

THE DRAWING OF REALITY: TRUTH AND ARTIFICE OF COMICS AND ANIMATED CINEMA

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Can drawn representation of reality complete and sometimes replace photographic documentation of the real? In the absence of official information and of photographic documentation, or in instances where such data is concealed, in a paradoxical context of overdose of seemingly objective, complete, updated “24 hours a day” information that produces a rising feeling of frustrating indifference, the popularity and need of reality expressed through comics and animated cinema grows increasingly. Almost as if there were more truth in the reconstruction by strips of less exposed or more hidden pages of history. In animated or drawn narration, where the artifice is manifest, the manipulation of the image is obvious, and hand-made subjectivity is not confused with supposed mechanical-photographic “objectiveness,” which can provide the relish of telling and visualizing political and social issues in total freedom. By studying some cases in which drawn testimony is made explicit – animated documentaries, graphic reporting, drawn reconstructions – we try to find cues which help us understand how such forms of hybrid expression can contribute in establishing a truth that derives from the pluralism of notions and also from the approaches that strive to come to terms with them.

In my previous paper on *Objective and Subjective Documentation of the Contemporary by Animated Films*¹, I examined the motivations that could induce authors to prefer the use of animation in the presence of authentic material, but in the absence of real live action footage. We have seen how in such cases visual documentary for completeness of information goes through a various range of processes of recreation and reconstruction, according to the aims of the animator-documentary-maker. Taken for granted that animated cinema and documentary film have definitely merged into what is commonly defined as animated documentary, or as a form of expression in the spirit of current times, we focus our attention on the credibility and authenticity of “artificially” reconstructed accounts of facts, on the balance between objectiveness and subjectivity, on the amount and means of exposure of such a subjective approach and the presence of the author. In a similar way and with the same aims, we shall also take into consideration the use of graphic novels and comic art in general which can provide an account of reality in different ways. We are speaking of that widely developed part of graphical narration produced in the more recent decades that falls under the categories of *carnets de voyages*, biographies and autobiographical narrations, reportages, graphical journalism.

Both in animated documentaries and in what we shall here call “non-fiction comics,” the moment of visualization of reality is openly artificial. Especially with “hand-made” techniques, namely by drawings (but also by cut-outs, modelled clay and puppets), the artificial recreation of reality is manifest. While the use of digital animation or digital illustration may straddle a wide line of ambiguity between the real and its recreation, the use of drawings is no doubt related to

the hand of the artist. To the hand and, more obviously than in all the other cases, to the point of view of the author. Nevertheless, especially when dealing with narration, the rhythm itself of narration, the layout, the involvement of the spectator-reader, the visual and sound effects may induce the receiver to forget the presence of the narrator and thus the narrator's point of view. The belying subjectivity of the narrator may be therefore overshadowed by the other elements that make the story credible and authentic. To some authors such a result may be desired (the need to make it seem or feel real). To others, surely among those who draw their accounts themselves or have them drawn, to have the presence of the artist exposed is a much more desirable effect.

So, we are taking a closer look at those works of documentary animation and non-fiction comics where the presence of the author-narrator is totally exposed, as is the narrator's point of view. Mindful of the fact that the reality reported has been recreated artificially on the basis of the narrator's choices, we propose to consider three main categories:

1. The drawn representation of reality (which may or may not include the presence of the author as a character within the narration). One example for all: *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) by Ari Folman.
2. The drawn representation of reality with the evident presence of pictures recreating reality (along with remediation)². Examples: *Little Bird's Diary* (*Čiža acīm*, 2007) by Edmund Jansons, *Yellow Sticky Notes* (2007) by Jeff Chiba Stearns.
3. The drawn representation of reality including the representation of the author in the act of drawing/recreating reality. Examples: *Maus II* by Art Spiegelman³, *Carnet de voyage* by Craig Thompson⁴, *Il Re bianco* by Davide Toffolo⁵, *Rural!* by Étienne Davodeau⁶, *È primavera* by Claudio Calia⁷.

The drawn representation of reality

We shall not insist too much on the simple drawn representation of reality, as it appears to pertain to the most common type which is easy to perceive, both in the field of animated documentary films and of non-fiction comics. As an example for all, let us take the animated feature documentary film *Waltz with Bashir* by Ari Folman. The successful film, included in the official competition at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival among a number of live action movies, has provided great support to the consolidation of the animated documentary as an established canon of cinema. The truly animated documentary film on the 1982 war in Lebanon powerfully exemplifies this hybrid expressive form as a means of documenting reality. Not just narrating or inventing stories, but actually documenting them through the use of authentic material, the reconstruction of facts and proof of what is being presented.

Though the author-narrator himself is represented as a character within the narration, as he investigates into the past – his own personal past and the repressed collective recent history of the massacres in Sabra and Chatila – we never see him as an artist. He is seen as the main character who is talking to friends and former military comrades, as he gradually uncovers the horrible reality hidden in his subconscious, but we never see him in the act of drawing or the drawings produced within the drawn story presented. Ari Folman, who is the protagonist in this autobiographical enquiry (though his name is never called) therefore never appears in the act of recreating reality within the narration itself.

The drawn representation of reality with the evident presence of pictures recreating reality

We shall focus our attention instead on the evident visibility of the manufactured pictures in two short animated documentary films. The open revelation of the artifice used in representing reality is declared from the title itself in *Yellow Sticky Notes* (2007) by Jeff Chiba Stearns. It is a visualized meditation of the author's filmmaking journey, where his internal reflection on his role as an artist merges into a consideration on the major political and environmental events that accompany his personal development. The technique⁸ used, besides considerations of stylistic and "economical"⁹ order, also implies the manifestation of the artifice in reproducing and reconstructing reality. In fact *Yellow Sticky Notes* was animated using over 2,300 yellow sticky notes, drawn and written with nothing but a permanent black fine-tipped marker. Openly artisanal in its making, it is a representation of interior and exterior reality with the evident presence of pictures and handwritten words in animated sequence that are shown in their function of recreating reality, besides remediating animated film-making. The fact that the technique used is all but high-tech, with a brilliantly fluid and warm soundtrack¹⁰, highlights even further the "confessed" manipulation and claim to being subjective when going through general subjects ranging from 9/11 terroristic attacks against the Twin Towers in New York to the Katrina hurricane and aligns them with his own personal course from his college years to his professional activities.

With *Little Bird's Diary* by Edmund Jansons the presence of hand-made drawings takes on an added meaning. The first Latvian animated documentary is built upon the original drawings of Irīna Piļke's diary, going from World War II to the early 1980s. The live action close-up on the weary face, intense yet calm, then on to eighty-year-old Irina's fingers moving the cut-out drawings, open this declared "documentary animation film." The serenely playful music by Girts Biss accompanies the film throughout to better serve the emotional reality that is exposed. "I've been drawing my diaries for most of my life, since 1947," says Irina's real voice recorded on tape, as we see the cassette recorder drawn and animated and the protagonist who is visualized with the young woman interviewing her by use of animated cut-out drawings. "For you these are just picture books. For me, it's my life:" the thumbled sepia drawings come to life as Irina narrates her own past as a fifteen-year-old girl with her mother, when in 1942 the Germans took her father away. From Southern Germany to Berlin, the war, the sirens and the bombing, and then Katyusha bullets shooting, images drawn directly on location find again their dynamic context. But Irina talks about her tragedy in a light-hearted way, with some laughter: "At the end of the war we were like two birds forced out of their own nest." The metaphorical comparison with two sparrows facing the Reich's eagle is the eloquent, indelible sign of a "little bird's diary." All is surmounted with ironic lightness: the hard work, two marriages, a hospitalization and Stalin's death, the British and French empires, the USSR, the DDR, the secessions and the reunifications, as life flies.

As we can see, in *Little Bird's Diary* the original drawings are remediated in order to relocate them in their original context, thus documenting more truthfully the reality they represent. Reality to the narrator Irina, whose voice leads us on, is not only an "objective" registration of facts and events, but mostly their subjective perception and how they relate to her personal life. This is probably always true, however objective the documentary-maker tends to be, but here it is more so as the facts are mediated more or less in real time. Showing such drawings within the film and showing the act of turning them into the basis of the film's scenes themselves may be accepted as a mark of further truth and insight of the reality documented.

Summing up we therefore point out the following specific markers in *Little Bird's Diary*:

- a. Metaphorical imagery.
- b. Direct mediation of facts through original drawings.
- c. Remediation of drawings into animation.
- d. Subjectivity of narrator through voice, private facts, light tone and music.
- e. Exposed making of film (interview, drawn picture albums).

Though not strictly connected to the main point of this paper, I think it is noteworthy to highlight the way in which the structure and use of drawings and animation in this film is even more complex, particularly in the way colours, techniques and styles are used. So we can see that the present dimension of the narration is fully coloured, whereas the images drawn in and from the past are sepia and “oldish.” In several parts the animation exalts the original diary form, which is iconic. The transfiguration of people into birds is sometimes used as metaphor or irony, as is the final scene that represents Irina and her friends as a variety of animals toasting to the success of the film as they wait for the television premier (and so in a future time compared to the making of the film itself). In the film there are also sequences of animated pseudo-photographs. As time passes, and modern cars and bikinis are shown, the drawings become more coloured and focused. *Little Bird's Diary* effectively bridges our previous second point to the following third one.

Drawn representation of reality including representation of the author in the act of drawing/recreating reality

This is the case where we can see in a very explicit manner the total reality including the author, and thus the mutual effect of the object documented and the documentary-maker in the act of documenting is conveyed. We can easily perceive how the subject also becomes object and how the objective merges with the subjective. So the author in several non-fiction comics of the last decades is part of the narration while drawing or taking notes, often discussing issues concerning the medium used itself, but also relating to the reality documented of which he or she – during the moment of observation – is part. By exposing the act of documenting through drawings within the medium used, an act that here means non fiction comics, the authenticity of the reality documented is completely restored in its objective and subjective components.

Let us examine this aspect in a few significant works of non-fiction comics. When Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was issued in 1986, a pointed question was raised: can a comic book represent the Holocaust? A special Pulitzer prize six years later, among other important recognitions, would settle that controversy for good. *Maus* is a true reconstruction, based on research and interviews, about the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany. It re-enacts a part of history made of concentration camps, crematoriums, gas chambers with the medium of the comics and – what's more – it resorts to a typical style and characterization of the medium, through the use of anthropomorphic animals. By representing the Jews as mice, the Germans as cats and those in uniform and boots as Nazi soldiers, the Americans as dogs and the Polish as pigs, Spiegelman vindicates the metaphorical validity of the classical comics' legacy which wavers between fables and reality. Nevertheless his masterpiece is generally considered as a fine example of authentic historical reconstruction.

Summing up we therefore point out the following specific markers in *Maus*:

- a. Reconstruction based on authentic sources (papers, interviews).
- b. Re-enactment of history.
- c. Metaphorical imagery “typical” of the medium.
- d. Subjectivity of narrator.
- e. Exposed making of non-fiction comic.

The narration, where the author pictures himself and his family as mice, develops on three interweaving levels:

- a. On a personal level with the relational tensions between Art and his old father.
- b. On a historical and documentary level based on the tale of his Jewish father’s memories as a survivor from Nazi Germany.
- c. On a critical and reflective level concerning the problems of the artist in reporting the true history collected from his father.

Maus testifies the work done to recover his own historical memory, which is personal as well as collective. The autobiographical elements (the difficult father-son relation, the emotions expressed by the author-protagonist) add to the subjectivity together with the reconstruction of the facts experienced and revealed by his father. Spiegelman also draws himself in the act of discussing his role as an artist and of drawing the story as he collects and edits it. By exposing the act of documenting through drawings within the medium used, he gives a total possibility of authenticity. This approach also includes his own active part in the building of a true story, experienced in person, but regarded at a sufficient distance to turn it into useful material which can lead to further elaborations, by bringing to the fore personal and political causes and effects. Thanks to the father’s testimony and to the graphic-narrative re-elaboration of the son, the reader is able to know a particular truth about the Holocaust. Though a story of “mice and cats,” the violence of the SS, the anguish of the victims, the tragic dimension of a story that is not only personal and that we know to be true, appear in all their reality. Enforced and not belittled by those aspects of “truly” human defects and contradictions (the father is even a racist against blacks!) that draws a perhaps less heroic picture, but surely more credible and closer to home.

Étienne Davodeau is a French author who draws and tells true stories that are inspired first of all by inquiries and meetings that draw him out of his atelier and enables him to confront the world outside. To set up his stories, Davodeau reconstructs the facts in their original environment, gathering information from newspaper scraps and other authentic material, in order to fully penetrate the reality he describes, relating to it to the utmost degree of direct involvement. Such is the case of *Rural!*, a serious graphic reportage done in 2001. As a graphical account of a real experience lived in the French countryside, it is a vivid testimony of the actual conflict of ways of thinking and contrasting economical interests between local inhabitants making a living on their lands and public and private national managers ready to upset their balance. To assure that all the issues are brought to light, Davodeau physically delves into the situation, and actually mingles for some time with that social texture, at the farms and houses with the people that live and work there. He thus manages to provide a real insight of life on the farm today, in particular of the daily work of three modern farmers, devoid of any ecological rhetoric or superficiality, though taking a political stand in their favour and of the movement of renewal they belong to.

Nevertheless *Rural!* is not an ideological propaganda pamphlet (yet supported by José Bové's Confédération paysanne), but rather the point of view that Davodeau has been able to have by relating himself to that reality. He shares with the reader the point of view of an insider, by drawing himself within the graphic narration, revealing his direct involvement and depicting himself in the act of drawing that reality. "Which author – questions Davodeau in the preface to this book – can assert for sure, once his story has come to its end, that neither his tastes nor his personal opinions have interfered with his work? Not I." And to those readers who, in presence of such warm black and white drawings produced with the fine tip of a pencil, are uncertain on how to label these 144 pages – documentary? reportage? comic book? – the author answers the latter: "Finally it is the narration of a piece of dear old reality... It is also, and most of all, a true story."

- 1 Lawrence Thomas Martinelli, *Objective and Subjective Documentation of the Contemporary by Animated Films. Case Studies*, in Catherine Naugrette (ed.), *Le Contemporain en scène*, Proceedings of Arts et Medias, Penser/Chercher/Écrire le Contemporain (Florence, 2-7 June 2008), L'Harmattan, Paris 2011, vol. 2.
- 2 See Jay David Bolter, Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1999.
- 3 Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*, Pantheon Books, New York 1991.
- 4 Craig Thompson, *Carnet de voyage*, Top Shelf Productions, Marietta-Portland 2004.
- 5 Davide Toffolo, *Il Re bianco*, Coconino Press, Bologna 2005.
- 6 Étienne Davodeau, *Rural! Chronique d'une collision politique*, Delcourt, Paris 2001.
- 7 Claudio Calia, *È primavera. Intervista a Antonio Negri*, Becco Giallo, Padova 2008.
- 8 The technical notes to the film inform: "Yellow Sticky Notes is a classically animated film that was entirely hand drawn. The entire film was animated directly onto 4x6 inch yellow sticky notes with only a black Staedtler Permanent fine-tipped marker. 2300 yellow sticky notes were used to complete the film and the process took 9 months to complete."
- 9 Andrew Farago reports "a budget of \$100." See Andrew Farago, "Fresh from the Festivals: April 2008's Reviews," in *Animation World Network*, <http://www.awn.com/articles/festivals/fresh-festivals-april-2008s-reviews/page/2,1>, last visit 6 June 2011.
- 10 The soundtrack is written and performed by Genevieve Vincent.