

Design Research Seminar

Topic: Animated Documentary as a Genre

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Masters in Design, Animation

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Declaration

We hereby declare that the project work done in relation to our graduation film and submitted as a written report to the Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay is a record of the original work done by us under the guidance of Professor Mazhar Kamran. Unless otherwise stated, the contents of this report in the form of the text and images are entirely our own. The views expressed in the documentation as part of the written submission of the project are our own and do not necessarily represent the views of Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay.

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Approval

The Report Committee for Animation Design, Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay certifies that this is the approved version of the following report on: 'Animated Documentary as a Genre' by Divakar S K, 176340005 and Harikrishnan S, 176340006.

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Project Guide:

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Abstract

Animated Documentary as a Genre

A study of a genre of film that fuses the technique of animation with that of documentary film. The genre has been defined. A review of notable works has also been done. The wide range of work within this space have been covered, along with observations on the creative and ethical sides. Finally, a study of the impact of certain films on public discourse.

Keywords:
Animated documentary, Animation

History and Evolution

Animated Documentary is a genre which predominantly uses animation form for telling non fiction stories.

It's an independent genre in itself that differs from live action documentaries in terms of the very visual differences and stretching the storytelling boundaries of conventional documentaries.

It's been exactly 100 years, since Winsor McCay has made *The Sinking of Lusitania*, an officially recorded first ever animated documentary in the cinema history. Ever Since the use of animation medium for documentary filmmaking had largely been unexplored for the next 20 to 25 years till the mid 40's apart from Fleischer Studio's works such as *Einstein's Theory of Relativity 1923* which had used animation for a kind of educational documentary.

Over the Silent era, It's mostly been a lot of experimentation that animation has undergone both in terms of form and narrative. The animated works of German legends like Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, Oskar Fischinger and Viking Eggeling were notable in this period but were overshadowed by the Success of their German live action counterparts like F.W.Munaru and Fritz Lang. Even though the Success of R.J.Flaherty's documentary films had a predominant effect in live action documentary filmmaking over the next decade, the arc of animation was still set away from the documentary genre.

The monumental Success of *Snow-white and the Seven dwarfs*, *Silly Symphonies*, *The New Gulliver 1935* had already turned animation industry into a successful commercial market pulling people to the theatres.

The increasing familiarity of the Disney's Cartoons among the common people has made the animation arc to explore new horizons such as politics, Consumerism and Social guidance. The result is a series of government funded Disney documentaries such as *Stop the Tank 1942*, *The Grain that built a hemisphere*, *The Winged Scourge 1943*, *The New Spirit(1942)*, *The Spirit of 43*, *Food will win the War 1942*, and *Victory through Air Power 1943*. The Box office failure of *Pinocchio 1940*, *Fantasia 1940*, and the urge to stabilize the Disney's treasury due to the war impact can also be cited as one of the reasons behind Disney's breach into these new horizons. It's counterpart, Warner bros were mostly into the Looney tunes series over this period except for animated documentaries like *So much for So little 1949* by Chuck Jones. Post war, the remains of archival footage and the haunting experience of the war survivors brought out a sea of war tales which are stronger and stranger than fiction giving rise to a lot of new wave film movements and directors. John Huston's *Let there be Light 1946* & Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog 1955* were notable examples of such war documentaries that stood out in portrayal of non fiction content. Disney continued to do animated documentary shorts on public guidance and animated education through films like *How to Catch a cold 1951*, *The Truth about Mother Goose 1957*, *Our Friend Atom 1957*, *It's tough to be a bird 1969*. Even though the film waves

like Italian neorealist movement had a profound impact on the way movies were made around the world, the animation genre was largely unaffected. Over the next 50 years, the extensive use of animation medium as a means of escapism in cinema telling tales of fantasy, fiction and all forms of extravaganza has always made animation to distance itself away from the clutches of non fiction and human condition in daily lives.

The contributions of *Norman McLaren* at NFB Canada has created a perfect platform for independent animators around the world to explore newer domains in animation. It has brought back the progress of animation in the right path. NFB's animated documentary works like *Hell Unltd 1936*, *Neighbours 1952*, *Universe 1960*, *Very nice, very nice 1961*, *What on Earth! 1967* had set flags for what animation can do in terms of showcasing the documentary content. Colin Law's *Universe 1960* served as an inspiration for Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, and ultimately earning a place for Colin in the *2001*'s crew itself.

Animated documentary short films from pioneer auteurs like Irwin Allen (*The Animal World 1956*), Alain Resnais (*Le Chant du Styrene 1959*), Saul Bass (*Why Man Creates 1968*), Rene Laloux (*Dead Times 1965*), Frederick Back (*The man who planted trees 1987*), Peter Lord (*War Story 1989*, *Going Equipped 1990*) have kept this genre alive throughout the later phase of the 20th century. Though there were frequent sightings of animated documentaries in short film formats, profoundly animated feature length documentaries were very rare and not popular among the film circuits yet.

John Hubley's *Of stars and Men 1962*, *The Strange Case of Cosmic rays 1957*, *The Thread of Life 1960*, Paul Fierlinger's *Drawn from Memory 1995* were the only Animated documentaries that came close to a feature film length over 50 plus minutes in this phase. [the Only previous occasion being the 1943 flick *Victory through air power* being 1 hours 10 minutes but that too isn't completely animated].

By the arrival of the 21st century, the tables have started to turn around. There were numerous live action documentaries like *Chicago 10 2007*, *Cobain Montage of Heck 2015* had already started to use bulks of animated content to support their narratives. Despite all these journey that had happened over the years, it was films like *Waltz with Bashir 2008*, *Persepolis 2007* that have compellingly announced the rebirth of the new genre of completely independent animated feature Documentaries. Over the last decade, documentarians and indie filmmakers have made a handful of content on the lines of animated documentary genre, making it a promising genre currently giving more space to play beyond the orthodox boundaries of documentary filmmaking.

Classification of Animated Documentaries

The Classification of animated documentaries are directly based on the classifications of live action documentaries. Based on a extensive study on the notable documentaries ever made, we have made a [extensive categorization](#) of the various documentaries.

Briefly, they can be classified as observational, educational, propagandistic and experiential documentaries.

Educational animated documentaries were usually the precursors of this genre that were made in early days targeted at social guidance, attitude building and medical awareness among the masses. Films like *So much for So Little*, *Our Friend Atom 1957*, *Universe 1960*, *Is the man who is tall ,happy?* can be cited as examples.

Propagandistic animated documentaries were either directly or indirectly funded by the Governmental and Corporational bodies aimed at campaigning their political and commercial agendas respectively. It was very evident in films like *How to catch a cold 1951* and *Victory through Air Power 1943* where their intentions gets clearly stated in the end, despite of the misleading titles and narratives of those flicks. The former aims at the selling of tissue papers by kleenex & the latter aims at taking Anti Nazi campaign among the masses.

Experiential documentaries are the truest resort to the indie animators and documentarians which gives a sufficient space

and freedom for creativity and expression. Experiential documentaries portray narratives either based on the biography of a person, past traumatic experiences from a war

or a disaster. One usual narrative is where the protagonist is usually such a survivor who narrates all the things he has witnessed through his hard times in the past. It can be seen in 1989's *War Story* by Peter Lord where the war veteran's monologue is portrayed along with the animated visuals. Similarly, *Waltz with Bashir* revolves around the memories of a soldier who has lived through the Lebanese War. In Keith maitland's 2016 animated documentary, *Tower* the entire documentary is made using a archival CCTV footage as reference of a shooting incident in Texas University. In this case, its a general recreation without being specific to a particular person but recreating the incident as a whole along with the recordings from different eye witnesses.

Incase of biographies, it's the other way around. Since, most of the biographies are made post death of a person, the narrative follows the sequence of interviews given by the people who has lived along with the subject. Meanwhile, it keeps track of the subject's life and work throughout the narrative. Cobain Montage of Heck 2015 was made using such a template.

Also the 2005's animated documentary *Ryan*, where the biography of a Canadian animator Ryan Larkin is portrayed. Apart from these categories, animated documentary as a genre has always dared to trespass into its neighbouring genres like mockumentaries, docufictions, docudramas etc.

Films like *Mary and Max 2009* is a kind of semi-documentary being based on a real story and portrayed with a mono narrative style of storytelling. The films by Paul Fierlinger is

an exception whose films stay true to the grammar of this genre and has always attracted a handful number of animators to tell stories in this genre of the animation.

Potential of using Animation in Documentaries

Animation have largely changed the way documentaries were made. It was very difficult to make a biographical documentary of a dead person, and the only resort was to cast a third person or to reenact the life of the person with blurred faces and distant visuals. This has always created discomfort for the viewers who were especially the fans and followers of certain celebrities and legends. So sometimes, the documentarian has to manage with the stock photographs and archival footages of the subject and thereby restricting the scope of narrative. But with animation in place, we can easily reconstruct the lives of those person with identical animated characters that does maximum justice to such situations. Sometimes, even the original works of the subjects such as drawings and photographs can be animated with photomanipulation animation techniques and end up highly effective in conveying the essence of the narrative. Rotoscopy is another boon in the animated documentary genre which gives a lot of flexibility to animate over the recorded interviews and archival footages of the subjects. In experiential animated documentaries, the animation has opened a whole new space for entire reconstruction of the tales told by the protagonists through the various animation techniques.

With the tremendous growth in animation technology

over the last three decades, there's a varied scope of storytelling unlike never before.

Indie animators and Documentarians use a variety of animation forms to evoke a specific kind of emotion and atmosphere in their non fiction works which serves as an ultimate boon for the unprecedented growth to the animated documentaries.

Moreover animation has contributed a lot in overcoming certain critical scenarios and limitations of live action documentary making. In fact, the depiction of disturbing visuals such as gore, nudity, physical torture, and violence had been a challenging scenarios but now with animation in the rescue the same sensitive visuals are made less severe and visually pleasing to the viewers also saving from censorship clutches of situations like getting X rated or banned.

Documentarians require a certain level of patience and social skills as their filming deals with real people in real environments. Sometimes they had to face life threatening situations and even some have perished their lives in their pursuit sneaking into places where they shouldn't have gone in the first place. Incase of animated documentaries, a lot of those dangers can be wittily avoided as there ain't a compulsory presence required on location, and most of those non fiction things can be reconstructed based on third person sightings, and writings. So, this has already encouraged a lot of young talents to take up animated documentary filmmaking.

CONCLUSION

Out of all the arts that exist in today's world, Cinema is a very young form of art still in its kindergarten phase. One might argue that cinema has evolved a lot as a whole in its very making and viewing aspects. Yeah of course, cinema has gone a great round trip from a 19th century Lumiere's Travelling Cinematographe to the today's palm reaching Netflix streaming services. Loads of genres have been explored. Some have vanished, Some were rare sightings, Some have stood the test of time and were still successful. But there's always a search for newer possibilities. There were many occasions where unexpectedly brand new genres gets created by the marriage of some completely different genres. And exactly, that's what keeps the very essence of cinematic art alive. Based on such graph, cinema is undoubtedly in its kindergarten phase and still has a lot of evolution left in it to attain the status of other arts such as music, sculpting, painting etc. So, considering this context, the recent bloom of Animated documentary genre and it's increasing popularity is an absolute sign of excellence towards which the cinema is travelling as an artform. An artform is the one which gives a complete freedom of artistic expression to the creator and that's exactly what happens in animated documentary genre as it makes the merge of two completely independent and highly potential tools that cinema has ever had, animation and documentary filmmaking. Over the past, a countless number

of animators and documentations has used these tools in astounding ways. The impacts they created were far greater and direct than their counterpart genres. So summing everything up, animated documentary genre as a tool can take

things forward to a whole new horizon beyond the perimeters of cinematic limitations, if wittily handled.

So Much For So Little

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ESmHv2h50s>

Victory through Air Power 1943

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUeKeN9bXSE>

Our Friend Atom 1957

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PwllA-CyJU>

War Story 1989

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fn1aVSTD-4g>

Ryan 2005

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbkBjZKBLHQ>

Reference

<https://www.wikipedia.org/>

<https://www.imdb.com/>

Categorization sheet of documentaries

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18Uya8KNrnmpD4V_h6NVP0fjL6FJgizZaSi4bEgiEUtk/edit?usp=sharing

Videos (Animated Documentaries)

The Sinking of Lusitania (1918)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5oftlm8HJA>

Is The Man Who Is Tall Happy?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cv66xFD7s7g>

