'Rare Bird':

Exploring the issues involved in the making of a participatory animated documentary

Anita Bruvere

Sheffield Hallam University

ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the outcomes of a practice-based research project conducted by the author in the second year of her undergraduate study. The project involved producing a short animated documentary about the experiences of an international student and reflecting on the theoretical and ethical issues arising in the process. The article begins with a theoretical discussion of selected aspects of animated documentary, including the functions fulfilled by animation, and the notions of realism and indexicality. This is followed by a critical reflection on the ethical issues involved in the production, and the implications for the author's own creative practice.

"Realism doesn't consist in reproducing reality, but in showing how things *really* are"

(Brecht quoted in Monaco, 2009:466)

Brecht wasn't talking specifically about documentary filmmaking, but this quote aptly captures what I wanted to achieve in my animated documentary project, along with the tensions between 'truth' and 'realism', 'creative' and 'factual', and related ethical issues. Brecht's statement fits in with Grierson's definition of documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality" (quoted in Ward, 2005:91) and can be applied to animated documentary. This essay begins with a theoretical discussion of selected aspects of animated documentary, including the functions fulfilled by animation, and the notions of realism and indexicality. This is followed by a brief analysis of several examples of animated documentary, and finally by a critical reflection on the ethical issues involved in the production of my own film.

Theoretical issues.

Whilst animation and documentary may at first appear incompatible, there is a long tradition of hybridisation of these modes. The animated documentary genre has been approached quite differently by various authors, ranging from a broad 'umbrella' term that includes "any animated film that deals with non-fiction material" (Sofian 2005:7), to more complex definitions based on a number of specific criteria that distinguish animated documentary from other kinds of non-fictional animation. Annabelle Honess Roe (2011:217) proposed that a film can be classified as animated documentary if it satisfies the following criteria: "(i) it has been recorded or created frame-by-frame; (ii) is about *the* world rather than *a* world wholly imagined by its creator; and (iii) has been presented as a documentary by its producers and/or received as a documentary by audiences, festivals, or critics." The second criterion in particular forces us to think about the relation between animated documentary and realism, whether or not animation should be realistic in order to become documentary, and what is understood by the term 'realistic'.

At this point, it seems useful to revisit the three functions of animation within a documentary genre, as outlined by Honess Roe (2011). The first function is 'mimetic substitution', where animation directly stands in for live-action, aiming to imitate reality as closely as possible. The second function, 'non-mimetic substitution', means that animation is still used as a substitute for live action, but the goal is a creative interpretation of reality,

rather than accurate reproduction. Finally, the 'evocative' function of animation is to show an *experience* of reality, and animated documentaries of this kind tend to deal with feelings and thoughts, which cannot be easily delivered through live-action.

As noted by Wells among others, 'realism' is a relative term, and a "film which seems to most accurately represent 'reality' is the kind of film which attempts to rid itself of obvious cinematic conventions in the prioritisation of recording the people, objects, environments and events which characterise the common understanding of lived experience" (1998:24). Yet the notion of 'recording' is hardly applicable to animation due to its wholly artificial and constructed nature. To address this apparent contradiction, Ward (2008) argued that we should distinguish between the notions of 'realistic' and 'true' when discussing how reality is being constructed through animation.

When analysing animation in terms of realistic depiction, the codes and conventions of hyper-realism can be applied to determine the film's mimetic qualities. This would involve, for example, the extent to which the design, context and action resemble the live action representations of reality; whether the conventional physical laws of the real world are applied to characters and objects within the film, including the physical aspects of the body; and whether the film's diegetic sound corresponds to the context from which it emanates (adapted from Wells, 1998). Animated documentaries which rely on mimetic substitution, usually attempt to meet all of the above criteria. In the absence of archival footage animation is used to recreate events that happened in the past, in a process similar to a reconstruction documentary, e.g. in the BBC series '*Walking with Dinosaurs*' (1999), CGI technology allowed to achieve a high level of realism in showing dinosaurs, and the digital footage was constructed to resemble a live-action recording.
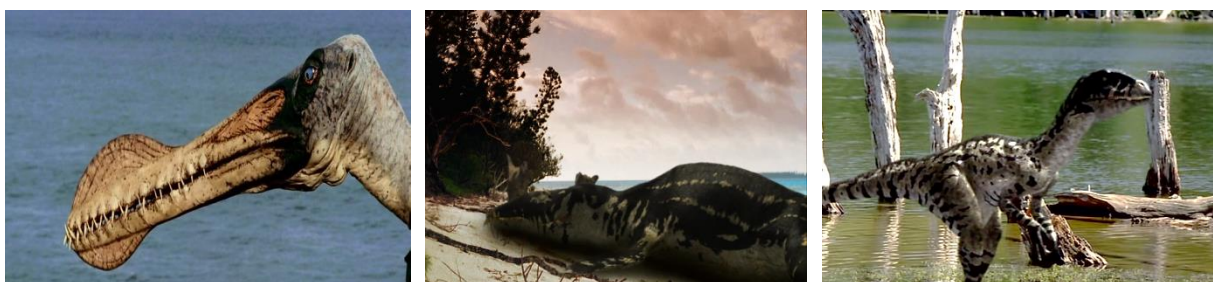
Images from BBC 'Walking with Dinosaurs' (1999)

However, not all animated documentaries attempt to mimic reality. In fact, one of the main strengths of animation lies in its ability to show subjective reality that is beyond the reach of live action, so rather than focusing on the photorealistic qualities, the second approach to analysis examines the extent to which the representation is 'true' and how it can illuminate real social issues in the world of actuality.

In Josh Ruskin's *'I Met the Walrus'* (2007) animation serves for non-mimetic substitution; the film animates an interview with John Lennon that took place in 1969 and was conducted by 14-year-old Beatles fan Jerry Levitan. There is no live-action record of the interview, and the film does not pretend to recreate one. The soundtrack is the main and largely self-sufficient vehicle to carry the film, whilst animation is used to enhance the meaning, by offering a visualisation (and a loose interpretation) of John Lennon's words.

Images from 'I Met the Walrus' by Josh Ruskin (2007)

The third example, *'Silence'* (Yadin and Bringas, 1998), is a story of Tana Ross, a Holocaust survivor, and it invites the viewer to share the protagonist's perspective and experience of the loss and dislocation. Here animation is used in its 'evocative' function to portray the invisible and the 'interior', with penetration (Wells, 1998) as the main narrative strategy. The story is narrated by Tana herself, however the film originates not from the edited interview as one would imagine, but from '*Through the Silence*' – a concerto for cello and survivor – co-written by Tana Ross and Noa Ain for on-stage performance. This poem-like text was then revisited by the filmmakers, and formed the basis of the script (Yadin, 2005).

Images from 'Silence' by Orly Yadin and Sylvie Bringas (1998)

The main criterion that enables *'Silence'* to be classified as a documentary, and distinguishes it from other in some way similar poetic works based on experience (such as *'To This Day'*, by Shane Koyczan) is the director's clear intention to make a documentary. Although the voice-over was scripted, this was done in a close collaboration with Tana (Yadin, 2005), which allows defining the documentary as 'interactive', i.e. suggesting an interaction between the filmmaker and his or her subject (Ward, 2006). The film's aesthetic is far from realism, nevertheless it remains 'true' in its' intent to reflect the authentic real-life experience.

All of the examples discussed above are certainly "about *the* world rather than *a* world wholly imagined by its creator" (Honess Roe, 2011:2017). In the case of non-mimetic substitution and evocation, when the film aims to show inner reality, the use of animation can offer much more room for manoeuvre than live-action, and seem to support a suggestion that "the key distinction is never one of form or style, but rather of purpose and context" (Ward, 2005:7). Hence animation may appear more suitable for showing particular aspects of reality, but that is not to say that the medium doesn't matter, as "the difference between animation and live-action is *not* a mere matter of conventions" (Rozenkrantz, 2011: np).

Rozenkrantz argues that "the photographic technology on which the documentary film rests produces a category of evidence that is existentially different" (2011: np). This difference lies in the relationship between the on-screen image and its referent. Unlike animation, the photographic image of live-action film has an indexical link to its referent. In other words, it confirms its referent's existence, as there would be no photograph of an object without that object. Of course, with the development of increasingly sophisticated digital technologies, the credibility of photographic image has become questionable, but this aside, the indexical relationship still exists in principle. With animation, on the other hand, the relation between the image and its referent is iconic, i.e. it resembles the referent, but can actually exist without it.

Rozenkrantz proposes two ways in which animated documentaries attempt to authenticate their claims. Films such as Folman's *'Waltz with Bashir'* (2008) or McCay's *'The Sinking of the Lusitania'* (1918) rely on what he calls 'photographic verifiers', or any photographic material incorporated into in all other respects animated film to help validating its' assertions, "as if the indexical trace makes itself wanted in one way or another" (2011: np). Honess Roe

(2012) makes a similar point about rotoscoping, as there is an indexical link between the raw photographic material and the rotoscoped image. The second strategy is to use authentic sound (such as real-life interview) to compensate for the non-indexical nature of the image, however this would only verify the fact that the words have been spoken, not the accuracy of the given information.

Thinking further about indexicality in animated documentaries, it is useful to consider participatory documentary approach, and the extent to which it can serve as another method to verify the film's claims. Paul Ward (2005) points out a tendency towards participatory working methods across many animated documentaries. Tim Webb's *'A is for Autism'* (1992) is a well-known example of collaboration between the director and the participants, as the film rests upon animated drawings and the authentic voices talking about the participants' own experiences of autism.
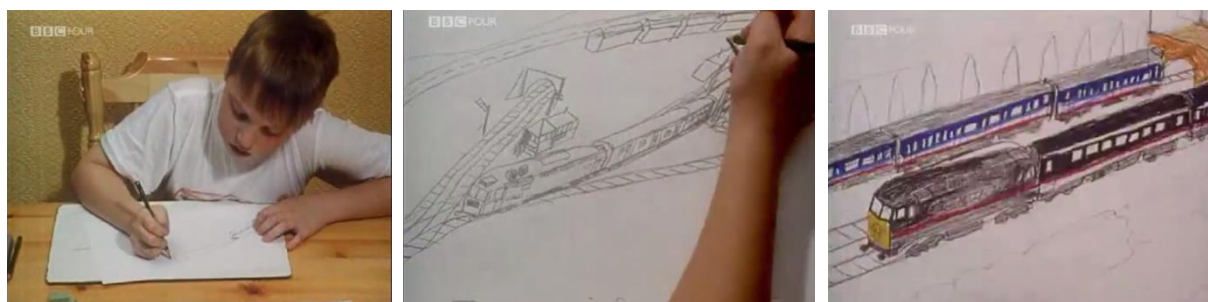
*Images from 'A is for Autism' by Tim Webb (1992)*

What makes this film a particularly interesting example, is a number of direct and indirect indexical relations (Lefebvre in Ehrlich, 2011) between drawings, their creators, and what the drawings represent, formed as a result of such collaboration. Here, animated drawings (along with the live-action footage) prove an existence of their creators, who are simultaneously the film's subjects. At the same time, the feelings and experiences that these drawings represent (i.e. what it feesl like to be autistic) are not tangible but unique and subjective, the images do not have a material referent. And here lies the main strength of animation to "document the undocumentable" (Ward, 2005:93). Both '*Silence'* and '*A is for Autism*' not only tell us about the first-hand experience, but attempt to convey what it feels like to be autistic or a holocaust survivor, more powerfully than the live-action documentary could. The examples discussed above seem to support suggestions that "animation enriches documentary and our experience of viewing it" (Honess Roe, 2011:217) and that animated documentaries, "by dint of their total creation […] can offer us a more critically distanced and reflexive form of documentary" (Ward, 2008:25).

Practice:

I will now explore some of the representational and ethical issues through an example from my own creative practice. For my participatory animated documentary '*Rare Bird*' I interviewed two international students, and used the fragments of the interview as the core narrative. The voice-over was accompanied by creatively animated visuals, partly-rotoscoped sequences and inserted live-action shots. I aimed to test in practice two ideas suggested in the literature: firstly, that animation that leans more towards abstraction on the mimesis/abstraction continuum (Furniss in Ward, 2008) can nevertheless make true claims about reality; and secondly, that the technique of rotoscoping can help to provide an indexical link between the image and the real world's referent, with live-action footage acting as a 'photographic verifier' (Rozenkrantz, 2011).

I knew from the outset that my animated documentary would be interview based, and would aim to visualise an authentic experience and give my audience an opportunity to imagine how it feels to be different.
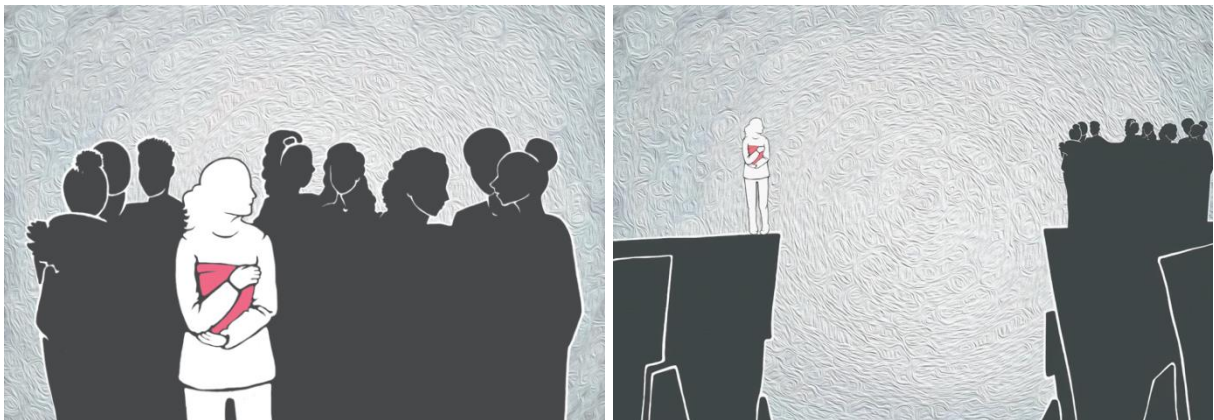
'Rare Bird'. 'Objective' and 'Subjective' reality: surrounded by people yet isolated and outside the situation.

During the initial presentation I pitched my project as participatory as I felt that in the case of animated documentaries the collaborative approach is particularly crucial. As Rozenkrantz (2011: np) points out "drawings colour sound", thus animated documentary to a greater or lesser extent is always an interpretation of what has been said. By representing and creatively interpreting someone else's experience, the animator effectively 'speaks' on their behalf, albeit in a visual language, and is therefore responsible for remaining true to the participants'

perspective. In the case of Samantha Moore's *'An Eyeful of Sound'* (2010), the only possible way to make sure that animation accurately represented synesthetic experience was to constantly re-check it with interviewees (Moore, 2011). I used a similar approach asking for continuous feedback from the participants, as in terms of visual style my creative input was fairly strong.

'Rare Bird': Character's metamorphosis

The animatic is constructed around the literary metaphor 'rare bird', and this concept was chosen before conducting the actual interviews. In the opening sequence I experimented with metamorphosis, following Wells' point (1998) that it is a very economic strategy for narrative continuity, establishing an immediate connection between seemingly unrelated images. In the case of *'Rare Bird'*, which is only 3 minutes long, it was crucial to make clear for the audience a connection between the character and birds from the very outset, therefore the visual metaphor of a bird is used throughout the film.
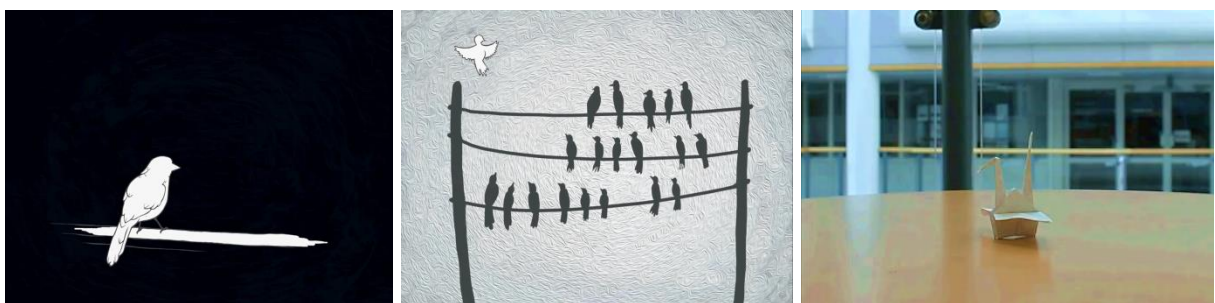
'Rare Bird': Birds appear in different forms throughout the film.

As discussed earlier, the notion of indexicality in animated documentaries is problematized. Initially the authentic soundtrack was meant to be the only indexical link to reality. The decision to use rotoscoping technique within live-action footage came later in the process. Rotoscoping helped to mask the character's identity, whilst leaving her within a recognisable University environment. The live-action footage was included almost by accident: it was filmed for my own records as I thought of rotoscoping it later, but due to the

time limits and with the tutor's approval, the live footage was left in the final version. As a result, my film became 'doubly indexed' (Honess Roe, 2012:36) indicating the presence of both the filmmaker and the interviewee within a recognisable and authentic environment.

'Rare Bird': before rotoscoping, and after (blur has been applied here to ensure anonymity)

I conducted two interviews with my overseas friends as it seemed to be a good opportunity to gain the first-hand experience, but due to the project parameters, only one of them was used in the final soundtrack. In my film I attempted to bring out some of the problems faced by international students that usually remain hidden or glossed over. My existing personal relationship with the interviewees was important, as it determined the conversational nature of the interview and allowed them to feel safe and relaxed. On the other hand, their trust has made me more sensitive to the ethical issues and dilemmas involved in the documentary film-making.

During the whole process of production I aimed to be as fair as possible to my interviewees and their experience. To be able to show the finished piece at the final pitch presentation, I needed my interviewee to sign a Consent Form. Documentary Filmmakers Handbook (Eckhardt, 2012:160) advices to get it done "as you shoot", which assumes asking your storytellers to release all of their rights to any form of ownership of documentary material to you, before you even know what exactly you are going to do with all this information. This strategy is in some way logical as the filmmakers need creative freedom when editing the material they got. Nonetheless it seems to be fully focused on protecting the filmmaker rather than the participants, creating a significant imbalance of power, especially bearing in mind that filmmakers, unlike their subjects, are able to access a lot of legal advice.

Documentary filmmaker Emily James (2012) speaks of a similar challenge in relation to her debut feature film, and her solution to this moral dilemma is very appealing to me. Instead of asking the participants to sign Release Forms at the beginning of production, she gave them an opportunity to watch a rough cut of the film before making this decision, in order to be sure that her representation of their actions isn't misleading. For Emily James this was a big risk, but it made the relationship with the participants less unequal and more ethical. In my situation, I was almost certain that there will be no problems with my interviewees consent, but I felt it was important to position my friend as a collaborator, by giving her every opportunity to change the details if she found them misrepresentative.

Bernard (2011:85) points out that "there is a difference between being *fair* and being *balanced*". During the production I found it challenging to negotiate between these two objectives. In the initial edit, I attempted to present a very balanced story, by alternating the emotional interview extracts with some neutral or general points. However, this did not seem to work. Given the short duration of the film (three minutes) there was no room to include everything, and still produce a coherent story. By trying to balance the story with too many diverse elements, the first edit seemed inconsistent and watered down what I felt to be the key experience, and weakened the potential for viewer empathy. Removing the neutral points and reordering the extracts allowed me to achieve a stronger emotional build up. Working through this dilemma has raised an important question for me as a filmmaker: should I make a stand for objectivity and balance (and fail to evoke the viewer's empathy) or, edit for a better story, which is more depressing than anticipated, but also more emotionally powerful, and in some way perhaps more true to the issue at hand? I think there is no right or wrong answer to this question, and the approach can vary depending on circumstances. On this occasion, I think the stronger edit was justified, as I was aiming to bring out an issue that is often neglected, and make a strong impact.

Initially *'Rare Bird'* was created as a part of the assignment for the Visual Storytelling module. However, certain editorial and aesthetic choices, which were beneficial for assessment in the module context, did cause some problems later when the circumstances changed. The short was commissioned for further development, and shown to a number of teaching staff across the Department as part of the short-listing process. Due to the emotional edit and the focus on negative experience, some staff members expressed concerns about giving this film unrestricted public access without further consultation.

This made me think about the importance of the context in which animated documentary is produced and viewed, and the additional challenge for the filmmaker, this time negotiating between the desire to convey an authentic emotional experience, and the need to be careful about the public image of the organisation involved. Shown out of context, a personal story of one individual student, told from a subjective point of view, and creatively treated through editing and animation, can be interpreted in many different ways, and once it is 'out there', the filmmaker is no longer in control of viewers' reactions and interpretations. Nevertheless, despite these reservations, all consulted staff members agreed that the film communicates an important message in a powerful way, and should be developed into an internal training resource to raise awareness among staff and students.

Conclusion:

As my experience has shown finding the right balance between mimesis and abstraction in representation of internal and external reality can help creating a powerful and touching story of life experience that hasn't been questioned by the audience. My practice-based research project has demonstrated the creative potential of animation when applied in documentary making, especially for showing the 'inner' reality. Due to their artificial nature animated documentaries lack the indexical trace possessed by live-action documentaries, but this can be compensated by a variety of strategies, such as authentic soundtrack or rotoscoping technique. Participatory approach can be productively employed to help the film verify its claims, but it does bring out additional ethical challenges, such as treading a thin line between collaboration and exploitation, choosing between an emotionally powerful and objectively balanced story, or risking the possibility of misinterpretation with a change in viewing context.

<h1 style="text-align:center"><u>REFERENCES</u></h1>

BERNARD, Sheila Curran (2011). *Documentary storytelling: creative nonfiction on screen*. 3rd ed., Amsterdam, London, Focal.

ECKHARDT, Ned (2012). *Documentary Filmmakers Handbook*. Jefferson, North Carolina, London, McFarland & Company.

EHRLICH, Nea (2011). Animated Documentaries as Masking. [online]. *Animation Studies Online Journal*, 6. Article from Animation Studies Online Journal last accessed 30 December 2013 at: http://journal.animationstudies.org/nea-ehrlich-animated-documentaries-as-masking/

HONESSE ROE, Annabelle (2011). Absence, Excess and Epistemological Expansion: Towards a Framework for the Study of Animated Documentary. [online]. *Animation: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 6 (3), 215-230. Article from SAGE Journals last accessed 26 December 2013 at: http://anm.sagepub.com/content/6/3/215.full.pdf+html

HONESSE ROE, Annabelle (2012). Uncanny Indexes: Rotoshopped Interviews as Documentary. [online]. *Animation: an Interdisciplinary Journal*, 7 (1), 25-37. Article from SAGE Journals last accessed 29 December 2013 at: http://anm.sagepub.com/content/7/1/25.full.pdf

JAMES, Emily (2012). *Shooting Outlaws without Hurting Anyone*. TEDxEaling. [online]. Talk from TED last accessed 2 January 2014 at: http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/Shooting-Outlaws-without-Hurtin

MONACO, James (2009). *How to Read a Film: Movies, Media and Beyond; Art, Technology, Language, History, Theory*. 4th ed., New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

MOORE, Samantha (2011). Animating unique brain states. [online]. *Animation Studies Online Journal*, 6. Article from Animation Studies Online Journal last accessed 2 January 2014 at: http://journal.animationstudies.org/samantha-moore-animating-unique-brain-states/

ROZENKRANTZ, Jonathan (2011). Colourful Claims: towards a theory of animated documentary. [online]. *Film International*, posted 6 May. Last accessed 29 December 2013 at: http://filmint.nu/?p=1809

SOFIAN, Sheila (2005). The Truth in Pictures. [online]. *FPS Magazine*, 2 (1), 7-11. Last accessed 16 December 2013 at: http://www.fpsmagazine.com/mag/2005/03/fps200503lo.pdf

WARD, Paul (2006). Animated Interactions: Animation Aesthetics and the World of the 'Interactive' Documentary. In: BUCHAN, Suzanne (eds.). *Animated 'Worlds'*. Eastleigh, John Libbey, 113-129.

WARD, Paul (2008). Animated realities: the animated film, documentary, realism. [online]. *Reconstruction: studies in contemporary culture*, 8 (2). Last accessed 16 December 2013 at: http://reconstruction.eserver.org/082/ward.shtml

WARD, Paul (2005). *Documentary: the margins of reality*. New York, Wallflower Press.

WELLS, Paul (1998). *Understanding Animation*. London, Routledge.

YADIN, Orly (2005). But is it Documentary? In: HAGGITH, Toby and NEWMAN, Joanna (eds.). *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television since 1933*. London, Wallflower, 168-172.

FILMS:

A is for Autism. (1992). [DVD]. Directed by Tim Webb. British Film Institute.

An Eyeful of Sound. (2010). [online]. Directed by Samantha Moore. Video from Vimeo last accessed 2 January 2014 at: http://vimeo.com/11649675

I Met the Walrus. (2007). [online]. Directed by Josh Ruskin. Video from Vimeo last accessed 29 December at: http://vimeo.com/11661493

Silence. (1998). [online]. Directed by Orly Yadin and Sylvie Bringas. Video from Internet Archive last accessed 19 December 2013 at: https://archive.org/details/OrlyYadinSylvieBringasSilence

To This Day. (2013). [online]. Collaborative voluntary project based on the spoken word poem by Shane Koyczan. Video from Vimeo last accessed 29 December 2013 at: http://vimeo.com/59956490

Walking with Dinosaurs. (1999). [DVD]. Directed by Tim Haines and Jasper James. BBC Worldwide, 2004.