

# AGAINST ANIMATED DOCUMENTARY?

ANNABELLE HONESS ROE  
UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

## Abstract

Animated documentaries have been written about in a mostly positive way that explores the way the form enhances and expands the documentary agenda. This is true of scholarly and academic writing as well as that in the popular press and film reviews. However, some authors have taken issue with the ascription of the term 'documentary' to animated documentaries. In addition, there are potential issues regarding audience response to animated documentaries and the technical proficiency of the films themselves as they become more ubiquitous. This chapter explores the existing, and potential objections to and criticisms of animated documentary and suggests that a more '360-degree' discussion of the form will enrich the scholarly discourse on animated documentary.

**Keywords:** Animated documentary; documentary; animation; discourse, objections

In 2013 I published *Animated Documentary* – the first book dedicated to the study of the convergence of the animated form and the documentary impulse. The book was a reflection of my own academic interests, in response to what I identified as a growing trend to use animation as a representational strategy in a nonfiction context – a trend that has expanded since it first began to take root in the 1990s. More recently, the book received some mild criticism for not engaging with the “skepticism that still exists toward animated documentaries” (Strøm, 2015, p. 94). This comment gave me pause to think. Was I too enthusiastic about animated documentary? Was I blinkered to their shortcomings and an existing “skepticism”? After some reflection I admitted that it was true – I did, perhaps unconsciously, set out to “champion” animated documentaries and as such I dedicate little space in the book to acknowledging the criticisms of the form. But, I then remembered, this was in part because at the time I was writing the book I struggled to find *any* of this alleged “skepticism,” at least in print. Indeed, the tone of most of the pre-existing scholarship on animated documentary was celebratory and accepting.<sup>1</sup> This is implied in Jeffrey Skoller’s introduction to a special edition of *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* dedicated to animated documentary, published in 2011. Here Skoller notes the “popular acceptance of recent hybrid forms that integrate animated [...] imagery into documentary

contexts” (p. 207) and “the acceptance of such hybrid forms by the mainstream” (p. 208). Skoller’s attitude reflects the majority (in fact, I would wager, the entirety) of published scholarship on animated documentary at the time I wrote *Animated Documentary*.

However, I thought it would be worthwhile to briefly consider at this juncture whether more resistance to animated documentary has manifested since my book was published. We will see below that while scholarship on animated documentary tends to continue to be positive, accepting and, dare I say, even celebratory, there are beginning to emerge voices that are more dissenting. Furthermore, I wish to consider potential and even anecdotal objections that, while not necessarily forming part of the “scholarship” are still an entirely valid part of the discourse surrounding animated documentary and therefore worthy of reflection. The purpose of this exercise is not necessarily to go on to refute these objections (although that exercise is one that is sometimes too hard to resist). But, rather, that a more “360-degree” consideration of animated documentary might enrich our understanding and future study of the form.

The most immediate potential objections to animated documentary are to do with issues of definition. Or, more precisely, documentary definitions. Indeed, this is something I acknowledge in the

introduction to *Animated Documentary* – the fact that “animated documentaries do not fit easily into the received wisdom of what a documentary is” (Honesty Roe, 2013, p. 3).<sup>2</sup> This objection forms the main tenor of Cristina Formenti’s nascent contributions to the scholarship on animated documentary. For example, in an article published in 2014, she takes issue with the “necessity of justifying the animated documentary’s allocation within the documentary realm” (p. 103) and suggests that because “what we see unfold on screen is far from being an objective record of the events depicted” (p. 104) that it would be “more appropriate to allocate the animated documentary in the docufiction territory” (p. 108). For Formenti, animated documentaries are too “creative” and “imaginative” to be classed as documentaries. They are, at their core, too fictional.

Formenti’s attitude echoes responses I have received, either directly or anecdotally, to animated documentaries. For example, I remember one conversation with two “old guard” documentary filmmaking instructors that occurred when I was on the cusp of completing my doctoral thesis on animated documentary. Their resistance to the notion of animated documentary was strong, and unequivocal. There was no way, they contended, that you could animate a documentary because a documentary had to contain observational, “objective” filmed footage. They could not be bent

on this matter, and they stubbornly held on to this aesthetically-specific conception of what a documentary should be. I have had similarly sceptical responses from undergraduate students to whom I show animated documentaries as part of a documentary studies syllabus. While they often respond positively to the films, they rankle at their description as “documentary,” because animation does not fit in with their preconceived notion of what a documentary should look like, and the relationship between what they expect to see on screen and what (supposedly) happened in reality. I am not the only person to experience such resistance to the form. Paul Ward (2013) recalls a particularly entrenched response from a peer reviewer to one of his early articles on animated documentary. “The author then discusses ‘animated documentary’ – as if there is such a thing ...” And trailblazing animated documentary maker Sheila Sofian (2013) notes that “there is still a pervasive idea that live action documentary is ‘real’ and therefore animation cannot be an accurate depiction of reality.”

All the above objections are of the same ilk – animated documentaries are not documentary enough. This attitude is rooted, as I suggested in 2013, in the widely held assumptions that “documentaries should be observational, unobtrusive, truthful, bear witness to actual events, contain interviews and, even, be objective.” (p. 3) This is, I think, a rather limited and overly conventional concep-

tion of the documentary. In this, I am in agreement with Paul Ward (2013), who notes that the reviewer response quoted above “suggested to [him] some crusty old fuddy-duddy, under a blanket in a bath chair, railing against the youth of today, ruining things with their dyed hair, their nose rings, their skateboards and (shudder) their ‘animated documentary.’” This attitude towards documentary is not only outmoded, but also unrealistic because, as I have pointed out,<sup>3</sup> very few, if any, documentaries have lived up to this purist ideal. Indeed, one of the reasons, I suggest, that John Grierson’s 1933 definition of documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality” has had such longevity is because it is broad church – it allows for a wide variety of aesthetic and practical approaches to making nonfiction. Thus, a documentary made in the 1930s is a very different animal to one made in the 1970s, which likewise looks not much like one made in 2015. In part this is due to the aesthetic implications of the changing technology of filmmaking, but also because attitudes and assumptions regarding what documentary “should” look like have changed to reflect all manner of other things, such as increasing visual literacy and a growing public savviness to the processes and institutions of media making. The idea, then, that there is any singular ideal (be that a detached observational style, or anything else) which a film must meet in order to be a “documentary” is quickly undermined by

a glance at the history of documentary filmmaking, from *Nanook* to *Senna*, from John Grierson to Errol Morris.

The responses to the objections stated above are, therefore, easy to rehearse. Of course documentary does not have to be (and in fact, I would say cannot be) objective. Of course documentary can be creative and imaginative (and is all the better for, I would say). Who says documentary must be “observational”? And, anyway, observational documentary itself belies a whole host of “creativity” and construction (who to film, how to film them, how to edit them, and so on) behind a veneer of non-intervention. I have always contended to my students that piffing over definitions and labels is a fruitless task. Call the films under discussion animated documentaries, or documentary animation or, even, if you would rather a term more onerous, animated reconstructions of factual events and experiences, it does not in the end make a lot of difference. It certainly makes little difference to the films themselves. What is interesting, and I think more important, than quibbling over semantics, is to think about what these films do and how they do it. Indeed, perhaps we can be heartened by the fact that the above published and anecdotal objections to animated documentary seem not to be about something *inherent* in the form itself. But, rather, simply the ascription of the term ‘documentary’.

But, what about objections to the form itself? As mentioned above, I have yet to come across anything that critiques the inherent form, aesthetics and structure of animated documentary in “scholarly” publications such as journal articles, books, and even blog posts. Scouring journalistic writing, mostly in the form of reviews of feature-length animated documentaries such as *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) and the more recent *Rocks in My Pockets* (Signe Baumann, 2014), also tends to reveal an open and responsive attitude from film critics. We can, however, identify two issues that critics repeatedly, if not overly frequently, express regarding animated documentary. These issues echo comments I have heard either directly or anecdotally. The first is to do with audience response and the second is about technical proficiency.

The audience response issue centres on the concern that animation is a “layer” that prevents the audience from directly engaging with the participants or story of an animated documentary (or, as it is sometimes expressed, “reality”). This is a response I have received on a few occasions when screening animated documentaries to audiences ranging from students, to academics in other disciplines, to members of the public. Indeed, this was a concern mooted at a recent festival dedicated to animated documentary that took place in London, UK, in September 2015 – the Factual An-

imation Film Fuss (FAFF). Here, at a Q&A session with three animated documentary makers, an audience member asked the panellists how they overcame this potential issue of animation detracting from the seriousness or “reality” of a situation. At the root of this question is the idea that animation somehow prevents us from directly engaging with the factual content of an animated documentary.

This concern is one that was voiced in the reviews for *Waltz with Bashir*, reviews that were otherwise almost universally positive.<sup>4</sup> For example, Peter Brunette (2008) in the *Hollywood Reporter* worries that the film’s animation “visually abstracts the scenes that haunt Folman and his former comrades, making them less emotionally immediate.” Similarly, *Variety* ponders whether “some auds may quibble that ultimately the atrocity isn’t tackled in a more head-on fashion” (Felperin, 2008). Yet, Elizabeth Weitzman (2008) in the *NY Daily News* sees this potential limitation in a positive light when she says “perhaps only animation could give us the distance that makes his subject bearable”. This concern regarding animation’s potential distancing effect reflects, perhaps, the form’s historic association with comedy and children’s entertainment. From this comes the perception that animation is not suited to “grown-up” material and that there is something inherent in the form that means we take what we see less seriously than we would live action.

The filmmaker panellists at FAFF, however, made the valid point that 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. This, again, is something I posited in *Animated Documentary*, following the insightful work of graphic novel scholar Scott McCloud (1994) in *Understanding Comics*. In that book, McCloud suggests that because comic book characters, and faces in particular, tend to be more abstract and symbolic (as opposed to realistic, in the sense of a photograph of a face), it allows a greater number of people to identify with it (see Honess Roe, 2013, p. 111). So, while only one person may “see” him or herself in a photograph, there is the potential for a much larger number of people to see themselves in a drawn or animated face.

The notion that we more easily identify with animation may be true, but it may also be true that some people find ani-

mation a turn off, or that it acts like a screen or layer that prevents them from fully engaging, emotionally and cognitively, with the realities being portrayed. The fact is that we know very little about how audiences respond to animation differently to live action as scant empirical or scientific research has been done in this area, for example in the fields of neuroscience of cognitive psychology.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, whilst much of film theory has been preoccupied with understanding spectatorship, that is theorising how and why audiences engage with film, very little theorisation has been done around whether audiences engage differently with animation and live action. What the critics' and anecdotal comments above point to is the need for more research into animation reception and a more robust theorisation of spectatorship in relation to medium-specificity.

The second issue, or potential objection, to animated documentary that is evidenced in reviews and anecdotal responses is one of technical and creative proficiency. Again, this came up at FAFF when one audience member asked about the potential downsides of the increasing ubiquity of animated documentaries. Animated documentaries were a rarity in the 1990s. Now the use of animation as a representational strategy for documentary is far more commonplace, to the extent that the *New York Times* ran an article on animated documentaries in November 2014 (Murphy, 2014) and

*The Guardian* newspaper has commissioned its own animated documentary, *Guantanamo Diary*, which can be viewed on its website. The downside of this prevalence, identified by the audience member, was that ubiquity leads to laziness and that animated documentaries, instead of utilising the animated form in an imaginative way, often simply bolt animation on to an existing (documentary) soundtrack. As a result, animated documentaries are in danger of becoming little more than illustrated radio documentaries with the animation merely providing a visualisation of what we hear on the soundtrack (and a very simplistic visualisation at that).

For example, Lauren Wissot (2012), in *Slant Magazine*, response to the 2012's *The Green Wave* (dir. Ali Samadi Ahadi) mirrored my own reaction to the film in commenting that the film "only seems to be using the medium in an effort to make blog diaries by twentysomethings appear cinematic. And because the animation is literally illustrative, there's no crucial tension between voiceover and image." When I saw the film I wondered what the point of the clunky, almost static, animation was, other than perhaps as a gimmick to attract audiences or as a cheap way to provide some visual accompaniment to the soundtrack.<sup>6</sup> The animation certainly did not enhance my understanding or interpretation of the reality of the situation of Iran's "Green Revolution" (unlike, for example, the an-

imation in *Waltz With Bashir*, whose realisation one can argue is a reflection of the film's themes regarding trauma and memory). This criticism is not limited to Ahadi's film. Early reviews of Leanne Pooley's WWI animated documentary *25 April* (2015) suggest that the animation in this film is also limited and limiting: "the faces look wooden and the movement is awkward" and one reviewer "couldn't help but think a straight doc about this subject would have been more interesting" (Tallerico, 2015). Of course any film, animated or otherwise, can have technical or creative limitations that detract from audience enjoyment and engagement. However, there was an acknowledgement at FAFF that there is the potential for animation to become a lazy or easy documentary strategy due to assumptions that it will attract an audience or because it is often cheaper and easier to animate than to reconstruct or otherwise film in live action. As a result, an increasing number of uninspired and uninspiring animated documentaries are filling up festival slots and online video streaming sites.

Of the objections and issues explored above, only one is genuinely inherent to the animated documentary – the notion that animation, through its very materiality and form, somehow limits audience engagement with a film's subject matter, or dilutes a film's impact. This is an important concern to explore, one that would be illuminated by the empirical

research and theoretical explorations suggested above. Issues of technical proficiency and thoughtful and relevant use of animation in a documentary context could perhaps be seen as a side effect of the maturation of the animated documentary. Early animated documentaries, those made in the 1990s, tended to be original, experimental and innovative – pushing new boundaries and exploring the potential for combining documentary stories with animated visuals. Films such as Jonathan Hodgson's *Feeling My Way* (1997) and Dennis Tupicoff's *His Mother's Voice* (1997) suggested the ways animation could offer fresh insights and new ways of seeing the world from the perspective of filmmaker or documentary subject. On the bedrock of those early films, animated documentary has grown and evolved as a form to the extent that it is no longer unusual to see reality animated. As with any established form, genre or medium, as animated documentary becomes more established it will entail less imaginative and successful examples alongside those that continue to stretch and challenge the form in a progressive and original way. To look at this concern more positively, animated documentaries that are less imaginative, those that do little more than illustrate a documentary soundtrack in a limited way, for example, can help us identify how and why animation does and does not function successfully in a documentary (or any) context. This can, as suggested above,

lead to a more "360-degree" consideration of animated documentary.

The objections surrounding classification – in particular that documentaries cannot be animated or that animated documentaries need another label – is one that is, in fact, rarely expressed by documentary, film or animation scholars. It certainly seems the case that film critics have no issue ascribing the animated form to documentary, as evidenced by their frequent and free use of this term in reviews. However, it is of course often interesting to explore issues of taxonomy and classification and this in itself leads to new and revived understandings of the media forms in question.

The brevity of this discussion of the criticisms of animated documentary reflects the fact that it is hard to find much of the "skepticism" that Strøm claims exists. Scholars are mostly celebratory and inclusive, seeking to explore the various iterations of animated documentary rather than looking to quibble over its existence. Similarly, film critics seem to have accepted animation as another means of documentary representation with little opposition. In many ways, this is itself a limitation of the discourse surrounding animated documentary because, as this brief exploration has shown, examining animated documentary from all angles, both positive and negative, can only help further illuminate and elucidate our study of the form.

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## Notes

- 1 Indeed, much of the early scholarship on animated documentary discusses which of Bill Nichols' documentary modes animation fits into, thus implying an inherent acceptance of animation as a mode of documentary representation. See Honess Roe (2013, pp.18-22)
- 2 I discuss the inherent assumptions regarding 'documentary' definition further in Honess Roe (2016, forthcoming)
- 3 See Honess Roe 2013 and (forthcoming) 2016.
- 4 Notably, critics use the term 'animated documentary' to describe the film with no inkling of an issue with that term.
- 5 Patrick Power cites, in a 2008 article, a 2006 study that examined fMRI scans of participants viewing live action and rotoscoped imagery. See Power (2008).
- 6 Interestingly, at a Q&A following a screening at the Edinburgh Festival in 2012, Ahadi acknowledged the influence of *Waltz With Bashir* on *The Green Wave*, particularly in terms of the style of animation the film's funders, wished the later film to emulate.