What unique features of animated documentaries motivate filmmakers to choose this medium over traditional documentary and fiction filmmaking, and does this choice influence the storytelling?

Master Thesis

Master of Arts 3D Animation for Film & Games

by David Seul

Matriculation Number: 11155612

Internationale Filmschule Köln

Technology Arts Sciences TH Köln

cgl Cologne Game Lab

Fakultät für Kulturwissenschaften

Academic Integrity Declaration

I declare that I have worked on the above-mentioned examination independently and without unauthorised assistance. I also confirm that I have not used any non-permissible resources. I am aware that the assistance of another person, working on the exam as a group (either in the same room or using social media) if the exam is not declared a team project, is considered unauthorised assistance. I am also aware that copying text passages from the internet, e.g. using "copy and paste", without giving credit is a form of using non-permissible resources. I am aware that the violation of examination regulations on cheating during examinations constitutes an administrative offence in accordance with § 63 (5) of the North Rhine-Westphalia Higher Education Act and may be subject to a fine.

Place/Date: _____

Signature: _____

First Examiner: Prof. Rolf Mütze

Second Examiner: Prof. Sophia Zauner

Abstract

This research investigates the unique features that distinguish animated documentaries from traditional documentary and fiction filmmaking, examining whether these features have an impact on storytelling. Animated documentary is a synthetic genre that blends factual storytelling with artistic interpretation. Bypassing traditional photographic representation, the genre uniquely navigates memory, trauma and personal narratives in search of emotional, psychological, and subjective truths. It natively portrays contemporary digital worlds and resurrects long-gone eras where evidence has faded. However, the constructed nature of animation raises questions of credibility and truthfulness, explored in this thesis through the concept of indexicality. Additionally, the growing use of animation poses the risk of overuse and audience desensitisation. Filmmakers counter this by employing various strategies to maintain credibility and enhance viewer engagement. By integrating academic research and filmmaker insights, this work explores the genre's evolving role in nonfiction storytelling. It aims to distil the motivations behind the use of animated documentaries to reveal how they reshape the landscape of nonfiction storytelling.

Table of Contents

Introduction

When did cartoons get so serious? Animated documentaries, once a niche experiment, have evolved into a bold and expressive medium. Fact meets artistic interpretation while audiences view the world through a handcrafted lens. While traditional documentaries ask “what happened?”, this question now steps aside in favour of “how do we remember it, how did it feel, from which point of view did we see it?”

By stepping further away from literal representation, animation paradoxically brings us closer to emotional truths. Its abstract nature both enhances emotional engagement and raises concerns about its credibility. Animation asks us to question what we see and to interpret what we cannot see. It lets us traverse psychological landscapes, navigates digital worlds like no other medium and cloaks painful truths in metaphor. As animated documentaries continue to gain recognition and legitimacy, we must wonder: What makes it such a compelling choice for filmmakers?

This thesis seeks to explore these questions, taking a deep dive into the characteristics of animated documentaries in order to better understand them. It will examine whether these characteristics influence storytelling or if the films remain fundamentally the same, merely presented with animated imagery. Recent years have seen a wealth of academic research in the field of animated documentary, providing a strong basis for this work.

Our journey begins with a historical overview of the evolution of animated documentaries, tracing their significance in nonfiction filmmaking. This history lesson is followed by exploring both established and fresh definitions of documentaries, animation, and animated documentaries, opening doors to new perspectives.

Next, we will consult media theory, enhancing our understanding of the genre while also delving into the captivating realm of digital worlds. Here, we will confront the credibility problem, investigating the concept of indexicality which leads to further findings like warranting devices and audience desensitisation. The examination will shift to the emotional core of animated documentaries, exploring their power to evoke empathy and impact audiences: What techniques are able to enhance viewer engagement?

Building on this foundation, later chapters will offer insights from actual filmmakers to root our research in the arts. The following will uncover how animated documentary challenges and reshapes traditional approaches to documentary filmmaking. Prepare to enter a space where fact dances with fantasy, and where reality is bent, but never truly broken.

A Rising Genre

Animation has long been used as a medium to represent reality, dating back to the early 20th century. One of the earliest examples is Winsor McCay's *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918), an animated depiction of a historical event that demonstrated the power of animation to convey reality. The public announcement of the film also saw the first use of the term “documentary animation”, framing the film as the only documentary evidence of the tragedy[1]. Around the same time, in 1917, Max Fleischer created animated training videos for the U.S. military, showing how animation could effectively convey complex information. This use of animation as a tool for education and information dissemination continued during World War II with the *Why We Fight* series (1942–1945). These films did more than provide facts; they also used colour and animation to influence viewers' perceptions and allegiance according to political wishes. Nevertheless, it marked a key development in the role of animation as an explanatory vehicle[2].

As animation matured, it became more deeply integrated into everyday communication. From 1959 to 1973, United Productions of America (UPA) produced films like *Windy Day*, *Cockaboody*, and *Moonbird*, which used seemingly random recorded audio tracks to guide the animation. Aardman Animations (1978–1989) followed a similar path, using animation to capture real-life conversations and interactions in works such as *Creature Comforts* (1989) in the *Lip Synch* series. These examples illustrate animation's growing ability to represent reality in combination with casual, relatable dialogue[3].

In 1996, a major shift occurred with the creation of machinima, a blend of “machine” and “cinema.” Although the term “machinima” was coined in 1998, the first machinima film, *Diary of a Camper*, was made in 1996 within the game *Quake*[4]. Machinima allowed filmmakers to use game engines to create movies, with players virtually puppeteering avatars to act out scenes. This convergence of animation, filmmaking, and game development opened new doors for documenting virtual environments and experiences.

---

[1] Krivulya, ‘DOCUMENTARY ANIMATED’, 106.
[2] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 8.
[3] Roe, 11–12.
[4] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 120.

As Ehrlich (2021) points out, the role of animation in documenting contemporary realities, including digital worlds, has become undeniable. Animation is now central to documenting and interpreting modern experiences, both virtual and physical[5]. By using screen capture, machinimas document the animation and simultaneously the virtual world. Animation now plays a crucial role in shaping how we perceive reality, with the boundaries between the real and the virtual world continuing to blur.

By the late 1990s, the use of animated documentaries began to see significant growth. In 1997, DOK Leipzig introduced a stream dedicated to animated films, recognizing their unique capacity for documentary storytelling[6]. Nowadays, we see animated documentaries frequently screened at a variety of film festivals. However, scholarly attention to animated documentaries remained sparse until the 2010s.

The BBC's *Walking with Dinosaurs* (1999) brought animated documentaries into mainstream consciousness by recreating what life might have looked like millions of years ago, as though a documentary crew had filmed it in real time. With the dusk of the new millennium, more festivals started including categories for animated documentaries. 2007 saw the releases of *Persepolis* and *The Chicago 10*, and *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) followed shortly after, exploring the filmmaker's traumatic memories of war. Premiering at the Cannes Film Festival and receiving an Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Feature, *Waltz with Bashir* demonstrated that animated documentaries could be powerful tools for the most personal topics and historical narratives. It opened the genre beyond a narrow circle of scientists and specifically interested documentary filmmakers[7]. In parallel to this mainstream branch, animated documentaries continued to explore our digital world. In 2010, *Life 2.0* examined how virtual worlds could become someone's reality, continuing the exploration of the blurred boundaries between the physical and digital realms that had started with Douglas Gayeton's *Molotov Alva and His Search for the Creator* (2007), filmed in the virtual world of Second Life. *Serenity Now* (2008) further illustrated this by documenting a World of Warcraft guild raid, using a blend of film editing, music, and social commentary.

---

[5] Ehrlich, 74–75.
[6] '2015_Schulmaterial_Die Weite Suchen.Pdf', 8.
[7] Krivulya, 'DOCUMENTARY ANIMATED', 1.

By the 2010s, animated documentaries were more firmly established for broader audiences, with platforms like YouTube and Vimeo making the content widely accessible[8]. By the mid-2010s, more cinema releases were receiving widespread attention. *Tower* (2016), a documentary about a shooting at University of Texas in 1966, premiered at SXSW and was well received. In 2021, *Flee*, an animated documentary about an Afghan refugee's memories, garnered an Academy Award nomination, highlighting the increasing importance of animation in telling real-life stories. That same year, Netflix released *Camp Confidential: America's Secret Nazis*, further cementing animated documentaries in mainstream media.

In 2022, two animated documentaries premiered at the Annecy Animation Festival: *No Dogs or Italians Allowed*, about the filmmaker's grandfather during the rise of fascism in Italy, and *Aurora's Sunrise*, which told the story of Armenian genocide survivor Aurora Mardiganian. Both films emphasised animation's ability to document deeply personal and historical narratives. As of now, animation in documentaries has become mainstream and is frequently added to lighten the mood or even be humorous where live-action footage might be too intense or serious for the audience. It is also commonly used as a mode switcher with animated interjections, making use of the contrast between live-action and animation to create moments of thematic and tonal punctuation[9].

Looking ahead, the form of animated documentaries shows no signs of slowing down. In 2024, a biopic of influential music producer and pop cultural icon Pharrell Williams, created in collaboration with pop cultural giant LEGO, will take the form of an animated documentary, signalling that the genre's evolution continues to break new ground[10].

In summary, animation has evolved from a niche tool for illustrating events and as military training support to a vital part of modern media, capable of documenting everything from historical events to virtual worlds. This increasing popularity suggests that the genre has yet to reach its peak. Animation, once seen primarily as children's entertainment, has become a powerful medium for exploring and interpreting the complex realities of our world.

---

[8] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 36.
[9] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 10.
[10] *Piece by Piece*.

Definitions

Documentary

Documentaries are supposed to be evidence of actual past events, and as such have an authentic indexical link to the event they portray. According to Bill Nichols[11], documentary films ‘‘address *the* world in which we live rather than *a* world imagined by the filmmaker”. By convention, documentaries often include interviews. They are received as “observational, unobtrusive, truthful [...], objective.” Times of crisis see more documentaries emerge, fitting a serious, evidence-based format, and fitting the current times of a “poly crisis”. The world is burning, and someone needs to document it. Documentaries fit to document a crisis: Documentaries are perceived as being serious and evidence-based.

Several scholars argue that documentary’s objectivity and reliability are just a myth[12], to an extent where they declare it “no more realistic than a feature film”[13]. Every camera framing, every cut, every choice of what the microphone shall be pointed at, involves a subjective decision of filmmakers that are part of this biassed world. Minh Hà denies that “truth” can be captured through a camera and be presented on-screen, while not denying documentary as a whole. There have been attempts to come as close to depicting the truth as possible, which led to streams such as “Cinéma vérité” in the 1960s. But it remains that documentary filmmaking is biassed. Even stepping back and trying to be objective is, in fact, an ideological illusion: We can never fully escape the systems that we were born into, in which we were raised and that continue to shape us.

What remains is an indexical link between documentary imagery and the real, physical world. Here, we see a possible conflict between animation, which is commonly asserted to be fictional, and documentary, which is commonly seen as representing the real.

---

[11] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary, Second Edition*, xi.
[12] Krivulya, ‘DOCUMENTARY ANIMATED’, 108.
[13] Minh Hà, *Theorizing Documentary*, 22–26.

Animation

Animator Phillip Kelly Denslow[14] once asked: “What is Animation, if not the desire to make real that which exists in the imagination?”

Animation is a double-edged sword, natively representing real data points like in animated diagrams, weather forecasts or GPS systems, but at the same time being traditionally connected to children’s entertainment, folkloric fantasies and comedy[15]. Animation’s role is shifting through its heavy use: It is now omnipresent.

We live in an age of animation. Animation as a medium is becoming mainstream with smartphones and computers showing images, videos, gifs or user interfaces in every situation at the most odd places, in aeroplanes, doctor’s offices, in schools, on toilets. Animation is more and more used to uncritically express events (in gaming), feelings (emojis), processes (education and data visualisation) and interactions (user interfaces).

Defining animation is not trivial, as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences can attest: The animation world is not amused about the composition of the award categories. To qualify for an award in the “Best Animated Film” category, animation must figure in 75 percent of a film’s running time. The most recent trouble embarked around Richard Linklater’s film *Apollo 10 ½*. The film didn’t qualify for the 2023 Academy Award race at first because it was claimed to feature too much live-action footage. Several scenes for the film were acted out and recorded beforehand and then rotoscoped. The choice is becoming weirder when considering that rotoscoped films have been eligible in earlier years, with rotoscopy being one of the oldest animation techniques. After some discussions and further proof of not using too much rotoscopy, the film was allowed to qualify.[16] The next animation technique to be not considered “Animation” for several film festivals, including the Academy Awards: Motion Capture. MoCap is said to be a recording of motion, not a frame-by-frame animation - even though a lot of manual keyframe animation is involved in polishing motion captured performances. This correlates with Charles Solomon’s definition of the imagery

[14] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 63.
[15] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 1.
[16] Chapman, ‘Richard Linklater’s “Apollo 10 1/2” Now Qualifies for Animation Oscar After Academy Initially Rejected It’.

being recorded “frame-by-frame” and the illusion of motion being “created, rather than recorded”[17].

Thanks to scholar Ehrlich, we have some further defining criteria of what animation is. She gave the definition of animation an update in 2021:

> ***Animation is every “movement that is only visible on screen.”***[18]

We’re facing a time where animation is not just *Aladdin* and the *Lion King*, not only *Prince Ahmed* and Oskar Fischinger’s *Music for the Eyes*, not only *Looney Tunes* and *Tom & Jerry*. The lines between the physical world and the digital world are blurring. Following a GPS system through their phone, car drivers live in two worlds at once: The first and physical world, where their eyes decipher the road ahead, and the second digital world, where a machine is deciphering satellite data and transferring it into an animation so that human eyes can comprehend it. The GPS world is shown as “movement only visible on-screen”, as part of our reality, and so it is a form of animation that is slowly merging with our physical world. To document this in-between world, we can make use of an in-between form like animation.

But animation became more than just an art form. It’s a medium that is becoming mainstream. Smartphones and computers show images, videos, gifs or user interfaces in every situation at the most odd places, in aeroplanes, doctor’s offices, in schools, on toilets. Animation is more and more used to uncritically witness events, think of eSports battles. It expresses human feelings through emoji animations, and explains complex processes for educational purposes. It serves as a bridge for interacting with digital worlds via animated user interfaces and visualises large data sets for polls, elections or enormous studies on society.

---

[17] Solomon, *Enchanted Drawings: The History of Animation*, 14.
[18] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 90.

Animated Documentary

Many different terms have been coined in parallel to “animated documentary”:

“Animadok” has been used first at DOK Leipzig in 1997[19], with “Animadoc” being the english version of it, and “Anidoc” being a short version. “Doqanima” is being used in areas with Slavic languages and then there’s “documentary animation”, which we already touched upon as one of the first terms to emerge. Some prefer to position the animated documentaries in experimental branches and label it “experimental animation”.[20] Gunnar Strøm gave a simplistic definition of animated documentaries in his 2001 Journal Article “The animated documentary – a performing tradition”:

> ***“A simple and pragmatic definition of the term animated documentary could be a documentary film where an extensive part, say at least 50 %, of the film is animated.”*** [21]

Strøm leans on film festivals that sometimes use a simple 50% threshold to decide whether a film falls into the animated or live-action categories - or 75% as with the Academy Awards. But the definition is not as easy as that, as we already know by the trouble around award categories.

Without a doubt, it can be stated that animated documentaries are animated films. There’s no debate about this. It’s not surprising that most animated documentaries are primarily made by animators, not documentary filmmakers. This supports that animated documentaries are part of the animation realm [22]. But there is a debate about to which degree animation is suitable for documentaries:

---

[19] ‘2015_Schulmaterial_Die Weite Suchen.Pdf’.
[20] Krivulya, ‘DOCUMENTARY ANIMATED’, 98.
[21] Strøm, ‘The Animated Documentary’.
[22] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 2.

Some scholars would consider animated documentaries a post-photographic type of documentary, even a genre of documentary films. Scholar S. Delgaudio objects, stating that animated films just exist at the exact time of their projection or electronic viewing, without any prior reality, no "prechamber event recorded in its manifestation"[23]. He would not consider any animation to document an event because it doesn't exist at the time that is to be documented: It only exists at projection time. Thanks to Ehrlich's works cited in the above definition chapter about animation, we can clearly state that Delgaudio's claim became untrue for digital animation. Digital animation is able to exist at the exact time a digital event takes place, and thus is able to natively document it.

While Delgaudio says that animated documentaries can't be a genre of **documentary**, Krivulya asserts that animated documentaries are not just a **genre** of documentary. She insists that it's a synthetic genre that's composed of multiple genres. According to Krivulya, if restricting it to only one genre, it could arguably be docudrama/docufiction. But unlike docudramas, animated documentaries don't imitate the audiovisual conventions and codes of documentary cinema. Krivulya labels some films with fitting genres to show the hybrid multi-species form of animated documentaries:

- Investigative films (*Chicago 10*, 2007; *Tower*, 2016)
- Diary memoir (*Life Inside the Islamic State*, 2017)
- Conversation films (*Is the Man Who Is Tall Happy?*, 2013)
- Monologue films (*His Mother's Voice*, 1997)
- Self portraits (*It Could Be Me*, 1997)[24]

Animated documentaries share qualities with traditional documentary re-enactments, which are not a single-genre form as well. Re-enactments are a multi-genre form, as well, and it can be argued that animated documentaries are in fact re-enactments. Animated documentaries and re-enactments both are able to recreate past events that weren't captured on camera and deal with serious and important topics. According to Bill Nichols, they both create a "fantasmatic" representation of the past, mixing past and present to evoke emotional responses[25]. But live-action re-enactments historically have a stronger link to "serious" documentary styles. Animation is perceived as rather performative and creative

[23] Krivulya, 'DOCUMENTARY ANIMATED', 99.
[24] Krivulya, 99.
[25] Ward, 'Animated Documentary, Recollection, "Re-Enactment" and Temporality', 69–70.

by viewers, as a creative representation. The strength of animation lies in “re-imagining” rather than “re-enacting”: It offers creative interpretations of actual events. Imaginative and emotional connections via animation provide a more personal experience, allowing for deeper explorations of psychological dimensions compared to the factual constraints of live-action.

Despite its strengths in emotional storytelling, animated documentaries maintain a connection to documentary traditions[26]. Hence, scholar Roe builds on Nichols’ theory about documentaries to create following definition of animated documentaries[27]:

> ***“Mindful of this, I would suggest that an audiovisual work (produced digitally, filmed, or scratched directly on celluloid)3 could be considered an animated documentary if it…***
>
> ***I. has been recorded or created frame by frame;***
> ***II. is about <u>the</u> world rather than <u>a</u> world wholly imagined by its creator;***
> ***III. and has been presented as a documentary by its producers and/or received as a documentary by audiences, festivals or critics.”*** [28]

[26] Ward, 81.
[27] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 4.
[28] Roe, 4.

The definition is somewhat relying on third-party judges which makes it quite blurry. The author of this master thesis would prefer if at least the “and/or” in section III were replaced by a clear “and”. This way, there are at least two judging parties involved. In general, leaving a definition to judges instead of a proper neutral definition highlights that the science of animated documentaries is still under construction. Roe does part of the work herself, stating that animated documentaries might make use of live-action media as well, but…

> ***…“for a film to be an animated documentary [...] the animation must be integrated to the extent that the meaning of the film would become incoherent were it to somehow be removed.”*** [29]

She compares it to two chemical elements reacting, forming a new substance “from which neither original element could then be extracted.” This addition to the definition prevents a documentary which randomly features an animated infographic from being presented as an animated documentary by its producer, with science blindly trusting the producer.

There’s further criticism of Roe's definition. To Nea Ehrlich, animation embodies a “double allusion”[30]: It is to portray both fact *and* fiction. While Roe claims that animated documentaries are about “the” world rather than “a” world, Ehrlich believes that animation can navigate both realms simultaneously. In her 2021 book “Animating Truth”, Ehrlich discusses examples such as Pixar’s *Inside Out* (2015), where animation visualises internal cognitive processes in a fictional narrative. She also refers to *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, where fictional characters wander not only the physical world, but also digital realms which become tangible through animation[31]. Ehrlich shines a light on the blurry lines between animated fiction and animated documentary filmmaking. A recent case of these blurred lines is *No Dogs or Italians Allowed* (2022), an animated documentary that also functions as

[29] Roe, 5.
[30] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 9.
[31] Ehrlich, 8.

a fictional retelling of the director's family history. The world of science is still in debate about where clear lines can be drawn - and whether drawing those lines is possible.

Having defined animation, documentaries and animated documentaries, it is now necessary to try and pinpoint where animated documentaries belong in the history of media theory.

Locating Animated Documentary in Media Theory: Old Patterns, New Approaches

The study of animated documentary has led researchers to question whether it fits into documentary studies, within traditional media theory. Animated documentary was tried to fit into three categorisations: First Bill Nichols' well-known "documentary modes", second Wells' modes for animated documentary, and third Patrick's "primary structures" for animated documentary. Early attempts to categorise animated documentaries often involve Bill Nichols' well-known documentary modes[32]:

1. *Poetic Mode* prioritising poetic mood over narrative; emotional
2. *Expository Mode* informative, narrative; authoritative voice overs
3. *Participatory Mode* filmmaker-subject interaction; interview-heavy
4. *Observational Mode* prioritising unobtrusive, fly-on-the-wall filming
5. *Reflexive Mode* examining the ethics and constructedness of filmmaking
6. *Performative Mode* subjective, personal truths with filmmaker involvement

Of these six, animated documentaries can be argued to belong to five categories. Only the observational mode can be scratched, with a nod to the constructedness of animation. Animation is to a high degree created by the filmmaker and thus can't be mapped to fly-on-the-wall filming.

We don't even need animated documentaries to fit into one single category: Even a single documentary can in parts attest to all six modes in parallel. Animated documentaries can be highly emotional (poetic mode), they can involve an authoritative voice over like in *Planet Dinosaur* (2011) (expository mode), they feature interviews in the most cases like in *Samouni Road* (2018) (participatory mode), they try to look behind the curtain and examine their own ethics by showing how and that they are constructed like in *No Dogs or Italians Allowed* (2022) (reflexive mode) and they often have an agenda, holding personal truths like in *Camp Confidential* (2021) (performative mode). The fact that animated documentary fits into almost all categories makes the categorisation quite nebulous. Scholars argue that these modes are limiting and fail to fully capture the complexities of animated documentary.

[32] 'Mapping Nichols' Modes in Documentary Film: Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry and Helvetica', 104–5.

This is why instead of Nichols' six documentary modes, Wells proposed four dominant areas for animated documentaries[33]:

1. *Imitative*: echoing live-action documentary conventions
2. *Subjective*: challenging objectivity
3. *Fantastic*: employing a style far removed from physical reality
4. *Postmodern*: questioning the very possibility of knowledge

These modes recognise that animated documentaries engage with reality in ways that differ from traditional live-action documentaries, often incorporating metaphor, stylisation, and subjectivity.

Relying on Wells' work as a basis, scholar Patrick identified four primary structures in animated documentaries[34]:

1. *Illustrative:* based on historical or personal evidence
2. *Narrated*: using voiceover and script to guide the story
3. *Sound-based*: relying on unmanipulated found sound to construct the narrative
4. *Extended:* surreal, symbolic, metaphoric approaches

It is now possible to sort films into their respective categories. Historical animated documentaries are mostly illustrative like in *The Animated History of Tibet* (2024), a comedic biography like *Nuts!* (2016) would fall into the Narrated category, Aardman's *Animated Conversations* (1977) is clearly Sound-based, and *A is for Autism* (1992) through its surreal approach fits mostly into the extended category.

Scholar Roe, however, remains sceptical, suggesting that these categorisations may be self-serving and not fully reflective of the medium's potential. According to Roe, they don't help in providing new insight about animated documentaries[35]. This is why she created a new categorisation that can serve better as a basis to analyse the films.

[33] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 19–20.
[34] Roe, 20–21.
[35] Roe, 21.

Creating New Patterns for Animated Documentary

The dawn of the 21st century has seen animated documentaries like *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) and *Flee* (2021) achieve significant critical and commercial success, further challenging traditional boundaries. These films illustrate the capacity of animation to convey personal and historical narratives in ways that live-action documentaries cannot, by visually representing abstract concepts such as memory, trauma, and displacement. These successes, coupled with the increasing use of animated documentary in mainstream media, suggest the need for a new theoretical framework that better accommodates the unique qualities of animation.

Annabelle Roe provides a compelling structure for understanding animation in documentary form, focusing on three key functions that may also occur combined in one film[36]:

1. *Mimetic substitution* resembling reality
2. *Non-mimetic substitution* symbolic and metaphorical representation
3. *Evocation* creating an experience of inner worlds or concepts

On the one hand, Mimetic substitution refers to animated documentaries that strive to resemble reality, attempting to visually authenticate the events they depict. This approach seeks to create the illusion of recorded reality, with animation serving as a stand-in for footage that could not be captured. Documentaries like *Walking with Dinosaurs* (1999) illustrate this approach, using animation to show what could not be filmed, inviting audiences to marvel at the lifelike animation while also validating its authenticity.

On the other hand, *non-mimetic substitution* involves no attempt to replicate the look of live-action footage. Instead, animation is used as a symbolic or metaphorical tool to communicate ideas that lack a straightforward visual representation. The documentary *Slaves* (2014) uses graphic word representations to illustrate the emotional and psychological impact of insults hurled at the protagonists[37]. In the film, bold typographies throw their intimidating shadows on their victim. In *Animated Minds (2003)*, visual

[36] Roe, 22–23.
[37] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 183.

metaphors and morphing techniques are employed to communicate the mental states of people with psychological disorders. Similarly, *Fish on a Hook* (2009) uses the metaphor of a wriggling fish on a hook to convey the experience of agoraphobia[38], where people perceive their environment as unsafe with no way to escape, triggering panic attacks. While still wriggling, the fish morphs into a protagonist of the film. These examples show that non-mimetic substitution allows animation to represent abstract or internal experiences, such as mental health struggles, in ways that live-action cannot. The use of metamorphosis is impossible to achieve in live-action captured imagery, which makes it an exclusive technique for animation[39]. Furthermore, topics without straightforward descriptions like love, war and family can be metaphorically communicated, as seen in *Silence* (1998) about protagonist Tana Ross:

> "'I was twenty-years old' Ross says on the soundtrack, 'yet I was still invisible, still the best at hiding.' As she speaks these words, the animated figure curls up into a suitcase, reminiscent of earlier scenes where Ross is packed away and hidden from the German guards."[40]

In academy award winning *Ryan* (2004), the protagonist is animated as a decimated figure: Many parts have gone missing after long times of drug abuse. This makes clear where animated documentaries are able to substitute the narrative without mimicking reality.

Finally, *evocation* is the use of animation to make concepts, emotions, or states of mind tangible that cannot be recorded or observed. Not everything in life is observable, and animation can reflect the non-observable with a diversity of styles. This is particularly effective in representing internal worlds, as in *An Eyeful of Sound* (2009). The film explores the experience of synesthesia - synesthetic persons are able to "see" sounds. By visualising sounds repetitively across the film, like a dog barking, viewers get to experience what it might be like to understand this language of another type. Evocative use of animated documentaries can serve as a documentary answer to the "problem of other minds": We can't observe the mental states of others. We live in the same world, but experience it differently. But because we're certain that "other human beings are almost like ourselves", we're able to empathically analyse what their feelings might have felt like. We can't exactly

---

[38] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 119.
[39] Roe, 115.
[40] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 160.

mimetically represent something that has no audiovisual equivalent, but animation can evoke a similar feeling in the viewer. A prominent example for evocative use of animation is in the partial animated documentary *Have a Good Trip: Adventures in Psychedelics* (2020), where world-famous celebrities recall their drug trips which are depicted in animated segments. Animation, lacking the exact indexicality of live-action footage, is ideal for representing non-observable phenomena such as emotions or mental states, allowing for a more expressive and subjective interpretation of reality.

The discussed three structures by Roe are a solid basis for further investigating an animated documentary and becoming aware of what the purpose of animation is in each film. But after Roe published her book in 2013, a new fellow is increasingly influencing the world of animation, and by doing so, also adding to the world of animated documentary. A new fellow, but she's been around for some decades already: Digitality.

Virtual Documentaries and New Frontiers

Virtual worlds need to be documented. They're part of our reality and increasingly so, because the lines between digital and physical worlds are continuously blurring[41]. Virtual documentaries, such as Douglas Gayeton's *Molotov Alva and His Search for the Creator* (2007), capture events and interactions that occur within virtual environments, documenting the digital realities of platforms like Second Life. In these films, animation is not used as a metaphor or substitute for live-action footage. Here, animation is a direct representation of events within a virtual space. Are documentaries in virtual environments then, according to Roe's structures, mimetically substituting reality? It looks like virtual documentaries are not a clear fit for Roe's structures. Virtual documentaries are not mimicking physical reality, but just representing a virtual reality. This approach challenges traditional notions of documentary as a record of physical reality, showing that virtual spaces can also be sites of meaningful human interaction and experience.

Machinima, a term coined in 1998, is a good example to examine this trend. In machinima films, players use video game engines to puppeteer characters and create animated narratives, often blending elements of film, animation, and game development[42]. This convergence of media forms raises important questions about the relationship between virtual and physical realities. Documentaries such as *Another Planet* (2017), which simulates the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp in CG, further illustrate how animation can represent historical events through virtual simulations. By blending physical and virtual aesthetics, these films create an emotional distance and alienation that allows viewers to engage with difficult subject matter in new ways[43].

The rise of interactive animated documentaries, such as VR-based experiences like *Project Syria* (2014), takes this a step further by immersing the viewer in a virtual environment. In these works, the audience becomes an active participant, experiencing events rather than simply observing them[44]. This suggests a blurring of the boundaries between documentary modes and mediums, combining elements of animation, game design and interactive

[41] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 14.
[42] Ehrlich, 120.
[43] Ehrlich, 146.
[44] Ehrlich, 156.

storytelling to create new documentary experiences. Research is still catching up, with scholars like Ehrlich leading the charge. Are we in mimetical substitution territory, or are we already non-mimetically substituting our physical reality using virtual realities? These questions challenge not just how we experience documentaries, but how we determine what is real.

The Credibility Problem

To many filmmakers and audiences alike, animation isn't close enough to reality; it doesn't suffice. In numerous animated documentaries, photography is used to back up that the film is about actual events. In those cases, photography is being used as a "warranting device", a word coined by Steven Lipkin[45]. Warranting devices function as "anchors to realities". They can be familiar documentary filmmaking conventions, used in order to increase perceived truth. In the definition chapter "Documentary", we carved out that objectively showcasing reality is an ideological illusion. But presenting photographs in animated documentaries shall attest credibility, because photography is still regarded as more connected to the physical world than animation is. This poses the question about how to root topics in reality that don't have a physical representation anymore. Human memories for example, off which some animated documentaries are based, are distorted and differ from reality. In the same vein, a tool that's different from reality is appropriate to depict them. Animation can dramatise reality in documentary formats. It doesn't present memories, as in showing them, because there is nothing to show. Thomas Waugh claims that even live-action documentaries are rather "presentational" than "representational". It follows that animation is able to represent memories[46].

Indexicality

This brings us to the topic of indexicality, which concerns the direct connection between a representation and the reality it refers to. It follows an examination of how animation is linked to the physical world. Indexical items are, much like an "index finger", pointing to something specific. To further explain the term indexicality, we can look at what is considered indexical in the English language:

- Personal Pronouns (I, you, he, she)
- Demonstratives (this, that)
- Time expressions (now, today, yesterday)

[45] Ehrlich, 54.
[46] Waugh, 'Acting to Play Oneself', 76.

All of them point to particular referents in the real world and are context-sensitively indexical. In media, indexicality refers to the direct link between a sign and its subject. Indexical signs don't need to resemble their subject, much like an index finger doesn't resemble the cat that it's pointing at. So an index can also be an empty sign. Interestingly, resemblance doesn't even guarantee indexicality - think of photoreal CGI of dinosaurs in *Walking With Dinosaurs*, or AI-generated portraits of actual human beings, or even well-painted artistic portraits. But photographic media is highly indexical because it captures "this" person or "this" event in a specific moment - the subject being physically present in front of the camera (prefilmic) at the moment the photo was taken or the video was recorded. Therefore, we're kind of witnessing an event ourselves when watching a live-action documentary. Animation, however, often lacks this direct link, making it more interpretive and less anchored in reality. This is why, as already touched upon, filmmakers frequently use photography as "warranting devices".

Further deconstructing the concept of indexicality, signs occur in three forms according to Peirce's trichotomy. Signs can occur as [47]:

1. Icons resembling objects
2. Symbols conventional references
3. Indices pointing to objects

Icons being signs that share qualities with their referent, like a portrait.

Symbol being a conventional reference to an object. The convention may be language, like many nouns. "Dog" refers to a four-legged animal of a specific species (one that smells if it comes out of the rain).

And the index consisting itself of two components:

1. Index
    a. Trace
    b. Deixis

A trace is a physical connection between sign and object, for example footprints or bullet holes. It shares some likeness with the object.

[47] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 63–64.

The deixis is an abstract showing, pointing or specifying, like the word “this” refers to something. Still, the word remains just an act of pointing to something if left without context. So a deixis without context is just showing. With context, it draws attention to an object through pointing there, without resembling it[48].

Animation can exist between these categories, functioning as icons, symbols, and index, and within the index as both a trace and a deixis. An animated smiley emoji for example can be an icon because it shares qualities with its referents, the human face and its emotion, but it can also be a symbol because it conventionally references a human face.

It can be argued that certain forms of animation also act as a trace. For stop motion animation, for example, an animator actually poses the figures, while the figures and the background assets were physically built by artists behind the scenes. The work of the animator points to the animator, and thus is an indexical link to what the animator physically changed. In the same vein, the background sets and assets are physical traces of the work of artists behind the scenes. This can be applied to any form of animation that is in fact a photographic medium, positioning physical objects in front of a camera.

Furthermore, a technique like motion capturing holds data that is worthless without context: It is an empty deixis. The reason being that the data recorded by motion capturing systems doesn’t point at anything yet; the data needs to be applied to a 3D character rig in an animation software to show the motion that it refers to. Motion captured data is pointing at something, but until we see it interpreted and contextualised within an animation software, the data remains dull and empty. If the data is not yet interpreted, it refers to only the process of pointing at something. Following this line of argument, motion capturing only holds the recording of potential movement. Contrary, it’s also a recording and thus a trace of the physical body: motion capturing can be both, trace and deixis[49].

In conclusion, animation does have several links to the physical world, with various forms of animation differing across the spectrum of indexicality. Some forms of animation leave actual traces like stop motion in *No Dogs or Italians Allowed* (2022), while others resemble the portrayed like the massive CGI project *Walking With Dinosaur*s (1999), and some use

[48] Ehrlich, 64.
[49] Ehrlich, 66–67.

recorded motion captured data which is non-photographic like in *Geständnisse eines Neonazis* (2023).

Digital Indexicality

Computerised cultures pose a new problem to indexicality. Ehrlich argues that "[...] the user's physical appearance is not the only credible visual reference of the protagonist" and "The physical body as visual signifier of the 'I' has been replaced by a multiplicity of representations" [50]. She's referring to digital worlds, where the users, the "self", can be embodied by manifold imagery, most tangibly in the form of a video game avatar. Users can also be embodied by the mouse cursor they're handling, functioning as an extension of the hand. Consequently, users are present in multiple worlds or realms at the same time, which Paul Roquet describes as "the composited self", being composed from layers of the digital landscape. Our digital selves are sometimes said to be "not real" for their lack of physicality, but research shows that avatars are not just representations. They impact the lives and the well-being of users and viewers . Julian Dibbel already claimed in the 1990s that what occurs in the virtual worlds is "profoundly compelling and emotionally true"[51].

The questions that are being raised here is: What can be indexical of our digital selves? What can portray virtual worlds appropriately? Can photography do so? Photography, a medium that's already lost part of its indexicality when shifting from chemically traceable and iconical analogue photography to iconical-only digital data[52]? Probably not. But one representational strategy can already be a document to digital events as discussed in chapter "Virtual Documentaries and New Frontiers". Animation already effectively represents abstract concepts like belief systems, constructions of knowledge or feelings. Those non-physical realities have existed long before digital realities, but animation can't natively document those physical realities. It can resemble them, or be an icon or symbol, or evoke feelings, but it can't evidentiary document physical things. Animation can, though, natively capture digital realities that appear visually uniform to everyone via screens. Animation can show what digital worlds look like because it also can happen digitally on screens. It is able to live in the same world as digital realities. Accordingly, animation maintains a direct

[50] Ehrlich, 107–8.
[51] Ehrlich, 112.
[52] Ehrlich, 64.

connection to reality, it carries an indexical trace of the digital world, even though it doesn't do so by resembling the physical world. It just shows what the digital world looks like. Animation can be a document of digital realities, including evidentiary status.

Soundtracks and Behind the Scenes Footage

Even though animation clearly has indexical links to reality and even possesses evidentiary status for digital events, there is much disbelief and a feeling of unreliability for animation in documentaries. Even filmmakers express these concerns[53]

Some things like contradictory inner worlds don't physically exist, which in turn makes it impossible for them to be directly indexed[54]. It is understood that animated documentaries dealing with the particular topics are not in need to prove that what they're showing exists. In those documentaries, filmmakers still employ a warranting device in the form of the soundtrack.

Commonly, the soundtrack of animated documentaries provides a direct link to physical reality in the form of the voice of an interview partner. Interviews are considered a reliable documentary tool by convention. An authoritarian audio track of a professional narrator might convince some viewers, but a conventional interview with an original witness raises the credibility of an animated film.

There are cases when soundtracks don't suffice as warranting devices. *Walking With Dinosaurs* (1999) features professional narrator Kenneth Branagh, but the documentary does provide several photographic pieces as additional evidence. This way, the viewer can compare the photographed dinosaur skeleton with the body of the animated dinosaur, evaluating whether the animation is precise enough. To further lift the credibility bar, the series was first airing accompanied by a considerable amount of behind the scenes material, illuminating the enormous efforts to bring the dinosaurs to life in a scientifically plausible way.[55]

---

[53] *Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan ('Camp Confidential')*, minute 07:55.
[54] Krivulya, 'DOCUMENTARY ANIMATED', 104.
[55] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 65.

This highlights that filmmakers at times actively take action to protect the credibility of their animated documentaries. However, as the democratisation of tools and the growing demand for animated content lead to an increase in animated documentaries, the sheer volume of these productions may also threaten their credibility.

Desensitisation

The number of films produced doesn't causally link to less credibility of films. It's the decisions behind choosing animation: More and more documentary filmmakers have the possibility to include animation into their films now. But just because animation can be used, doesn't mean that animation suits the film. According to scholar Tomas Mitkus, an over-saturation and overuse of animation can "hurt the form's credibility". He thinks that if filmmakers don't have the expertise on how and when to use animation in an appropriate way, then it will affect the entire form of animation for documentary purposes[56].

Director and producer of animated documentary *Tower* (2016) Keith Maitland witnessed great international acclaim among film critics and audiences alike. After the release, he was approached "at least a dozen times" as a consultant on how to use animation in documentaries. He recalls that half of the projects "were thematically appropriate, but the other half wanted it as a band-aid to cover up a weakness in the movie."[57]

According to Mitkus, there lies a great chance in using animation to create a "deeper connection with the audience". The caveat: Audiences must believe that what they're being shown faithfully represents the truth. A weak narrative and lacking warranting devices can lead to the audience not trusting the documentary, while a great narrative and credible documentary can strengthen the trust of the audience[58]. His findings imply that due to a related phenomenon, filmmakers even need less money to produce their films if viewers trust their film:

[56] Mitkus, 'Aesthetics in Adult Animation: Animated Documentary', 75, 82.
[57] Miller, 'Documentary Filmmakers Are Using Animation in Novel Ways to Tell Their Stories'.
[58] Mitkus, 'Aesthetics in Adult Animation: Animated Documentary', 375.

"[...] once the member of the audience trusts that the image on the screen represents truth about our world the viewer no longer applies the usual animation quality demands that he or she would to a fictional animated work."[59]

High animation quality often means more detailed work like more drawn frames per second, more detailed assets or longer computation times, translating to higher production cost. Keeping production costs down can be very tempting to filmmakers due to challenges in acquiring funding, especially in a chronically under-funded form like documentary. Including animation meets the current high demand in animated content. But including cheap animation in each and every production leads again to the opposite phenomenon: Poor animation quality paired with a weak narrative that audiences don't trust leads to audiences complaining about poor animation quality. Following Mitkus' findings, the same quality of animation would have sufficed if the narrative were strong enough. Roe reports from the Factual Animation Film Festival (FAFF) that animation has the potential to be a lazy documentary strategy in order to attract viewers. She reports the fear of filmmakers choosing animation just because it can be cheaper and easier when compared to a live-action production.[60]

The Green Wave (2009) acts as an example in Mitkus' work, where he evaluates movie reviews by film critics and casual movie reviewers. The reviews mention that narrative, message and animation are in disharmony. Mitkus concludes that the animation in the film is "missing depth and intellectual approach."[61], undermining his argument with a paper by Roe where she makes clear that the animation in "The Green Wave" doesn't provide any added value to the narrative. Reviewer Lauren Wissot summed up her thoughts this way: "And because the animation is literally illustrative, there's no crucial tension between voiceover and image."[62]

The film uses animation to attract viewers, but the animation doesn't enhance the experience of moviegoers. Mitkus carves out that filmmakers need an appropriate understanding of the medium and that alone cannot evoke a deeper emotional response; it can only amplify what is already present. While Roe's category of "evocative" animation in

[59] Mitkus, 375.
[60] Roe, 'Against Animated Documentary?', 24.
[61] Mitkus, 'Aesthetics in Adult Animation: Animated Documentary', 380.
[62] Wissot, 'Review'.

documentary filmmaking (Chapter “Creating New Patterns for Animated Documentary”) contradicts this statement, it remains clear that animation cannot function as a band-aid for weak narratives. Over-saturating the market with animated segments where they don’t provide added value will hurt the status of animation in documentaries in the long-run. It will hurt the authentic emotional connection with the audience.

Empathy

At the heart of many documentaries is the goal of fostering empathy. As Ehrlich notes, documentaries often strive to bring viewers "eye level" with their subjects, encouraging a recognition of shared humanity and a sense of responsibility. This connection is rooted in empathy. Empathy is described as "standing in the other's shoes", which is backed up by Sobchack arguing that corporeal identification (identifying with a body, a physical connection to characters) is crucial for ethical film viewing[63].

With animation living in an on-screen world that's distant from the viewer's world, a physical connection to characters seems distant as well. How to stand in animated shoes? It would make perfect sense if animated documentaries and an empathic viewing experience weren't the most common couple.

Previous chapters include a partial answer for digital realities: New digital forms of representation through animation have in fact a closer connection to our digital selves than live-action documentaries might be able to create.

In 2006, World of Warcraft player Drakedog documented his in-game virtual self-destruction via screen capture, creating a film called *Drakedog's suicide*[64]. In the film, Drakedog deletes his in-game inventory items one by one, slowly, bit by bit, destroying his virtual legacy. The lingering of the computer mouse symbol above each item before clicking to delete it unveils emotional tension: The viewers identify with the one operating the computer mouse, the mouse being a deixis of the protagonist and one of the layers of the "composited self" (see Paul Roquet in chapter "Digital Indexicality"). So the user's representation as a digital symbol is present in the digital world, thus users are active and present in the exact space where animation happens. Stepping into the other's shoes might not be feasible there, but stepping into the computer mouse is. We can conclude that new forms of representation are in fact able to create empathic connections.

Circling back to the physical world, none of the arguments about digital realities are valid. In search of an anchor for identification, in search of the human part in animated documentaries, the soundtrack plays a crucial role. It is explained in the chapter

[63] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 179–80.
[64] Ehrlich, 112.

“Soundtracks and Behind The Scenes Footage” that the soundtrack is indexical and acts as a warranting device. Human voices are a very approachable part of animated documentaries. The soundtrack, oftentimes an interview, enables the viewer to “face the protagonists at eye level” and therefore be empathic.

On the visual side, animation doesn’t provide an indexical representation of the protagonists - but animation has a trick up its sleeve and turns this weakness into a strength. For animated documentaries dealing with highly controversial current debates, where interview partners might face severe problems if their identity were leaked, animation can serve as an answer to protecting the speaker’s identity[65]. It’s basically masking the speakers. A person might not agree to be visible on-screen talking about a controversial or very personal topic, but she might agree with being depicted as an animated character. This can take on several forms, like in *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), where Ari Folman filmed interviews and later re-traced the imagery through rotoscoping, or like in *Slaves* (2014), where protagonists like Abuk are depicted as stylised animated characters in what could be called animated re-enactments.

Slaves can tick another box on the pro side of masked depictions: The faces of enslavers and slaves in the film are left to be silhouettes, leaving the question of their identity open. The animated documentary is inviting the audience to speculate on who might be portrayed. Enslavers and slaves could be anyone. Here, animated documentary is making a statement beyond what a live-action documentary could state, through the use of masking[66].

Via this anonymity, animation manages to address taboo topics. Typical examples include sex and drugs: Films like *Getty Abortions* (2023), *Le Clitoris* (2016) or *Private Parts* (2016) explore sexuality, while *Ryan* (2004) tackles drug use and abuse. By peeling back layers of stigma, these films help us understand other people and their states of mind better, bringing us to eye level with them and fostering empathy.

In a similar way, animation can also help us to step into the past. Take *Another Day of Life* (2018), where Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński reflects on Angola’s 1975 civil war, where his reporting played a crucial role. In some rare live-action sequences of the film,

---

[65] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 89.
[66] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 183.

Kapuściński and the film team visit places in Angola, discussing what happened at this exact spot in 1975. The area seamlessly transforms into an animated world of the same spot, and Kapuściński enters the stage as his animated younger self. His current self continues recalling the story on the audio track, while the viewers can connect to it through this substitutive layer of visualisation. The visual storytelling brings us closer to eye level with people of the past while still following the narrative. The audience is connecting emotionally with events and people from a different time. This visual approach subtly sidesteps the limitations of realism, offering a bridge between memory and the present.

Interestingly, this is where animation truly shines—by avoiding the pitfalls of realism, and making animation undoubtedly look like animation. Animators frequently face the problem of falling into the "Uncanny Valley" when trying to be overly realistic and photoreal with their depictions. Masahiro Mori's Uncanny Valley hypothesis at its core says that the closer a character is approximating realism, the less empathy the character creates[67]. It's only if we're not approximating realism, but hitting it, that the Uncanny Valley ends. Conversely, this means that more character design elements and more stylisation will lead to designs that evoke more empathy. This doesn't make animation outrun recorded re-enactments in terms of ethical viewing, but it already highlights that animation is travelling a different road. Abstract and symbolic styles, like cartoon styles, make images and characters more universal. More people can relate to the character if the character is a bit like them: Everyone can see him- or herself in a circle with two dots and a line, whereas only a few can instantly identify with a photograph or a photorealistic image of a specific person[68].

Live-action realism is best caught on camera. Cameras are great at recording events but unfortunately, they can't portray how those events are experienced. Fortunately, animation can show multiple perceptions of reality. In what Roe describes as "evocative" type of animated documentary filmmaking, we find a toolbelt that can help the audience experience something, literally presenting experiences as seen through the eyes of the protagonist[69]. It can invite the audience to experience autism, trauma, synaesthesia or electromagnetic hypersensitivity (*Quiet Zone,* 2015)[70]. The audience is stepping in the other's shoes, emphasising empathy on a different level.

---

[67] Mori, 'The Uncanny Valley'.
[68] McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 36.
[69] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 192.
[70] Ehrlich, 191.

The emotional potential of animated documentaries is accentuated in Roe's works. Quoting a study that shows that viewers are responding in a more intellectual way to realistic images and in a more emotional way to non-realist images, she articulates that animation can help **transfer knowledge of a different order**[71]. This indicates that animation can help overcome limits of previously unemotional, untouching historical representations through its aesthetic. It echoes in a quote by Yadin[72]:

> "A child's experience of being in a concentration camp as remembered 50 years later – how to convey it? Through archival footage of children found by allies at the end of the war? Through symbolic effects of dark and light? By filming an interview with a 60-year-old woman and trying to imagine her as a little girl? Or ... by creating a child's world view through animated images."

[71] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 109.
[72] Haggith and Newman, 'Holocaust and the Moving Image', 169.

Impact

Animated documentaries activate the viewer and are likely to lead to political action and thus foster change. While often understood as a means of spreading knowledge, animated documentaries are frequently funded or commissioned by NGOs or organisations following an agenda to make specific topics visible to a broader audience. Several animated documentaries are made for educational television, which likewise has an agenda to spread knowledge. *A is for Autism* (1992) was meant to raise awareness of autism and especially encourage a better understanding of autism. Online sales are handled by the "National Autistic Society", and the series was commissioned by "Channel 4 Television" in the United Kingdom, who already made the *Animated Minds* (2003) series. The series transitioned to being funded by a UK medical charity foundation "The Wellcome Trust". That same trust commissioned two more animated documentaries, *An Eyeful of Sound* (2010) on synaesthesia and *Centrefold* (2012) on female genital cosmetic surgeries[73].

Sometimes, the impact of animated documentaries can be measured: The interactive animated documentary *Darfur is Dying* (2006) successfully turned tens of thousands of its 800.000 players into activists, providing tools for sending social media messages and emails to friends. The messages offered varying content, ranging from informational resources about Darfur to writing letters to former president George W. Bush, or even contacting the player's respective Representatives in Congress to alter laws in favour of the people in Darfur[74].

Filmmakers try to enhance viewer engagement through gaps by artistic and indexical means[75]. The gap between the constructed, animated visuals and indexical, recorded audio interviews, for instance. This gap invites the viewer to try and imagine how the interviewed voice fits the animated character, fulfilling a personalised version of the protagonist in the viewer's imagination. Viewers are involved in the film and try to make sense of what they see and hear.

---

[73] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 135–36.
[74] Ehrlich, *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 187–88.
[75] Ehrlich, 184.

The constructedness of animated imagery is always openly visible, leaving a gap to reality. Traditional realism tries to hide its artifice, while animation being overt with its constructedness can be more honest, not pretending to be transparent. What's considered realistic live-action documentary imagery is based on convention. Viewers feel that those conventions create transparency. They include shaky and improvising camerawork that misses to focus the subject from time to time, creating blurry imagery, or having microphones obviously malpositioned in the frame. Those documentary conventions were already sufficiently unmasked by the "mockumentary" genre, which uses the exact same conventions to create fictional films in documentary style.

Breaking conventional realism aids in developing new views on the world. This approach correlates to Bertolt Brecht and surrealism breaking rules and conventions in order for the viewers to open their eyes and question what they're witnessing[76]. Animation keeps viewers engaged through this constant shift in style and the blending of reality and interpretations, forcing viewers to stay active and critical.

Critical viewing is especially important in an era of misinformation and post-truth. Viewers that don't passively accept truths start to question the presented truths and are aware and critical of the information presented. In modern media, the lines between fact and fiction begin to blur. This is where animated documentaries make use of documentary conventions themselves, using them as warranting devices, as anchors to reality. It was described earlier how films make use of photography, the soundtrack or behind-the-scenes footage to root the film in reality.

To sum it up, the weakness of animated documentaries to feature uncertain and not-entirely-indexical imagery is also one of its biggest strengths because it turns viewers into engaged questioners. Audiences become actively involved in the portrayed topic to a point where they're more likely to take action than regular documentary film consumers.

[76] Ehrlich, 206.

Filmmaker Perspectives

In the upcoming section, several interviews with practitioners in the field of animated documentaries will be analysed. The analysis focuses on finding out what the filmmakers experienced as strengths or weaknesses of the form, what characterised working on animated documentaries and why they chose the form in the first place. All the filmmakers remain active and have released animated documentaries in recent years. Notably, Sheila M. Sofian has previously contributed to the academic field of the genre. The selection of filmmakers covers a wide range of the genre. While some have created feature film length films, others have focussed on television-length or short-form projects. Their backgrounds range from renowned animators working with large teams to independent solo artists. They also differ in their expertise, with some coming from an animation background, but others coming from documentary filmmaking. Some filmmakers deal with history, some with trauma, some with contemporary politics and societal issues, and the filmmakers express differing views on why animation matters to their projects. One video interview (Mohammad Farokhmanesh) and an email interview (Volker Schlecht) were specifically conducted for this master thesis, providing unique insights into topics that weren't sufficiently covered by information found in other sources.

Sheila M. Sofian

In a journal article, animated documentary filmmaker Sheila M. Sofian explicitly highlights three reasons to choose animation over live-action[77]

1. "to elicit greater empathy with the film's subject"
2. "to effectively illustrate the subject's point of view"
3. "to add additional information about a given film's documentary subject matter through use of animation."

All of Sofian's films are very personal and intimate stories featuring tangible interviews on the soundtrack. In her journal article, it becomes clear that Sofian prefers this type of personal film for animated documentaries[78]. Her films deal with human rights and social

[77] Sofian, 'Creative Challenges in the Production of Documentary Animation', 222.
[78] Sofian, 233.

issues. She sees shared qualities between re-enactments and animated documentaries[79] and feels that animation styles can add to documentary storytelling. For example, she finds that painting on glass fits the act of memorising very well:

> "After the painting has been rendered, a photograph of it is taken. The painting is then modified in order to create the film's next frame and re-photographed. Each previous frame of original artwork is destroyed in the creation of the next frame throughout the animation process. As a result, the painted images melt into one another and thus resemble fading memories."[80]

Soufian stresses that animation can add a layer of meaning. For her film *A Conversation with Haris* (2001), she added a layer of intimacy via animation which changed the tone of the scene, claiming that live-action interviews would have created a more detached and clinical viewing experience (Sofian, p223). In *Survivors* (1997), Sofian commented on the interview text, interpreting the words and again adding a layer of meaning:

> "For instance, there is one scene in which the speaker describes how her pastor told her that 'God does not want people to be divorced. You must stay together and make it work. If you both believe in God, and you both go to church, you can make it work.' At this moment, a man and woman appear on screen facing each other. A cross materialises between them: its 'arms' stretch out and push the couple towards each other. After being crushed, the couple become entangled together in rope; the female member of the couple struggles, but cannot escape. This scene has resonated strongly with some viewers who connected with its religious material and metaphoric animated imagery."[81]

She also uses animation to compress the storytelling. Arguing that animation can fulfil not only an illustrative, but also an examining role that expands specific points of an interview, she gives an example:

> "An example from Survivors that illustrates this point is a sequence where counsellor Brian Hanstock states that some men have very rigid ideas of what a man's role is and what a woman's role is. Viewers see an image of a woman taking notes, which

[79] Sofian, 223.
[80] Sofian, 223–24.
[81] Sofian, 228.

> morphs into an image of a woman carrying shopping bags, which then morphs to an image of a woman carrying a baby and holding on to a young child. Although the visual content of these images are not described in Hanstock's testimony, they offer explicatory examples of the roles in which society is used to seeing women."[82]

For the film *Survivors* (1997), Sofian filmed interviews in silhouette but felt that via animation, she was able to add to the boring experience of observing silhouettes[83]. In her opinion, live-action interviews are a basis for prejudices towards a person and thus are distracting because they're activating personal biases. Those biases are softened with iconic representations of humans, tearing down some barriers between subject and viewers[84]

Sofian also experienced the flipside of the coin, where the iconicity and thus also anonymity of animation became an issue. *Survivors* features some expert interviews that were not specifically labelled as such and didn't show a face accompanying the recorded interview. As a result, viewers were highly sceptical, calling for proof of what the expert stated. Sofian reflected that expert interviews hold up better with live-action footage and changed her methods accordingly in her later work *Truth has Fallen* (2013).

A recurring theme in Sofian's work is the pursuit of reliability and truth. She acknowledges that animation's association with propaganda may contribute to its occasionally questionable reputation in documentary filmmaking. Yet, she argues that all filmmaking carries an inherent agenda, stressing that she doesn't aim for "impartial" films[85]. To Sofian, animation in documentaries serves as "Mary Poppins' spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down"[86].

Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan

Filmmakers Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan lean less to personal stories than Sofian, viewing animated documentaries primarily as a vehicle to reexamine the past and deliver a political message. For their 2021 film *Camp Confidential: America's Secret Nazis*, the main reason

[82] Sofian, 229.
[83] Sofian, 226.
[84] Sofian, 229.
[85] Sofian, 222.
[86] Sofian, 229.

for choosing animation over live-action was the lack of footage. The American nazi camp was torn down in 1946, with all documents burned[87]. The directors didn't favour a film composed of experts examining it all as talking heads. They wanted to immerse their viewers in the story. Sivan proposed using animation for the audience to really feel the story. Loushy stayed sceptical, but attempting a detailed digital recreation of the camp and featuring this via animation got her on board. In the end, she says it was the "best decision for the film"[88].

Loushy and Sivan felt the need for warranting devices and mixed the film with material from archives. It is obvious to them that archives enhance the credibility of a film. They wanted to root the film in reality:

> "We don't wanna [just] do recreations, for us it's a red line with the holocaust."
> "People will know: No, it's not only animation. It really happened."[89]

To the directing duo, the animation style was key to making the hybrid a fit. They felt that glossy 3D animation would be out of place and wanted to avoid any science fiction vibes. The look was about bringing the '40s to life and finding a vintage vibe. They spent a lot of time with an animation studio to probe the right art styles[90].

Camp Confidential follows a clear agenda and the filmmakers stand strongly behind its message. Where's the red line when the worst people excel at their job? Is it moral to still use their expertise? The film prominently features Wernher von Braun, who lived in the camp and is still a star in NASA; the filmmakers want to judge him for his past. Loushy felt that via animation, they were able to make this project happen and the interviewed people felt a strong need for their voices to be heard. "Past needs to be reexamined", Loushy claims[91].

---

[87] *Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan ('Camp Confidential')*, min 07:23.
[88] *Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan ('Camp Confidential')*, min 08:20.
[89] *Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan ('Camp Confidential')*, min 09:10.
[90] *Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan ('Camp Confidential')*, min 10:25.
[91] *Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan ('Camp Confidential')*, min 11:55.

Raul de la Fuente and Daniel Nenow

Filmmakers Raul de la Fuente and Daniel Nenow delivered a political message as well, but additionally saw animation as a commercial tool: By choosing a comic-book style for their animation in *Another Day of Life* (2018), they hoped to reach a young adult comic-book-interested target audience. Raul de la Fuente speaks of a film with a "documentary touch"[92] and states that he didn't want the film to look like animation. To bridge the gap between animation and live-action, the filmmakers used motion capture, blending realism with graphic-novel-style animation to engage a younger audience[93]. Nenow adds that motion capturing was supposed to help with serious, non-exaggerated acting to draw a line between Disney family entertainment and *Another Day of Life*.

The directors went for a hybrid approach, mixing actual footage with animation to "demonstrate to the audience that everything is true"[94], which is a clear use of live-action material as a warranting device. Nenow sees the hybridity as a strength and finds hybridity in the source material, a book by the film's protagonist Ryszard Kapuściński combining poetry, realism and facts. According to Nenow, Kapuściński lets the audience see through a "prism of his emotions"[95]. Nenow says that animation is poetry to capture what the camera won't see: Our thoughts, fantasies and fears.

Like Sofian, Nenow sees that animation doesn't pretend to be a true narrative. He thinks that the more the animation differs from the live-action documentary parts, the more it complements it. He views the diversity of animation as a great tool to portray our world:

> "Our complex world is bursting with different views and perspectives, so such a combination of various techniques and conventions definitely makes sense."[96]

---

[92] *EFA 2018 - Interview with Damian Nenow & Raul de La Fuente*, min 05:07.
[93] *EFA 2018 - Interview with Damian Nenow & Raul de La Fuente*, min 01:50.
[94] *EFA 2018 - Interview with Damian Nenow & Raul de La Fuente*, min 02:50.
[95] Gutt-Lehr, 'Interview with Damian Nenow, Co-Director of "Another Day of Life" - Poland's Submission to 2020 Oscars'.
[96] Gutt-Lehr.

Mohammad Farokhmanesh

To Mohammad Farokhmanesh, who was interviewed for this master thesis, animation is a visual stimulus that best reaches very young audiences. He doesn't talk about poetry and adult animation like de la Fuente or Nenow, but uses animation to make documentaries for children or adolescents. Screenings of his film *Kleine Germanen* (2019) in schools showed him that animation in documentaries about difficult topics retained a longer attention span with adolescents than live-action documentaries[97]. To him, animation is a tool for visual spectacle to provide a higher entertainment value. Farokhmanesh doesn't think that animation is a more emotional storytelling medium than live-action storytelling, but says that animation reaches children and adolescents better. Because of the fantasy-driven touch of animation, he's careful about the suitability of the topic for animation. For *Kleine Germanen*, he sees a fit because the film is for adolescents and about childhood. Its primary storyline is an original interview that was re-recorded by an actress and the director argues that the soundtrack with live-action material or archive material would have had less stimulus for the audience[98].

Farokhmanesh is not only directing, but also producing films and thus familiar with budgeting and pitching. He states that the use of animation is not a plus when pitching films because TV channels always question the necessity for animation because it's expensive and time-consuming. TV channels are very sceptical towards animation in documentaries, he says[99]. This contradicts Roe (chapter "Desensitisation") when she fears that animation could be used as a cheap and easy option in documentaries.

When asked about the credibility of animated documentaries, he doesn't see the problem on the side of the medium, but on the filmmaker's side. Considering that each and every documentary has a credibility problem (as touched upon in the defining chapter "Documentary"), he claims that the honesty of filmmakers is what makes films credible, and not foremost any warranting devices[100]. *Kleine Germanen* still makes use of a text display that ensures the viewers that the animated scenes are based on a true story, and it makes use of archive material. Both would be a warranting device in the Lipkin sense, but

[97] Farokhmanesh, Mohammad Farokhmanesh on Animated Documentaries, min 04:25.
[98] Farokhmanesh, min 03:30.
[99] Farokhmanesh, min 08:20.
[100] Farokhmanesh, min 12:00.

Farokhmanesh argues that the honesty of the filmmaker is more important. A film using warranting devices could still be highly manipulative.

Alain Ughetto

While previous chapters saw scholars argue that stylised, animated characters can create greater empathy, filmmaker Alain Ughetto objects. For his film *No Dogs or Italians Allowed* (2022), he chose puppets because there's "nothing human about them". The distance from humans is what interests him:

> "First and foremost, you can express a lot using puppets, but there's nothing human about them, despite the fact they share our proportions, and I find the distance afforded by puppets really interesting, because they can do things which don't necessarily fit with reality."[101]

Furthermore, Ughetto tells a deeply personal story with the film. A story about his family, which is why he saw including his hands on-screen in the stop motion film as a perfect fit: He wanted to tell the story with his own hands and created a connection to his hard-working ancestors[102].

Jonas Poher Rasmussen

For his 2021 film *Flee*, Jonas Poher Rasmussen followed an agenda to bring across that every refugee is a complex individual deserving respect and deserving to be heard[103]. Rasmussen attended a Danish workshop titled "Anidoc" where animation and documentary filmmakers met to network and develop film ideas, which is where the idea of using animation originated[104]. Rasmussen's main reason for choosing animation was to keep his

---

[101] 'Alain Ughetto • Director of No Dogs or Italians Allowed'.
[102] 🎙 *Alain Ughetto Talks about His Film 'No Dogs or Italians Allowed' at Annecy 2022*, min 01:44.
[103] *'Flee' Director Jonas Poher Rasmussen on How Animation Made It Easier to Revive the Past in His Film*, min 05:35.
[104] *FLEE and the Art of Animated Documentary | Jonas Poher Rasmussen - Q&A | Film Independent Presents*, min 03:10.

protagonist anonymous[105]. This anonymity was also used for marketing purposes: Famous actors Rizwan Ahmed and Nikolaj Coster-Waldau dubbed the English version of the film, replacing the original interview audio. The director feels that he sacrificed authenticity for publicity here, but thinks that it was worth it because the story reached a significantly larger audience this way. *Flee* tells a very personal story about the filmmaker's friend[106] featuring trauma and memory, which the filmmaker felt was very fitting for animation. He puts forward that animation offers tools to depict the surreal and dreamlike.

Once the choice to tell the story via animation was made, Rasmussen was keen on making the choice matter: The animation was designed to not only illustrate interviews. It underlined the interviewee's words and also how he said things, reading the emotion in his voice and emphasising it in the animation and the animated scenery[107]. Art direction aimed for Edward-Hopper-inspired sceneries, trying to amplify and reflect the protagonist's solitude that can be felt in Hopper's paintings and adding another layer of meaning via animation[108].

Drawing from his background in radio interview production, Rasmussen changed up the interview style from classical headshot interviews. The protagonist lay down and closed his eyes to recall more details of his memory of places, which was supposed to also aid the animation in being more precise[109]. Historical archival footage was used as a reference for the animation and as a warranting device, proving to the audience that we're witnessing a story that "happened in our world"[110].

Volker Schlecht

In an interview for this master thesis, Volker Schlecht regards animated documentaries as a rather common form these days. For his own films in this field, he puts emphasis on the sound and text as a basis for animated documentaries. To him, it doesn't make sense to

---

[105] *FLEE and the Art of Animated Documentary | Jonas Poher Rasmussen - Q&A | Film Independent Presents* min 03:30.
[106] *FLEE and the Art of Animated Documentary | Jonas Poher Rasmussen - Q&A | Film Independent Presents* min 04:10, 14:00.
[107] *'Flee' Writer/Director Jonas Poher Rasmussen Breaks Down a Scene | 94th Oscars*, min 08:39.
[108] *'Flee' Writer/Director Jonas Poher Rasmussen Breaks Down a Scene | 94th Oscars* min 02:15.
[109] *FLEE and the Art of Animated Documentary | Jonas Poher Rasmussen - Q&A | Film Independent Presents*, min 06:30.
[110] *FLEE and the Art of Animated Documentary | Jonas Poher Rasmussen - Q&A | Film Independent Presents*, min 09:30.

make an animated film if live-action imagery would cover the topic more authentically. And because he doesn't rely on live-action imagery, he wants the soundtrack to be as authentic as possible. The sound designer he collaborates with thinks carefully about which sounds to amplify or reduce, in order to not create an artificial truth. Volker Schlecht speaks out strictly against dubbing the original soundtrack with actors' voices, even if the audio material isn't of great quality at times.

He wants his imagery to be as subtle as possible while still supporting the audio interviews and keeping track of the story. Beyond the interview content, he thrives to fill the potential that the extra narrative layer of animation gives him. This way, he ensures that the animation is not just a band-aid replacement for missing photoreal imagery. In his film *Broken* (2016), he tries to let the protagonists' fates speak for themselves and let the animation contextualise the stories with reduced, abstract and robotic imagery. The animation in Schlecht's later film *The Waiting* (2023) is more actively involved, trying to build a bridge to the covid pandemic which is not part of the soundtrack, emphasising the parallels to a frog disease that's discussed in the soundtrack.

Schlecht mentions that when using animation, the distance to reality is transparent right from the beginning. It is clear to the audience that what they're watching has been created after the event the documentary portrays. With live-action imagery, he argues, there's the danger of a potentially manipulative illusion of authenticity [111].

Time and Labour

Many of the filmmakers agree that making animated documentaries is a time-consuming and labour-intensive process. *Another Day of Life* took five years to complete, with more than 200 people (500 including logistics) contributing to the project[112]. Alain Ughetto's film *No Dogs or Italians Allowed* took 9 years, 25 people in the art department and 19 during the film shoot[113]. Sofian's *Survivors* was completed in 4 years and featured 10.000 unique drawings; her later film *Truth Has Fallen* featured 40.000 unique drawings and took 10 years

[111] Schlecht to Seul, 'Interview Master über Animadoks', 09 2024.
[112] Gutt-Lehr, 'Interview with Damian Nenow, Co-Director of "Another Day of Life" - Poland's Submission to 2020 Oscars'.
[113] 'Alain Ughetto on NO DOGS OR ITALIAN ALLOWED | MyFrenchFilmFestival - YouTube', min 09:12.

to complete[114]. *Flee* by Rasmussen featured a crew of more than 100 people and saw eight years go by from inception to completion. He was used to making documentary films with a crew of maximum a handful of people, while this time, he had to navigate a team of 60 people working in parallel at times. Rasmussen adds that funding the film was a lot harder due to all the work that's necessary for animation[115].

[114] Sofian, 'Creative Challenges in the Production of Documentary Animation', 233.
[115] *'Flee' Writer/Director Jonas Poher Rasmussen Breaks Down a Scene | 94th Oscars*, min 00:15, 03:20.

Extracting Unique Features and their Influences on Storytelling

Animated documentaries offer a unique feature set, motivating filmmakers around the world to choose this genre over traditional live-action documentaries or fiction filmmaking. The following section distils the distinctive characteristics of animated documentaries from the previous analysis to learn why filmmakers choose this form and where it influences storytelling approaches.

Animated Documentaries are…

…ideal for agenda-driven content.

> Chapters “Impact” and the interview with Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan reveal how animation is particularly effective when the documentary aims to communicate a specific ideological, social or political message. This potential can also be (mis-)used, as implied in “A Rising Genre”, to create persuasive propaganda media with a clear bias. An extreme or even propagandist agenda constitutes an influence on storytelling when compared to traditional documentary filmmaking, but less so when compared to traditional fiction filmmaking.

…enhancing audience engagement.

> When the goal is to captivate and involve the audience deeply with the subject matter, animated imagery is an optimal tool as discussed in chapters “Empathy” and “Impact” and underlined by filmmaker Sheila M. Sofian. For instance, audience engagement can be boosted by increasing the gap between animated imagery and indexical soundtrack.

…encouraging political action.

> Interactive documentary *Darfur is Dying* (chapter “Impact”) shows that animated documentaries can be powerful tools for mobilising viewers toward political or social change, making abstract causes feel immediate and urgent.

…stimulating critical thinking.

Volker Schlecht mentioned what was discussed in the chapter “Impact”: With animation, the constructedness of the film is always openly visible, provoking viewers to question the seen and to remain critical.

…more honest than live-action documentaries.

With their constructedness transparent, animated documentaries are more honest by bypassing the manipulative pitfalls of live-action filmmaking (chapter “Impact” and interview with Volker Schlecht). Because a part of the credibility question is answered through the very act of animation, one might think that similar stories in animated documentaries might use less warranting devices than traditional documentaries. But filmmakers still feel the need to convince audiences of their integrity and use manifold warranting devices in animated documentaries (chapters “Indexicality”, “Soundtracks and Behind the Scenes Footage”).

…leveraging compelling sound recordings.

Commonly, the form relies on rich audio material that can be complemented by animation in a way that heightens the audio’s impact, as implied by Sheila M. Sofian and Volker Schlecht. The form of animated documentaries inspires filmmakers to use alternate interviewing methods like Rasmussen’s closed-eyes lay-down interview in *Flee* - which alters not the storytelling, but the level of detail of the story told.

…portraying digital or virtual realities.

Ehrlich (chapter “Virtual Documentaries and New Frontiers”) explains how animation excels in representing and presenting digital spaces such as video games. She points out that animation can natively document digital realities, as opposed to live-action fiction and documentary works.

…reconstructing historical events or creatures authentically.

Animation allows for a highly detailed reconstruction when combined with scientific findings like in *Walking With Dinosaurs*, as laid out in the “Indexicality” and

"Soundtracks and Behind The Scenes Footage" chapters. These documentaries make particularly heavy use of warranting devices, differing from traditional filmmaking approaches.

…depicting stories with minimal historical documentation.

Where there's little or no archival material, animation can creatively fill the gaps and bring to life narratives that would otherwise remain untold, again like in *Camp Confidential* by Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan, or like in the series *The Animated History of Tibet* (2024) by Dr. Alexander K. Smith.

…facilitating emotional connections with historical figures.

By seeing animated characters, audiences humanise historical subjects and emotionally connect with individuals from the past.

…especially well-suited for deeply personal narratives.

In most animated documentaries, subjective experiences are especially significant. Due to a high level of viewer engagement (chapter "Impact"), empathy (chapter "Empathy") and animation's suitability for depicting memories, this is where personal narratives unfold new powers. They're effectively told through animation's ability of representing individual points of view, uncovering that traditional filmmaking techniques offer less personal storytelling.

…exploring memory-based narratives.

Several animation techniques share qualities with memorising, as Sheila M. Sofian mentions. Animation proves very flexible in illustrating subjective memories as can be observed in *Waltz with Bashir* or *Flee*. It enables the emotionally powerful depiction of memories that would be impossible or wildly different via traditional live-action filmmaking and opens up fresh takes on interview techniques like the one Rasmussen used in *Flee*.

…appropriate for addressing trauma.

Capturing emotional and mental complexities of traumatic experiences via surreal and abstract imagery, animation fits for topics centred on psychological trauma as pinpointed in chapters “Creating New Patterns for Animated Documentaries”, “Empathy” and by filmmaker Jonas Poher Rasmussen.

…visualising altered states of mind.

When aiming to depict psychological conditions or mental health issues, animation’s abstract capabilities can vividly translate the intangible into visual form. In the chapter “Creating New Patterns for Animated Documentary”, Roe’s types of animated documentaries are identified as making different states of mind more understandable and immersive for audiences: Non-mimetically substitutive and evocative films.

…exploring taboo topics.

Sensitive or controversial subjects are approachable in an accessible and nuanced way, sidestepping restrictions of live-action imagery. This is touched upon in chapter “Empathy”, where anonymity of protagonists is also brought forward as a reason why protagonists open up and talk freely about societal taboo topics.

…masking subjects.

With a little sacrifice of narrative integrity, animation allows to protect the protagonist’s identity. This can be helpful if subjects otherwise fear consequences, are insecure themselves or to avoid triggering audience prejudices towards the outer appearance of protagonists (chapter “Sheila M Sofian”).

…depicting extreme emotional intensity or violence.

Particularly violent, serious or intense matter can be mediated via animation by providing a safer space. Sofian talks about “Mary Poppins’ spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down”, Mitkus calls it a damping of the shock[116]. Animation can also

[116] Mitkus, ‘Aesthetics in Adult Animation: Animated Documentary’, 373.

blend humour into otherwise sombre narratives. It offers a tonal balance, relieving tension while still addressing the core issues.

…creating moments of thematic or tonal punctuation.

Mixing animation with live-action footage or even mixing multiple animation styles, animation breaks up stiff narratives, creates shifts in tone and moderates the pace of the film (chapters “A Rising Genre” and filmmaker perspective by Sofian). This is a significant storytelling tool that doesn’t exist in pure live-action media.

…adding a layer of meaning.

Animated documentaries allow for subjective interpretations of reality: Filmmakers can comment on indexical soundtracks, offering insights beyond straightforward representation. Sheila M. Sofian and Volker Schlecht specifically mention this, and it is a core part of the definition by Roe. She is quoted in the chapter “Animated Documentary”: “[...] the animation must be integrated to the extent that the meaning of the film would become incoherent were it to somehow be removed.”[117] It can be argued that animated films offer more storytelling layers than live-action films because filmmakers actively think about their depiction medium (animation) as an additional storytelling device.

…utilising metamorphosis.

Animated Documentaries allow for non-literal morphing metaphors that transform an image into a completely different image. Metamorphosis is technique exclusive to animated imagery and can be used in ways that deepen the viewer’s understanding of a topic like the wriggling fish morphing into a protagonist (chapter “Creating New Patterns for Animated Documentary”). The morphing of two states creates a bridge, a shortcut that would call for additional scenes and storytelling effort in traditional filmmaking.

[117] Roe, *Animated Documentary*, 5.

…emotionally deeper than re-enactments.

When traditional re-enactments feel too detached or creatively restrictive, animation offers a more expressive alternative (chapter “Animated Documentary”).

…alienating.

Animated virtual reality experiences like *Project Syria* from chapter “Virtual Documentaries and New Frontiers” show how the disorienting and isolating effects of VR can be utilised. The alienation itself can be thought of as a storytelling device that can’t be used outside of VR and it thus an impossibility in traditional filmmaking.

…enabling interactive audience experiences.

Interactive experiences make the audience explore topics by themselves, making them active participants in the narrative (“Virtual Documentaries and New Frontiers”). Again, this interactivity is impossible in live-action media and opens new paths for storytelling like in the experience of a concentration camp in *Another Planet*.

…transferring emotional knowledge

Animation offers a powerful conduit for emotional engagement rather than purely intellectual responses. It is more effective at conveying emotional truths (“knowledge of a different order”[118]) when compared to traditional live-action documentaries.

…attracting a larger audience

Animation’s aesthetic appeal often helps in drawing a broader audience. It can be used to target groups interested in specific styles (Interview “Raul de la Fuente and Daniel Nenow”).

[118] Roe, 109.

…poetically expressive.

Some filmmakers see animation elevating documentary to a poetic art form, fueled by animation's abstraction abilities (Interview "Raul de la Fuente and Daniel Nenow").

Conclusion

In summary, animated documentary is a versatile and uniquely powerful storytelling medium that surpasses certain limitations of traditional live-action filmmaking in key areas. The abstract and constructed nature of animation allows for tackling subjective, complex and emotionally intense topics with a greater degree of creativity and freedom. Live-action formats struggle to achieve the emotional depth and visual metaphors that help in a deep exploration of personal narratives, memories, trauma and altered states of mind.

Animation's flexibility makes it ideal for reconstructing memories and historical events, portraying digital realities and exploring controversial or taboo topics. Filmmakers value the anonymity of animation, masking protagonists who might not consent to being interviewed were their identity not protected. Furthermore, animation can lend punctuation and tone to documentaries.

A key advantage is the introduction of additional layers of meaning via animation. Narratives can not only be represented, but also be commented on by filmmakers, resulting in a more nuanced and richer interpretation of the subject matter. These films hold an extra layer of intellectual complexity while still heightening emotional engagement in order to allow deep emotional connections with the material.

Additionally, the transparent constructedness of animation fosters audience engagement and critical thinking. In some respects, this makes animated documentary a more honest medium. Contradictingly, animated documentaries demand an act of balance to prevent films from being read as unreliable or even propagandist works. This is where filmmakers make extensive use of warranting devices to convince their audiences of their neutrality.

Balancing emotional expression and intellectual depth, animated documentaries open unique paths for storytelling. Their unique toolset enables filmmakers to communicate complex experiences and ideas in ways that are both accessible and impactful.

As a synthetic genre, animated documentary is an increasingly valuable form of nonfiction filmmaking. It thrives in the blurry space between fiction and fact, raising questions about

the genre's definition. Scholars should explore whether a strict distinction is necessary, or if this blurring of lines is inherent to the medium's strength. Maybe it is less about drawing lines and more about erasing them - why force a distinction when the blur is where the magic happens? Further study might explore the layered meanings that are challenging traditional notions of documentary filmmaking. Filmmaking practitioners shall be motivated to deepen audience engagement by exploring hybrid media forms, integrating animation, live-action, virtual reality and interactivity. Animated documentary, defined by its flexibility, offers ways to innovate and to rethink storytelling approaches.

By embracing the insecurities and ambiguities of the form, filmmakers craft thought-provoking works with lasting impressions on their audiences. The films don't just tell stories - they make real events, emotions and history feel tangible and alive. While fiction films can evoke emotions and tell stories, animated documentaries pull audiences closer to reality, often grounded by interviews with actual witnesses, allowing viewers to feel the weight of lived experiences. Fiction and fact, though never intersecting, asymptotically intertwine, forming a new genre. In Latin, *animare* means "to breathe life into something": In this sense, the genre breathes life into documentaries, making factual content resonate more deeply. These films create enduring and touching documents that continue to impact audiences long after the screen fades to black.

Bibliography

Alain Ughetto Talks about His Film 'No Dogs or Italians Allowed' at Annecy 2022, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANqZK8aN5sE.

'2015_Schulmaterial_Die Weite Suchen.Pdf'. Accessed 7 October 2024. https://www.dok-leipzig.de/sites/default/files/2024-03/2015_Schulmaterial_Die%20Weite%20suchen.pdf.

'Alain Ughetto on NO DOGS OR ITALIAN ALLOWED | MyFrenchFilmFestival - YouTube'. Accessed 23 September 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIXxlmBuboc.

Chapman, Wilson. 'Richard Linklater's "Apollo 10 1/2" Now Qualifies for Animation Oscar After Academy Initially Rejected It'. *IndieWire* (blog), 9 November 2022. https://www.indiewire.com/awards/industry/apollo-10-1-2-qualifies-best-animated-feature-oscar-1234780890/.

Cineuropa - the best of european cinema. 'Alain Ughetto • Director of No Dogs or Italians Allowed', 17 June 2022. https://cineuropa.org/en/interview/426833/.

EFA 2018 - Interview with Damian Nenow & Raul de La Fuente, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rT5MdsQuNtc.

Ehrlich, Nea. *Animating Truth by Nea Ehrlich*, 2021.

Farokhmanesh, Mohammad. Mohammad Farokhmanesh on Animated Documentaries. Interview by David Seul. Video Interview. Translated by David Seul, 10 2024.

FLEE and the Art of Animated Documentary | Jonas Poher Rasmussen - Q&A | Film Independent Presents, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TyRurJSW-I8.

'Flee' Director Jonas Poher Rasmussen on How Animation Made It Easier to Revive the Past in His Film, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6R6N_vTjaY.

'Flee' Writer/Director Jonas Poher Rasmussen Breaks Down a Scene | 94th Oscars, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRhARZL_vqk.

Gutt-Lehr, Joanna. 'Interview with Damian Nenow, Co-Director of "Another Day of Life" - Poland's Submission to 2020 Oscars'. Austin Polish Film Festival, 21 October 2019. https://www.austinpolishfilm.com/apff-blog/2019/10/21/inteview-with-damian-nenow-co-director-of-another-day-of-life-polands-submission-to-2020-oscats.

Haggith, Toby, and Joanna Newman. 'Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television since 1933'. London ; Wallflower, 2005.

Krivulya, Natalia G. 'Documentary Animated: Genesis and Specificity'. Translated by Google Translate. *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Kul'turologiya i iskusstvovedenie*, no. 43 (2021): 96–115. https://doi.org/10.17223/22220836/43/7.

'Mapping Nichols' Modes in Documentary Film: Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry and Helvetica'. *The IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication and Film* II, no. I (Summer 2014): 103–27.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. HarperPerennial, 1994.

Miller, Stuart. 'Documentary Filmmakers Are Using Animation in Novel Ways to Tell Their Stories'. Los Angeles Times, 31 October 2018. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-ca-mn-documentaries-animation-20181031-story.html.

Minh Hà, Trịnh Thị. *Theorizing Documentary*. Edited by Michael Renov. ROUTLEDGE, 2015.

Mitkus, Tomas. 'Aesthetics in Adult Animation: Animated Documentary', 2021.

Mor Loushy and Daniel Sivan ('Camp Confidential'): 'Every Part of History Is Worth Being Reexamined', 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEuY7HUcRdQ.

Mori, Masahiro. 'The Uncanny Valley: The Original Essay by Masahiro Mori - IEEE Spectrum'. Translated by Karl F. MacDorman and Norri Kageki. Accessed 7 October 2024. https://spectrum.ieee.org/the-uncanny-valley.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary, Second Edition*. 2nd ed. Indiana University Press, 2010. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gznjb.

Piece by Piece. Animation, Biografie, Komödie. Focus Features, Tremolo Productions, The LEGO Group, 2024.

Roe, Annabelle Honess. 'Against Animated Documentary?' *International Journal of Film and Media Arts* 1, no. 1 (21 April 2016). https://revistas.ulusofona.pt/index.php/ijfma/article/view/5433.

———. *Animated Documentary*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137017468.

Schlecht, Volker. Letter to David Seul. 'Interview Master über Animadoks', 09 2024.

Sofian, Sheila M. 'Creative Challenges in the Production of Documentary Animation', n.d. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748694129.

Solomon, C. *Enchanted Drawings: The History of Animation*. Knopf, 1989. https://books.google.de/books?id=FSdQAAAAMAAJ.

Strøm, Gunnar. 'The Animated Documentary'. *Norsk Medietidsskrift* 8, no. 2 (October 2001): 51–65. https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN0805-9535-2001-02-04.

Ward, Paul. 'Animated Documentary, Recollection, "Re-Enactment" and Temporality', n.d. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748694129.

Waugh, Thomas. 'Acting to Play Oneself: Performance in Documentary (1990)'. In *The Right to Play Oneself: Looking Back on Documentary Film*, edited by Thomas Waugh, 0. University of Minnesota Press, 2011. https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816645862.003.0004.

Wissot, Lauren. 'Review: The Green Wave'. Slant Magazine, 5 August 2012. https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/the-green-wave/.

Filmography

A Conversation with Haris. Animation, Dokumentarfilm, Kurzfilm, 2002.

A Is for Autism. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Kurzfilm. Fine Take Productions, Channel 4 Television Corporation, n.d.

Aladdin. Animation, Abenteuer, Komödie. Walt Disney Pictures, Silver Screen Partners IV, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 1993.

An Eyeful of Sound. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Kurzfilm, n.d.

Animated Minds. Animation. Mosaic Films, n.d.

Another Day of Life. Animation, Biografie. Platige Image, Kanaki Films, Puppetworks Animation Studio, 2019.

Apollo 10 1/2: A Space Age Adventure. Animation, Abenteuer, Drama. Minnow Mountain, Submarine, Detour Filmproduction, 2022.

Aurora's Sunrise. Dokumentarfilm, Animation. Bars Media, Broom Films, Gebrueder Beetz Filmproduktion, 2023.

Camp Confidential: America's Secret Nazis. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Kurzfilm. BABKA, Netflix, 2021.

Centrefold. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Kurzfilm, 2012.

Chicago 10. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Geschichte. Consolidated Documentaries, Participant, Public Road Productions, 2008.

Cockaboody. Animation, Kurzfilm. Hubley Studios, n.d.

Creature Comforts. Animation, Kurzfilm, Komödie. Aardman Animations, Channel Four Films, 1989.

Diary of a Camper, 1996. https://mubi.com/de/de/films/diary-of-a-camper.

Die Abenteuer Des Prinzen Achmed. Animation, Abenteuer, Drama. Comenius-Film GmbH, n.d.

Drakedog's Suicide, 2006.

Fish on a Hook, 2009. https://www.animafest.hr/en/2011/film/read/fish_on_a_hook.

Flugt. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Biografie. Final Cut for Real, Sun Creature Studio, Vivement Lundi, 2021.

Geständnisse Eines Neonazis. Dokumentarfilm. Sendefähig, OnPoint Studios, 2023.

Getty Abortions. Dokumentarfilm, Kurzfilm, n.d.

Have a Good Trip: Adventures in Psychedelics. Dokumentarfilm, Komödie. Sunset Rose Pictures, Sugarshack 2000, 2020.

His Mother's Voice, 1997. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUQ31SQ-1mM.

Inside Out. Animation, Abenteuer, Komödie. Pixar Animation Studios, Walt Disney Pictures, 2015.

Interdit Aux Chiens et Aux Italiens. Animation, Drama, Familienfilm. Les Films du Tambour de Soie, Nadasdy Film, Vivement Lundi, 2023.

Is the Man Who Is Tall Happy?: An Animated Conversation with Noam Chomsky. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Biografie. Partizan Films, 2014.

Kaputt. Animation, Kurzfilm, Biografie. Die Kulturingenieure, 2016.

Kleine Germanen - Eine Kindheit in Der Rechten Szene. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Drama. ARTE, Brave New Work, Deutscher Filmförderfonds (DFFF), 2019.

Le Clitoris. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Kurzfilm. Concordia University, 2017.

Life Inside Islamic State. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Kurzfilm. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2017.

Molotov Alva and His Search for the Creator: A Second Life Odyssey. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Kurzfilm. Submarine, n.d.

Moonbird. Animation, Komödie, Kurzfilm. Storyboard-Harrison, 1959.

Nuts! Dokumentarfilm, Animation. Cartuna, Gland Power Films, 2016.

Piece by Piece. Animation, Biografie, Komödie. Focus Features, Tremolo Productions, The LEGO Group, 2024.

Planet Dinosaur. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Action. BBC Studios, Canal+, Discovery Channel, 2011.

Prelude to War. Dokumentarfilm, Kriegsfilm. U.S. War Department, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), U.S. Army Special Service Division, 1942.

Private Parts, 2016. https://letterboxd.com/film/private-parts-2016/.

Project Syria, 2014. https://docubase.mit.edu/project/project-syria/.

Puss Gets the Boot. Animation, Kurzfilm, Komödie. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Cartoon Studios, 1940.

Quiet Zone. Dokumentarfilm, Kurzfilm. National Film Board of Canada (NFB), 2015.

Ralph Breaks the Internet. Animation, Abenteuer, Komödie. Walt Disney Animation Studios, Walt Disney Pictures, 2019.

Ruiz, Susana. 'Darfur Is Dying', 2006.

Ryan. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Kurzfilm. Copperheart Entertainment, National Film Board of Canada (NFB), Seneca College, n.d.

Samouni Road. Dokumentarfilm, Animation. Dugong Films, Picofilms, Alter Ego Production, 2018.

Serenity Now, 2008.

Sinkin' in the Bathtub. Animation, Kurzfilm, Komödie. Leon Schlesinger Studios, Harman-Ising Productions, 1931.

Slaves, 2008. https://letterboxd.com/film/slaves-2008/.

Survivors. Animation, Kurzfilm, n.d.

The Green Wave. Dokumentarfilm. ARTE, Dreamer Joint Venture Filmproduction, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), 2011.

The Lion King. Animation, Abenteuer, Drama. Walt Disney Pictures, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 1994.

The Rise of the Tibetan Empire | The Animated History of Tibet | Episode 1, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZJSKTRwDAI.

The Sinking of the Lusitania; Animation, Kurzfilm, Kriegsfilm. Universal Film Manufacturing Company, 1918.

The Waiting. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Kurzfilm. MobyDok Medienproduktion, 2023.

Tower. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Krimi. Go-Valley, Texas Archive of the Moving Image, Killer Impact, 2017.

Truth Has Fallen. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, 2013.

Vals Im Bashir. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Biografie. Bridgit Folman Film Gang, Les Films d'Ici, Razor Film Produktion GmbH, 2008.

Walking with Dinosaurs. Dokumentarfilm, Animation, Geschichte. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Discovery Channel, France 3, 1999.

Windy Day. Animation, Kurzfilm, Familienfilm. Hubley Studios, Paramount Pictures, 2002.

Yatziv, Amir. 'Another Planet', 2017. https://letterboxd.com/film/another-planet-2017/.