



# Anonymity in Animated Documentaries: Reshaping the Expressive Scale of Documentary Imagery Between Fiction and Reality

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**Abstract.** Animated documentaries are gradually evolving from experimental films into a more mature genre. Exhibiting characteristics such as the socialization of themes, non-linear narratives, and enhanced ethical awareness. They are widely used in topics such as war memories, political trauma, refugee experiences, and personal narratives. This article takes the "anonymity" of animated documentaries as its research starting point. By combining current cases with practices on anonymity in terms of ethics, emotional resonance, and narrative structure, this paper explores how animated documentaries can provide a safe space for expression for sensitive narratives and marginalized individuals through methods such as identity concealment, symbolic narrative, and separation of sound and image. And discusses how this reshapes the expressive scale of documentary film, balancing between fiction and reality.

**Keywords:** Animated Documentary; Authenticity; Metaphor; Narrative Ethics

## 1 Introduction: Theoretical Basis and Development of Animated Documentaries

The widely accepted definition of animation was proposed by Norman McLaren: "Animation is not the art of drawings that move but the art of movements that are drawn."<sup>[1]</sup> The early definitions of "documentary" in the Oxford English Dictionary at the end of the 19th century emphasized its function as a suggestion rather than an objective representation. Within film studies, documentary has long been distinguished from narrative film, experimental film, and animated film, primarily based on its assumed relationship to reality. However, this distinction is increasingly being challenged by hybrid forms.

The concept of "animated documentary" originated abroad and later sparked discussion in the domestic academic community.<sup>[2]</sup> Animated documentaries are not a new form of film. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, animation was used in newsreels and social satire films. However, works from this period were largely experimental and symbolic, lacking a clear genre consciousness. With the advancement of digital animation technology and shifts in documentary concepts, animated documentaries are regarded as a hybrid type that breaks the traditional classification of

documentaries,<sup>[3]</sup> and have gradually moved from marginal experimentation to a relatively mature creative form.<sup>[4]</sup>

## 2 Changes in the Reality of Animated Documentaries

Some scholars contend that animation can reflect inner emotions and psychological states more authentically than traditional documentaries, as it transcends the physical world's surface to delve into characters' mental realms. Conversely, others argue that animation's use may undermine documentary authenticity, as audiences may instinctively perceive it as fictional work.<sup>[5]</sup> Nichols (2017) notes that documentary authenticity typically rests on the physical referential relationship between images and the real world; photographic images, due to their "having been there" quality, are regarded as direct and truthful evidence. Animated imagery lacks this direct indexicality to reality, leading to its early perception as antithetical to the spirit of documentary filmmaking. Addressing this issue, Ehrlich (2015) introduced the concept of "animated realities," emphasizing that animated documentaries do not replicate reality but rather re-enact authentic experiences.<sup>[6]</sup> Wells (2016) further argues from a creative practice perspective that animated documentaries do not diminish documentary authenticity but rather expand its expressive dimensions.<sup>[7]</sup> Moreover, animation's inherent creativity, imaginative potential, and aesthetic qualities enable it to depict content absent from documentary footage, portray the inner emotions of subjects, and establish the emotional tone of a narrative.<sup>[8]</sup> Murray and Ehrlich (2018) contend that animated documentaries prioritize experiential authenticity over evidential authenticity, shifting focus from what happened to how events were experienced and remembered.<sup>[9]</sup> Animated documentaries construct a vivid "real" world through painting or digital animation techniques based on factual narrative information.<sup>[10]</sup>

The emergence of animated documentaries has driven a shift in documentary authenticity. Animated documentaries may conceal or obscure the source of truth through emotional persuasion rather than factual presentation, thereby forming an "anonymous" construction of reality.<sup>[11]</sup> In analyzing *Waltz with Bashir*, Ekinçi (2017) notes that animated documentaries represent a hybrid form where animation mediates traumatic memories rather than directly reenacting historical reality. This visual fiction does not diminish the film's documentary integrity but instead enables viewers to more deeply comprehend the psychological impact of war on individuals.<sup>[3]</sup> Animated documentaries are not entirely animated; they also incorporate small amounts of live-action footage, occasionally interspersed within animated scenes for contrast. The conclusion of *Waltz with Bashir* employs animated imagery to depict women who lost sons and husbands approaching soldiers, their cries from all directions leaving the soldiers frozen in place.<sup>[12]</sup> Animation creates distance between traumatic experiences and their visual representation, allowing memories to be reconstructed without relying on the indicatory nature of photographs. As long as the film remains faithful to the narrator's experience and emotions, its authenticity is established.<sup>[6]</sup> This perspective provides significant theoretical legitimacy for animated documentaries and lays the groundwork for subsequent discussions on anonymity.

### **3 Interpreting Sociocultural Realities Through Animation: From "Documenting Facts" to "Reconstructing Experiences"**

Unlike traditional documentaries that recreate historical worlds through live-action footage, animated documentaries rely on animation's expressive power to capture events. Creators can use animation effects to depict occurrences that cannot be filmed in reality.<sup>[13]</sup> The documentary film *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru*, set against the backdrop of the 1942 sinking of the Lisbon Maru, employs modern visual techniques such as animation and simulated sound effects to reconstruct historical scenes. By interweaving eyewitness accounts, symbols, and rituals,<sup>[14]</sup> it reconstructs the historical event. This approach bridges the gap left by the absence of authentic footage. It adds to the "truth" basis "truth under false plan".<sup>[15]</sup> *Waltz with Bashir* employs animation to revisit the director's traumatic wartime memories. This animated imagery transcends objective documentation of battlefields, instead interweaving the creator's psychological reality, collective memory, and national trauma. Animated imagery freely traverses memory, dreams, and symbolic realms, thereby accessing spiritual truths inaccessible through direct filming. They reconstruct social memory through visual metaphors of truth and reveal cultural psychology through symbolic forms. This "re-creation of imagery" enhances the social penetrative power of documentaries, transforming them from merely "recording society" to "interpreting social culture" and "expressing emotions and certain spirits."

### **4 Anonymity as the Theoretical Foundation of Animated Documentary**

Animation can more authentically depict realities like trauma, memory, and historical events that cameras cannot capture.<sup>[16]</sup> Widdowson (2023) notes that in interview-based animated documentaries, animated characters can diminish direct identification of identities, thereby reducing the social and political risks faced by subjects.<sup>[17]</sup> Traditional documentaries have long relied on the camera's direct recording of the real world, with authenticity often grounded in the immediacy, recognizability, and indexicality of the footage.<sup>[4]</sup> Within this paradigm, the faces, bodies, and spaces of subjects were regarded as crucial evidence of authenticity. However, in contemporary social contexts, issues such as war trauma, political violence, refugee migration, gender oppression, and private memory—due to their high sensitivity, irreproducibility, or ethical risks—reveal the limitations of photographic documentation in expressing psychological and moral dimensions. Against this backdrop, animated documentaries present authentic experiences through drawing, modeling, and visual reconstruction. Their "truth" no longer relies solely on the physical correspondence between images and reality, but shifts toward expressing memory, emotion, psychological states, and subjective experience. Ehrlich (2015) introduced the concept of "animated realities" in his research, arguing that animated documentaries do not diminish the inherent authentic-

ity of documentary filmmaking. Instead, through subjective and symbolic visual reconstruction, they expand the dimensions of understanding reality within documentary practice.<sup>[6]</sup> This perspective provides crucial theoretical support for animated documentaries and prompts academia to rethink the definition and boundaries of "truth" in documentary film.

## 5 The "Anonymity" of Animated Documentaries

**1. Identity Concealment:** Animated documentaries can effectively protect interviewees' personal information by altering elements such as appearance and voice. In the animated documentary *Father*, the story script was adapted from real interviews, but the film did not use the protagonist's real identity.<sup>[18]</sup> In traditional documentaries, subjects' faces are often directly linked to their identities. This poses exposure risks when covering political violence, gender-based violence, or sensitive events. Animation allows characters to be "redrawn," safeguarding identities while preserving the authenticity of emotional experiences. The identity concealment in animated documentaries does not hide the subject but reconstructs it. Anonymous character representations actually make it easier for audiences to project their own experiences, fostering broader social empathy.

**2. Emotional Universality:** Projecting the experiences of anonymous individuals in animated documentaries onto collective societal experiences to evoke universal empathy. *Persepolis*, scripted from director Marjane Satrapi's personal experiences, depicts how the social upheavals surrounding the Iranian Islamic Revolution impacted individual lives, local female identity, and cultural belonging. Though rendered in black-and-white animation, its narrative draws from authentic personal history, ensuring clear authenticity. The "I" (Marjane) in the film is rendered as a highly symbolic animated figure: simplified facial features, highly stylized character design, and non-realistic body proportions. This treatment transforms "Marjane" from an individual experiencing specific events into a collective symbol for the generation of youth during the Iranian Revolution, converting personal experience into generational experience.

**3. Visual Anonymity:** Through abstraction of imagery and reconstruction of space and body, concrete visuals are transformed into animated symbols, which in turn become vessels for emotion, memory, and consciousness. Since its premiere, *Tower* (2016) using animated rotoscoping combined with extensive firsthand interviews and archival footage, it reconstructs the 1966 University of Texas at Austin tower shooting from the perspective of survivors. Centered on firsthand testimonies, the production employs animated storytelling to fill the gaps in real footage. Alternating between animation and archival footage, the narrative achieves both an authentic sense of witnessing and a vivid depiction of the event's details. Their accounts rely not on recognizable real-life faces, but on animated reconstructions of scenes to convey psychological and emotional experiences.<sup>[19]</sup>

**4. Psychological Anonymity:** Animated documentaries reflect psychological authenticity through visual fiction, guiding audiences to understand and emotionally resonate with protagonists' experiences by evoking symbols and imagination.<sup>[20]</sup> Ani-

mation is not merely an aesthetic choice but a medium for traumatic memory. Waltz with Bashir detaches traumatic recollections from concrete visual evidence, creating psychological distance that allows the subject to navigate between repression and confrontation. Animation functions as a psychological barrier, enabling the subject to safely reapproach repressed memories from a secure distance.<sup>[21]</sup> By stripping away the indexicality of photographic imagery, animation shifts the audience's focus away from questioning whether events were "actually filmed," redirecting attention toward understanding psychological states and emotional experiences. This diminishes the film's representational authenticity while amplifying its psychological truth.

**5. Narrative Anonymity:** Animation unconstrained by reality, creates unique visual effects and offers greater creative freedom, enabling documentaries to maintain artistic consistency while vividly presenting stories.<sup>[18]</sup> "In animated documentaries, the burden of providing 'traces' shifts to sound and language due to the absence of visual cues."<sup>[22]</sup> In *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru*, the film's emotionally resonant narrative is enhanced by vividly realistic ambient sound effects that authentically recreate the era's environment. These details not only reinforce the ship's drifting reality and the prisoners' helpless isolation at sea but also starkly highlight Japanese military atrocities and the war's brutality. While music and sound effects may lack the direct expressiveness and prominence of visual language or narration, they weave into the film's narrative fabric through melody, atmosphere, and emotion, becoming an indispensable implicit driving force in the storytelling process.<sup>[23]</sup>

**6. Cultural Anonymity:** The anonymity of animated documentaries represents both a narrative practice and an ethical strategy, shifting the documentary's "truth" from recognizable faces to relatable emotions. The creator's identity and subject selection reflect underlying ethical motivations and mission-driven stances.<sup>[24]</sup> further expands the expressive scope of documentary film. The anonymity of animated documentaries not only protects the narrative subjects but also transforms individual experiences into culturally symbolic representations with universal resonance.

## **6 Conclusions: Narrative Structure of Animated Documentaries - Constructing New Imagination and New "Sequences of Seeing" on the Foundation of Reality**

Traditional documentaries often employ linear narratives to construct temporal continuity and causal logic to present events. Animated documentaries, however, break this linear model, exhibiting nonlinear, fragmented, and memory-based characteristics.<sup>[17]</sup> As a supplement and extension to documentary's "realistic representation" under evolving media technologies, animation demonstrates irreplaceable advantages in portraying the invisible and transcending superficial reality—aspects where live-action footage falls short.<sup>[25]</sup> Animation's challenge to documentary also reveals its unique value in serving visual storytelling. "The Debate and Definition of 'Animated Documentary'" proposes that "the original intent of applying the concept of 'animated documentary' was to combine the characteristics and strengths of both mediums."<sup>[1]</sup> In terms of "narrative scale," animation offers documentary a new expressive order across

multi-layered dimensions of time and space. On the "ethical scale": in sensitive topics, animation's anonymity becomes a means of protection and respect. Animated documentary is both an innovation in visual technology and a reshaping of cultural expression. It shifts documentary from "seeing facts" to "understanding people," no longer merely "telling an event" but "presenting a feeling." Animation is not the periphery of documentary, but another center for reinterpreting reality.

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