

## Panel D2

Sala delle Colonne 1

### Theoretical perspectives on the animated documentary

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#### Real Is As Real Feels: Towards a Phenomenological Understanding of the Animated Documentary



In this presentation I wish to propose that we take seriously the ‘world-making’ quality of animated images in their interaction with reality, and argue that they carry an ontological quality, which any semiotic analysis may simply fail to account for. More specifically, I claim that animated documentaries can open up a passageway to their subjects not merely as significations, whether indexical or iconic, but as parts of a world presented to us in all their complex and multifaceted existence. Towards that end, animated documentaries often put the viewer through an experience of a synthetically reproduced reality, far more complex than what may normally meet the eye with live-action cinema.

Animated documentaries, I argue, *produce an illustration of an issue by creating a cinematic articulation of an experience*, an expression that invites intersubjective communication between spectator, text and filmmaker. Any critical consideration of the animated documentary, in my opinion, should take into account the possibility of an embodied viewership with respect to the understanding provided by the phenomenological strand in film studies. I wish here to extend such discourse, revise it to meet the ontological properties of an animated image, and mark the specifications which distinguish such engagement from that with a live-action image. In some of her work, Joanna Bouldin tries to theorize embodied spectatorship of animation, and argues that the animated image carries a kind of phenomenological presence. Bouldin argues that, despite the lack of verisimilitude between animated and real, natural flesh-and-blood bodies, of which the cartoon viewer is well aware, there still exists an essential link between animated and real bodies – a certain resonance between the animated body with its impossible physicality and the viewer’s own body.

Respectively, and following Bouldin’s theorization, I would like to further consider how a viewer may be somatically involved with an animated image. Animation, I believe, could be described as what Marshall McLuhan referred to as a “cool media,” requiring more effort on the part of the viewer to determine meaning in it. McLuhan specifically addresses comics as an example of a cool media. Due to their minimal presentation of visual detail, comic illustrations require a high degree of effort to fill in details, which the cartoonist may have intended to portray. In my opinion, an animated image, placed between the ‘hotness’ of moving images, and the ‘coldness’ of comic strips, is still closer to the latter in terms of the many details it invites the viewer to fill in. Animation often provides less visual information than photographic films, therefore requiring a higher degree of spectatorial attention and participation to fill in the gaps.

Put differently, if animation as a mode of representation can be considered ‘thinner’ than live-action in terms of the richness or preciseness in details, viewers may need to resort to their own bodies of experience (or the experience of their own bodies) in order to complete the missing information and details. To use a different terminology, insofar as the animated film can be understood as a “lazy machine” that requires viewers “to do some of its work,” (Eco 3) the extended degree of cognitive filling-in demanded by the animated film may

include, among other cognitive activities, also a corporeal process of comparison between the viewer's body and the animated one, which may result, as my case studies will clearly suggest, in rather unique tactile responses.

With respect to the animated documentary, it is only by understanding that trusting its truth claims is inseparable from experiencing it meaningfully, that we may account better for the experiential knowledge gained by watching it. Such an understanding of our 'physical' engagement with, and response to, documentary further complicates and undermines Bill Nichols's proposed template of documentary as a "discourse of sobriety," because it treats the viewing experience of a documentary as one not merely occurring on a conscious, rational level of engagement. Such an understanding also echoes Michael Renov's psychoanalytic critique of Nichols as a model that cannot sufficiently account for the ways in which our fascination with the documentary is guided by unconscious desires rather than merely conscious motives.

To illustrate my theorization, I will discuss several examples of animated documentaries that evoke feelings and mental states in an experiential manner, among which *Animated Minds* (Andy Glynne, 1993), *A is for Autism* (Tim Webb, 1992), *Snack and Drink* (Bob Sabiston, 2000), and *An Eyeful of Sound* (Samantha Moore, 2010).

## Biography

Ohad Landesman holds a PhD from the Department of Cinema Studies at New York University. He is currently a teaching fellow in the Film and Television department at Tel Aviv University and a faculty member in the History and Theory department at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem. His recent publications appeared in *Studies in Documentary Film*, *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind*, *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* and *Visual Anthropology Review*. His blog, [doctalk.co.il](http://doctalk.co.il), focuses on documentary cinema in Israel and worldwide.