

Creative Actuality: Modes of Animated Documentary

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Introduction

Since the widespread introduction of digital technology, animation techniques have become much more accessible to a wider range of practitioners and this has led to a change in thinking about what animation is. No longer simply a medium of storytelling for children, as it was traditionally seen, animation has now expanded into many other areas. This presentation will focus on animations that draw upon actuality and lived experience to form their subject matter.

According to many conventional sources of information about film history, the term documentary was coined by the Scottish filmmaker John Grierson in 1928 (although there is evidence of much earlier writing on the subject from Poland¹). Grierson described documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality' and from the earliest critical discourse on this topic, we can see evidence of films being cited for their depiction of reality, but actually demonstrated very personal, cultural or historical approaches to the subject. An example of this is the film *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert Flaherty, which is often cited as an example of an early documentary, but is actually a very patronising and colonial approach to depicting the Inuit native peoples of Canada and distorted the reality of the situation shown in the film. For example, the lead character's real name was not Nanook, but Ilakariallak. The two women shown in the film were not actually his wives but both girlfriends of Flaherty. Ilakariallak actually used guns to hunt for seals, but was asked by Flaherty to catch seals in a more traditional and photogenic way. In addition, Inuit people had begun to wear Western clothing in this period, but Flaherty required him to dress traditionally as a more authentic 'Eskimo'².

This example demonstrates that the use of live action film and the indexical properties of photography are not enough to guarantee that the truth is being told in a film. Is there even such a thing as truth? Animated documentary raises very profound questions about epistemology – the philosophy of knowledge. This presentation uses examples of animated documentaries made by graduates of the Royal College of Art in order to illustrate different strategies for making claims to the truth in the documentary format.

Throughout our over 30 years of history, our students have made a range of different kinds of films at the RCA which have included those which are grounded in real life rather than fiction. However, it is especially since the release of the autobiographical film, *Persepolis* (2007), directed by Marjane Satrapi from her graphic novel about her life growing up in Iran during the revolution, and the film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), a feature length film directed by Ari Folman that uses animation to dramatise interviews with soldiers who are clearly traumatised by their memories of the 1982 Lebanon War, that our students have become increasingly interested in making documentary films.

To cope with this demand for the subject we have just started a new specialist pathway³. Built on the long established MA in Animation at RCA, the new Documentary Animation pathway explores mixing different forms of animation practices with different approaches to documentary. Our students work mainly on films, but can also create other forms of output such as interactive apps.

¹ Scott MacKenzie, *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology* (University of California Press, 2014), 520.

² Richard Roud, ed., *Cinema A Critical Dictionary: The Major Filmmakers*, vol. One: Aldrich to King (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 368.

³ <https://www.rca.ac.uk/schools/school-of-communication/animation/documentary-animation-pathway/>

In Documentary Animation, we are searching for new ways to use animation with the documentary format to expand the boundaries of how to represent 'the truth'. So, how can non-photographically generated materials be used in a genre whose defining characteristic is to engage with the 'real'?

- **Explanation.** Animation is uniquely able to explain information. Using either the diagram or forms of narrative structure, animation is uniquely placed to allow a coherent navigation of the complexity of 'big data'.
- **The unphotographable.** Animation can depict spaces that are impossible to photograph – such as the vastness of outer space or the inner workings of the quantum atom.
- **The personal perspective.** Animation can also be used to portray very sensitive subjects such as abuse or mental health - by anonymizing and protecting the witness or through creating empathy with subjective states of mind.
- **Time travel.** Through animation we can re-animate history - recreating events in the past that were never captured on film, interrogating them with new perspectives and to imagine the future.⁴

In order to look at some of the different strategies that can be used to make animated documentaries, I have gone through our archive of over 30 years of creating cutting edge animated films at the RCA. I have picked out films with different techniques and used an adaptation of Bill Nichols's categories of modes of documentary⁵ to examine them. Nichols's modes of documentary represent different strategies for approaching and structuring truth claims in non-fiction films. They can be thought of as different theoretical approaches to epistemology or how to talk about the truth. I am presenting these modes of documentary as separate categories, but filmmakers often use a mixture of different approaches in one film. Therefore, it would be more accurate to consider them as 'tendencies' rather than rigid forms of classification.

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⁴ For a more detailed examination of these topics, see Annabelle Honess Roe, *Animated Documentary* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁵ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).