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# 跨界时代的动画

2016中国动画学年会论文集

主 编 | 钟远波

Animation in the Age of Crossover:  
the First China Animation Studies  
Conference (2016)

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# Creative Actuality: Modes of Animated Documentary

Writer/Dr Birgitta Hosea, Royal College of Art

**Abstract:** Since the advent of the personal computer has made animation techniques accessible to a wider range of practitioners, perceptions about what animation is have been changing. No longer simply a medium of storytelling for children, as it was traditionally seen, animation has now expanded into many other disciplines.

This presentation will focus on animations that draw upon actuality and lived experience to form their subject matter. Using Bill Nichol's concept of 'modes of documentary', it will consider examples from animated documentaries made at the Royal College of Art to illustrate different strategies for the creation of non-fiction animated films.

**Keywords:** Animated documentary, actuality, non-fiction, modes of documentary

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

According to many conventional sources of information about film history, the term documentary was coined by the Scottish filmmaker John Grierson in 1928 (although there is evidence of much earlier writing on the subject from Poland<sup>[1]</sup>). Grierson described documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality' and from the earliest critical discourse on this topic, we can see evidence of films being cited for their depiction of reality, but actually demonstrated very personal, cultural or historical approaches to the subject. An example of this is the film *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert Flaherty, which is often cited as an example of an early documentary, but is actually a very patronising and colonial approach to depicting the Inuit native peoples of Canada and distorted the reality of the situation shown in the film. For example, the lead character's real name was not Nanook, but Ilakariallak. The two women shown in the film were not actually his wives but both girlfriends of Flaherty. Ilakariallak actually used guns to hunt for seals, but was asked by Flaherty to catch seals in a more traditional and photogenic way. In addition, Inuit people had begun to wear



Carla MacKinnon, *The Devil in the Room* (2013).

Western clothing in this period, but Flaherty required him to dress traditionally as a more authentic ‘Eskimo’<sup>[2]</sup>.

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

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

films.

To cope with this demand for the subject we have just started a new specialist pathway<sup>[3]</sup>. Built on the long established MA in Animation at RCA, the new Documentary Animation pathway explores mixing different forms of animation practices with different approaches to documentary. Our students work mainly on films, but can also create other forms of output such as interactive apps.

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

Explanation. Animation is uniquely able to explain information. Using either the diagram or forms of narrative structure, animation is uniquely placed to allow a coherent navigation of the complexity of ‘big data’.

The unphotographable. Animation can depict spaces that are impossible to photograph – such as the vastness of outer space or the inner workings of the quantum atom.

The personal perspective. Animation can also be used to portray very sensitive subjects such as abuse or mental health –



Miaojian Dong, *Cracked Chimney* (2016)

by anonymizing and protecting the witness or through creating empathy with subjective states of mind.

Time travel. Through animation we can re-animate history – recreating events in the past that were never captured on film, interrogating them with new perspectives and to imagine the future.<sup>[4]</sup>

In order to look at some of the different strategies that can be used to make animated documentaries, I have gone through our archive of over 30 years of creating cutting edge animated films at the RCA. I have picked out films with different techniques and used an adaptation of Bill Nichols' s categories of modes of documentary<sup>[5]</sup> to examine them. Nichols' s modes of documentary represent different strategies for approaching and structuring truth claims in non-fiction films. They can be thought of as different theoretical approaches to epistemology or how to talk about the truth. I am presenting these modes of documentary as separate categories, but filmmakers often use a mixture of different approaches in one film. Therefore, it would be more accurate to consider them as 'tendencies' rather than rigid forms of classification.

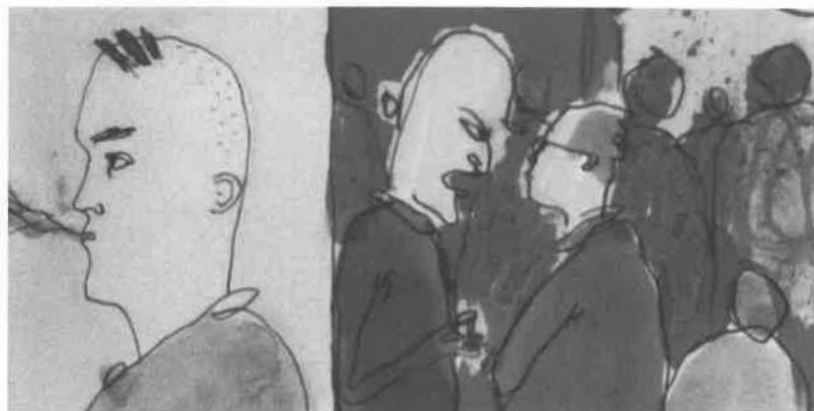
### 1. Mode of Documentary: Expository

The word expository is used to refer to that which is

described in words. Nichols uses this to describe a mode of documentary in which the audio track is used to testify to the truth. This can take the form of narration by a voice of authority – either an expert in the subject being covered by the film or perhaps even an actor with a professionally trained voice who is reading a script – or interviews with witnesses who can authentically attest to having experienced the subject of the documentary at first hand. The images play a supporting role as illustration. It uses direct address to the viewer. The personal opinions of the filmmaker are hidden from view and presented as the objective truth. Two examples from the RCA' s archive of graduation films are:

Carla MacKinnon, *The Devil in the Room* (2013). In this film about the phenomena of sleep paralysis, an expert in the field provides a voiceover and this is backed up by witnesses who have themselves suffered from sleep paralysis describing their own, personal experiences. The visuals illustrate an artistic re-enactment of how it feels to suffer from sleep paralysis.

In Miaojian Dong' s film, *Cracked Chimney* (2016), a portrait of her eccentric father, it is the filmmaker herself who provides the voiceover. In the narration she describes her father and recounts memories from her childhood. The audio track



Jonathan Hodgson, *Nightclub* (1987)

structures the imagery. As we know she is talking about her own father, we believe the filmmaker's description of him to be the truth.

### 2.Mode of Documentary: Observational

Unlike the previous category, with the Observational mode of documentary there is no voiceover. As with the Cinema Verité film genre or reality TV, the filmmaker appears to be a neutral recording device for reality. We think the filmmaker is invisible and we are watching life as it is being lived. There are no interviews or reenactments. The viewer is given the impression that s/he is looking at life as it is lived without the intervention of the filmmaker. Events don't seem to be staged for the camera - this is what is really happening. But how staged and scripted is it all really? The filmmaker has carefully selected and constructed the material used to put across a certain viewpoint.

Since animation is not conventionally understood as a direct recording of reality, it may seem contradictory to consider animations as Observational Documentaries, however, I argue that the following two examples fit within these parameters:

Jonathan Hodgson's film, *Nightclub* (1987), was created from observational sketches made in Liverpool drinking clubs. Drawing directly from real life experience, he took this material

and then created an animation out of it. The film examines human behaviour in a social situation, exploring the loneliness felt by the individual lost in the crowd.

Callum Cooper's *Victoria, George, Edward and Thatcher* (2010) film uses a very different form of animation. It was made on an iPhone and animates a series of still photographs. The film documents his journey as he walked from where he lived in East London to where he was studying at the Royal College of Art in West London. The title refers to the different styles of architecture and the former Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. The changes of architecture during his journey make a powerful statement about class and living conditions in different parts of London.

### 3.Mode of Documentary: Poetic

The Poetic mode of documentary take an entirely different approach. There is neither direct observation of actuality nor a spoken audio track to direct the viewer's interpretation of the film as having a relationship to the 'truth'. Visual associations, abstract, symbolic or metaphorical representations of actuality are used to show the filmmakers poetic perspective on the subject matter. The viewer needs to interpret the visuals to arrive at the films intended meaning and, therefore, the



Callum Cooper, *Victoria, George, Edward and Thatcher* (2010)

filmmaker must use universal or commonly understood symbols for his/her intended meaning to come across clearly.

An example of this is Max Hattler's film, *Collision* (2005). This animation uses iconography from flags and commonly understood symbols, such as swords, to express his feelings about the American wars in the Middle East. Sound cues reinforce the interpretation of the abstract visual images on screen, so that they can be identified as pertaining to the USA or the Middle East.

#### 4. Mode of Documentary: Performative

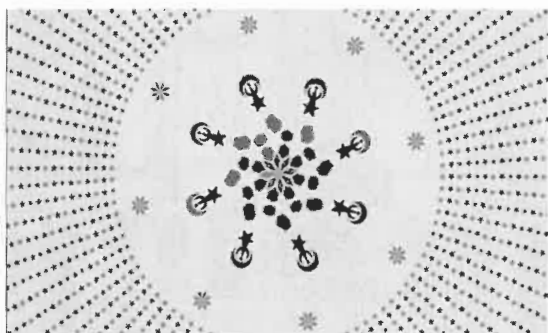
With the Performative mode of documentary, the filmmaker's own subjective viewpoint is shown. In this type of film, knowledge is presented as first-hand, lived experience. Rather than drawing upon second-hand verification in the form of experts or witnesses, as in the Expository mode, the filmmaker seeks to represent to others how the world seems through their own personal perspective. This may involve poetic re-enactment, interviews personal to the filmmaker, the filmmaker's own narration and visualisation of her or his memories.

In Ngendo Mukii's film, *Yellow Fever* (2012), a range of techniques are used to explore the phenomenon of skin

bleaching amongst African women and the impact of colonialism on these women's perception of beauty. A mixture of character animation, audio interviews with the filmmaker's family, re-animated colonial archival imagery and creative re-enactment in the form of dance, build a powerful picture of how self-worth can be eroded through advertising and negative stereotypes.

#### 5. Mode of Documentary: Participatory

With the Participatory mode of documentary, there is an explicit and direct encounter between the filmmaker and the person who is their subject of their investigation. Influenced by sociological and ethnographic techniques of participant observation, the filmmaker's dialogue with this person and his/her own, personal journey to investigate a situation forms the central structuring principle of the film. We have the sense that the filmmaker has really been there and learned from their relationship with the subject. The person who is being presented by the filmmaker is participating in the truth claim of this form of documentary, but they may be proved to be a liar. Thus, this mode of documentary shows different points of view, since the filmmaker might not agree with the opinions demonstrated by the subject. Knowledge is presented as a dialogue between a series of opinions. In a further development of this mode, the filmmaker



Max Hattler, *Collision* (2005)



Ngendo Mukii, *Yellow Fever* (2012)

might also use participants to help them create the animation.

In Ian Gouldstone's *Guy 101* (2005), we are shown the filmmaker in an Internet chat room talking to another man. As we follow their conversation, we start to learn that the other man has been the victim of a horrible crime. The witty narration shows the filmmaker's journey from knowing very little about the man who forms the subject of the film - *Guy 101* - to learning a lot more about him through their exchanges in the chat room. The viewer is left with many questions. Did the events really happen? Did *Guy 101* really enjoy being the victim of a crime?

#### 6. Mode of Documentary: Reflexive

With the Reflexive mode of documentary, the filmmaker reflects on how the truth is constructed and, thus, comments on the very nature of filmmaking itself. The artifice behind how the film is made is revealed. These films question fundamental notions of evidence and truth.

In Susan Young's film *Betrayal* (2015), medical and legal documents from a court case are taken out of their original context and closely examined. This re-animation of authentic documents challenges their claims to truthfulness. Through close-ups and rapid montage, Young changes the meaning of those documents and shows another side to the court case that

they come from. Her challenge to the status of document as proof can be extended as a metaphor in which she is challenging all forms of representation - including documentary - as representing the vested interests of powerful institutions as opposed to the actual experience of individuals.

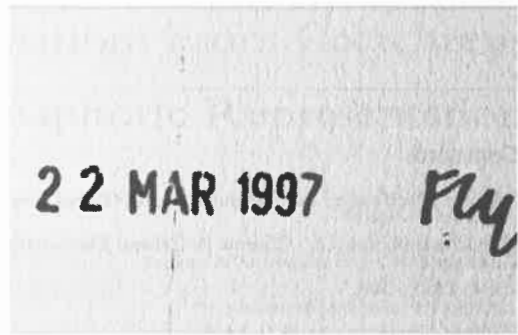
#### Conclusion

This presentation has covered a range of different strategies for telling the 'truth' in animated documentaries. However, post-modern theorists have challenged the very concept of truth as objective and universal and the possibility that grand narratives can explain away our complex world.<sup>[6]</sup> My contention here is that whatever technique is being used - whether we are making animated or live action documentaries - how the truth is told is a construction. The filmmaker has chosen the subject and how it will be presented. With the use of live action, this act of construction is often hidden from view. The audience is made to feel that films shot through a lens must really be 'true' since they have been photographed. However, through its use of obvious manipulation and artificially constructed techniques, animation makes this process of construction clear





Ian Gouldstone, *Guy 101* (2005)



Susan Young, *The Betrayal* (2015)

and transparent. So I argue that animated documentaries have the potential to be more honest and, indeed, ‘truthful’ than those made with live action.

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### Biography

Dr Birgitta Hosea is an artist and curator who works in the field of expanded animation. She has exhibited widely in the UK and internationally, has been the recipient of numerous awards and artists’ residencies and her work is included in the Tate Britain archive. Birgitta is Head of Animation at the Royal College of Art. She was formerly Course Director of MA Character Animation at Central Saint Martins (University of the Arts London), where she gained her PhD in Animation as Performance. She has published a number of academic articles and book chapters on her topics of research interest, which include animation as a post-medium practice; drawing; digital materiality; performance and liveness. She keeps a blog at <http://expandedanimation.net>.

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## Comments

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

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

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

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

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

[6]cf. Alan Cholodenko, ‘ “The Borders of Our Lives” : Frederick Wiseman, Jean Baudrillard, And The Question of The Documentary ’ , *The International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 1, no. 2 (2004).