

Animated Documentary: A New Form of Representing Reality

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Summary

Documentary has never been a closed field as its boundaries are constantly expanding. Looking back on the centuries of development of documentary: from the “City Symphony Films” in 1920s to the Grierson-style documentaries in 1930s — 1940s, to “Direct Cinema” and “Cinéma Vérité” in 1960s, to the "New Documentary" in 1970s as Thomas Waugh put it, and then to the "New Documentary" in 1990s, every innovation in form and style presents a new possibility of documentary expression and refreshes the boundary of documentary over and over again. The continuous "cross-border" act from the producers has challenged our original understanding and cognition towards documentary as well as prompted us to rethink the nature of it, furthermore, the documentary theories has also developed accordingly. From this point of view, new exploration in creation is often an important opportunity for theoretical renewal as well.

As far as recent documentary productions, the rise of animated documentary is quite remarkable. In this paper, I will first give a brief description of the history of animated documentary, and then compare animated documentary with general moving images to outline its unique attributes and functions in representation. In addition, I will clarify some doubts about animated documentary in theory, and make some explanations about the legitimacy of animated documentary as a new form of documentary practice. In this part, although the focus of my research is animated documentaries and the purpose is to solve some theoretical dilemma encountered by animated documentary, what is more important is to think about the general attributes of documentary, that is, what is documentary? Animated documentary provides us with a new perspective to re-examine our understanding toward documentary and a new way to approach the essence of the concept. Thus, the study of animated documentaries is quite meaningful.

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Introduction

The concept of "animated documentary" has caused many disputes and discussions as a sub-genres of documentary that is growing prosperously.¹ In fact, for film researchers, when we try to define a genre of film or classify it into different forms but cannot find a way or fail, it is not a negative signal actually, because it indicates that a new form has emerged in film production. Documentary and animation seem to have always been distinguished from facts and fiction, reality and imagination, naturalism and expressionism, indexable images of reality and artificially created images. However, since the 1980s, people have come to realize that the principles advocated by "Direct Cinema" and "Cinéma Vérité"² are not the essence of documentary, so that modern documentary makers have gradually begun to emphasize personal experience and subjective interpretation. Therefore, the first-person narration, the expression of personal experience and subjective emotional experience, speculation and judgment began to appear in the creative practice of documentary production. For example, *Sherman's Expedition* (1985), which set a milestone for the first-person documentary. In *Sherman's Expedition*, the director Ross McElwee reflected the intense North-South cultural conflict in the United States from a completely subjective first-person perspective, as well as the impact of this conflict on the director's individual life. This intense personal style has been extended and strengthened in his latest work *Bright Leaves* (2003).

¹ For example, many theorists have written articles denying the existence of animated documentaries. Paul Wells claims that 'the very subjectivity involved in producing animation [...] means that any aspiration towards suggesting reality in animation becomes difficult to execute. For example, the intention to create 'documentary' in animation is inhibited by the fact that the medium cannot be objective.'" William Moritz believes that animation and real-life images are not only different in quality, but the latter is considered to be more infectious to the audience than the former, and the two belong to completely different forms. More discussions can be read in the second chapter of this article.

² "Direct Cinema" was born in the United States in the early 1960s, and a group of filmmakers led by Robert Drew and Richard Leacock proposed such a claim of making documentaries. The camera is always a bystander and does not interfere with or affect the process of the event, and always only observes and records in silent. Interviews, performance, lights, explanations are both forbidden in "Direct Cinema". It rejects all kinds of subjective interventions that may damage the original ecology of life. While "Cinéma Vérité" is a style of documentary filmmaking invented by Jean Rouch. It combines improvisation with the use of the camera to unveil truth or highlight subjects hidden behind crude reality.

At the same time, technology has also changed people's understanding of documentary as well. Filmmakers continue to explore and discover various subjective expressions that can penetrate into the inner world of the subject: dreams in the subconscious, mud in memory, color of emotions, etc. Stan Brakhage's experimental work *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959, Figure 1-2) is an excellent example. This short documentary, filmed by Stan and his wife Jane, expressed a series of feelings of childbirth in an intimate experience. The experiments that appeared in many works have gradually pushed the traditional boundaries between animation and documentary to a vague area.



Window Water Baby Moving (1959). Figure 1-2

As far as aesthetics is concerned, the animated documentary is hardly a new phenomenon in film history. It originated from the modernist aesthetic practice of avant-gardism movies and experimental movies in Europe and America. Nowadays, the hybrid practice of animation and documentary has gradually penetrated into various practices of non-fictional media — from documentary to news, newspapers, magazines, web art and so on. These inseparable artistic practices that hybridize with animation and non-fiction media have gradually changed people's understanding and cognition of cartoons and documentaries. Some important film festivals also provide a certain platform for the exchange of animation documentary. In the past ten years, the research of animated documentary has been rising gradually in the academic circles of documentary. There are not only the related theories of Paul Wells, Donald Crafton, and Paul Ward, but also many documentary researchers, such as Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, Brian Winston and so on, have noticed that this hybrid form of animated documentaries has brought new changes to the creation and research of documentaries.

Since entering the digital era, the development of technology has made it easy for us to “reproduce” the real world with high-definition analog images, which brings some problems to the definition of the identity of animated documentary: it appears in a way that is independent of both documentary and animated, then, is the documentary in animated form still a documentary or not? How can animated images break through the virtual representation to achieve a deeper reality? The previous studies on documentaries often focused on "performance", "reproduction" and "subjective reconstruction".³ The research on animated documentaries also basically focused on how animation technology creates the reality of images and its application rules and principles in documentaries, but they both failed to form a complete theoretical system.⁴

Although the main research object of this paper is animated documentary, it is also a good opportunity to think deeply about the ontology of film, the ontological attributes of documentary and the ontological attributes of animation, and thus hopefully to provide some theoretical support for the fragile practice of animated documentary.

³ Take Bill Nichols, Carl Plantinga and Brian Winston, the most famous contemporary documentary theorists, for example. Their research is all aimed at documentaries based on real-life images. They also focus on the performance in documentary, the genres of documentary, the subjectivity and objectivity of documentary, etc. But animation has never entered their research scope.

⁴ Among many books and papers on animated documentaries, such as *Animated Realism: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Animated Documentary Genre*, these authors only discussed the application of animation technology in documentaries, but did not discuss the particularity of animation as a material in expressing reality.

The Development and History of Animated Documentary

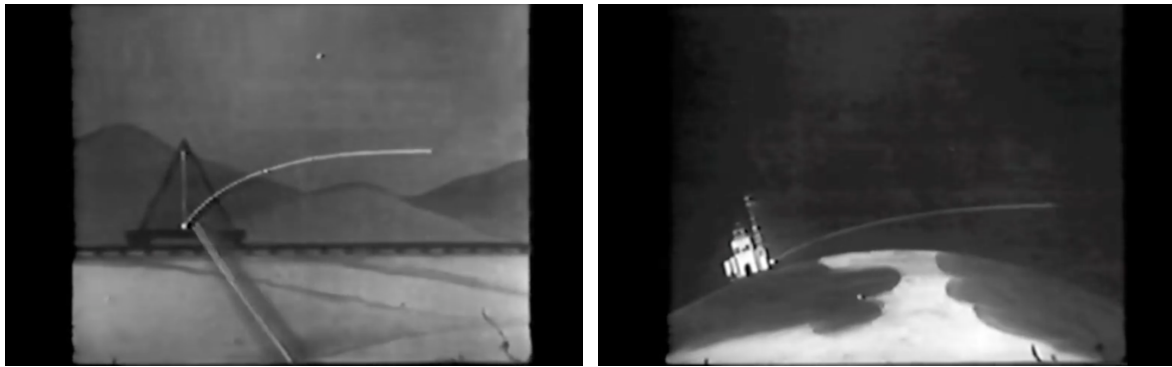
According to the usual understanding, animated documentary refers to the type of film that expresses and deals with non-fictional characters and events in the real world in the form of animation. The origin of this type of film generally dates back to Winsor McCay's work *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918, Figure 3-4). The film nearly 10-minute depicts the tragic incident in 1915 when Lusitania, a British cruise ship, was attacked by a German submarine on its way from New York to Ireland, and 1,198 lost their life in the tragedy. This serious incident directly led to the United States joining the First World War. In this film, McKay vividly reproduced the whole process of cruise departure, cruise tracking by German submarines, cruises twice hit by German torpedoes, passengers falling into the sea, and cruises finally sinking. Since there was no sound in the film at the time, there was no voice-over commentary in the film, and only the intermittent subtitles made the necessary explanation for the development of the plot.



The Sinking of the Lusitania (1918). Figure 3-4

The practice of expressing non-fictional content in an animated form, which McCay adopted, was not uncommon at the time. During World War I, there were many British and American directors who used animation technology to produce military films. By the 1920s, City Symphony Documentaries began to rise. Some of the main directors, such as the German director Walter Ruttmann, the Soviet director Dziga Vertov, had both used animation technology to their documentaries. However, in these works, animation just occupied a small

space, in which reason it did not attract more attention. During this period, there were some other directors began to try to explain some important scientific theories by animation, for example, the Soviet director Vsevolod Pudovkin made *The Mechanics of the Human Brain* in 1962, in which work Pudovkin reveals Pavlov's biological theory in the form of animation. In addition, Max Fleischer, a famous American animation director, and his brothers have also made some influential works, such as *Evolution* and *The Einstein Theory of Relativity* (Figure 5 -6). Albert Einstein himself appreciated Fleischer's animation in explaining the theory of relativity, and praised Fleischer for "excellent attempt to illustrate an abstract subject".⁵

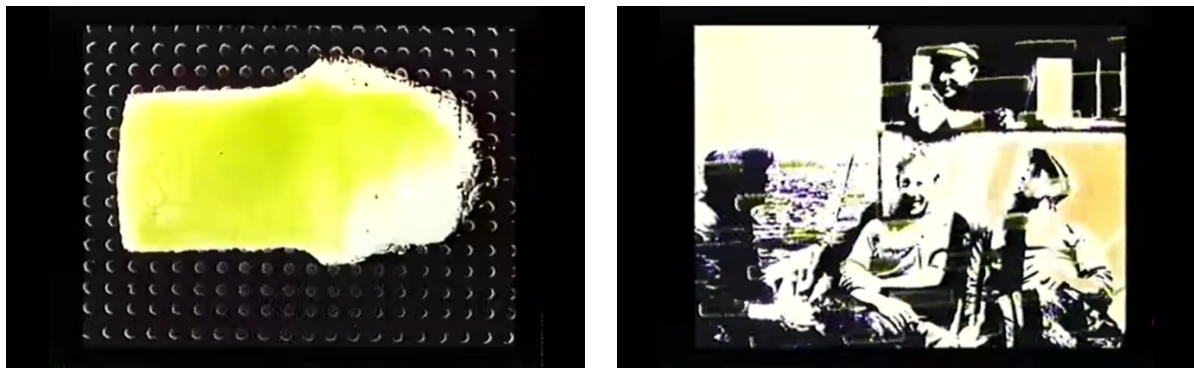


The Einstein Theory of Relativity (1923). Figure 5-6

From the 1930s to the 1960s, before the rise of “Direct Cinema” and “Cinéma Vérité”, John Grierson, the “father” of documentary, was undoubtedly the most remarkable documentary director. Although Grierson himself has never produced animated documentaries, under his leadership, some innovative directors have made some very influential works, such as Len Lye's *Trade Tattoo* (1937, Figure 7-8). In this film, Lye made use of some previous footages taken by the photography team and after post-processing, he created a silhouette effect of people and objects on the screen. In addition, there are abstract lines, color blocks and subtitles directly painted by Lye on the screen. These methods gave the film a strong sense of collage. It shows countless colors, shapes and words in just three minutes, which is visually appealing. Lye fully mobilized all available colors with the use of found footage to make the film continuously attractive. The rhythm of *Trade Tattoo* is absolutely excellent and the vision effect

⁵ Koszarski, Richard. *Hollywood on the Hudson: Film and Television in New York from Griffith to Sarnoff*. Rutgers University Press, 2008: 322

of the film is quite bright and dynamic. Besides, Norman McLaren, who was later transferred to the National Film Board of Canada with Grierson, also produced a number of films, for example *City of Gold* (1956), *Universe* (1960), etc. These works maintained the creative tradition of animated documentary in British documentary movement. Ian Aitken have commented that the British documentary movement reached its creative peak between 1934 and 1936.⁶ Although this does not refer specifically to the creation of animated documentaries at that time, animated documentary is undoubtedly one of the most important manifestations of artistic achievements among the movement.



Trade Tattoo (1937). Figure 7-8

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, technological breakthroughs brought some revolutionary changes in the field of documentary production, and corresponding changes in animated documentaries. As a result of the emergence of a new generation of 16mm cameras that can be worn on the photographer's shoulders, lenses and films that can be shot under natural light conditions, and tape recorders that enable actual sound recording, etc., how documentaries are filmed, structured, and even the entire aesthetic style has undergone tremendous changes, and the most phenomenon is the rise of direct cinema and cinema verite. It is also from this period that the actual sound began to enter the animated documentary. In 1959, American director John Hubley and his wife quietly recorded their two young boys' childish conversations while playing and animated them to create his work *Moonbird* (1959, Figure 9-10). Since then, they have made *Windy Day* (1967) and *Cokaboody* (1973) in a similar way, but the main characters

⁶ Ian Aitken. *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement*. Routledge, 2013.

of those two are their little daughters. In terms of sound pickup in the shooting stage, it is not difficult to see that these film are no different from direct cinema.



Moonbird (1959). Figure 9-10

If we consider Hubley's works as some kind of animated direct cinema or animated observational documentary, then after the 1980s, more animated documentaries could be regarded as variants of *cinéma vérité* or participatory (interactive) documentaries. In 1976, Peter Lord and David Sproxton co-founded Aardman Animations. Similar to Hubley, they began by recording conversations in real life in a spectator way, and then animated them, such as their work *Confessions of a Foyer Girl* (1978, figure 11-12). But in the late 1980s, they used more formal interviews to pick up the sound, in which way the subjects could express their views on life and events more directly, and their opinions would be directly attached to the film. Such films have the ability to penetrate the surface of social life, so that they can explore real social issues. This trend has actually become the mainstream of animated documentary production since the 1990s. Paul Ward used Bill Nichols's classification of documentaries to refer to this type of film as "interactive animated documentary."⁷

⁷ Ward, Paul. "Animated interactions: animation aesthetics and the world of the 'interactive' documentary." *Animated 'Worlds'*. Eastleigh: John Libbey (2006): 113-129.



Confessions of a Foyer Girl (1978). Figure 11-12

Since 1990s, with the rapid development of digital technology, people's views on documentaries have become more open, and the production of animated documentaries at the same time has become more diverse. Represented by the Israeli animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2008, the film won the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film and was nominated for the Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film as well. *Waltz with Bashir*, which is called "the first animated documentary in the length of the fiction film", has aroused more and more attention from the documentary industry and academia to the development of animated documentary. For example, in 2001, the Sheffield Documentary Festival in England specifically listed the animated documentary screening unit. A panel was also set up at the *Visible Evidence* documentary seminar in Brisbane, Australia, to discuss the animated documentary. In 2007, the influential International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam also set up a unit to screen "documentaries that partly or completely consist of animation"⁸. These can all be seen as some kind of sign that the animated documentary is quietly rising.

⁸ IDFA Animation Programme, 2007.

Debate of Legitimacy — Can Animation Express Reality?

The combination of animation and documentary seems to be contradictory. They express our experience, cognition and evaluation of the real world in absolutely different ways. We are always accustomed to think that animations and cartoons are exaggerated fiction, mainly expressing various unreachable subjects. In 1906, Stuart Blackton's *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* came out. Although it was only five minutes, the characters in this short film were deeply impressed the audience by their funny and exaggerated faces. From then on, animations which reflect people's life, ideals and aspirations by means of illusion, exaggeration, deformation and other techniques in the form of painting and other plastic arts have been constantly produced, thus strengthening people's acceptance of animation — It is a kind of "subjective" art that completely contrary to realism. But documentary is called "serious discourse of reality", and it pays attention to the rigorous verification relationship with reality. John Grierson defined documentary as "creative treatment of actuality". Bill Nichols believes that documentaries deal with "the world" in which we live, while fiction films deal with "a world" that is entirely imagined by the creator.⁹

A common question about animated documentary is that the fiction of the animation itself conflicts with the authenticity required by the documentaries. Charles Solomon pointed out two essential elements of animation: each frame of film was exposed individually, rather than as part of a longer take; and the illusion of movement was created, rather than recorded.¹⁰ This kind of moving image that is artificially drawn, instead of directly extracted from reality, is bound to fail to present and express reality like documentary. From this point of view, the difference between documentary and fiction film is that the former is about truth, while the latter is fictional. This statement seems reasonable, but it is far from absolute when it comes to detail. For any kind of text, authenticity cannot be proved or explained by itself. We can only judge whether the text is true or not by linking it with the referential objects outside the text.

⁹ Bill Nichols. *Representing Reality*. Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991:109.

¹⁰ Maureen Furniss. *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics*. Sydney: John Libbey, 1998: 5.

When we discuss the authenticity of documentary, we can not confine ourselves to the text itself, but inevitably involve how to define the universal philosophical proposition of "authenticity". Noël Carroll, who intervened in film research as a philosopher, once said, "Compared with other film research fields, discussions about documentaries often involve philosophical issues more directly."¹¹ Carroll's judgment is directly related to the long-standing documentary's claim towards "reality".

The key to understand animated documentary is whether animation can reach the "real" expression of the real world. Maureen Furniss believes that the classification of moving images can be constructed in a relationship between different "expressions" and "realism", that is, between the two axes of "simulation-abstraction" is a middle ground with multiple meanings. Depending on the relationship between the image and the reality, any kind of moving image can find the right position in this axis. Animation is roughly in the middle of the axis, while documentary is near the end of the simulation.

Bill Nichols referred to the symbolic system of Charles S. Peirce in the analysis of documentary: one is iconic signs, which represent reality in a simulated way, such as painting; the second is indexical signs, representing things in terms of "point-to-point" correspondence, such as X-rays, photographs, fingerprints; the third is symbols, which are artificially endowed with a specific meaning for symbols, such as language, Morse code and national flag.¹² Nichols and Carl Plantinga believe that the image of documentary corresponds to Peirce's "indexical signs" system, that is, there is a "point-to-point" relationship between image and reality. In fact, Peirce attributed photos to the image category first. He said: "Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical

¹¹ Carroll, Noël. *Engaging the moving image*. Yale University Press, 2008: 165.

¹² Bill Nichols. *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*. Indiana University Press. 1994: 18

connection.”¹³ Although photography is a representation of the reality after "sensing" the light, we should understand that it always involves the process of composition, focusing, imaging and so on. Although such images are "similar" to what they represent, their "real power" lies in their "image meaning".¹⁴ Especially, the modern digital technology is increasingly "eroding" the indexability of photographic images. Therefore, the belief that documentary is an kind of objective record of reality is quite doubtful. Peirce has pointed out that "A photograph, not only excites an image, has an appearance, but, owing to its optical connection with the object, is evidence that that appearance corresponds to a reality"¹⁵. Not only in the legal context, but in many cases, photographs are considered as truthful evidence. As far as moving images are concerned, video photography is more widely used as "evidence", while the images taken on the spot in documentaries and TV news programs are based on the indexing nature of symbols. This type of indexing seems to guarantee the status of the material as "evidence". However, photographs and photographic images also have the characteristics of "symbolic symbols" (the third kind).

In a survey of photojournalism, Davis Howard and Paul Walton found that only a relatively small part of the entire material would be directly expressed in the main body of news reports, namely characters, spaces and events, while most of the other content has a certain skewed relationship with the news that has been presented; these materials "represent" the real world in a symbolic and indexed way.¹⁶ Similarly, a large number of images in documentaries represent the real world in symbolic and indexed ways, but they are regarded as more "real" than other forms of expression. In fact, while it has an index relationship with the expressed reality, the images of documentary has more symbolic meaning, that is, it has quite strong subjectivity. Only based on this cognitive principle can we recognize the possibility of animated documentaries in expressing the reality of the real world.

¹³ Innis, Robert E., ed. *Semiotics: An introductory anthology*. Indiana University Press, 1985: 11

¹⁴ David Deacon, Michael Pickering, Peter Golding & Graham Murdock. *Researching Communications: A Practical Guide to Methods in Media and Cultural Analysis*. London: Arnold.2007: 188.

¹⁵ Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Vol. 5. Harvard University Press, 1934:359

¹⁶ Davis, Howard, Paul Walton(1983b): "Death of a Premier: Consensus and Closure in International News". In Davis & Walton (Eds.), op. cit, p.45.

As far as the composition of the image of documentaries is concerned, neither John Grierson nor Bill Nichols defined documentary as live shooting, it's just that we're used to acquiescing that the material of documentaries must be filmed live, in real life. Of course, up to now, this method is still holding the great charm of documentaries to attract audiences. In fact, with the development of digital technology, the corresponding relationship between indexed images with certain subjective tendencies and the real world becomes more and more suspicious.

At the same time, the photography style and means that documentary directors' usually use are increasingly abused in the production of fiction films, making it ever harder for us to judge whether a film is a documentary or a fiction one only by its image quality and shooting techniques. Lev Manovich once mentioned in his book *The Language of New Media*: "Once live-action footage is digitized (or directly recorded in a digital format), it does its privileged indexical relationship to prefilmic reality. The computer does not distinguish between an image obtained through a photographic lens, an image created in a paint program, or an image synthesized in a 3-D graphics package, since they are all made from the same material — pixels. And pixels, regardless of their origin, can be easily altered, substituted one for another, and so on. Live – action footage is thus reduced to just another graphic, no different than images created manually."¹⁷ However, although in this passage Manovich tried to expand the scope of Hollywood film production to all film production, its context is based on the production of fiction rather than intend to deny the "real images" of documentaries absolutely. In fact, the development of digital technology and simulation technology has brought changes to the documentary in two ways. On the one hand, the index relationship between documentary and reality becomes suspicious, but on the other hand, digital technology has also promoted the variety of documentaries, and the means of expression are more abundant, such as Werner Herzog's 3D documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010, Figure 13-14), a wonderful display of the original murals dating back 30,000 years ago in the Chauvet caves of southern France.

¹⁷ Lev Manovich. *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press, 2002: 300.



Cave of Forgotten Dreams (2010). Figure 13-14

Although the increasingly developed rotoscope technology makes animated images more realistic, the constructed nature of animations and cartoons still determines that there is a certain "distance" between their images and the real world that they try to express. The image of animation is totally “constructed”, and it does not originate from the direct "capture" of the real world image as direct cinema does. However, although there is a certain distance between animations and external reality in terms of presentation and indexing, they can still interpret and analyze real events and characters.

The use of animated fragments in documentaries is basically understandable and acceptable to the audience, and animation science films have been widely used for education, for example *Sea Monsters: A Walking with Dinosaurs Trilogy* (2003), *Ice Age Giants* (2013), *Planet Dinosaur* (2011, figure 15-16), etc. Indeed, animation can give us a picture that is hard to capture in real-life shooting: ancient history, distant planets, and forgotten pasts. The *Sea Monsters* series reproduces ancient marine life in the form of animation. The expressive ability of animation can prompt the audience to react to what they see on the screen, to imagine and think, and to connect the images with what they see in reality, so as to stimulate and enrich the viewing experience of the audience. In fact, animated documentaries expand the expressive potential of documentaries in epistemology and expands the path and scope for us to acquire knowledge. Animated documentaries provide us with enhanced personal perspectives and realities, and present us with “the world” in which real-time images can not reach in "breadth" and "depth". It calls on audiences to imagine and to react on what they see and hear on the

screen with the emotions and experiences what they have experienced, thus drawing the link between documentary and reality. Sergei Eisenstein, the father of montage, also spoke highly of animations. When talking about Disney's works, Eisenstein described them as follows:



Planet Dinosaur (2011). Figure 15-16

“The rejection of the constraint of form, fixed once and for all, freedom from ossification, an ability to take on any form dynamically. An ability which I would call ‘plasmaticity,’ for here a being, represented in a drawing, a being of a given form, a being that has achieved a particular appearance, behaves itself like primordial protoplasm, not yet having a stable form, but capable of taking on any and all forms of animal life on the ladder of evolution.”¹⁸

Eisenstein here proposed a concept called "plasmaticity" and regarded it as a feature of Disney's animation. "Protoplasm" is the general term of all living substances in cells and the material basis of all forms of life. Whether plant or animal cells, all life is derived from this colloidal substance, which contains a large number of chemical elements and has a complex internal structure. It is the most primitive breeding place of life, so it is also the hovering place where life has not yet been finalized. It means unlimited possibilities, fast-changing liquidity and irregular diversity.

In Eisenstein's view, the changing state of Disney animation, which is constantly divorced from the nature of things themselves, is very similar to the original state of life. He pointed out a

¹⁸ Eisenstein S. Eisenstein on Disney[M]. Seagull Books Pvt Ltd, 1986.

certain trait inherent in animation very keenly, and gave it a vivid and accurate summary called "plasmaticity". The freedom and agility of animation is indeed like "protoplasm" with infinite plasticity and possibility.

Whether animation can express reality and whether animated documentaries exists was once controversial in the 1990s: Paul Wells believes that the essence of animation is abstract¹⁹, so it cannot express the concrete real world; William Moritz believes that animation and real-life images are not only different in quality, but the latter is considered to be more infectious to the audience than the former, and the two belong to completely different forms.²⁰ However, with the continuous development of animation technology and the changes of people's perception towards documentary, more and more animated documentary works and the acceptance of the audience have fundamentally changed the views of animation researchers and documentary researchers both. For example, when talking about the audience's acceptance of real-life documentaries and animated documentaries, Annabelle Honess Roe said: "TV and theatrical release schedules are saturated with 'serious' live action documentaries, many of which fail to find an audience or strike a chord - perhaps because we are already inundated with indexical imagery of the 'reality' of the contemporary world. Also, these 'serious' documentaries tell stories, usually, of an individual or small group of people and there is potential for us to disregard their realities as specific to that person or group and therefore not relevant to ourselves. Animation, on the other hand, allows for a more universal level of identification by more easily enabling us to imagine ourselves into a scenario."²¹ Besides, based on the context of new digital technology, Paul Ward strongly criticized Wells in the paper, *Animated Realities: the animated film, documentary, realism*, for mistaking the abstract characteristics of animation as the essence of it, thus denying the possibility that animation can be used to express reality. In addition, he pointed out sharply that Moritz's viewpoint of judging a video's value from its source was seriously inappropriate.

¹⁹ Paul Wells. *Understanding Animation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998: 28

²⁰ William Moritz. "Some observations on non-objective and non-linear animation" in *Storytelling in Animation: The Art of the Animated Image* volume 2 Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1988: 21.

²¹ Annabelle Honess Roe. *Against Animated Documentary?*

https://www.academia.edu/26828990/Against_Animated_documentary

From the epistemological point of view, if we admit that documentary is a form of creative expression of reality and artificially constructed text, and if we still believe that documentary can lead to and even expose some part of the real world, then, in the ability to approach reality, we have no reason to think that animated documentary is not as good as "orthodox" documentary, which is shot in the real world. There are still subjective constructions that can not be ignored in the image, but the specific expectations of watching "documentaries" caused by specific traditions determine that people would turn to think the "orthodox" documentary can present "reality" better. But in the way of presenting the world, neither of them can avoid the key word "construction" — from this point of view, no one has the right to deny the legitimacy of the existence of another one.

Bill Nichols wrote at the beginning of *The Introduction to Documentary*: "Every film is a documentary. Even the most whimsical of fictions gives evidence of the culture that produced it and reproduces the likenesses of the people who perform within it." In addition, Dai Vaughan, a experienced British documentary director, also holds the same view, saying: "what makes a film 'documentary' is the way we look at it."²² From this standpoint, the form and style of the film itself can not be used as the basis for identifying it is a documentary or not. Whether a film is shoot in real-life or made in animation, whether it is realistic or expressionist, it has nothing to do with whether it can become a documentary. The only criterion here is whether the audience could follow the clues of the film and point their thoughts and emotions to the real world in which we live. Can animation do that? The answer is, of course, yes.

²² Dai Vaughan. *For documentary: twelve essays*. University of California Press, 1999: 84.

The Unique Expressive Ability as Documentary

Andre Bazin, in his famous article *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, once inspected the historical evolution of painting and photography as part of plastic arts. He believed that before the birth of photography, painting had two different pursuits: one was expressionist style, which belonged to the primarily aesthetic; the other was realistic style, which was rooted in people's psychological desire to replace the outside world with realistic simulations. According to Bazin, the invention of photography fundamentally changed all of this, he wrote: "The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space."²³ Although long after the birth of photography, many oil paintings can depict reality more vividly than photographs, but "it will never have the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith"²⁴ Thus, Bazin asserts that photography "has freed Western painting, once and for all, from its obsession with realism and allowed it to recover its aesthetic autonomy"²⁵ Here Bazan's so-called aesthetics of Western painting refers to "the expression of spiritual reality where- in the symbol transcended its model".²⁶ Indeed, human spiritual activity is non-spatial and cannot be captured by photographic lenses. If we must resort to spiritual activities in visual, then painting is probably the best choice. This is clearly reflected in the animated documentary.

A is for Autism (1992) is an animated documentary about autism made by British director Tim Webb in 1992. In the film, he interviewed seven people with autism, including children and adults. Those interviewees narrated various problems they encounter in daily life and their difficulties in communicating with others, especially their unique psychological state. For

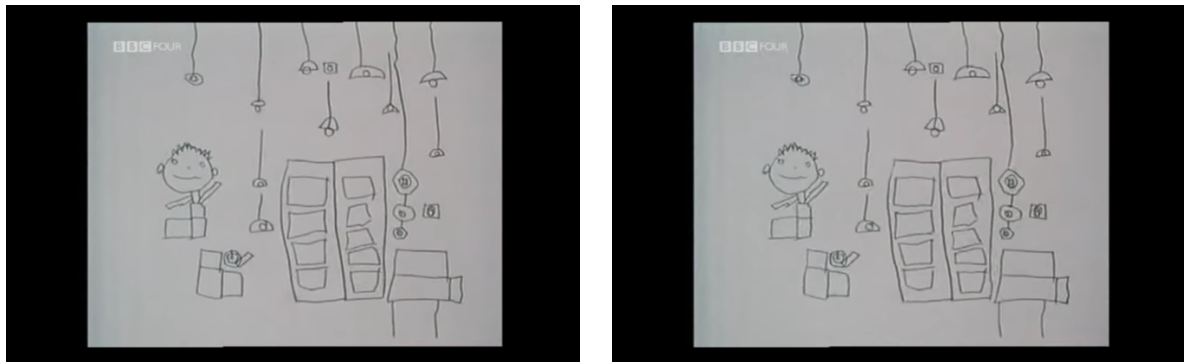
²³ Bazin A. What is Cinema? vol. I[J]. Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: U of California P, 1967: 16-40.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ ibid

²⁶ ibid

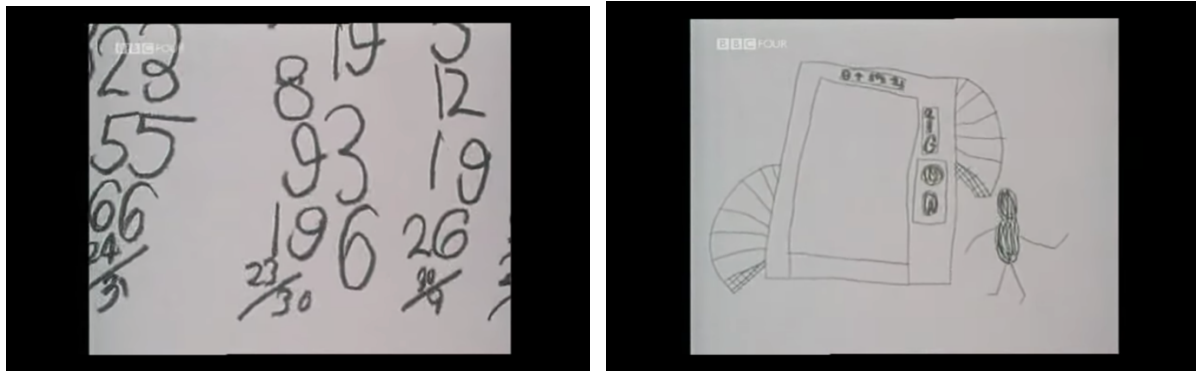
example, an adult male interviewee said that he was unable to communicate with others when he was 16 years old. He dared not look into each other's eyes and could not keep up with the other's thinking. Also, he often interrupts in conversation because he can't tell when is the time to listen to others and when is the time to speak and express himself. (Figure 17-18)



A is for Autism (1992). Figure 17-18

Another woman interviewee recalled that she would always ask the same questions in her childhood, such as "why is the street light on?" because every time she heard the answer, she felt very happy. In order to effectively convey the psychological state of these autistic patients, Webb collected some paintings created by them, and by technical processing, these paintings were presented in the film with the form of animation. One patient talked about that he didn't like to go to a small shop before he was old enough because he had vision problems and everything he looked was very small. He said he became obsessed with numbers when he was six years old and sometimes he would spend hours counting from 1 to 1,000. He didn't like to go to town or other public places either because the noise sounded like thunder to him and made him feel uncomfortable and unbearable. In the film, this part began with the outline of a building drawn with pencil on white paper, and then enlarged gradually. The windows of the building became clearer and clearer. The point of view passed through the windows and entered the building. When he was talking about his vision, there was a door on the screen and a corridor beside it. The space was constantly rotating and the relative proportion of objects was constantly changing. And when he was talking about his obsession with numbers, the handwritten calendar on the screen moved quickly from right to left, and then the picture stopped suddenly. A pair of handwritten numbers filled the screen and swayed constantly. Then

some other objects of life began to appear on the screen, such as rivers, bridges, railways, trains, elevators and so on, these objects have been moving constantly, while the figures on the picture were still moving rapidly and disorderly, and at the same time the background voice is the patient's continuous counting voice: "60, 61, 62...". (Figure 19-20).



A is for Autism (1992). Figure 19-20

The use of animation in this film greatly strengthens the patient's oral content, enabling the audience to deeply appreciate the confused inner feelings of the autistic patient. Such a remarkable expressive ability is difficult to achieve with real-life moving images.

The expressive ability of painting and photography is different. To illustrate the difference, German writer Camille Recht once compared painters to violins and photographers to pianists. He said:

The violinist must first produce the note, must seek it out, find it in an instant; the pianist strikes the key and the note rings out. The painter and the photographer both have an instrument at their disposal. Drawing and coloring, for the painter, correspond to the violinist's production of sound; the photographer, like the pianist, has the advantage of a mechanical device that is subject to restrictive laws, while the violinist is under no such restraint. No Paderewski will ever reap the fame, ever cast the almost fabulous spell, that Paganini did.²⁷

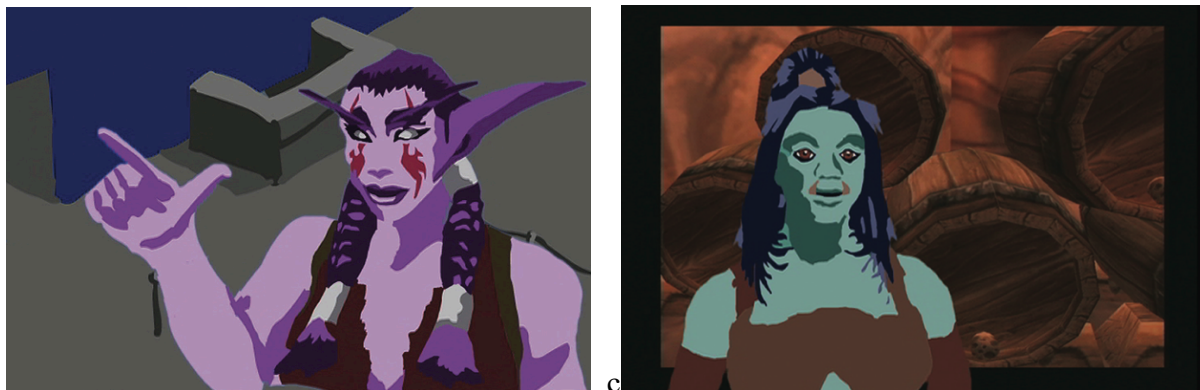
²⁷ Eugene Atget, Lichthilder, with an introduction by Camille Recht (Paris and Leipzig, 1930), p. 10. [Benjamin's note]

This analogy that Recht put may not be entirely appropriate. While painting has more flexible expression space, photography has the "essentially objective character" that painting can never replace, both of them have their own advantages in expression and they may not have absolute differences.

But Recht's words does point out that painting is beyond photography's reach in some extent. In fact, as early as 1929, Creighton Peet had noticed the uniqueness of animation expression, he said: unhampered by any such classical limitations as dramatic unities, or even such necessities as the laws of gravity, common sense and possibility, the animated drawing is the only artistic medium ever discovered which is really "free". This kind of visual expression, which has almost no restrictions, adds another dimension to the documentary to express the real world. Contents that cannot be captured with a lens can be presented in a very expressive way in this dimension. In *A is for Autism*, the presentation of the hero's inner world belongs to this situation. Similar examples exist widely in other first-person narrative animated documentaries, such as *Ryan*. What animation can do, of course, is not just to show the character's inner world. In the process of making an animated documentary, the producer could magnify the object that he wants to show or express, or even expand to the whole film. By controlling the form and style, animation becomes an important rhetoric means, giving the theme of the film an extraordinary meaning.

An example is the animated documentary *Stranger Comes to Town* (2007) by American director Jacqueline Goss. After the September 11 attacks, the United States government, out of its sensitivity to terrorist activities, strengthened the entry checks for foreigners, such as fingerprint extraction, photography, more complex document audits, and stricter security checks. In this film, Goss interviewed six foreigners who entered the country and let them to talk about their experiences and the unpleasant feelings when they entered the country. For example, a female interviewee described that she had been asked to have a gender check when she entered the country. Another interviewee from Muslim countries described how he had been asked to give more complicated explanations and instructions when he entered the country. In Goss's view, those initiatives are meaningless and they are just a kind of overreaction. The

experience of those "strangers" in the film is not normal. It is contrary to the equality, tolerance and values advocated by civilized society. To highlight such a theme, Goss introduced a famous online game, *World of Warcraft*, in his animation design. The woman mentioned above was designed to have pink hair, green skin and pointed tusks. (Figure 21-22) When she first appeared, she ran in a world of Warcraft with a sword behind her, passed through some strange houses, rode through a dinosaur monster, and came to a green-haired monster with a pickaxe in her hand. Later in the interview, she was always facing the audience, and the monster remained the same place behind her a little. This film deals with several other interviewees in a similar way. They have both been designed as Warcraft characters, but their shapes are different, and their spatial backgrounds are also various. It is not difficult to see that the design of those Warcraft characters highlights the concept of "stranger and outsider". It is easy to associate with some potential "demonization" of "strangers" by the American government in the real world. Warcraft characters goes in and out of a fantastic world and obey the law of the jungle, which is far away from civilization. Several interviewees were implanted in such a space, which obviously constituted a kind of irony to reality.



Stranger Comes to Town (2007). Figure 21-22

In the animated documentary *Stranger Comes to Town*, animation as a unique means of expression shows a unique rhetorical ability that is irreplaceable. We may notice this in many other works as well. For example, in the Australian film *It's Like That*, the protagonist is three children who have been taken into custody for suspected illegal immigration. The audio in the movie is a telephone interview with three children, while the video animates them into caged

birds. Birds lost their freedom. They are fragile, innocent and pitiful. This is a metaphor of the producer for several children who have been taken into the custody. Like *Stranger Comes to Town*, although it is a fictional scene and image, animation conveys the theme of the work more vividly and forcefully. Paul Ward, a British scholar, once said:

Animated films offer us an intensified route into understanding the real social world, by virtue of the peculiar dialectic that is set up between knowing that this is a film about a real person[...] and knowing that what we are looking at is an animated construction, with nothing of the indexical correspondence that we have become so accustomed to.²⁸

This is a very accurate observation. Ward's "dialectic" here also reminds us of the contradictions inherent in the expression of animated documentaries. On the one hand, the facts described in the film come from the real world, which is a kind of realistic existence. On the other hand, the film is completely stylized and expressionist, with a fictional appearance. There is a potential epistemological deviation of animated documentaries from traditional documentaries.

Bill Nichols proposed in *Blurred Boundaries* that a new type of documentary is emerging. According to Nichols, one of the most important characteristics of this type of documentary is that it abandons the traditional documentary style and strengthens the expression of the subjective experience and subjective feeling from the producer. Subjective shots, montages, dramatic lighting, lyrical music, and many other expressionist elements come in handy here. Nichols named it "performative documentary." For this type of documentary, the traditional realist epistemology is "questioned and attacked", and the world it presents is filled with "evocative tones and expressive shadings". It reminds people that "the world is more than the sum of the visible evidence we derive from it"²⁹ Although Nichols' discussion did not involve animation, it would be very appropriate to apply his description of the performative documentary to the animated documentaries discussed earlier. In other words, they should

²⁸ Ward, Paul. *Documentary: The margins of reality*. Columbia University Press, 2006

²⁹ Nichols B. *Introduction to documentary*[M]. Indiana University Press, 2017

probably belong to the performative documentary.

In addition, the animation documentary also has the function as "mask" that is not available in real-time images. We know that in addition to the physical constraints from time and space, specific social and cultural constraints on the use of cameras will also be formed. *Backseat Bingo* is an animated documentary about the sexual life of the elderly. Because of their sensitivity to sexual topics, the interviewed elderly in the film did not receive interviews in front of the camera, so the director used a simple audio interview, and then put them in the film as the form of animation.

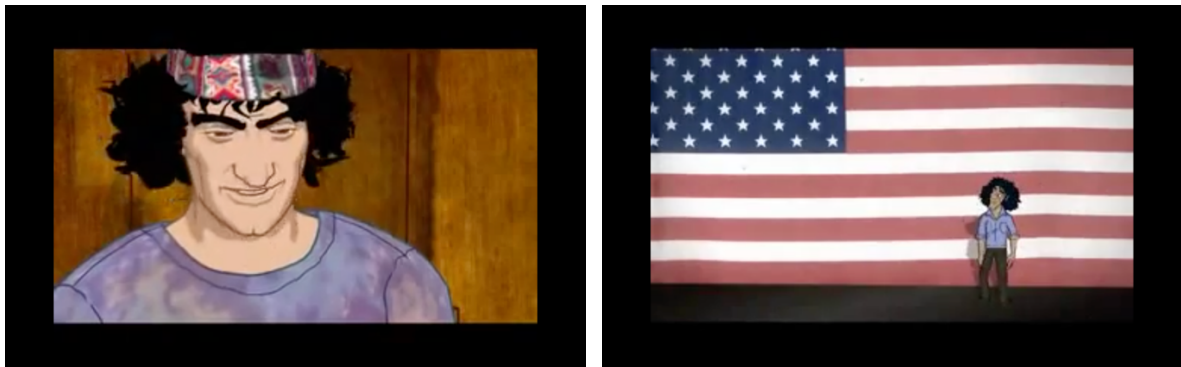
Another example is a plot in *Waltz with Bashir*. When the protagonist of the film, that is the director himself, and his friend, went to the friend's house, Folman asked his friend if he could draw him and his seven-year-old son. His friend said, "You can draw as you like, as long as you don't film." (Figure 23-24)



Waltz with Bashir (2008). Figure 23-24

In the practice of documentaries, children should be treated more cautiously than adults. On the one hand, this is the meaning of documentary ethics, on the other hand, there are also relevant legal provisions. In the animated documentary *It's Like That* that was mentioned earlier, the three protagonists are all eleven or twelve-year-old children. If not with animation, but with a camera, their faces will inevitably appear on the screen. At this time, the director is faced with the embarrassment of not only fully expressing the protagonist's story, but also avoiding the appearance of their face on the screen. Animation avoids this problem and opens up a new

rhetorical space for producers and directors. Similar to the restrictions on filming children, some countries have special requirements for court filming, and sometimes they even prohibit filming. In news and reports, we can often see that the court scene presented by painting. In the production of documentaries, it can also be represented by animation. For example, in the animated documentary *Chicago 10* (2007, figure 25-26), the trial process is only a main plot line throughout the film. However, because there is no image and videos of the trial, the director adopted animation to vividly reproduce the whole trial process according to the trial records. From this we can easily see that animation not only has flexible expressive ability, but also provides a broader space for filmmakers to protect their subjects and grasp the ethical scale.



Chicago 10 (2007). Figure 25-26

Conclusion

In recent years, some scholars still believe that animation as a special "image material" can not be represented as documentary, because the audience would "instinctively regard it as a fictional work".³⁰ This assertion is clearly only half right. Animated documentaries will never require the audience to interpret the animated image as a true record of the real scene, and at this point, the audience will not make a misjudgment, which is precisely the meaning of animation expression with "alienation". But is it true that only real-life images can refer to reality, and animation can not? In fact, when watching animated documentaries, the audience on one hand would understand that this is a virtual representation of animation, and on the other hand they would also be sure that it presents real events and real people in reality. This is a unique psychological mechanism. Audiences can build trust in animated documentaries, the role of sound can not be underestimated undoubtedly.

After the baptism of "Direct Cinema" in the 1960s, people often believe that there is a point-to-point correspondence between the image of the documentary and the object being photographed. In fact, auditory correspondence is also included in this correspondence. In 1963, a theorist lamented the emergence of a new type of camera: "Releasing the camera from the shackles of the tripod is equivalent to curing hemiplegia." If a similar analogy is made, the emergence of the simultaneous recording seems to give hearing to the deaf. Sometimes, due to special reasons, photographers fail to record clear videos, or even all of them are black field. The sound recorded on the scene can also make the audience feel immersed in the scene and ensure the authenticity of the image. From the perspective of Michael Moore, "sound is more important than picture."³¹ He gave us an example that "You've been in a movie theater where it's been out of focus just a little bit or maybe the frame is spilling over onto the curtain. Nobody gets up, nobody says anything, nobody goes and tells the projectionist. But if the sound goes

³⁰ Nie Xinru. Could Animation Become Documentary? China Television, 2010(9): 46.

³¹ Michael Moore. Michael Moore's 13 Rules for Making Documentary Films.

<https://www.indiewire.com/2014/09/michael-moores-13-rules-for-making-documentary-films-22384/>

out, there is a riot in the theater, right? ”³² Those original conversations and sound collected during the shooting process played a very special and significant role in depicting the atmosphere and highlighting the characteristics of the characters. In the book *Audio-vision: sound on screen*, Michel Chion analyses how various sound elements (conversation, music, etc) give a sense of time and space to the image, and play a "value-added" function. He re-examined the importance of sound in audio-visual media and considered sound and image “mutually influence each other...lending each other their respective properties by contamination and projection”.³³ Chion concluded that, whether when watching early sound films or films that use the latest sound technologies (such as Dolby, Tomlinson Holman Experiment), the moving image that audiences think they see with their eyes are actually illusions constructed by sound.³⁴ This concept may be too absolute, but it also reflects to some extent the important role of sound for images — especially for documentaries. In order to make the audience sympathize with the characters and stories presented, and have a strong sense of immersion while watching, it is essential to use sound properly in the documentaries. And those directors of the animated documentary clearly knows this.

In recent animated documentaries, there are two types that dominate the mainstream. The first one is the interactive animated documentary, and the second one is the first-person animated documentary. In both types, those animations appear on the screen certainly do not exist as evidence. But when talking about audio, whether it is the interviews, dialogues in the interactive animated documentary or the narratives of the director in the first-person animated documentary, they can effectively establish the psychological connection between the film and reality for the audience.

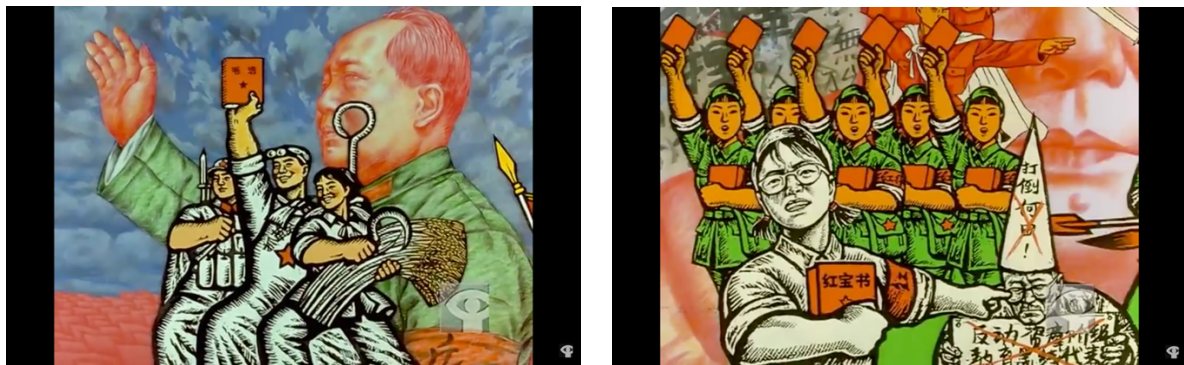
Besides audio, animated documentaries can also make a difference in visual design. The visual expression of animation can be unrestrained and has unlimited possibilities. The purpose of applying it to documentaries is to open up such a new space of expression. But this does not

³² Ibid.

³³ Chion M. *Audio-vision: sound on screen*[M]. Columbia University Press, 2019.

³⁴ Ibid.

prevent a large number of visual symbols that refer to reality from entering the animation. Take the Chinese documentary film director Wang Shuibo's animated documentary *Sunrise Over Tiananmen Square* (1998) as an example. Similar to the processing on the soundtrack, the film presents a lot of scenes and symbols full of specific historical meanings, such as the juxtaposition of Tian'anmen with the red sun and sunflower, the portraits of Mao Zedong, Lenin, Khrushchev and Kennedy, and the Red Guards in the "Cultural Revolution" hold the red book and shout "Long live" three times, the scene of criticism of class enemies and so on. (Figure 27-28) Although all the images have been highly stylized, as Chinese audiences, we can still clearly relate them to the real objects.



Sunrise Over Tiananmen Square (1998). Figure 27-28

In addition, animated documentaries do not exclude photographs, text and other elements of expression. For example, in the *Sinking of the Lusitania* mentioned above, when describing the victims on the cruise ship, the film inserts some photos of celebrities and corresponding text introduction. This combination of historical photographs and animations is being widely used in contemporary animated documentaries.

Of course, some natural and historical explanatory animated documentaries can not find similar auditory or visual reality support. This is the case with *Walking With Dinosaurs* made by the BBC. This series of works shows the survival of many different types of dinosaurs, including how they foraged, how they fought against each other, how they multiplied, and so on. At this point, the audience may invoke their own background knowledge about dinosaurs, but the film has no clear relationship with reality as we mentioned earlier. Why do audiences still believe

in the authenticity of the film?

A Norwegian scholar Arild Fetveit once pointed out that “with increasingly different practices, now encouraged by the advent of digital techniques, our understanding of and trust in photographic images must more than ever take varying practices and conventions into account. Thus, the credibility of photographic discourses becomes less reliant on an overarching trust in the technology of photography and more dependent upon institutional warrant.”³⁵ In my opinion, Fetveit's judgment can well explain why audiences could accept *Walking With Dinosaurs*. Although as ordinary audiences, we can not judge the authenticity of many content in the series, but due to the authority of the BBC, generally speaking, we still tend to believe in the authenticity of those works.

In the course of the development of documentaries, there have been many debates, from the early discussion on what is reality to some scholars' doubts and denials about animated documentaries. In fact, in my opinion, all these disputes are discussing a same problem, that is, what is a documentary? Where is its boundary? The fallacies in these debates also stem from the narrow definition of the concept of documentary itself. The same is true of the controversy triggered by the animated documentary. After explaining the existence of animated documentary at the empirical level, the more important task is how to prove its legitimacy as a sub-type of documentary in theory, which is what this paper tries to answer. Since we discuss it to this extent, it will inevitably involve how to define the concept of documentary film itself. This is the core issue of contemporary documentary theory, which deserves our further exploration and reflection.

³⁵ Arild Fetveit, Reality TV in the Digital Era: A Paradox in Visual Culture?, Culture & Society 21 (1999), p. 797-798.

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