**Observational Animation: An Exploration of Improvisation, Interactivity and Spontaneity in Animated Filmmaking.**

Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the use of real time motion capture technologies in the animation process and how they can create a more interactive and participatory approach to creating an animated film. By utilizing real time capture for both virtual camera and actor performance, I hope to create a unique atmosphere in which both character and camera operator have the ability to influence action and actively participate in an evolving narrative.

Observational films are known for their intimacy. Achieved by immersing the filmmaker into the lives of the subjects, these films give the audience the ability to more actively participate in generating the films meaning and to forge close, personal relationships with the subject matter. Animation has inherent obstacles that limit that level of personal interaction and spontaneity. By looking to both direct cinema and cinema verite, this thesis explores how live action documentary techniques translate into an animated film.

In this paper, I study and discuss several animated documentaries and the tendencies and challenges the films face when approaching claims of truth and authenticity. I also analyze three well known observational films, Primary, Salesman and Titicut Follies and the transformation of ordinary people into ‘social actors’. It is this assumed role, the everyday presentation of self that audiences relate to and perceive as truthful and authentic and is the backbone of my thesis research. Through the creation of two separate short films, Grandpa and Wade, I explore both virtual characters as social actors and my own role as a filmmaker in the animation process.
DEDICATION

To my parents, for their unwavering love and support and for encouraging me to pursue my artistic endeavors.

To my sister, for being a pillar of positivity and for supporting me, not just in graduate school, but in life.

And to my fellow ACCADians, whose collective creativity and insights have been nothing short of inspirational.
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INTRODUCTION

Possibly the most intriguing discussion taking place within Animation Studies is how animated films relate to our conceptions of reality and the real world. Two principal tendencies have emerged in the representation of the real in animated films; mimesis and abstraction. The former describes a multitude of techniques used to create and evaluate how an animation can appear realistic. Disney films tend to fall into the former as they tend to lean towards a ‘hyper-realist’ aesthetic. That is, a lot of attention is given to the highly accurate reproduction of human movement and visual representation. In more recent years, it can describe animations pursuit of realism through the creation of photo-realistic CGI characters. While both techniques fall into acceptable representations of realism, they also tend to operate within a fictional space (Ward 2008).

Animated documentaries, or those that seek to incorporate a higher level of truthfulness in their representation of subject matter, tend to adhere to a more abstracted approach to animation. This is in part due to animations ability to better represent emotions and internal struggle than live action documentary which, unless a subject shows extremely well defined facial features or is comfortable revealing their deepest emotional states, may be missed by the camera. A documentary film following a criminal case is going to be a more convincing depiction of the truth when told through a camera’s lens, but an animated film documenting the succession of emotions the victim
of that crime might have felt at the time can go deeper and reach people’s souls through
the use of illustrated metaphors or analogies (Fierlinger 2008).

As counter intuitive as documentary and animations union remains to some, films
such as Ari Folman’s Waltz with Bashir and Chris Landereth’s Ryan have shown that such
creative treatments of reality can act as an accurate mode of truthful representation. The
goal of my thesis then is not to attempt to justify animated documentaries existence, but
to challenge our understanding of the animation process and how, by deconstructing its
fabricated nature can discover a more interactive and participatory approach to creating
and interpreting an animated documentary.

The point of attack for my thesis research was to explore the use of camera in
both animated and live action documentary. In Chapter 1, I begin to explore
documentary as a practice and how differing modes of representation, (Poetic,
Expository, Reflexive, Performative, Participatory and Observational), relate to
audiences. While these six modes of documentary are by no means all-encompassing,
they do serve as a foundation on which my thesis animations are derived. More
specifically the participatory and observational modes (also referred to as cinema verite
and direct cinema) have raised a series of interesting questions pertaining to process,
camera and interactive techniques in relation to animated documentary. How does
foregrounding animations constructedness build a relationship of trust and transparency
with the viewer and can doing so allow them to feel that what they are watching is a
truthful representation of reality? In what ways can the use of camera and staging
encourage viewers to take a more participatory role in analyzing an animations subject
matter? What is the role of the filmmaker in an animated film and what kind of ethical responsibilities do they have to audiences when representing the real world and lived experiences?

In observational film, the role of the filmmaker has been a long-debated topic. From this discussion evolved different perspectives on ways in which filmmakers approach non-fiction in their practice. One is Direct Cinema, in which filmmakers focus on highly objective observations and make an attempt to mask the camera's presence in hopes of having no influences on the film's subject and situations. Another is Cinema Verite, in which the filmmaker takes a more aggressive approach in use of the camera. Filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch believes that using the “camera as instigator” and as a catalyst for interaction and confrontations enables the filmmaker to elicit truth from observed situations and reactions both expected and unexpected. Using the camera in a participatory role allows for the discovery of situations that may not have taken place without the presence of the camera. Chapter 2 explores three influential observational films, Primary, Salesman and Titicut Follies, and how through the use of camera, each creates unique interpersonal relationships between audiences, filmmakers and subject matter.

There are a wide range of animations that that relate to audiences in a similar way as observational films. These relationships however, are not usually informed or discovered by way of an instigative camera. Animated films, by nature of their production process, distance themselves from the direct, indexical link with external reality (Ward 2008). Despite animations ability to mimic the documentary aesthetic, the
relationship between character and filmmaker remains one separated by a mouse, keyboard and computer monitor. It is an inherently ‘created’ medium whose abstract nature leads viewers to recognize that what they are watching is a reconstruction of a reality rather than one being “captured”. In chapter 3, I begin to explore the tendencies and challenges of animated documentaries and the techniques implemented to overcome them. By analyzing the relationship animation has with the different modes of documentary, I hope to discover how the rules of objectivity (both environmental and figurative) play a role in our perception of animated documentaries.

My research into animated documentaries involved the creation of two short films Grandpa and Wade. While both explore similar aspects of documentary film, the use of camera is distinctly different. Grandpa, an animated short about isolation, aging and societal separation was created in a style that closely resembles that of direct cinema films such as Frederick Wisemans Titicut Follies (1967) or the Maysles brothers Salesman (1968) in which the filmmakers are focused on highly detailed outward observations and the non-intervention of subject matter. In Grandpa, the camera films from a static and fixed point of view. It watches for extended periods of time in hopes of ‘capturing’ elements of truth that happen to wonder in front of the camera.

As a natural progression in my exploration of observational cinema techniques, I began to explore cinema verite and such films as Robert Drew’s Primary and the Maysles brothers Grey Gardens and how their use of camera affected audiences. With Wade, I took a much more participatory approach to filming. Through the creation of a real time motion captured camera and by utilizing an actor’s captured performance; I was able to
develop a process for filming in virtual spaces that allowed for improvisation, interactivity and spontaneity. Unlike in Grandpa, in which a conscious effort was made to mask the presence of a camera operator, Wade embraces it and uses the relationship formed between the camera and character to create an intimate relationship with the viewer.

Creating a visual experience that asks viewers to question their perceptions of truth and reality in animated film is an important part of this experiment. The conclusion of this thesis will reflect on the outcomes and process developed in hopes of validating the incorporation of real-time motion capture technologies into the practice of creating an animated film. It also begins to question the implications of portraying virtual characters as social actors and the indexical link between animated imagery and the real world situations it depicts. How can an animated character be perceived as authentic and ‘true-to-life’ as social actors within live action documentary? How can animation form these distinct bonds to the world we all share in a way that closer relates to audiences and allows them to feel that what they are watching is a truthful a representation of reality? These questions remain at the center of my thesis research and are explored in the following paper.
CHAPTER 1: DOCUMENTARY IN CONTEXT

1.1 TRUTH AND REALISM IN DOCUMENTARY

“The world and its truth exist; they need only be dusted off and reported”

-Bill Nichols

Documentary film has always strived for an accurate representation of truth. For some it would seem a hopeless goal, believing that reality can never be truthfully represented through film. In documentary, the camera does not work randomly; it does so with purpose and makes conscious and irreversible choices from the very beginning of the documentation process. A finite amount of footage is obtained before the editing process even begins; with choices of subject matter, camera angles, duration etc. all predetermined. Shots can be shortened, removed, juxtaposed and can be dubbed with narration or even explained through text, but new footage cannot be added in the editing room. In the silent documentary Nanook of the North (1922), Robert Flaherty created the impression that some scenes took place inside of Nanook’s igloo when in fact they were filmed in open air environments. Although this forced the subjects to do a bit of acting (as if they were inside), it gave Flaherty enough light to capture events that without the reconstruction would have gone unseen. These kinds of choices, although not all are as heavy handed as the latter, represent tactics filmmakers use to create a specific impression on their audience. However, despite the conventional distortions of reality that
occurs when translating a lived experience into the medium of film; accuracy, truth and how each filmmaker chooses to capture and present it remains at the center of discourse for documentary film.

Narrative storytelling also became a significant influence on documentary film. The creation of a narrative gave filmmakers the opportunity to present their own voice or perspective on the worlds they had created. The problem/solution approach too many documentaries uses narrative techniques to resolve conflict and achieve order (Nichols 2001). It also lends itself towards forms of suspense and anticipation within a film where complications can mount and grow. In Frederick Wiseman’s *Titticut Follies* (1967), a documentary about the daily lives of inmates at the Bridgewater State Hospital, an inmate is force fed while being held down by guards. The scene cycles back and forth between shots of the force feeding and the man being prepared for burial by the coroner. The choice to juxtapose this cruel event with the man’s eventual death creates tension and delivers a message from filmmaker to viewer about his stance on the subject matter. Robert Drew (Primary, 1960) also focused heavily on story finding and the dramatic/crisis moments in his films. He would often structure his documentaries as “stories”; using a combination of cinema verite techniques and fictional concepts in order to create his own personal vision of the subject matter. The creation of a narrative also refined the techniques of editing to create a seamless sense of time and space to the places in which subjects were filmed. Even when material was compiled from different times and locations filmmakers’ attention to matching movement, action, scale allowed for continuity from one image to the next. These developments invited audiences to
participate with and interpret what they saw in films such as *Primary* or the Maysles brothers *Salesman* (1968) as if they were fiction.

Italian neorealism films (although fictional narratives) were celebrated for what Andre Bazin considered, “a profound respect for reality by finding a narrative ‘voice’ that was humble and modest but hardly silent”. Filmmakers such as Roberto Rossellini (Rome, Open City, 1946) and Vitorio De Sica (Bicycle Thief, 1948) emphasized combining photographic realism with the narrative qualities of a film. They focused on the use of untrained actors, casual occurrences of everyday life and the problems confronting ordinary people in the present day rather than past events or a constructed future. It was an important form of narrative filmmaking that contributed to the development of documentary film by defining three major interpretations of the term “realism”.

**Photographic realism** primarily deals with the physical (characters and environment) through minimization and continuity of editing, shooting on location as well as straight forward filming in an attempt to create a feeling of ‘being there’ for the audience. The camera shots in these films often appear to be spontaneous, seemingly without much thought or artistic influence. In general, there are usually several different layers of action occurring on the screen simultaneously requiring audiences to take a more participatory role in exploring the complexity of each scene. An example of photographic realism can be seen in Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967) where the camera is often immersed in tightly packed groups of inmates and the ability to focus on
one subject over another is limited. It is unable to avoid the constant passing of men in front of it, break eye contact of curios inmates who stare directly into from inches away or able to focus on one subject over another for any length of time.

-Psychological realism involves the representation of a subject's inner state in believable and convincing ways. It attempts to realistically portray a character's state of happiness, loneliness, anxiety, fear etc. through the use of many devices of cinematography including duration of shots, music or the juxtaposition of images. The Maysles brothers utilized shot duration in films such as Salesman (1968) or Grey Gardens (1975) to show the psychological states of their subjects. By continuing to film a person after certain events had occurred, they were able to capture suggestive gestures or facial expressions that were often more telling about the subject’s state of mind than the actions themselves.

-Emotional realism deals with the creation of a specific emotional state for the viewer. Emotional realism is a kind of "anthropomorphic mirror" existing within a film's narrative. Both music and soundscape can be used to reflect the mood of the story and the characters feelings that, despite a scene that lacks psychological depth and photographic realism, can create genuine emotions within the viewer by relating to past experiences (Sven E Carlsson).
1.2 TOWARDS A CATEGORIZATION OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

Every documentary is unique, attesting to the individuality and perspective of the filmmaker, but remains within a loose framework of techniques associated with documentary filmmaking. Film theorist Bill Nichols conceptualized six modes of representation that functioned to distinguish between particular traits and conventions of documentary film styles: The Poetic, Expository, Reflexive, Performative, Participatory and Observational modes.

Poetic Mode

The poetic mode focuses on associations of patterns, rhythm and juxtaposition in place of continuity and spatial orientation. The subjects of the film rarely obtain any level of psychological complexity and are used by the filmmaker as standard objects to be arranged and compiled in very specific ways. Filmmakers using this technique not concerned with traditional narrative, the development of individual characters or even presenting events in objective ways; but instead desired to convey a specific mood or tone. Documentarian Dziga Vertov explained it as, “the art of organizing the necessary movements of objects in space as a rhythmical artistic whole, in harmony with the properties of the material and intern rhythm of each object.” (Michelson, O’Brien, & Vertov 1984) While poetic documentaries rely on historical context for their source of material, they choose to present that world through a series of loose associations, fragmented scenes, moments of color and subjective impressions in order to interpret the world in a new way.
**Expository Mode**

The expository mode focuses more directly on the viewer than the latter. It takes from historical context and assembles the footage into the form of argument to suggest the filmmaker’s stance of perspective on the subject matter. It does so by use of narration or titles which can be categorized in two different ways: first is the ‘voice-of-god’ commentary in which the narrator is heard but not seen and the second, referred to as a ‘voice-of-authority’ commentary, where the viewer both hears and sees the speaker.  
(Burton 2007). The dialogue serves as a persuasive instructor emphasizing a specific interpretation of what is being seen. It also gave rise to what Nichols refers to as “evidentiary editing” in which images are selected to help advance the argument rather than focusing on spatial or temporal continuity.

**Reflexive Mode**

The process of negotiation between the filmmaker and the viewer is the central focus of the reflexive mode. It shifts from exploring the filmmaker’s interaction with their subjects to their interactions with the viewer by directly addressing problems inherent to the representation of the real world. Instead of using documentary as a passage into the world in which they observe, reflexive films ask the viewer to see documentary for what it is (constructed reality) and to question the validity of the content shown. It challenges the concepts of physical, emotional and psychological realism as well as the use of evidentiary editing and narrative structure by bringing into the spotlight
the ways in which they are used to address reality. In *The Man with a Movie Camera*, Dziga Vertov forces viewers to reflect on the construction of reality by juxtaposing scenes (such as people riding in a horse drawn carriage) with the ways in which they were shot and edited to create the sequence at hand. As stated by Nichols, “reflexive documentaries point to us as viewers and social actors, not to films, as the agents who can bridge this gap between what exists and the new forms we can make from it.”

**Performative Mode**

Performative documentaries stress subjective experience and emotional responses to the world and question what kind of information, besides factual, goes into our understanding of it. They are strongly personal, experimental and sometimes include enactments of events designed to present the viewer with a specific point of view. Drawing from fiction, filmmakers use expressive techniques (flashbacks, freeze frames etc.) in order to address social issues that neither science nor traditional modes of documentary can explain.

**Participatory Mode (Cinema Verite)**

In the participatory mode, the encounter between the filmmaker and subject is recorded as the filmmaker actively engages with the situation they are documenting (Nichols 2001). It takes a more aggressive approach to finding truth in its films. The camera acts as an instigator, forcing the subject to acknowledge its existence by invading personal spaces and sometimes creating situations that would not be present without it.
Subjects confronted by the camera as instigator provide reactions that are both expected and unexpected and the camera records those interactions. Instead of waiting and watching, the filmmaker attempts to pull the truth out of situations. Filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch, who is considered one of the pioneers of the participatory mode, believes that this kind of participation in the process pushes subjects farther than what is capable in other documentary modes.

**Observational Mode (Direct Cinema)**

Unlike the latter, the observational mode emphasizes the nonintervention of the filmmaker leaving the subjects free to ‘act’ and the filmmakers free to record with little interaction between the two. Many of the conventions associated with the poetic, expository and participatory modes (staging, music, interviews, narration etc.) were replaced with the desire to record lived experience as it happened. The observational mode excels at giving the sense of duration of actual events by opposing the fast paced drama chasing tendencies of other documentary styles through means of long, dense takes and the amassing of details. The films of this genre focused on immediacy, intimacy, and revelation of individual human character in ordinary life situations (Nichols 2001). By presenting subject matter in the most simplistic and unobtrusive way, filmmakers hope to encourage viewers to take a more active role in analyzing and coming to their own conclusions about what is said and done.

While the six modes of documentary described by Nichols are by no means all encompassing (there are many documentaries seen as cross modal), they do serve as a
loose framework on which my thesis animations are derived. More specifically the participatory and observational modes (also referred to as cinema verite and direct cinema) have raised a series of interesting questions pertaining to process, camera and interactive techniques in relation to animated documentary. Can animations constructed nature build a relationship of trust and transparency with the viewer? If so, how does this affect their perception of animation as a truthful representation of reality? In what ways can the use of camera encourage viewers to take a more participatory role in analyzing an animations subject matter? What is the role of the filmmaker in an animated film and what kind of ethical guidelines must they follow when representing the real world and lived experiences through animated images?
CHAPTER 2: FILM ANALYSIS

The goal of early pioneers in the verite movement such as Robert Drew ("Primary" 1960) was to capture the climax or crisis moment of a situation by being constantly present with his subject. Drew saw these moments as the ultimate goal and principal structural element of his films. The use of the crisis structure had several advantages. The first was that it was a storytelling device that audiences were previously familiar with. At times this became a topic of debate due to the conflict between the advances in obtaining the footage and structuring them into stories, but Drew argued that a skillful approach to the presentation of cinema verite films was a “mark of discipline and professional imperative” and continued to uphold a naturalistic beginning, middle and end. The second advantage of the crisis structure was that it defined a smaller period of time rather than spending months of shooting and having to struggle with continuity during the editing stages of a film. Simplifying the editing process seemed to allow the final product to more closely represent the events that actually occurred in front of the camera.

Despite its advantages, this type of cinema verite limited the way its filmmakers initially looked at the world. A portrait of a person going about their daily tasks was not likely to be the subject matter of this type of film. Topics more inherent to crisis or contests such as political elections or other events that were likely to excite the audience
were more probable and had the tendency to have a defined objective. The more “insignificant” and often overlooked events leading up to the climax were only viewed in context of a larger structure, limiting the viewer’s point of view and understanding of motivations which often resulted in a superficial portrait of the subject.

If audiences can accept what they are watching to be “true” and drop their guard, people open themselves to be immersed and involved in the events/situations that are unfolding on screen. Possibly the most interesting and defining aspects of both direct cinema and cinema verite is their use of camera. With the use of small scale cameras and crews, the filmmaker allows themselves to be immersed in the environments and situations that they are filming. By doing this, they take a step towards breaking the hierarchical or “privileged” barrier created in classical cinema. By focusing on lived experience, showing not telling, observational films create imaginative participants giving them the freedom to do what they will with the information presented. I propose that use of camera in an animated film, as opposed to creating visual likeness, has the ability to create a more intimate relationships between the filmmaker, animated subject and audience as well as present naturalistic situations in order to overcome the viewer’s distrust in objective truthfulness in an abstracted form of observational film.

In order to begin exploring the possibilities of creating an observational animation, it is important to understand how audiences relate to observational cinema and its subjects and how these relationships are formed. Through the analysis of three observational films, Primary, Salesman and Titicut Follies, I hope to discover distinctive
ways in which observational films use of camera can create deep interpersonal relationships between audiences, filmmakers and subject matter.

2.1 *Primary (The Drew Associates 1960)*

Robert Drew played a major role in the emergence of cinema verite. Frustrated with previous forms of documentary filmmaking, which he referred to as “lectures with picture illustrations”, he sought to develop a new approach based upon five main ideas: the recording of live events as they happened, providing the audience with the experience of “being there”, storytelling instead of arguing, expert summary and information (Grimmshaw/Ravetz 2009). Drew influenced many young filmmakers who shared the desire to take documentary in a different direction. Among them were Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker and the Maysles brothers David and Albert.

*Primary* is a film made in 1960 by the Drew Associates about the Democratic presidential nomination battle between John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey. Initially believed to be conceptually and technically revolutionary for documentary film, it has long been a focus of debate surrounding the verite movement and non-fiction filmmaking. Putting these issues aside, *Primary’s* distinctive features begin to explore the role of documentary filmmaker as observer and how those observations can be constructed in a meaningful way.

The film was shot by a number of camera crews each filming different points of action as the two candidates compete in the 1960 Wisconsin primary. In hopes of winning votes, the two run a gauntlet of public activities from handshaking on the streets to prime time political rallies and the filmmakers capture the drama that unfolds. *Primary*
reaches its climax when Kennedy nudges out Humphrey in the polls on election day and
the two candidates move on to their prospective next steps of securing the Presidential
election.

Similar films of the time were largely seen as works of political performance,
process and ritual rather than a representation of truthful ideals and substantive issues. 
*Primary* abandoned the formal interview and photographic staging for the politics of the
street. Doing so forced Drew and his camera crew to develop an impromptu style of
shooting to accommodate for unpredictable environments, capturing authentic
conversations, going from exterior to interior lighting and capturing dialogue in noisy
locales. The process was somewhat improvisational, and the camera men learned to
anticipate and react to situations on the fly in order to capture the spontaneous and
chaotic nature of a political environment. Drew understood that the attractiveness of the
film had to be more than just taking the camera off of the tripod and following a
character.

Drew believed being a skilled observer was a process of unfolding relationships.
Small cues such as facial expressions, body posture and gestures became the focus in his
search for what he called “moments”. Filmmakers had to learn to anticipate, to be
prepared to capture the spontaneous and open to the often overlooked as having potential
to show new insights into a person or situation. Knowing that they couldn't possibly film
every second of every day, they had to practice selective observation. Drew and his crew
constantly made decisions on where to film, how to film, when to stop filming and
possibly more importantly when not to stop filming. In order to become a skilled
observer, a filmmaker must not make these decisions in advance, but during the recording process itself.

Cinema verite fell under much scrutiny with its supporter’s absolute truth claims. Dutch activist Joris Ivens disagreed with cinema verite’s assertion that not only did it tell the truth, but earlier form of documentary did not (Auferheide 2007). He felt that the movement ran the risk of merely, “skimming reality instead of penetrating it.” (Ibid pg. 52). Some, like French director Jean-Luc Godard, adopted the style in the creation of fiction films believing that cinema verite ‘purists’ were sacrificing the cameras’ intelligence and sensibility whilst denying themselves the ability to be selective and reflective. During a screening at Emerson Arts Theater in Boston, Drew discussed the mimicking of cinema verite’s camera style. “(Jean-Luc) Godard shook his camera to look like us and feature films began shaking their camera to look like Godard.” Insisting that he would rather do without the camera shake, he believed that in the hands of a skilled observer the camera could finally begin ‘to see’. “It’s a good idea, a powerful idea and I can’t see it going away.” Drew was not wrong. Despite the many criticisms and debates over what kind of truth cinema verite films offered, filmmakers believed that the process was a catalyst that allowed them to reveal rather than discover an absolute truth.

Needless to say, audiences related to Primary in a way unique to political documentaries of the time. Its informal nature and avoidance of presenting the senators with distance and compliance allowed a more personal and humanistic view into the candidates' lives. Pennebaker, Leacock and the other filmmakers attempted to be a part of the events they were filming through the use of lingering over-the-shoulder shots,
invasion of personal spaces (filming inside of Humphrey’s car as he sleeps) and the capturing of whispered dialogue. They allowed themselves to be bumped, jostled and carried by the momentum of developing situations and excited crowds creating the sense of a living and breathing camera. The camera manages to ‘stare’ directly at its subjects and acknowledges them with a unique sense of openness and curiosity.

While storytelling and human drama were at the center of the film, Drew’s inclination towards pushing excitement to keep the film moving caused some to question his agenda. He was pursuing a new type of journalism; one whose rough and informal handheld camera style was meant to give audiences the feeling of ‘being there’. However, the improvisational filming techniques that leaned towards a more personal relationship between audiences and subjects had forced camera crews to shoot within a tighter time frame than in previous documentaries. If a shot was missed, they couldn’t simply restage it and shoot again, the moment was gone. These circumstances sometimes forced the filmmakers to become heavy handed in their attempts capture authentic moments. With the lack of planning, preparation and research in the filming process and the pressure from Drew to focus on action, Pennebaker, Leacock and the Maysles brothers were forced to just “go along for the ride” and were asked manage interpersonal relationships the best they could. This caused there to be limited engagement between subjects and filmmakers and did not allow for these relationships to significantly develop throughout the length of Primary. By focusing so heavily on action instead of character, the filmmakers Drew worked with believed that audiences were left feeling disconnected from the film rather than being a part of it.
2.2 *SALESMAN (ALBERT AND DAVID MAYSLES 1969)*

Pennebaker, Leacock and the Maysles brothers left Drew’s company in 1963 and were free to pursue their own interpretations of observational cinema. While “showing and not telling” remained at the center of their work, they drifted away from a journalistic approach toward documentary. Although observational cinema was recognized as an authored medium, it remained an unusual and complex relationship lying somewhere between filmmaker, subject and the viewer. The exploration of authorship became an influential approach towards observational filmmaking seen in Albert and David Maysles brothers film *Salesman*.

The first few minutes of the film establish the Maysles brother’s intentions and distinctive approach to filmmaking. Not only are they exploring a specific piece of American culture, but the way in which they went about observing their subjects was uniquely intimate and personal. Somewhat the antithesis of Drew’s *Primary*, which put action and heroic endeavors at its core, *Salesman* focuses on the relationship between the filmmakers and their subjects. They filmed as a single entity, living with and filming the men over a six month period in hopes that their presence would become accepted as daily routine and allow for a more natural interaction with Paul and the others. The process was about building trust. The relationships formed allowed Albert’s relationship with his subjects allowed him to film in uncomfortable and awkward situations and did so with a sense of compassion instead of a goal to alienate.

The film opens on a pair of hands flipping through a bible. Paul “The Badger” Brennan is pushing a fifty dollar, finely illustrated bible to an uncomfortable client. What
should feel charming and genuine comes across as desperate and deceptive. It is obvious Brennan’s sales are few and far between. As the transaction is lost, the camera holds for a moment on his face. He peers downward towards the bible distraught and deflated. The film cuts and we see three other salesmen (also nicknamed after animals and their distinctive selling style) and within each encounter something new is revealed.

The audience is thrown directly into the midst of Brennan’s sales pitch with no narration, introductory text or basic background information. The audience is immediately aware of the drama unfolding around the camera and lead to believe that there is something at stake. Each shot feels fragile and are wrought with tension and unease, despite the lack of conventional action or crisis. The filmmakers passively observe, uncovering a unique entanglement of relationships that surround each transaction. The Maysles brothers’ sensitivity towards its subjects becomes apparent through the balance of hovering camera shots and the constant risk of disrupting each moment. As the camera’s follow the four salesman’s journey through suburban streets, dingy motel rooms and underwhelming motivational conferences, we realize that the film is as much about the idea of the American dream as the salesman themselves.

Salesman is nothing if not an accumulation of details recording moments of awkwardness, humility and the segregation of characters. It was able to do so by cautiously and relentlessly observing, sometimes for extended periods of time, in order to uncover an emotional subtext within each character that lay hidden beneath their outward attempts to portray themselves in a particular way. In one of the most agonizing sequences, Paul accompanies co-worker Raymond on a sales call and makes a crucial
interjection that blows the whole deal. Out of frustration Raymond begins to humiliate Paul in front of the potential costumers and although he shrugs the moment off through his words, Paul's body language shows that a of broken man. It is this focus on subtly and detail that allows for the film to capture the richness of human interaction. Albert believed in order to properly interpret the subject matter you must see not only the men and their merchandise, but the richness of the world around them and the material contexts of their lives. He explained,

“I don’t think in terms of actions and reactions. I don't think in technical terms at all, but rather of what I want to get, and what I really want to get is a head on look at the person who is talking at the time. I’m not thinking of an artistic shot or an artistic composition of shots, but I feel that is one of the reasons why the human content of films is so strong and so totally convincing, because my concentration is on what I feel I have to get of the person, rather than some artistic thing I am trying to prove.”

This shift away from focusing on larger scale moments in society to honing in on the smaller, often more intense ones, gave the Maysles brothers films an interesting emotional texture. The films narrow scope leads to broader questions about ideals and lived experience and was recognized as a remarkable achievement for documentary film.
2.3 *Titicut Follies* (Frederick Wiseman 1967)

Frederick Wiseman is recognized as one of the leading figures in American post
war documentary cinema. His films, often characterized as “observational”, explore
American society through the filter of institutions and agencies of power. The following
analysis of his first and famously controversial film *Titicut Follies* (1967) explores the
nature of Wisemans commitment to the observational technique and examines what this
process of filmmaking means to him and to the context of his work.

*Titicut Follies* was Wiseman’s first documentary and chronicles the facilities of
MCI-Bridgewater, a state run treatment center for criminally insane and sexually
dangerous patients. With a dedication to social observation and pursuit of public
awareness and social reform, Wiseman’s goal was to create a film that required looking
attentively and critically onto the world in which we live in order to better understands it.
Not unlike other observational films of the 1960’s, *Titicut Follies* was meant to be
representative of events as they happened rather than recalled after the fact and pushed
its viewers to take a more active and participatory role in the films interpretation.

In the opening scene of the film, the camera looks across a dimly lit stage of the
Bridgewater theatre as a mixture of patients and guards perform wearing bowties and
glittery hats. The camera, seemingly overwhelmed by the spectacle occurring before it,
struggles to capture the entire event in frame and sets about breaking it apart. We view
the scene through a camera that, despite seeming passive in its approach, is exploring
and inquisitive as it wanders from face to face watching as the men nervously try to stay
in line with those next to them. From a distance, the scene appears to depict a
conventional variety show, but the closeness of the shots appear to reveal the maddening effects of repetition and constant interpretation of new information occurring around them.

The use of abrupt location changes is a common technique used by Wiseman throughout the film and can take the audience by surprise. He often introduces events and situations that are already in progress and purposefully cuts them before they are resolved. At the end of the opening scene, one of the head guards at the institution begins telling an elaborate joke. As he delivers the punch line and the audience laughs, what would seem like a light-hearted moment is quickly brought to an end with images of inmates being forcibly strip searched by the same guard whose previous humor now comes across as callous and misplaced. Very little information is given to help the audience navigate from scene to scene and immediately creates feelings of uncertainty and uneasiness. Reinforced by the constant use of close-ups, Wiseman created an anonymous and confusing environment in which the viewer can never comfortably situate themselves. In one scene the inmates are packed into an undersized room. The cameras proximity to the men does not allow it to focus on anyone for very long. One inmate stares into the camera from just inches away, too close to focus on, and even as it pans away to watch another man smoking a cigarette the ability to thoroughly observe him is impeded by other patients passing in front of the camera as they exit the room.

Although the cameras proximity would suggest a level of personal connection with his subjects, the observational style throughout Wiseman’s work has been seen as a “privileged” one. His filming process hinged upon the idea of gaining access rather than
creating trust with his subjects. From the opening scene of the film, Wiseman seems to refuse to take a position with his subjects-hovering above and behind the audience but never with, opposing the characteristics of human observation. This feeling of a detached camera has created discussion in terms of voyeurism within his work has been criticized for a failure to adequately support, narrate, or contextualize his subjects, failing to give them the chance to explain themselves.

This critique has come up several times throughout his work and has caused many to question the filmmaker’s role as observer in such environments. Where exactly is the filmmaker positioned in the world and what are the implications of that position? When presented with scenes of nudity, and verbal brutality; where does one draw the line between observation and intervention? In Titicut Follies there is a scene where Jim, one of the inmates, is led from his cell to the barber and back in what should be a relatively uneventful process. The guards however, verbally berate and patronize the inmate; feeding off of his mental incapacity and pushing him to react, sometimes violently, while laughing among themselves. The sequence lasts a little more than five minutes but feels infinitely longer. As a viewer, you desperately want to help and in turn want the camera to intervene, but relief only comes when the sequence is over. This dehumanization of the camera seems to adversely affect the audience’s concept of reality in such sequences as it objectifies the subjects to such an extreme that it feels unnatural. It would seem at times that Wiseman favors the institutional worker over the clientele in that he holds the two to separate standards. While he holds to strict rules about interaction with inmates in Titicut Follies, the guards seem to be in a constant state of performance. Many times they
sing, dance and joke all while sneaking peeks at the camera to make sure it is watching. While it’s not to argue the living conditions or within such institutions, the willingness to let the employees make fools of themselves brings to light Wiseman's preconceived biases about the subject matter and signifies an affiliation to one side of a hierarchy over another. Such a move creates doubt, whether justified or not, about the truthfulness of what we are seeing on screen and what it represents.

Wiseman’s focus on larger scale contexts required a unique editing style focused on deductive and associational tendencies in order to communicate his message to his viewers, however ambiguous it may be. Nichols has described Wiseman's editing style as a poetic mosaic of narrative parts, but unlike a conventional mosaic, the sequences do not form a larger coherent structure. Instead, each sequence holds within it an isolated narrative that rarely overlaps with the shot before or after it. In Titicut Follies it would not be uncommon to edit a doctor/patient interview, a performing patient singing in a poorly lit room and an inmate being strip searched in a relatively short sequence with a lack of subject continuity between shots. However, in one of Titicut Follies most discussed sequences, he intercuts images of an inmate being force fed with footage of that same inmate being prepared by the coroner for embalming. It is a scene which Wiseman has often been criticized for its pushing of a parallel narrative (being treated better in death than in life) and in his own words the heavy handedness in which he pushed the issue.

Wiseman’s style of editing is seen as one of “theme and variations”. Through his use of montage, radical juxtaposition and attention to spatial continuity he is able to
combine a series of self-contained occurrences into a coherent, dramatic and interlinked experience. Because he organizes his films according to metaphor and patterned associations, the viewer is asked for a certain level of engagement in analyzing the films meaning. Wiseman's editorial decisions are driven by his belief that social situations are compiled from a series of complex, web like influences and must be represented as such. (Nichols 1978 p.18)

Through the explorations of a mental hospital, a high school, an army basic-training camp and even a New York modeling agency, Wiseman’s early films portray a far bleaker world than that of other filmmakers of the time. Although he worked with many of the same techniques and technologies common the realm of cinema verite and direct cinema, Wiseman’s objects to the use of the terms to describe his work claiming his process was a much “fresher” way of presenting the material.

“In this approach there is no obvious barrier (narration or interviewer) between the viewer and the event. When the technique works, it works because you have a sense of immediacy, you feel like you’re present, observing events as they occur. This is an illusion temporarily created by the editing and structure of the film which gives the viewer the feeling that they are present and witnessing the events seen. This technique makes more of a demand on the viewer by asking them to think through their own relationship to what they are seeing and hearing. This style of filmmaking also makes it possible to suggest the complexity and ambiguity of ordinary experience….I would never claim my films to be the truth (cinema verite). My films are a report on what I’ve learned. Someone else looking at the same events would see things differently.”

-Frederick Wiseman (Interview with David Winn)

While these films only begin to scratch the surface of the observational filmmaking genre, they do encompass a variety of techniques could be influential to audience’s perceptions of truth and authenticity in animated film. The focus on
improvisation while learning to anticipate and react in Robert Drew’s *Primary* are powerful tools in giving the audience a sense of being in the moment. However, Drew’s heavy focus on action and somewhat chaotic nature of filming on-the-fly did not allow audiences to reflect upon or build a significant relationship with the subjects in the film.

In the Maysles brothers film *Salesman* on the other hand, the films focus shifted to the relationships formed between the filmmakers and subjects in place of action and heroic endeavors. With a more passive approach to observational filmmaking, *Salesman* revolves around the tension and fragility of each shot as the camera’s unwavering stare watches for extended periods of time. The accumulation of detail and willingness by the Maysles brothers to continue filming during moments of awkwardness and humiliation creates an environment that encourages careful observation by the viewer to uncover and form unique relationships with the subject matter.

Frederick Wiseman’s film *Titicut Follies* is a combination of relentless observation and dramatic storytelling through montage, radical juxtapositions and heavy use of metaphor. It is a film that asks the viewer to take a more participatory role in analyzing the larger scale contexts of which the film explores. It more importantly raises important question about ethical responsibilities of documentary filmmakers, especially when filming difficult subject matter and potentially dangerous situations. When is the protection of the physical and psychological well-being of the subjects more important than revealing the reality of a situation to audiences? Does a subject’s mental state or status as a prisoner forfeit their right to give consent? Or to privacy and dignity?
While questions of ethics did not arise for me until later in the filmmaking process, I began to question how I the latter films use of camera and exploration of subject matter could translate into my thesis film Wade. It also forced me to begin contemplating my role as filmmaker in the animation process. What story did I want to tell? Should it by ‘my’ story are ‘a’ story? How much should I focus on narrative vs. the presentation of real world events as they happened? How could I create a process that allowed for improvisation and observation in virtual spaces? In the next section I look at the current state of animated documentary and the ways in which these films relate to and communicate with audiences.
CHAPTER 3: DOCUMENTARY ANIMATION

3.1 TENDENCIES AND CHALLENGES IN ANIMATED DOCUMENTARIES

As animation approaches the realm of documentary and nonfiction filmmaking, it runs into an inherent problem. Animations abstracted nature leads viewers to recognize that what they are watching is not actually a recording of the external world we live in. Inversely, the correspondence between live action films and the “real” is quite powerful. As Bill Nichols notes “documentary gives us photographic and aural representations of likenesses of the world” and that “there is an obviousness and naturalness” about that world. Even with certain levels of experimentation in live action documentary, the viewer correlates the images they are seeing as, maybe not reality itself, but as strong representation of the real world. For animation, these notions of natural and obvious representations become problematic. Animated films are completely fabricated and do not share live action’s correspondence to the “real” in our world. However, if documentaries claim to represent the real by the integrity of its mimetic properties, then similarly animated documentaries can be thought of as a way of “creating” the real (Ward, 2008). Perhaps foregrounding this fabrication can offer a more reflexive form of documentary, free to comment on real issues and relationships and avoid complicating these ideas as seen many times with live action forms.
While there have been attempts to categorize different types of animated documentaries into similar modes as described by Nichols about live action film, most have become muddled in terminology and philosophical debates leaving their usefulness little more than self-serving attempt at identifying it as a discrete form. Illustrative, narrated, sound-based, imitative, subjective, fantastic and even postmodern mode; all terms used to try and classify animation within the documentary genre. It is important however, to recognize the influence of documentary modes and analyze how animation has built upon and adapted them in order to better understand how animated documentaries work.

3.1.1 COMMUNICATION OF COMPLEX AND DIFFICULT MATERIALS

Audiences react to animated documentary in a much different way than its live action counterpart. They are willing to receive animated images without putting up any barriers, opening themselves up for a powerful and potentially emotional experience (Sofian 2001). It is often seen as a ‘friendly’ medium and can be the perfect tool for getting the viewer to take the extra step, especially when the simplicity of the images relieves some of the harshness of the topics being presented. In the documentary Blue Vinyl (2001), Gold and Helfand struggled to find an elegant way to address effects of PVC on people and the environment. They reached out to animator Emily Hubley, who had previously helped director Peter Friedman to visualize ‘programmed cell death’ for his award winning film Death by Design (1995). Using hand drawn techniques and a simplistic style, Hubley was able to turn Helfand’s argument regarding our self-destructive reliance on PVC into coherent and comprehensible sequences. “Animation is
this extraordinary, liberating art form that can connect the dots in this unbelievable way,” Helfand explained. “Perhaps when they watch it, they remember being a kid and being told a simple story, and they think to themselves, ‘Okay, I’ll listen, I’ll go there. You can take me there.”(Shira Golding *Upstream: Drawing Truth* 2008)

3.1.2 IN THE ABSENCE OF ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE

Possibly the most popular function of animation in documentary is its substitution for a lack of live-action archival footage. It is also one of the first ways in which animation was used to examine non-fictional scenarios. In 1918 American artist Winsor McCay created the 12-minute short film *The Sinking of the Lusitania* which documented the destruction of a 787 ft., 2000 passenger British ocean liner by a German submarine in the First World War. Paul Wells described it as “part informed speculations, part quasi-newsreel, part propaganda” and was meant to be believed and understood as real. It was created in the silent film era thus McCay utilized text to enhance and explain the drama taking place on screen. By animating normal people fighting for their lives and using photographs to bring actual faces to those that died, he was able to create a powerful and emotion impact on the audience. The photographs use was not to shock, but instead asks its viewers to contemplate the extreme loss that the incident signified while simultaneously exposing a common weakness in the mediums documentary claims, the reliance on real world devices to portray an accurate representation of reality.

A more recent of “substitutive animation” (Honnes-Roe:19) can be seen in Brett Morgan’s *Chicago 10* (2007). The film combines motion capture, animation and found footage to tell the story of 10 activists accused of starting riots during the 1968
Democratic Party Convention in Chicago. While many have read stories about the famous trial, no cameras were allowed in the courtrooms so Morgan used animation in order to bring written transcripts of proceedings to life. The characters movements were derived from motion captured performances enacted mainly by Morgan himself. He claimed it gave him “absolute control in a way that I wouldn’t have had in any other animation style.” However, each scenes style changed from one to the next, whether is archival interviews or hand drawn animations of riot police descending upon the park, in an attempt to expose the audience to multiple perspectives. According to Morgan, he wanted “to break the audience out of the illusion in the Brechtian sense, to constantly keep them guessing and constantly remind them that these are mere representations”.

Like Dziga Vertov with his film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Morgan believes that by acknowledging the subjective and constructed nature of animation, we can create a more honest approach to animated documentary.

Similar in the substitutive approach to *Lusitania* and *Chicago 10*, animated documentaries such as Nick Park’s *Creature Comforts* or Hanna Heilborn & David Aaronowitsh’s *Hidden* (2002) make use of animation to visualize spoken interviews from human subjects. Though neither film was concerned with designing characters to resemble their real world counterparts, (in *Hidden* the filmmakers had to protect anonymity of the subject) they both make an attempt to capture a person’s essence, personality and intensity of their emotional states in a truthful way while exploring the symbolic and expressive potential of animation.
3.2 REALISM IN ANIMATED DOCUMENTARY

Ideas of art as imitation of reality have long been at the center of animated film culture and technologies. In fact, ‘the main goal of research’ in the CG field has been the achievement of photorealism (Power Animation 209; 4; 107). Although photorealism seems to be the standard by which we judge visual realities, realism of motion and social realism play important roles in how we view animated films as well.

3.2.1 PHOTOREALISM

The psychological concept of the uncanny has been applied from Freud’s psychoanalysis to animation (Honess Roe, 2012), in particular when animation contains elements of realism at odds with the diegetic world of the film. According to Freud, the uncanny occurs when we experience something both familiar and unfamiliar. When speaking in terms of animated film, this concept is referred to as the uncanny valley and arises when CG characters look too human and yet not human enough. The theory states that viewers tend to feel attracted to inanimate objects with human traits, but as an object begins to look to human they stop seeing the similarities and begin noticing the flaws instead such as motionless eyes or awkward movements leaving the viewer unsettled and uncomfortable. Films such as The Polar Express (Zemeckis 2004), Beowulf (Zemeckis 2007) and more recently Mars needs Moms (Zemeckis/Wells 2011), have all strived to achieve a photorealistic style, however all have fallen under a similar scrutiny because of it. While these films all operate within an accepted form of realism, they also tend to be
viewed as existing in a decidedly fictional space and are asking its viewers to look at ‘a
world, not the world’ (Nichols, 1991: 109ff).

*Walking with Dinosaurs* (1999) was six part series created by the BBC that explored the prehistoric lives of dinosaurs as well as the evolution of humans through the use of live action, animatronics and animated imagery. The show assumes a photorealistic style of animation that feels like a recording of historical events while mimicking reality as it is represented on film. It is an early example of how the use of camera can be used to bring a higher level of believability and ‘truthfulness’ in animated film. The camerawork frequently used in natural history programming is similarly coped throughout the *Walking with Dinosaurs* series. For example in Episode 2: Time of the Titans, the opening sequence shows a 25 ton Diplodocus laying her eggs in a prehistoric forest. The camera shoots from a distance, carefully positioned behind the brush, as if not to disturb the nature of the act taking place on screen. The exploratory, inquisitive and cautious nature of the camera work implies the presence of camera man existing and shooting in the same world as the dinosaurs themselves, bringing audiences closer to the subject matter being explored. While we by no means are made to believe that dinosaurs currently inhabit the earth, the use of careful composition and camera work bring a level of intimacy to the film that communicates to the viewer that what they are seeing is a truthful representation of historical events.

### 3.2.2 Realism of Motion

Before computer graphics gave filmmakers the ability to achieve the ‘hyper-real’, rotoscoping was used in order to capture the realistic and subtle nuances of form and
motion. *Old Glory* (Jones/Warner Brothers 1939) is an animated film starring Porky Pig that explores the origins of the United States of America. In the short, Porky is trying to learn the Pledge of Allegiance, but quickly loses interest and falls asleep. Uncle Sam appears to Porky in a dream and teaches him the history of Colonial America, the Revolutionary War and even the Expansion of the old American west. Unlike a majority of other Merrie Melodies of the time, the subject matter is surprisingly serious and animation is heavily rotoscoped. The classically “cartoonal” style of Porky is interestingly juxtaposed with a highly realistic style of Uncle Sam, Paul Revere and other characters which serve to inform the viewer that what they are watching is more than jokes, parodies and satirist material, but something that should be taken more seriously.

David Sproxton from Aardman Animation’s believes that rotoscoped imagery is subjected to similar uncanny oddities as photorealistic CG characters, due to the excess information of human movement captured by to faithfully reproducing a person’s physical behavior. He states: “There is often too much detail in the movement necessary for the human form to keep upright or to balance itself or simply idiosyncratic action”. This highly detailed naturalistic motion often feels out of place in a highly constructed and often unrealistic animated world. This seems to hold true for *Snack and drink* (2000), a rotoscoped ‘docushort’ created by Bob Sabiston and Tommy Palotta from Flat Black Films. The two accompany Ryan Power, an autistic teenager from Austin, Texas on a trip from his apartment to a local 7-Eleven convenience store to buy candy and a soda. Despite its psychedelic imagery and color palette, the characters movements manage to feel mimetic of human motion. Combined with the multitude of shifting image
planes creating a strange sense of depth and dimensionality, the film feels as if it carries the remnants of the original footage. There is an uncanny sense of reality permeating from the animated image, feeling accessible if you could just peel back the rotoscoped layers and gain access to the filmed image underneath (Honess Roe 2012).

While the accompanying soundtrack is the primary source of information we gather about Ryan, the expressive and impressionistic animated visuals represent the reality of how obsessively fixated an autistic person can be. For example while Ryan is filling up his soda the animation draws attention to how he interacts with the world and how this experience differs from our own. The scene is made up of both sporadic and nonsensical imagery as well as more calm and focused ones showing how some objects can retain his attention while others are mere noise and distractions.

Figure 3.1: Images of Ryan filling up his soda taken from Bob Sabistion’s Snack and Drink (2000).
Although the conventional documentary aesthetic may be absent from his films they manage to provide the audience with an authentic experience and much insight into the interviewee’s mind. While Sabiston’s rotoscoped interviews can be both ambiguous and erratic, they challenge the viewer’s perception of what an animated documentary can be while providing them with an enhanced appreciation of the reality being depicted on screen.

3.2.3 SOCIAL REALISM

Social realism is a difficult term to define as it has become somewhat ubiquitous used indiscriminately to define an idea’s content, its concerns and even its visual style. Social realist films are often described as raw, gritty and offer a slice of life style look into how life ‘really’ is. The term is often interchanged with others such as ‘kitchen sink’ realism or ‘working class’ realism, making it particularly difficult to unpack and understand. For the sake of this paper however, I only wish to explore the term as it relates to animated film and the decision making process involved in animated documentary.

“Social reality, that is interacting human individuals and groups, produces appearances which are something more and else than mere illusions. Such appearances are the modes in which human activities manifest themselves within the whole they constitute at any given moment - call them modalities of consciousness. They have far greater consistency, let alone coherence, than mere
illusion or ordinary lies. Appearances have reality, and reality involves appearances.” (Lefebvre: 62)

Social Realism in animation can be explained as the extent of which an animated film is constructed to convince audiences that the fictional world they are viewing on screen is as complex and varied as the real world. It is less concerned with the accurate reproduction of photographic imagery or naturalist movement, but rather the reality attributed to a message and the depiction of the complicated, messy and downbeat nature of everyday life. The Simpsons television series for example, is often looked to as a prime example of how a highly stylized work can often be viewed as “more real” than animations such as aforementioned Old Glory or even Square Pictures’ 2001 film Final Fantasy: Spirits Within whose realism relies on highly detailed reproductions of natural objects and hyper-real CG characters. Shows like The Simpsons are able to relate to audiences because of the social issues they explore from youth, gender, sexuality, religion and even racial intolerance, as well as the unashamed way in which they present it. It attempts to reveal the relationships between human interaction and the web of value systems, economic structures, political institutions, social groups and natural environments we encounter on a daily basis. In viewing an episode of The Simpsons (if you are able to look beneath the two-dimensional depiction of yellow tinted characters and outrageous humor) you find a critique of social order along with the familiarity of human structures and deeper questions of the human condition.
CHAPTER 4: THESIS FILMS

4.1 GRANDPA: AN OBSERVATIONAL STUDY

In the beginning of every film production, whether it is live action, documentary or animation, there is an ideation process in which the filmmaker makes decisions on what to communicate with the audience and how to do so. In this pre-production stage, the tasks a filmmaker chooses to perform varies and is largely dependent on both the medium in which one is working and the situations they are choosing to explore.

While preproduction is a process proven to be useful by many in the animation industry, I’ve never put much focus on it in my own work. Not in the classical sense anyway. I’ve always found that taking a ‘stream of conscious’ approach to my animations has been a much more effective way to develop characters and explore subject matter. Working in this manner has allowed me to explore the developing relationships between animator and character, making it the main focus of my thesis work. This desire to focus on interpersonal relationships as well as a need to inform, educate, inspire and potentially motivate people to act through the exploration of the human condition, has lead me to look to the documentary filmmaking processes as inspiration for my work.
4.1.1 BACKGROUND

In the spring of 2008 I graduated from The Ohio State University with a bachelor’s degree in art and technology. I focused heavily on computer animation in my years there, but in lieu of starting a career in my field I chose to move back to my hometown while I contemplated my next steps. While I was there I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with my grandfather. What started out as a part time job as caretaker, transformed into a daily ritual of discovery and the strengthening of a bond that had previously faded. I’ve always looked up to my grandpa as a man, a husband and a father. Looking back on it, I’d always wondered where my passion for art came from and I now believe it developed through the experiences we shared. He was a handy man. Some of my oldest memories are of spending time with him in his workshop (running the lathe, using the drill press and the miter saw) and while I was too young to think of it as art, it’s where I grew to know sculpture as a means of expression.

Unfortunately as a child, I wasn’t too interested in getting to know my grandpa as a person. By the time I was old enough to appreciate that kind of relationship I had moved to Columbus and begun my life as a professional student. Needless to say I wanted to take the time to get to know him while I had the opportunity; however he was now 86 years old and beginning to show some early signs of dementia. Most of my visits began with a hello and maybe a short story, but our ability to communicate was lacking. Thinking I had lost my opportunity to connect with him I became upset, but soon realized that his story could be told through the items all around me.
First and foremost was his relationship with his Wife Jean, my grandmother. As I wondered through the house I found pictures from their 50th wedding anniversary on the night stand, family portraits next to his bed, a painting of her sunbathing in the corner, all memories of times past. When I got to the basement steps I found signs of harder times. She developed Alzheimer’s at an early age, in fact I have few memories of her without it. Above the steps was a stain where she had tossed spaghetti at him and I began to remember stories of her forgetting who he was all together. It was disheartening at first, but later began to view it as sign of his strength. His commitment and promise to her as a husband, in sickness and in health, was there until the very end. The basement itself reviled more. It was the untouched items that I found most interesting; the three years expired mayonnaise, peppers my grandma had canned and an ironing board seemingly frozen in time, all items the common person wouldn’t hesitate to discard but to him were impossible to let go.

The realization of my grandpa’s isolation, both physically and mentally, became apparent over time. He remained in his own home despite his deteriorating health, but was restricted from moving about it freely. The cyclical process of aging became apparent. A mail courier for thirty plus years, he raised three boys, lost a daughter and even fought in world war two and was now confined to the first floor of his house by a baby gate on one end and a bungee cord on the other. It happens to all of us though, fighting the losing battle with age trying to hold on to what we are and what we were. It was the inspiration for my short film Grandpa, an animation that addresses those in a state of isolation in hopes to discover what it is they do when they’re alone and how,
through physical behavior instead of verbal communication we can discover a truer sense of who somebody is.

4.1.2 PROCESS

*Grandpa* was always based on my own experiences, but I never intended for audiences to associate the main character to myself as the author. I wanted to create a character through which they could associate their own life experiences and explore the common ground which we all share. The first step to achieving this was through character design.

In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud uncovers ways in which we relate to stylized characters. He explains how comics use the world of icons to pull audiences into the story. Icons as such can be anything, anyplace, anyone or any idea. He shows how even the simplest cartoon face plays a vital role in how the human mind processes imagery. According to McCloud, a cartoon smiley face (as opposed to a photorealistic representation) allows the viewer to impose their own identity into the character unlike the latter which is commonly seen as a specific person. “Draw a circle. Add two dots. Doesn’t it look like a face? Yet, compared to the Mona Lisa, it looks nothing like a face. The Mona Lisa looks like…..Mona Lisa. A smiley face looks like…us” (Scott McCloud 2010).

Based on this notion I wanted to create a character that was simple enough to allow for interpreted identity, but still specific enough to retain the features of an elderly man. I began with the face. Without a proper concept sketch, I began modeling with three major things in mind: 1) He needed to have an exaggerated nose and ears as it
seems they are two things that continue to grow throughout your entire life. 2) The eyes, while puffy and slightly recessed, should be friendly and engaging. 3) The lower half of the face (cheeks, mouth and neck) should appear as if it were beginning to sag and slowly blending into a single shape.

![Figure 4.1 : Grandpa Character model. (Face Detail)](image)

There were also a few important things I wanted to capture with the design of the body as well. I remember as my grandpa aged and became less active, his appetite deteriorated as well. His baggy sweat shirt and sweat pants always seemed to be hanging off his body, never being quite enough to hid his thinning figure. The arms and legs were built like matchsticks, lacking muscle and structure, which could later aid in showing the difficulty he had moving about. Although the character was initially designed to be
wearing clothes, it was brought to my attention through critics that they might possibly hide the brittle form I had worked to achieve. The lack of clothing also became a constant topic of discussion revolving around aspects of voyeurism and how it could support the intimate nature of the piece.

![Grandpa Character Model](image)

**Figure 4.2 : Grandpa Character Model. (Body Shape)**

With the character design finished, I moved on to creating the environments my character would inhabit. The living room, which also serves as a bedroom, dining room and smoking den, is the central hub of the house. Its appearance needed to reflect that. In the center of the room I built a recliner where he would eat, sleep, and generally exist for a majority of the animation. It was representational of a significant part of his
character, the imprint of which could be seen every time he got up. Legs, back, head; all visibly molded into the form of this chair. It is also surrounded by his essentials. A fan that was in constant oscillation kept him cool and dissipated the smoke from his cigarettes and a heater similarly focused on warming his feet while he slept. Next to him a bowl of chocolates and a bottle of calcium tablets in preparation to offer his guests should they ever arrive. Behind him would be a noisy air purifier installed not by him, but by those who found the smoke unbearable. All of these objects became a window into the life of a man who spent most of his later years alone, living in anticipation for that next visitor to walk through the door.

The living room leads outside onto the porch, one covered by tacky neon green carpet, and is a place for grandpa to escape the monotony of recliner life. It is a place to go see people, to interact even if it only consists of a simple wave or a smile. There is an ashtray where Grandpa stacks cigarette butts one by one into interesting little sculptures that can be found in other places around the house. For the most part his gaze is empty and aimless, but with every car that drives by or person passing on the sidewalk he regains focus and making his excitement and joy apparent. From time to time he gives an awkward wave in an attempt to draw someone’s attention.

Small acts such as these are the focus of most of the animation. It is an exploration of not only aging, but of what people do to pass the time when they are alone. In Grandpa’s case, most of his day revolves around the anticipation of visitors. In the living room scenes for example, grandpa’s attention is constantly drawn to the window by the reflections of car mirrors as they pass by the house. In the kitchen, he sits at a
bench that allows him to stare directly out the window (usually with a coffee and a cigarette in hand) while he watches and waits. On nice days he is able to substitute the company of family with the birds that gather around the feeder outside the window. If he’s lucky a squirrel will wander up and provide some much needed entertainment. He also checks inside the house for company. In his old age, he fears he may not remember even if someone had come to visit. Fueled by creaking and cracking of an old house, he repeatedly checks both the attic and the basement for that person who may have come in while he was sleeping. While grandpa’s actions are telling of his state of mind, decisions relating to camera, editing and style were used to reinforce them.

When I began creating *Grandpa*, I had not yet begun my research into the different forms of documentary. I knew I wanted to explore themes of isolation, loneliness and intimate personal spaces, but was unsure of how I was going to approach it. My decisions on what to record and where to record from stemmed from the reality of capturing things not meant to be captured i.e. how to film someone without the presence of a camera operator. What started as a practical answer to how to film in specific situations became an interesting experiment in how audiences relate to animated characters. It wasn’t until later that I was able correlate the techniques and patterns of direct cinema to my own use of camera and editing throughout the piece.

In most shots the camera is positioned to reinforce the societal separation grandpa feels within his own home. While on the porch, the camera records grandpa through the rails of the porch steps contrasting a warm and sunny environment with a cold and impersonal shooting style. In other scenes throughout the piece he is recorded through a
window, over a half-wall separating kitchen and living room, behind a baby gate and behind a bungee cord that keeps grandpa out of the attic. In all the scenes the camera records passively; not moving, exploring or searching for anything other than what is framed. The camera’s roll is one of ‘pure’ observation in that, like direct cinema films, truth is what walks in front of the camera.

The proximity of the camera was meant to suggest a personal connection between itself and grandpa as well as my relationship with him, but like in Fredrick Wiseman’s Titicut Follies it seems to present a more privileged position. The camera is usually located above or below, but never at eye level with grandpa; countering the natural characteristics of human observation. Although initially an unwanted effect, I found that creating the feeling of a detached camera helped to enhance the themes I strived to achieve through aesthetics, action and environment. The camera also tends to watch for an extended period of time, forcing viewers to focus on the mundane and analyze actions and environments that may otherwise be overlooked. The animation opens with a scene of grandpa sleeping in his recliner while the camera ‘watches’. His motion is subtle, (the up and down of his chest as he breaths or the random twitching of feet), and fairly repetitive through the duration of the scene. After ten or fifteen seconds you begin to realize nothing substantial is going to happen and the environment begins to tell the story. The television is on and the volume is at the level one would expect from an 85 year old man and the weather channel loops the same weather forecast over and over. While a lit cigarette burns in the ashtray next to him, a series of fans and air purifiers oscillate.
around him to keep him comfortable and it becomes apparent that this is where grandpa lives most of his life.

The lighting and shading of the scenes became an important part of telling his story as well. Following McCloud’s theory of simplistic character design and how people relate to it, I chose a very stylized and minimalistic approach to the look and feel of his environment. In order to allow grandpa to blend into the ambiance of each scene the textures needed to have a significant lack of detail and color. Every object in the house was represented by a pale white color scheme while grandpa assumed a light beige hue to represent the skin tone of an elderly man. It served as a metaphor for the circumstances in which he lived, alone and companionless, allowing for each object in a scene to hold equal importance. The environment emerged as a character itself, one grandpa viewed as friend, adversary and main proponent of interaction and socialization.

For me, Grandpa served as an interesting look into the use of animation as a form of documentary. Because it is a highly stylized and somewhat fabricated representation of how my grandfather lived in a day to day capacity, it questions traditional concepts of physical, emotional and psychological realism much in the way as live action films such as Dziga’s Man with a Movie Camera. By choosing to present a world through a series of fragmented scenes, loose associations and subjective impressions; I hoped to create a piece that did not concentrate on traditional forms of narrative, but rather one that could explored the relationship between audiences and animation and how it can be used to address reality.
Although Grandpa remains unfinished, the exploration of observational film and it’s translation into an animated medium continued with my short film Wade. While my previous work on Grandpa was an invaluable exploration into animation as documentary, largely in the form of direct cinema, the static and purposely positioned camera seemed to create a sense of voyeurism invoking a relationship with the character not initially intended. This relationship, while personal and intimate, lacked a level of interactivity and spontaneity that represented my true relationship with him and the relationships audiences have with those closest to them. As a natural progression in my exploration of observational cinema techniques, I began to explore cinema verite and such films as Robert Drew’s Primary and the Maysles brothers Salesman and Grey Gardens and how their use of camera affected audiences.

A common thread throughout the prior mentioned films is how the camera interacts with its subjects. Unlike direct cinema films whose camera remained detached and purely observational, these films attempted to document situations by becoming a part of them, sometimes to the point of dictating action and the unfolding of events and dialogue. By becoming a catalyst for action and participant observers, filmmakers believed that they would be able to capture truth in situations that may be missed by passively observing. The films become not only a mere representation of reality, but as the Maysles brothers put it an experience of life and “telling that exact experience to the world.” By asserting themselves as characters in their films, cinema verite filmmakers are able to give audiences new points of reference and persona to embody as they experience
the events unfolding in front of them. Viewers are more likely to imagine themselves behind the lens and take on a more participatory role in both experiencing the films and how they extract meaning from them.

When working with Wade, the challenge became to break free of the classically controlled medium of animation and put myself in the position of camera operator in order to form a more personal relationship with the character and audiences. I wanted to give that character a ‘voice’ in the film and a way to allow for spontaneity, interaction, improvisation and creating the sense of ‘being there’ in the virtual space as the events took place. By doing so I hoped to give both myself as camera operator and the virtual character the ability to drive and influence action throughout the animation creating a unique environment for exploration and discovery.

4.2.1 BACKGROUND

For most people, junior high school is a blur of awkward memories most of which they have purposely or subconsciously forgotten. My experience was no different. I do remember however being alphabetically stuck behind a loud, obnoxious and overdressed 13 year old named Wade. Being a quiet and more reserved kid we didn't initially relate, but over time I discovered our similarities outweighed our differences and became close friends. He was my cool kid in when we got to high school and through sports, fishing and family life became inseparable.

We applied to and attended different college after graduation. I found my way to The Ohio State University where my father, brother and later sister would graduate from while Wade moved on to the University of Toledo. Several months in our college careers
I decided to make a trip to visit him. It didn't take long to realize that things had changed. Wade had always been predisposed to succumbing to peer pressure and despite his popularity and good looks was insecure about who he was. Clean cut and self-proclaimed Abercrombie spokes model now smoked, listened to hard core death metal and lived a excessive party based lifestyle. I’ll never forget the devastating effect watching him snort a crushed painkiller through a rolled up dollar bill had on me. Needless to say our personalities had drifted down two separate paths, but for better or worse our friendship would withstand.

Despite our diverging personalities we stayed close. I had always chalked it up to college exploration and somewhat naively believed it would pass. In hindsight his actions were telling me different. He left the University of Toledo after just one year for and moved back home (Ashtabula, OH) for reasons at the time that were attributed to family issues. Ashtabula is a great place to grow up, but it’s lack of jobs and industry leave little for young professionals besides low paying labor work and a tendency for substance abuse. Wade fell into both.

After I received my degree from Ohio State I moved back home while I figured out my next move. Given the opportunity to be closer to Wade opened my eyes to how far he had fallen. He was spaced, attentive, constantly sleeping and consistently missing work and despite our friendship being a shell of what it once was, I managed to overlook most of it and accept his excuses. It wasn't until his family came to me asking for an ‘investigation’ that I really began to take notice. Over time polite questioning turned to awkward discussions and eventually intense confrontations most notably when I caught
him attempting to steal from my parents. His family and I staged an intervention and drove him myself to rehab in a single afternoon. Within a couple of days after I had left Ashtabula and Wade in rehab to attend graduate school, leaving the situation and our friendship behind. With a list of questions left unanswered, creating a short film about addiction, friendship and how people are affected by it seemed like a rational and therapeutic way of getting closure.

4.2.2 BEN: DIARY OF A HEROIN ADDICT

Ben: Diary of a heroin addict is a dark, disturbing and intimate self-shot documentary about a man’s struggle with substance abuse. The subject matter of the film is not in and of itself unique, but the way it was shot and put together something I had not seen prior. For the last two years of his life, Ben Rogers documented two very different sides of his life: One a man striving to be a loving son and brother and the other a life of a heroin addict spiraling out of control. With no clear goal other than to create a sense of control over his own life, Ben recorded over 30 hours of raw and startling footage which was later discovered by his family after his passing. The resulting film mergers Ben’s video documentation with interviews and archival footage into an unflinching documentary unique in its closeness to addict and his addiction. Olly Lambert, the director who put together the film, comments “At the end, the camera was the one person he could talk to in the middle of the night. That camera was in and out of Cash Converters all the time. He had to pay 200 euro every time to get it back...But he always went back to get it.”

This relationship between Ben and his camera became an intriguing point of
analysis when discussing use of camera in documentary film. He allowed it to bear witness to the graphic nature of heroin abuse from injecting it into any vein that will accept it to the resulting effects on both himself and those around him. A couple of factors play a role in the authenticity of both specific situations and subject dialogue and response that comes across in front of the camera. One can be attributed to the close relationship between camera operator and subject matter which in this case is Ben himself. With the absence of a judging gaze, outside of his own, Ben presents his daily routines in an open and honest way. Often times in documentaries exploring substance abuse, the subjects embarrassment and denial about the situation leads them to hide most drug use from the camera. Audiences catch glimpses through cracks in doors or through a covered window but rarely are these actions shown in such detail in a casual and nonchalant nature. This openness to capturing drug use makes many scenes hard to watch as most of Ben’s veins have closed up and is forced to inject the heroin into his groin. At one point he is so disoriented that he doesn't have time to pull the needle out of his stomach before he falls onto his bed. While the graphic nature of this film is initially off putting, it’s relentless gaze and raw exploration of the truth behind substance abuse draws audiences in and forces them to deal with and rationalize what they are witnessing on screen.

Another variable that contributes to the authenticity and truthfulness of the subject matter is Ben’s drug induced state of mind. A common critique of documentaries and their truth claims is that subjects often tend to perform for or become more reserved in front of the camera and film crew. Cinema verite films attempt to counter this by
immersing themselves into the environments and situations with its subjects in order to form a close relationship with them, allowing them to drop their guard. With Ben, there is no sense of deception or attempts to guide the viewer’s opinion in one way or the other. His drug use seems to almost keep him honest in a way or at least refrain him from doing the opposite. It also leads to some very unique camera work. For the most part doesn't concern himself with framing, exposure, lighting etc. as seen by the many shots out of focus, blocked with dirty laundry, close ups of inanimate objects and focus solely on filming in the moment while the shaky and sporadic camera helps in defining his state of mind.

4.2.3 Process

I wanted to approach Wade with the similar mindset Ben had when he began filming himself, however, creating an animation with a complete lack of planning, structure or even a clear goal is not as easy as just picking up a camera in real life. In order to present a truthful situation represented through animation that felt natural and spontaneous, I focused on not only the use of virtual camera and its interactivity with both environments and character, but how that character can be given the power to influence the camera itself and how events unfold on screen.

4.2.3A Virtual Camera

In order to create an implied camera operator in a virtual world and to achieve a participatory and reactionary environment we utilized the process of real-time motion capture. We created a camera system whose real world movements would be translated
into virtual space along with a live feed of the 3D environment the camera operator can see while navigating.

A physical ‘camera’, in this case a hand held portable T.V., is rigged with several reflective spheres whose translation and rotation coordinates are recorded up to 120 times per second by 13 infrared cameras mounted in the motion capture studio. That information is then transferred from the motion capture software into a 3D package such as Unity or Autodesk’s Motion Builder where it is mapped onto a virtual camera in real time. Traditionally, virtual cameras are moved around a scene by hand keying them from point A to point B, but with the real-time motion capture feed, as the camera operator moves, so does the virtual camera.
A virtual set was then created for the camera operator to navigate. Fig. 4 shows an early test done with the living room from the *Grandpa* project and is a screen shot of what the operator sees in their camera as they explore. This real time feed of the virtual set can be as simplistic or detailed (depending on the computer’s hardware) including textures, lights, shadows and even real time reflections in order to create a natural and recognizable space to delve into and begin filming in.

4.2.3B **Virtual Character/Performance Capture**

After successfully creating a camera system that allowed for real-time exploration and recording of virtual environments we began to introduce a virtual character into the scene. First attempts at camera/character interaction were very simplistic. The virtual character was assigned a small number of pre-determined movements and expressions and would react to the proximity of the camera. If the operator moved close, the character would turn and address the camera and if the camera became intrusive the character would react accordingly. Short of creating a massive bank of different actions to program onto the character or developing some sort of artificial intelligence simulator, there would be no way of giving him enough variability and unpredictability that makes cinema verite so interesting. Through a high level of planning, storyboarding and fabrication these aspects could undoubtedly be mimicked (Sony Pictures Animation was able to capture a varying degree of spontaneity in their animated feature *Surfs Up* in 2007), but it became a more interesting task to capture these moments as authentically as possible.
Several variations of character/camera interactivity followed including traditionally key framing scenes and bringing in an outside camera operator, someone unaware of the action staged before them, and allowing them to film and react to each event as it happened in front of them for the first time. While seeming initially plausible, it would give us only one attempt to capture each moment and although in real world documentary this is the case, it did not seem an efficient methodology for my film. It also limited the affect the virtual character could have in the development of each shot since no matter what actions the camera operator performed, the characters actions remained constant and consistent.

In an attempt to create a more reactionary process for filming in virtual spaces, we began to experiment with the use of live actors and performance capture. With the ability to capture and translate a real world camera’s movements into virtual space, we thought we might also be able to do so with an actor to a similar effect. Due to a somewhat outdated motion capture system, full body real-time capture was not initially achievable, however, capturing a few key body parts was. For early test we merely captured the characters head, hands, chest and sometimes feet. Although each object appeared independent from one another, the eyes tended to fill in the gaps while providing enough of a ‘character’ to successfully frame, shoot and react to in the virtual environment.
The information gathered from these early experiments was invaluable. Despite having so little information to film, it did not take long to lose oneself in the virtual world. One of the first attempts of filming a motion captured character in real time was a simple interview conducted with a close friend of mine. In the beginning we found ourselves enamored with the technology rather than the content of which we were shooting. The actor, fitted with a full body motion capture suite, found himself watching his virtual counterpart on a projected screen rather than interacting with myself as the camera operator, but as we spent more time together we began to develop a more natural dialogue and interaction. For the first time in my process I began to feel like an observational filmmaker, building a report with a subject and getting them comfortable
enough with the presence of a camera to begin to open up and act naturally in a very unnatural environment.

During the finalization of my thesis filming process our motion capture studio was updated with state of the art cameras and software which opened up all new possibilities for performing real-time capturing. The ability to perform full body capture in real-time was now at our finger tips and provided an entirely new set of solutions for filming in virtual spaces. Instead of being limited to mapping a few key body parts, it was now possible to import an entire 3D character into our workspace and map it’s movements to the performing actor. While not completely necessary for our process, nor technically adding a great deal, it did bring a level of coherence to the virtual world and brought us a step closer to a natural filming environment. It more importantly allowed us to further streamline the process for filming in virtual spaces, allowing more focus to be given to the relationship between character and camera operator and less on troubleshooting and technical problem solving.
4.2.3C  SHOOTING VERITE STYLE: A PROCESS FOR CAPTURING SPONTANEITY.

With the process of real-time camera and performance capture figured out, it was time to start filming *Wade*. Perhaps the most difficult part of creating this film was finding a sweet spot between a purposeful lack of planning and producing a coherent final product. Traditionally, the process of creating and animated film follows a logical organization of steps that can be broken down into three major parts: Pre-Production, Production and Post-Production. The following images represent first, a simplified process to tradition animated film production, and secondly my own process during the creating of *Wade*. 
Objectivity is defined as the ‘striving (as far as possible or practicable) to reduce or eliminate biases, prejudices, or subjective evaluations by relying on verifiable data.’ When watching a documentary film audiences generally assume that it is objective by that definition, however it is extremely difficult for most film-makers to objectively capture reality on screen, as through the process of making the film and becoming more and more familiar with the characters involved in its story, it is a natural reaction to draw conclusions and consequentially become biased. Animated documentaries have an even
more difficult time in representing the real as they are constructed from the ground up.
The goal in the creation of Wade was to relinquish as much control over camera,
character actions and story development as possible.

Saying that Wade was created without a script would be somewhat misleading as there were key concepts that I wished to explore throughout the piece and created a rough outline of how the animation was to unfold. First and foremost the film was to be about the relationship between two close friends; Wade, who is the only character ever scene in front of the camera and myself, the camera operator. It was also about Wade’s addiction and how I discovered it over time. It is made up of eight primary scenes, each gradually progressing from playful exchanges to awkward interactions and finally to an intense confrontation.

I approached each scene with the most basic of instruction. For the opening shot I gave my actor a simplistic scenario, ‘Two longtime friends are reuniting after several years apart’. The actor and I then began to improvise a multitude of situations during our motion capture session, recording take after take until we felt we had achieved a sufficient array of dialogue and action. One of the main advantages of real-time performance capture is the ability to shoot a multitude of footage in a relatively short period of time. It is important to point out here that, like documentary film, an important aspect of my thesis project was the editing process. Not only must I as the filmmaker choose what questions to explore and who to follow on screen, choosing what parts of the film to cut and which ones to leave in the final draft of the film were important in creating an objective piece. Unlike traditional animation, which strives through planning
and layout to avoid this kind of lengthy editing, I was able pick and choose specific moments that best represented Wade and I’s relationship, whether it be a witty joke, an awkward pause or some other unexpected interaction between the two characters.

In the beginning, gathering quality footage was easy as the actor and myself are close enough friends to comfortably share some friendly banter. As the shots progressed however, we soon realized that our poor acting skills left the more intimate encounters lacking. We continued to push through scene by scene and used our experience to form a better dialogue between the two of us. As with the early experiments with improvised performance capture, the longer we filmed a specific situation the more comfortable we were existing in it and the authentic interactions we were able to discover. This drawback of this process however, was the more time we spent on certain scenes the more likely we were to continue repeating specific lines and some shots felt scripted over time. The importance of dialogue then became an important element to be used to overcome these types of scenarios.

Early on I realized the importance of using talented and experienced actors in this type of film despite most of the dialogue being conversations most of us have on a daily basis. I was lucky enough to have met some very talented actors on a previous project and they agreed to play the role of Wade and myself. The two, Kevin McClatchy and Alex Boyles were 3rd year graduate students in the theatre department and had lived together for the past few years. Their own friendship and extensive experience acting together made them a perfect duo for my thesis film.
By the time we began recording audio, all of the action for the film had been shot and edited into a 12 minute compilation and while it was by no means set in stone, it helped lay the framework for the actors to visualize their performances on screen. The recording of dialogue was approached in a very similar manner as the performance capture, however it was necessary to provide a more comprehensive script to the actors that was derived from the filming process. After completing a single cold read of the script, I explained to the actors the basic premise of each scene and encouraged them to improvise there dialogue throughout. With the talent level of Kevin and Alex, they improvised the entirety of the film in a single take and produced unscripted, natural and intense dialogue that perfectly represented both characters in each specific situation.

With the audio recorded and the action filmed, it was time to bring the two together. The benefits of using real time capture once again became apparent in this process. The footage I had gathered up to this point, with stand in sets and character, served largely as an animatic or pre-visualization of what the final animation was to be. For the final piece I created much more detailed and polished versions of each environment sometimes including hundreds of individual objects and textures and later imported the motion captured camera and character. Using that character as a guide and a reference for action, I was able to hand key my custom Wade character to match its motion. The Wade rig was much more advanced than the stand-in and was built with a wide range of controls over the hands, feet and face that allowed me to bring a greater level of detail and personalization over the data gathered during our motion capture sessions. In many instances, since the action was recorded separated from the audio, it
was necessary to completely re-key the character’s and camera’s movement entirely. For example, in the gas station scene, Alex and Kevin provided far more dialogue than we had rehearsed in our mocap sessions and a lot of the camera time is spent exploring the scene instead of focusing on Wade’s character. It was therefore necessary to go in and hand key the camera to turn and address Wade throughout. Similarly, our real-time camera setup did not give us control over functions like zoom and focus, so those aspects had to be animated after the fact as well.

Figure 4.8: A side by side of the Pre-visualization scene on the left and the later rendered and animated scene on the right.

While the characters mouth, arms, hands, eyes and facial expression were all completely hand keyed, other objects such as the feet and hips often relied on raw motion capture data to drive them. This mix of hand keyed animation and motion captured movement was determined on a shot by shot basis and the decisions on what it involved
was based largely on efficiency of production. The hips and feet aren’t seen during a shot there was no reason to hand key them. Also motion capture is better equipped to capture the nuances of ambient motion and was used in situations where Wade remained stationary for longer periods of time. The car scenes for example, used motion capture data to drive his torso in order to better represent the small shifts in weight and stability that might occur while one is driving a car. In the end however, even the motion captured objects were overlayed with multiple hand keyed animation layers to achieve a final animation that represented both realistic movement and expressive motion of camera and character.

In its entirety, the process for creating Wade was one of improvisation and constant evolution. Each scene presented its own unique set of circumstances that dictated decisions about camera use, character animation and editing. While a purposeful lack of planning created a unique environment of exploration and experimentation, it also highlighted the importance of organization, vision and directive decisions through a multitude of technical and narrative obstacles. By working through these problems, I was able to generate a working model of how to bring spontaneity and interactivity to a medium known to be highly composed and directed. In doing so, I hoped to create an animated film whose content and character could relate to audiences in a similar way as observational films such as Robert Drew’s Primary or Frederick Wiseman’s Titicut Follies.

While the adaptation of the handheld aesthetic played a large role in uncovering the emotional texture of each scene, it was important to move beyond it and focus on the
implications of process and how that affected the final animation. The documentary style is one commonly mimicked in television and fiction films, however audiences rarely assume that what they are seeing is real. This can be especially true in animated films whose stylization and constructed nature are brought to the forefront. Perhaps by foregrounding my animation process, (multiple takes, improvisational filming, camera/performance capture), audiences can overlook Wade as a fabricated narrative and invite them to reflect upon and open themselves to be immersed and involved in the events/situations that are unfolding on screen.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Documentary films represent real world events and people. Generally explored through live action filmmaking, the filmed record of these people and events serves as an indexical link between the audience and the material and actions unfolding before the camera. Although it is usually understood that the footage has undergone a varying degree of editing, selection and manipulation; a connection remains between the people and situations filmed and the authenticity of their depiction on screen.

In animation and more specifically the animated documentary, this link between audiences and subject matter can become problematic. The events enacted on screen are no longer captured recordings of what passed before a camera or hold an existence within real world environments. In other words, ‘a camera records what is in front of it, and not what the photographer thinks is in front of it’ (Currie 2006:142). It could be said that as a painter paints what he or she thinks is there, an animator re-creates characters, environments and situations as they think they should exist. These events, however, remain more than a mere construction containing no connection to a past, existent reality (Ward 2011), and are arguably as effective as representing fact as live action documentaries. Through my thesis research and the creation of Wade, I have attempted to explore and analyze the indexical link, or lack thereof between animated imagery and the real world situations it depicts. By introducing real time camera and performance capture
into my animated film, I hoped to challenge our understanding of the animation process and create a more interactive and participatory approach to creating and interpreting an animated documentary.

Central to performative modes of documentary is what Bill Nichols refers to as the “virtual performance” which is understood as being unscripted and unrehearsed or at least appearing as such. While the term does not have any direct correlation to my animation process, in which virtual performances are literally recorded, it does help in the understanding of a specific process of mediation where ‘ordinary people’ are transformed into ‘social actors’. It describes the “everyday presentation of self” (Nichols 1991:122).

It is performance that, according to Rune Gade and Anne Jerslev,

“..obscures itself as performance by giving the viewer a feeling of a privileged access at the same time as the projected impression of authenticity and sincerity is based upon the repetition of a historical determined agreement on the kinds of performance that may pass as authentic.”

It would seem that because social actors are perceived as more ‘true to life’, they become more relatable to audiences creating a greater level of emotional engagement with the subject’s trials and tribulations than fictional characters. And although their feats may not be dramatized or embellished into something larger than the really are, we as an audience care and stay engaged with the social actor’s ventures. In animation however, the viewer’s acceptance of virtual sets and characters as accurate representations of reality is at odds with the perceived authenticity of live action documentary precisely
because it is understood that what they are watching is a frame-by-frame construction.

So how then can an animated character be perceived as authentic and ‘true-to-life’ as
social actors within live action documentary? How can animation form these distinct
bonds to the world we all share, be it sound, imagery or experiences, in a way that allows
for empathy, the development of intimate relationships and the belief that what is being
viewed is an authentic representation of a character and subject matter?

The relationships audiences form with social actors is at the core of my thesis
research. As humans we have a tendency to grab onto the real world of our own physical
and psychological existence and animation can challenge that in many ways (Gasek
2012). It can urge audiences to expand their thinking and perception of the world, but
needs to contain an element that allows viewers to make the leap into an animated world.
This connection often comes in some sort of psychological or physiological
identification. With Wade, I wanted to create a character whose life stretched beyond
what was seen on screen. That is, a character whose existence was not dependent on the
presence of a camera or actions controlled by my hand. To do so I felt it was important to
establish a strong relationship between Wade and the camera operator and build a greater
sense of history and story than what was being shown on screen. Through this
relationship I wished to engage viewers and give them a heightened sense of being there
in the moment as if they could have captured it themselves.

Part of that feeling is derived from the imperfections in the shooting of Wade.
Unlike stop motion or traditional hand drawn animation, computer animation as a process
is thought of as inherently too “perfect”. For example a car drawn by hand or modeled in
clay will never look quite as real as a computer generated model. On the other hand, imperfection is thought to be one of the strongest elements of psychological and physical identification as we are consciously aware of our own imperfections and limitations. These elements are purposefully introduced into computer animated films to speak to that part of us, to show the characters are as flawed as we are. Computer animation is also thought to mask the hand of the artist as their manipulation over the virtual worlds is mediated through a computer, (especially in contrast to stop motion animation where the artists has physical contact with all of the story elements). This contact and impression left by the artist is a powerful median between audiences and stop motion films by delivering true physical and visual reality, something that will always be lacking in computer animation. I believe however, that these elements can be implied and effectively achieved through the use of improvisational camera techniques and the imperfections of filming in real world scenarios.

By utilizing real time camera capture in the filming of Wade, I was able to introduce a tangible, touchable element into my animation process. While the final product will remain a virtual representation, I believe that the act of filming and interacting with a virtual character in real world space allowed me to begin to bridge the gap between physical realities and the virtual worlds the character exists in. In my film there is no sense of high level production or any form of professionalism behind the camera’s actions, which helps to imply a more personal relationship between the two. It also helps avoid feelings of voyeurism and exploitation of the main character by showing a
consistent acknowledgement and interaction with the camera. Unlike *Grandpa*, which used a focused and static camera, *Wade’s* feels more organic and reactionary.

Animated films have used this type of camera work before, or at least implying the presence of a camera man and can be most commonly scene in end of film ‘blooper’ reals. The popularity of these segments shows audiences desire to believe that the characters existing on screen are actual physical entities. This attraction was actually a jumping off point of my thesis research. Sony Image Works’ *Surfs Up* (2007) is a feature length film that played of this notion of being captured by a real world camera crew. It recognized that while virtual cameras have no limits to what they can do, scenes filmed with real world limitations help to make the 3D world relate to audiences in a more familiar and fundamental way, making them appear more believable. While my research began with a similar exploration of real world camera techniques, it began to diverge with the introduction of performance capture of real world actors.

I realized after some experimentation, that while real time camera capture had the ability to heighten the sense of authenticity and reality in animated film, the characters themselves and their ability to influence the unfolding of the story were limited. I felt that if the characters were given the ability to participate in the animation process that they could be further grounded as real world social actors in the eyes of the viewer. It is perhaps the strongest element of cinema verite films; not only the hand held camera techniques, but the filmmaker’s immersion and interaction with their subjects forming close personal relationships with them. The addition of real world actors created a more authentic interaction between camera and character while introducing a level of
unpredictability that documentary films are known for. The hesitations, faults and inconsistencies of both the actor’s performance and camera operator’s reactions to it, make Wade’s character appear more like a living organism than an animated puppet. It also gave the character decision making abilities. How would he react when the camera is pushed in his face or when I trip over a camera cable in the real world space? It is these unplanned and unpredictable reactions and the give and take between the two that invites the audience to take a more active role in the film’s interpretation. By forming this connection through camera and performance the viewer is able to look past the stylized nature of the film and focus on projecting their own meanings onto the ‘virtual performance’ as they do with human actors.

The freedom given to myself as the camera operator and the performance of my actor was not only one of the biggest positives of my process, but also the part that would most benefit from restructuring. One of the major benefits of real time camera capture is the ability to shoot and reshoot allowing for multiple takes in quick succession. Not unlike in cinema verite films, there was a level of comfort and trust needed between myself and the actor in order to properly portray and capture each scene. However, it took us quite some time and a lot of takes before we were comfortable within each virtual scene and scenario. Through a multitude of rehearsals we had fallen into a rhythm and often tell back onto the repetition of our own actions within each scene, and although each scene was conceptualized organically and on the fly, the final captured scenes felt more planned than spontaneous. This could most likely be overcome by seeking the help
of trained actors; those who are more comfortable with improvisation, embodying a character and less afraid to confront and challenge me as the camera operator.

By creating an environment and camera style that encouraged participation and a character that required careful observation, Wade was able to connect with the audiences in a unique way. Despite being largely unpolished at the time of its first showing, the strength of the relationship formed between the camera operator, Wade and the audience seemed to overshadow the lack of hair, a missing texture or rough animation. I found this level of engagement left very little concern with the camera’s continuous movement as well, in fact just the opposite. It suggested a sense of exploration by the camera operator and encouraged the audience to do the same. They were immersed into the world, watching what I watched as I filmed, analyzing each scene, looking for environmental clues and exploring the mass of detail captured in each environment and created a sense of ‘being there’. While taking such an unstructured approach to animated film may never make its way into the main stream, I do hope to raise questions about how we as animators approach our own process of filmmaking. How do our narratives evolve? What ethical dilemmas do we face as animation further approaches the real world process of shooting documentaries? How do audiences perceive and relate to animated film as a truthful representation of reality? As Sherry Turkle comments in her book Alone Together, “Computers ‘understand’ as little as ever about human experience…They do however, perform understanding better than ever.” Animated characters may never be truly alive, but as technologies progress and experimentation continues they will continue to expand our perceptions of reality.
LIST OF REFERENCES


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