

Recreating Reality: *Waltz With Bashir*, *Persepolis*, and the Documentary Genre

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Is a digital image consisting of dots and lines and digital information, is it more real? Is a drawn image, talking with real sound, less true? Who can say? Who is to judge?

Ari Folman (2008)

We are practically drowning in the present; we are practically drowning in the past.

Nicholas Rombes (2009: p. 96)

This paper examines Ari Folman's *Waltz With Bashir* (2008) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007) to elucidate how artists, distributors, and audiences shape and define the porous boundaries of the documentary genre, and how such perceptions are shaped within a digital context. By analyzing how each film represents reality, that is, how documentaries attempt to represent the real world, this paper explores the elements of performativity within animated documentary as a reflection of both the growing fluidity of the documentary genre and the instability of the indexical in a digital age. In our digital context, where the "real" can be manufactured at an increasing rate, stronger skepticism and cynicism push the documentary genre towards more subjective explorations, with animated documentaries serving as a key example of how genre distinctions have fluctuated in response.

Indexicality Dissolving in a Digital Era

With the advent of digital media, documentary's claim to capture "reality" is disrupted. Programs such as Photoshop enable anyone to alter and manipulate images at will, often to a remarkable degree of verisimilitude. Photographic and filmed images no longer hold an inherent

element of truth or trustworthiness, though as scholars have more recently argued, such indexicality was never really there to begin with (see Gunning 2007, 2008). People have been faking photography since its invention. The digital destabilization of the photographic image's indexical relation to reality also destabilizes the genre of documentary, which historically depended on this indexical relationship.

As Brian Winston (2008) observes, there is “no theoretical position, no definition of documentary, that does not in some way reference the relationship to the real” (p.9). While documentary's definition can be nebulous at times, British documentary film movement founder John Grierson's definition is usually the standard for its flexibility and historical relevance. His definition of documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson, cited in Wolfe 2014 p. 144) certainly gives both filmmakers and critics leeway, but such a definition evaporates within the current digital context. As Winston (2008) notes, current “technology ensures that Grierson's original strong claim on actuality will stand no chance at all. Digital image manipulation will, in combination with the documentarists's imagination, bring down the entire Griersonian construction” (p. 286).

While the Griersonian reliance on the veracity of film crumbles along with the rise of subjectivity in documentary film, *cinéma vérité* and its American counterpart, direct cinema, may seem to pose as a response as a more authentic, non-curated form of documentary. However, such objectivity has been questioned since the movement began. As Peter Graham presciently wrote in 1964, “these film-makers present not *the* truth, but *their* truth. The term *cinéma-vérité*, by postulating some absolute truth, is only a monumental red herring. The sooner it is buried and forgotten, the better” (p.36, emphasis in original). Hanna Schenkel (2014) notes that “even ‘fly on the wall’ films like *Gimme Shelter* (Albert Maysles, David Maysles & Charlotte Zwerin,

1970) – have elements of fiction, such as characterisation, three-act structures, rising tensions and a resolution” (p.72). While *cinéma vérité*/direct cinema appears to offer an unconstructed look at everyday subjects, such “observational documentary operated as part of the philosophical belief system of empiricism. However, this foundation has clearly suffered multiple philosophical and pragmatic shocks over the last hundred years” (Dovey 2008, p.254). While Stella Bruzzi (2006) aptly summarizes one of the main issues that plague observation documentaries, namely that observation and objectivity are non synonymous (p. 74), the rise of digital cinema ousting the previous authority of indexicality also unsettles preconceived notions of the objectivity of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema.

Such changes to the documentary field reinvigorate a long discussion in film theory about the ontology of the moving image, invoking a new question: if artists cannot achieve objective representation, is truth likewise beyond the artist’s reach? Annabelle Honess Roe (2013) responds, noting that “now [that] we accept that objective representation is a fantasy, we also acknowledge that this does not entail a wholesale rejection of attempts to represent and convey reality” (p. 22). Instead, filmic representations appear to be free from the burden of verisimilitude, as cinema shifts away from a Griersonian model of documentary towards mining new influences from the work of Dziga Vertov.

While initially dismissed and marginalized within the documentary film movement, scholars and filmmakers consistently find new insights to pull from Vertov’s work (Feldman 2007). These insights have aided scholars in analyzing the current trend of overtly artificial documentaries. Vertov found that “any cinematographic trick was acceptable as a way of revealing the film ‘fact’” (Winston 2008, p.167). Obvious construction of images became a tenet of his work, and such subjectivity in his films preemptively “echo central themes of the digital

age” (Hicks 2007, p.136). With Vertov’s influence spreading in documentary filmmaking, subjectivity is now more acceptable and common in documentary, as performance modes within documentary like reenactment grow more popular. Along with this rise in performative documentary comes animated documentaries as well.

As concerns over improper image editing rose through the 1990s (Winston 2008, p.8), animated documentaries grew increasingly popular as the indexicality of images, including documentary film, came under greater scrutiny.¹ The emergence of digital contexts was central to the growth of animated documentaries as an accepted form of the documentary genre, and enables films such as *Waltz With Bashir* and *Persepolis* to engage audiences about the real world through animation.

While the documentary tradition undergoes a variety of changes, it’s important to discuss how we define documentary’s increasingly porous boundaries. Arguing for documentary as a genre, Bill Nichols (2010) argues that

we can consider documentary a genre like the western or the science-fiction film. To belong to the genre a film has to exhibit conventions shared by films already regarded as documentaries or westerns. These conventions help distinguish one genre from another: the use of a voice-of-God commentary, interviews, location sound recording, cutaways from a given scene to provide images that illustrate or complicate state points, and a reliance on social actors, or people, who present themselves in their everyday roles and activities, are among the conventions common to many documentaries (p. 21).

While Nichols posits that documentary can be considered a genre, scholars such as Paul Arthur (2005) and Dai Vaughan (1998) situate documentary as a mode of filmmaking, akin to production and distribution processes. In examining how documentaries can subvert such genre conventions, Trinh T. Minh-ha (1993) argues that “documentary can thus easily become a ‘style’: it no longer constitutes a mode of production or an attitude toward life, but proves to be only an ele-

¹ Notably, animated documentaries grew increasingly popular during the 1990s, growing alongside the release of image editing software Photoshop, first released in 1990.

ment of aesthetics” (p.99). Even more striking, Minh-ha declares that “there is no such thing as documentary” (p.90)! While the preferred phrase may vary (‘tradition’, ‘practice’, and ‘process’ may also suffice), I prefer to use the term genre because of its descriptive purposes in identifying the tropes, conventions, and expectations that surround and shape documentaries. It will be through the genre of documentary that this paper investigates how *Waltz With Bashir* and *Persepolis* grapple with documentary tropes in their performance of the real world.

Performance and its Presence in Documentary

Performance is an element of documentary not normally identified by audiences, as “documentary film, in everyday common sense parlance, implies the absence of elements of performance, acting, staging, directing, and so forth, criteria that presumably distinguish the documentary form from the narrative fiction film” (Waugh 1990, p.75). However, “the ingredients of performance and direction are within the documentary tradition - certainly within the classical documentary . . . [but also] in the modern vérité and post-vérité documentary as well” (Ibid.). Scholarship around these elements of performance has slowly expanded, including Bill Nichols’ categorial modes of documentary. While these categories can be helpful as well as inhibiting, I want to focus my attention on Nichols’ newer addition: performative documentary. Nichols (2010) explains that “the performative mode raises questions about what knowledge actually amounts to” (p.199), observing that “performative films give added emphasis to the subjective qualities of experience and memory” (p.202).

From this description, it would seem that animation’s inherent lack of indexicality fits Nichols’ description of performative documentary quite well. Honess Roe (2013), however, warns that “to shoehorn the animated documentary into one of Nichols’ modes threatens to limit our understanding of the form” (p.29). She ultimately argues that the discourse placing animated

documentaries within certain frameworks detracts from the discussion about the content itself. Instead, Honess Roe finds that “the pertinent questions are *how* this knowledge [being conveyed by the documentary] is conveyed and *what type* of knowledge it is” (Ibid, emphasis in original). Jonathan Rozenkrantz (2011) takes it one step further, asserting that “there seems to be a tendency to ‘squeeze’ [animated documentary] into a frame of reference in order to validate it, that is to say that if we manage to fit an animated film into one of Nichols’ categories we have, so to speak, proven that it is a documentary” (n.p.). While Nichols work is helpful in identifying the various methods of documentary, his examination of performative documentary is less informed by performance studies, and in particular the concept of performativity. This paper will therefore not merely engage with Nichols’ work on performative documentary, but the work of other scholars in the documentary field and beyond.

In *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, Bruzzi (2006) asserts that “documentaries are performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performance and performativity” (p.1). Bruzzi argues that performance is not just a mode of documentary, but an essential component to its being. Animated documentaries in particular are prime examples of this performativity, as they involve performative recreation and reenactment. They usually animate conversations, memories, imagination, and interviews among other transcribed records, recreating the world using animation. Such animated recreations often function like reenactments or dramatizations in documentary film, performances that remediate the real world as conscious (re)constructions of the real world. Animated documentaries are, as Thomas Waugh (1990) describes, *presentational* rather than merely representational. As Waugh describes, a representational style has subjects

‘acting naturally,’ the documentary code of narrative illusion, borrowed from the dominant fiction cinema. When subjects perform ‘not looking at the camera,’ when they ‘rep-

resent' their lives or roles, the image looks 'natural' as if the camera were invisible or as if the subject were unaware of being filmed (p.76).

Conversely, "the convention of performing an awareness of the camera rather than a nonawareness, of presenting oneself explicitly for the camera— the convention the documentary cinema absorbed from its elder sibling photography— we shall call 'presentational' performance" (Ibid.). Waugh identifies this kind of performance in Griersonian documentaries and in particular *cinéma vérité*/direct cinema, as "the classical American *vérité* filmmakers systematically snipped out all looks at the camera in order to preserve the representational illusion" (p.80). As Waugh explains,

the difference between representation and presentation is not that one uses performance and the other doesn't, but that the former disavows and hides its performance components through such conventions as not looking at the camera, whereas the latter openly acknowledges and exploits its performance components (p.79).

By its very nature of being animated, and thus overtly artificial and constructed (as opposed to the natural authenticity proposed by *cinéma vérité* and other forms of documentary), animated documentaries' own construction highlights the construction of images themselves. These methods of animated reenactment illuminates its subjectivity and the subjectiveness of truth in general, refusing an objective documentary stance and remaining *a truth, a* means of seeing the world. As Dirk Eitzen (1995) highlights, "every representation of reality is no more than a fiction in the sense that it is an artificial construct, a highly contrived and selective view of the world, produced for some purpose and therefore unavoidably reflecting a given subjectivity or point of view" (p.82). In this way, animated documentaries inhabit the same theoretical space of performativity, of conscious constructions of performance. The animated documentary is not reality itself, but intends to capture an essence of reality through its iconic expression.

Performativity, the awareness and embrace of performance, including the social construction of identity, also helps channel past traumas for the performers themselves, who, in addition

to the audience, also serve as the audience for their performances. As Rebecca Schneider (2011) notes, reenacting “an event or a set of acts (acts of art or acts of war) from a critical direction, a different temporal angle, may be. . . an act of survival, of keeping alive *as* passing on” (p.7, emphasis in original). Seen through this perspective, performance, including the performance of animated documentary, is vital in shaping both the performers and the audience. Waugh (1990) articulates this dynamic, highlighting how social actors construct their performance of identities within documentaries:

“Acting to play oneself” is still the key, but “Don’t look at the camera” is replaced by “Look at the camera” as a “basic necessity” of documentary collaboration. In the same decade, Walter Benjamin spoke of “modern man’s legitimate claim to be reproduced”; might we not add that the individual has now established the claim also to construct that reproduction, the right to play oneself? (1990, p.92).

Both *Persepolis* and *Waltz With Bashir* have their creators consciously crafting their own images and identities, reenacting various traumas through the medium of animation to process the memories for the filmmaker and the audience. As animators become actors through the creation of the character performances (Wells 1998, p.107), so too do the artists behind animated documentaries, with the films (including setting, characters, and voice acting) serving as a performance of the real world.

Animators themselves facilitate the performance of the real world, a performance that affects themselves as well as the audience. As James Loxley (2006) explains:

Our identities are not given by nature or simply represented or expressed in culture: instead, culture is the process of identity formation, the way in which bodies and selves in all their differences are produced. So culture is a process, a kind of making, and we are what is made and remade through that process. Our activities and practices, in other words, are not expressions of some prior identity, or the things done by an agent that is what it is prior to its actions, but the very means by which we come to be what we are (p. 118).

Filmmaking as a process of culture making affects both artists and audiences. As Satrapi and Folman lay the burden of their memories onto the audience, creators and viewers emerge enlightened from this performative process, a process that requires more elaboration to further our discussion. It is useful here to discuss *Waltz With Bashir* first and later turn towards *Persepolis* later as a counterpoint to illustrate how animated documentaries construct themselves within a performative context.

‘Real’ Representation in *Waltz with Bashir*

Waltz with Bashir is an exploration on Folman’s part to interview the fellow veterans of the 1982 Israeli invasion into Lebanon and reconstruct memories, dreams, and nightmares that haunt them. Production began with the crew’s solicitation on the internet for testimony of people who served in the First Lebanon War. They shot all the interviews possible in a studio, and filmed dramatized reenactments as reference materials for the animators’ storyboards and animatics. The recorded reenactments and dramatizations were drawn from “scratch” to make storyboards, and then animating the storyboards with basic animatics (Folman, Goodman, Polonsky, 2008). From there the animatics served as the primary source for animators to inform them how people moved, rather than the live action footage originally shot, as the crew stresses in the making-of documentary “Surreal Soldiers: Making ‘Waltz With Bashir’ (Folman, Goodman, Polonsky, 2008). For the faces, the animators tried to keep the stylized movements of the those interviewed intact, rather than focusing on solely realistic details. The animators worked with Flash, a computer program that works by manipulating flat objects and can therefore produce a sense of rigidity. To counter this, the animators separately animated hundreds of drawn bits that comprise, for example, a face, and gave each individual bit its own movement to avoid stiffness in motion.

In order to grasp the animation in the film and the way it reconstructs reality, we need a more specific description. I would term the aesthetics of *Waltz With Bashir* as a “simplified naturalism”: characters are meant to look real, but with as few specific details in the artwork as possible. The art style uses bold lines to mark the faces and bodies with weight and substance. This emphasis on broad strokes rather than detail mirrors the film’s treatment of the subject matter itself, as “the film has thoroughly disavowed the importance of contextual detail, and asked for emotionally based spectatorial alignment” (Saunders, 2010 p.184).

Also significant is the production crew’s choice to animate much of the film in slow motion in what Director of Animation Yoni Goodman describes as “stylized movement” (Folman, Goodman, Polonsky, 2008). Following Norman McLaren’s definition of animation as ‘the art of movements that are drawn’ (cited in Furniss 1998 p.5), this emphasis on slow motion choice also adds to the weight and realism of the characters.² This focus on movement aligns with Christian Metz’ argument for defining realism in that “It is *movement* [. . .] that produces the strong impression of reality” (cited in Gunning 2007, p.41, emphasis in original). Tom Gunning (2007) summarizes these findings in his own analysis of realism and the history of indexicality, noting that “motion therefore need not be realistic to have a ‘realistic’ effect, that is, to invite the empathic participation, both imaginative and physiological, of viewers” (p.46). The characters’ typically slow movement might not be realistic in an abstract description, but in terms of visceral effectiveness, the film succeeds in drawing in its audience into its performance of memory. *Waltz With Bashir*’s animation performs reality through the scope and heft it brings towards animating its subjects, so much so that the film’s animation has been mistaken for rotoscope due to this realistic movement. The slow moving characters soberly and sombrely recreate traumatic experi-

² Of course, this aesthetic is also economical. As Folman remarks, the characters “move slow, because the budget is low” (Folman, Goodman, Polonsky, 2008).

ences, aiding in the animation's goal of performing realism. But *Waltz With Bashir* performs that past not just visually, but aurally as well.

Waltz With Bashir's documentary status arises from a few particular features: its use of voice over narration, but also standard documentary interview setups, and live action archival footage. Vocal performances narrate consistently over recreated memories, almost obsessively, allowing the vocal performances to authenticate the animated footage and reassure the audience that this did happen. *Waltz With Bashir*, like many other animated documentaries, tethers itself to reality through voice over narration, though this narration is another element of its performance. While the animation itself is a visual performance, Winston asserts that "it is the act of witnessing, expressed in the soundtrack, that makes these cartoons documentaries" (p.282). Rozenkrantz terms this "acoustic indexicality" (2011, n.p.), as animation relies on oral testimonies, narration, and other vocal performances to anchor the animated documentaries to the real. To return to Waugh's concepts of representational and presentational, *Waltz With Bashir* has both styles represented in its vocal narration. Most interviewees' voices were performed by the actual people, but two of Folman's friends were actually played by different actors. This further blurs the lines of defining the films' performances. Aurally the film contains both presentational ('acting naturally') and representational ('performing an awareness of the camera') styles, and both types of vocal performance connect what is animated on the screen to reality.

Waltz With Bashir's realism gains strength from a synthesis of aural and visual performances, performances that, while constructed, also serve to better elucidate the mental states of the Folman and his subjects. Nea Ehrlich (2011) analyzes this kind of tactic, comparing the use of animation in general as a mask, noting that "masks can cover the wearer's face but can also 'give face', exposing the wearer's beliefs, wishes and cultural associations". Bruzzi (2006) ex-

pands upon this, noting that “the performative documentary uses performance within a non-fiction context to draw attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation” (p. 185). In this way, *Waltz With Bashir*’s performance of the past and present help Folman - and the audience - understand the intangible phantoms of memory and trauma through this performance, this animated mask presenting truth of the real world to the audience.

In this way, *Waltz With Bashir*’s voice over acts as a familiar expositional documentary genre convention, and its use of talking head interviews does as well. The film’s final interviews are talking heads in a neutral studio backdrop, the documentary standard. While these sections are exercises in investigative journalism, they also highlight the film as a documentary through the use of these genre conventions. These, along with the archival footage at the film’s end, further distinguish (or reassure) the film as a documentary. And yet, these sections are also the least inventive. These scenes, despite their fidelity to the original interview footage, could have been made more engaging with some “creative treatment” as it were. By positing itself as a documentary, the film is constrained by its conventions, conventions that are already increasingly shifting as the genre itself is destabilized within digital and performative contexts.

Honess Roe presents three criteria to categorize an animated documentary. According to this criteria, an animated documentary “(i) has been recorded or created frame by frame; (ii) is about *the* world rather than *a* world wholly imagined by its creator; and (iii) has been presented as a documentary by its producers and/or received as a documentary by audiences, festivals or critics” (p.4). Honess Roe’s criteria illustrates the different perspectives artists, distributors, and audiences have on the documentary form, and how they just distinctions are not universal. Film distributors arguably have the most power in widely defining documentaries through advertisements, reportage, and festival distributions. Distributors, sensitive to marketing goals, help reify

the genre boundaries of documentary through their promotion, framing, and distribution of documentaries with standard genre conventions, a process illustrated in *Waltz with Bashir*'s own release.

While the film uses some documentary conventions, it is the distribution, particularly the American distribution, that firmly frames the film as an animated documentary, which has a traceable history. While the main website (<http://waltzwithbashir.com>) for the film never once uses the term “animated documentary,” trailers help frame the veracity of *Waltz With Bashir*. The U.S. (Sony Pictures Classics 2008) and UK (MUBI UK 2012) trailers both emphasize the factuality of the events depicted, with “BASED ON ACTUAL EVENTS” and “Based on a true story” appearing at the beginnings of each trailer, respectively. The American press release kit (Sony Pictures Classics 2008) positions the film as an animated documentary, quoting Folman as saying that “WALTZ WITH BASHIR was always meant to be an animated documentary” (p.4, emphasis in original). Press kits developed and distributed by Sony Picture Classics frame *Waltz With Bashir* as an animated documentary, a position that circulates through reportage to shape audience expectations, expectations needed to “(1) both standardize and differentiate products, and (2) market movies to many individuals” (Staiger 1997, p.10). Film critics, in creating reportage around the film, funnel distributor’s descriptions and labels, further situating *Waltz With Bashir* as an animated documentary among audiences. As A.O. Scott’s (2008) coverage illustrates, film critics at the time found the term animated documentary to be “a phrase that sounds at first like a cinematic oxymoron” (P.C1), but dutifully replicated the framework presented by the distributors of animated documentary in their reviews.

While *Waltz With Bashir* does push some boundaries of the documentary genre through its use of animation and voice over work, such efforts are largely undone by its final scene as the

film drifts further into expositional documentary tropes. After Folman finally understand the hallucinatory dream that haunts him as a revenant of his experiences and complicity in the Sabra and Shatila massacre, we are then confronted with live action archival recording of the massacre's aftermath, acting as the bearer of true reality. By showing Folman's realization through live action footage, the film ends up reasserting the status quo that live action footage is the realm of documentary, and that animation does not have such a claim to the real. *Waltz with Bashir's* animated portion present us with subjective truths of Folman's friends, and the results are captivating. But this kind of embrace of subjectivity is swept away with the reinstallation of live action footage, presented as objective truth as seen in "the expository mode of documentary [that] emphasizes the impression of objectivity" (Nichols 2010 p.169). The final shot of the film lingers on the face of a dead child pinned between rubble, confirming the image as described by an animated talking head earlier in the film. By the film's end, *Waltz with Bashir* reifies traditional, expositional documentary tropes, not only through the live action indexical footage being the bearer of truth and reality, but also through dependence of expositional documentary tropes to assure the audience of its veracity.

Perceiving the Real in *Persepolis*

By comparison, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, also deals with memories of trauma as the filmmaker reflects on their experiences in the Middle East through a performative mode, but largely avoids any hallmarks of expository documentary tropes. As the film illustrates Satrapi growing up during the Islamic Revolution, the film has a few elements of oral narration bookending the story, but it largely presents the story without such annotations. Actors perform the vocal roles of the people who influenced her life—presentational vocal performance, to use Waugh's terminology. Samantha Moore's comments on documentary voice acting, asserting that a trace of

the real is still in performative voice acting, such as the voice acting in *Persepolis*, because such vocal performances remediate real encounters and interactions that occurred in the real world. As Moore comments, both archival audio and voice acting “carry the indexical trace of the words” (Animation Studies 2.0, 2013). Winston (2010) further argues that “the use of acts to reenact prior-witnessed events is but a step beyond asking participants to repeat on camera what they had previously been doing” (p.282). Original audio is not necessary for an animated documentary to present the real world through animation, as it’s merely a performative act to assure audiences of authenticity.

This echoes André Bazin’s (1967) writings on the ontology, or indexical, claims of cinema, arguing that it’s not merely a technological change that issues us of the authenticity of film, by a psychological change as well:

Again, the essential factor in the transition from the baroque to photography is not the perfecting of a physical process (photography will long remain the inferior of painting in the reproduction of color); rather does it lie in a psychological fact, to wit, in completely satisfying our appetite for illusion by a mechanical reproduction in the making of which man plays no part. (p.12)

Bazin argues that it is the act of mechanical reproduction of a camera that allows us to “maintain some belief in (or feel for) the photograph’s relation to the real” (Andrew 2014 p. 337). Vocal performances in animated documentaries function in much the same way. Audiences hear the voice behind the animation, tethering the animation to the real world, even though it is another constructed performance. Denying *Persepolis*’s presence within the documentary genre denies this form of “acoustic indexicality” (Rozenkrantz 2011), despite this kind of presentational vocal performance in *Waltz With Bashir* as well.

While the digital expanse in documentary has broadened the genre towards animated documentaries, *Persepolis* is not currently considered a documentary. This difference points to

the question of who define documentaries, and who ultimately holds that authority. As Honess Roe notes, artists, distributors, and audiences all play a part, but in the case of both *Waltz with Bashir* and *Persepolis*, we find the distributor holding such the most power in framing genre distinctions within popular discourses. While Sony Pictures Classics released both *Waltz with Bashir* and *Persepolis*, the *Persepolis* press release (Sony Picture Classics 2007) briefly describes the film as “the animated film version of [Satrapi’s] memoir” (p.4). *Persepolis*’ trailer does not emphasize the veracity of Satrapi’s memoir, but rather that her story is based on her “best-selling graphic novels” (PERSEPOLIS trailer 2007). While being “based on a true story” is a popular phrase used to attract audiences, Sony Picture Classics likely found Satrapi’s previous success in print a more alluring angle for promoting the film. Exploring why Sony Pictures Classic chose to market these films differently further reveals why such distinctions are made between them. More specifically, it is important to recognize the differences between the already similar two films, and recognize some of the aspects of *Persepolis* that encourages the distributor to frame the text outside the documentary genre altogether.

The aesthetic qualities of each film are partially what distances many from calling *Persepolis* a documentary. Drawn in simple, black and white imagery reminiscent of wood block prints, *Persepolis* eschews the sense of simple naturalism *Waltz With Bashir* displays. Evelyn Hielkema (2013) describes the aesthetics exhibited in both the film and its graphic novel source material, noting that they use

a flat, often austere style, using symmetry and imagery that is iconic in that it employs abstraction and critical distance to make larger points about the author’s memories. . . . *Persepolis*’ style flattens historical expositions, emotionally charged memories, childhood fantasies, and large-scale events into a unified stream of images and text (p.16).

This austere style is similar to Folman’s simplified naturalism, but its flattening effect creates a stronger distancing effect than *Waltz With Bashir*. As Eitzen (1995) reminds us, “the form of the

text can prompt viewers to ‘frame’ it in a particular way” (p.91). The aesthetic forms of each film function differently, as *Waltz With Bashir*’s simplified naturalism strives for a more realistic approach while *Persepolis*’s flattened aesthetics create a stronger distance between the art and audience, partially explaining the different receptions to the texts.

A large factor in separating *Persepolis* away from the documentary genre is its rejection of expository documentary tropes, particularly in terms of sound. While *Persepolis*’ historical context and events dealt within the narrative are historically verifiable, Satrapi’s framing of her admittedly subjective portrayal of her life leads *Persepolis* away from standard expository documentary conventions such as consistent voice over narration as seen in *Waltz With Bashir*. This contrasts to other similar works, such as Paul Fierlinger’s *Drawn From Memory* (1995), another autobiographical animated documentary. This film, however, contains typical representational voice work, with Fierlinger narrating his own life, sometimes showing photographs from his past that act to confirm the veracity of the work.³ As Eric Patrick (2016) identifies, it is the sounds, particularly of the human voice, that creates the sense of the real in animated documentaries. *Persepolis* avoids this kind of sonic framework and the didacticism of exposition documentary, embracing a more subjective portrait of Iran and the political tensions that affected her and her family.

While Sony Picture Classics marketed *Persepolis* based on the best-selling status of Satrapi’s works, Satrapi herself as a key artist framed the reception of her text as well. In interviews, Satrapi herself revoked the idea of *Persepolis* as a documentary, and her comments illustrate the tensions of fictionalization within documentary:

³ Rozenkrantz (2011, n.p.) terms this practice as the use of “photographic verifiers”, noting that this practice of live action footage to support animated documentaries channels all the way back to the very first animated documentary, Winsor McCay’s *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918).

“[*Persepolis* is] certainly not a documentary about my life, and it’s certainly a subjective point of view . . . so if I pretend that it is one hundred percent autobiographical that means that the dog looks like the dog that I draw that this thing that I said exactly I said this thing, which is not true of course, it’s a part of storytelling, it’s based on my own experiences, and then, you know, you have to make a story. I think even documentaries, they are part fictional as soon as you make a story. You have to have some fiction, otherwise it doesn’t work” (MovieWeb 2010).

Satrapı’s disavowal of *Persepolis* as a documentary arises from her perception of the fluidity between fiction and non-fiction in documentaries, and her perception of documentaries as solely representational works. Yet by the end of her quote she acknowledges the fictionalization that occurs in documentaries. Her comments reflect what Bruzzi (2006) identifies, namely that “most practitioners recognise, by now, that documentary film can never offer a representation of real events indistinguishable from the events themselves, although theory has not yet come to terms with the value of such a realisation” (p.74). Satrapı’s comments also illustrate the tensions that surround how we define documentaries, particularly within a digital context that removes the representational trustworthiness of images that the documentary genre used to solely rely on. Artists, distributors, critics, and audiences all have different perceptions of the boundaries of the documentary genre, and have different motivations for doing so. While Sony Picture Classics prefers to market on Satrapı’s graphic novelist success, Satrapı avoids the label of documentary to highlight her own subjective presentation of her life.

In short, both *Waltz With Bashir* and *Persepolis* display a presentational performance of the past in similar ways, but are labeled differently based on a variety of frames and perceptions created by the artists and distributors, circulated by critics, and consumed by audiences. As Eitzen (1995) summarizes, as audiences assess between fiction and non-fiction, such “perception is with few exceptions a product of the metatextual label or interpretive framework that they apply to the text, not a product of the form of the text per se” (p.91). Distributors often offer the

strongest overarching interpretive frameworks for films, as they label and market them, critics facilitate these labels through reportage, and audiences respond to these cultural commodities and consume them. But artists themselves, as the creators of their own work, and often functioning as interview subjects to promote such work, also shape the discourse surrounding their works as well. As the documentary genre becomes more fluid within a digital context where indexicality no longer completely dominates the field, animated documentaries such as *Waltz With Bashir* and *Persepolis* illustrate how the discourse around animated documentaries, and the genre as a whole, are shifting and changing as a response.

Conclusions

In an interview with *Cinéaste*, Folman describes the difficulties getting funding for his documentary:

Cineaste: *Why were you hassled for calling [Waltz With Bashir] a documentary?*

Folman: Israel's film establishment is very narrow-minded. There are strict rules. I started with documentary funds. They said it can't be a documentary because it is animated. So I went to animation and fiction funds and they said they couldn't support it because it's a documentary. . . . Does it matter if you declare it an 'animated documentary'? In the future I will say, 'It's my personal story and I'm going to animate it' (Ester 2009 p.67, emphasis in original).

Folman's humorous comments illustrate how animated documentaries are pushing public conception of the boundaries of the documentary genre. In one sense, the genre stabilizes through the use of standard documentary techniques and tropes. But as Nichols (2010) notes, "the diversity of the films that make up the documentary tradition also contributes to its fluidity" (p.20). If we define documentaries as "address[ing] *the* world in which we live rather than *a* world imagined by the filmmaker" (Nichols 2010, p.xi, emphasis in original), it is clear *Persepolis* qualifies as a documentary. Performing memories through animation and presentational oral performance,

Persepolis, much like *Waltz With Bashir*, pushes the boundaries of documentary further than ever before.

Documentary scholars have identified that the performative aspects of documentary have always existed (Bruzzi, Waugh), and that digital technologies enable a further shift from the indexical to the performative (Winston). While popular perception as displayed on sites like IMDb⁴ follow distributor frameworks, and do not label *Persepolis* as a documentary, this paper illustrates the different discourses generated around the documentary genre and how animated documentaries arrive at a time of fluidity within the genre. As Winston (2008) recognizes, “public reception of the documentary still turns too much on an unproblematized acceptance of cinematic mimesis” (p.9). Animated documentaries, however, continue to interrogate documentary’s “creative treatment of actuality,” and powerful texts like *Waltz With Bashir* and *Persepolis* will continue to push the boundaries of the documentary genre.

⁴ While IMDb labels both *Waltz With Bashir* and *Persepolis* as biography, they both only identify *Waltz With Bashir* as a documentary and *Persepolis* instead as a drama.

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