The Objective Representation of Animation in Documentary Film

Corrigan and White define documentary as “a visual and auditory representation of the presumed facts, real experiences, and actual events of the world” (2012, 256). Ka-nin believes animation can be summarised as the “illusion of movement”, but highlights it’s ability to be “non-representational” (2009, 78) and thus poses a question to the authenticity of such an art form. This essay will evaluate whether an animation can be accepted as a documentary to provide insightful information or whether it should remain in the world of fiction. This will include an emphasis on several scenes from animations considered documentaries to illustrate how animation is used to contribute to the factual narrative. An analysis of Ryan (Landreth, 2004) will demonstrate how experimental visualisation influences the audiences’ empathy with characters. Waltz With Bashir (Folman, 2008) will highlight the significance of dramatisation to drive the emotional weight of a subject matter while introducing the concept of reenactments that aim to authenticate individualistic perspectives over broad fact. This will lead the essay into considering the fictional depiction of real events to create a personal understanding of the filmmaker’s intent while fundamentally challenging the “ethics of documentary filmmaking” proposed by Paul Ward (2008, 191). Lastly, these perspectives will be brought under scrutiny in an examination of Chicago 10 (Morgen, 2007), which combines dramatisation with factual accounts held through limited transcripts and audio recordings that leave interpretation in the hands of the creator. Interwoven into this evaluation will be critical insight from various writers including Bill Nichols (2008) who argues that while audiences must be informed, they should be left with the flexibility to hold their own interpretation of the depicted narrative. In all, this essay will explore animation as an expressive art form that highlights the changing face of documentary film and importance of subjectivity in narratives. As Corrigan and White conclude, documentaries are no longer simply about fact, they allow audiences to see narratives “through debate, through exploration, and through analysis” (2012, 282).
Firstly, Chris Landreth’s short film Ryan utilises the exaggerative quality of animation to examine animator Ryan Larkin’s devolvement into substance abuse. It’s significance to this investigation is how Landreth uses animation to develop imagery for real psychological feelings which are visually non-existent, supporting Ka-nin “non-representational” (2009, 78) concept that animation goes beyond live action to depict physical subjects with unorthodox expression. For example, Landreth begins by generating empathy with the audience by drawing attention to the narrative’s visual oddity. The setting is presented as impoverished and decrepit with an urbanist realism to convey unfamiliarity to the audience, thus placing them in Landreth’s nervous state of mind. Ryan Larkin’s disfiguration is characterised by missing body parts which highlight that he’s literally a broken man, leaving the audience with a sympathetic outlook. The visuals serve as a representation of Ryan’s upsetting situation and consequently the sentimentality of the interview begins to show. The imagery condenses the need to explain every detail as it guides the audiences’ perspective and essentially takes hold of their judgement and tells them what to think. Animation becomes less of an accuracy issue and instead serves a tool to get across information in a distinct way. As Roe explains, “animation compensates for the limitation of live-action material” (2011, 229). This indicates the usefulness of animation in Landreth’s documentary to communicate the personal meaning of Ryan’s story as the emotion of the characters is carried far more vividly with experimental visuals than through traditional talking head interviews. Roe argues that Landreth’s personal intentions were clear by painting an “expressionistic” portrayal of the world rather than “mimicking” it (2013, Chapter 4), making the viewer identify with Landreth’s subjective thought process.

Moreover, this is evident in Chris’ pleas for Ryan to consume less alcohol which triggers the interview to change into an intervention. A halo emerges around Chris’ head before being shattered by Ryan who rebukes him for the scrutiny of his chosen lifestyle, a visual which Roe argues
“reveals his saintly, yet misguided, intentions” (2013, Chapter 4). Landreth has shifted from being an objective observer to taking control of the situation. As a result, Landreth’s control of the audiences’ perspective dictates each character’s status despite highlighting his personal awareness of the situation. In other words, the information is controlled by the filmmaker but the audience can detach themselves from reality and understand the subjective influence. Bordwell and Thompson highlight how this intervention would be condemned by the cinéma vérité movement who aim for naturalism over “restaging, narrational commentary” to capture authenticity without the need for involvement (1994, 566). Yet, it’s important to acknowledge that this style existed over 50 years ago and thus brings it’s relevancy into question. In this sense, Ryan begins as an impartial non-participant interview but it’s shift to subjective evaluation clarifies Bordwell and Thompson’s belief that the new age of documentary looks to “search for instants of drama or psychological revelation” (1994, 566). But indeed, it devolves into a “persuasive” position (Corrigan and White, 2012, 269) in which emotions take control of the actuality.

On the other hand, what is called into question in Ryan is highlighted in Waltz With Basir, were Ari Folman maintains a dramatic overtone that presents the 1982 Lebanon invasion as a mood piece in which Folman makes it apparent to the audience that his memories are gone and thus the film becomes a quest for answers. Lilienfield et al explain in psychological terms that memories are “prone to distortions” (2010, p. 66), meaning that Folman’s clarification about his doubt allows the audience to acknowledge the likelihood of inaccuracy to avoid deception. For example, dramatic emphasis is conveyed during his memories of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Instead of narration, Folman stands over the beach during a heavy storm to establish the “guilt” (Roe, 2013, Chapter 5) that war has left on him. He communicates his feelings by entrancing the viewer with a sorrow violin track as the young, uncertain Folman returns to camp. As he enters the city, citizens come rushing in tears from the direction he’s heading and leaves an ambiguity to consider. The scene
itself is a fictional representation of Folman’s experience, not the event. The warm orange glow from the beach transitions to desaturated blues to affirm that a disastrous event has occurred. The subtly and lack of information conveys a sense of sheltering to the audience so that they cannot witness the horrific aftermath. As a result, the audience remain firmly on Folman’s side as they regain information they aren’t deliberately told. Roe (2013) highlights how realism and fantasy consolidate the documentary’s harrowing themes which means animation continues to reveal information but from a personal perspective to call attention to the horrific massacre. The visualisation thus accentuates the dramatic importance of the event. Roe highlights the lack of “overt visual metaphor” (2013, Chapter 5) which evidently is found in Ryan. Where as Ryan explicitly used exaggerative imagery to control judgement, Roe (2013) shows that Waltz With Basir employs realism so that the audience can identify with the representative reality.

However, White questions how the “uncanniness” of the film’s style makes it appropriate as a documentary because the “autobiography” portrayal brings it “closer to fiction” (2008, 5). White (2008) suggests that Waltz With Basir is stylistically driven under the same values as fictional dramas with factual source material as the foundation of it’s narrative. As such, dramatic stylisation becomes the issue with animated documentaries. Ward writes that changes to filmmaking have led to the “drama-documentary” that relies heavily on “speculative framework” (2008, 191). In other words, Waltz With Basir’s reliance on faded memories and limited information to tell a real story makes it appear fictitious rather than factual. Ward queries the position of the audience in these kinds of documentaries as the use of “performances” to reenact “dramatic scenarios” changes what documentaries strive for (2008, 191). He notes that performance styles can break the illusion of fact to make the audience aware of the fictional elements, whereas some films “disrupt and distance the viewer” from reality (2008, 192), essentially making them just as accurate as any historical fiction. For instance, both Ryan and Waltz With Basir’s distinct visual qualities distinguish fact from fiction
in unique ways but the truthfulness of their accounts are still doubtful and contradicts the technique of documentary filmmaking.

However, Nichols work appears to disagree. Whereas White and Ward believe Waltz With Basir is too stylistically distant from reality, Nichols (2008) sheds light on the importance of reenactments. Nichols shows how empirical data collection tends to cut out everything considered “fabrication” or “inauthentic” (2008, 72). Yet despite the discretion of accuracy in reenactments, “fantasmatic elements” exist intrinsically in all documentaries (2008, 73). In short, bias and subjective thought is inevitable. Nichols further states that reenactments should acknowledge their semi-fictionalisation to give awareness to the audience to avoid “deceit” over fact and fiction (2008, 73). This perspective supports much of this analysis thus far as both Folman and Landreth call attention to their use of animation to express a particular mood and idea. Nichols conclusion consolidates the complexity of authenticity and fantasy in that “reenactments vivify the sense of the lived experiences” (2008, 88). It reinvigorates memories of the past which highlight the filmmaker’s perspective and emotional connection to the viewer. In simple terms, there is no escape from the fantasy that comes with truthful recollection.

Lastly, Chicago 10 exemplifies a broad portrayal of the themes found in this discussion. Brett Morgen uses audio and written transcripts to recreate the court proceedings of eight political activists in 1968. Morgen intercuts animation with archival footage to highlight the political temperature at the time. Unlike Ryan and Waltz With Basir (with the exception of it’s conclusion), Chicago 10 uses archive footage prominently throughout and by definition makes it worthy of documentary status on the basis of it’s authenticity. However, Roe explains the use of motion capture and rotoscope was to “create lifelike movement” and maintain “verisimilitude” (2013, Chapter 2), yet rather than focus on photorealism, Morgen aims to show “recognisable” characters
so that it wouldn’t draw attention to the differences between animation and life action (2013, Chapter 2). This approach discredits Ward’s (2008) argument of highlighting fictional and factual differences and both Folman and Landreth’s stylistic methods. In the introduction, following a montage of each activist, the animation aims to emphasise each character through various visual distinctions. For example, prosecutor Thomas Foran is given voice of God control in the court room through his narration of the case, low angle and close up composition to give him dominance over the audience and his black and white suit presents him as an objective political presence. Activists such as Abbie Hoffman on the other hand are presented more expressively through “extrapolated” gestures (Roe, 2013, Chapter 2). By way of explanation, Morgen interprets visual movements from his knowledge of each character to express their unique identity such as blowing kisses or fisting pumping the air. Attorney William Kunstler’s blue suit highlights his siding with the activists due to a more powerful colour choice in contrast to black and white suits. The issue of bias becomes evident as Morgen shines a negative light on the prosecutors through opposing visuals. While he highlights the facts surrounding the conflict, he’s chosen a side to stand with. Since the court proceeding is recreated without footage, the use of animation disrupts the context of the dialogue to give judgement over government figures and thus confirming that Morgen has control of the construction of events. Nichols’ categorisation of documentary styles would dictate that Chicago 10 in this case would fall under “stylization” as it favours “perspective” over truthfulness (2008, 86). His use real archive footage to reinforce reality and objectiveness still proves to be at ethical risk (Ward, 2008) because the media itself is controlled by the hands of it’s creator.

For example, at a heated point in the case where Bobby Seale is denied free speech, dramatic music evidently disconnected from reality followed by an angered, passionate speech by Hoffman transitions to archive footage for the remainder of the runtime. Hoffman’s portrayal embodies Ward’s response to the significance of animation’s “performative mode” (2011, 297), in
which “what we see enacted on the screen is not what passed before the camera” (2011, 294). In other words, Ward’s words highlight the issue with Morgen’s portrayal of Hoffman’s character. His performance has a dramatic quality similar to Folman’s in Waltz With Basir that can be taken out of context. Morgen is attempting to get a particular message across that exploits the audience into his defensive perspective, identical to Landreth’s portrayal in Ryan. There is no chance for the audience to consider alternative opinions as the rest of the film focuses purely on public disorder that sides with the activists as it stylistically comes from the mind of Hoffman as inferred from the camera tracking into his head. It extracts the objective representation of life and it’s essence is lost to the opinion of Morgen. However, Aufderheide (2007) demonstrates that documentaries are told as a story and the filmmaker has monopoly over how to represent and develop events. Aufderheide elucidates that honesty must exist but the filmmaker may “employ poetic license” (2007, 3) to give a certain perspective to a real issue, which in the case of Chicago 10 provides as efficient background for audiences to question and challenge Morgen’s information because as Nichols concludes, “reenactments are clearly ‘a’ view rather than ‘the’ view from which the past yields up its truth” (2008, 80).

In conclusion, it is clear that the approach to documentary filmmaking have changed considerably to the extent in which there is no universal way to construct a factual narrative. Animation is simply another way to interpret or reconstruct people and events. Nichols has indicated the major issue with the filmmaker’s “embodied perspective” and the audiences’ emotional response in representing reality (2008, 88). Everyone interprets and responses individualistically to life based on their own prejudices and personal intentions. Yet, that is not to say that objectivity cannot exist in reconstructions. In the analysis of Ryan, animation proved to be a signifiant factor to detailing the characters’ perceptions to the audience and therefore consolidated the need to vocalise information. The uncontrolled nature of cinéma vérité is compromised by the
rise of technology which is inherently controlled by the creator and further illustrates outdated beliefs. Animation is an artistic form that requires “performance” (Ward, 2011, 294) to understand it’s meaning and can be construed in various ways. Animated documentary provides a platform to surpass the “economics of information” (Corrigan and White, 2012, 257) and analyse and theorise on individuals, ideas and perceptions to shine an alternative light on a story. While dramatic stylisation is questionable for it’s distorted representation, Ward (2008) acknowledges that it serves to amplify the subject matter and prominently display the issues the filmmaker aims to convey.

Waltz With Basir is able to go beyond simply history itself and capture the weight of war through the tragic eyes of those who experienced it first hand. Chicago 10 appears to present an adapted version of the truth to encourage debate and analysis over the ambiguity of a divided conflict. Despite it’s apparent fictionalisation, audiences do not need to draw immediate conclusions fabricated by the filmmakers but can now question and scrutinise what they’ve been told. Roe concludes that animated documentary has brought “subjective reality” (2013, Chapter 5) in factual storytelling to the forefront and it is now time to pursue “beyond general observation” (2011, 229). The foundations of fact have already been established through generations of enquiry which today means filmmakers and audiences must find a new means in which to understand a subject matter, providing an opportunity for animation to succeed the boundaries of mere fiction.
References


