Psychological Realism in Modern Animation: Greater Unites of Form and Content

A Thesis Presented

By

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To

The Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree

In the field of English

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

April, 2017
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities

Northeastern University

April 2017
In his “The Myth of Total Cinema,” André Bazin offers his version of the historical narrative of filmmaking technologies, in which filmmakers move closer towards realistic representations with their work due to advancements in technologies. These technologies include camera mobility and volume, sound and microphone technology, set design, etc. There is a similar historical narrative for animation and animation filmmakers, where the technologies have improved over the years to create polished pieces of cinema with perfected colors and lines. Before these technologies, commonly used techniques posed limitations that actually impinged on the representation of the images; the images seemed less controlled because of clunky animation. In this way, these technological advances are less visually intrusive for an audience, and the images are more controllable. This thesis argues that contemporary animators have begun to reverse this trend, using antiquated animation techniques that intrude upon the quality of the image. Yet, the goal for these filmmakers is not to create jarring images without purpose but to create a harmonious message between the form of animation and the content that feels more psychologically real, rather than visually real. This thesis considers three contemporary animators, Ari Folman, Jonas Odell, and Don Hertzfeldt, and argues that their work accomplishes this step towards psychological realism, most especially as they reject not only the historical narrative of animation technologies and techniques, but also the larger historical narrative of cinema technology.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Professor Dillon, who took on my unique and sprawling project, and who helped me to shape it through many permutations into something meaningful and significant—thank you.

To Professor Kaplan, Professor Lerner, Professor Boeckeler, Professor Goshgarian, and Professor Cushman, for your guidance over my time at Northeastern, and whose passions have helped me to develop my own—thank you.

Thank you endlessly to the wonderful friends I have found at Northeastern, and to a cohort more cohesive than I could have ever hoped for—I will take these bonds with me throughout the rest of my life.

Thank you to my family, whose love and support are with me at every step, whether it is cartoons or coursework.

And thank you to Hayao Miyazaki, whose imagination is more real to me than anything else.
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INTRODUCTION: THE ANIMATED NARRATIVE

Though the history of technological advancements in animation begins much earlier, the past seventy years has seen a dramatic uptick in the number of new techniques that increase both the efficiency of the work and the visual quality of images. The more advanced the techniques and technology are, the more control animators have over all of the images on the screen. One side effect of this is that the materiality of the form is in many ways lost in this process of image perfection. Digital formats, unlike clay and puppet animations, erase much of the evidence of the human hand (or technology) at work in the artistry. Yet, in the midst of this drive for image quality perfection, several modern animators have defied this trend with their work by deliberately using antiquated techniques. This may feel strange to many audiences who have become used to features like *Frozen* (2013) or *Zootopia* (2016), which feature arrays of perfected digital imagery. Instead, many animators have started to ask the question of *why* instead of *how*; *why* are we using this technology, and what is the most effective way to communicate a message? Their work, using antiquated techniques like montage, digital cutouts, and stick figures, is a rejection of the need for animators to perfectly control every aspect of the *mise-en-scène*. I argue that animators use these techniques to communicate psychologically realistic messages, in contrast to those more intent on visual efficiency, quality, and control. In this way, recent animators, like Ari Folman, are uniting their content with animated forms that speak to that content in psychologically expressive ways. The historical narrative of progress in animation and technology is a crucial backdrop for understanding this new direction.

Many contemporary consumers of animated works identify Walt Disney’s 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* as the birth of animation, and in many respects, it is—or rather the birth of *modern* animation as we know it. *Snow White* is the first feature film to utilize cel
animation, a technique invented by Earl Hurd in 1914, where a transparent cellulose acetate sheet is laid over an illustration; the outlines of the illustration are inked onto the cel, and when they are dried, the cels are flipped over so that the back sides can be painted with color (the back side of the cel is used so that the color is more constant and any mistakes made in the painting are largely concealed). The basic idea of cel animation is to limit the amount of work that has to be done to create animated works, whereas before (as in the case with Winsor McCay’s *Gertie the Dinosaur* in 1914), the background had to be re-drawn for every frame. Cel animation quickened the process so that one background layer could stay constant while many foreground images could be layered on top (the number of cel layers were necessarily limited, however, as adding more layers began to cloud the background image and colors).

However, “animation” as a concept, form, and medium had undergone dozens of less advanced permutations before *Snow White* and Disney’s *Steamboat Willie* in 1928, though many were no less graceful. There were many elegant designs and rotating devices that predated cel animation, from the Magic Lantern (1603) to other devices like the Thaumatrope (1824), Phenakitoscope (1831), Zoetrope (1834), Kineograph (1862), and Praxinoscope (1877). (Witcombe). The timeline is murky before the Magic Lantern, as the definition of ‘animation’ (to make move) is distinct from that of ‘illustration’ (in this sense—to make). Moving forward in time from the late 19th century, there are many technological advances that seek to better simulate motion among images like drawn-on-film animation (also called ‘direct animation’) where animators actually draw on the film stock itself. In 1988 with the film *Alice*, Jan Svankmajer commercialized the use of stop-motion animation, where the illusion of movement is created by taking a shot of a model or puppet and moving it slightly before another shot is taken. ‘Claymation’ or clay animation, which is essentially stop-motion animation with clay
puppets, was born out of stop-motion animation. While the term itself comes from the late 70s, the form was popularized by Aardman Animations’ *Wallace and Gromit* (1990), and even more significantly *Chicken Run* (2000), which grossed over $224 million (“The Longer View: British Animation”). In 1995, *Toy Story* became the first fully-computer-generated feature film, and in 2006, Richard Linklater created *A Scanner Darkly*, which set a precedent for digital animation in the new millennium by combining live-action with digital animation. This, in turn, has opened up a substantial critical debate about the definition of animation, especially considering films like James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) and Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity* (2013), which are both largely considered to be live-action films despite massive amounts of computer-generated imagery (CGI). Today, even the most stubborn and celebrated animators like Hayao Miyazaki make use of digital aids and CGI for the same reason that cel animation became the norm in the early Walt Disney era of cinema. The process becomes less painstaking, and the animators can spend more time improving upon their actual crafts. Not only is the process more expedient, or rather less strenuous, but animators have more control over motion than ever before, as CGI has introduced digitally crisp lines and the perfection of the color wheel. These are all crucial stops in the context of animation techniques, each with its own distinct signature and method of forcing an image to move.

This historical narrative of animation techniques fits snugly into the narrative of cinematic techniques offered by André Bazin in his “The Myth of Total Cinema,” published in 1967. Bazin argues that the goal of cinema and technological advances in cinema is to represent physical reality as closely as possible. CGI in live action films works in exactly this way, providing filmmakers with a larger degree of control over the entire image. Since 1895, the craft of filmmaking has worked diligently for sound-on-disc technology, cameras that are mobile and
quiet, and microphones that don’t limit actor movement within a set. These are the sorts of innovations that Bazin argues inches cinema closer towards its ultimate goal: physically resembling real life because the technology is not intruding in the image. Bazin doesn’t consider animation specifically in his analysis of the film industry, and it’s true that animation as a mode feels at times foreign to this historical narrative, using fantastical elements and illustrations rather than captured images. However, given the litany of technological advances that have honed the craft mentioned above, we can imagine the narrative of animation technology to be, if not integrated with, parallel to the greater cinematic narrative trajectory that Bazin observes. With fewer technological limitations, animation is more visually immersive, as the entire form can be more easily commanded. The greatest evidence for this is the fact that the critical conversation about the definition of animation exists; CGI has made filmmaking so controllable and immersive that it has become difficult to distinguish animation from live-action. However, several animators around the world have recently taken to using technology and techniques that defy this narrative.

The most readily accessible examples of this are Miyazaki’s many masterpieces, such as Spirited Away (2001), Howl’s Moving Castle (2004), and Princess Mononoke (1997), which he tirelessly painted and drew with brushes and pencils. His watercolor and illustration technique defies the sweeping trend towards the digital, and he has been frequently quoted in opposition to any CGI use in animation (this said, his most recent works have used minimal CGI). In his wake there are several animators who have made revolutionary films in the sense that they defy the trend of technological advancement towards greater levels of verisimilitude and visual control by using antiquated techniques of illustration or filmmaking. In the process of reversing the larger narrative above, contemporary directors depict figures and characters whose movements are
limited by the techniques used to create them. These techniques are directly responsible for a
different kind of realism in the cinematic experience: a more developed understanding of
psychological realism. Ari Folman, director of the renowned *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), uses the
antiquated technique of montage to depict how trauma impacts the mind. Similarly, Jonas
Odell’s *Aldrig som första gången! (Never Like the First Time!)* (2006) uses paper doll cutouts
and silhouettes to relate how memory latches onto certain ideas over others. Finally, Don
Hertzfeldt’s *It’s Such a Beautiful Day* (2012) features the use of stick figures and spotlights to
psychologically simulate the experience of mental illness. In this process, they reject the perfect
digital control over the image that contemporary Disney and other studios utilize; however, I
argue that this only makes their films more psychologically real as it is emblematic of the lack of
control that people have in life. These filmmakers are lighting a torch for a new tradition of
animation that defies the technological advancement trend to present films in which the
techniques and technologies used intrude on the image. They opt for less control and in order to
more appropriately communicate psychological sensations to the audience. This new wave of
animators seeks to distance itself from efforts of technological advances and move closer
towards psychological expression.

**WALTZ WITH BASHIR: TRAUMA AND THE MONTAGE REVIVAL**

Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) is one of the most critically acclaimed animated
features of the new millennium. It received numerous awards including a Golden Globe. Folman
is the central figure in his own animated documentary, in which he grapples with his obscured
memory of his involvement in the 1982 Lebanon War and more specifically, the Sabra and
Shatila Massacre\(^1\). He has a recurring nightmare of the massacre, in which he and his friends are bathing in the sea next to the city, which is lit by flares falling amidst the buildings. In the film, Folman (the character) has conversations with his friends who were soldiers and a psychiatrist to finally unlock his guilt-ridden memory: he was one of the soldiers lighting flares so that the massacre could take place. While the film is currently banned in Lebanon\(^2\) (as of 2009 it is illegal to project or import the film in Lebanon), it exists as a chilling post-Holocaust reminder of the horrors of catastrophe and war. Folman’s story is an adventure through the way the mind perceives guilt (which is in this case perpetrator trauma, or as Raya Morag calls it, the “perpetrator complex”), and it is almost entirely depicted in animation, though the last few moments are in live-action. Folman uses the antiquated technique of montage for the dream sequences, and this speaks to the nonlinearity of emotional trauma. Montage is a technique that allows the filmmaker to cut up moments in time and place them together to skip ahead in the plot quickly; this choppy sense of time is similar to what traumatized individuals feel. Folman’s use of montage is deliberate and meaningful, rather than a largely pragmatic storytelling device, as such sequences often are.

Regarding montage, the Soviets in the early 20\(^{th}\) century famously theorized that, for filmmakers, context was equally as important as the images themselves. The Kuleshov Effect is a famous idea theorized in the 1910s that by strategically placing two images in a sequence, one after the other, a specific kind of meaning is created. Lev Kuleshov proved his findings by filming a man’s face with a deliberately emotionless expression and duplicated it three times. Before each time the man’s face is shown, Kuleshov spliced one of three other shots (one of a

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\(^1\) An unknown number (likely thousands) of largely Palestinian citizens were killed by the command of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and allies of the IDF

\(^2\) Many Lebanese soldiers (Lebanese Forces) perpetrated much of the violence during the massacre; as a result the film is banned.
bowl of soup on a table, another of a corpse in a coffin, and the third of a woman looking suggestively at the camera). By associating the man’s face with the previous image, the audience creates meaning from their association, and that meaning is different for each pairing.

Another Soviet making cinematic strides in the early 20th century was the famous Sergei Eisenstein. He became the authoritative figure for those studying theories of montage in cinema, famously stating that “montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots” (4). Kuleshov’s images thus “collide” with one another, and a specific kind of rhetoric emerges from these collisions. Montages cut out the parts that would take large amounts of time to show on the screen, showcasing only the highlights that allow an audience to understand the basic events taking place. Montage is still used as a technique for filmmakers, though sparingly, to advance the plot quickly; in this sense, the technique helps a filmmaker to control the events of the film. However, the meaning of the word montage has since changed from the time of these pioneering Soviets3. Since the 70s and 80s, montage has become much more of a gimmick than anything, often used for comedic purposes. The largest reason that the technique now feels much more like a gimmick is because it is far less about linking shots together to create one sequence in a scene, but rather about creating full scenes themselves completely unbound by the limitations of time. As montages have transitioned from pragmatic to gimmick, they have also been largely phased out of filmmaking; they certainly do still exist, yet they don’t appear with the same frequency.

However, the montage sequences in *Waltz with Bashir* are dissimilar to the traditional montage sequences that seek to control the flow of time by skipping forward. In many ways, the montages in *Waltz* are far more invested in looking back than they are in advancing the action

3 The iconic montage moments that come to mind in the 80s of are Rocky Balboa sprinting up steps and punching meat, training for his big fight. Montages of this sort jump from setting to setting and splice together different moments in time.
forward. The first montage in the film is actually the first scene, though the montage depicted here has a linear shape. In dark grays and blacks, the first part depicts several rabid dogs sprinting around a city together in a pack; their eyes are bright yellow and the sky above them is cloudy, yet also mustard yellow. The pack of dogs then runs through people sitting outside a café, toppling tables and chairs and terrorizing the people cowering on the ground. After running through another similar dining area with similar results, they collectively stop outside of an apartment to bark and growl, and a man (Folman) looks down upon them from the window. Afterwards, Folman struggles to make sense of his vision as it temporally and visually confuses him. The same happens when he has a dream of himself with two other men, naked and floating in the water outside the city. This sequence repeats throughout the film several times, revealing in harsh blacks and mustard yellows the three men that leave the water while flares fall into the city (see Figure 1). The next few images of the montage are of the men putting on their clothes and walking into the city, encountering hundreds of screaming women. The two major moments

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*Figure 1. Folman and two others float in the water and gaze at the flares falling in the city.*
of the sequence, Folman and two others floating in the water watching the flares and the three of them walking through hundreds of miserable women, are juxtaposed. As Folman interviews several military friends and psychologists during the film, he finds himself unable to place where he was on the night of the massacre, as he doesn’t remember floating on the water with two other men like his dream suggests.

There are dozens of montages throughout the film, some set to popular music and others to orchestral scoring. Yet this one, the three naked men floating in the river outside the city, is the most haunting to Folman, as it causes temporal confusion (in as far as it causes him to question if the events he sees in the dream are real and when they might have happened) and causes him to struggle to locate himself during the massacre in his memories. This temporal struggle is significant because montage sequences are often used to explain away the passing of time within a film—to counter any narrative confusion the audience may feel. Yet, time is not explained away in these montages, which only cause confusion for Folman, rather than solving or countering it.

Cathy Caruth speaks about time and experience with respect to trauma in her landmark study *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The perspective that she provides is helpful in understanding Folman’s trauma, how it distorts his sense of linear time and how it is recurrently present. She states:

> What seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that… is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and
is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (3-4)

Caruth describes the mental effects of physical or emotional trauma as “the repeated infliction of a wound” (3). She also claims that trauma, even if of the emotional sort, is also a “breach in the mind’s experience of time.” Trauma repetitively makes itself present to its beholder throughout time and well after the initial occurrence. Therefore, montage, as Folman uses it as a technique that causes confusion rather than countering it, is psychologically realistic in Waltz. It probes the way that trauma persists through time, repeating and reminding; as Waltz’s montages chop up time and play with it to cause temporal confusion, so does trauma. Trauma continually reasserts itself for traumatized individuals like Folman in a cyclical, nonlinear movement.

Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* also speaks to the idea of nonlinearity and traumatic flashbacks. In this piece, however, her focus shifts to the idea of truth and perspective, insinuating that part of the truth of an event is the way that it is perceived, and traumatized individuals have a difficult time comprehending events. She states:

> The ability to recover the past is thus closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it. And this suggests that what returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness… For the survivor of trauma, then, the truth of the event may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension. The flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility. (152-3)
Caruth argues that traumatic events “def[y] simple comprehension,” such that part of the truth about them is their very incomprehensibility. Caruth describes that a traumatic event is defined by its “lack of integration into consciousness.” These dream sequences, even as they falsely represent what actually happened for Folman, project truths about the experience of trauma as incomprehensible. Trauma is persistent and incomprehensible for Folman, yet there are also other levels of psychological realism that these montages evoke, specifically with regard to mediation.

About halfway through the film, Folman has a particularly curious conversation with a trauma expert, Professor Zahava Solomon (see Figure 2). She describes his condition as a dissociative event, claiming that “it’s when a person experiences a situation, and yet they perceive themselves as outside of it” (Waltz with Bashir). She likens his situation to that of a

Figure 2. Folman discusses his memory concerns with Professor Zahava Solomon in an interview that he animates and adds in the film.
photographer who had survived a war in the 80s by treating the entire experience as though he was seeing it through a camera—as though it wasn’t actually happening, like a daydream. In her book, *Distant Wars Visible: The Ambivalence of Witnessing*, Wendy Kozol describes a concept called “media witnessing,” when someone witnesses trauma through a medium like a television. Like other scholars, including Laura Tanner in *Holding onto 9/11*, she wonders whether such witnessing creates opportunities for a person to further distance him or herself from those experiencing trauma—a process of othering—or opportunities to “mobilize empathy and action” (31). In this case, the unnamed photographer follows the first idea, that by pretending that everything he saw was through a camera, he was offered some distance and security from the actual events taking place. Similarly, Folman’s mind has constructed a way in which he can no longer perceive the events that had happened directly save through a dream-like medium that offers him distance and security. However, eventually the photographer’s camera broke, causing him to no longer have that security in distance, and he began to experience the trauma around him (Solomon states that the man became “consumed” by the horrors of the war). This suggests to Folman that, in some way, he needs to ‘break his camera,’ or overcome the illusion that he continues to have in order to understand the truth of what happened, however traumatic it may be. While montage is notorious as a technique that is temporally unrealistic, it is actually a psychologically effective method of storytelling for Folman, as it fits the description of Kozol’s ‘media witnessing’ and Caruth’s traumatic incomprehensibility (trauma is nonlinear, segmenting time).

Raya Morag also discusses Marianne Hirsch’s renowned concept of postmemory when thinking about *Waltz with Bashir*. Hirsch’s postmemory is particularly relevant to *Waltz*, as the
film itself is invested in trauma and guilt and as Folman’s own parents were victims to the Holocaust.

The work of “postmemory,” described by Marianne Hirsch as the response of second-generation Holocaust survivors to the trauma of the first, “characterizes the experience of those who . . . have grown up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the powerful stories of the previous generation, shaped by monumental traumatic events that resist understanding and integration.” During Folman’s quest, his best friend, the therapist, tells him that the unconsciously assimilated memories of his parents imposed on Folman “the role of the Nazi” when he was a soldier. The double postmemory shift from indirect perpetrator in Lebanon to direct perpetrator in the Holocaust, and from the Lebanon camps to “those” camps, involves blurring identifications of childhood innocence and youthful complicity through mechanisms of repression and projection. (99-100)

Ari Folman comes from a Jewish heritage so deeply shaped by the Holocaust that to be personally involved with and partially guilty of another massacre of any kind is to invoke powerful cultural guilt. Folman feels the weight of “the role of the Nazi” in his conscience, given his cultural postmemory from his parents and the victimization of the Holocaust, and as a result, feels tremendous perpetrator guilt in the context of his postmemory. Like Caruth’s description of “the repeated infliction of a wound,” the weight of the Holocaust is repeatedly inflicting itself upon Folman. Waltz becomes like what Isabelle McNeil calls a “screen museum… a space where personal and collective memory overlap, a space of cultural memory” (54). Folman’s film is oriented around an almost romanticized quest for truth, yet, it uses two traditionally divergent
forms to get closer to this truth: animation and documentary. Documentary is traditionally an effective method of truth-seeking and telling as it is organized consistently as a journey towards revelation in the medium of visual realism. Animation appears to conflict with this directly, as it departs from live-action and seems to more closely resemble fiction.

Morag continues, suggesting that of its two modes, animation and documentary, documentary is the one that provides validation, giving a film truth power. Animation, she argues, does not. She states:

An intriguing hybrid, the film’s innovative language (animated documentary) has its origins in the “old” logic of cinema aesthetics — with the alleged disparity between the icon (animation) and the index (live footage) — and moves between the two. This transformation endows the archive with a truth value that animation apparently lacks and with an eeriness and uncanniness that are “not associated with the realms of the icon or symbol.” (102)

Morag suggests that the documentary aspects of the film provide more truth power to a film otherwise dominated by a form (animation) that lacks truth power. However, Morag does not take this a step further and consider animation as precisely the thing that feels most psychologically realistic, creating these “icon[s] and “symbol[s].” Waltz with Bashir’s animation provides a method of understanding an extremely complex and difficult truth to pin down: the idea that Folman’s Holocaust postmemory haunts him in the wake of his own guilt in the war. This is best articulated by animated montages in a metaphorical visual language of images and juxtapositions. While the animated sequences and figures are drawn, rather than photographed or ‘documented,’ they speak to reality not as it looks but rather as it is perceived. Therefore, animation is an ideal way to represent truths like these that are abstract and psychological; it
offers a filmmaker the ability to control more of the images on the screen. Yet, *Waltz* not only uses animation, but also montage, which, in in this film is not so much an attempt to control time—to escape the linearity of it—but rather a method of explaining how trauma transcends that linearity. As mentioned, montage actually provides this other level of psychological understanding as it articulates the sensation of trauma repeatedly cutting through time in nonlinear fashion.

Folman doesn’t use animation for its ability to “stretch reality or the laws of physics and physiology” as Morag suggests (104), but rather as a means of understanding traumatic truths in the only way that makes sense to him: concepts, symbols, and metaphors. Animated montages are the best possible way of representing Folman’s attempts at recollection; they are also, however, the only means by which Folman can come to grips about the traumatic truths of his participation in the war. By recreating events as animated montages, he is able to come to an understanding of what happened in simple truths and feelings, until he is finally able to handle his own guilt. The transition from animation to live-action represents his personal transformation, as he has unlocked the live-action images by overcoming the mediation in his memory like the anecdote of the photographer. Morag’s consideration of *Waltz* as “closer to fiction than reportage” is fundamentally flawed, even despite her inspirational scholarship on Folman’s film. It is the animated montages that allow Folman to wade through raw emotions and symbols to get closer to the truth.

What I am suggesting about the film is closer to the analysis of Landesman and Bendor, who work to classify the ‘spectatorial experience’ of *Waltz* in their article “Animated

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4 There are many visual metaphors in the montage sequences; constantly at play are the themes of light (yellow) and dark (black), as Folman struggles to deal with what he *can* see (in his visions) and what he *cannot* (that which is obscured by or omitted from his visions).
Recollection and Spectatorial Experience in *Waltz with Bashir.*” They claim that the animation is “not just a fictional add-on” in the film, but rather speaks to “the way we experience the world” (356). Landesman and Bendor state that “the film’s cognitive and embodied effects, a product of its unique aesthetic strategies, are essential for its disclosure of reality in all its complexity, ambiguity and multifacetedness.” In this sense, they continue to claim that *Waltz,* “exemplifies the ways in which the animated documentary exceeds its utility for showing what is otherwise difficult or impossible to represent in non-animated documentaries (stream of consciousness, unconscious elements, dreams, imagination, affects, etc.), to also serve as a vehicle for fostering a new relationship between the viewer and the documentary text” (354). This idea is critical for the animated works featured herein, as it focuses on the idea of the “disclosure of reality”—how animation is the tool that filmmakers can utilize when working with material that, though real enough, is difficult or impossible to display otherwise. Stream of consciousness, dreams, and even imagination are *real;* they are ideas that *real* people perceive and they affect people in meaningful ways. Animation as a medium provides a much needed degree of control for depicting imaginary images, though it is precisely the lack of control of time on display in montage sequences that makes *Waltz* a unique foray into the psychology of a traumatized individual who is himself unable to control the memories of his past.

*Waltz with Bashir* is then a showcase of how animation can depict events such that the audience has a chance to experience it in similar ways to the original bearer. In other words, Landesman and Bendor describe this move from *Waltz* as a transition from faith to trust. “This relationship is one that moves away from faith—having faith in the image because it represents reality with photographic indexicality—to trust—trusting the documentary text to be making truth claims that reflect the world in sophisticated ways” (354). The animated image lacks the
immediate indexicality that the photographed image has, yet as discussed above, indexicality, or what reality physically looks like, is not what Folman accomplishes in *Waltz*.

The term “indexicality” in the above passage fits with André Bazin’s understanding of the photographic image as factual. In his “Ontology of the Photographic Image,” he considers the photograph to be like a visual fingerprint, something “preserved in amber,” in as far as it is stable, unchanging, and most closely represents reality (8). Both he and Roland Barthes discuss photography’s place among a visual ontological spectrum, the latter referring to photography as something that “mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially” (Barthes, 4). Photography is a mechanical mimesis of visual reality, such that it spooks Barthes. Animation, and specifically *Waltz with Bashir*, is unlike the photograph in that it does not have mechanical indexicality—visual mimesis—but is rather psychologically in tune with Folman’s experience.

Folman’s psychological film uses montage, a technique that has been largely reserved for comedic effect in recent years. Yet, instead of explaining away the gaps in time presented in more traditional and cliché uses of montage, *Waltz* presents these gaps as problematic—equally as troubling as Folman’s struggle to recover his memories of the war. The use of montage in *Waltz* only serves as a psychologically sound indication of how trauma is nonlinear and incomprehensible, constantly affecting the beholder throughout time. It also speaks to Kozol’s “media witnessing,” such that Folman’s mind has constructed the illusion that he was not inside the city to create distance between himself and the event, lessening the guilt that haunts him. Taken one level further, the use of montage is related to this idea of control and animation technologies; typically used as a method of plot control, the montage in *Waltz* makes the plot more disjointed and uncontrollable for Folman, akin to how both time and trauma are
uncontrollable. Using a version of montage that is devoid of its usual clichés and antiquated plot devices, Folman is able to recreate real and often nebulous psychological phenomena.

**ALDRIG SOM FÖRSTA GÅNGEN! (NEVER LIKE THE FIRST TIME!): MEMORY WITH PAPER DOLLS**

Still within the genre of animated documentary, *Aldrig som första gången! (Never Like the First Time!)* (2006) is a short film by Jonas Odell that relates interviews from four different individuals about their first sexual experiences. Each story, narrated by its interviewee, is animated over the course of around four minutes and each uses drastically different styles of animation as Franziska Bruckner identifies in “Hybrid Image, Hybrid Montage: Film Analytical Parameters for Live Action/Animation Hybrids” (34). Odell mixes photography and illustration to establish different materials and textures throughout the film. Chapter 4 uses the digital cutouts that are seen infrequently throughout the previous three chapters, cropping a digital image and layering it into the composition. The aesthetic of each chapter corresponds to the setting, whether it’s the sepia tone that evokes the zeitgeist of the 1920s, or the colorful array of the first narrator’s party. There are occasional 3D tracking shots, which only put Odell’s skill on display, as he is able to create perspective and three dimensions in a composition that often intentionally lacks complete detail. The middle two chapters use more hybrid images and rotoscopy.

The way that Odell layers his images and backgrounds may feel backwards in relation to the digital animation of recent films like *Frozen* (2013) or *Zootopia* (2016), for which software programs help to more efficiently generate images and backgrounds. His digital cutouts should also feel backwards for the same reasons; their presence is an intrusion on the overall image,
whereas software programs seek the control to have no such intrusion. His *Never Like the First Time!* only highlights this larger narrative of contemporary animators taking liberties with the form, using antiquated but effective techniques deliberately and with a purpose. In depicting visualizations of memory, rather than explaining how memory works in narration, Odell uses specific techniques (paper doll cutouts, silhouettes, and marionettes) that make his film feel like a compilation of memories. This is true because his techniques allow him to evoke a sense of the relationship between the narrator and his or her own memories—he not only animates the memories but also the fact that they are narrated and owned by an individual.

With CGI and modern techniques, rarely ever in a Disney or Pixar film is the audience meant to struggle to determine what they see on the screen or grapple with more abstract images. Yet there are endless other styles that each have different uses and each afford different storytelling opportunities. Each of the styles Odell uses for *Never Like the First Time!* is seldom, if ever, used commercially because the movement of objects lacks the fluidity and control that the larger studios utilize. Each is also drastically different from the others, though they all seek to most accurately describe the way the narrator perceived the events of his or her story. This is to say that the use of paper doll cutouts and unornamented silhouettes affords opportunities to meditate on the idea of memory and how it latches on to certain aspects of life, yet not everything. The use of paper dolls, though digitally created, is within the tradition of puppetry and marionettes. Unlike other animation that uses puppetry, like Claymation where the clay can be continuously shaped, the paper dolls do not change in each frame with different facial expressions and bodily movements, and they only do so sparingly with digital aid (see Figure 3).

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5 Many of his marionettes and paper dolls move in a herky-jerky or robotic manner
This makes Odell’s dolls feel more marionette-like and less controlled in their movements;

the limbs of the figures move and the bodies often bounce as though on strings while the facial expressions and other human movements are missing.

Odell uses paper doll cutouts most heavily in chapter four as a technique that intentionally evokes a marionette-like feeling for an audience—the sensation that something is archaic and not quite human. This is a suitable way to animate these memories, which are described to us by a narrator, who is controlling the sequence with words like strings. These narrators are the masters of their own memories, the ones who are able to manipulate the puppets of their past, yet not with the perfected control of CGI because memory is never that digitally refined. The use of marionettes as representations of figures is a psychologically appropriate method of depicting narratorship, and the control (or lack of control) that a narrator has over his or her memories. While marionettes and puppetry is a tradition dating back thousands of years,
the practice of illustration with silhouettes dates back almost as far in the form of ancient Greek black-figure pottery paintings (Boardman). Both techniques are antiquated, and yet both are used to make psychologically significant statements about memory narratorship.

In meditating about how the four narrators perceive reality and how the animation works well at articulating that perception, Dan Torre helps us to see the possibilities and limitations of animation, or lack thereof, when articulating human experience. In his article, “Cognitive Animation Theory: A Processed-Based Reading of Animation and Human Cognition,” Torre makes strides in relating sensory perception to animation. He suggests:

Correspondingly, if we were to consider cognition and memory in terms of process, we would focus less on specific imagery, memories or storehouses of knowledge, but more upon the complex amalgamation and re-juxtaposition of countless sensory perceptions that we experience. Although, in actuality, animation and cognition are quite different—one is a visual medium, the other strictly an array of mental processes—when considered in terms of process, it is relatively easy to find similarities between the two. (50)

Torre sees a straight line that connects animation to memory and the way that humans cognitively organize, register, and make sense of the world, even if animation, as a medium, only operates within one of our senses: sight. For Torre, it is the “amalgamation” and “re-juxtaposition” of visuals in animation that speaks to how we mentally catalogue items in memory. He even goes as far as to claim that “anything is possible in animation and anything is possible in mental imagery” (57). Therefore, animation, as a form of visual representation, seems an effective tool for depicting memories and mental re-configurations.
This side of animation—thinking about its juxtapositions and arrangements—is something Torre elaborates on later in his article, meditating further on the way that people render juxtapositional elements.

The processes of our image perception and of our mental image generation also involve a compositing of visual material through our process of seeing and within our visuo-spatial working memory—two distinct but interrelated systems. Rather than imaging as the camera does, we see by amalgamating saccadic fragments of visual information to create a ‘visual trace’ image, and then generate cognitive images by a multifaceted compositing of stored imagery elements. (57)

When audience members perceive the sort of animation in Never Like the First Time! (“saccadic fragments” where not everything retains its detail and instead becomes subject to juxtaposition with the other fully-detailed objects), in contrast to traditional animation from Disney, they create three-dimensional maps through the “visual information” they receive. Torre argues that the way we perceive images as assemblages and juxtapositions is similar to and “interrelated” with the way we mentally generate images. This is likely responsible for the fact that Never Like the First Time! is rife with these “saccadic fragments,” constantly forcing audience members’ eyes to shift rapidly in order to catch each of the juxtapositions and visual information.

Moreover, it’s crucial to pay attention to Torre’s second sentence above for the context of this thesis: “rather than imaging as the camera does, we by amalgamating saccadic fragments of visual information to create a ‘visual trace’ image, and then generate cognitive images.” This is a claim that specifically rejects the realism of the camera in capturing motion and images as they happen. Torre’s “visual trace” is like the mental snapshots that people take of objects and others that they can take with them cognitively. In this sense, the animation feels psychologically
realistic because of the connection between memory formation (as the narrators relate their memories) and image perception (as the audience perceives these memories) that Torre speaks of.

*Never Like the First Time!* has the distinction of being entirely told in first person narratives, and Jonas Odell decided to let the narratives guide the way that he would animate the story. The first chapter details the experiences of man whose first sexual encounter took place in a bathroom, and it is animated with photography and digital cutouts as though the narrator is making the visuals appear with his voice alone. Each sequence of the chapter has its own color tone; the first sequence is filled with cool blues as the narrator is alone with anxiety in his bathroom. The second sequence—as the narrator walks through an energetic and loud party full of personalities—is colored in reds for visual and psychological contrast. The carpet is pulled out from the background and becomes distinctly detailed in the scene. Odell works with cutout

*Figure 4.* The narrator walks through the party and only recalls liminal details, which are then animated by Odell; the red carpet here is photographed to be distinct from the cool tile in the previous sequence.
photographs of a red carpet in this instance, which gives it weight amidst the drawings (see Figure 4). One would have to imagine that the carpet sticks out in his memory to such an extent because the sexual encounter notably happens on bathroom tile; thus the carpet in this sequence helps to provide a realistic, sensorial contrast for the viewer. As the man in this chapter felt the carpet to be a very different sensation from the tile floor of the bathroom, so too do the film’s spectators, who experience this with him through the screen because of the style of animation Odell uses. This film also breaks the 180 degree rule constant; rather than being bound by the limitations of filmmaking, it accepts a more realistic perspectival movement that is still not visually confusing (the larger movements of the sequence are easily identifiable—the narrator moves from right to left when seeking a condom, back to the right towards the bathroom, and finally back to the left when leaving the bathroom). More innovative still, the camera actually takes the first person perspective at times: when the man rushes back up the stairs with a condom, his eyes become the camera, and when in the bathroom later the same thing happens when the camera focuses on the locked door handle moving up and down.

The level of detail for each character also varies greatly depending on their importance to the memory and each has his or her own set of specific colors. Many characters have no facial or bodily details of any kind and exist only in the background as white silhouettes. As the man walks about the party, the level of detail suggests the degree to which the figures stuck out in his memory. This is crucial because for this sequence, it is apparent that he doesn’t care about nearly anyone else in the crowd, yet at the end of the interview, he relates that the feeling of leaving the bathroom and being congratulated by the masses was a better feeling than the actual sex. This lack of detail suggests that while he doesn’t much care for his relationship with the individuals

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6 The 180 degree rule mandates that the camera must never flip across a 180 degree line and spatially confuse the audience by using another perspective from the other side of the action.
cheering him, what he cares for most is the feeling of social acceptance or the release of the social pressures that accompany virginity. In this way, the style of animation, where certain characters (like his show-off friend who brags about his sexual experience) are fully animated and others are not, sheds light on the sensorial experience and focus of the main character. The photographed red carpet stands out as though almost a different texture that is felt a different way for the audience. The first-person perspective shots, while physically impossible in reality (impossible to see through someone else’s eyes), feel more realistic because as he is rushing back to the bathroom and the camera is shaking, we also feel the rush, hoping that the woman will still be waiting there in the bathroom for him (and in this way, for us). And finally, as a direct result of the fact that many people are detailed and only a few are not, it is possible to feel the sensation that he does afterwards; we don’t care about the individuals who cheer for him as he leaves the bathroom but we do care for the feeling of social acceptance. The audience observes a psychologically realistic representation of the narrator’s experience because of the style of animation. If traditional methods of animation were used, Odell’s first chapter would have been bound by the restrictions of third-person-only animated filmmaking, and bound by the use of only one type of visual: drawn images with CGI.

The animation in the second chapter places its attention on the setting; the bedroom is meticulously animated, showcasing the posters and books and things on the desk. Yet the two characters are essentially translucent with only a white outline to distinguish between them and their background (in many ways this is in opposition to the style of animation from the first chapter) (see Figure 5). The man and the woman see each other for months in a deliberate and calculated process moving towards sex. However, after all of the escalation, the sex they have is
disappointing and they separate the next day. While the animation is practical in this story—as a manner of hiding the nudity of the characters—it also speaks to the fact that this sort of situation could happen to anyone. Disillusionment through first sexual encounters is not an uncommon phenomenon, and many members of the film’s audience have undergone similar experiences. In this sense, the animation style makes it possible for audience members to step into the characters’ shoes and psychologically situate themselves within the screen.

Moreover, the characters are the only elements of the *mise-en-scène* that are static and unchanging, whereas the settings are rotated through, and seasons change. The attention to detail for everything else on screen aside from the actual people suggests that there was less of an emotional attachment between the two than they may have originally thought. This is because the story is from the narrator’s perspective, and thus the characters (herself included) are animated in a way that her memory recalls them. This detail also allows for the audience

Figure 5. The second narrator describes the steps leading to sex for her first time, and though they are merely silhouettes, the background is very detailed.
members to feel that disconnect themselves and feel no attachment to the amorphous silhouettes on the couch. Furthermore, the detailed environments and unornamented silhouettes seems to suggest that the settings have more agency, more control over the characters’ lives, than

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 6. The narrator walks through the winter landscape; there are many of these walking shots that only differ in the kind of weather the character is experiencing.*

characters themselves. This is especially true in the numerous seasonal shots of the narrator moving through different weather situations (see Figure 6). In this sense, while animating the characters in this way does not create a realistic look, it affords the opportunity to understand something psychologically real and meaningful about what actually happened between the real people who are pictured in the story: that the act of sex seemed to be far more important than the person each is having it with. The audience is able to feel the disillusionment in the same fashion that the actual people themselves did, without the opportunity to scrutinize or to be captured by the physical appearance of the characters.
The third chapter animates characters in multiple ways, though similarly to the first chapter, some images are cutout digital paper dolls, some are photographs, and others are drawings. This chapter also makes use of similar tactics, filling in bodies entirely sometimes to highlight other elements of the scene (at one point a man doesn’t give out his name to the woman and she chooses one randomly from an allotment of names—the man is animated by hundreds of letters and names that make up his entire body). A woman describes her first sexual experience as a terrible one; she is out drinking with friends when they end up in a shady apartment with two men who take advantage of them. She blacks out and wakes up violated. She gathers her friends and leaves as quickly as possible. The animation for this chapter is dissonant; images flash on the screen and cut abruptly to other images that are distorted, which allows the audience to physically embody the same drunkenness that she experiences. As she wakes up in the morning, the camera’s perspective becomes first-person and the room appears to spin to simulate a hangover. Odell also makes use of screen burning here to give the appearance of light

Figure 7. “Manne” is always animated with particular focus on his skull tattoos and peculiar grin.
sensitivity. Imagine a third-person perspective scene instead of this kind of animation; the shots would reveal little about the characters’ emotional and mental states. Animated as it was, however, the audience is given the opportunity to experience the events in a way similar to how the narrator remembers it. In one shot, the skull tattoos of the man referred to as “Manne” protrude out from his neck, and his dark beard obscures his facial features; all that remains of his face is his devilish grin (see Figure 7). Every time this man is featured, only his torso or upper torso is shown emanating from a dark background, from his grin to this chest with his skull tattoos. Just as the main character’s sight was mostly obscured through the darkness, so too is ours in the audience, and as a result, we perceive the skull-tattooed man in the same, ominous manner.

The final chapter similarly selects what to animate based on the level of attention the characters are paying certain elements of the world. The sequences alternate between the uses of

![Image]

*Figure 8. This time in sepia colors, which convey an antiquated feeling, Odell animates figures that bounce across the screen like marionettes.*
paper doll cutouts and drawings to tell the story of a man who meets a woman in the 1920s when society was strict about sexual relations. The man’s narration focuses on certain elements of the scene and the animation follows suit; everything that the man is not describing is colored in a dark blue to force more important elements out from the background. The man describes that there was no education about sex at the time, and that he used to believe that even writing letters back and forth could cause pregnancy. During this description of the 1920s situation (see Figure 8), the color palette becomes somewhere between grayscale and sepia, and paper doll cutouts stiffly articulate to the audience what the time was like. Their motions during this sequence seem robotic and almost lifeless, echoing the color tone. The most fascinating aspect of this story is what happens after the encounter. The narrator describes the next morning by stating that “the air was like champagne” (see Figure 9). As this is described the sky takes on a golden hue, and as he describes the trees, they too become vibrant and green. He describes the same phenomenon
happening in his mind’s eye, claiming that the brown buildings “suddenly shone like palaces”

Birds, plants, street signs, people, streetcars, and floating leaves all take on vibrant colors and the world as it is animated begins to move with a whole new life in contrast to the grayscale, robotic movements showcased in the previous sequence.

This final sequence of the fourth chapter creates a sensory overload for the audience, depicting various elements of the scene from marching bands and cartwheeling people, to trains that circle around in a paradoxical (closed loop) manner. While serving as an uplifting end to the film, and as a stark contrast to the previous chapter, this final part also affords the audience members the opportunity to glimpse the way that the characters perceived the world. Real life never looks quite like the kaleidoscopic ballet of moving objects and people that is effusively presented to the audience in this last sequence (see Figures 10 and 11). Yet, as the images move farther away from what real life looks like, the result is that what is presented becomes more
psychologically telling; the new relationship between the two characters gives them and the

Figure 11. Layers upon layers of color and paper dolls are added continuously, as Odell barrages the audience with images.

world they perceive new life, and the audience is able to glimpse the kind of effulgent perspective that these characters now have as a result of their blissful inflation.

Each of these stories is told with brilliant minimalist animation that highlights the fact that he relinquishes his control over the image. Odell uses paper doll cutouts and dominating color schemes that work to force a certain kind of spectatorial experience. In chapter one, the only objects that are given detail are those that matter, providing the audience the opportunity to live within the same memory that the narrator describes. Memory cannot provide the narrator the perfect set of details of every single person who was at the party, and it is therefore psychologically unrealistic to animate every background character in such a way. The opposite effect in chapter two of unornamented, detail-less bodies amidst fully detailed and elaborate settings, helps the audience to understand something powerful about the memory; the audience feels the same sexual disillusionment that the characters do. The dissonant imagery of chapter
three forces the audience to focus on only one image at a time against a white background. This technique is basic, yet each image carries with it the way that the narrator perceived it, and as such becomes highly complex even for its simple design. The narrator was under the influence of alcohol during this memory, and this is reflected in the way the images are presented—constantly shapeless and spinning. In the final chapter, only part of each scene is fully detailed and animated before the couple has sex, yet after, everything that exists in the world becomes animated and detailed. Even though the technique of paper dolls is fairly simple, it becomes as extravagant as a synchronized swimming exercise with parts and pieces rotating around one another, each painstakingly animated. Odell’s *Never Like the First Time!* continually affords the audience the ability to glimpse these representations of memory at their most psychologically realistic state, understanding the relationship between narrator and memory. Though the drawing techniques are often minimalist or antiquated, the form becomes reflective of the psychological story being told—and of how memory captures saccadic fragments—and more meaning is created.

**IT’S SUCH A BEAUTIFUL DAY: STICK FIGURES UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT**

Moving away from documentary, Don Hertzfeldt’s fictional works are equally revolutionary in rejecting the larger historical narrative of animation and technology. Hertzfeldt is both commercially unknown and critically acclaimed as an animator of existential ideas that diverge unmistakably from the child-friendly notions of life and humanity offered by much of the Disney canon (and for that matter of the Pixar and DreamWorks ones as well). He painstakingly combined his most recent series of films, a trilogy consisting of *Everything Will Be Okay*, *I Am So Proud of You*, and *It’s Such a Beautiful Day*, into one feature-length film by the
name of the latter, *It’s Such a Beautiful Day* (2012). Everything, from daily life encounters to larger ordeals, becomes an existential crisis through the lens of Hertzfeldt’s artistry. One example is how the main character (Bill) forgets the name of a person at the bus stop, and the narration describes that they would both forget about it the next day and never see each other again. Similarly, Bill drops his keys on the counter and thinks about every time he had ever done that same action before. In this instance, he thinks about how unusual it is that he repeats this action, though he soon after contemplates: “Realistically, this was his life, and the unusual part was his time spent doing other things.” The entire film is told in hundreds of vignettes about Bill’s life and how he contemplates events and actions, as he is discovered to have a mental illness that deteriorates his memory and causes frequent confusion. In truth, Bill’s mind is essentially dying throughout the entire film, until his short yet insightful observations about life give way to largely incoherent strands of thought. What is unique about *It’s Such a Beautiful Day* is Hertzfeldt’s mastery of illustrating stick figures and spotlights, such that the audience is able to better psychologically understand the limitations of Bill’s mental illness. His mastery is only punctuated by his decision to use stick figures, which afford an illustrator less control over the way that the image represents reality. While the effect of using stick figures is less control over the entire representation, Hertzfeldt is able to repackage this lack of control alongside a message of Bill’s mental illness—as Bill struggles to control his own life, the animation grapples with a lack of control of the visuals.

Even as Hertzfeldt departs from child-friendly animated concepts and storylines, he utilizes the most basic drawing techniques, like stick figures, and combines them with photography and multiple exposures. Steven Pate of *The Chicagoist* once wrote: “are stick figures supposed to make me feel this way?” Pate’s observation, though seemingly trivial,
actually carries some weight; people sympathize with others who are most like them, and it is a
difficult task to sympathize with a stick figure with very little outward emotional expression. The
technique itself is literally one of the oldest in the history of illustration techniques, first
appearing in the form of cave paintings and etchings. Detail was extremely difficult for early
modern humans who used rocks to etch figures into other rocks—and therefore stick figure
drawing was an appropriate technique. In more recent history, the 1920s saw Otto Neurath create
ISOTYPE (International System of Typographic Picture Education), which used Egyptian
hieroglyphics as a guide to create educational images for children. Many of these educational
images contained stick figures as basic representations of people (The History of Symbols:
Isotype). More recently still, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics is credited as the first games to use stick
figure illustrations for its events, and stick figures have served as the basic building blocks for
quick and simplistic illustrations ever since. Today, bathroom signs, “Wet Floor” signs, road
signs, and others use stick figures to communicate messages in the simplest and most accessible

Figure 12. Blackton’s Humorous Phases of Funny Faces in 1906 uses a blackboard so that the images could be quickly altered.
ways possible. In the context of animation, stick figures are almost never used—especially not by contemporary animators for commercial films. Even J. Stuart Blackton’s 1906 *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* (see Figure 12), which is widely considered to be the first work of cinematic animation (as a film rather than a device like a kineograph), uses far greater detail than stick figures can provide. Blackton animated people and devoted much effort to creating subtle changes in their facial expressions on a blackboard.

Hertzfeldt’s film doesn’t have the variety of computer generated images in modern Disney or Pixar features, instead making the most of the simplest drawing techniques to create wonderfully artistic and meaningful configurations. What makes *It’s Such a Beautiful Day* powerful is precisely its ability to convey depth and meaning about Bill’s mental illness while using stick figures and black-and-white photography. By comparison with *Humorous Phases* in the image above, which uses only one or two levels of detail more than stick figures, Hertzfeldt’s style of illustration relinquishes the sophisticated control of the image. Yet, this level of sophisticated detail and control—the intrusion of the technique in the form—is often responsible for the richness of the message being communicated. While causing physical deterioration to his memories, Bill’s mental illness restricts the amount of agency and control he has in his daily life; just as the images themselves demonstrate a lack of control over movement⁷, Bill’s mental illness strips him of his control over his own life. While later in the film, Hertzfeldt packs a tremendous amount of meaning in every shot, one moment from the beginning of the film is telling of Bill’s psychological condition through its visuals.

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⁷ Hertzfeldt’s film technically runs at 24 frames per second, which is not unusual for either American or English cinema, but there is still a herky-jerky flow from one illustration to the next due to the way that Hertzfeld illustrated.
This sequence (see Figure 13) begins with Bill feeling very tired, “even though he’d just been sleeping.” The narration then describes the following in succession: Bill has a calendar with a manatee on it that he feels is “always” staring at him; he then sits down to eat crackers to try to wake up but feels strange eating in front of the television when it is off; he then watches a boxing match on the television that continually replays a moment where one of the fighters is cut on his forehead gruesomely. The narration states that “before he knew it” Bill eats the entire box of crackers. While it seems like these events are unrelated in some ways, Hertzfeldt places them together on the screen all at the same time for a deliberate reason. This sequence provides a number of hints as to the way that Bill’s mind is deteriorating. It is evident that Bill is having a difficult time remembering his daily events from minute to minute. The manatee that “always” seems to stare at Bill is only the image for one month, meaning that he has not remembered to change the calendar to the next month for some unspecified—yet lengthy—period of time. It also
seems that as the television continually replays the gruesome injury in the exact same way every time, Bill cannot remember having watched it before, and as a result, consumes the entire box of crackers (as he only has the television on as a means of distracting himself from eating the crackers). The only reason he is able to escape this paradoxical loop is that he begins to feel terrible because of all of the crackers he eats; unable to remember when he started eating the crackers or that the boxing injury is being repeatedly shown, he would have been stuck for eternity had the box of crackers been endless (or at least until the television ceased to play the injury clip). The amount of control that Bill has over his own life is minimal, and the narration itself, with phrases like “before he knew it,” projects this uncontrollability. Every action he takes is simply a decision based on how he feels at that exact moment, rather than being based on memories of events prior; his mental illness creates a failure to perceive linear narrative. All of this is communicated with a stylistic overlay that includes simple animations like stick figures, black-and-white coloring, and spotlights.

At its core is how stick figures and spotlight images represent Bill’s psychological perception of reality. Bill’s perception of reality is related to the audience precisely as he experiences it: jumbled, chaotic, and in isolated moments that are distant from one another. Bill’s mental illness is one that constantly causes deterioration of his memories to the extent where his daily interactions become characterized by this feature; every single moment is an opportunity for tremendous personal reflection because he cannot remember reflecting about it ever before (see Figure 14). Dropping his car keys and examining a shopping bag floating in the wind are two of these moments where minor events lead to massive observations about the world; it is as though he is observes everything in his life for the very first time, every time that it happens. The style of animation actually tells the same story, creating a harmony between the images and
narration. The spotlight vignettes, as I call them, are surrounded by a pitch black background

Figure 14. Bill does mundane actions and thinks that he spends most of his life practicing mundanity.

Figure 15. Bill grapples with nonlinear times; the film becomes even more difficult to understand linearly, as the film begins to flip through events in his life nonlinearly.
so that it is as though nothing else exists in Bill’s world except for those moments depicted within the spotlights. In this way, the audience perceives the events happening exactly as Bill does, as he is only able to keep one idea in his head at a time and the audience only ever sees the singular events depicted within the spotlights. More still is the fact that not every image is a hand-drawn illustration. Some are photographs, and this causes even more of a chaotic feeling for an audience, which is likely already experiencing temporal confusion given the volatile narration and complex timeline.

In his essay, “Whole-Screen Metamorphosis and the Imagined Camera (Notes on Perspectival Movement in Animation),” Ryan Pierson claims that when a film uses both live-action and animation, what he calls the “whole-screen metamorphosis,” is “a feeling of one’s world becoming unfixed” (18). Pierson’s notion is innovative, yet there are multiple levels of this

Figure 16. After various treatments, Bill is asked to comprehend numbers and figures; this is presumably a first-person perspective of what Bill’s mind is able to grasp.
“unfixed”-ness. On the surface, Pierson makes a brilliant move by stating that the audience feels as though they are observing something existing between the boundary lines of animation and live-action, and that this creates an “unfixed” sensation for the audience. Yet this unfixed-ness may be, and in the case of Hertzfeldt’s work is, an intentional move on the part of the filmmaker to bridge the sensorial gap between the audience and the characters, and allow the audience to begin to understand Bill’s mental illness.

As Bill thinks about each of his interactions as though it was the first time he is experiencing them, yet it is the first time that the audience is experiencing them with Bill. The audience is presented with on-screen information and events in the same way that Bill is—experiencing them for the first time and thinking thoughtfully about them. The audience then is able to have the same sensations (or as close to the same as is possible) that Bill has because the spotlight vignettes are seemingly unrelated to each other and dissonant. Therefore, as the character begins to feel unfixed, as Pierson suggests, so too does the audience, and in this process the film becomes more psychologically realistic because we perceive the events of the film in the same way that Bill does: with the feeling of dissonance and temporal bemusement. This becomes complicated when considering that the audience can never truly perceive the events of Bill’s life in the exact same way that he does, simply because the audience members do not have the same mental illness that prevents them from recalling the earlier events of the film. We are also able to comprehend different textures in the filmmaking, which include Bill’s stick figurine. As the film progresses, Hertzfeldt includes photography and different, more detailed
types of illustrations when depicting the surrounding environment (see Figure 17). This is similar to Odell’s environment in *Never Like the First Time!*, as the environment appears to have more agency and control over Bill’s life than he does.

This said, the type of storytelling presented brings the audience as close as possible to understanding Bill’s perspective of the world through his mental illness, not allowing the audience to see events linearly (the film constantly flips backward and forward in time), or to see contexts for these images within the spotlights (rarely does the audience have the opportunity to observe more than Bill does because of the confinement of the spotlights). This sensorial bridging happens directly as a result of Hertzfeldt’s style of animation with the spotlight vignettes and stick figures.

**CONCLUSION: ANIMATED ABOUT PSYCHOLOGICAL REALISM**
Another of the many technological advances in animation is motion capture (also called mo-cap), which allows for animators to better cast the movements of three-dimensional characters and objects. The process is essentially the recording of an actor (often wearing sensors on various parts of the body) in real footage and the mapping of that information onto animated models. With motion capture, the software has become fairly cheap, the process has become less complex and strenuous, the amount of data received is tremendous, and—maybe most importantly—there is very little latency (or lag)\(^8\). In contrast to techniques like mo-cap, a marionette and its movement is almost entirely based on latency (or lag). This process has helped create fantastic animations, such as Gollum’s character from Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-3), who stalks around the set with an uncanny creepiness. The benefits of motion capture, like the benefits of cel animation against its predecessors and of CGI against cel animation, are undeniable; we are able to both *make things* and *make things move* in with more control and less latency than ever before. However, until fairly recently, the question of *why* filmmakers use the most advanced techniques was rarely, if ever, asked. This was largely because it seems misguided to ask *why* when the benefits can be this clear and propitious. Instead, filmmakers and animators too often asked *how much* (control) or *what else* for dozens of years.

Ari Folman, Jonas Odell, and Don Hertzfeldt are doing important work for filmmaking by asking the question of *why*—or rather what the purpose is within our films of using the most visually realistic methods and techniques. There are numerous filmmakers (Michael Bay comes to mind) who could care less about the *why*, and as a result, their films bear less meaning or

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\(^8\) With early motion capture, there was latency, or a delay between movement and the ability of sensors to pick up that movement, and another delay in the time it would take for movement to be reproduced on a computer screen. Now, the process is much quicker and animators can watch the 3D model movement on the screen in real time.
cultural weight than those of directors like Miyazaki. I am suggesting that one of the most important questions animators of the computer-generated age can ask is: what techniques can I use that are meaningful or would help create meaning within the context of the content or story I am working to tell? Filmmakers and game developers alike claim that immersion is one of the most important qualities of content in the digital age. If immersion is a desirable trait for films and video games, it may seem counter-productive to make use of techniques like montage, marionettes, and stick figures, which each move further away from what real people look like and how real people move. They force a certain kind of spectator that is completely aware of the materiality of the image—completely aware that the images on the screen are unlike his or herself. Yet, thinking more cognitively, rather than visually, these techniques are psychologically immersive because of the realistic messages they communicate. Filmmakers, like the three discussed most heavily in this thesis, have found ways of making their films far more immersive by relinquishing their total control and by actually reversing the trend of reaching greater levels of immersion through more advanced technologies and methods.
Works Cited:


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