

## Panel E3

Sala delle Colonne 2

### Animation and “Reality”

Alex Widdowson

**Contrasting the ethical responsibilities of an animated documentary director in three instances; when the subject of the film is identifiable, when the subject is anonymous and when the director themselves is the subject**



In this paper focus will be paid to notions of caricature and its relevance in contemporary documentary animation practice. This mode of representation traditionally regarded as derisive, yet it is still a reasonable description of how identifiable subjects in animated documentaries are represented.

Chris Landreth's approach to representing Ryan Larkin in *Ryan* (2004) will be contrasted with my own representation of Nick Mercer, an addiction therapist and former addict, in *Escapology: The Art of Addiction* (2016). This will be supported by a recorded interview with Mercer a clip from *Alter Ego* (d. Lawrence Green, 2004).

If it is agreed that an identifiable subject in a documentary animation forms a caricature, how does this rationale extend to cases where the subject's identity is denied to audiences? In contrast to live action documentary, an anonymous subject's features are not hidden but crafted. The director is thus responsible for a representation that could be considered a caricature - not of the individual but of a group or even a topic, be it asylum seekers, mental health or sexual dysfunction.

In the case of *Seeking Refuge: Julianne's Story* (d. Andy Glynn, 2012) and *Slaves* (co-d. David Aronowitsch & Hanna Heilborn, 2008), the minority groups depicted are identifiable, whereas the individuals are not. To what extent are these representations caricatures of ethnic groups and therefore images of racial stereotypes? How does the aesthetic of these animated representations, created by white westerners, contrast with representations of ethnic minorities created by members of those groups, such as Emory Douglas's Black Panther poster designs?

There have been a variety of tactics used in animated documentary to side step issues of anonymity and representation. One such example comes from the Southern Ladies Animation Group, who used anthropomorphic character designs in their film *It's Like That* (2003) to represent child refugees. By substituting a human with an identifiable skin colour or stereotypical racial features for a bird, symbolic of migration, the directors were able to protect the subject's identity and circumnavigate any accusation of racial caricaturisation.

Jonathan Hodgson was commissioned to animate the audio interviews for *Wonderland: The trouble with Love and Sex* (d. Zac Beattie, 2011). To ensure the participants' anonymity at no point was Hodgson allowed to meet or see images of the subjects. As Hodgson had only voice recordings to work from, did this tactic increase or reduce the degree with which he projected his preconceptions and prejudices onto the subjects whose characters he was designing?

The paper will conclude with an exploration of the advantages of self representation in documentary. In my career as a documentary animation practitioner I have created a number of characters or caricatures of myself while addressing personal and troubling topics such as mental illness and sexual dysfunction. What unique liberties is a director afforded when representing themselves? Is the inherent narcissism of a self portrait problematic? Ari Folman has a consistent presence in his own feature animated documentary, *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). This will be used as a counterpoint to my own animation practice.

## Biography

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Alex Widdowson is a London-based documentary animation director. He is artist in residence at the Philadelphia Association, a psychotherapy organisation founded by R. D. Laing and his colleagues.

Alex he writer for AnimatedDocumentary.com, the UK's leading blog in the field, as well as his own blog DocumentaryAnimationDiscourse.com.

He is the co-host of Kino London, a monthly open-mic short film night and an assistant organiser of Chin-Up Festival, a summer arts event. Alex teaches workshops and guest lectures across the UK. He is a graduate from the Animation Workshop's AniDox:Lab in Viborg Denmark and is currently completing a Masters Degree in Documentary Animation at the Royal College of Art.