

WRITING ANIMATED DOCUMENTARY: A THEORY OF PRACTICE

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Abstract

This short discussion provides some introductory remarks on writing for the documentary form in animation. Taking into account theories of the place of animation in utilitarian films, avant-garde works and the essay film, the analysis, based on auto-ethnographic insights, provides some methods and approaches to developing animated documentary work. These include 'Making Animation Choices', 'Staging in Space', 'Using Attachment and Detachment', developing 'Episodic lists and Micro-Narratives', and deploying 'Transition and Associative Relations'. The analysis seeks to show that these approaches to the animated documentary reveal and evidence a theory of practice, and a practice of theory.

Keywords: Non-Fiction Essay; Auto-Ethnography; Public Engagement; Occasion ;Purpose; Addressee; Document; Non-Fictional Dramaturgy

Documentary Stories...

Though animation theorists and historians have long argued about the importance of animation *per se* in many areas of social and cultural expression over its long history, it is only comparatively recently that animation's self-evident role in public engagement has been properly acknowledged. Animation has been used in most production cultures worldwide in public information films, propaganda, public display, infotainment, commercials, and to use Heidiger and Vonceault's term, "films that work" (see Hediger & Vonderau, 2009), for over one hundred years.

Animation has also played a constituent part in many documentaries, in texts with documentary tendencies, and in its own right as "animated documentary," though again the latter's very existence has only but recently been accepted as proven and valid. (see Skoller, 2011; Kriger 2012; Honess-Roe, 2013). For those practitioners who have always principally worked in the documentary-styled form, animation has always been a ready tool of expression, and helped facilitate highly progressive texts, but for the most part, the theorisation of documentary practice has been characterised by the address of its core genres – travelogue, *cinema vérité*, fly-on-the-wall, screen-journalism, docu-drama, observational actuality, etc. – and the place of animation, either used as an additional component of expres-

sion or as an application in its own right has not been fully considered. In the following discussion, then, I wish to identify specific approaches to writing animated documentary, using theoretical concepts as tools of practice, and identifying practical applications, illustrated through the perspectives of practitioners and my own screenwriting practice in the form on a film entitled *The Oil Kid* (Hakim Farai, Norway, forthcoming). One further, and significant addition here, is also the reclamation of what are sometimes regarded as "How To" or "technical" manuals as formal theories of practice, hugely important in acknowledging the intellectual characteristics of creative endeavour; so often unrecognised in traditional or orthodox approaches to understanding and using (critical) theory.

To take but one immediate example, film-maker, Shelia Curran Bernard, refuses to deeply problematise documentary, merely arguing that documentary is an act of storytelling like any other, but using "actuality" as its materials. She notes,

Story does not have to mean three-act drama, and it definitely does not mean artificial tension that is imposed from without. Story comes organically from within the material and the ways in which you, the filmmaker, structure it (Bernard 2007:10)

This approach immediately foregrounds

the crucial role of the practitioner in choosing and organizing the material; a mode of practice in this instance that borrows freely from what are arguably the "guru" templates in defining structure in Hollywood narratives, written by Field, Vogler, McKee and their like.¹ Bernard sees such work as plot or character driven or question-led, but just as concerned with exposition, character arcs (development and transformation), narrative spine, theme, and resolution as any typical film story-telling. Bernard essentially treats non-fiction as fiction at the structural level, and in this way points the documentary towards an overt declaration of its subjectivity, and its affiliation with the essayistic. Laura Rascaroli has usefully addressed and related these tropes in her consideration of "the personal camera" (see Rascaroli 2009), while Scott Macdonald, extends this further by looking at intersections of documentary and avant-garde cinema (see Macdonald 2015) as a way of thinking about documentary when situated as "art" or as an experimental form, and within the parameters of arts culture. This perspective on documentary has been reinforced by Julian Stallabrass' collection of core papers and essays that define the form as a model of contemporary art. (see Stallabrass 2013).²Crucially, these three texts are based upon and include the perspectives of practitioners, and in all cases may be viewed as auto-ethnographic reflections on making documentary without any self-consciousness about

subjectivity, indexical relativity or the illusionist artifice in creating a documentary text. This lack of self-consciousness serves to authenticate such texts as authored works, privileging the creator of the work as an empirical presence, providing inquiry, discourse and point of view. Not merely does this facilitate the idea that animated documentary has the same authenticity in sharing such terms and conditions, but also points to the way in which such texts reveal in their necessary need for research, procedural development, signature expression and implied argument, a direct audio-visual analogue to written non-fiction essays. It is on these premises, and using the cited texts and examples, that I wish to discuss animated documentary practice as a singular form of public engagement.

Films That Work

As Hediger and Vonderau have pointed out industrial, utility and public information films “cannot be divorced from the conditions of their production and the contexts of their use. Far from constituting self-sufficient entities for aesthetic analysis [these] films have to be understood in terms of their specific, usually organizational, purpose, and in the very context of power and organizational practice in which they appear” (Hediger & Vonderau (eds) 2009:10). This perspective provides a useful starting place to both delineate the differences between more utilitarian applications and ani-

ated documentary, and to articulate some perspectives upon the outset of a project. It is clear that the animated documentary cannot be divorced from its conditions of production, since this may relate to a specific context, sponsor, or socio-political outlook, but the contexts of use may vary, for example, becoming a “festival” film, an artwork, a vehicle for information and training, an educational text for knowledge transfer, etc. Indeed, this may lend the films to be subject to “aesthetic analysis,” and as such, authenticate themselves more within the organizational power or institutional context of arts culture, which essentially verifies them, rather than sometimes the disciplines or social contexts they represent. To play “devil’s advocate,” this sometimes diminishes their achievement because the text is often more interrogated for its form, rather than its content. In recent years, this is changing as the animated documentary gains increasing credibility for what the “form” can uniquely achieve in relation to “content,” an issue that is at the heart of this discussion.

Further, Elsaesser insists that more utilitarian films have *auftrag* (an occasion), *anlass* (a purpose) and *adressat* (an addressee), and *not* an *auteur* (see Hediger & Vonderau (eds) 19-34) It is immediately clear that the animated documentary benefits from self-reflexively foregrounding its implied authorship. There may be a finer distinction to make by suggesting that animation is an inherently rhetorical

form, and its overt artifice only signifies that someone has obviously crafted the film, though this may not lend it “auteurist” credentials at the level of a unique or particular vision or style. It is pertinent to consider though, that whoever has constructed the film, must indeed consider occasion, purpose and addressee. It is this which starts to distinguish the text from not merely being “art” by an artist but a text by a publically engaged animation film-maker creating a socially directed model of documentary work. “Occasion” in this instance, should not only be seen as the inciting moment or reason for the film, but as the key point in which it is considered why the film should be made in animation. Animation is a complex and labour intensive form, and ultimately, should only be employed if its distinctive vocabulary is appropriate to representing the topic, subject or idea in a way that significantly differs from using “live action.” These may be highly pragmatic reasons related to the need to re-construct events that have no extant record, or providing visual evidence in support of anecdotal or statistical evidence, or simply about preferred aesthetic outcomes, but such considerations insist upon deciding what the use of animation helps to actually achieve in the film that cannot be achieved in any other way. This in itself may be contentious – especially for those who might hold a highly “purist” notion of documentary insisting upon the use of “as it happens” footage – but as I will seek

to demonstrate animation does have distinctive tools and applications at its disposal that privilege a particular enunciative documentary register.

The sense of “purpose” in making an animated documentary may take on a number of guises; first, the simple imperative to complete a specific kind of labour-centred aesthetic work; second, to achieve a particular outcome in foregrounding specific knowledge, arguments, conclusions and opinions; and third, to speak directly to a named or known addressee beyond the idea of an audience, the general public, or the public sphere *per se*. In my own practice on *The Oil Kid* which I will assess later, for example, this was made complex in that the co-sponsors wanted slightly different outcomes – the Oil Museum in Stavanger, Norway, required a film that rendered the social history of the oil industry in a fair and balanced way, mediated through a personal story, and largely working as an educational piece to show to the general public in a museum. The sponsors from the Oil industry itself, though, required an outcome that viewed the oil industry favorably, and were fearful that a representation of the tragic disasters that have attended the advance of the industry over the years, would set too negative a tone, and undermine both what had been achieved socially, culturally and materially through oil revenue, and the reputation of the major companies in the contemporary era.

Their intention was that the film should essentially talk to customers and clients. This was complicated further by the fact that a consultant on the project, and author of the memoir on which the film was partially based, Aslak Sira Myhre, was both a previously unquestioning “oil kid” brought up during the core period of the major developments in the oil industry, only to later become a leftist political activist, questioning the oil industry’s politics and economy. Myhre saw the addressee as someone like himself; previously naïve, now properly informed, and socially committed to a political agenda. All of this before the impact of the “creatives” who wanted to make an animated film in a particular way as an enhancement of their expertise in technical animation into more character based narrative work., that would both satisfy their artistic aspirations and reach new potential markets for their skills. The scriptwriter – in this case, me! – has to reconcile these influences, therefore, to speak to a number of addressees. and to satisfy the requirements of important collaborative partners. At all points, then, occasion, purpose and addressee become on-going considerations in the creative process.

The animated documentary, for all its enunciative aesthetics, though, like any other documentary remains an act of social record. Like the more utilitarian applications in public information or industrial training films, it is still historically

situated, and as part of reclamation and critical redress of such work, there is an underpinning desire to resist its previously ephemeral status. The role of the “practitioner-historian” becomes vital in this work, placing an imperative on the practitioner to become the historian of their own work, evidencing the process, the research, the technique, the material resource, the creative decisions, the context of production, reception etc. These are the aspects of the work that represent and evidence “*record* (institutional memory), *rhetoric* (governance) and *rationalization* (optimizing process)” (Hediger & Vonderau (eds) 2009:11). First, then the way in which animated documentary operates as a model of personal, social and institutional memory; second, as it reflects aspects of the relationship between individuals and governing bodies; and crucially, thirdly, how such texts evidence their own form as a matter of record; in this instance prompting the idea of identifying just exactly what the “document” is in animated documentary, and how it informs a particular procedural engagement.

Tools as Technique

It is always useful to note what animation offers as a distinctive form of expression. Much of my own work over the years, and the work of other colleagues, has been dedicated to this task, but rather than re-state the key principles of such texts, it is worthwhile seeking out a more

pertinent historical antecedent in this regard as an example of both the difficulty in bringing animation into social, artistic and commercial discussions, and the ways it seeks to convince its more ignorant or sceptical attendants of its particular value. Writing in 1951, John Halas, of the Halas & Batchelor Studio in the UK, sought to theorise the distinctiveness of the form when he tried to convince industry, business and education of the value of animation as a specific language of expression and communication, and crucially, one that could support serious messages. In a publication – “Management” – dedicated to industrial issues, he suggested that animation’s key characteristics were:

- Symbolisation of Objects and Human Beings
- Picturing the Invisible
- Penetration
- Selection, Exaggeration and Transformation
- Showing the Past and Predicting the Future
- Controlling Speed and Time (Cited in Halas & Wells 2006:160)

This is a very helpful “check-list” of qualities specific to the animated form. Symbolism can work to clarify and simplify an idea - a flag can represent a nation; a moving arrow, the direction of an invisible force, like the wind; a single iconic soldier, the military ambitions of a whole country. Such devices can “picture the invisible,” too. Sound waves, magne-

tism, radar and other physical properties characterised by laws not visible to the eye can be rendered clear and apparent. Halas suggests that animation can also “penetrate” interior workings of the body or a machine, or other kinds of complex inner state (dream, memory, consciousness, fantasy) and provide a literal and conceptual interpretation that enables them to be more readily understood. Further, by “selecting” an aspect of a scene or scenario to be visualised this can be accentuated or brought into the foreground for effect; thus, it might be “exaggerated” or “transformed” to better reveal its properties or significance. All these elements can be contextualised within various time-frames – things can be represented from the long past and projected easily into the future, perhaps on the one hand, depicting extinct fauna and flora, or on the other, re-imagining nature in one thousand years time as a consequence of current ecological issues and effects. The speed and time in which this is presented can also be varied – a split-second can be extended while millions of years can be truncated, into a minute or two. The animator can intervene in these timeframes, also, accelerating or showing in slow motion particular details. Halas’ theories reinforce the control the animator has in constructing an artificial world that can be determined on its own terms and conditions, and with varying degrees of “realism” or to the point of complete abstraction.³ These conceptual ideas

are effectively “tools” that the animation scriptwriter or practitioner can adopt as ways of creating the documentary text, and fundamentally characterise the ways in which key issues and complex ideas may be addressed.

John Canemaker, film-maker, historian, and creator of the autobiographical quasi-documentary, *The Moon and the Son: An Imagined Conversation* (Dir: John Canemaker, USA, 2005), has engaged with these ideas intuitively and consciously in his own work. He suggests,

I also worked on a film called *Break the Silence*, which was a film about child abuse; it was a CBS film. Animation is something which can personify thought, it can become emotions. I talked with them about finding the places where we could do that. They said “Yes, because we don’t want to show the abuse as it happened, we want to show how it felt to the children.” We were able to do that – when a child was being set upon by his father, being beat up by his father with a belt – I created an octopus that had many belts on its “hands” and would chase after the children and would swing these huge belts at the children. That gave a psychological aspect to it. When a little girl was sexually abused, I was able to

do research and found out that people who draw their trauma – both children and adults – have several motifs. Some are genitalia, some are giant eyes because there's no privacy, and some are drawings of hands. From that research, I was able to put together this huge blue hand that comes into the child's bedroom, steals the covers off the bed, takes the teddy bear and throws it away, and then covers over the child with the giant hand. (Kriger 2012:49)

Note here Canemaker's application of Halas' animation tools – the octopus as a symbol of multiple "beatings" by using the visual echo of its tentacles as belts; picturing "child abuse" through the synecdoche of the giant blue hand of the abuser; penetrating the psychology of the abused by drawing upon research on common visual motifs representing their pain and anxiety; selecting the tentacle and the hand to exaggerate and transform into the emblematic actions of abuse; using animation to reveal and illustrate a "past" made invisible by the perpetrators of abuse, but anticipating a "future" that prevents such behaviour in the future; drawing long periods of pain and suffering into the relief of concise, momentary, but powerful representational imagery, that directs attention to unspeakable and unspoken about acts, here now a matter of record, a "docu-

ment" of how it feels to be abused as a child. This is but one example of the ways in which the core principle of animation can be adopted to the tenets of documentary work.

Arguably, all documentary is to a certain extent ideologically charged and potentially politically motivated; conditions, ironically, which are sometimes seemingly anathema to the artist. Canemaker though, readily articulates the ideological imperatives and outcomes by delineating the creative process – thereafter, how documentary work reveals itself through animation. Robert Coles insists, however, that "put differently, what kind of moral or psychological accountability should we demand of ourselves, or who lay claim to social idealism, or to a documentary tradition that (we hope) will work towards a social good? – expose injustice, shed light on human suffering or contribute to a growing body of knowledge stored in libraries, in museums, in film studios" (Coles 1997:74). The answer to this question, in my view, is that "moral or psychological accountability" resides in the ideologically and artistically driven investment in making an animated documentary, since its *aestheticization* is a marker of its authorial insight and an acknowledgement of a methodology by which ethical and social responsibility is articulated and made clear, and thereafter open to interpretation and evaluation.

One aspect that Halas neglects, but is

of crucial importance in the animated documentary is the use of sound. All animation soundtracks are by definition non-diegetic, though animated films are made to ape live action conditions and conventions in this regard after the fact. The role, function and status of the interview is at the heart of much debate about animated documentary since it often operates as the key indexical link to "reality," especially when it is the voice of a specific witness, a known expert or critic, an authoritative participant or relevant observer. Film-maker, Dennis Tupicoff, is especially astute on this aspect of production, as it informs one of the most notable of recent animated documentaries, *His Mother's Voice* (Dir: Dennis Tupicoff, Australia, 1997), featuring a deeply affecting radio interview of mother Kathy Easdale, as she describes the realisation and impact of the death of her son in a shooting incident. Tupicoff – in the spirit of both traditional and avant garde documentary, uses the interview twice, the first time, ostensibly literally illustrating the mother's version of events; the second time, playing out its psychological and emotional implications by drawing scenes in which the boy may once have been present and is now absent; the world left behind, now only haunted by his spirit. Tupicoff believed this was possible to do because of the strong rhythm he detected and believed occurred in the transition between her place as a witness, and her development into a "storyteller" as she implicitly rehearsed the

narrative in its telling to others in the ten day period between the incident and the interview. He notes,

We all speak in a kind of rhythm. In her monologue that you hear in the film, she speaks for six and a half minutes without a break in that rhythm. In fact, you can tap it out on your knee, and you'll see that it's twenty six frames per beat, without a break – until fairly close to the end, when she starts getting more upset, and then it goes up to 28. What is song but words in rhythm? She's actually "singing" a song of love and grief to her deceased son. I think one of the reasons it's so effective is because the interviewer lets her go on, and she strikes that rhythm, and she's told it before, and it's exactly like a song. It's unusual for any interviewer to let someone speak for six and a half minutes. (Kriger 2012:120-121)

Tupicoff's creation of a "subjective" animated documentary neatly straddles the line between illustration and stylisation, letting the rhythm of Easdale's voice dictate the pace and emotional impact of the film; her second delivery, shorn of the shock of what she reveals and the immediacy of its impact, becoming further aestheticised by virtue of the shift from revelation to reception. The "song"

Tupicoff identifies in her narrative, and which becomes the essential "subject" in his creative deployment of the second play of the interview, is a marker of the transformation from surprise / shock to grief / loss, and the significant shift from the "particular" to the "universal"; from the "record" of events to a "document" that invites common empathy from all who have known the death of those who they have deeply loved. It is the very "subjectivity" enabled by the animated documentary that moves it beyond social statement into full and literal "public engagement."

Research and Development

In recent years, there has been a shift in the Academy, in which practice has been required to more properly evidence itself as research. The animated documentary's affiliation with essayistic approaches and the necessity for what might be argued is either conventional primary research (ie the interview) or archival practice (ie identifying footage, photographs, pertinent documents etc) or more broadly, a relevant literature review, makes it comparatively easy to recognise as a model of published research. More challenging is to prove how an animated documentary not merely speaks to the public sphere as evidenced above, but how in itself it answers research questions. It is rare though for any creative practice not to start with some core questions the artist wishes to answer through the

work, or for any creative process not to be characterised by problem solving and reflective re-engagement with, and modification of the work. With my "academic" head on, I have long years of being taught and reading about "research methods," and apply these to conventional models of developing material for books and articles, but with my "screenwriter / practitioner" head on, I have always sought advice and techniques from fellow screenwriters, animators and documentary film-makers. John Canemaker, again, in his preparation for *The Moon and the Son*, notes,

I started with research materials – newspaper reports, transcripts from my father's court trial, family photos, a transcript of an interview with my father a couple of years before he died, among other inspirational sources including a few dreams. Based on that material, I began making many concept sketches, idea drawings, paintings and doodles in different media ie pencils, inks, pastels, watercolors, gouache, etc. By the end of my one month residency in Bellagio, working every day, I had the first draft of a storyboard or script. (Kriger 2012:66)

This is fundamentally concerned with gathering *primary* materials – testimony, photographic and institutionally archived

evidence, pertinent journalism, personal memories and momentos. These function both as possible materials to be included *in* the film, but crucially in the instance of animation, as visual inspiration *for* the film. By processes of “associative relations” (see Wells 1998:93-97), Cane-maker does not seek to scout physical locations or arrange shooting schedules, but visualise material pertinent to his theme, context and narrative intention. He develops his own visual text balancing his own concerns with those determined by his text that require further verification and validation.

This is effectively about mobilising pertinent *secondary* materials. Documentary Film-maker, Jon Else provides a useful “rule of thumb” in this respect:

You need the ten most important and widely respected books about the subject, and then you read the two fringe books at either end of the subject...you figure out who are the ten important living people and what are the ten important available documents or pieces of stock footage. And then you call the experts. (Bernard 2007:118)

This may not be always required, of course, but what it ensures is that the interpellation of the material is always driven by a *social subjectivity* informing a *non-fictional enunciation*, and not

merely a personal piece of art-making. Conforming this, Paul Laverty, ex-lawyer and human rights worker in Nicaragua, screenwriter, and long time collaborator with left-wing film-maker, Ken Loach, for example, suggests “research develops content,” but allied to this it is crucial to remember “good issues don’t make good films – good stories do,” necessitating that a certain perspective is required in which the “document”- primary or secondary - essentially becomes subject to what I have termed, an *animated non-fictional dramaturgy*.⁴ The final remarks in this discussion then, begin to define this dramaturgy, pertinent to Halas’ taxonomy above, and five core principles required to create animated documentary,

- Making Animation Choices
- Staging in Space
- Using Attachment and Detachment
- Episodic lists and Micro-Narratives
- Transition and Associative Relations
- These principles will be illustrated from my own screenplay for *The Oil Kid*.

Five Core Principles Making Animation Choices

In any discussion with animators, it is always ironic that in any consideration of the work before them, explained by directors, and implied in the script, storyboard and animatic, that they consider any way in which they can avoid “animating”!! This is not about any intrinsic laziness or short-cutting, however, but

the pertinence of “animating” and the options available using digital tools. Inevitably, animated documentary, often uses a variety of approaches, consistent with budget, production time, aesthetic style and preference, representational convention and the varied mix of 2D and 2D software. These include:

- Full Animation (normally characters and objects)
- Animating Layers (normally foreground, mid-composition, background elements)
- Animating Single Elements (normally simple single movements)
- Animating Graphic Symbols and Forms (normally, maps, graphs, statistics, diagrams, charts, arrows, shapes, etc)
- Animating with the Camera (normally rapid zooms or lateral tracks to link elements in the composition)
- Animating in rapid edits (normally motion created through fast-paced montage)
- No Animation (normally, establishing shots, close-ups, two-shots with key visual information)

Here is a short sequence featuring Knut, a long time veteran of the oil industry, engaging his eco-warrior grand-daughter, Hanna, recalling her father, Morten’s death. It is a purely visual scene, which could be animated in any style, but it uses the camera to essentially “zoom” to a flashback, that remains a shared memory for the two characters triggered

by the photograph. Little needs to be “animated” in this sequence, so more dramatic weight might be accorded to animating the key action of the accident.

Scene

CUT TO
Int-day-Office

Knut looks at Hanna and smiles. He picks up a picture on his desk and shows it fondly to Hanna. It is an image of Knut, Hanna and Morten standing on a quay-side, all wearing hardhats.

Both look up quickly and the camera speeds out through the window to view an incident of Morten in a supply boat, tossed by high seas. We see Morten hit by a container on a crane. He falls down seemingly unconscious.

The image speeds back to the hand holding the photo as it is slowly placed back on the desk. Knut then picks up an envelope.

CUT TO
CU of Knut taking out an invitation to the EcoFisk Jubilee Celebration, which he intends to give to Hanna,

CUT TO
Knut turns towards where she was.

CUT TO
Hanna walking away in the far distance

of the corridor they initially walked down.

Staging in Space – Uniplanar, Cross-planar, Multi-planar

Crafton has identified the importance of *uniplanar* and *cross-planar* movement in determining animation space (Crafton 2013:170), the former left to right or right to left sequential movement in which the character does not change scale; the latter background to foreground or foreground to back-ground movement that necessitates a change of size, definition and scale in the character as it corresponds to changing perspective and depth of field. Though the former with its key poses and in-betweens, and possible multi-limbed gestures and movements, is complex, all the more demanding is creating all that while moving the character into the distance, and vice versa. More significantly, though, in the digital era, is the ease with which characters and objects can move through *multi-planar* perspectives in implied space. This is a very important consideration in script-writing since it encourages the creation of action, mobility and blocking in three dimensions rather than in two-dimensional “flat” space, even though this is always available to the animator, particularly when using more specifically graphic signs. Crucially, it enables *condensation* in the composition of the *mise en scene*, and *metamorphosis* within the *mise en scene* (see Wells 1998:69-79)

Once more, the opening scene below, shows that a range of animation techniques can be deployed, here for example, using some primary photographic materials, 2D motion graphics, and a choreographic principle in which the environment is just as “animated” as the characters. Equally, the sound affords the opportunity to contextualise the visual material as a changing historical timeline, mixing the personal and the social.

Scene

A gush of oil emerges from the bottom of the screen, splashing across the frame and forming the title “The Oil Kid” [Subtitle...The Story of Oil in Norway], which in turn metamorphoses into the silhouetted figure of a man in the far distance – this is Knut, who slowly advances into the foreground amidst numerous photographs which appear, creating a virtual passage for him to walk through. On the sound track is a radio constantly being re-tuned – we hear fragments of music, news commentary, weather forecasts, interference etc, which compliments the images looked at. These include images from Knut’s career in the oil industry, images of a changing Norway, and family photographs.

Knut then walks into a space in which the images surround him in a circle, almost suggesting a “hall of mirrors.” We observe him glancing from one to another. He looks back and forth between the

following images as a set of contrasting “pairs.”

CUT TO...

Using Attachment and Detachment

Thus far, though the scenes from *The Oil Kid* clearly demonstrate their “animated documentary” credentials in the material used, the decisions about animation technique and the fabrication within a multi-planar space are also pertinent to fictional animation texts. Crucial in the animated documentary, though, is what I am calling the *process of uncoupling*, in which the expected indexical validity of a literal representation, and the *anchoring* in material reality this implies, becomes subject to the more illusionist applications of the animated form. Simply, the animation screenwriter looks to particular “documentary” images and sounds that *attach* the narrative to actuality and realism, only to seek out symbolic or associative relations in the images and sounds that *detach* the narrative into the rhetorical illusionism of animation – an artifice that is not available in live action. As animator on *Waltz with Bashir* (Dir: Ari Folman, Israel, 2008), Yori Goodman confirms:

Animation has a kind of “detaching” quality about it, so you can take the audience further. For example, the scene in *Bashir* where

they’re driving the wounded and the dead in the armored vehicles – these are extremely violent, graphic shots. Had the audience in live action seen these in live action, they might have turned away. (Kriger 2012:11)

The use of animation in these instances then becomes an interrogation of reality as it seeks to document it. The following sequence shows the moment when “a union card” *attaches* Knut to his role in the unions, but the *process of uncoupling* enables the image of the oil rig to come to life in the animation of a “flame,” and *detaches* the literal object into something which becomes metaphorically significant as a commentary on the oil industry. Equally, here there is attention to the use of “screens” as visual contexts for core narrative information – first, the placards, and second, the use of a mobile phone photo cache to tell the implied story of Hanna’s childhood. This may be done in metamorphosing animation or in shifting stills. Significant, then, is that the screenwriter must seek out ways in which *attachment / detachment* oscillates in the imagery to fix the text as “non-fiction” but provoke *socio-symbolic* and *personal-as-political* meaning in the narrative.

Scene

Knut plucks his Norwegian Oil and Petrochemical Workers Union card from

the gallery. The Nopef logo on the card comes into focus; the flame on top of the rig in the logo suddenly flares and Knut drops the card as if reminded of earlier more incendiary times. He picks up the card, looks at his younger face on it. The image expands from his face outwards to discover Knut standing holding a “JOIN YOUR UNION NOW” placard, in front of colleagues with other placards. The camera moves along a line of men with placards noting “NO THIRD CLASS WORKERS,” “PAY THE PRICE, COUNT THE COST,” “MORE RESPECT, MORE PAY,” and “SAFETY FIRST.” This is accompanied by crowd noise and discontented murmuring.

CUT TO

The screen of the mobile phone with Hanna’s thumb flicking through a series of images of her and Knut – Knut pushing a young Hanna on a swing; Knut and Hanna walking a dog; Knut showing Hanna how to use a fishing rod; Hanna proudly holding a trophy observed by a smiling Knut; Knut and Hanna with their heads through a seaside sideshow prop, where they both look like clowns; Knut giving Hanna an ice cream at a rig’s festival-style opening; Knut giving Hanna a toy doll.

Episodic Lists and Micro-Narratives

Whereas fragmentary images in live

action are normally used for montage sequences, in animation they are usually important place-holders for narrative information. Embedded in singular images with minimal or no animation is normally episodic suggestion of action or a specific kind of pictorial record. Thereafter, embedded in short sequences or "micro-narratives" – effectively the accumulative building blocks of "story" in animation – are resonant and suggestive images with compressed content and context that serve to *simultaneously* operate literally and symbolically. The following sequence uses a simple metamorphosis device in the "spinning" of the placard to use a "screen" that could be used for animated drawings, photographs or live action footage. These are the embedded "episodes" here that Hanna commentates on, but the "micro-narrative" is Hanna using the placard as a vehicle of protest against the oil industry, directed at her grandfather. The content and context are condensed in a single piece of staging – a micro-narrative.

Scene

Hanna

People are dying, Granpa. Dying from climate change caused by the bloody oil industry. It has to stop.

Hanna spins her placard, which arrests at various images as she speaks about them.

Hanna (VO)

(Images of masses of falling ice into water) The atmosphere, the weather, the environment, everything is changing. They are trying to deny it but global warming is right here, right now. The glaciers are melting, sea levels are rising. There are floods destroying crops. There is only disaster, if we don't do something.

(Images of forest fires) Heat waves come unexpectedly. Fires break out.

(Image of storms) Storms come more frequently too.

(Image of drought) Yet there is water shortage, drought, deserts, disease.

(Image of armed figures) And there is panic, poverty, and people fighting to survive.

(Image of lone animals) No bio-diversity. Species extinct. Ecosystems destroyed.

(Image of classic "rig" with burning gas flame) And why ? Carbon emissions, grandpa. Burning oil and gas. Don't you understand? This has to stop somehow.

Knut

So, a doomsayer now, Hanna. Is that all you can see when you look at oil ? (Dismissive) You are being childish.

CUT TO

CU: Hanna looking towards the camera with a sullen anger on her face.

Transition and Associative Relations

I have mentioned associative relations earlier – essentially narratives that can be developed through visual echoes and conceptual suggestion – but for the screenwriter, this is effectively the "content" by which *transition* writing, suited to metamorphosis and micro-narrative is achieved. Below is a sequence in which Knut describes the development of his career - and with it a social history of some aspects of the oil industry - by using a series of transforming doors. Such doors are historically situated, enabling movement of the narrative through time, and the scene at the end of the sequence, evidences documentary research of the ways in which oil industry practices and artifacts impacted on domestic scenarios, and an early hint of the presence of American companies in the first claims to the oil fields.

Scene

Knut moves out of the frame and brings a basic door back with him, fitting it in the space.

Knut (VO)

At first, it was silly things. Some of the

rigs did not even have toilet doors. We objected. We fitted them.

The door starts to change. It develops a pane of glass, becoming an office door.

Knut (VO)

The men worked hard. The management got better, Less them and us.

The door starts to change. It becomes Knut's office door that we saw earlier.

Knut (VO)

Some of us did quite well.

The door starts to change. It becomes an ornate house door.

Knut (VO)

On shore, the standard of living got better. We could afford better homes.

The door starts to change. It changes into a wooden cottage door.

Knut (VO)

Your father could buy the cottage. Your home. You are an oil kid, Hanna.

A younger Hanna runs out from the door into the cottage garden. Ext-Day-The garden of the seaside dwelling

Knut now standing in the garden.

Knut

Don't you remember the fun you had ? With your dad ?.

A young Hanna plays in the garden, with Hanna's father, Morten. There are some oil rig parts – drill-bits and oil drums etc, present as ornaments. A tyre is used as the flat base for a swing, hanging from a tree. Morten wears a Diver's helmet and stands on the tyre. Hanna wears a cowboy hat , and throws him a rope. Hanna pulls him towards her. Morten jumps from the tyre and pretends he is being drawn up from the sea.

Nothing But the Truth

As I have sought to demonstrate here, the animated documentary affords the film-maker, animator and screenwriter the opportunity to combine the "variousness" that constitutes both forms in a socially directed vehicle of non-fictional expression underpinned by a consciously authorial voice. To take but one outstanding example, the work of Sheila Sofian, in films as diverse as *Survivors* (Dir: Sheila Sofian, USA, 1997) about the victims of domestic violence; *A Conversation with Haris* (Dir: Sheila Sofian, USA, 2001) about a young Bosnian immigrant talking about his impression of the Serbian conflict; and *Truth Has Fallen* (Dir: Sheila Sofian, USA, 2013), about wrongly

convicted murder suspects, uses all the approaches and techniques cited above, to achieve animated visual essays that characterize the combination of documentary work and an artist-essayist point of view. Consequently, like many animated documentary film-makers, like those cited above, and hopefully illustrated in my own work, Sofian uses the opportunity to animate in the documentary mode to offer alternative and less obvious "truths" by innovative interpellation and interpolation, that in turn offers insight *about* the subject, and empowerment *to* the subjects. Her own aesthetic motifs – flowing shifts of point of view, illustrations of action and reaction not subject to live action record, and close-ups of eyes to stress psychological and emotional response – reveal the implied verité of subjective experience within the context of failing or alien or contested social, cultural and legal infrastructures. Ultimately, it is this, that characterizes the rhetorical function of animation when engaged with non-fiction, and specifically, ideologically-charged documentary forms, and which may be understood and applied through the core dramaturgy outlined here as a theory of practice, and a practice of theory.

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Notes

1 See Field, S. 2003. *The Definitive Guide to Screenwriting*. London : Ebury Press; Field, S. 2005. *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. New York: Bantam Dell / Random House; Mckee.R. 1999. *Story*. London: Methuen; Vogler, C. 2007. *The Writer's Journey*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions.

2 It should be stressed that these are not new considerations but were previously marginalized in the discussion of documentary. Though documentary theories have directly embraced Vertov, Jennings, Ivens, Herzog, Morris etc. as film-makers who re-define documentary on more aesthetic terms, it was as early as 1971 that Rosenthal acknowledges that 'optical transformation' in Norman McLaren's *Pas de Deux* Dir:Norman McLaren, Can, 1968) was a way of thinking about an interface between animation and live action that spoke to documentary tropes. See Rosenthal, A. 1971. *The New Documentary in Action: A Casebook in Film Making*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press.

3 For more extended descriptions and critical perspectives on the distinctive language of animation, see Beckman, K. (ed). 2014. *Animating Film Theory*, Durham & London: Duke University Press; Furniss, M. 1998. *Art in Motion: Animation aesthetics*, Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing; Furniss, M. 2008. *The Animation Bible*. London: Laurence King Publishing; Gehman, C. & Reinke, S. 2005. *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema*, YYZ Books: Ottawa; Pikkov, U. 2010. *Animasophy: Theoretical Writings on the Animated Film*, Talinn : Estonian Academy of Arts; Wells, P. 1998. *Understanding Animation*, London & New York: Routledge; Wells, P. & Hardstaff, J. *Re-Imagining Animation: the Changing Face of the Moving Image*, Lausanne : AVA Academia.

4 Personal Interview with the Author, June 2007.