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The Winnipeg Documentary Project

SERIES

Animated Documentary Shorts

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CURATED BY
ALEX ROGALSKI

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2:00 PM ▶ Cinematheque

In the early stages of the second century of cinema, short form documentary has explored new technologies and expanded conventional expectations of what is accepted within the documentary form. Fusing documentary with its antithesis in filmmaking holds incredible potential in accessing bolder ways of exposing 'the real'.

The convergence of documentary and animation seems oxymoronic. One form, bound to capturing 'truth', the other built upon whims of imagination and artistic expression. While only a few examples of feature length animated documentaries exist (*Waltz with Bashir*, *Persepolis*), the short form has delivered an explosion of new films over the past decade. Canadian filmmakers have made the most of our cinematic strengths, where our largest contributions to filmmaking exist (undeniably tied to the National Film Board). Academy Award winning *Ryan* (2004, Chris Landreth) brought attention to this fused film form and *Cattle Call* (2008, Matthew Rankin/Mike Maryniuk) endures as a stunning example of independent experimentation. Digital animation applications, expanding forms of documentary, and

interdisciplinary filmmakers have coalesced into an exploration of creative options available through animation that best serve their chosen documentary subjects. The short form permits experimentation in filmmaking that feature films tend to avoid.

What do short films achieve in combining two forms that existed on separate cinematic practices and analysis for so long? What is better achieved through animating the real? What remains of documentary convention?

Rotoscopy is a comfortable starting point to understand how these cinematic forms intertwine. Beginning with recorded footage of 'the real,' rotoscopy breaks down the moving image into single frames. In its simplest form, these frames are copied by tracing single images to create duplicates that can be altered (including or excluding detail from the original). This process is paradoxical, because although it transitions the 'real' into the animated world of creative, subjective interpretation - taking it further away from its supposed objectivity and existence - it also makes the artifice of filmmaking more apparent, highlighting a truth. The subject in the original image is a recording, no longer real but only a reference. Tracing over that subject and showing a drawing of it is not that removed from what was recorded. This animation technique makes us conscious that we are viewing artificial movement/presence and that cinema is an intermediary. Awareness of the filmmaking process delivers a greater truth where the illusion is laid bare.

The animated films of Bob Sabiston and Marie-Josée Saint-Pierre use forms of rotoscopy to create character portraits of real life personalities.

Saint-Pierre employs a minimalist visual approach of monochromatic outlines to create a contrast between the character and setting, further removing it from recognizable similarities to the real. This works to great effect in her portraits of animator Norman McLaren in *McLaren's Negatives* (2006) and *The Sapporo Project's* (2010) study of Japanese calligrapher Gazanbou Higuchi. A live action documentary of these individuals would separate the viewer from the artist's practice, even if we were to observe them in studio. The use of rotoscoping to illustrate their creative characteristics gives Saint-Pierre the opportunity to show (more than tell) us about the art and meaning her subjects wish to express. It becomes an examination of the internal as opposed to external. The synthesis between the subject's artistic truth and a creative expression of it by the filmmaker is a chance to see beyond the physical and better understand the subject's philosophical identity. This counters a more objective scientific approach common to live action documentary whereby the art-making practice is recorded but stays at a distance from where the artistic philosophy exists. Witnessing the physical does not always translate into revealing the truth documentary seeks. If anything, rotoscoping becomes a translation of that truth, something more easily and deeply comprehensible.

Bob Sabiston's animation employs a more vibrant and layered palette. *Snack and Drink* (1999) follows Ryan Power, a unique teenage boy on his walk to a 7-Eleven for a Double Gulp. Using the original video audio recording as the soundtrack, Sabiston keeps us connected to reality with the authenticity of Ryan's likes and dislikes in a casual conversation. He juxtaposes this by creatively interpreting the visuals through rotoscoping, sometimes transforming the shape and movement of Ryan into a complete abstraction. Ryan's voice remains a constant as the visual tone of the film makes great leaps. The gap that's created between what we hear as real, and what we see as surreal is where the strongest opportunity for a reading into the meaning of this documentary exists. If it were just a three minute video recording of this quotidian walk, it would leave the viewer with much less to contemplate. Instead, the space between the real and surreal creates an expanded realm for contemplation and interpretation. In this way, these animated documentaries heighten our sense of real, by exploring what exists beyond the physical and examining the cerebral.

This gap between real and surreal extends into Sabiston's film *Grasshopper* (2004). Taking what would otherwise be a straight forward 'talking head' interview, the type familiar to most documentaries, *Grasshopper's* use of rotoscoping transforms a monologue into something far more visually



ABOVE: *The Sapporo Project* by Marie-Josée Saint-Pierre

interesting. Whereas the original source material relies solely upon the interview as an aural device, the animated interview heightens our response to what is being said. Stimulating our visual senses creates a greater interaction with the subject's message. We, as viewers, are cognizant it is not an entirely accurate depiction of the individual talking, but it is a very effective method to illustrate the concepts being discussed in a philosophy film.

Rotoscoping is not tied entirely to recordings of the real that are visually altered. Saint-Pierre's film *Passages* (2008) moves away from existing documentary footage to become an entirely re-enacted portrayal of a very personal story. Its first person narration recounts Saint-Pierre's process of giving birth to her first child and is an examination of a faulted medical system. If confined to traditional documentary methods, this film would lack the emotional core and greater truth that it seeks to expose. Not shying away from the creative flexibility that animation offers, she anthropomorphizes the doctors to more accurately depict her experience. This first person account falls more within the documentary convention of re-enactment. Re-enactment has long held a place in documentary practice, where one accepts the reprisal of actual events as factual. By placing the personal into an animated form that is subjective, there is a more complete expression of honesty. Personal stories are immediately subjective, so a false agreement is set up in documentaries that employ objective observation to establish individual truth. *Passages* avoids this manipulation, confronting subjectivity not as something to be distrusted, but allowing Saint-Pierre to be completely honest about her experience, permitting the viewer to share in the frustration, fear, anger and love that are the core of the film.

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The subjective personal form of documentary evolves in contrast to the firm objective scientific approach of observation that presents image as fact, and filmmaking as the purest form of articulating truth. The sterility of this objective form of filmmaking prevents documentary from focusing on deeper understandings of what it means to be human from emerging. It is in this area that animated documentary has played a critical role in advancing the subjective personal form.

Flawed (2010, Andrea Dorfman) is a playful twist of animation, with Dorfman painting cartoonish static images, seen through time lapse photography that correspond with first person narration about her relationship with a plastic surgeon and moral dilemma with his occupation. Including her hand using an ink brush provides a specific connection between author and the subject, increasing the personal tone and nature of the film. Dorfman's drawings are reminiscent of those found in children's books, yet her commentary on physical appearance focuses our attention squarely on an issue that preoccupies adults. The drawings prevent the viewer from judging individual body images by never showing us photographic imagery of the people she talks about, including herself. Instead, we see the parts of the body she dwells on through exaggerated caricatures. If we were to be staring at the subjects who undergo surgery to transform themselves while listening to her narration, the tone of the documentary shifts to the scientific or falsely objective, which is not the goal of this film. Ethical issues are the centre of its



ABOVE: *Grasshopper* by Bob Sabiston

'truth seeking' - an examination of internal issues about external presences. Seeing Dorfman's perspective on her relationship and childhood through her drawings, the animation reveals a truth that exists beyond the surface, fittingly capturing a reality that is more than skin deep.

Suckerfish (2004, Lisa Jackson) continues the use of animation to enhance personal story telling. Although *Suckerfish* is a mixed live action/animated film, its animation sequences play a critical role in portraying past childhood events and a portrait of mother-daughter relationship. Fragmented memories come alive through mixed-media animation that helps establish the tone of the re-enactments. Re-enactments ask us to accept actors as representations of people as they once existed. The trappings of fiction become

The animation reveals a truth that exists beyond the surface

apparent, and in the case of very personal stories, the presence of strangers portraying our closest relations becomes a barrier to revealing the honesty that is critical to this form of documentary. Animating these memories is not about complete factual accuracy, but an interpretation of how these memories affect the present.

Jackson's recent film *The Visit* (2009) utilizes an audio recording of family members recollecting a shared experience of witnessing a bright light in the night sky. This shared event is enhanced through an animated storyline. This better depicts the occasion than live action re-enactments, which moves the filmmaking further toward fiction and less toward revealing the greater truth or meaning of the film — one of documentary's true ambitions. *The Visit* shares with *Flawed*, *McLaren's Negatives*, *The Sapporo Project*, *Grasshopper* and *Snack and Drink*, a commitment to the subject's existence in a shared world through its audio track narration, but departs into the creative world by visually expanding upon the meaning of the narration. This is not to say there is only a single way of reading or understanding these films. If anything, the animation invites the viewer into a broader realm of introspection and contemplation, but retains a connection to the real through narrated soundtracks. The gap between what is seen and what is heard creates a paradox that the viewer must negotiate to determine what they value as truth. This contradiction is a powerful tool in documentary, and offers great potential for evolving the form. ▶