Animating Truth: Documentary and Visual Culture in the 21st Century

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ANIMATING TRUTH: DOCUMENTARY AND VISUAL CULTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Animating Truth: Documentary and Visual Culture in the 21st Century
Nea Ehrlich
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In 2013, Annabelle Honess Roe published *Animated Documentary*, a pioneering study arguing that animation is a perfectly acceptable medium for documentary, and thus by no means a medium only suitable for humour and fantasy, or primarily aimed at children. Honess Roe shows that animation can achieve things that live-action documentary cannot achieve, or not so well. Specifically, she points out, animations can provide realistic or imaginative visuals for events and persons, objects, and events of which no recordings exist (e.g., pre-historic dinosaurs, unfilmed atrocities); and they can visualize subjective moods, states, and mental afflictions (e.g., memories, dreams, and traumas).

Nea Ehrlich's *Animating Truth*: *Documentary and Visual Culture in the 21st Century* builds on Honess Roe's ideas. Ehrlich focuses on two topics: on the use of animation in games and data visualizations; and, like Honess Roe, on its use in documentary films.

I will first address Ehrlich's discussions of animation's role in games and datafication. She convincingly argues that in an era in which quantifying information is both pervasive and important animation fulfils a key visualizing role. Models of all kinds, for instance in finance, environmental issues, and medical diagnoses, rely heavily on animations to render changes and trends accessible and interpretable. For such communicative purposes animation is an excellent medium. Ehrlich also extensively discusses the central role of animation in entertainment games. The depiction of avatars, characters, objects, and events in these games draws on animation to portray realities that simply do not exist outside the provenance of these virtual worlds. Ehrlich rightly emphasizes that although datafication and game worlds by definition cannot constitute visual records of things in the physical world, they are as real as phenomena in that physical world: "animation is often used to depict what is

otherwise unrepresentable visually" (p. 74). This of course also means that documentaries that have animated games or data visualizations as their topic cannot but use animations to "realistically" depict these virtual realities. Ehrlich moreover stresses that games need not only (re)present fantasy worlds, but can also engage with the physical world in so-called "serious games," of which she analyses several specimens.

That said, the author's eagerness to sing the praise of animation sometimes makes her forget that equating virtual and physical worlds can also be dangerous, for instance when she enthusiastically discusses the documentary *Second Skin* (Piñeiro Escoriaza 2008). This documentary portrays gamers who consider their avatars a fundamental part of their identities, no less real than their identities in the physical world (p. 143). Ehrlich fails to mention that excessive gaming is a risky form of escapism: several gamers in this documentary grew so alienated from embodied reality that they turned into addicts, with sometimes disastrous consequences. But by and large I find Ehrlich's observations on animation in (serious) games and data visualization persuasive and insightful. She is clearly well informed about these topics, and presents interesting case studies.

I have considerably more problems with her discussions of the second topic: wholly or partly animated documentary films (or: "animentaries," Honess Roe 2013). Here, the author gives the impression that she discusses animentary because it enables here to preach the ubiquity and growing importance of animation as a sophisticated and honourable medium to (re)present reality rather than because she is intrinsically interested in documentary. She also appears less up-to-date about live-action documentary film than about games and data visualizations. Whereas misattributing *Nanook of the North* to John Grierson instead of Robert Flaherty (p. 109) can be excused as a slip of the pen, it is somewhat worrisome that Ehrlich refers to the first edition of Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary* (2001) rather than to his substantially revised second (2010) or, further revised, third (2017) edition. She also does not quote the work of influential documentary theorists such as Stella Bruzzi, Carl Plantinga, or Brian Winston.

My uneasiness with Ehrlich's approach to documentary stems from several assumptions about the genre that I do not at all share with her. First, she is wrong to consider "documentary" an umbrella category that is more or less synonymous with non-fiction: "in this study 'non-fiction' refers to an expansion of the documentary field to include other disciplines that engage with factual content and its varied visual representations, such as journalism, serious games, data and scientific visualisations" (p. 21). This is misleading. While there is overlap between documentary, journalism, serious games, and data/scientific visualisations, these are all subcategories of non-fiction, each with its own meaning-making conventions, and its own goals. One cannot simply extrapolate these from one subcategory and apply them to another. A second generalization I find unacceptable is her definition of documentaries as "the narrativisation of documents" (p. 119) and as "depiction[s] of contemporary realities" (p. 229). Documentaries are neither narrativized documents nor mere depictions.In the spirit of Grierson (1934), Plantinga (2013) and Nichols (2017), I propose that documentaries are (necessarily subjective) *argumentative* perspectives on realities that may, but need not, take the form of narratives. A documentary is thus a kind of audio-visual speech aiming to convince an audience of the rightness, or validity, of a certain point of view on reality.

I also become very nervous when Ehrlich insists that we live in an era governed by "post-truth" (described as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief," p. 29), or even "truthiness" ("the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true," p. 29). It is not entirely clear whether Ehrlich endorses post-truth and truthiness. Sometimes she discusses the danger of rejecting truths and facts, but at other moments she

appears to accept post-truth and truthiness as inevitable characterizations of contemporary life, for instance when stating that in an era of truthiness, "facts are secondary to what one feels, or wishes to be true" (p. 167) and "notions of what is true are based on emotion and persuasion more than fact and evidence" (p. 235). An acceptance of post-truth and truthiness also shines through in Ehrlich's rejection of Noel Carroll's claim that "most films arrive already labelled so that audiences know how to receive them" (p. 83). By contrast, Ehrlich emphasizes the freedom of the viewer: aspects such as "vividness" (p. 152) and "believability" (e.g., p. 185) are what matter in a world in which there are no longer any undeniable facts and truths. She does not hesitate to point out that "what I am interested in is the *authoritative role* the viewer is given to create a personalised truth narrative and define the documentary value of the work" (p. 171, emphasis in original). I cannot but interpret this as that, for Ehrlich, the burden for the credibility of a documentary no longer primarily resides with its makers, but is now mainly dependent on the ideas, feelings, and whims of its audiences.

I consider this an alarming view. While I fully acknowledge that sorting out what is "true" and what is "fact" is becoming increasingly difficult in our thoroughly mediatized society, to me there is not a shade of doubt that truths and facts are as important as they always were. Appealing to emotions and believability play a key role in making (or failing to make) a documentary persuasive, but they can never replace the centrality of making truthful claims and anchoring subjective perspectives in robust facts. The events in the prophetic fiction film *Wag the Dog* (Levinson, USA 1997) are vivid and thoroughly believable to their intended audience – but unfortunately they are thoroughly fabricated lies.

Ehrlich's blurring, or even suspending, of the boundaries between several traditional dichotomies (non-fiction versus fiction; documentary versus serious games; post-truth and truthiness versus facts and truth) all feed into breaking down another supposedly obsolete contrast: that between animated and live-action documentary. She refers for instance to the "transitional status of animation today: increasingly used as a credible form of news reportage and non-fiction, yet still subject to longstanding assumptions about the existence of more worthy, credible and established modes of [live action, ChF] documentary representation" (p. 35). She thereby seems to suggest that the direct visual record of a pre-existing physical reality that has characterized documentary for most of the 100+ years of its existence is no more than a historical fluke, soon to be completely merged with, or even superseded by, animated varieties.

To be fair, Ehrlich is well aware of the complexities of the question how a (re)presentation (of any kind) is indexically linked to the, or a, profilmic physical reality, devoting an entire chapter to this thorny issue. She pledges allegiance to the idea that "without it [= indexicality] the whole concept of documentaries collapses" (p. 62), emphasizing that even "in digital culture, something of photography remains and that is the notion of indexicality as a primary marker of veracity" (p. 63). Nonetheless, her analyses of animated documentary often contradict and undermine this professed allegiance. In my view Ehrlich underestimates how important it is that in live-action documentary filmmaking analogue and digital cameras *automatically* generate a visual record of (a part of) a physical reality that to *some* extent obviates the intervention of a human being. As Plantinga (2013) emphasizes, in principle pushing the "record" button on an a camera results in the automatic production of some sort of "trace" of the pro-filmic reality at which this camera is directed – although he hastily adds that, clearly, such traces alone do usually not suffice for claiming that the recorded footage is *evidence* of something. But it is precisely the absence of such traces that typically characterizes the visuals in animation. I thus strongly reject Ehrlich's downplaying of the difference between photorealism and animation (e.g., "Once it is acknowledged that photography has multiple meanings, any direct link to realities recorded by photographic means is open to doubt," p. 57). Of course, live-action photography of a physical reality can be

ambiguous or difficult to interpret, or even downright misleading – but the fact that it *records* a fragment of this physical reality is fundamental: however "realistic" animated visuals may be, in most cases these animations *have no visual indexicality whatsoever*, [1] and this remains a fundamental difference with live-action documentary. It is therefore not at all surprising that so many animated documentaries – also among those discussed by Ehrlich herself – include some live-action footage or photographs, simply to provide the viewer with "traces" that help anchor the documentaries indexically in a pro-filmic, physical reality.

Ehrlich's relative neglect of the crucial role of "traces" for claims that (re)presentations are evidence of something also transpires elsewhere. Despite short references to animated documentaries' soundtracks (e.g., pp. 55, 139, 182, 189), Ehrlich nowhere systematically analyses the role of sounds or, even more important, of spoken language, in securing indexicality. As she herself admits, "the relationship between sound and image is a huge field in its own right that exceeds the scope of this book. Here I focus on animation as a visual medium" (pp. 220-221). But this is a serious omission, as in the absence (or reduced presence) of visual indexicality in animated documentary, the burden of providing "traces" of the pro-filmic, physical reality shifts proportionally to sound and (spoken and written) language!

In repeatedly underlining the importance of appealing to viewers' emotions, Ehrlich implicitly follows Aristotle, who insists that *pathos* is an honourable technique for enhancing the believability of a documentary. She also several times insists that viewers need to *trust* the documentary maker but, again, I think she hugely underestimates the importance of this (= Aristotle's *ethos*). I am convinced that ultimately it is the *ethos* of the makers of a documentary, and of any witnesses whose testimonies are included in it, that more than anything else makes audiences (hopefully) decide that they can trust a documentary's presentation of facts and truth claims (see Plomp & Forceville 2021 for more discussion). Indeed, I suspect that in a not-too-distant future in which animations may become indistinguishable from live-action recordings, makers of animentaries and traditional documentaries alike will be expected to explicitly indicate whether, and if so, where and how, they have technically "transformed" these representations.

Let me end by formulating my larger worry reading *Animating Truth*. In her zeal to promote the medium of animation, Ehrlich vastly exaggerates the degree to which virtual and physical worlds converge and merge. Even today, most of us live most of the time in a world with *real* people, handling *real* objects, suffering *real* pain, eating *real* food, and eventually dying *real* deaths. There is, and remains, a crucial ontological difference between the virtual and the physical world, and despite growing hybridization, the former is subservient to the latter. To the extent that these worlds *do* merge and converge, we should be highly alert not just to the advantages of virtuality, but also to its dangers. Virtual reality has yielded many benefits, but has also brought phishing, hacking, identity theft, the photoshopping away of the unwanted, and deep fakes. It has also enormously stretched the opportunities for claiming "alternative facts" and "fake news." We need to fight for (and when found: respect) facts and truths. No society or civilization can survive without fundamental agreement about the facticity and truth of most things on planet earth – even though reaching this agreement will require prolonged, fierce, and often painful debate.

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[1] Actually, there are some varieties of animation – rotoscoping, motion capture, and stop-motion filming, discussed by Ehrlich (p. 66) – that preserve a vestigial visual indexical link to the profilmic, physical reality that live-action filming provides *sui generis*, since these animation techniques begin by recording live-action persons and events, and are subsequently transformed into animations.