Outer Worlds: Mediated Aesthetics and Alethic Truth

The practice is concerned with how found footage collage can be used to address non-empirical reality. And although its predominantly comprised of photographic elements, its construction uses animation techniques and its level of mediation situates it within animation. And as its non-fictional, it’s a form of animated documentary. Developing a system for articulating this practice has involved thinking allot about the evidential status of images, objectivity, subjectivity and the location of truth.

Context – ‘Inner’ Worlds and Exact Accounts

So what I’m going to talking about is the truth value of animated documentary in relation to the notion of ‘inner’ worlds and ‘outer’ worlds.

A feature of the debate on one hand is that inner worlds are rendered in animated documentary. With the emphasis on subjectivity.

On the other hand there have been counter claims that animated documentary fails to represent objective, accurate accounts of the real.

Although these can be seen as sitting at opposite ends of a spectrum, I’m going to argue that both claims are based on flawed subject/object dualism that is challenged and substantially solved by the philosophy of critical realism.

My main argument is that to more fully understand what’s going on in animated documentary, we need what critical realists call an ontic, or alethic, conception of truth.

Critical Realism

Critical realism was originally founded by Roy Bhaskar in the 1970s as a philosophy of science and has since been developed across a variety of disciplines and topics. Its main premise is the separation and distinction between epistemology and ontology, and a focus on the independence of reality.

A central concept of critical realism is the division of reality into three domains that together comprise the whole of reality:

* *The domain of the empirical* is that of experiences
* *The domain of the actual* is that of events
* *The domain real* is that of the mechanisms and structures that generate events

Amber Fletcher has provided a useful analogy for the domains, illustrating their interrelationship with the image of an iceberg.

The 3 Domains of Reality

The visible tip of the iceberg is the empirical level, where observed events are recorded and interpreted. The water line indicates the limits of observation. As observed phenomena are no more than the tip of the iceberg, ‘observability cannot be the criterion of existence’ (Danermark, et al. 2019). Experiences at the empirical level don’t provide access to how things ‘actually’ and ‘really’ are.

Focus then 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. Mechanisms are transfactual, existing beyond their manifestation as empirically detectable events and established facts. As it can’t be known empirically, the real can only be known theoretically and conceptually.

Critical realism 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). 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, my emphasis)

Inference and 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 (...) idealism 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 (1975, my emphasis)

From this perspective, the imagined doesn’t entail the illusory or internal, it is neither subjective or objective, it works with a balance of the empirical and causal inference. It is in responding to experience through the imagined, and the combination of facts and theory, that we can arrive at ontological depth and understanding.

Subjectivism, ‘Inner’ Worlds and the Epistemic Fallacy

Much of the debate around animated documentary focuses on its capacity to engage with the ‘internal’. It has been argued that subjective experience is represented in animation, and it lends itself to conveying interior worlds.

A critical realist position would argue that addressing the complexity of reality is an inherently social practise. Experience must be thought of in terms of a social, collective process that can’t be taken outside of a social context. We don’t develop our subjectivity autonomously, and it is not possible to speak from a vacuum outside of our own social situatedness.

Against what she calls the individualistic epistemology of cartesian thinking, Allison Assiter argues 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).

The notion of a ‘world in here’ implies that subjectivity develops independent of the concrete, and the real structures that are part of the generative domain. But 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. Individual subjectivity is forged through contact with the external world, the common object of perception in the production of our social, intersubjective knowledge. The notion of ‘inner worlds’ risks constraining the referents of creative construction within the subjective, thus severing the imagined and the real.

Arguably, there are no subjective and internal realities, or ‘worlds in here’. The assumption of internal worlds risks falling into what critical realists call the epistemic fallacy, the conflation of knowledge and being that reduces reality to the subjective*.* Reality is swallowed up by subjectivity and the iceberg disappears. I feel that this is in danger of limiting, rather than enlarging the scope of animated documentary.

Objectivism and The Ontic Fallacy

Against the affirmation of animation as a valid form of non-fiction, there have been counter arguments that seek to separate animation and documentary. This has been based on the claim that animation, as opposed to photographic film, fails to present an ‘exact account of what occurred’. Whilst acknowledging the evidentiary value of the indexical image, this argument suffers from the essentialism and reductionism of what critical realism calls the ontic fallacy.

Objectivism’s variant of the epistemic fallacy is the ontic fallacy, where reality is fully equated with what can be experienced, ‘it says what you are experiencing is real, given, certain’ (Price, 2014). Knowledge derived from observation directly corresponds to reality, reality ‘speaks for itself’ and ‘can be interpreted as an open book’ (Høyer, 2012). This reduces reality to the tip of the iceberg and denies what’s below the water.

To the critical realist, and ‘exact account’ can’t be achieved empirically, regardless of the methods and technologies involved. If reality was transparent enough so that ‘exact accounts’ were easily apprehended, 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). This follows Marx’s assertion that ‘all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided’. The belief that our perceptions can be identical to reality has no credible basis in experience and knowledge. The ‘solipsistic exclusion of a nonempirical 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).

A primary property of reality is that it is not transparent to observation. Phenomena must be ‘hidden’ beneath the empirical surface if they are ever to be discovered.

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 and what it means.

Ontic/Alethic Truth

Bhaskar uses the following example to illustrate that our concepts change 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, p. 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 inner realities’. To believe so is to commit the epistemic fallacy. The descriptions serve to address the same material thing according to different historical contexts, with different ‘standards’ of existing knowledge.

The dolphins always were dolphins, whether people knew it or not. If a condemned man is proven innocent, he doesn’t suddenly become innocent, he was innocent all along. If we were to discover that William Shakspeare really was Christopher Marlowe, he always was.

Although our conceptions of reality are produced within the context of our existing knowledge and the limitations of perception, the truth of our concepts is not relative to themselves. Accepting the realism of an independent and layered reality, we see that truth is not in our representations or knowledge. It is in reality itself, reality is the ‘truth maker’ (Porpora, 2015). This is critical realism’s *ontic*, or *alethic,* conception of truth.

Gary Potter has said that ‘meaning is an ongoing human creation (...) this process is structurally framed within a wider context: the nature of reality and the reality of our nature (...) It is a combination of how the world is and how we are’ (Potter, 2002).

If we accept this, we see that our understanding of the world is a hybrid of how it is and how we see it. This is the location of the non-dualism of both critical realism and animated documentary.

The Realism of Abstraction

As Maureen Furniss has said, animation’s formal features move between opposite ends of a spectrum, with ‘mimesis’ at one and ‘abstraction’ at the other (Furniss, 1998).

In the popular use of the word, ‘abstract’ is typically used to describe something ‘vague’ or amorphous. An ‘abstraction’ is commonly understood to be divorced from reality and of little practical relevance or value. But for critical realism, an abstraction is a concept that analytically isolates an aspect of a real complex object. What we abstract from are the ‘many other aspects which together constitute concrete objects such as people, economics, nations, institutions, activities and so on’ (Sayer, 1992). Its purpose is to be true to the complex nature of the object. The phenomena abstracted are real, and abstractions are used to call forth the nature of their reality at the non-empirical level. Given this, ‘the abstract and the concrete should not be aligned with the distinction between thought and reality’ (ibid.). Danermark et al. state that:

Abstractions, such as ‘class’, ‘gender’, ‘role’, or ‘norm’, are not more vague or unreal than natural science abstractions, such as ‘air pressure’, ‘density’, ‘energy’, or ‘gravitation’. What unites all these phenomena is that they manifest themselves through their effects, but it is not possible to immediately observe or ‘touch’ what the concepts represent, that is, the generative mechanisms (Danermark et al. 2019)

Through abstraction, we come to a better understanding of the causality of concrete objects. ‘Concrete object’ refers to an external thing that is constituted by a plurality of elements and forces. ‘Concrete’ refers to the layered structure itself, not only the fact that the object exists:

By ‘concrete’ we mean something real, but not something which is reducible to the empirical: we mean far more than just ‘factual’. The concrete object is concrete not simply because it exists, but because it is a combination of many diverse forces or processes (Sayer, 1981)

Abstractions, like language and representation more generally, have an indirect relationship with reality, but the relationship is not arbitrary. The constraint forced on abstractions is that they are not conjured from nothing. They respond to the external world. The implication this has for interpretation is that it can’t be considered entirely ‘of our mind’, it is not purely subjective or relative. As Kieran 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’ (Cashell, 2009) Abstractions:

...are not subjective classifications of an undifferentiated empirical reality, but attempts to grasp (...) precisely the generative mechanisms and causal structures which account in all their complex and multiple determinations for the concrete phenomena of human history (Bhaskar, 1998)

=Seen from this perspective, as the abstractions of animated documentary are in response to the real world, we can view them in realist terms as extracts from reality, which show us the ‘the fundamental part,’ ‘the essential part’, or ‘the core’ of phenomena.

This form of abstraction is not used *instead* of fact and analysis, its applied *along* *with* fact and analysis. The abstractions of animated documentary are of the imagined, not the imaginary, they are of an alethic, rather than an epistemic truth.

Non-Dualism and Hybridity

The co-present empirical and subjective tendencies at work in negotiating and understanding events are not antithetical or at odds, the subjective is always in contact with and within the external independent world. They are both engaged in what Stella Bruzzi calls the ‘perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation (...) the two remain distinct but interactive’ (Bruzzi, 2000). This suggests that the hybridity of animated documentary is not just a matter of form or technique, it is also, and more importantly I feel, a matter of its underpinnings as a philosophical principle. To use Timothy Rutzou’s description of the aims of Critical Realism, 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’ (Rutzou, 2016), showing us the underlying reality of the world in its essences rather than its appearances.

Conclusion - Reality, Visibility, Politics

To conclude, I’ll briefly mention what I feel the wider implications of this may be.

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 debates that attempt to 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 forces 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 powers are visible through ordinary perception or from within an interior subjectivity.

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).

By representing causality and the truth more fully, we more fully represent the human impact and effect of the event in question. In the antithesis of the reductionist and ideological suppression of complexity, this enables and supports revelation and visibility, fostering higher levels of awareness, understanding, and the possibility of empathy and solidarity.

But rather than overextending the powers of the photographic or collapsing into inner worlds. This is best achieved through an alethic conception of truth.