

DOXA

Documentary Film & Video Festival

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Vancouver Canada

FESTIVAL
GUIDE

Animated Documentaries

by Jessica Meistrich Gidal

"Cinema verité set back documentary filmmaking 20 or 30 years. It sees documentary as a sub-species of journalism... There's no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything." — Errol Morris, *Cineaste* XVII:1, 1989.

While it has long been recognized that the camera "lies" and that documentaries are no longer assumed to be strictly objective recordings of events, this comment by Errol Morris begs the question: how much can documentary footage be manipulated and still be considered non-fiction? The constructed medium of animation clearly inhabits an extreme end of the spectrum. Indeed, since as far back as Winsor McKay's *Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918), dozens of films fall under the seemingly incompatible genre of the "animated documentary."

The bulk of these "anima-docs" combine real audio with images entirely generated by the animator. The animated imagery can serve many different functions in these films. In Ellie Lee's *Repetition Compulsion* (1997), for instance, animation protects the identities of homeless and battered women. Moreover, her 3,000 charcoal drawings depict hardship with a universality that does not exploit the victims' lives. Feeling that any verbal description of the violence would compete with the images, Lee concentrated the

voiceover on the emotional content while depicting the specifics of the violence in the drawings. The effect is powerful — in fact, one interviewee told Lee that the film articulated emotions that she herself could not.

In another type of anima-doc, live footage is manipulated frame by frame. For example, Bryan Papciak's *Met State* (2001) employs pixilation to breathe life into an abandoned insane asylum, and Paul Bush's *Shinjuku Samurai* (2004) uses time-lapse studies of faces against backdrops of Tokyo's Shinjuku district to paint a picture of the area and its citizens. Both films juxtapose static and dynamic environments, offering new ways to examine and document a place and time.

Other animators graphically alter existing video with techniques like rotoscoping — the process of drawing over individual frames from a live-action sequence. Rotoscoping over live reenactments gives what Dennis Tropicoff calls "a trace of life"



Repetition Compulsion


to *His Mother's Voice* (1997), his haunting film about love and death. The distinctively different animation styles of the two segments underscore the fact that, just as there is no single interpretation of her story, there is no one response to pain.

To create *Roadhead* (1998), Bob Sabiston's team of twelve artists rotoscoped over live video, adding a humorous layer of running commentary to the short interviews. While there is no doubt that the artists' depictions of the subjects are highly interpretive, the use of real video allows the film to flirt with reality more than other animated documentaries that construct imagery from scratch.

Every shot in a documentary is dependent on subjective choices by the filmmakers — animation just makes those choices more obvious, more transparent. Picasso said, "Art is a lie that reveals the truth." Animated documentaries are no exception.

How much can documentary footage be manipulated and still be considered non-fiction?

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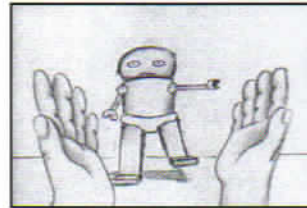
SUNDAY MAY 28

2:00 PM

**Vancouver International
Film Centre**



His Mother's Voice



Faith & Patience



Repetition Compulsion

Real Cartoons: Animated Documentaries

Curated by Jessica Meistrich Gidal

Frankly Caroline

USA, 1999, 9 minutes
Directors: Frank & Caroline Mouris

Caroline Mouris tells her life story, and her husband Frank insists on "helping" her. The resulting dialogue between them says as much about the couple's collaborative process – squabbles and all – as it does about Caroline herself.

Faith & Patience

USA, 1991, 5 minutes
Director: Sheila Sofian

A conversation with a four-year old girl about her newborn sister.

Flashbacks from My Past:

Starry Night

USA, 2003, 4 minutes
Director: Irra Verbitsky

A personal account of the filmmaker's childhood in Russia and the tragic events that unfold during World War II.

Met State

USA, 2001, 10 minutes
Director: Bryan Papciak

A visual portrait of an abandoned insane asylum.

Repetition Compulsion

USA, 1997, 6 minutes
Director: Ellie Lee

Stories of how prolonged childhood abuse in the lives of homeless women has set the stage for further victimization on the streets.

Craft

Russia, 2004, 3 minutes
Director: Dmitri Geller

A document of the simple beauty that is all in a day's work for Russian metalsmith, Aleksandr A. Lysjakov.

His Mother's Voice

Australia, 1997, 15 minutes
Director: Dennis Tupicoff

An exploration of an unexpected death.

Shinjuku Samurai

UK, 2004, 6 minutes
Director: Paul Bush

Over the course of one day, twenty-six citizens of Tokyo are asked to stand completely still for five minutes in front of a time-lapse camera while the teeming crowds of the Shinjuku business and entertainment district stream by.

Give Up Yer Aul' Sins

Ireland, 2002, 5 minutes
Director: Cathal Gaffney

Nominated for an Academy Award, this warm and funny film is based on original recordings of children telling Bible stories to their teacher in 1960s Dublin.

Roadhead

USA, 1998, 14 minutes
Director: Bob Sabiston

Filmmakers Bob Sabiston & Tommy Pallotta drove from New York to Austin, stopping along the way for roadside interviews with everyday folks.

Bike Ride

USA, 2000, 7 minutes
Director: Tom Schroeder

An entertaining tale of a heart-breaking journey set to an improvisational jazz soundtrack.

Program length: 84 minutes

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Curator biography

Jessica Meistrich Gidal, a former Vancouverite, is a filmmaker and editor based in Boston, Massachusetts. She is currently editing the *Screening Room with Robert Gardner* DVD series, and has recently worked on television and web-based productions for *WGBH*, *Frontline* and the Discovery Channel. In addition to working on her own personal films and non-profit videos, she has curated three presentations of animated documentary films at Boston's Coolidge and Brattle Theatres. Prior to filmmaking, she worked for community development organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area and in India.