ANIMATING DOCUMENTARY MODES:

NAVIGATING A THEORETICAL MODEL FOR ANIMATED DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE

ALEX WIDDOWSON
ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART, UNITED KINGDOM

Abstract

Music & Clowns is an animated documentary that intimately portrays the subjectivity and relationships between my brother, our parents, and myself. This film will function as a case study to facilitate a reflective exploration and practice-informed analysis of some of the theoretical frameworks relevant to animated documentary discourse. Placing emphasis on Bill Nichols' modes of documentary, I trace the influences, interactions, and specific application that this theoretical topology has had on *Music & Clowns*. Expanding upon Nichols' framework by way of visual metaphors, I develop increasingly sophisticated models of the interactions between practice and theory, maintaining Nichols' topology to integrate live-action and animated documentary traditions.

Keywords: *Bill Nichols, documentary modes, animated documentary, theory, practice*.

Introduction

Music & Clowns is an animated documentary containing a rich portrait of someone with Down syndrome. This film was conceived as a response to the polemic documentary, *A World Without Down Syndrome* (Richards, 2016), presented by Sally Phillips, which addresses the introduction of Non-invasive Prenatal Testing (NIPT) to the United Kingdom (UK), and the likelihood that it will decrease the birth rate of people with Down syndrome. In the UK, prior to the introduction of NIPT testing, 90% of fetuses diagnosed with Down syndrome were aborted. In Iceland, after NIPT testing was introduced, the abortion rate rose to 100% ("Sally Phillips's film on...", 2016, para. 7-8).

It could be argued that the significant drop in the birth rate of people with Down syndrome fits Rob Nixon's caracterisation of "slow violence", a process or destruction that is gradual and often invisible (Carruth, 2013, p. 847). Jane Fisher, director of the support organisation, *Antenatal Results and Choices*, argues that these tests simply provide pregnant women with more accurate information. Phillips was criticised by Fischer for occupying an overtly pro-life position, attempting to directly influence the choices of pregnant women who are likely to give birth to a baby with Down syndrome (McVeigh, 2016, para. 5). It was also problematic that Phillips focused on the stories of people with Down syndrome who are high functioning. Fischer argued that Phillips' thesis was informed by a relatively privileged experience of raising a high functioning child with Down syndrome. Despite Phillips' son being representative of just a small fraction of the UK's population of people with Down syndrome, she built an argument for the potential of the entire community to make societal contributions comparable to those without the diagnosis. In response to the dialogue between Phillips and Fisher I chose to create a film that placed emphasis away from the abortion debate, instead developing a film which tackles the under-representation of the ordinary lives of people with Down syndrome. This film provides qualitative evidence, which will hopefully demonstrate to audiences my brother Jamie's human worth, irrespective of his profound limitations or capacity for proactive contributions to wider society.

Suzanne Buchan proposed that politically motivated animated documentaries can be characterised as an "encounter", evoking for the viewer a sense of being "..."present" and/or involved in the subject matter and people depicted" (2014, p. 252). *Music & Clowns* has the potential to present viewers with an encounter with my family, positioning them in our home, immersed in our interpersonal dynamics. This film contains within it curated opportunities to observe Jamie's unique personality, quality of life, and the influence his presence has had on my parents and I.

Despite Jamie's extremely limited verbal communication, *Music & Clowns* attempts to demonstrate how funny, charming, and perceptive he is. The film is structured around a series of interviews I conducted with mine and Jamie's mother (Anna) and father (David). Topics discussed, relevant to the political subtext, include how they both felt when first hearing of his diagnosis, as well as the impact of their decision to eventually move Jamie out of the family home into one run by carers. Anna, who was not provided with a prenatal diagnosis, does not express a position on the debate surrounding diagnosis informed abortions. In contrast, David alludes to his pro-life perspective. During the editing process his politicised opinions were selected based on their relevance to his informed perspective and rejected where it was possible to infer overt judgment regarding the choices made by others.

I also conducted interviews with Jamie. It felt necessary to grant him an active role in the documentary and offer him an opportunity to provide consent. The ethics of creating a film about someone who is not legally able to offer informed consent was a significant concern. In response to asking Jamie if he felt comfortable with me making a film about

him, he laughed and kissed the microphone (figure 1). While it is tempting to infer consent from this act, I cannot assume he understands the difference between a private screening of the film and its wide distribution, and thus may not be able to forsee the potential impact of the film's release on his life. In accordance with the Royal College of Art's ethical procedures, David and Anna provided consent on Jamie's behalf. In a later interview, without prompt, Jamie kissed the microphone once again. I interpreted this repetition as a signifier of his intuitive comprehension of the comedic value associated with unanticipated subversion. He was either making a joke in the former interview or observed my response, prompting a re-enactment.

Upon completion, I observed Jamie's response to the film. He engaged enthusiastically with elements of the work, particularly those featuring clowns or music, and was able to recognise family members. However, his attempts to articulate his recognition or approval were cut short, possibly because the fast editing and dynamic animation may have been difficult for him to process. I do not consider this a flaw in the project as he is not the intended audience. If he were, the final outcome would be significantly different.

Music & Clowns addresses several ethical ambiguities, arguing for the social value of the life of someone who can't care for themself, referencing Jamie's limited ability to explain whether or not he is offering consent, deciphering obscured mental processes based on observation, questioning the legitimacy of each family members interpretation of his cognition, and challenging viewers to trust documentary value of a non-indexical method of representation to illustrate informed qualitative observations. In order to encourage critical

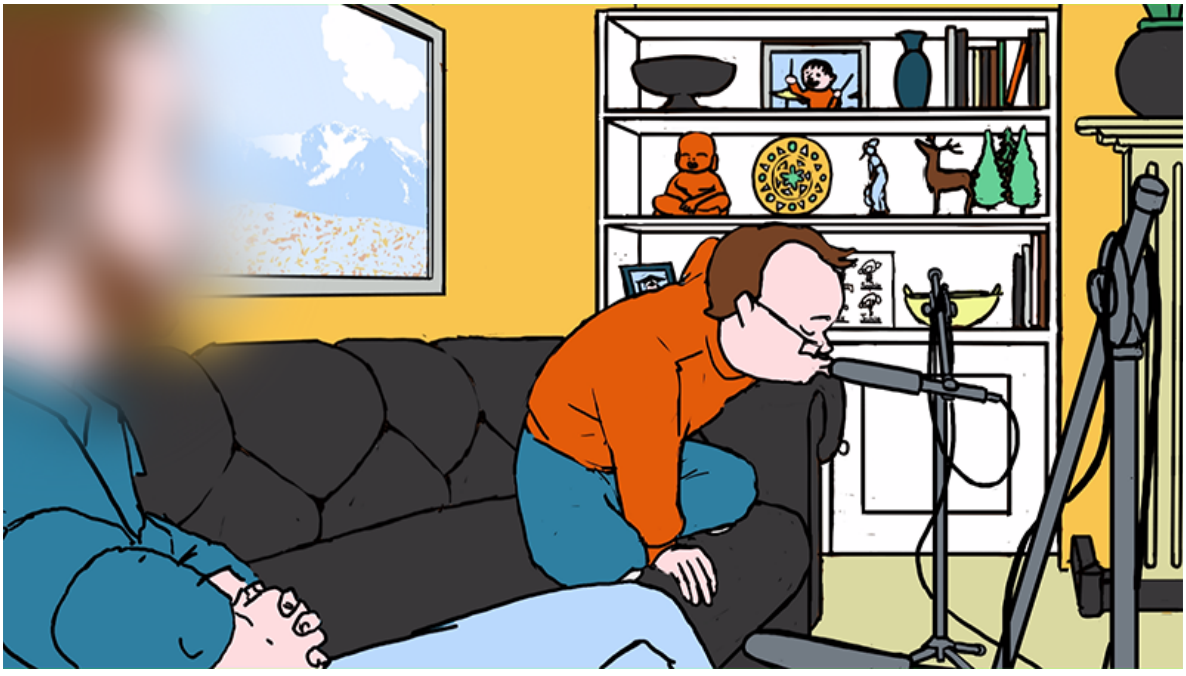


Figure 1: Jamie kissing the microphone. Screenshots from ***Music & Clowns***, Author, 2018

engagement with the form and subject matter, the film possesses numerous reflexive devices. However, the multiple strategies employed in this film prevent it from being categorized in Bill Nichols' reflexive mode. My choice to animate the presence of microphones in some scenes replicates and contrives a trope of the participatory mode. Interspersed between conventionally structured participatory scenes, structured around indexical testimony, are sequences that exemplify Bill Nichols' performative mode, in which the subjectivity of a participant is evoked. In addition to this, the use of observational archive footage and the playful experimentation with form imply additional affiliations with both the observational and poetic mode. This complex medley of modal interactions has prompted my reevaluation of the relationships between animated and live action documentary practice, and the theoretical discourses relating animation to Nichols' topology of documentary.

Developing visual metaphors to plot Nichols' theoretical framework of documentary

John Grierson's pithy definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" (1933, p. 8) has endured as the foundation of documentary theory. Annabelle Honess Roe argues this is partly due to a flexibility associated with epistemological "broadness" (2011, p. 216). Bill Nichols' proposed modes of documentary create six subdivisions akin to sub-genres in his book, *Introduction to Documentary* (2001, p. 99, 1st ed.). His topology was composed of the "poetic mode", which places emphasis on aesthetics rather than a subject; the "expository mode", which presents a linear authoritative perspective; the "observational mode", documenting a subject naturalistically; the "participatory mode"; focusing on the relationship between the filmmaker and subject; the

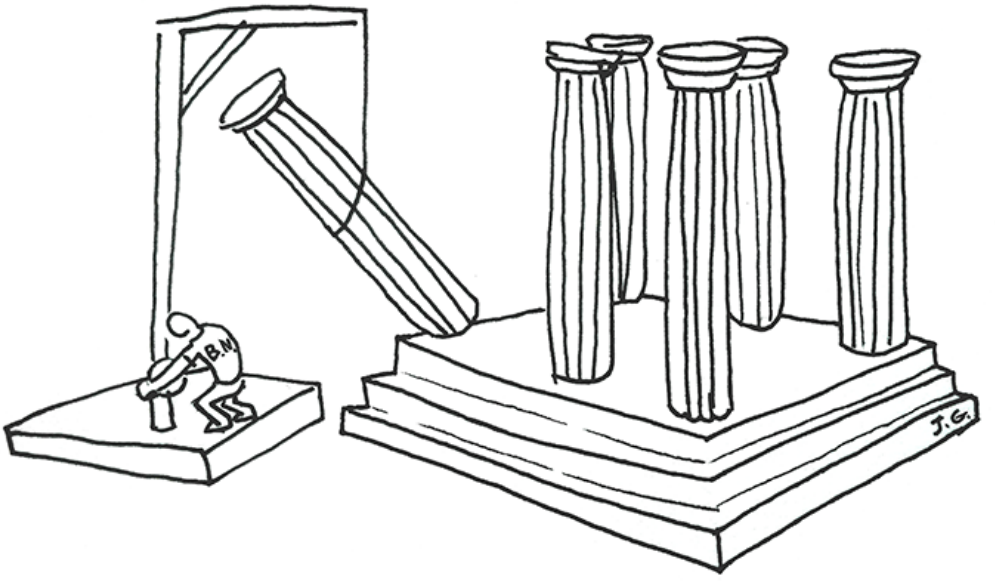


Figure 2: Bill Nichols erecting the modes of documentary practice on top of John Grierson's foundational definition, Author, 2018

"reflexive mode", focusing on the relationship between the filmmaker and the audience; and the "performative mode", attempting to represent subjective knowledge (2001, p. 125 & 138, 1st ed.). Collectively the modes appear, at first glance, to be a method for dividing the spectrum of documentary productions into distinct camps. This evoked for me an image of six pillars standing tall upon Grierson's enduring foundation. Nichols' rough chronology of the advent of each mode (2001, 138) could inform an extension of this metaphor indicating both the order and manner in which Nichols arranged the theoretical columns. The allegorical act of erecting individual columns could represent the linear progression implied by Nichols' table of documentary modes (2001, 138).

Annabelle Honess Roe reviews early approaches to building a theoretical framework for animated documentary (2011, p. 223). These theoretical strategies anchored the discipline to individual modes of documentary practice proposed by Nichols. Contextualising animated documentary in this way further atomized his framework. The resultant discourse became preoccupied by conflicting opinions regarding which of the modes possessed animated documentary as a constituent. Sybil DelGaudio (1997, p. 192), while referencing an earlier publication by Nichols featuring just five modes (1991, p. 56), argued that animation was inherently reflexive in a documentary context because it functions as "meta-commentary" by way of artistically interpreting conventional documentary sources. Gunnar Strøm undermines the idea that animated documentary is a subdivision of the reflexive mode by illuminating the culturally informed audience's preconceived limitations on the practice. Non-fiction publications demonstrate that the written word, devoid of indexical mechanics, evidences the potential for animation to be capable of representing fiction and reality (2003, p. 52). This argument trivialises DelGaudio's reflexive characterisation.

Strøm instead points to Nichols' performative mode due to the emphasis it places on subject specific strategies of representation (2003, p. 53). Eric Patrick supports this categorisation, however, his argument shares similarities with both Strøm and DelGaudio by adding that "...the very nature of animation is to foreground its process and artifice" (as cited in Honess Roe, 2013, 18). Animation is therefore performative, evoking subjective of subject and animatore, by way of a reflexive device.

Paul Ward, in contrast, considers the relationship between a documentarian animator and their subject demonstrates a participatory or "interactive" tendency within the discipline. Like Patrick, Ward focuses on the interpretation of testimony as animation, instead emphasizing the potential for dialogue between subject and filmmaker to facilitate representational authenticity through feedback (Ward, 2005 p 94-95).[1]

Honess Roe was critical of attempts to "shoehorn" animated documentary into Nichols' modes, which were conceived with live action documentary in mind. Instead she establishes a framework specific to animation based on how the medium functions differently from live action in a documentary context (2011, p. 225). These included: "mimetic substitution", in which live action documentary footage is imitated due to the absence of a camera or be impossibility of capturing events on film; "non-mimetic substitution", where footage is replaced with illustrative or figurative imagery unbound by conventional documentary aesthetics; and "evocation", which describes the use of animation to represent abstract and subjective concepts such as emotions, sensations, and mind-sets. (2011, pp. 225-227).

Nichols is also dismissive of attempts to segregate individual films into any one category, preferring a "mix and match" approach (2001, 34). He avoided categorising animated documentary into any particular mode. While not mentioned in the first edition of an *Introduction to Documentary* (2001), in the second edition (2010) he grounds various animated documentaries into two separate modes, while highlighting the overarching relevance of a third.

Characterised by the modernist tendency towards artistic interpretation, an emphasis on form and overthrowing conventions, Nichols references *Silence* (Bringas & Yadin, 1998) and *Feeling My Way* (Hodgson, 1997) as exemplars of the poetic mode in which the artist's vision is foregrounded (2010, p.164). Nichols points to the stylized reenactments and metaphorical signifiers in *Waltz With Bashir* (Folman, 2008), *Ryan* (Landreth, 2004), and *His Mother's Voice* (Tupicoff, 1997), attributing them to the performative mode (2010, 204). Furthermore, Nichols highlights the use of animation in documentaries as inherently reflexive. For at least some audience members animation prompts them to "question the assumption that a documentary must support its proposals or perspective with historically authentic footage" (2010, p. 33).

Despite his efforts to accommodate animated documentary in the second edition, Nichols has overlooked a significant portion of the discipline. The films he cited are certainly exemplars of the animated documentary cannon, however, Honess Roe, proposed a modal distinction between the films Nichols discussed and what she describes in her own topology as examples of mimetic substitution. *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (McCay, 2018) and the series *Walking With Dinosaurs* (BBC, 1999) use animation to replace absent or what would be impossible footage (2011, p.226). In the former, the intertitles represent the U.S. government's propagandist motivations, and in the later a voice-over matches the contentions of natural history documentaries, linking both examples to the expository mode.

With Nichols' "mix and match" approach in mind, my previously proposed architectural metaphor now appears to be superficial and inadequate. In its place I envisage a more complex gravitational system model, akin to a solar system, which may elucidate the interactions between the genre, modes of practice, and individual films.

Each mode, with its own gravitational field, orbits the documentary genre. In this model an individual film moves through the figurative solar system, initially guided by the directors intentions. The production's progress is influenced by a number of gravitational fields in varying strengths, shaping the film's trajectory. Some will arrange themselves like satellites, in tight orbits of a single mode, others will form a complex series of arcs as they travel between modes, through the system.

When extending the metaphor to account for the difference between animated and live action documentaries, one can observe that the two disciplines tend to be drawn to particular modes, and offer distinct qualities. Comparing the medium to a vehicle, allows us to account for animation's time consuming nature, and thus these productions have a slower means of propulsion. Live action, which often involves larger crews for a shorter period of time, can be represented by larger, faster shuttles. Educational or industry training may be equivalent to a starting position or resting place. I imagine two distinct stations orbiting the documentary sun, one which services animation shuttles, the other larger live action ships.

The movement of the modes, in their orbit of the genre, may roughly characterise the shifts in trends throughout documentary history. Live action expository films, for instance, gradually rose and fell in prominence during the 20th Century. This tendency can be represented by the relative proximity of the two orbiting bodies at any given time. Tracking the 100 years would show the modes gradually rotating clockwise around the genera, before reaching their current position represented in figure 3.

Navigating documentary modes though animated documentary practice

Case study 1: Jamie's aspiration to be a clown vs. his appreciation of clowns. Facilitating and visualising verbal metacommentary to further distinguish contrasting perspectives, manifested in the performative mode.

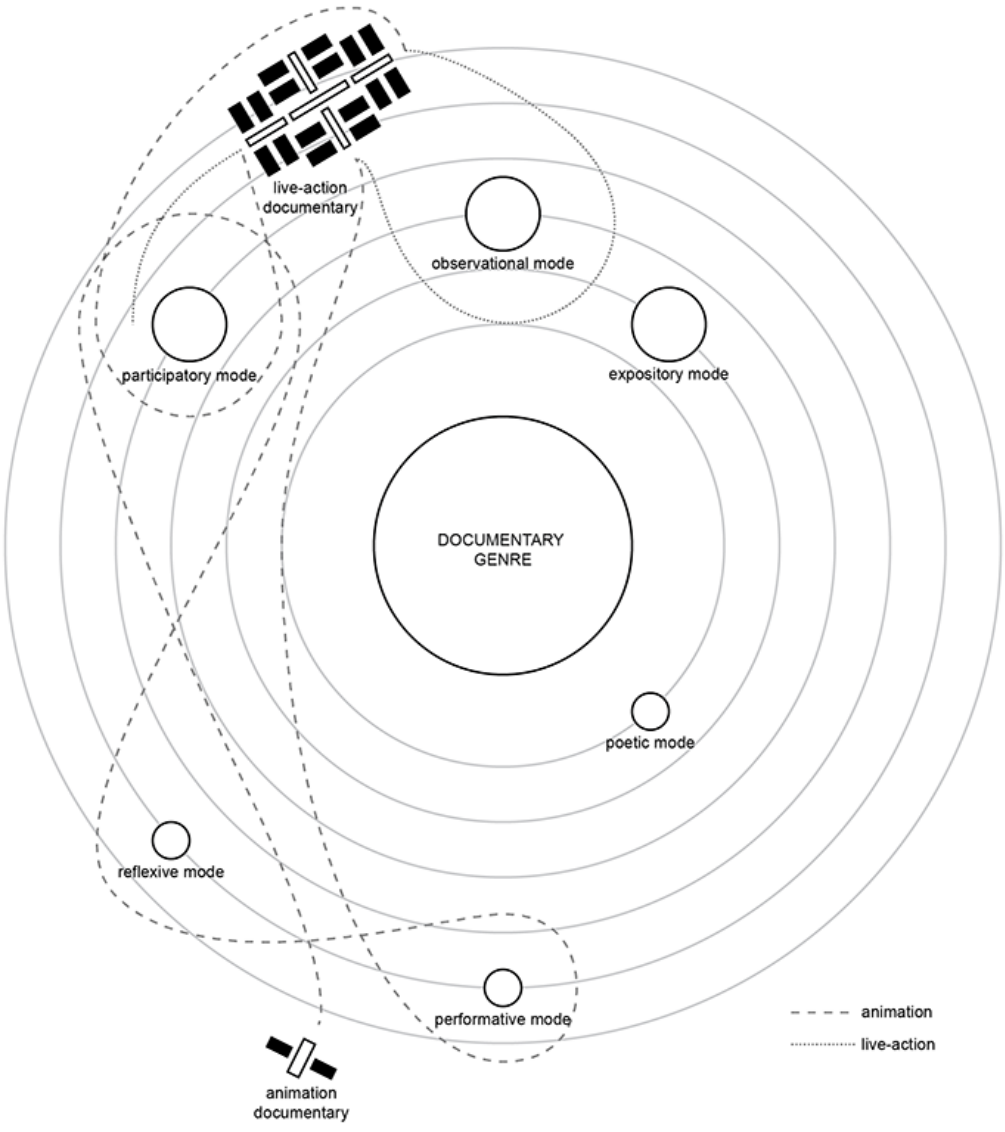


Figure 3:
Tracking modal influence and mediums used in ***Music & Clowns*** through a gravitational system model of the documentary genre, Author, 2018

Music & Clowns is one of six films produced by the inaugural year group of animation masters students graduating, from the documentary pathway, at the Royal College of Art (RCA). Initially conceived by Joan Ashworth and Sylvie Bringas, following Ashworth's departure as programme leader, Birgitta Hosea oversaw its launch in 2015. This coincided with the first Ecstatic Truth symposium, hosted by the RCA, and organised by Tereza Stehlikova and Hosea.

Figure 3, which tracks detectable influences from Bill Nichols modes of documentary in my graduate film, *Music & Clowns*, is a testament to how effective the master's degree has been in familiarising me with documentary discourse. In addition to this training much of the success of this project is attributed to working with my family. It became clear early in development that 30 years of first hand experiences of my subjects facilitated unlimited access and provided an enormous advantage.

The performative qualities of animated documentary, argued by Strøm (2003) and Patrick (2004), and supported by Nichols's reading of specific examples (2010, 111), are conceptually dominant in *Music & Clowns*. Nichols characterises performative documentary as, resisting the western philosophical tradition of knowledge as abstract and universal, instead promoting forms of knowledge that are subjective, constructed from lived experience and personal interpretation. Nichols emphasises that the performative mode promotes an interpretation of meaning as a "affect-laden phenomenon" (2001, 131). Jakub Traczyk, Agata Sobkow, and Tomasz Zaleskiewicz, faculty members from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Wroclaw, consolidate various definitions of affect-laden as follows:

> People differ in the ease with which they create vivid mental images of various objects and situations. Consequently, affect-laden mental images should evoke emotions that differ in intensity in people who vary in mental imagery ability. (2015, para. 35)

In the context of performative animated documentary, a directors role is to expand and articulate a subject's affect-laden reading of a situation. The ambiguous nature of Jamie's communication strategies provide numerous opportunities for this. The most tangible evidence for what Jamie is thinking at any time is his frequent reference to key interests. These include family members, favoured musicians, clowns, and the circus. More often than not these words or phrases are proclaimed spontaneously. The limitations on his ability to engage in dialogue makes it hard to contextualise his assertions and decipher his thought process. Despite not knowing what goes on in his head, the rest of the family are prone to speculation, often drawing different conclusions. For instance, while Anna thinks Jamie's fascination with clowns must indicate that he has aspirations to be one, David disputes this, believing Jamie is drawn to clowns because their comedy is communicated almost entirely through body language and therefore more legible to him than other humour. Inspired by Samanta Moore's "collaborative cycle" methodology (2014, pp. 105-125), I capture my parents differing perspectives by recording David's feedback as he watched an early version of the film, featuring Anna's speculations about Jamie's aspirations. I then incorporated David's verbal metacommentary into a later version of the film. This created space for David to narrate a shift in style between the two scenes, both of which are simulations of their respective affect-ladened interpretation of Jamie's aspirations (see figure 4).

Case study 2: Interpreting Jamie's ambiguous behaviour. Demonstrating the complex inter-modal dynamics at play when shifting between the perspective of multiple documentary subjects

Some of the speculations about Jamie by the other subjects in *Music & Clowns* arguably reveal insight into the mindset and biases of that participant. When David recalls Jamie approaching him during a moment of stress, he



Figure 4: Jamie's interest in clowns representing Anna's and David's perspectives. Screenshots from *Music & Clowns*, Author, 2018

compares his son's touch to the effect of a "lightning conductor" (author, 2018), draining away the frustration. David is proud of Jamie's sensitivity and perception. During an interview he proposed this anecdote as supportive evidence, however, I remember thinking that this story didn't prove Jamie's intentions. I've seen my brother approach my father this way a number of times but this instance stood out in David's memory, possibly because of his vulnerability at that moment. Rather than demonstrating Jamie's intention to comfort my father, I inferred from this memory that the anecdote was an indicator of confirmation bias. This term is used in behavioural science to describe people's tendencies to overvalue information that supports an existing belief, while overlooking evidence that is unsupportive or contradictory (Heshmat, para. 2). During the editing process I reflected on how audiences might interpret the conflicting attitudes in this interview. I could see how David might be seen as a sentimentalist, where as I come across as more of a cynic. Resisting the impulse to introduce to the film as an argument for confirmation bias, I developed representational strategies to signify our conflicting interpretations and visualised the tension between them.

The scene was initially rendered in TVPaint[2]. These digitally drawn frames

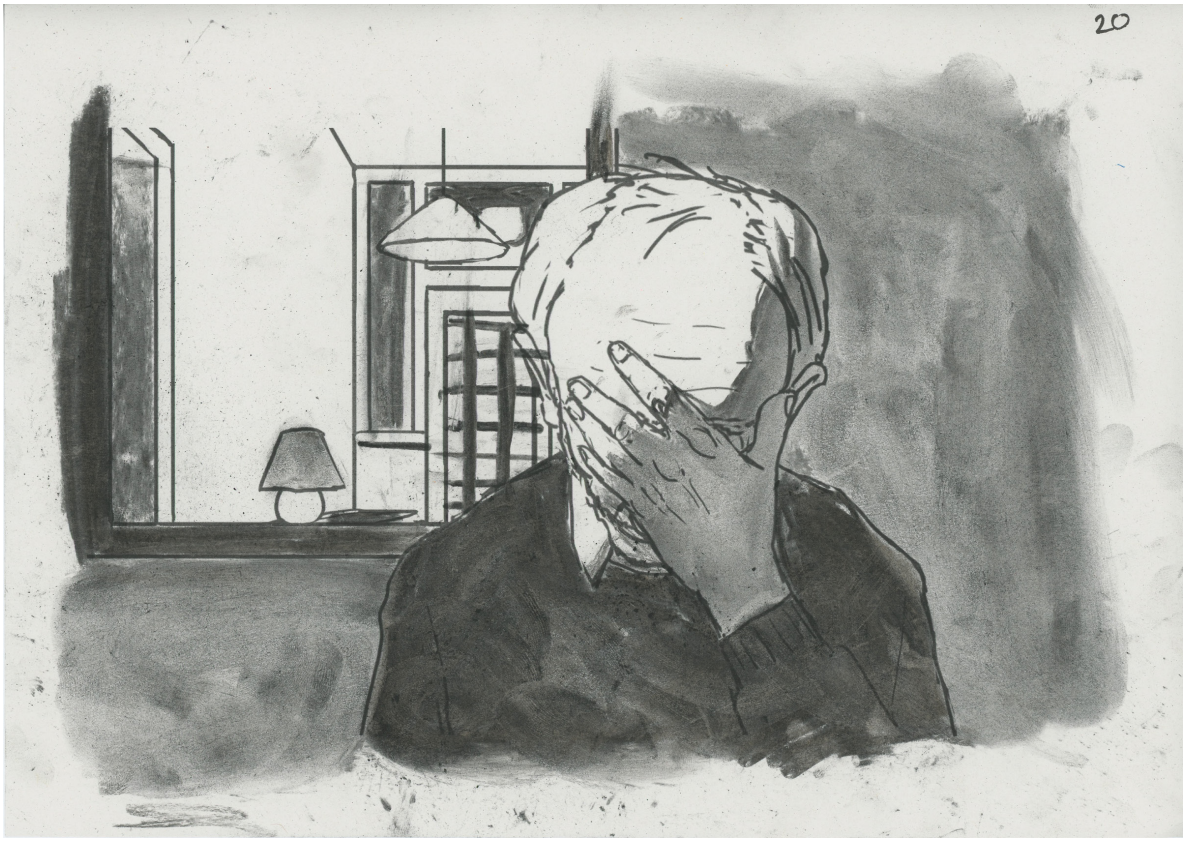


Figure 5: David's colour Scanned frame from *Music & Clowns*, author, 2018

were then printed and, with the help of four assistants, manually coloured. The shots where David experienced stress were shaded with charcoal, signifying his melancholy (see figure 5). Jamie is coloured using pastels, a signifier for David's emotional reading of Jamie's healing potential. Triggered at the point of contact, a wave of pigment radiates across the frame, vanquishing gloom from the scene. The temporal space of this reenacted memory is fractured when I enter the frame to question my father about his proposition. This break with documentary convention hybridised the performative reenactment with a participatory interview, invoking reflexivity. I signify my detached, analytical perspective by transitioning the imagery from printed, hand-coloured frames to stark, flat, digital colours rendered in TVPaint (see figure 6).

Unlike the rest of the film, line-boil is absent from the digital character animation in this scene. This specialised term is used, in my experience as a practitioner, to refer to an animated line, the product of traced and sequential substitution, often looped, composed of a minimum of two drawings. The stillness of the fully digital sequence can be read as a further manifestation of the cynical nature of my critique. In contrast, the scanning process of the printed scenes was conducted with such haste that many frames are misaligned. When played in sequence, a tonal comparison with early black and white footage is noticeable. Where charcoal shading is dominant, the frame movement both invigorates the sequence and adds a turbulent quality. This was complimented in post-production with non-diegetic sound design featuring a recording of heavy rain. As pastels fill the frame the rain subsides, making way for bird song. The calming effect was further enhanced by my efforts to stabilise the josseling image sequence, correlation with the moment of transition. The cumulative result of these methods should invoke in the audience recognition of: firstly, an emotional shift in David, triggered by Jamie's approach; followed by a change in tone, instigated by my intruding scepticism. The modal transition towards participation, and it's reflexive connotation, rather than nullifying the performative qualities of the scene, illuminate the dynamics between active participants and their subjectivity. Jamie's passivity, and lack of representation in the performative construct is informed by his absence during the source interview.

Case study 3: Approaching Jamie's subjectivity. Demonstrating the complex ethical and inter-modal dynamics at play when representing the explicit perspective of an individual documentary subject.

Paul Wells, in an early attempt to innovate a topology specific to animated documentary in 1997, proposed four categories: the imitative, subjective, fantastic, and postmodern modes (Wells, 1997). Wells' subjective mode recognised the attempt of documentary makers to use animation to represent the individual worldview of their subjects. This sub-category shares a close affinity with Nichols' performative mode.

In two scenes I attempt to embody Jamie's perspective. The first instance features abstract animation to emphasise the difficulty experienced, by both David and Anna, when imagining the manner in which Jamie thinks. This scene is unique in the film as the only sequence I chose not to animate myself. Emily Downe, a first year documentary animation student at the RCA, with an aptitude for abstract action, had never met my brother. Her unfamiliarity with him liberated the scene from the potential signifiers which may have emerged if I were to have animated it. I anticipated that a lifetime of observing Jamie's behaviour and appearance may have contaminated my attempts at abstraction (see figure 7).

The second attempt at representing Jamie's subjectivity took Inspiration from *A is for Autism*, directed by Tim Webb (Arnall & Webb, 1992). In what Ward described as a "collaborative working method", Webb encouraged the subjects of his film, who are on the autistic



Figure 6: The perspective of David, hand coloured in charcoal and pastels, and Author, manifest as digital colour. Screenshots from *Music & Clowns*, Author, 2018 Screenshots from *Music & Clowns*, Author, 2018

spectrum, to draw and discuss, on tape, their passions and concerns (p.94). In 2005, I was able to encourage Jamie to draw my portrait for an A-Level project about our relationship (see figure 8). Thirteen years later, he showed no interest in participating as an artist in *Music & Clowns*. I navigated around this by tracing, on my graphics tablet, drawings he created when he was younger. The resultant images, which were the basis for character designs of the entire family in this scene, do not constitute "Outsider Art"[3]. Roger Cardinal, coined the label Outsider Art to formulate an English language equivalent of Jean Dubuffet's term, "Art Brut". Their overlapping definitions encompass artwork created without traceable influence from contemporary art practice or history (Cardinal, 1972, p.21). The movement is associated with works produced by individuals who are either institutionally or mentally isolated from the art world. If Jamie's drawings are identifiable as Outsider Art, my taking influence from his representational style could be interpreted as an inversion of the outsider convention due to my formal training, as well as my purposeful response to a recognised art movement. When considering my translations of his work, the indexical chain between Jamie's drawings and the scene I've animated is significantly weak. With regards to the documentary process, the scene is better described as an imitation rather than a collaboration.

My inability to solicit drawn contributions from Jamie prompted me to appropriate artwork he created in an educational context, approximately twenty five years ago. This process was further problematised by his inability to provide consent, in an informed manner, for me to use his artwork. Our shared parents, once again, took this decision on his behalf. While maintaining a strong degree of resemblance, the images I traced were significantly altered by adapting them into new mediums, and coloured, before being animated. The aforementioned conclusion, that my method was antithetical to Outsider Art, would not apply to *A is for Autism,* as the film is mitigated by the director's significantly collaborative approach.

Mosaic Films, under the direction of Andy Glynn, have produced a number of animated documentaries which adopt performative devices comparable to the *Music & Clowns,* scene discussed in the previous two paragraphs. The *Seeking Refuge* series (2012), features first hand testimony from children who were forced to flee their homeland and chose to resettle in the United Kingdom. A comparison between two of the *Seeking Refuge* episodes reveals potential problems that arise from an imitative, as opposed to collaborative, performative animated documentary. There is a noticeable difference in the degree with which Glynn has executed artistic collaborations with the young refugees featured in each episode. This is demonstrated by *Juliane's Story* (2012), animation direction by Karl Hammond at MUMMU Studio, and *Ali's Story* (2012), animation direction by Salvador Maldonado, produced in house at Mosaic Films.



Figure 7: An abstract representation of the impenetrability of Jamie's consciousness. Screenshot from Music & Clowns, author, 2018.

Ali's Story is rendered without adherence to conventional perspective. The animation technique, commonly known as cut-out or 2 ½ D, makes use of flat puppets, consisting of individual bitmap images rigged together to make a character form. These are composited in a three dimensional digital space featuring parallaxing sets and backgrounds. *Ali's Story* includes a mixture of digital imagery and scanned hand rendered artwork, much of which was created by the subject. His testimony emphasises a passion for drawing. A viewer has enough information to identify the influence Ali's artwork had on the films art direction.

Juliane's Story includes some animated references to what might be her own drawings. However, unlike Ali, she does not corroborate that these are her creations. The indexical link between Ali's scanned drawings and those of Julianne's are broken in this episode by the animators use of vector based tracing. The mechanical indifference of scanned original artwork, akin to the mechanisms of live action documentary, is entirely lost.

While this methodology is comparable to one used in *Music & Clowns*, audiences are left to infer a collaboration between Glynn, Hammond, and Juliane. Where as, this is explicitly evident in *Ali's Story*. The increased creative dominance of the animators in *Juliane's Story* makes the episode a relatively strong example of Nea Ehrlich's characterisation of animation as "suspect and un-objective as a documentary language" (2011, para. 3).

Glynn described his interview methods during a panel discussion I attended at the animated documentary festival, Factual Animation Film Fuss (FAFF), in September 2015. Glynn, a trained clinical psychologist, recorded conversations with the pree-teen subjects of ths series. From this he would extract the narration for the series by editing out his voice. Nichols referred to this process as the "masked interview", utilised by observational documentaries in order to maintain the fly-on-the-wall aesthetic (2001, 113).

In contrast to the performative and participatory tone of the relevant scene in *Music & Clowns,* the *Seeking Refuge* series, directed by Glynn and supported by multiple animation directors, navigates a different path between modal influences, aligning very closely with performative conventions. This dominant mode contains within it a complex amalgam of other modes: a poetic animation, informed by an observational version of obscured participatory interviews.

Nichols describes a shift in prominence from the observational to participatory documentary modes. He partly attributes this trend to the limited scope of observational methodologies for exposing a director's existing bias, as well as the disparity between a literal documentary crew and the figurative fly-on-the-wall (2001, 114). The strategies developed in the participatory mode were successful in mitigating these issues, providing further opportunities for

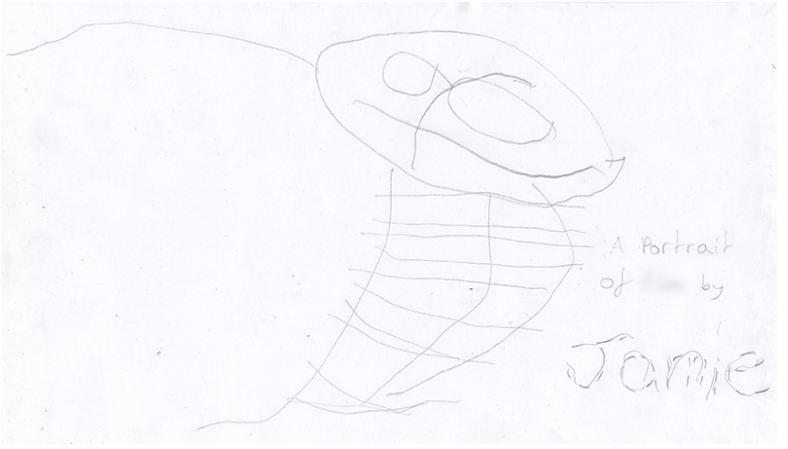


Figure 8:
A portrait of Author by Jamie. Jamie Surname, 2005, with permission from the artist's parents.

filmmakers to reveal their existing prejudices by way of perceivable profilmic or audible interactions with subjects. Participatory documentaries also reveals some of the influence filmmakers have on events as they unfold (Nichols, 2001, 119). The weaknesses Nichols attributed to observational films, which prompted participatory innovations, helps further illuminate problems relating to ethics of authenticity when comparing *Music & Clowns* with *Seeking Refuge*.

Doctoring the interviews in the *Seeking Refuge* series obscures Glynn's presence in order to remove potential distractions from the subjects' testimony. However, whittling down the dialogue to produce a monologue nullifies the transparency and ethical benefits of the participatory act. The masked interview facilitates the construction of the performative strategy "We speak about ourselves to you". This notion is essential to the performative mode and influenced by auto-ethnography (Nichols, 2001, 133-4). However, as mentioned previously the degree of influence the *Seeking Refuge* subjects had on the art direction of this series varied greatly.

Despite the visual auto-ethnographic and participatory of the seeking refuge series being either inconsistent or lost, animated documentary audiences are in an advantageous position, relative to viewers of a live action documentary. The indexicality of footage also helps to mask a filmmaker's bias. Animation on the other hand provides continuous stream of fully constructed semiotic information, providing vast data set for a critical analysis of what prejudices may have informed the iconographic coding of each animated documentary. Ehrlich's scepticism with regards to the limited documentary value of animation based on it's "constructedness" (2011, parap. 3), is in these circumstances an advantage for a critical viewer.

There is also value to be found in reflecting on why these modal strategies were selected by the directors. In *Music & Clowns* I appropriated Jamie's adolescent drawings out of necessity. He was out of practice and would not engage with a collaborative exercise. Where as, Ali's accomplished drawings were, judging from his testimony, presented to the filmmakers with enthusiasm. Julianne on the other hand evidences no enthusiasm for drawing, possibly due to her level of ability and the self consciousness one could infer from this. Glynn may have masked his presence in the *Seeking Refuge* interviews because he probably considered his relationship with the participating children as irrelevant. In contrast, I chose to maintain a role in the scene with Jamie because our relationship is as much of a central theme as his ability to respond to questions and the performative interpretation of his subjectivity.

Other modal explorations in Music & Clowns

Music & Clowns features one observational scene composed of archive footage taken from a 1985 BBC Two documentary about my parents experience raising a child with Down syndrome (Chapple). This segment originally began with exposition from the programme narrator. The testimony then shifted to off camera masked interviews with my parents, participatory at the point of recording but observational in the context of the BBC Two documentary. The camera crew hid from sight, an explicitly observational filming technique, providing scope to record the dynamics between David and Anna, both in their thirties; Guy, my other brother, age two; and Jamie, age five. Within the context of *Music & Clowns*, careful editing of this footage allowed me to partially synchronise contemporary testimony from Anna and David with footage of them from over thirty years ago. The observational footage of my brother, visibly joyful and energetic, combined with the materiality of the damaged VHS recording may evoke a sensation of nostalgia. This is juxtaposed with contemporary participatory interviews I conducted with mine and Jamie's parents. David describes Jamie's decline after being moved out of the family home into one where he is assisted by carers. My brother, who was in his late 20s when this decision was made on his

behalf, has since entered a gradual intellectual decline, probably caused in part by the relatively unstimulating and overly accommodating environment he lives in. Anna, responding to my questions about this decision describes her "no regrets" attitude, managing the associated guilt by explaining "you can only do what you think is best at the time" (Author, 2018).

The affecting disorientation of combining conflictual visual and verbal narrative threads, complimented by a temporal displacement, places the scene closer to the performative mode. It may produce in a viewer a divided emotional state, something akin to cognitive dissonance, a term used in psychology to describe the discomfort of simultaneously experiencing conflicting thought processes ("Reference Terms Cognitive Dissonance").

This pluralised subjectivity approach was inspired by *Through the Hawthorn* (2014). An animated documentary, commissioned by the Wellcome Trust, to communicate problems related to the disparate interpretations of risk and attitude that can develop during psychiatric treatment. Three directors: Anna Benner, Pia Borg, and Gemma Burditt, were each granted equal space within the frame, adopting contrasting methods to simultaneously represent the perspective of each of the three protagonists: a psychiatrist, a psychiatric patient, and the patient's mother. Not strictly a documentary, the script was written by D. R. Hood and inspired by the 2011 non-fiction book, *Henry's Demons;* co-authored by Henry and Patrick Cockburn; and informed by observations of family therapy sessions in a Hospital in South London (Borg). Despite the several degrees of separation between the animated film and the real world experiences that inspired it, *Through the Hawthorn* clearly demonstrates performative methodologies, which are situated within the experimental and formal concerns of the poetic mode.

> The poetic mode sacrifices the conventions of continuity editing and the sense of a very specific location in time and place that follows from it to explore associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions. (Nichols, 2001, 102)

It could be argued that the prominence of formal devices, which help divide and structure my film, *Music & Clowns,* justify a poetic undertone. However, a performative and participatory reading of the film are more dominant. These devices could also be interpreted as having a reflexive connotation.

Unlike David, Anna and Jamie, I attempt to manifest my own subjectivity consistently throughout the film. Adopting the role of an inquisitive documentary filmmaker, the mimetic, untextured digital animation technique was intended to function as a baseline from which the aesthetics deviated throughout the film. Taking inspiration from *Slaves: an Animated Documentary* (Aronowitsch & Heilborn, 2003), and *Ryan* (Holborn, Smith, Page & Landreth, 2004), I signified both the participatory context of the audio recordings and emphasised my role as a documentarian by contriving the appearance of microphones in frame.

There is a conceptual difference between a utilitarian use of microphones and their symbolic inclusion an animated interview. Nick Broomfield's confrontations with an unwilling documentary subject in *Kurt & Courtney* (1998), may not have become a film at all were he to ask for permission off camera. Thus, his wielding of a microphone is a necessity (Nicholson, 2001, 119). While microphones were present in my family home, similarly arranged to how they appear in *Music & Clowns*, this is not an example of Honess Roe's mimetic-substitution category. I could have easily captured these scenes on camera as profilmic participatory interviews. This fact is evidenced to the audience when footage of me painting Jamie's face appears alongside the end credits. By contriving participatory acts in animation I was able to both emphasise to audiences the dynamics between subject and filmmaker, while also promoting a reflexive

metadiscourse, due to the purposefulness of this act. The reflexive potential of a contrived microphone adjustment is exemplified in the scene where Anna recalls her emotional state following Jamie's birth and the subsequent diagnosis of Down syndrome. The animation features her in a hospital bed 40 years earlier holding Jamie in her arms. At the start of the scene, I adjust the microphone while I sit beside her, ten years before I was born. It is reasonable to predict some viewers may be momentarily distracted by this folding in of temporal space. Making use of Nichols' comparison between the participatory and observational modes (2001,p. 125), the onscreen presence of an animated documentarian, microphone in hand, prompts the viewer to raise their awareness of the form, shifting focus momentarily from the relationship between me, the filmmaker and my subject, Anna, to the me, the filmmaker and them, my audience. I use this trope a number of times in the film, often with comedic effect.

While I would argue the act of navigating between multiple documentary modes is inherently reflexive, *Music & Clowns,* completes a full orbit of the performative mode in figure 3, indicating its dominance. However, Nichols warns of the strategic limitations of the mode to address objective truths, in addition to their "excessive" preoccupation with style (2001, 138). Ward also argues this point, highlighting the pertinence of these issues with regards to performative animated documentaries (2005, 86). This mirrors Ehrlich's aforementioned concerns about the "constructedness" and "un-objective" constraints of animation in a documentary context (2011, parap. 3).

Rather than diminishing the authority of animation as a documentary medium, Okwui Enwezor, when addressing recent documentary innovations, argues such works "...raise new relations of ethics and aesthetics because instead of presenting the viewer with non-negotiable facts, they create a 'truth process'" (Ehrlich, 2013, p. 252). This mirrors Werner Herzog's attack on the preoccupation within the documentary tradition for seeking objective truths. Herzog mocks this concept comparing it to the "truth of accountants". In its place he coined the term "ecstatic truth", describing it as "...mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization" (Walker Art Centre).

In attempting to strike a balance between the fluid concepts of documentary truth proposed by Herzog and Enwezor, and cautionary words regarding the performative mode and animated documentary put forward by Nichols, Ward, and Ehrlich, I devised a strategy for mitigating the risk of anecdotal subjectivity. Rather than developing a single performative strategy, as I did in my auto-ethnographic film *Patients* (2012), I developed distinct representational styles to separate the subjectivity of the four documentary participants in *Music & Clowns.* In addition to this, Anna, David, and Jamie presented or prompted distinct topics that required individual aesthetic treatment, further pluralising my representational pallet. The accumulative effect of this montage of techniques was intended to figuratively increase the sample size of my aesthetic readings of the participant's subjectivities. Within the social sciences such an approach would in most circumstances be expected to improve the reliability of data collected. However, this research contains within it only a degree of correlation between the figurative data points. In addition to the general glowing assessment of Jamie's character, there are many conflictual accounts and unsubstantiated assumptions about what life must be like for him from myself, David and Anna. Rather than undermining the usefulness of my results, it helped me create a rich portrait of Jamie's life, contextualised by our family dynamics, the results illuminate the limits of our knowledge. The product of my research, *Music & Clowns,* suggests we can never truly know Jamie because of his limited expressive capabilities, and to a lesser degree each other, due to the limits of our own subjectivity. A key aim of this film was to evoke "truth", in Herzog's sense of the word, by way of

a reflexive transparency regarding the capability of animation to supersede the "truth of accountants", which still holds the attention of many live action documentarians.

Conclusion

My eight years of practice informed animated documentary research has been punctuated by exposure to two key text, *An Introduction to Documentary* (Nichols, 2001 & 2010) and Annabelle Honess Roe's book, *Animated Documentary* (2013). Honess Roe establishes a bespoke theoretical framework for animated documentary, breaking from previous attempts to adapt Nichols mode system. Honess Roe went back to the drawing board and developed her own taxonomy, based on how animated documentaries function differently from live action: mimetic substitution, non-mimetic substitution, and evocation. Defined as categories rather than modes, they illuminate three distinct strategies employed by animated documentaries and, for the most part, they are inapplicable to living documentary. Honess Roe's framework was both insightful and inspiring, as well as a helpful framework to improve the efficiency with which I repeatedly explained what my discipline was.

However, when directly comparing the practical application of theoretical topologies contained within these two publications, the emphasis Honess Roe places on the difference between live action and animation potentially marginalises the practice of animated documentary. In a teaching context, if fledgling animator documentarians are encouraged primarily to pursue the topics that live action documentary is not capable of addressing, this might point them down a narrowing path.

Nichols, contrasts this approach in the second edition of his book, *Introduction to Documentary* (2010), by introducing animated documentaries into an existing theoretical framework. Despite only referencing examples of practice that exemplify particular modes, the flexibility of his modal system, characterised by the "mix and match" approach, prompts the reader to compare and contrast animated and live action documentaries that intersect two or more modes. The boundaryless approach to documentary discourse that Nichols promotes stimulates a dialogue with dominant live action forms, while illuminating numerous potential paths for creative exploration.

The detailed analysis, diagrams, metaphors and examples collected in this article should demonstrate both the aptitude of animation for navigation of Bill Nichols's modes and the enduring and invaluable contribution he has made to animated documentary discourse. The complex, shifting and interactive relationships contained within Nichols' documentary topology, should not be considered evidence for his weakness as a taxonomist, but rather, a testament to his strength as a theoretician, having developed a powerful set of tools to inform and reflect on animated documentary.

When attempting to articulate the influence Nichols' modal system has had on the development and production of *Music & Clowns*, I found it necessary to invoke visual metaphors to clarify my insights. This process culminated in the development of a gravitational system model of Nichols documentary modes. It is a testament to the enduring brilliance of Nichols' theoretical framework, that I was able to expand my initial solar system metaphor to not just indicate the relative position the modes in relation to each other and the genre, but also account for tenancies and trends associated with the two dominant mediums, live action and animation. The analytical potential of this figurative approach was then demonstrated by the ease with which I was able to plot the allegorical journey of my own production through the medley of influences specific to the documentary genre. While conscious of the risk of over extending the space exploration metaphor, I would like to propose one final annex to the figuration, borrowed from Adam Curtis' 2015 essay documentary, *Bitter Lake*[4] (Kelsall).

Stanisław Lem's 1961 science fiction novel, *Solaris*, centres on an exploratory mission by cosmonauts to observe a strange planet. While orbiting Solaris, the crew experience vivid hallucinations, which are at times indistinguishable from reality. These mirages, seemingly evoked by the planet; and the subsequent delusions, are informed by past experiences and memories of loved ones. The application of Lem's science-fiction to the metaphor of the gravitational system model of the Nichols topology for documentary, expands, all be it fantastically, the intangible mechanism by which each mode inspires and facilitates creativity at the point when filmmaker enters the range of a particular mode's gravitational pull. My choice to conclude my practice informed theoretical analysis of the animated documentary, *Music & Clowns*, by leaving the realms of newtonian physics, and entering the territory of science fiction, may indicate the limits of my own comprehension with regards to the precise mechanics of inspiration.

Bibliography

Arnell, D. (producer) & Webb, T. (Director), (1992) *A is for Autism* [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: Fine Take.

Aronowitsch, D. (co-producer/director) & Heilborn,. H (co-producer/director), (2003). *Slaves: an Animated Documentary* [Motion Picture] Sweden: Story AB.

Author (producer/director), (2018). *Music & Clowns* [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: Royal College of Art.

Author (producer/director), (2012). *Patients* [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: Loughborough University.

Benner, A. (co-director), Borg, A. (co-director), Burditt, G. (co-director) (2014) *Through the Hawthorn* [Motion Picture]. London: Wellcome Trust.

Borg, P. (2014) *THROUGH THE HAWTHORN* [website]. Retrieved from http://piaborg.com

Bringas, S. (co-producer/co-director) & Yadin, O., (co-producer/co-director), (1998) *Silence* [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: Halo Productions.

Broomfield, N. (producer/director), (1998). *Kurt & Courtney* [Motion Picture]. Capitol Films

Callam, C. (producer); Richards, C. (director) (2016) *World Without Down Syndrome* [one off television special]. Dragonfly Film and Television.

Child Care and Parenthood 4 [Television segment]. (1985, may 20). In Chapple, J. (series producer), *Daytime on Two*. London: BBC 2.

Cardinal, R., (1972). *Outsider Art*. London: Studio Vista

Carruth, A. (2013). Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor by Rob Nixon. [review], *MFS Modern Fiction Studies,* 59(4), 847-849. doi: 10.1353/mfs.2013.0055

Ehrlich, N. (2013) Animated Documentaries: aesthetics, politics and viewer engagement. In S. Buchan (Ed.), *Pervasive Animation* (pp. 248-272) London & New York: Routledge.

Ehrlich, N. (2011, December 22). Animated Documentary as Masking [peer-reviewed open access online journal], *Animation Studies Online Journal*, Regrieved from https://journal.animationstudies.org/nea-ehrlich-animated-documentaries-as-masking/

Glynn, A. (Producer/director), (2012, June). Ali's Story [Television series episode]. In *Seeking Refuge*. London: BBC 2.

Glynn, A. (Producer/director), (2012, June). Julianne's Story [Television series episode]. In *Seeking Refuge*. London: BBC 2.

Fouman, A. (producer/director), (2008). *Waltz with Bashir.* Israil:Bridgit Folman Film Gang; France: Les Films d'Ici; Germany: Razor Film Produktion.

Heshmat. S., (2015, April 23) What Is Confirmation Bias? Wishful thinking. [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/science-choice/201504/what-is-confirmation-bias

Hoban, S. (co-producer); Mark Smith (co-producer); Marcy Page (co-producer) & C. Landreth, (director), (2004). *Ryan* [Motion Picture]. Canada: National Film Board.

Hodgson. J. (producer/director), (1997) *Feeling My Way* [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: Hodgson Films.

Honess Roe, A. (2011). Absence, Excess and Epistemologica Expansion: Towards a Framework for the Study of Animated Documentary. *Animation: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 6(3), 215-230, doi:10.1177/1746847711417854

Honess Roe, A. (2013). *Animated Documentary,* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kelsall, L. (producer) & Curtis, A. (director), *Bitter Lake* [Motion Picture], United Kingdom: BBC productions.

Notes

1 Nichols' participatory mode was originally coined as "interactive" in Representing Reality (1991, p. 44).

2 2D bitmap animation software.

3 I examined the potential redundancy of Outsider Art in terms of ontology, due to increasing reach of media and popular culture influences, as well as ethical implications of a movement which incentivises the exclusion of artist for fear of creative contamination. Author , Art: Redundant Term or Useful Category? 2011, BA dissertation, Loughborough University.

4 In his 2015 essay film, *Bitter Lake*, Adam Curtis' proposed the planet Solaris as a metaphor for Afghanistan, illuminating the ideological fractures experienced by invading forces throughout modern history.

MacCay, W. (producer/director), (1918) *Sinking of the Lusitania* [Motion Picture]. United States: Jewel Productions.

Moore, S., (2014) Out of Sight: Using animation to document perceptual brain states [Doctoral thesis]. Retrieved at Loughborough University institutional repository (https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/18020**)**

Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing Reality,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

Nichols, B. (2001). *Introduction to Documentary* (1st ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, B. (2010). *Introduction to Documentary* (2nd ed.), Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nixon, R. (2011). Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Reference Terms Cognitive Dissonance, (no date). Retrieved from https://www.sciencedaily.com

Sally Phillips's film on Down's is 'unhelpful' for families, warns antenatal specialist. (2016 October 2) *The Guardian Online*. Retrieved from

https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/oct/01/downs-syndrome-screening-jane--fisher-expert-criticises-sally-phillips-bbc-documentary

Strøm, G. (2003). The Animated Documentary. *Animation Journal*, 11. pp. 47-63

Tim Haines (co-director) & Jasper James (co-director), (1999). *Walking with Dinosaurs* [television series] (1999 October 4). Bristol: BBC Natural History Unit.

Tupicoff, D. (producer/director) (1997) *Mother's Voice* [Motion Picture]. Australia: Australian Film Commission.

Traczyk, J., Sobkow, A., & Zaleskiewicz, T. (2015). Affect-Laden Imagery and Risk Taking: The Mediating Role of Stress and Risk Perception. *PLoS ONE*, *10*(3), e0122226. http://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0122226

Walker Art Centre, (2017 October 12), *Werner Herzog's Minnesota Declaration* [video file]. Minneapolis:Walker Art Center. Retrieved from www.youtube.com

Ward, P. (2005). *Documentary: The margins of reality*. London: Wallflower.

Wason, P. (1960). On The Failure to Eliminate Hypotheses in a Conceptual Task. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 12(3), 129-140. doi:10.1080/17470216008416717.