foul of an attempt to mark out contemporary animated documentary as separate, yet linearly descended, from the history of these two forms. Instead, the precedent for contemporary animated documentaries must be mapped as a network of both interweaving and independent threads. If we think of animated documentaries as ‘new media,’ relative to the ‘old media’ of hand-drawn animation and documentary, then we reveal a history of mutual enrichment. What is also revealed is the wide variety the historical hybridization of these two forms takes. The intertwined history of animation and documentary is not, however, a teleological progression towards the current trend of animated documentaries. Just as Foucault’s archaeology of the history of ideas ‘does not seek to rediscover the continuous, insensible transition that relates discourses, on a gentle slope, to what precedes them, surrounds them, or follows them,’ the history of the overlaps between animation and documentary is not one of easy continuities (Foucault, 2008: 115). There is no single beginning, but rather many concurrent, international examples can be found that demonstrate the instinct that documentary can be strengthened by animation, and vice versa. Similarly, there is no terminal point towards which this history progresses. What is important to take from this history, however, is that animation was early seen to have a unique representational function for the non-fictional moving image, one that could not be fulfilled by the conventional live-action, photographic based alternative.

In 1918 pioneer American animator Winsor McCay made what is widely dubbed

as the ‘first animated documentary,’ *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (Wells, 1998: 16; Wells, 1997: 63; Patrick, 2004: 36). McCay, who was better known for his flamboyant vaudeville lightening sketch performances and animated high jinx with *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), turned to non-fiction upon the sinking of the British passenger liner *Lusitania* by a German submarine in 1915. Shocked at the death of innocent civilians, many of them American, but stymied by the absence of original footage or photographs, McCay recreated the events, as retold by the survivors, using animation.ⁱⁱⁱ His aesthetic approach to the material was modified from his usual animation style to suit the subject matter and the look of the twelve-minute long film resembles newspaper editorial illustrations and newsreels of the time.^{iv}

Significantly, *The Sinking of the Lusitania*, contains several textual implications of the suitability of animation to the representation of real life, a sentiment that is echoed in extra-textual material surrounding the film. An early intertitle tells the audience ‘you are looking at the first record of the sinking of the Lusitania’ and, in general, the images’ perspective resembles those of an imaginary eyewitness, viewing the events from a distance (see figure 1). The *Lusitania* is mostly seen in ‘long shots’ that allows us, for example, to watch its slow but inevitable disappearance after the torpedo strike. Even the live action prologue, in which we see McCay and his colleagues setting to work on drawing the film’s images, suggests an unproblematic application of animation as a medium for an actuality subject. McCay makes no distinction between live action and animation in terms of their ability to show us reality and contemporary reviewers seemed equally content to accept that the film offered audiences a chance to ‘*witness* the whole tragedy, from the moment of the first attack to the heartrending ending’ (Bioscope, 1919: 74. Emphasis added). *The Sinking of the Lusitania* demonstrates the early use of animation as a substitute for missing live-action material.

While McCay’s film was the first commercially released ‘animated documentary,’^v there are earlier examples of animation being used in a non-fiction context. In particular, animation has historically been used as a tool of illustration and clarification in factual films. British filmmaker Percy Smith made a series of films, including *Fight for the Dardanelles* (1915), that used animated maps to depict battles of the First World War. In the US, Max Fleischer made animated films for the military as

early as 1917 that were used to train soldiers heading to the battle zones in Europe. The realization that animation could clarify and explain more effectively and efficiently than live-action led to an even greater uptake of the medium by the US government and military in the Second World War. The Walt Disney Studios was commissioned to make numerous educational and training films and also provided the animated sections for Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series of seven propaganda films (1942 – 1945). In these types of films we see animated maps, moving illustrations of military equipment and diagrams that explain military strategy. This use of animation demonstrates that envisioned information is easier to understand and retain, and that much factual information is communicated more efficiently via animation than the spoken word. These films, however, often conveyed more than facts through their animation by using it for emphasis and visual association. Simple symbolism prevails throughout the *Why We Fight* series, such as pitting dark hues for enemy nations against paler colours for the Allies. This type of symbolism is established in the series' first animated sequence, in *Prelude to War* (1942), when a dark, black inky stains spreads across Japan, Italy and Germany as the narrator notes the cultural differences between these countries and the US (see figure 2).

Outside of wartime there is a long history of putting animation to educational use. While still working the Mid-West before moving to California, Walt Disney was commissioned to make two films on dental hygiene.^{vi} With these early pedagogic endeavours, he was following many of the pioneers of animation and cinema. As early as 1910 Thomas Edison made instructional films that included animated sequences and, according to Richard Fleischer (2005: 27), Randolph Bray made partially animated educational films for the US Government prior to 1916. Subsequently, animators from the Soviet Union to the United States would use animation to explore the physical world. From the Fleischer Brothers' *Einstein's Theory of Relativity* (1923) to Vsevolod Pudovkin's *The Mechanics of the Human Brain* (1926) animation was used as a prescient tool to explain, clarify and visualize.

There are plenty of contemporary examples of animation being used in documentary for a specific purpose. Animated segments are still used in a non-fictional context to clarify, explain, illustrate and emphasize. The use of animated maps, charts,

graphs and diagrams in mainstream formats ranging from television news to theatrical documentary are too numerous to mention. This illustrative function of animation has become so commonplace to the point of being inconspicuous. Similarly, natural history, science and history programming now uses digital animation as a matter of course to bring to life that which is impossible to capture with the live action camera. For example, the BBC's recent *Wonders of the Solar System* (2010) displays CGI close-up images of far-off planets that would be impossible to film or photograph.

A frequent, and perhaps relatively recent, use of animation is live-action documentaries that use animation to create moments of, often ironic, interjection. In films such as *Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore, 2002), *Blue Vinyl* (Judith Hefland and Daniel B. Gold, 2002) and *She's a Boy I Knew* (Gwen Haworth, 2007), animation is rendered in a humorous and cartoon-like style as a way of contrasting with the seriousness of the documentaries' subject matter. Emily Hubley's simple line-drawing style animation in *Blue Vinyl* punctuates Hefland's argument regarding our self-destructive reliance on PVC. The animated segments in *Bowling for Columbine* evoke the anarchic humour of television show *South Park* and highlight the absurdity, as perceived by Moore, of America's relationship with firearms. In *She's a Boy I Knew*, Gwen Haworth interjects animated sections into the autobiographical account of her gender transition. Retro adverts and magazine extracts are brought into motion in a segment entitled 'how to be a girl... by Mom' that accents, in a light-hearted way, the issues Gwen's mother has with her take on being female. Hawthorn has commented that she included animation in her film to 'lighten the mood' and add humour to what she was concerned would otherwise become a too intense and serious film.

With the exception of *The Sinking of the Lusitania*, none of these films or television programmes would be described, however, as animated documentaries, either by their makers or their audiences. They lack the sense of animation and documentary cohering into a single form in which the animation works to enhance our knowledge of an aspect of *the* world and to the extent that the separation of the animation from the documentary is either impossible, or would render the inherent meaning of the film incomprehensible. Examples as varied as *Waltz with Bashir*, *Walking with Dinosaurs* and the *Animated Minds* series communicate meaning because of their complex and

inseparable interplay of animation and documentary. The first-person accounts of mental health issues in *Animated Minds* are more than just radio documentaries. The animation adds something very specific to the way we interpret and understand the experiences being recounted. *Walking with Dinosaurs* depends on its realistic animated reconstructions of prehistoric life, in a style that copies the familiar aesthetic of natural history programming, to deliver its scientific hypotheses about way dinosaurs lived. Ari Folman's personal journey to unearth suppressed memories of his role in the Sabra and Shatila massacre during the 1982 Lebanon War in *Waltz with Bashir*, resonates thematically via the style of animation and the film's refusal to make an aesthetic distinction between past and present.

The animated documentary is archaeologically linked, as suggested above, to the earlier examples of the use of animation in non-fiction scenarios, just as it is connected to contemporary examples of documentary utilising animation for specific purposes. The possibilities for the convergence of animation and documentary into a coherent form, however, was anticipated in the US by the work of John and Faith Hubley and, in the UK, by Aardman Animation. John Hubley, a key figure at the left-leaning and aesthetically innovative United Productions of America (UPA) animation company, and his wife Faith set up their independent company in 1953. In 1959 they made *Moonbird*, a fantastical flight of fancy that matches animated visuals to a soundtrack of their young sons playing. They followed this up with two further films, *Windy Day* (1967) and *Cockaboodie* (1973), which similarly pair documentary tape recordings of their children at play with animated imaginings of their make believe world. What we see in these films is often directly connected to what we hear the children talk about as they play; thus, when they talk about finding a rabbit, one pops into the scene. The Hubleys' visualization of their children's imaginations is enhanced by the films' expressive aesthetic, with its hand drawn quality that resembles children's drawings.^{vii}

Aardman began combining stop-motion animation of Plasticine puppets with documentary soundtracks in the 1970s. David Sproxton and Peter Lord produced two short films for the BBC in 1978 under the collective title of *Animated Conversations*. Both films, *Confessions of a Foyer Girl* and *Down and Out*, use documentary sound as their basis and stop-motion animate malleable puppets against an audio track of

eavesdropped conversations. This led to a commission from Channel 4 to make five more shorts, under the banner *Conversation Pieces*, that “demonstrated how real people’s voices could be characterised with insight, humour and sensitivity.”^{viii} The soundtracks of the five *Conversation Pieces* were again recorded by openly ‘eavesdropping’ in locations such as workplaces and community centres.

Ultimately, this trend in Aardman’s work led to 1989’s *Lip Synch* series, one of which was the *Creature Comforts* short film of Plasticine zoo animals animated to the musings of interviewees on their living conditions and domestic amenities, which won the studio its first of many Academy Awards.^{ix} By this stage, Sproxtton and Lord began more formally interviewing and recording their subjects, often using a trained radio journalist to do the interviews, which they later cut out of the final soundtrack.^x While *Creature Comforts*, and its subsequent ‘sequels’ and spin-offs, may be read as making astute observations on the human condition, with its matching and mismatching of animal form and human voice, it is rarely presented or understood as a documentary. The film does, however, effectively integrate documentary and animation into a coherent whole – in this case a comedy short. The critical and commercial success of this piece of genre integration elevated the profile of the now very successful animation studio and signalled the creative possibilities for the convergence of animation and documentary.

This brief survey is demonstrative of a long-standing relationship between animation and documentary. Historically, documentary makers have utilised animation to illustrate, clarify, visualise and emphasise, using animation to make up for the shortcomings of live-action material. Concurrently, animators have turned their attentions to events occurring in *the* world. This shared history suggests animation and documentary are more compatible than they at first seem. This was confirmed by the Hubleys and Aardman Animation, who clearly demonstrated the potential for the seamless integration of animation and documentary material to create short films that were far more than the sum of their parts.

Interpreting Animated Documentaries

In the two decades since Aardman’s *Creature Comforts*, the production of animated documentary has proliferated. Despite this, and their increased exposure through festival,

conferences and public viewing outlets, there is still a relative paucity in scholarly work on the form. In 1997, two essays appeared on the subject: Sybil DelGaudio's 'If truth be told, can 'toons tell it? Documentary and animation' in the journal *Film/History* and Paul Wells's 'The Beautiful Village and the True Village: A Consideration of Animation and the Documentary Aesthetic' in a special edition of *Art & Design Magazine* guest-edited by Wells. These first forays into examining the existence and nature of animated documentaries were followed several years later by two further essays (Michael Renov and Gunnar Strøm, both 2003), and Eric Patrick's 'Representing Reality: Structural/Conceptual Design in Non-Fiction Animation' (*Animac Magazine*, 2004). Then, in 2005, the March issue of the online animation magazine *FPS (Frames per Second Magazine)* made animated documentaries its cover story and included three articles on the topic by both animators and scholars. The same year saw published Paul Ward's short book *Documentary: The Margins of Reality*, which includes a chapter on animated documentary.

Much of this early scholarship on animated documentary takes as its foundation key ideas from documentary studies. In particular, the desire to fit animated documentary into the organizational structure of documentary 'modes' first suggested by Bill Nichols in *Representing Reality* (1991).^{xi} Ward argues for certain types of animated documentaries, namely ones that include documentary voiceover and interviews with participants, as fitting into the 'interactive' mode. He casts these animated documentaries as interactive not just because of the nature and origin of their audio tracks, but also because their production involves the collaboration of the documentary subject(s). DelGaudio prefers to class animated documentaries within the 'reflexive' mode because, she claims, 'animation itself acts as a form of 'metacommentary' within a documentary' (192). She is suggesting here that by adopting animation as a medium of representation, animated documentaries are necessarily passing comment on live action's ability, or lack thereof, to represent reality. This is especially the case, she argues, in animated documentaries that document events and topics that were not, or could not have been, captured on camera.

Both Strøm and Patrick see animated documentaries as examples of Nichols' 'performative' mode. According to Nichols, the 'performative documentary underscores

the complexity of our knowledge of the world by emphasizing its subjective and affective dimensions' (2001: 131). His conceptualization appears to welcome animation as a mode of representation, not least because of the necessarily subjective nature of much of animation production. Patrick identifies this appeal with his claim that 'the very nature of animation is to foreground its process and artifice' (2004: 38). Furthermore, when Nichols tells us that 'the world as represented by performative documentaries becomes, however, suffused by evocative tones and expressive shadings that constantly remind us that the world is more than the sum of the visible evidence we derive from it,' it is as if he could be speaking directly to animation.

I would suggest, however, that to shoehorn the animated documentary into one of Nichols' modes threatens to limit our understanding of the form. Ward's ascription of animated documentaries to the interactive mode is, as he admits, only applicable to certain types of animated documentary. Not all animated documentaries have a documentary voice-over and even fewer are produced through an interactive relationship between producer and subject. Similarly, DelGaudio's definition of animated documentaries as reflexive excludes those films that are not necessarily critiquing live action's capabilities to represent reality. Furthermore, even if animation is doing something live action cannot, it does not necessarily follow that the resulting film is passing comment on the representational abilities of either approach. The assignment of animated documentaries to the performative mode is, I contend, equally limiting. Nichols' explanation of the performative mode is, at times, nebulous. While these types of documentary foreground subjectivity, they also "demonstrate how embodied knowledge provides entry into an understanding of the more general processes at work in society" (2001: 131). This is a definition of the performative documentary that is far harder to reconcile with animation.

We might question, then, how useful it is to try to fit animated documentaries into Nichols' modes of documentary production. Both Wells and Patrick come up, instead, with different typologies that may be more fruitful for a discussion of this form. Wells re-figures the modes of documentary production outlined by Richard Barsam and examines how animated documentaries fit into, and expand, these modes. In so doing he reconstitutes Barsam's categories into four 'dominant areas within the field of animation'

(Wells, 1997: 41). By tracing similarities in overall tone, subject matter, structure and style, Wells determines these four dominant areas as the imitative mode, the subjective mode, the fantastic mode, and the post-modern mode.

Films in the imitative mode ‘directly echo the dominant generic conventions of live-action documentary’ (Wells, 1997: 41). As such, Wells claims, these films are often intended to educate, inform and persuade. The subjective mode often challenges the notion of objectivity through creating tension between the visual and the aural by combining humorous animated representations with ‘serious’ documentary voice-overs or by connecting to broader social issues through the individual expression of the animator (Wells, 1997: 43). Ultimately, the subjective mode uses animation to ‘re-constitute “reality” on local and relative terms’ (Wells, 1997: 44). The fantastic mode extends the subjective mode’s commentary on realism and objectivity to the extent of rejecting realism entirely as ‘an ideologically charged (often politically corrupt) coercion of commonality’ (Wells, 1997: 44). The fantastic mode further challenges accepted modes of documentary representation by presenting reality through the lens of surrealist animation that bears little or no resemblance to either the physical world or previous media styles. The post-modern mode adopts the general characteristics of postmodernism in ‘prioritising pastiche, rejecting notions of objective authority, and asserting that “the social”, and therefore “the real”, is now fragmentary and incoherent’ (Wells, 1997: 44). Wells claims that one of the fundamental pursuits of the documentary project is the attempt ‘to engage in the annunciation of commonality and the social dimension of the real’ (Wells, 1997: 45). This pursuit is undermined, Wells contends, by the post-modern mode’s questioning of the possibility of knowledge in itself.

Patrick adopts the notion of ‘structures’ to categorize animated documentaries, suggesting ‘in making any kind of film, structure tends to be the skeleton that the content lives on’ (2004: 39). He proposes three primary structures, the illustrative, narrated, and sound-based, and a fourth, the ‘extended structure,’ which is an extension of Wells’ fantastic mode (Patrick, 2004: 39). ‘The four structures encompass the range of possible approaches to animated documentaries without initial regard to concept, techniques or aesthetics’ (ibid). Patrick takes a different conceptual approach to Wells, looking through the lens of storytelling rather than the films’ relationship to reality. ‘Illustrative,’ Patrick

contends, is a more apt term to describe the films discussed by Wells under the imitative mode. These films illustrate ‘events based on historical or personal evidence’ and use this to structure the storytelling (Patrick, 2004: 40). The narrated structure uses a script to tell the story and these animated documentaries often use ‘voiceover that recounts and connects the elements of the story’ (Patrick, 2004: 40). The sound-based structure, by contrast, ‘uses sound that has either been found or recorded in an unmanipulated, uncontrived way as the primary structuring device’ (Patrick, 2004: 41). Patrick notes that this aural link between film and reality gives these films all at once a ‘naturalistic or improvised’ and ‘dramatic and cinema verite’ feel (Patrick, 2004: 41). Patrick dubs Wells’ fantastic mode as ‘expanded structure’ because it ‘expands the possibilities of the documentary form by transmuting the traditional storytelling method’ (Patrick, 2004: 42). Like Wells, Patrick notes the highly subjective nature of this approach and how films in this category eschew a direct relationship or commentary on reality preferring instead a more surreal, symbolic or metaphoric approach. Patrick then goes on to observe conceptual trends within each mode, by which he means ‘the very essence of the film... the content of what the filmmaker is talking about’ (Patrick, 2004: 43). So, for example, the sound-based and narrated structures tend to be memorials or portraits of individuals or groups and films with an illustrative structure often have a historical basis.

This discussion of two different approaches to categorizing animated documentaries, however, begs the question of the purpose of such an exercise. Patrick suggests that his structures are ‘a springboard for studying the nature of the form’ (2004: 45). While Patrick’s and Wells’ work helped, in the early days of scholarship on animated documentaries, to make the case for its identification as a discrete form, it is questionable whether their modes and structures help us understand this type of film or fulfil much of a purpose beyond a self-serving one of being able to divide films up among their suggested categories. This question of usefulness and purpose is exacerbated if one queries the founding assumptions of their approaches. For example, it is unclear whether ‘illustrative,’ ‘narrated,’ and ‘sound-based’ are actually structures of storytelling rather than modes of delivery. Patrick’s omission of a detailed explication of what he understands by the terms ‘structure’ and ‘storytelling’ further muddies these waters.

Wells’ approach, which devises categories that speak to the relationship between

representation and reality, can be seen as responding to the so-called crisis of postmodernism in documentary. The year before Wells published his essay, an article by Noël Carroll appeared in the collection co-edited with David Bordwell, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* entitled ‘Nonfiction Film and Postmodernist Skepticism.’ In this chapter Carroll takes issue with several theorists’ (including Michael Renov, Bill Nichols, and Brian Winston) discussion of the fictional elements or stylistic tendencies in some non-fiction. Carroll extrapolates (and, one could argue, misinterprets) these discussions to be a wholesale rejection of a connection between documentary and reality. He characterizes this as a new trend in scepticism regarding the documentary project, one that is inflected by postmodernism more generally. Even earlier than this, in 1993, Linda Williams’ essay ‘Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History and *The Thin Blue Line*’ uses the lens of postmodernism to examine that film and suggests truth is relative and contingent. While Wells does not cite either of these essays directly, his modes highlight the supposed ineffectuality of conventional documentary representation (as in, live action) to access or show reality. Furthermore, he suggests a teleology developing towards the post-modern mode that ultimately questions the coherence of reality itself.

The existence of a postmodern crisis in documentary has, however, since been debunked. Michael Renov points out that the targets of Carroll’s censure ‘rarely addressed postmodernism in any direct way in [their] writings on documentary film’ (2004: 137). Renov counters that Carroll’s critique is a ‘documentary disavowal’ that fails to recognize that the form has long-since abandoned such rationalist goals as objective, disinterested knowledge (ibid). Instead, he suggests documentary is more often concerned with ‘contingency, hybridity, knowledge as situated and particular, identity as ascribed and performed’ (ibid). Renov’s words remind us that contemporary documentary studies rarely questions the notion that the form conveys knowledge. Rather, the pertinent questions are *how* this knowledge is conveyed and what *type* of knowledge it is.

In response to these debates, I would suggest that Wells’ modes of animated documentary are entrenched in a now rejected postmodernist doubt regarding the viability of the documentary project and the very possibility of representing reality. It remains true, however, that there are different types of animated documentaries that

present their subject matter through a variety of styles and techniques. Furthermore, animation is not used in the same way in all animated documentaries. It may still be useful, therefore, to demarcate different types of animated documentaries. One means of doing this is to consider how the animation functions. In other words, what is the animation doing that the conventional alternative could not? ^{xiii} I suggest that animation functions in three key ways: mimetic substitution; non-mimetic substitution; and evocation. I believe this is not just categorization for the sake of it, but rather a way to help understand how animated documentaries work. In particular, sorting these films into categories of functionality helps us understand *what* we learn from animated documentaries and *how* we learn it. This, in turn, will aid consideration of whether, and if so how, the epistemological status of the animated documentary differs from the non-animated documentary and what the implications of such a difference are. By considering the functionality of the animation along epistemological lines this is not an exercise in postmodern doubt regarding the *possibility* that documentary can teach us something about *the* world. Neither is it a by-product of questioning the existence of the real altogether. Furthermore, I am not suggesting that animated documentaries are a subset of Nichols' reflexive mode. Rather, this process embraces the epistemological potentiality of the documentary form by suggesting that animation has the capacity to enhance and extend this potential.

One way that animation functions in animated documentaries is in a substitutive way. In these instances, the animation illustrates something that would be very hard, or impossible, to show with the conventional live-action alternative and often it is directly standing-in for live-action footage. The animation here is substituting for something else. This is, in fact, one of the first ways animation was used in non-fiction scenarios in, as discussed above, Winsor McCay's *The Sinking of the Lusitania*. More recent examples of substitutive animation can be seen in the BBC's 1999 natural history series *Walking With Dinosaurs* and Brett Morgen's *Chicago 10* (2007). In *Chicago 10*, motion-capture and traditional animation is used to recreate the trial of Abbie Hoffman and the other members of the anti-war movement accused of inciting riot in the run up to 1968's Democratic National Convention in Chicago. No filmed record of the courtroom exists and these sequences are based on the transcripts of the legal proceedings, which often

descended into a circus-like state of chaos as the defendants refused to adhere to the proceeding's rules and regulations. In *Walking With Dinosaurs*, prehistoric creatures are created using 3-D computer animation that are superimposed on backdrops that had previously been filmed at suitable-looking locations.

In both these examples, the animation is used to stand-in for live-action. This is necessitated for similar reasons in both cases, as well as in older examples such as *The Sinking of the Lusitania*, that there exists no live-action footage of the events being portrayed. In these examples, therefore, animation functions as a kind of re-enactment of historical event and this kind of animated documentary works very similarly to a reconstruction documentary. In that sense, it calls on the viewer to make certain assumptions and allowances and similar to a reconstruction, says 'this is a reasonable likeness of what these events looked like the first time they happened and we have chosen to reconstruct them, or in this case animate them, because we don't have a filmed record of that first time they happened.'

Substitutive animation is, in these cases, made to closely resemble reality, or rather, the look of a live action recording of reality. In most of the examples in this category the animation is created using digital computer techniques, which are achieving ever-increasing levels of verisimilitude. *Walking with Dinosaurs* was celebrated at the time of its release for how realistic the CGI images of the dinosaurs were. However, the series also inserts extra details, which are extraneous to the narrative, to further imply that the imagery we are seeing is what would have been captured by a camera, had one been around in prehistoric times to track these ancient beasts. In one instance, for example, a T-Rex turns and roars right into the 'lens' of the camera, splattering it with spittle. There are many other examples of other animated documentaries that use these kinds of techniques to make it seem as if the material has been shot on film, even though we know it has not. The History Channel's *Battle 360* (2008), for example, uses digital animation to reconstruct the exploits of a WWII aircraft carrier and the digital footage is often manipulated to look like aged film.

There are other animated documentaries that also substitute animation for live-action. However, whereas the animation in *Chicago 10* and *Walking With Dinosaurs* attempts to mimic the look of reality, these other films are not so constrained. Animated

interview documentaries often use this approach, where a documentary soundtrack is loosely interpreted through animated visuals. The 2002 Swedish film *Hidden* (Heilborn, Aronowitsch and Johansson) animates a radio interview with a young illegal immigrant. Unlike *Chicago 10*, this film has less concern for making the characters resemble their real-life counterparts. Similarly *It's Like That* (Southern Ladies Animation Group, 2004) animates young asylum seekers as knitted puppets of small birds (see figure 6). In these animated documentaries, the animation works as non-mimetic substitution. There is no sense of trying to create an illusion of a filmed image in these examples. Instead, they work towards embracing and acknowledging animation as a medium in its own right, a medium that has the potential to express meaning through its aesthetic realisation.

In both mimetic and non-mimetic substitution, the animation could be considered a creative solution to a problem: the absence of filmed material. Animation functions in both cases to overcome limitations of a practical nature. In the case of several animated documentaries, the existence of original filmed material is impossible. The dinosaurs preceded the motion picture camera by several millennia; no cameras were allowed to film the trial of Abbie Hoffman and his co-defendants; there is no visual record of the interviews with the Swedish and Australian child immigrants. In these examples, animation is one of many choices available to the filmmaker who could, conceivably, have used another documentary device such as reconstruction or archival material. Often, too, there are ethical considerations at play. The filmmakers of *Hidden* had a responsibility to protect the anonymity of their child subject. In Liz Blazer's *Backseat Bingo* (2003), a short animated documentary about the sex lives of senior citizens, she gained consent to interview her subjects on the promise that they would not appear on camera.^{xiii} In both cases animation becomes an alternative to the silhouetted figure familiar from television interview documentaries and current affairs programming.

Evocation is a third function of animation in animated documentaries that responds to a different kind of representational limitation. Certain concepts, emotions, feelings and states of mind are particularly difficult to represent through live action imagery. Historically, filmmakers have used various optical devices such as wavy lines, blurring the edges of the image and alterations of colour palate and film stock to indicate the representation of subjective states of mind. Similarly, certain camera angles inform

the audience that we are seeing the world from a particular character's point of view. Animation, however, is increasingly being used as a tool to evoke the experiential in the form of ideas, feelings and sensibilities. By visualizing these invisible aspects of life, often in an abstract or symbolic style, animation that functions in this evocative way allows us to imagine the world from someone else's perspective. In *Feeling My Way* (1997) Jonathan Hodgson uses animation to communicate his train of thought on his daily walking commute to work. *Animated Minds* (Andy Glynne, 2003) combines animated visuals with a soundtrack on which an interviewee speaks of their experience of living with mental illness. The style of animation reflects the experiences being described on the soundtrack and gives us a visualization that aids our understanding of these internal worlds.

This evocative functionality of animation has been used particularly to evoke the reality experience by the films' subjects, realities that are often quite different from those experienced by the majority of society. In these instances, animation is used as an aide-imagination that can facilitate awareness, understanding and compassion from the audience for a subject-position potentially far removed from their own. Samantha Moore's 2009 film *An Eyeful of Sound* is about synaesthesia, the neurological condition of experiencing normally separated sensations at the same time (such as seeing a sound or tasting a noise). In the film, Moore focuses on people who have audio-visual synaesthesia, or who see sounds. Like many animated documentary, she combines animated visuals with an audio track of interviews with participants with first-hand experience of synaesthesia. The film works to evoke, rather than represent the experiences we hear being described and Moore's images respond to the film's musical score in a way a synaesthetes brain will trigger images in response to sounds (see figure 7). Moore is attempting to evoke the synaesthetic experience for her viewers through the interplay of animation, documentary soundtrack and musical score.

These three functions – mimetic substitution, non-mimetic substitution and evocation – are the three key ways animation works in animated documentary. In the case of mimetic substitution, in examples such as *Chicago 10* and *Walking With Dinosaurs*, the animation tends to be offering us knowledge of something that we could have all seen, had we been alive in prehistoric times or a spectator in Judge Julius

Hoffman's courtroom. This is, perhaps, the kind of knowledge that the documentary is, traditionally, evidential of: knowledge that is out there, in the shared historical world, which we all could have accessed equally if we were eyewitness to it. In non-mimetic substitution, such as *It's Like*, the animation begins to add something, to suggest things through its style and tone. *It's Like That* makes a point about the incarceration of innocents with the representation of the young asylum seekers as soft, knitted birds. This shift from the observable is furthered through the evocative use of animation. Pieces like *Feeling My Way*, *Animated Minds* and *An Eyeful of Sound* are, instead of pointing outwards, pointing inwards towards the internal. These films, through the use of animation, are proposing documentary's ability and suitability to represent the world *in here* of personal experience as well as the world *out there* of observable events. Extending on from this, films that engage with the personal memories of the filmmakers, such as *Waltz With Bashir* (Folman, 2008) and *Silence* (Yadin and Bringas, 1998), use animation as a tool to explore and reveal hidden or forgotten pasts, demonstrating the medium's capacity for documenting the world from a subjective point of view.

Conclusion

Looking at how the animation functions in animated documentary allows us to draw some conclusions regarding the epistemological status of these types of films. While all documentaries purport to teach us something about *the* world, animating documentary broadens the epistemological potential of documentary by expanding the range of what and how we can learn. Through mimetic substitution, non-mimetic substitution and evocation, animation compensates for the limitations of live-action material. Rather than questioning the viability of knowledge-through-documentary, animated documentaries offer us an enhanced perspective on reality by presenting the world in a breadth and depth that live action alone cannot. Life is rich and complicated in ways that are not always available to observation, something that is reflected in the diversity of style and subject matter of contemporary animated documentaries.

This is a decisive moment for the study of animated documentary. We no longer need to marvel at their mere existence; that was the job of the forward guard scholarship, discussed above. Now, the heterogeneity of animated documentary demands we go beyond general observation, towards specification and theorisation. The question of the epistemology of animated documentary is just one place to start, one that addresses some fundamental assumptions of documentary. Animation and documentary have co-enriched each other since the earliest days of cinema, and we can hope they will continue to do so for a long time yet. As the form evolves, so too must the questions we ask of it.

End Notes

ⁱ These are some of the most frequent assumptions I have heard expressed by students in undergraduate level documentary courses.

ⁱⁱ For brevity, I will refer to the audiovisual texts under discussion as ‘films’, even though many of them are produced on digital video and are not intended for projection on the big screen.

ⁱⁱⁱ A process that took two years and required 25,000 individual drawings.

^{iv} This emulation was clearly effective as the film was included in the Universal Weekly newsreel shown in movie theatres. See Crafton (1982: 116).

^v While it was not labelled as such at the time of its production or initial reception, an argument can be made for it being understood as such, according to the criteria set out above.

^{vi} *Tommy Tucker’s Tooth* (1922) and *Clara Cleans Her Teeth* (1926), both for Dr. Thomas B. McCrum of the Deener Dental Institute in Kansas City, Missouri. See Shale (1976: 112).

^{vii} One of the Hubleys’ daughters, Emily, became an animator and some of her work appears in Abraham Ravett’s autobiographical documentary, *Everything’s For You* (1989) and Judith Helfand and Daniel B. Gold’s *Blue Vinyl* (2002).

^{viii} <http://www.aardman.com/html/history.asp> (accessed Feb 15, 2009). The five films are *On Probation*, *Sales Pitch*, *Palmy Days*, *Early Bird* and *Late Edition* (all 1983).

^{ix} And also led to many commissions for television commercials. See <http://www.aardman.com/html/history.asp> (accessed Feb 15, 2009). The other films in this series are *Going Equipped*, *War Story*, *Next!* and *Ident*.

^x David Sproxtton, e-mail message to author, October 1, 2008.

^{xi} Nichols initially suggested four modes: the expository, the observational, the interactive and the reflexive. He later added the poetic and the performative and re-named the interactive as the participatory mode. See Nichols (1991, 1994 and 2001).

^{xii} By ‘conventional alternative’ I mean the types of photo-based media familiar to documentary, such as observational filming, archival footage, reconstruction, interviews, photographs, and so on.

^{xiii} Although once they had seen the finished film they agreed to their photographs appearing in its credits. Liz Blazer, email message to author, February 17, 2009.

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