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Outer Worlds: Animated Documentary and Critical Realism

Abstract

Premised on matters of construction and fabrication, much of the debate around animated documentary has focused on its capacity to engage with the ‘fantastical’, ‘illusory’ and ‘internal’. Supported by the philosophical position of critical realism, this article will examine the capacity of animation to address the non-empirical levels of the external world. Critical realism argues for the independence of a complex, layered reality, whilst recognising the contingency and fallibility of knowledge. This resists the dualism of the objectivist belief in an observable and measurable reality, against approaches that foreground the subjectivism of language and discourse. In this context, animation is seen to balance the empirical and the conceptual, offering a model of reality that is located in the relationship between the indexical and the abstract. In a challenge to unitary notions of what it means to be objective or subjective, this points to the recognition of the non-dual philosophical principles underpinning animated documentary. In relation to the strategy of defamiliarization, the author argues that constructed aesthetics can function as a mode of inference towards the real but empirically undetectable structures generating actual events. The author also suggests that this can provide access to an ontological depth that is arrived at through an active, imaginative and intersubjective apprehension of the world.

Keywords

Animated documentary, objectivism, subjectivism, critical realism, causality, visibility.

Introduction

Within the community of practitioners and academics producing and theorising animated documentary, there is broad agreement that animation provides distinct advantages within documentary film.¹ Affirmative arguments claim that ‘animation can communicate ideas more clearly and more expressively than live action’ (Torre, 2017: 171), and that it can ‘grasp some aspect of reality that would otherwise be inaccessible’ (Ehrlich, 2021: 5). Much of the critical analysis has likewise focused on understanding animation as a means of articulating ‘interior’ or subjective realities (Honess Roe, 2013, 2021). There have been counter arguments that assert that animated documentary fails to represent accurate or ‘exact’ accounts of the real (Formenti, 2014). Standpoints that argue for or against the full legitimacy and efficacy of animated documentary may appear to sit at opposite ends of a subjectivist/objectivist divide. This article will argue that both perspectives are premised on a subject/object dualism that is challenged by the philosophy of critical realism (henceforth CR). In applying CR, I aim to illuminate the operating principles of documentary animation as a form of ‘communicative interaction’ (Sayer, 1992) that is practically adequate for negotiating the complexity of reality. CR offers a number of concepts that provide a productive framework for reflecting on the function performed by animation when it ‘documents differently’ (Rozenkrantz, 2011).

In response to the plurality of contemporary practice, scholars have addressed the hybridity of animated documentary aesthetics with reference to its multiple positions (Ward, 2008) on the spectrum of constructed realisms (Furniss, 1998). These strategies lie between and across the indexical and the abstract (Ehrlich, 2021; Torre, 2017), enabling access to the territories between the subjective and objective. For CR, the interaction of the subjective and objective is a necessary condition for understanding the ontological depth of actual events. Animated documentary is positioned in turn as a form of realist inference, used to

hypothesise the non-physical causal forces generating perceivable events. This suggests a new perspective for understanding animated documentary's status within the politics of representation, highlighting its capacity to negotiate the unobservable structures and mechanisms that shape the social world. In response to the current crisis of fidelity and representation, CR helps us position animated documentary as a conduit for political visibility and the apprehension of what critical realists call ontological depth.

Critical realism

CR is a broad movement within philosophy and social science. Its main premise is the separation and distinction between epistemology (knowledge, theories, ideas) and ontology (independent reality, the objects of investigation). It combines a realist ontology (there is an independent reality to investigate) with a relativistic epistemology (knowledge is context dependent). The distinction and centrality of ontology supports the effort to explain reality itself, and not just our knowledge or understanding of that reality. CR offers an alternative paradigm to what it sees as the reductionism and inadequacies of both objectivism and subjectivism.

In his early work, Roy Bhaskar, the founder of CR, claimed that science would not be necessary or possible if the world was transparent to our perception (1975). As it is differentiated and stratified across ontological levels that are not directly perceivable, reality is opaque to observation. Events are produced through forces that we are not always aware of. The causes of events are understood to be operating *transfactually*, beyond their manifestation in observable events and facts. If the world is not transparent, and perception and reality are not identical, then the work of science is to intervene in and discover reality beyond the empirical level.² Also, Bhaskar argues that experience and the production of knowledge are always mediated by our socially produced concepts and theories. But we can

come to a better understanding of reality through using theories to infer the operation of the forces that generate events (known within CR as causal mechanisms).³ In response to the complexity of the independent world, ‘the nature of the work we must do in order to find out about the world shows us both that the world is not transparent to us but needs to be discovered, and that it can be made to yield up its secrets’ (Collier, 1994: 22). This is the core of CR, the principle that informs the work that applies and develops its central features across a range of disciplines (Buch-Hansen and Nielson, 2020). As Bhaskar put it, ‘what critical realism tries to do is give a picture of the whole’ (Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2010: 78).

In the language of CR, the reality that exists independent of perception, thought and knowledge is the *intransitive* dimension. The intransitive contains the independent objects of investigation across the natural and social worlds, such as ecosystems, political institutions, geological processes and social relations. The aggregate of these objects is the whole reality that ‘exists and acts quite independently of men and the conditions which allow men access to it’ (Bhaskar, 1975: 17). The transient epistemological sphere of knowledge is the *transitive* dimension. The transitive contains the ‘antecedently established’ (Bhaskar, 1975) ideas, concepts, theories and facts that exist at any given time. Knowledge is of something that is external to it. Concepts and theories address something that is independent of perception and the concepts and theories themselves. As knowledge is grounded in time and space and in particular contexts of production, it is historically and socially situated and contingent. As the intransitive and transitive are not aligned, the relationship between knowledge and its object is not one of identity.⁴

Below, I will offer an analysis of several animated documentaries in reference to their capacity to produce transitive knowledge of intransitive objects. This can be seen in Anja Fofmel’s *Chris the Swiss* (2018), a film that uses animation to describe the causal context of armed conflict. Combining live action and animation, its subject is the life and mysterious

death of journalist Christian Würtenberg during the Balkan war of the early nineties. Following a period of war reporting, Christian took a direct part in the conflict as a member of an international militia fighting the Serbian army. As he is drawn further into the war, a succession of dream-like scenes depict Christian encountering a black, swirling mass that swarms, pestilence like, through the war-torn environment. Evoking inexorable and destructive natural forces, the mass concentrates the dark human impulses that drive the viciousness of war. It is a metaphor that infers the capacity for violence, hate and aggression that exceeds historical events. These are forces that exist in the transfactual depth beyond the observable effects of the war, and beyond the specifics of any particular conflict and its participants. The example illustrates the alignment of factual animation and CR in the common effort to give a picture of the whole that transcends the visible surface of reality.

As suggested in the distinction of knowledge and its object, across the intransitive and the transitive, there are events that happen independent of perception. Given the complexity of reality, only some events are perceived and become empirical experiences. Also, events are distinct from the causal mechanisms that generate them. This leads Bhaskar to identify the three overlapping domains of reality:

- *the domain of the empirical* is that of experiences;
- *the domain of the actual* is that of events;
- *the domain of the real* is that of the mechanisms and structures that generate events.

In Bhaskar's definition, the real domain incorporates the actual and the empirical. The actual incorporates the empirical. Together, the three domains comprise the whole of reality.⁵

Bhaskar argues for the ontological distinctiveness of the three domains, asserting that access to one domain does not provide uncomplicated or direct access to another. Amber Fletcher (2017) has provided a useful analogy for the domains, illustrating their interrelationship with the metaphor of an iceberg (fig. 1).

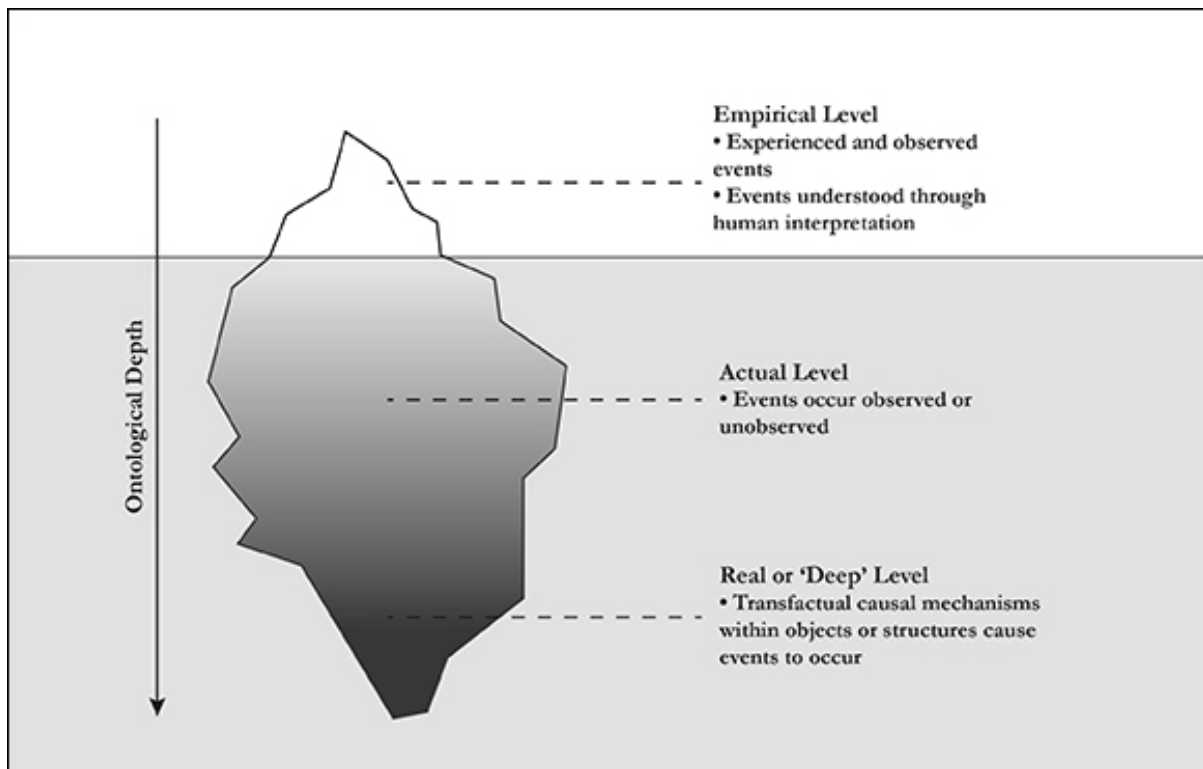


Figure 1. The three domains of reality (Adapted from: Fletcher, 2017: 183).

The visible tip of the iceberg is the empirical domain, or level, where observed events are recorded and interpreted. The water line indicates the limits of perception and observation. As observed phenomena are no more than the tip of the iceberg, ‘observability cannot be the criterion of existence’ (Danermark et al., 2019: 24). Experience of events at the empirical level don’t provide access to how ‘things “actually” and “really” are’ (Danermark et al, 2019: 24). Focus shifts from observable phenomena to underlying structures hidden ‘underneath the water’. The actual is the level of events, many of which occur unobserved. The events of the actual are produced by the interaction of causal mechanisms at the real, or metaphorically ‘deep’ level. The underlying structures in the real domain can’t be accessed through direct perception.

For us to have a deeper and truer understanding of reality, we must use experience to best understand the domain of the real. To George Steinmetz, ‘events are always and necessarily overdetermined by a plurality of conjuncturally interacting mechanisms’ (2004: 383). Understanding reality must be grounded in sensitivity to the complexity and fluidity of ‘overdetermined constellations’ (Steinmetz, 2004: 383) that generate events and experiences. As Nick Wilson says:

This simply confirms our common sense thinking that there exist in the world different things, operating at and across discrete levels. In fact, we have no difficulty in thinking about the world in this way, such as when discussing the chemical, biological, cultural or perhaps aesthetic make-up of an object or event. (2020: 5)

Steve Fleetwood (2014) has called for a shift from ‘thin’ to ‘thicker’ causal explanations. Thin causality is the understanding of an event only as an outcome of the events that preceded it. Thick causality considers the interaction of causal powers that have combined to trigger the event.⁶ As the empirical alone can’t offer an account of causality, investigating events demands the use of imagination and creative modelling. To borrow Douglas Porpora’s language, this is ‘something discursive rather than an equation [explanations are] more pictures that need to be painted than equations that need to be solved’ (Porpora, 2015: 46).

In the following sections, objectivist and subjectivist readings of animated documentary are discussed in relation to the capture of reality. In applying the metaphor of the iceberg, objectivist accounts limit the boundaries of representation to the tip of the iceberg, denying what’s ‘underneath the water’. Subjectivism foregrounds the individual and the interior in a shift away from the complexity of the exterior world. In failing to recognise the interaction of the objective and subjective in how we come to know the real, the potential of animation to access the social world is obscured. I argue that, from the non-dual position of CR, the recognition of animation as a vehicle for thick explanation is realised. This

accounts for the properties of animation as a means for painting the ‘pictures of the whole’ that transcend the limits of the observable.

Objectivism and the aesthetic fallacy

For objectivism, knowledge derived from observation corresponds to a reality that can be perceived, recorded and measured. In this view, reality ‘speaks for itself’ and ‘can be interpreted as an open book’ (Høyer, 2010: 168). Reality is equated with what can be experienced, ‘it says what you are experiencing is real, given, certain’ (Price, 2014: 58). This is what Andrew Collier (1994) calls shallow realism and what Bhaskar (1975) calls actualism. Actualism restricts reality to the domain of the empirical, seeing cause and effect only at the level of observed events, and denying the existence of underlying structures and mechanisms.

Events are not exhausted by our experience or knowledge of them, nor does knowledge exhaust the possibilities of reality. Events go unperceived, and may be unperceivable, but that does not mean they don’t occur. We can’t rely exclusively on the empirical, for this would exclude most of reality. For CR, experience is not a mirror of the intransitive that imprints an unmediated impression on transitive knowledge. The data derived from experience are filtered by an ‘*ensemble* of theoretical and empirical ideas’ (Bhaskar, 1975: 138, emphasis in original), that structure our subjectivity through ‘social transmit’ (Toulmin, cited in Bhaskar, 1975: 138). Experience and the description of experience ‘will always be to a greater or lesser extent theoretically determined. . .not neutral reflections of a given world’ (Bhaskar, 1975: 249). Facts, warranted as evidence of events, may tell us that something happened at the empirical level. But they may not tell us what caused it, or what it means. A deeper explanation is arrived at through creative inferences that capture the context and causes of events.

This is important to consider because the claim has been made that animation, as opposed to photographic film, fails to present an ‘*exact* account of what occurred’ (Formenti, 2014: 112, my emphasis). Although the evidentiary value of the indexical image should be recognised (Rozenkrantz, 2011), this argument suffers from the empirical realism and the essentialism of actualism. It assumes an empirical ‘purity’ in documentary representation that can’t be supported (Eitzen, 1995; Winston, 1995); it does not acknowledge that reality and images have an indirect relationship that is mediated by human practice (Wayne, 1997); and it fails to recognise the role of the non-empirical factors that determine how we interpret and understand reality (Bendor and Landesman, 2011). More recently, Cristina Formenti has argued that:

When an animated work illustrates a fragment of reality, what the viewer sees unfold on screen is far from being an objective record of the factual events it depicts. Rather, it is a creative (and often imaginative) interpretation of a real-life occurrence that cannot but reflect its author’s point of view. (Formenti, 2022: 14)

The expectation that documentary can deliver an unmediated record of the factual is premised on the tenets of objectivism allied to the apparent scientific status of the camera as a neutral recording device. This sustains the belief that a film can be ‘exact’ and objective in its treatment of reality. But it is not possible for any representation to achieve this aim within human affairs, as no representation is removed from the social and cultural conditions that determine all perspectives and viewpoints (Ward, 2005). The absolute distinction between photographic film and animation can’t be sustained on the basis of animation’s assumed creative and imaginative status. The production of live action documentary is also creative and imaginative. Its indexical images are conditioned through creative mediation. Its interpretation of events is shaped within the subjectivity and imagination of the filmmaker. Faith in the ‘unfiltered’ image suggests a confidence in the capacity of the photographic to

deliver unmediated truth. For a critical realist, the photograph, like observation and experience, does not have a direct correspondence with reality. Reality sits at many levels; its depth is not visible to human perception or the camera lens. The level that the photograph records does not render this complexity, only its surface appearance in events that happen to be witnessed and captured (Ehrlich, 2021; Torre, 2017).⁷

Consistent with this argument, Jeffrey Skoller has called for the acceptance of mediated, animated aesthetics within documentary. In terms that echo CR, he says that alternatives to photographic media may be more suited to capturing the forces that generate the events we experience. In response to the complexities and ambiguities of reality, traditional ‘documentary evidence is not always possible, revealing or clarifying’ (2011: 207). In the absence of certainty derived from observation and facts, theoretical speculation and imagination is demanded. An ‘exact’ account can’t be achieved, regardless of the methods and technologies involved. If reality was transparent enough so that ‘exact’ accounts were possible, there would be no need for any form of inquiry within science or any other field. If “‘everything that is” were in the open, if reality were transparent, there would be no need for science as we know it’ (Danermark et al., 2019: 24). This follows Karl Marx’s assertion that ‘all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided’ (1966: 817, cited in Buch-Hansen and Nielson, 2020: 31). As Kieran Cashell says:

To believe that the vehicle confers reality on the content it possesses (or mediates) is an example of the *aesthetic fallacy*. . . the naïve assumption that the properties of the vehicle of representation are literally “the same” as the properties of the represented. (2012: 341, my emphasis)

The belief that our perceptions and representations can be identical to reality has no credible basis in experience and knowledge. The ‘solipsistic exclusion of a non-empirical real world

also generates a whole range of problems, one of the most obvious of which is that of understanding how we ever come to discover anything new' (Sayer, 1981: 12). A primary property of reality is that it is not transparent to observation. Phenomena must be 'hidden' beneath the empirical level if they are ever to be discovered. Reality contains mechanisms that can't be observed, but we can come to know them indirectly through their effects.⁸

Subjectivism and the epistemic fallacy

It has been argued that the fabricated vocabulary of animated documentary captures the subtle complexities of reality in ways that are not possible in live action production (Ehrlich, 2019, 2021; Honess Roe, 2013; Torre, 2017; Ward, 2005, 2008; Wells, 1997). By transcending the photographic and empirical, animation can negotiate multiple levels of reality across the psychological, sexual, emotional, social and cultural spheres. More specifically, debate has focussed on its facility for engaging with the 'internal' spaces of subjective experience. On this, Annabelle Honess Roe says:

The "world in here" of subjective experience is represented via animation. In fact, rather than the type of things that are physically visible, such as events that could be witnessed by others, or the "world out there" that is typically represented in conventional, live-action documentaries, animation has been shown to lend itself well to conveying realities that are subjective and internal. (2021: 127-128)

She goes on to say that documentary animations 'demonstrate the potential for animation to expand the epistemological scope of documentary by enabling films about the reality of the "world in here" instead of just the "world out there"' (2021: 138). The suggestion is that, as animation is deployed, a move is made towards the subjective 'inner world' and away from reference to the external world. This implies the existence of multiple subjective 'realities'.

For CR, experience and knowledge are perspectival and relative, but reality is not.

Subjectivism's withdrawal into interiority collapses reality (questions of ontology) into knowledge (questions of epistemology). This is called the *epistemic fallacy*, the denial of the distinction between reality and knowledge. Within subjectivism, the epistemic fallacy is expressed in a relativism where reality is reduced to what people feel, think or believe. Bhaskar says the fallacy sustains 'the view that statements about being can be reduced to or analysed in terms of statements about knowledge; i.e., that ontological questions can always be transposed into epistemological terms' (1975: 36). For example, there is a tendency to reduce a person to our experiences and memories of that person, a reduction that obscures the complexity of the whole independent, complex individual. The epistemic fallacy grounds an epistemic conception of truth. Epistemic truths are premised on knowledge production as a process that arrives at a point of certainty and security. The 'producer' or location of truth is the process of conceptualisation itself, 'the content of the certain knowledge attained is truth. . . truth, according to the epistemic conception, is knowledge content that is certain' (Porpora, 2015: 77). In other words, truth is equated with what is known. In contrast, CR calls for an ontological conception of truth as independent of perception and knowledge. As Margaret Archer says, 'there is a state of the matter which is what it is, regardless of how we view it, choose to view it or are somehow manipulated into viewing it' (2007: 195).

For CR, addressing reality is an inherently social process. We don't develop our subjectivity autonomously, and it is not possible to speak from a vacuum outside of our own social situatedness. Individual subjectivity is forged through contact with the external world, the common object of perception in the production of our social and *intersubjective* knowledge. In writing about what CR can offer intersectional theory, Martinez et al. have warned against over emphasising the personal in the analysis of the social world, 'a focus on interpretation. . . carries the risk that such research will be "drained of causal import" as it attends primarily to individual interpretations of reality' (2014: 433). They go on to say that

the ‘implication of this line of thinking. . .is that structural issues tend to be analyzed primarily in terms of individual experiences and related understanding of them, to the detriment of the analysis of unrecognized structural factors’ (Martinez et al., 2014: 453-454). The psychology and subjectivity of individuals is emergent from structural factors at the social level. The psychological is irreducible to the social, but it can’t be divorced from social structures that are always its activating, causal context.⁹ Personal experience must be thought of in terms of a collective process. Against what she calls the individualistic epistemology of Cartesian thinking, Allison Assiter asserts the CR conception of the social production of knowledge. She says that ‘the solipsistic knower is implausible in the light of human socio-biology. This suggests that people are basically collective and social beings and therefore collective knowers’ (Assiter, 2001: 245-246). As the interpretation of phenomena is activated by socialisation, the reading of facts is a function of human agency that is mediated by social structures. As Bhaskar has said, ‘established facts are social products. . .facts always depend upon social activity. . .reading depends upon the mechanisms of the reproduction and transformation of language, of knowledge and of society’ (1975: 187-188). As a projection of experience that is enmeshed in the social, animated documentary addresses the world external to subjectivity. The ‘world in here’ is not separate from the ‘world out there’. There is only one, interconnected reality that we access from different positions and contexts. Fleetwood puts it this way:

Critical realists reject the idea of “multiple” realities as a category mistake: reality is not the kind of thing that there can be more than one of. There is only one reality although, importantly, there often are several discourses (etc.) that act as interpretations of it. (2014: 208)

Importantly, intersubjectivity does not signal a move towards relativism or the incommensurability of competing accounts. Rather than taking us further from the truth, ‘by

learning from each other's culturally limited perspectives and adjudicating among them, we can move from situated knowledge to. . . a truth that transcends the limits of our socio-historical situatedness' (Porpora, 2015: 76). The fact that we respond to animated documentaries, that they mean something to us, is determined by the intersubjectivity and exteriority of what they describe.¹⁰

For example, in Jennifer Zheng's *Tough* (2017), the ambiguities and tensions of national and cultural identity are explored. The film situates a personal exploration of identity within a collective and multi-generational historical context. It illustrates a conversation between a Chinese immigrant to the UK and her daughter, who is also the filmmaker. In response to Zheng's attempt to understand the historical context of her own life, the Mother describes her childhood experience of the cultural revolution and the profound impact of political and social turmoil on her family. Pencil mark making and textures in the film's design reinforce the sense of intimacy, familial bonds, and the roots of self-image in formative, childhood experience. Part way through the film, the conversation turns to the differing expectations and perceptions of mother and daughter. Here, the malleability and conflicts of identity are captured in an image of a childlike drawing of faces that are animated in synch with the dialogue, briefly projecting the personas of mother and daughter. The faces are then altered and coloured to echo Zheng's fluid sense of nationality, inferring the interacting mechanisms that generate the constituent components of personal identities across the familial, national and ethnic. In what is clearly a work derived from and motivated by personal experience, the extrapersonal mechanisms that shape collective identities are addressed. The film suggests that the experience of identity formation could not be meaningfully and adequately interpreted by a lone individual. The exteriority and contingency of identity are foregrounded as intersubjectively produced within the family, community and larger society. *Tough* reveals the complexities of identity for the second-

generation children of immigrants, addressing the uncertainties and elisions inherent in the negotiation of a family history embedded in the instability of an uncertain past. But it also offers a recognition that this complexity can be navigated through dialogue and interaction within a shared process. As Marx said, ‘people make history, but not under conditions of their choice’ (cited in Bhaskar, 1979: 73). We can’t define ourselves autonomously, as we don’t choose the conditions that determine the emergence of our identities. But we can come to a better understanding of those conditions through a plurality of positions and standpoints.

Mm-hmm (2017), by Hannah McNally and Martha Halliday, also addresses social structures through an elaboration of personal circumstances shaped by exterior forces. The film describes the experience of a young autistic person, named Joel, and his mother and carer Mary. It is focused on Mary’s concerns as she contemplates the possibility of Joel living independently, and her fear that he may be left without the daily support that he needs. The hand drawn, coloured pencil animation features fragmented lines and an unstable sense of movement that establishes a playful tone, but also suggests the potential threat to Joel’s circumstances. In the narrative, his possible vulnerability and precarity in navigating society alone is expressed through images of a tiny, miniaturised Joel traversing the kitchen in the family home. At one point, he balances on the thread of a tea bag stretched like a tight rope over a hot cup of tea. Later, he pushes a biscuit from a high shelf that breaks on the kitchen worktop, highlighting the dangers he may face if left without full time help. Mary’s hand is seen working on a written list of tasks and appointments. The list is then scrambled and tangled to a thick mass of squiggles, invoking the threat to the care and routine that Joel relies on. He then appears within the squiggles, suggesting the disorder and disruption he may suffer if support from his mother were lost. Although the film captures the personal experiences of its subjects, and its hand-drawn aesthetic reflects the domesticity of the situation, it infers the exterior social conditions faced by autistic people as they enter

adulthood in a society that does not accommodate their needs. An emotionally charged sense of specific subjective experience is situated within the social conditions that produce the experience. Social reality is metaphorically represented in the vastness of the kitchen from the miniature Joel's perspective, an image that movingly expresses the difficulties of the world for an autistic person. The metaphor also captures the interrelation between the circumstances of a domestic, private space and the public, social structures that are its context.

Intersubjectivity is rooted in the social and ontological basis of language and representation. Concepts are intelligible only if they presuppose something to conceptualise. Timothy Rutzou has argued that:

The descriptions and names we use of phenomena move beyond what is present and already commit us ontologically, whether we like it or not. To speak, to describe, let alone to interpret, has already committed us to saying something more than we can show, something beyond that which is manifest in the particularities we encounter (2016: 333)

Cashel (2009) has written of the function of representation within the focus on 'independently existing structural characteristics' (Rutzou, 2016: 331). He describes the aim of representation as 'teleological in nature: pursuit of an external object that establishes the internal conditions of possibility for representation-transcendent contact with that object' (Cashell, 2009: 137). The end goal of representation is the revelation of an independent reality through forms that *exceed* their own internal conditions, *through* those internal conditions. For Cashel, this is only possible if representation is undertaken with an awareness of the separation of the representation and the object. In challenging the aesthetic fallacy, he says: 'What is essential to avoid here is the unintuitive notion that the act of representation confers reality on what it refers to. If this is rejected, representation can be acknowledged to

disclose reality *only* if what it represents is ultimately *separable* from its representation’ (2009: 138, my emphasis). If it can’t be divided in this way, representation can only refer to itself. If it has no referent in reality, it has no relationship with the intransitive. This applies to fictional entities that are of *an* invented world, but not references to *the* historical world. Realist representation presupposes external reality and is primarily ‘a vector that relays attention to something else’ (Cashell, 2009: 153).

This separation is integral to representation that is distinct from but responds to what ‘is there’ in the world. From this perspective, the constructions of animation are not a barrier to addressing reality, nor are they tied to the subjective or fictional.¹¹ In semiotic terms, as representation is not entirely epistemic, it is in the zone occupied by the signifier, between the intransitive and the transitive, and between the signified and the referent. Concepts, and their interpretation, can’t be considered entirely ‘of our mind’, they are not purely subjective or relative. As Cashell says, ‘interpretation is both motivated and determined by socio-historical. . .and existential. . .factors. Therefore interpretation cannot be regarded as irreducibly subjective or relativistic in nature’ (2009: 157). The assumption of internal worlds risks falling into the epistemic fallacy, pushing animated documentary too far towards the subjective, and away from addressing the ‘systems and relationships’ (Wells, 1997: 4) beneath the surface appearance of reality.

Consider Rosa Fisher’s *Sent Away* (2019), which examines the damage done by the British boarding schools to young children, and the wider social and political implications. A personal story catalyses a politicised engagement with the structural characteristics of the boarding school system. The subject of the film, the adult Tom, describes the emotional and psychological effects of removal from the family home at eight years old. An opening scene depicts Tom as a child, happily playing a toy trumpet as he interacts with his attentive mother. The scene is rendered in a bright yellow colour that reflects the vibrant energy of his

play. As he is taken to the boarding school by his father, he is enveloped by a grey, drab environment of severe discipline and restraint. Later, as Tom attends music lesson and plays the horn, the frame is filled with sheet music. Tom appears joyfully marching along the staff lines and playing the horn as his happy mother looks on. Suddenly the lines snap and Tom falls out of the frame. The scene infers the psychological violence of the separation from a loving parent. Later, the central metaphor of the film is rendered as the emotional isolation they endure forces the boarders to suppress their emotions. The boys are shrunk and encased in robot like, hard figures that are coloured with the drab grey of the school environment. Small figures within the shells remain bright yellow, indicating the inner light of a repressed, emotional core. An extension of the metaphor then goes on to suggest the wider implications and effects of the boarding school system. A phalanx of marching robot figures fills the frame. As a drum plays a military beat on the soundtrack, the figures transform into soldiers, and then politicians. A zoom out reveals hundreds of figures, implying a broad, widespread societal impact. The destructive role of an exaggerated masculinity in the disciplinary culture of the schools, and the social effects of former boarders taking leading roles in UK politics is described. In this way, Tom's specific story is a platform for pursuing a causal argument that addresses wider systems and relationships. It engenders a collective interpretation of sociohistorical and existential factors. This moves from Tom's experience, to the broader culture of the schools, to the social and political sphere of British institutions. The layering of the metaphor succinctly and powerfully infers a network of power relations and the psychological dysfunction that produces damaging political and social effects.

Ontological realism and the imagined

Documentary film is constructed in a dialogic relationship between facts and evidence on the one hand, and the inevitable mediation of subjectivity that shapes all representations on the

other. The co-present objective and subjective tendencies at work in negotiating and understanding events are not antithetical or at odds. Rather, they are both engaged in a ‘perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation. . .the two remain distinct but interactive’ (Bruzzi, 2000: 9). This is consistent with the CR approach that ‘treats conception and perception as distinctive, separate, stratified, and yet related in an emergent way’ (Wilson, 2020: 58). If we accept this, our understanding of the world is a hybrid of how it is and how we think of it, or imagine it to be. This is the location of the non-dualism of both critical realism and animated documentary.

CR attempts to explain the empirical by modelling what is beyond the visible at ‘a level at which things are really going on irrespective of the actual outcome’ (Bhaskar, 1975: 51). As imagination is unavoidable in going beyond the empirical, ‘explanation thus involves, centrally, the substitution in our imagination of a real or empirical relationship for an unreal or theoretical one’ (Bhaskar, 1975: 154). The imagined is the only access to what is most important and valuable in the understanding of an event, its causes in the generative domain. Whereas for subjectivism ‘the imagined mechanism is *imaginary*, for realism it may be *real*, and come to be established as such. What is *imagined* may be real; but what is *imaginary* cannot’ (Bhaskar, 1975: 146, second emphasis added). An emphasis on the imagined indicates that the object of reference is often of a non-physical, but real, kind. The intransitive contains the material and the non-material forces that can generate events. From this perspective, the imagined doesn’t only entail the illusory or internal; it works with a balance of the empirical and mediation as causal inference towards the real domain.

This is activated through representational strategies that reject objectivism in favour of disrupting the surface appearance of reality. Active forms of construction can negotiate the principles of defamiliarisation, refusing to take the world on the ‘face value’ level that the over-extensions of objectivism encourage. Nea Ehrlich has argued that ‘animation can be

included in this category since it can create multi-layered representations that require active engagement and viewer interpretation' (2019: 24). A more complex, defamiliarising aesthetic provokes awareness that the surface is produced by something else, something imperceptible. This can work towards "“giving face” to what otherwise would not be photographically representable' (Ehrlich, 2019: 34). In this sense, defamiliarisation can be thought of as a critical realist tool. The 'enhanced cognitive interaction' (Ehrlich, 2021: 184) provokes questions about why something is the way it is, or why something happened. This catalyses spectatorship as a 'truth-production process. . .precluding any one objective or authoritative view' (Ehrlich, 2021: 212).

To illustrate, *Drop by Drop* (2017), by Alexandra Ramires and Laura Gonçalves, adopts visual metaphor to reveal the deterioration of traditional life in a Portuguese village. In the film's introductory scenes, a figure in a carnivalesque costume with a devilish mask capers to the folk music in the soundtrack. Its design is a reference to costumes used in ancient rituals within traditional celebrations in rural Portugal. We see villagers wearing masks similar to that of the costumed figure, as an interview subject refers to her family history and her drawn depiction whittles a new mask. These connections establish the devil figure as a metonymic personification of the culture and community of the village. The devil 'gives face' to the collective consciousness and shared history of the villagers. The message is reinforced as the drawn interview subjects emit cloud like shapes from their mouths that merge with the body of the devil, 'breathing life' into the collective spirit of the village. Etchings and textural elements lend a sense of antiquity and tradition to the design. An expression of the central theme, this speaks to the notions of transience and loss that the film articulates. As the film progresses, the village floods and high winds carry off inhabitants, evoking the mechanisms that compel people to leave the community. In an imagined translation of the underlying reality, intransitive economic and social forces are made

manifest as relentless natural phenomena. Masks are blown away by the wind, along with the leaves of the emblematic cork tree at the centre of the village, that has stood for over five hundred years. Soon only four people remain, clinging to fences and the roofs of their houses. Later, as the flood water rises, the devil constructs a raft from pieces of the village. A line of ants take refuge in a floating bottle top, echoing the precarity of the population. The devil's raft protects the remaining, tiny population from the deluge. Falling beneath the surface of the water, the devil transforms into an anchor that tethers the raft to its roots in the history of a lost life and community. The film powerfully embodies the fragility of local cultures eroded by large scale economic and social forces. Through its layered use of metaphor, the causal mechanisms producing the conditions of the village are revealed. The film captures a truth that is arrived at through an active, imaginative and intersubjective apprehension of the events it describes.

A focus on an external conception of truth, independent of subjectivity, is consistent with the ontological realism of CR. In contrast to subjectivism and objectivism, ontological realism establishes an ontological conception of truth. Although our conceptions of reality are produced within the context of existing knowledge and the limitations of perception, the truth of our concepts is not relative to themselves. As Kevin Schilbrack states, 'that *E. coli* swims in your intestines or that the Cambrian explosion exponentially increased species are facts that biologists came to understand recently, but they are not facts that became true recently. Truth does not depend on understanding' (2014: 170). The gap between the transitive and intransitive demands the persistent development of new ways of understanding reality, through the continual transformation of knowledge within a collective, social process. Bhaskar uses the following example to illustrate the contingency of knowledge in response to an independent world:

If changing experience of objects is to be possible, objects must have a distinct being in space and time from the experiences of which they are the objects. . .when modern sailors refer to what ancient mariners called a sea-serpent as a school of porpoises, we must suppose that there is something which they are describing in different ways (1975: 31)

The point here is that when the mariners and sailors describe the same concrete, external phenomena in different ways, they are not ‘creating their own realities’. To believe so is to commit the epistemic fallacy. The descriptions serve to address the same external thing according to different historical contexts, with different standards of existing knowledge. Accepting the ontological realism of an independent and stratified reality, we see that truth is not in our representations or knowledge. It is in reality itself, reality is the ‘truth maker’ (Porpora, 2015). CR grounds the commonsensical notion of the truth we invoke in general, everyday discourse. We don’t mean ‘the truth only as I see it’, we appeal to the truth ‘out there’ in the world, not within our perceptions and interpretations.

As argued, imagination is required in apprehending aspects of reality that cannot be directly perceived. What ‘imagination does is to liberate us from the grasp of the actual’ (Mackie, 2023: 125) so that the mechanisms within the real can be conceived. Causal mechanisms can be the object of animated documentaries that infer non-empirical forces through the features of their language. The analysis of their operation can provide insight into how animation can be ‘an effective revealer of those unfilmable aspects’ (Torre, 2017: 177) within the invisible parts of the world. As Maureen Furniss has said, animation’s formal aspects move between opposite ends of a spectrum, with ‘mimesis’ at one end and ‘abstraction’ at the other (Furniss, 1998), with various degrees of iconicity as ‘intermediate positions’ (Ward, 2008) across the scale. As images are decoupled from physical referents, the movement to the iconic and abstract broadens the scope of representational capacity and

possible interpretations (Torre, 2017). As opposed to the move inwards towards the interior and subjective, this is the move outwards to the external world. Animation works as a ‘transitional object’ (Wilson, 2020), an artwork that operates in the space between the subjective and the objective, between the imagination and the outside world. Its realist ontology and externality mean that ‘animation can no longer be regarded as non-realistic’ (Ehrlich, 2021: 43). Not only is animation realist; it should also be regarded as a form of strong realism (Collier, 1994). Because it stimulates awareness that goes beyond surface appearances, it is *transphenomenal*, where ‘knowledge may not only be of what appears but of underlying structures, which endure longer than those appearances, and generate them or make them possible’ (Collier, 1994: 6).

In *Something More* (2022), directed by Mary Martins, abstract animation is employed in the examination of the causes of knife crime in inner city London. In the early part of the film, organic, frenetic marks created using organic plant matter on physical film, are established as a visual expression knife violence. The marks imply its destructive force, suggesting the emotional and physical toll that it takes. Through editing and alignment to interviews with professionals from the criminal justice system and youth workers, the abstraction is then understood to be an embodiment of the social deprivation that is the primary cause of the violence. The mark making then renders iconic images of the urban environment, implying the presence of a persistent threat within the social structures of the communities affected. Later in the sequence, the marks are juxtaposed with photographic layers as they are applied to live action footage of the community’s physical space. This strategy visualises the presence of deprivation as a primary causal force determining incidents of knife crime. As strong realism, the film operates in the transitional space between a mediated rendering of causal forces and their concrete effects in the external world. The contextualisation and juxtaposition of the animation also infers the confluence of causal

mechanisms across the criminal justice system, community relations and capitalist economics. It is these invisible forces that are the referent and object of the film. Martins uses animation as a transphenomenal device, producing knowledge of underlying structures and causal contexts that make actual events possible.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the vocabulary of animated documentary can be understood through critical realist philosophical principles, showing us the underlying reality of the world in its essences, rather than in its appearances. To use Timothy Rutzou's description of the aims of CR, animated documentary also 'searches for a means of moving beyond the surface and getting at the structures, and with the structures, the causal mechanisms, powers, capacities and dispositions of social reality that account for the surface events' (2016: 334). Animated documentary is deployed in what Nick Wilson calls 'reality testing', fostering a search for truth through 'the ability of the mind to assess the reality of the external world, and to act upon it accordingly' (2020: 181). This is critical to our autonomy and agency as human beings. It is something that is 'not just "nice to have", but it is something as human beings we "need"' (Wilson, 2020: 102).

Current developments in digital imaging and their presence in mass communication have the potential to destabilise the reliability and trustworthiness of representations of the world. This in turn shapes the debates that negotiate issues of truth, and how reality can be accessed or 'seen', particularly with regards to the social and political implications of 'visibility'. We can't directly see many of the structures and mechanisms that determine the conditions of politics and society. We can't see networks of financial and political power, or the complexities of climate change, or much of the institutional violence of neoliberalism.

None of these forces are visible through ordinary perception or from within an interior subjectivity.

Animated documentary is an important tool in traversing and understanding the ‘zones of invisibility’ (Chanan, 2008) that must be accessed to understand what is happening to us and why. Rather than being a marginal, peripheral activity, working with and thinking about the conjunction of animation and the factual is at the forefront of how we understand representations of the social world. Understanding how images of the real are constructed and interpreted, and how the world is mediated in relation to what is visible, invisible and meaningful is central to the negotiation of our present conditions. It’s these principles that challenge the ideological decoupling of causes from effects that obscure social relations and structures; a smokescreen that enables the reduction of increasing food bank use, or homelessness, or the prevalence of knife crime, to a matter of individual agency and responsibility.

Nea Ehrlich warns that ‘as animation in documentary proliferates, its unique characteristics - its potential representational contribution - will diminish, unless used wisely’ (2021: 193). It is in its ontological grounds that the ethical imperatives of animated documentary as a form of ‘practical wisdom’ (Rutzou, 2016) and ‘moral realism’ (Wilson, 2020) will be maintained. As Celina Valente has put it, ‘without ontology we have no ethic for action - no emotion to get us moving. Without ontology, what is the point? What are we *about*? What do we stand *for*?’ (Geuenich et al., 2023: 143, emphasis in original).

Thought of as a technology of seeing, the potential of animated documentary is in seeing external things differently. In this way: ‘animation can be the realm in which such graphic rendition might make social forms available to knowledge’ (Leslie, 2014: 34). Rather than overextending the powers of the photographic or collapsing into inner worlds, this is best achieved through a critical realist conception of truth.

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Notes

1. I will be using the term documentary as distinct from the broader category of non-fiction that includes newsreels, home movies, news reports, recorded lectures, training videos and public information films (Ward, 2005). I am referring to film works that arrange parts to form a whole sequence and a story (Rosen, 2001). Following Rosen, Jaimie Baron says that; non-fictional ‘documents, with their fragmentary status, are distinct from documentary in that documentary, in order to narrate history, must provide both sequence and meaning’ (2014, p. 10).

2. Bhaskar argues that only the controlled conditions of the laboratory can produce the constant conjunction of events, where one event always following another. One event will not constantly follow another outside of artificially produced closed systems that exclude the influence of other causal forces. Most of reality is outside of closed systems. In open systems,

events will always be caused by the changing context of multiple causal forces working in unpredictable ways.

3. Although the term ‘mechanism’ suggests a physical thing, it is used in CR to refer to the ‘powers or properties of an object’ (Mingers, 2006: 22). For example, water has the power to extinguish fire, gunpowder has the power to cause an explosion, a market has the power to produce wealth or poverty, and people have the power to work and love (Buch-Hansen and Nielson, 2020; Mingers, 2006). However, an object’s power may not always be exercised. Water may be drunk instead of thrown on fire, or unemployment may curtail a person’s power to work. Under CR, the criterion for existence is causal rather than empirical, ‘for an empiricist only that which can be perceived can exist, whereas for a realist having a causal effect on the world implies existence, regardless of perceptibility’ (Mingers, 2006: 22).

4. As Douglas Porpora says ‘we might finally discover. . .that William Shakespeare truly was Christopher Marlowe. If so, he always was. The intransitive past does not change with our transitive knowledge of it’ (2015: 181). There will always be an ‘ontological gap’ between knowledge and reality (Danermark et al., 2019). This acknowledges the relativity of knowledge, without divorcing it from ontology altogether.

5. Bhaskar is keen to stress that he is not suggesting an ontological hierarchy across the domains. He says ‘I am not saying that experiences are less real than events, or events less real than structures’ (1975: 58).

6. The CR view of thick causality is consistent with the resistance to both subjectivism and empiricism within Clifford Geertz’s (1973) concept of ‘thick description’. Graham Murdoch

(1997) invokes thick description in his call for a critical realist interpretive cultural analysis that recognises material conditions. However, Douglas Porpora (2020) has pointed out that Geertz differs from CR in ‘arguing that social explanation is not a species of causal explanation, but more an enterprise of interpretive understanding’ (2020: 526).

7. This is not to deny or downplay the value of photographic representation. I agree with Rozenkratz (2011) that ‘photographic verifiers’ as an ‘evidential ingredient’ do provide a ‘sign of existence’ at the empirical level. But this in itself can’t show us the deeper strata of reality. Also, given that observation and recording is never ‘pure’ and wholly independent of subjective construction, no absolute ‘distinction between what can be observed and what can be inferred on the basis of observation can be sustained. . .we must acknowledge that the boundaries of “the empirical” are both fuzzy and changeable’ (Sayer, 1992: 12).

8. Recognising the contingency of knowledge does not deny the possibility of knowing the world, it does not ‘imply that knowledge is hopeless or the possibility of realism is a futile quest’ (Archer et al., 2016).

9. Critical realists assert that social structures are independent of agents and their actions. But as the context of social activity, social structures both enable and constrain actions that either reproduce or transform social structures (Bhaskar, 1979; Archer, 1995).

10. I am not arguing that animation can’t or shouldn’t represent what people feel, think or believe. I am arguing that critical realism offers a productive way of thinking about this that embeds the personal within the social.

11. Formenti has suggested that within animation ‘reality is portrayed through a fictional form’ (2022: 23). Accepting Cashell’s realist argument that fictional forms don’t refer to objects and events in the intransitive, animated documentary’s engagement with the intransitive should not be considered fictional.

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