

A NEW LANGUAGE OF TRUTH: THE ROLE OF ANIMATION IN A FAST CHANGING WORLD

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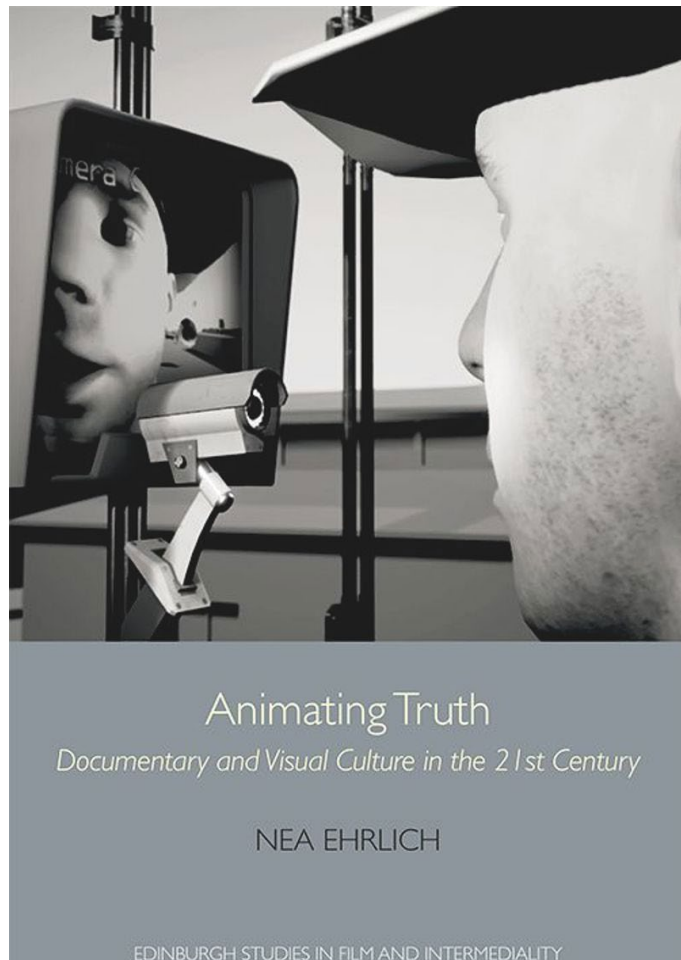
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ABSTRACT

Nea Ehrlich's *Animating Truth: Documentary and Visual Culture in the 21st Century* brings together her research into the relationship of animation to contemporary technoculture, and the ways in which this culture is changing the nature of what we understand as the "documentary". This book brings animated documentary scholarship firmly into the contemporary media landscape. By beginning to develop new conceptual tools with which to discuss and analyse new media forms, Ehrlich has created a helpful book that breathes fresh ideas into animated documentary scholarship.

Keywords: Animated documentary; Technoculture; New media; Gaming.



Nea Ehrlich's *Animating Truth: Documentary and Visual Culture in the 21st Century* brings together her research into the relationship of animation to contemporary technoculture, and the ways in which this culture is changing the nature of what we understand as the “documentary”.

The book begins by exploring the evidentiary status of animation, and its relationship to notions of “realism”, noting that the twentieth century’s “crisis of representation” has led into a complex landscape in which “changing relations between imagery and the reality it claims to depict are rapidly transforming”. (Ehrlich, 2021, p.6) It looks at the rise of non-photorealistic animation media and its growth as a counterpoint to traditional documentary aesthetics, arguing that “animation may be deemed real and believable even if its appearance belies this”. (Ehrlich, 2021, p.11) She shows that with the rise of fake news and image manipulation, animation as a mode of communicating reality has become less controversial. She also discusses the ubiquity of animation and graphic imagery, including social media filters, gifs, emojis, as well as the rise in data visualisation and the use of “machine vision”.

The first chapter looks at “reality effects”, asking what factors lead a viewer to accept a representation as “true enough” and to allow themselves to be persuaded. From this, she looks at animation used as “documents” in our contemporary mixed-reality landscape, where

the physical and virtual converge. She discusses the changing nature and place of animation, going into depth on definitions of animation that theorists have adopted over time, many of which have been problematised by transformations in animation's technology and use. She looks at ways in which digital technology complicates definitions by blurring boundaries between animation, live-action, and other forms. Technologies such as motion capture (MoCap) and Machinima allow animation to act as a "trace" of the physical, "which can be placed on a continuum between iconicity and the symbolic, depending how similar it is to the referent". (Ehrlich, 2021, p.68) Meanwhile graphic forms such as the smile emoji may be seen as an icon, a symbol, a deictic index, or a trace of the physical.

Ehrlich discusses animation's role in representing realities that are un-photographable, and introduces the concept of "a post-photographic documentary mentality". (Ehrlich, 2021, p.68) She also raises the question of animation in digital environments, which represents user input and is a direct visualisation of code rather than being planned and executed by a traditional animator. For Ehrlich, these digital events, when recorded, are "more like a photographic document than interpretative documentary imagery, because they capture the only visual appearance of these online activities". (Ehrlich, 2021, p.75) Ehrlich presents animation as capable of being "both trace and deixis [...] not only capable of indicating the mixed realities of today, it also fulfils the dual function of a document-as-proof and/or as indication, and consequently can act as a form of legitimisation and credibility for documentary works". (Ehrlich, 2021, p.78)

The book then looks at virtual documentaries, arguing that the fabric of contemporary culture includes "the virtual", which reflects, reacts to, and shapes physical realities. She discusses the changing status of the screen, including mobile screens, interactive screens, multi-screen installation, big-screen display and more. This ubiquity and heterogeneity of screens, in combination with the increased prevalence of AR, blurs traditional boundaries between "off-screen" and "on-screen". On-screen life is increasingly understood as part of "real" life, and this brings a broader acceptance of diverse modes of representation. Furthermore, we are increasingly physically involved with screens, they engage the body in direct ways, such as using a cursor or an avatar, as well as the use of social media filters to distort and disguise the image of ourselves. While "in the past, animation may have seemed artificial because it appeared only on screen", now "the user's body is mediated through technology, creating various forms of embodiment, telepresence and varied on-screen representations". (Ehrlich, 2021, p.100) In this "mixed reality", where the material and the virtual combine, Ehrlich argues that animation is an appropriate representational strategy for the virtual aspects of our experience.

Ehrlich goes into more depth on gaming in the next section. An activity that is increasingly popular among a surprising range of demographics, gaming is also acclimatising people to having real experiences in virtual (animated) spaces, in which they themselves

are represented by animated avatars. Ehrlich focuses particularly on machinima, the creation of content using game engines and recorded gameplay. In this context, animation is “a mimetic visual portrayal of events, turning machinima into *documentary capture animation*” which can be seen as both animated document and documentary. (Ehrlich, 2021, p.120) Ehrlich also looks at games that document non-game realities, and films that use game graphics to tell non-game stories. She uses the case studies of Jacqueline Goss’s *Stranger Comes to Town* (2007) and Amir Yatziv’s *Another Planet* (2017), to illustrate how games and game aesthetics can innovate and appropriate representational strategies for even the most serious subject matter.

The next chapter focuses on interactive animated documentaries, VR documentaries, and documentary games. Using examples such as the work of Nonny De la Peña, Ehrlich shows that VR documentaries can offer researched and effective documentary experiences, though she also discusses the problematic notion of immersion in VR, and the barriers that exist to really feeling “present” in the represented environment. She notes that this brings risks relating to the ethics of spectatorship and complicates VR’s often-repeated claim of evoking empathy. Moving on to look at documentary games, Ehrlich notes that games and interactive documentaries engage the viewer and can simulate a sense of presence that can potentially increase both empathy and a faith in the authenticity of the subject. Ehrlich also acknowledges that the documentary status of games is difficult to measure or define, and it is a rich but understudied field which would benefit from further scholarship.

Questions of ethics and empathy continue in the next section of the book, which returns to looking at the aesthetics of the “real”. Ehrlich argues that audiences have become numbed to mimetic and photographic depictions of horror and hardship, justifying the exploration of alternative representational strategies, such as animation, as a means to evoke empathy. Animation can reveal things that would be difficult using traditional methods, but it can also make a protagonist seem less real. While animation aesthetics can simplify protagonists to symbolic, generic forms, Ehrlich argues that the thoughtful addition of detail can add personal touches that restore a character’s humanity, while also leaving space for a viewer to “flesh out and bring imagination to” the character, involving them more actively in the representation and the subject. In game forms, this can be further exploited through the emotional bond a player might experience with their avatar, who often also represents the protagonist. This empathy can be converted into a real-world response; many documentary games include an explicit social or political call-to-action at the end of the game or in paratextual materials.

The next chapter returns to animated documentaries in relation the idea of post-truth. In a media landscape dominated by concerns about fake news and by a preference for “truthiness” over fact, animated documentary has an important role. It both presents visually simplified versions of reality and offers a complex mode of representation that promotes critical viewing. Ehrlich describes animated documentary as

an “in-between” form that both exposes and disguises, familiarises and defamiliarizes, and evokes factual and fictional worlds. As “masked, self-reflexive documentary aesthetics that both hide and expose information, and foreground issues of truth verification versus disinformation” animated documentary is “a perfect form of representation for the zeitgeist”. (Ehrlich, 2021, p.201)

While largely written in clear language, this book presents wide-ranging and sometimes densely complex ideas that demand time and attention to fully take on board. It looks at animated documentary as part of a landscape of disciplines, and draws on art, theatre and film history and analysis, gaming studies, semiotics, and philosophy, alongside other approaches and ideas. Throughout the book, key theories and definitions of documentary are presented and returned to, including those from Grierson and Flaherty, Gunning, Nichols, and Sobchack. These contextualise the argument but are also used to stress-test, scaffold, and add nuance to the documentary claims being made. More recent work by scholars such as Honess Roe is also referenced, built on, and sometimes challenged.

This book brings animated documentary scholarship firmly into the contemporary media landscape. Many of the linear, single-screen animated documentary films that are widely referenced by animated documentary scholars were produced in the late 20th or early 21st century, and Ehrlich largely forgoes mention of these, in favour of discussing work largely produced in the last decade. This transforms traditional arguments by offering new contexts and perspectives. Ehrlich’s descriptions and analysis of the ways in which animation, through mixed-reality, has become a part of our everyday lived experience, and how it can offer a direct visual trace of that experience and activity, feels particularly important to the field. By beginning to develop new conceptual tools with which to discuss and analyse new media forms, Ehrlich has created a book that will be helpful for many scholars to come.

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