

BEYOND HUMAN AND SCIENCE DOCUMENTARIES:  
*MOLOTOV ALVA* AND *WALTZ WITH BASHIR* AS NEW STUDY CASES IN THE  
REPRESENTATION OF REALITY

by

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April 2009

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents Enrique and Luz Helena Pinzon. I would have never made it without their unconditional love and support. I would also like to very specially thank Jefferson Beck for all his love and dedication to see me graduate, for always being there to listen to my ideas, and for giving me the strength to finish. Finally, I would like to thank my advisors for all their hard work, and Carolyn Schlemmer and Jen Shoemaker for their revisions and invaluable input in my paper.

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## GLOSSARY

1. Second Life: (Abbreviated as *SL*) is a virtual world developed by Linden Lab which launched on June 23, 2003 and accessible via the Internet. A free client program called the Second Life Viewer enables its users, called Residents, to interact with each other through avatars. Residents can explore, meet other residents, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade virtual property and services with one another, or travel throughout the world, which residents refer to as the grid. In 2008, Second Life was honored at the 59th Annual Technology & Engineering Emmy Awards for advancing the development of online sites with user-generated content. Philip Rosedale, President of Linden Lab, accepted the award.
2. Machinima: a Portmanteau of *machine cinema*, is a collection of associated production techniques whereby computer-generated imagery (CGI) is rendered using real-time, interactive 3-D engines instead of professional 3D animation software. Engines from first-person shooter and role-playing simulation video games are typically used. Consequently, the rendering can be done in real-time using PCs (either using the computer of the creator or the viewer), rather than with complex 3D engines using huge render farms. Usually, machinima productions are produced using the tools (demo recording, camera angle, level editor, script editor, etc.) and resources (backgrounds, levels, characters, skins, etc.) available in a game. Machinima is an example of emergent gameplay, a

process of putting game tools to unexpected ends, and of artistic computer game modification. The real-time nature of machinima means that established techniques from traditional film-making can be reapplied in a virtual environment. As a result, production tends to be cheaper and more rapid than in keyframed CGI animation. It can also produce more professional appearing production than is possible with traditional at-home techniques of live video tape, or stop action using live actors, hand drawn animation or toy props.

ABSTRACT

Although the use of animation to support science documentaries has been well studied, and is easily accepted by viewers, the public has little familiarity with animations or virtual realities as being appropriate tools for other kinds of documentary storytelling. This paper contrasts previous studies of the use of animation and CGI in documentary filmmaking with issues generated by some of the more recent evolutions in the field. I find that although the public may have more difficulty understanding the link between an animated image on the screen and its real world referent, when used effectively animations and virtual realities can offer a new, though potentially problematic, range of storytelling tools.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite widespread public trust in documentaries, there has been extensive literature written questioning their veracity. The idea that documentaries are merely a representation of reality is not new. Authors like Bill Nichols in *Representing Reality*<sup>1</sup>, and Michael Renov in *Theorizing Documentary*<sup>2</sup> – among others – add important arguments about how closely documentaries mirror reality to the critical theory of a film genre that has for years been naively read by its consumers. Dereck Bousé, author of the book *Wildlife Films*<sup>3</sup>, does his part in criticizing the subgenre of nature documentaries when he points out how they are perhaps the most important, and in many cases misleading, source of information about the natural world, “especially to viewers who may have had little or no direct experience with wild animals and nature and whose expectations have been shaped more by media images than by real experience.”<sup>4</sup> However, when the documentary is in the form of an animation or is built up of images of virtual environments, the idea of a documentary as a construction seems more evident than when composed of photographic or video images. The indexicality of the images appears to become more questionable than ever before.

In the terms of Saussure<sup>5</sup> and other semioticians, signs have two parts, the signifier and the signified. The “signified” is the concept being indicated. The signifier can be symbolic, iconic, or indexical. Symbolic signifiers are arbitrary symbols: letters or numerals, a national flag or heraldry shield, or modern traffic symbols. The connection must simply be memorized. Iconic signifiers give perceivers clues to meaning in that they *resemble* the signified. They include cartoons, as well as scale

models, 'realistic' sound effects, and gestures that imitate the signified. Finally, in the indexical mode, the signifier is in some way directly connected to the signified: the viewer rarely needs to process clues in order to comprehend the signified. Thus photographs, films, and video and audio recordings are indexical in that they are closer to direct perception than the symbolic and iconic modes.

Up until now, the study of the use of 'unreal' (animation, computer generated images or cartoon) footage in documentary films, has focused on the instances where this footage has been used as a means for describing what can not be recorded. However, I will focus on films that choose to use animation mostly for aesthetic reasons, as well as those that have used virtual footage (different from cartoons, animations, or CGI) to depict virtual worlds. These techniques therefore provide an indexical representation of reality rather than an iconic one.

In this paper I will contrast previous studies of the use of animation and CGI in documentary filmmaking, with issues generated by some of the more recent evolutions in the field. I will argue that people's experience with the real world and people's familiarity with different kinds of media may shape the way each individual understands and identifies the degree of construction in documentary filmmaking, and how they relate to documentaries made up of animated or virtual footage. Specifically I will argue that viewers perceive animated documentaries as having a looser indexical bond with reality than computer simulations or CGI driven documentaries (and based on scientific data), therefore making the animated documentaries harder to be perceived as a close representation to reality. (However, I will also explore how animated documentaries in

some situations can conversely provide the audience with a closer connection to a subject matter than live action films can.) In order to do so, I will compare two films that correspond to what I believe could be new emerging kind of documentary, one of which takes place in virtual environments, and in what I will call an un-necessary animation.

The films I will discuss in this paper are new, exciting hybrids of existing forms of documentary filmmaking. But even though they have significantly expanded the field of filmmaking, they are not entirely new inventions. They have evolved over time as products born of a certain culture and from filmmakers who understand the experimentation we have already seen in the field.

I will start with a brief history of the use of animation in documentary filmmaking. I will then take a look at films made entirely with either animations or virtual images, as are *Waltz with Bashir*<sup>6</sup> and *Molotov Alva and His Search for the Creator*<sup>7</sup> and discuss their place in the documentary world and the role they play in the depiction of the real world. I will use *Waltz with Bashir* as a case study to analyze the theoretical relationship between animation and the real. And I will use *Molotov Alva and his search for the creator* (“the first documentary shot entirely in a virtual reality” as advertised by HBO<sup>8</sup>) to study computer generated worlds and their possible connection to ethnographic film.

## ANIMATION AND THE PROBLEM WITH DOCUMENTARY

As unconventional as the animated documentary may seem, the idea is not a new one. The first recorded example was Windsor McCay's 1918 twelve-minute recreation of the sinking of the *Lusitania*<sup>9</sup>. The animation, requiring 25,000 drawings, was created as anti-German war propaganda. Other early animations also served as war propaganda or war training films.<sup>10</sup> Later animated non-fiction efforts, often intended for schools, could be considered documentaries because they fit the presumption that documentaries are "educational." While *The Sinking of the Lusitania* was strikingly realistic for its time, many of these early efforts were probably not high enough quality images to be considered highly accurate and detailed representations of reality. Instead, they conveyed a general sense of events that took place.

When we see a contemporary animation in a science film, however, we easily accept it as an accurate representation of reality. For example, a documentary or news story on brain research may cut from data based on MRI images of actual brain scans to computer generated images (CGI) representing neurons firing in the brain. Viewers tend to accept the animated images as a realistic depiction, partly because they realize that there is no way, with today's technology, to film neural interaction processes directly, and partly because this assumption of images as a realistic depiction is embedded in the format of a film of fact.

Sybil DelGaudio, in her article *If Truth Be Told, Can 'Toons Tell It? Documentary and Animation*<sup>11</sup> writes a fairly complete review of the documentary cartoon's beginnings as a medium to tell the truth or educate, especially in military

training subjects as well as early attempts to visualize cosmic scientific theories. DelGaudio argues that the ongoing questioning by scholars like Brian Winston and Philip Rosen who talk about “both the mimetic nature of the photographic image and the reliance on its mimesis in the investigation of a film’s classification as a documentary”<sup>12</sup> open the door for the consideration of certain animated films as documentaries. DelGaudio’s article supports these ideas concentrating on military training films as well as films that deal with scientific theory but do not necessarily need us to believe in the images as truths in and of themselves. Instead, the films offer as a more playful explanation of what *could be*.

In these terms of what *could be*, Mark J.P. Wolf, in his essay *Subjunctive Documentary: Computer Imaging and Simulation*<sup>13</sup> talks about other more ‘realistic’ techniques such as CGI (Computer Generated Images) and gives the name of “Subjunctive Documentary” to films that heavily employ computer imaging and simulation to illustrate “what *could be*, *would be*, or *might have been*”. He argues that:

“by translating invisible entities (beyond the range of human vision) or mathematical ideas into visible analogues, computer simulation has allowed the conceptual world to enter the perceptual one. It has created new ways in which an image can be linked to an actual object or event, with mathematically reconstructed simulacra used as representations, standing in for photographic images. By narrowing and elongating the indexical link and combining it with extrapolation of speculation, computer imaging and simulation may suggest that there is a difference between what is called ‘documentary film’ and ‘nonfiction film,’ especially when one is documenting the subjunctive. In this era of computer simulation, there is greater willingness to trade close indexical linkage for new knowledge that would otherwise be unattainable within the stricter requirements of indexical linkage that once needed to validate knowledge empirically.”<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, James M. Moran in his essay *A Bone of Contention: Documenting a Prehistoric Subject*<sup>15</sup> argues that dramatizations when scientifically informed “can serve as proper footage in the documentary sense, providing an index of real events where no direct photographic evidence can ever be possible.”<sup>16</sup>

Both Wolf and Moran argue that as long as the images in question are based on scientific data, they provide an index to reality where no direct photographic evidence is available. However, Anneke M. Metz in her article *A Fantasy Made Real: The Evolution of the Subjunctive Documentary on the U.S Cable Science Channels*<sup>17</sup> points out that the use of subjunctive documentary can be dangerous because it capitalizes on the viewer’s tendency to believe that CGI represents a truth by coaxing them to accept as fact anything that remotely resembles science. According to Metz “scientific credibility itself has become fictionalized” in films based entirely on CGI like the case of the Discovery channel’s *Walking with...* documentary series.

“These subjunctive documentaries are profoundly aggressive in their insistence that the fictions they are “documenting” not only could be real but truly are real, because CGI has made them so. In a matter of years, the form has matured quickly, from using CGI as an illustrative tool to creating images so compelling that the need to attend to the factual basis underlying the image has become secondary.”<sup>18</sup>

For Metz, “the trend of documentaries that not only use CGI to create ‘evidence’ of fictitious life forms but also provide a fictionalized science on which all the simulations are based is disquieting.”<sup>19</sup>

Science and scientific language gives animated imagery the additional credibility it needs to make the leap from being iconic to being indexical. Non-science based

animations, though, are more easily seen as merely cartoons, and the indexical bond is strained. In the next section I will discuss films that use animation to create evidence of historical events, which do not benefit from the same credibility as science-based animations, but do have strengths of their own.

## WALTZ WITH BASHIR

*Waltz with Bashir* is an almost entirely animated film about the experiences of the filmmaker, who was then a soldier, during the 1982 Lebanon War. The filmmaker, Ari Folman, uses animation to show both the interviews he actually shot first on film, and the memories generated by those interviews.

Although groundbreaking, *Waltz with Bashir* is not the first film to use animation when talking about memories of war. Sheila Sofian, (Associate Professor at the University of Southern California and winner of numerous awards for her animated films) in her article, *The Truth in Pictures*<sup>20</sup>, reviews the history of animated documentaries and explores the effects that films like *Drawn From Memory*<sup>21</sup> (released in 1991 and based on the events of WWII) that also narrate a personal experience during wartime, have on the audience in terms of credibility. Her review also includes films that deal with memories of other traumatic subjects including alcoholism and even encounters with aliens, as in the 1995 film, *Abductees*<sup>22</sup>. This last film uses a different animation style for each story of abduction, letting each person give a very individual story of events that no camera was there to document.

However, in the end, no matter the intention of the filmmaker Sofian believes that "most people associate 'cartoons' as a medium for children or as propaganda. It is difficult for audiences to get used to the idea of animation as documentary. It is a new way of thinking and if you have not been exposed to non-fiction animation, it can be difficult to adjust to."<sup>23</sup> *Waltz with Bashir* has a few answers to this challenge; like many films

Sofian examines, it uses interviews which include the actual audio of the interviewees, but also dramatically overcomes this obstacle in the last scene, as I will discuss later.

Both *Waltz with Bashir* and *Drawn From Memory* follow in the footsteps of Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*<sup>24</sup>, the celebrated graphic novel about the Holocaust. This story used the freedom of its medium to create an "allegorical abstraction," replacing people with animals in a comic-like format to look at a disturbing subject in a new and more intimate way.

Robert S. Laventhal, professor in the Department of German Studies at the University of Virginia, makes the argument that the graphic format of *Maus* enables the writer to provide several levels of allegory as he talks about the Holocaust.

"Maus is allegorical, not merely to the extent that it treats the individuals as figures in a much more complex and global story, but insofar as its very textual structure is comparable to the allegorical structure of the emblem, with a graphic image elucidating the text, as well as a superscript expressing the "topic" or "theme," the actual statements of the individuals in the frame, and often a subscript containing unconscious thoughts or afterthoughts. In *Maus*, the image is never left to stand alone, but is always caught up in the differential between narrative, image, dialogue and reflection. In this manner, an opening or aperture for critical thinking on the transmission of past trauma is created."<sup>25</sup>

*Waltz with Bashir* is a film that forwards the discussion of the relationship of animation to the real with films because it does not use animation to stand in for photographic images that are unavailable but rather *chooses* to use animation. The filmmaker's choice of format (CGI, animation, film, video) is used as an allegory to what the film really is – a memory under construction. The film remains animated until the filmmaker's memory is complete, at which point we see live action footage for the first time.

Israeli filmmaker Ari Folman, formerly a soldier, and his friend are veterans of the same battle, the first Lebanon war in the 1980s. Though both have flashes of images or nightmares from that time, Folman cannot actually remember his time in the war. *Waltz with Bashir* shows Folman's attempt to recover the truth by interviewing other soldier friends who were there. As the film progresses, eventually his own real memories begin to return. His memories are layered over, or hidden behind, the knowledge that his own family includes both victims and survivors of the Holocaust.

Even though most viewers walk into the theater knowing that this film is meant to be a documentary – therefore, that these events actually happened – animation allows us to get detached from what is presented on the screen, from a real and horrifying war story. The decision to present the events as a narrative, rather than a depiction of a process (as in the neuron and many other scientific examples), or a documentary, by starting with a dream sequence further separates *Waltz With Bashir's* style from viewers traditional expectations of a documentary. This narrative brings viewers back to the experience of watching cartoons, which are almost universally fictional.

Dream sequences such as the one that starts the film; reinforce the cartoon quality, even when the content is horrific. For example, the main character (Folman) is floating in a boat that is about to explode. He is lying in the boat, drunk and hopeless. Suddenly, from behind him comes a giant naked woman who picks him up, holds him to her, and backstrokes him safely away from the boat as the explosion comes. Or at least that is how he remembers surviving the incident.

As in many documentaries the interviews in *Waltz with Bashir* provide the building blocks on which the film is supported. These could serve as a cue to viewers that the film is a documentary; however, Ari Folman's choice to render his *Waltz with Bashir* interviews, as well as dreams, in animated format allows the viewer to remain relatively unreal.

To reinforce the cartoon-like feeling, Folman includes touches of comic relief. In an interview with one of his closest friends, for instance the interview takes place in the friend's house. Talk about war and destruction is counterpointed by images of play: a hot air balloon, a ferris wheel, and a toddler "driving" a little car and comically struggling to carry a huge exercise ball. In actuality, all interviews took place in a studio. "In the first stage, all of the conversations Folman conducts in the movie were shot in a studio. In order for the footage to be useful as raw material for the animators, the speakers engaged in various simulations. If the conversation was supposed to be taking place in a pub, for example, they would hold shot glasses. If they were supposed to be speaking in a car in cold weather, they wore fur hats and would hold a plastic steering wheel in their hands."<sup>26</sup> Folman and his editors must have purposely added the light-hearted images later. Sofian, talks about this technique as:

"The audience reacts to animated documentary in a much different way than traditional live-action documentary. I believe that the use of iconographic images impact the viewer in a way in which live-action cannot. The images are personal and "friendly." We are willing to receive animated images without putting up any barriers, opening ourselves up for a powerful and potentially emotional experience. The simplicity of the images relieves some of the harshness of the topic being described."<sup>27</sup>

And she uses it in her latest film *Truth Has Fallen*<sup>28</sup> (a series of interviews with people wrongly convicted of murder and that now suffer unjust incarceration), she only uses animation when the convicted is given a personal narrative of the events. Following what she mentions above, she may be doing this to break down any preconceived notion that the convicted may be guilty, and to create a sense of sympathy towards them. *Waltz with Bashir* uses the animation also to create a buffer between the historical events in the film. However, the last scene, thirty seconds of live action, is what reinforces all of *Waltz with Bashir's* claims to be a documentary despite the previous hour and a half of animated characters that Folman used to create a feeling of unrealness. In fact, the conclusion hits even harder perhaps than if one had been watching real footage about war the whole time because throughout the film, Folman's only memory of the war plays over and over again. In this scene, he and two of his comrades are floating in the water as they watch the sky above them lighting up with flares. They get out of the water, get dressed, and start walking through the remains of a city destroyed by bombs. As they turn a corner, crying women walk by them. That is all he remembers, perhaps not surprisingly considering what he was about to see. Jayson Harsin, writer for the online *Bright Lights Film Journal*, describes the scene as follows:

“The music, narrative, and animation style coalesce and culminate in a final scene where the filmmaker-veteran recalls where he was during the massacre. At this point, the animation gives way to real footage of that historical event. The dream is over, the harsh memory recovered. The footage is extremely graphic, people herded into buses and bodies piled high — the visual indicator of the Holocaust inevitable for many audiences. The symbolism of this switch is obvious, but given the impressive build-up of the narrative to that climax, it is difficult to read as trite or cheap. In fact, Folman uses animation expressionistically to present

a surreal ethos, the mind driven through dreamscapes in pursuit of an elusive memory. Thus, when that dream surrenders to the recovered memory, it no longer makes sense to continue the animation; and it makes more sense that the footage is not just in color, but graphic and disgusting for viewers.<sup>29</sup>

Ari Folman tells International Herald Tribune reporter Joan Dupont in an interview, "A lot of my colleagues said that using archival images was too in-your-face, cheap. But I didn't want you to leave, saying, 'What a beautiful film that was.' That's missing the whole point."<sup>30</sup>

The intensity of the explicit and graphic violence of the final scene denies viewers any possibility of remembering *Waltz with Bashir* as a pretty or beautiful film. It is as real and as terrible as Folman can make it "But it's not a war movie, it wasn't meant to be." He tells Joan Dupont.

In classifying *Waltz with Bashir* as a documentary, it would probably fall between the interactive and reflexive modes as defined by Bill Nichols in his book *Representing Reality* along with films like *Sherman's March* and to a certain extent *The Thin Blue Line*. Nichols defines the interactive mode as follows:

“Interactive documentary stresses images of testimony or verbal exchange and images of demonstration (images that demonstrate the validity, or possibility, the doubtfulness, or what witness state). Textual authority shifts toward the social actors recruited: their comments and responses provide a central part of the film’s argument. Various forms of monologue (real or apparent) predominate. The mode introduces a sense of partialness, of situated presence and local knowledge that derives from the actual encounter of filmmaker and other. Issues of comprehension and interpretation as a function of physical encounter arise: how do filmmaker and social actor respond to each other; do they react to overtones or implications in each other’s speech; do they see the power and desire flow between the?”<sup>31</sup>

This is true in *Waltz with Bashir*, but Folman uses reflexive techniques to engage viewers with his own struggle with locating real within his memories. In the reflexive mode “rather than hear the filmmaker engage solely in an interactive fashion... we now see or hear the filmmaker also engage in metacommentary, speaking to us less about the historical world itself... as the process of representation itself”<sup>32</sup> “...since animation itself acts as a form of ‘metacommentary’ within a documentary, a form that is traditionally and most frequently characterized by live-action and non-dramatization, particularly in the case of films that ‘document the undocumentable’, either because a camera has not been present at the event, or because the event has occurred at a time prior to the photography or any other type of recording.”<sup>33</sup>

Contrary to this, films that take place in a virtual environment have a different placement within the world of documentaries.

## MOLOTOV ALVA AND ITS PLACE IN DOCUMENTARY

What *Molotov Alva and his Search for the Creator* by Douglas Gayeton and *Waltz with Bashir* by Ari Folman have in common is that they are both a ‘personal journey’ kind of documentary, much like Ross MacElwee’s *Sherman’s March*<sup>34</sup>. And neither film is shot in real life, although to a certain degree both their narratives and the source of their images are based on some kind of reality.

The main difference between the two films is the format; *Molotov Alva*’s indexicality with its subject (the signified) is greater. Whereas *Waltz with Bashir* makes mostly iconic references, *Molotov Alva* makes mostly indexical references, though not to real life, but rather to a virtual environment.

*Molotov Alva* is director’s Douglas Gayeton latest film, presented on the Internet as a series of “dispatches” and on cable television as a single film. It takes place entirely in the virtual world of Second Life. And, while it may look like an animation it is actually a new filmmaking technique called machinema. The most important distinction between animation and live-action filmmaking is that animations are usually frame-by-frame artistic creations where animators design every element of the image to achieve their purpose. By contrast in live-action films, as in films shot in virtual environments such as Second Life, although documentary filmmakers have huge amounts of control over what their images look like, they are still usually aiming their cameras at worlds that already exist and to some extent function independently of the filmmaking process. Unlike traditional animation, more exists outside the frame than what the audience sees.

Another way to view it is thus: in Second Life, virtual trees blow in the (virtual) wind and people meet to dance - whether or not there is a camera there to film them.

In 2006, the Dutch production company Submarine hired Gayeton to make a documentary about the Web 2.0 culture. In early 2007 he and his wife Laura had their first child requiring him to stay closer to home while making the film. "That's when I realized I could stay in Second Life and not have to leave the house" tells Gayeton in an interview with the New World Notes.<sup>35</sup> In the same interview he mentions that his original plans for the film were to make it half in real life and half in Second Life. "After spending a couple months in Second Life, however, he realized residents rarely discussed their real lives at any great length, and so discarded reality altogether."

Molotov Alva is the name of the "avatar" or character that represents Gayeton in this virtual world. His film centers around his experience in Second Life as he tries to understand this new dimension he has just entered. Using famous quotes from Einstein and other great thinkers as guidelines, he gradually progresses in his quest for meaning in this alien world. In the first minutes of the film, Alva acknowledges that he is in a digital world, and even shows photographs of his old world (the one we recognize as real), but carefully distinguishes each world as separate and presumably equally real. He illustrates that the only way to get into this world (Second Life) is as an avatar oneself.

Faces, bodies, clothing, buildings, possessions, and scenery are constantly being created and used by all of the people/avatars who enter this virtual world. And there are a great many of them: Second Life claims over 15 million accounts and an average of 38,000 people logged in at any one particular time.<sup>36</sup>

In the first seven of the ten episodes Gayton employs one of the characters, the ‘hobo king’ Orhalla Zander, to serve him as both a guide “and his virtual world producer, finding him locations, arranging interviews with Residents, and so on, talking with Gayton via Skype as they maneuvered their avatars through various scenarios. These were recorded live, and events unfolded naturally”. Gayton tells reporter Wagner James Au for his article *Making "Molotov": How The Man Behind The HBO/Cinemax Special Created His Avatar-Based Documentary, And Why*<sup>37</sup>. In another interview, Gayton says “none of the interactions were scripted, and all the avatars and locations used exist within Second Life.”<sup>38</sup>

I have described the structure and genesis of *Molotov Alva*, a film that defies much of what we know about filmmaking and certainly defines a new sub-genre. However, the film also contains elements of established film genres, which help ground it in viewers mind’s as firmly belonging the realm of documentary despite these differences. It ties itself to the documentary tradition most closely by following the well-defined narrative of an ethnographic documentary film, but also incorporates elements of personal journey films and common techniques of cinema vérité. To begin with, how much does *Molotov Alva* fit or strain the definition of the ethnographic film?

“Like classic ethnography which encapsulates a culture in one volume, an “ethnographic film” becomes a metonym for an entire culture.”<sup>39</sup> This view illustrates that the ethnographic filmmaker believes that he or she has the ability get a decently accurate idea of what a culture is like *and* relay that to an audience through film. Gayton seems to share that belief and the notion that there is a shared culture within Second Life.

He also said on the same telephone interview “My goal was to make something for the legions of people that have never logged into Second Life but were curious about what virtual worlds mean for society,”<sup>40</sup>

Alva’s journey consists of meeting different people (their avatars) in not only a search for the ‘creator’ in Second Life, but as an ethnographic journey to discover the range of cultures represented in the virtual world. This ethnographic impulse, however, often gets superceded by his need to find personal meaning in his new virtual life; a common “finding oneself” theme found in many personal journey films. During his brief interactions with most of the characters in the film, Gayeton manages to talk about the different demographics with this virtual environment in a way very much like an ethnographic film. He basically studies the culture behind Second Life. As reporter for [documentary.org](http://documentary.org) explains “What it became was several months of Gayeton immersing himself in Second Life, learning the culture’s conventions and mores. He created his avatar, Molotov Alva, who had to overcome the challenges of entering a closed community and gaining the inhabitants’ trust. Gayeton compares the process to that of an anthropological documentarian who goes down to South America and goes through various rites of passage in order to become part of a tribe he or she is hoping to film.”<sup>41</sup>

Most early ethnographic films had as a subject matter indigenous cultures who were considered exotic by viewers. As Nichols would put it, they were films speaking about Them for Us. (In recent times, the distance between Them and Us has grown a lot shorter, as filmmakers make ethnological films about subcultures within their own culture like poker players, birdwatchers, and video game players.) In this same sense,

people/avatars in Second Life are certainly exotic in the way they look and they are multicultural in their origins. To a newcomer, the inhabitants of Second Life certainly do seem like “The Other.”

However, Second Life is a world comprised entirely of immigrants, and Gayeton’s film is more about finding his place in this new world – a world in which there are no real cultural barriers for assimilation – than in making a film for Us about Them. In Second Life, any of Us can become Them as soon as we create an avatar and start exploring.

To what degree is *Molotov Alva* an example of cinema vérité? The goal of cinema vérité is to catch the real behavior of people acting in ways they might not if they knew that the camera were present. While in most vérité films one can argue that the filmmaking process changes the very reality the filmmaker is trying to document, *Molotov Alva* represents an advancement in the genre; the people/avatars in *Molotov Alva* have absolutely no way of knowing that they are being filmed unless the filmmaker tells them. In Second Life, the camera is never obtrusive. Instead the camera is invisible and can be repositioned from any angle at any time. On the other hand, unlike in a classic cinema vérité film Gayeton built layers of construction, beyond simple editing of content, over top of his vérité footage. He includes very little natural sound and tells the story much more through narration than by letting Second Life avatars share their lives directly through their words and actions.

*Molotov Alva and his search for the creator* has a unique place in the documentary world. It falls between the participatory mode, a personal journey film, and

an ethnographic film using cinema verité techniques. And most interestingly, the film takes place in a virtual world which gives it several levels of indexicality to referents within both Second Life and the items which they in turn reference in the real world.

## CONCLUSION

Regardless of the approach a documentary may take, it is defined as a representation of reality, and the audience's experience with the world, media, and what they see on the screen is crucial to how much they trust in the documentary filmmaker's presentation. Therefore questions of indexicality within animated and virtual reality films, due to their uniquely-fabricated natures, become even more important.

A live action film like *Sherman's March*, for example, may make people question if McElwee is portraying the people he meets fairly or is being honest about his own motivations, but no one questions that the light creating the images is reflected directly from a real thing or person. The referent has existence outside the film; one could find other images of it and go to visit it.

DelGaudio acknowledges that animated documentaries must employ various techniques to overcome their lack of live footage. "Since an animated film 'exists' only when it is projected – there is no pre-existing reality, no pro-filmic event captured in its occurrence – its classification as a documentary can be problematic. Without any existence in the world of actuality, the animated film must, like the partially dramatized documentary, rely on a kind of artistic re-enactment, depending, in part, on imaginative rendering of one sort or another that may serve as compensation for the camera's non-presence at the event."<sup>42</sup>

*Waltz with Bashir* is at the other end of a continuum from the live action *Sherman's March* in that the cartoon images have been created by drawing them specifically for this film. Except for the short archival clip at the end, all of the *Waltz with*

*Bashir* images (though they were based on real, recognizable people) are iconic. They have no existence outside the film.

Also with *Waltz with Bashir*, which portrays events that occurred decades ago and for many people in a place that is even hard to imagine, it is certainly possible that people could question not only whether or not the events were portrayed accurately but more so whether the film can even be considered a documentary. After all, as Nichols points out, “how can a filmmaker represent that which is not readily available for documentation, having occurred in the past, outside of any camera? ... Documenting the undocumentable’ becomes both a practical and a philosophical concern, directly challenging myths, not only about the ‘knowability’ of the world but also about cinema’s capacity to represent it.”<sup>43</sup>

Animation not only has the power to compensate for the lack of the camera, but also has strengths that live action footage does not. It can show people a reality that stock footage and recent shots of historical places cannot, since it has complete control to show people and places who no longer exist or have changed with time. It can also show unattainable camera angles, weave special effects seamlessly into its aesthetic, and create a uniform feel throughout an entire film.

In *Waltz with Bashir*, Folman uses animation so effectively that it makes it seem like the only real choice for telling his story. The malleability of animation makes it ideal for his questioning of historical knowledge and the veracity of memory. His control over his medium allows him to portray events more convincingly than with clumsy attempts at making archival footage of similar events serve as signifiers. Also, as has already been

discussed, people become desensitized to common ways of documenting war. As in the graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, sometimes showing something through a drawn medium can be more powerful. And finally, his use of animation consistently throughout the film gave the last few seconds of real archival footage much more potency than it would have had otherwise. That archival footage then also validates the rest of the film, cementing the indexical bond between the animated portrayal of events and history.

*Molotov Alva*, on the other hand, has a different set of issues, that lie somewhere between *Sherman's March* and *Waltz with Bashir*. The digital world of Second Life is relatively durable. An avatar can return to the same place many times, look again at buildings or scenery, live in the same house or move to another one. Interactions between avatars are spontaneous and unscripted. Because they are not representations of the world we think of as real, they could be considered only symbols or icons rather than objects that have an indexical bond to reality. Yet within the rules of this world, images are durable, revisitable, and from that point of view, indexical.

Alva's world is also a representation of the real world within a virtual world. Images and avatars are created within the digital world by real people in the real world. Yet, though created, those images are not so much iconic as indexical *IF* the viewer enters the virtual world and accepts its rules. A machinema viewer who has visited Second Life a few times will have a greater understanding of the virtual world and more investment in that world as a tangible place than will someone who has never seen a virtual environment. And for someone who has truly become part of Second Life culture,

their indexical bond will be that much stronger as they may even have memories of the virtual places and people appearing in the film.

This difference of perception becomes very evident in a 57-second film, *Nothing Can Replace the Forest*<sup>44</sup>, by filmmaker identified only by their username, “Wildcuts.” The film begins with an aerial look at a forest complete with sounds of birds, crickets, and the waves of the nearby ocean. In the distance; an astonishing sunset. A girl stands with her father as they discuss the natural spectacle unfolding in front of them, and it appears to be the first time she has seen the forest. She asks, “Daddy? How do trees smell?” The dad looks surprised and sad, and doesn’t seem to know what to say. The camera shows a sign “Forest Museum” as it zooms out revealing father and daughter with an empty look staring at the sign. The virtual environment film, featured on machinima.com under the documentary category, makes a number of different commentaries, and can be perceived differently depending on the viewer’s familiarity with Second Life. All viewers should walk away with some sort of vague message about the loss of wilderness. Yet if the viewer is not at all familiar with virtual realities, they may perceive the film as a cartoon that is meant to be a substitute for people in real life, and will inevitably be surprised when one of the characters in the film starts asking her father about the world she is trapped in. The other kind of viewer, one familiar with Second Life, will probably recognize the environment right away and will still be surprised. But this viewer’s very familiarity will cause them to take for granted that the virtual world has no smells and will then question what exactly the girl in the film is; an avatar, or something else? The familiar viewer may also get the point that the film is less

of a documentary, but more of an attempt to comment on the fact the virtual realities may be starting to be too much a part of our daily lives. It is basically asking the question of when is the virtual nature in the virtual environments the only nature we'll know.

In addition to having direct familiarity with virtual worlds, those who have had more experience with newer sorts of media in general may have more complex understandings of virtual filmmaking. As more people grow up immersed in the worlds they see in video games, interactive web videos, and new forms of media that have yet to be developed, virtual filmmakers will have a growing audience that needs little help understanding what they are seeing on the screen. But they also may need to be reminded that they are missing out on more than the smell of trees as they inhabit virtual environments. For those who study film, the increasing pace of experimentation with animation and virtual reality means that the pace of study must increase as well if we are to understand the new opportunities, challenges, and pitfalls of these films.

New documentaries are likely to be a blend of these and other techniques. Theorists, including semioticians will need to find new terms to describe the relationships between images, avatars, and reality – and the ways those things are defined within created as well as real worlds. Filmmakers will continue to play with the juxtapositions of these as-yet-imperfectly-defined and fast-evolving worlds. Even though animations (or cartoons) may be recognized by scholars and academics as documentaries, what the audience interprets may be completely different and this may be due to their experience with the media. Viewers must educate themselves in order to be able to choose to enter

unfamiliar worlds of perception and conception, suspending disbelief yet retaining enough critical stance to understand what they see.

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