THROUGH THE EYES OF PETER PAN: INTERNALIZING MENTAL ILLNESS VIA
ANIMATION IN THE DOCUMENTARY *LIFE, ANIMATED*

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Through the Eyes of Peter Pan: Internalizing Mental Illness via Animation in the Documentary *Life, Animated*

_Abstract

This article discusses to what extent the documentary film, through its aesthetic strategies and narrative style, spotlights the topic of mental illness, contributing to society's acceptance of this taboo topic. The 2016 documentary *Life, Animated*, which integrates animations into its presentation, gives insights into the concrete possibilities of negotiating the topic of mental disorders. A discourse-analytical examination embeds the film in a larger context and focuses on the crisis of the documentary film under the sign of hybrid forms combining fact and fiction. The article shows how these hybrid formats both question the documentary film's claim to reality and offer the opportunity to find images conveying inner states, and highlights that an extension of the possibilities of representation, such as the integration of animation in documentaries, allows conditions that are completely unknown to the viewers to be immersively experienced, thereby contributing to their de-stigmatization.

1_Introduction

In 2017, 729 million people (10.7% of the world's population)[1] were affected by mental disorders such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, eating disorders, drug addiction, or alcoholism. Thus, mental illnesses are some of the most widespread disorders and are omnipresent, albeit often pushed aside and concealed. Despite their prevalence, they are still subject to stigma and are often associated with character weakness in combination with great feelings of guilt on the part of those affected by psychiatric disorders. While somatic illnesses are attributed to malfunctions of our biological organism, over which we seem to have little or no influence, the responsibility for our mental health is often seen as being in our hands and conditioned by our willpower. It is thus not surprising that those affected are frequently confronted with statements such as "don't always be so sad," "just drink a little less," or "you don't have to be afraid of that." These possibly well-intentioned pieces of advice reflect the ignorance and insecurity of the patient's relatives, who cannot deal with these conditions as effectively as professional therapy.

The basic condition for therapy, however, is the patient's acceptance of her/his illness. A way of encouraging this first step is to improve society's tolerance of mental illness, and to counteract the mystification, tabooing, and defamation of those affected by it.

The media, with its educational potential, accessibility, and great influence, plays a decisive role in this matter. Documentary film in particular focuses in greater detail on its subjects and their socio-cultural context. In film history, the origins of documentaries on mental illness date far back to the release of films such as *Let There Be Light* (USA 1942), *Titicut Follies* (USA 1967), or *San Clemente* (Italy 1980), which are characterized by taking a distanced and general look at persons with mental illnesses, their behavior, and the conditions of psychiatric institutions. However, in these earlier documentaries, the camera mainly focuses *on* the patients instead of taking their perspective; it generalizes illness instead of presenting individual fates and lets those affected talk about their challenging condition. In a change of perspective, more recent documentaries (*Dialogues with Madwomen* (USA 1993), *La Moindre des Choses* (F 1996), *Tarnation* (USA 2003), *People Say I'm Crazy* (USA 2003), *Kopfleuchten* (Germany 2008), *Schnupfen im Kopf* (Germany 2010), and *Mama is God* (Sweden 2104)) try to make each individual's experience with mental illness intelligible. In this context, the contemporary documentary film offers a practical perspective on and negotiation of mental disorders by using rhetorical and aesthetic strategies that aim to express inner psychological events. Therefore, the documentary film, which has always claimed to inform and enlighten, plays a central role in the educational work on mental illness. As media of (self-)encounter and (self-)cognition, documentary formats not only address mental disorders, but they have also developed aesthetic strategies and forms to make mental states re-experienceable — a quality normally attributed to feature films with their immersive, emotionalizing potential. Hence, the documentary film can create and control public discourse. Its true potential becomes apparent where it sheds the "sobriety discourses"[2] of the genre and gives expression to the perceptions and experiences of those affected with its multimodal and polyphonic possibilities. It thus provides the spectators, the individuals affected, and outsiders with access to an unknown and foreign world by shedding light on different perspectives and furthermore creating empathy and understanding.

In the following, the documentary *Life, Animated* by Roger Ross Williams (USA 2016) will be examined more closely as it blurs the boundary with the feature film by using fictionalization strategies to make the inner processes of Owen Suskind, affected by autism,[3] accessible to the viewer. *Life, Animated* makes use of narration and emotionalization techniques of the feature film by integrating passages from Disney films

and animated sequences into its presentation. Taking it as a reference, I show to what extent the documentary film, through its cinematic aesthetic strategies — especially animation and narrative style — spotlights the topic of mental illness and contributes to a higher acceptance of this taboo subject in society. The paper highlights how hybrid formats question the documentary film's claim to reality and offer the opportunity to find images conveying inner states. It discusses forms of expression and possibilities of factual narration of mental health on the blurred border to fiction. A systematic film analysis gives insight into the concrete methods of negotiating the topic of mental disorder using the example of *Life, Animated* and will be embedded in a discourse-analytical examination which frames the film in a larger context that also focuses on the crisis of the documentary film[4] under the sign of hybrid forms, combining fact and fiction. It will be shown how the nonfictional film approaches the subject matter with rhetorical and aesthetic strategies and thereby explores the possibility of the genre to give voice to inner psychological processes.

2_*Life, Animated*: Oscillating between Animation and Original Footage

Life, Animated tells the story of the now 23-year-old Owen, affected by autism. At the age of three, he lost his voice and only regained the ability to speak by watching animated Disney movies, which enabled him to establish a playful relationship with the outside world. The documentary takes a retrospective look at the challenging discovery of his illness at a young age and culminates in a portrayal of current events, such as Owen leaving his parents' home after graduating high school to move into a supported living group where he begins a more independent life. His parents, his older brother, and Owen himself describe their experiences and concerns regarding the boy's autism in numerous interviews. The film crew accompanies them in their everyday life at home, at Owen's therapy, at his school, at his film club meetings, and during important events such as graduation, moving out, breaking up with his girlfriend, and starting a new job. By paralleling everyday situations as well as the actions and reactions of his peers with the characters and stories of the Disney universe, Owen succeeds in correctly assessing situations on an empathetic level. The filmmakers appropriate this way of perceiving the world through animated films and use it to familiarize the audience with Owen's mental processes through a metaphorical filmic mode. In this sense, animated

black-and-white sequences, Disney film clips, and a short story written by Owen himself are visually processed by the filmmakers into animations that interrupt the factual interviews and portrayed everyday situations of Owen's family members, therapists, and fellow students. Thus, the filmmakers present — referring to the title of the documentary — life in an animated form.

The documentary, which aims to depict factual truths in the frame of a sobriety discourse, makes use of stringently fictional episodes as door-openers into the world of a boy with a developmental disorder. As it is only possible for Owen to communicate his needs and feelings through fiction, it is the only way to approach the foreign consciousness, or as Monika Fludernik points out: "In so far as narrative depicts psychological states, it is fictional since such states cannot be rendered except by using the techniques of fiction."[5] The animated Disney universe becomes part of his real world and is therefore part of the documentary that tries to approach the world in which he lives. Fact and fiction are no longer binary oppositions here, they penetrate and mutually enrich each other.

In this context, the literary scholar Wolfgang Iser also speaks of the imaginary as a mediating instance between the two concepts, and replaces the seemingly binary opposition pairing with a mutually interpenetrating triad of the real, the fictive, and the imaginary. The real, which according to Iser encompasses the extratextual world as a space of reference, can thereby be part of the fictive.[6] It is an intentional act of representation that takes up a lifeworld reality. The imaginary is expressed when the fictionalized reality becomes a sign that refers to something imaginable in the fictionalizing act.[7] Thus, the fictive encompasses the real and the actually diffuse objectless imaginary, which, however, is given a definiteness in the fictionalizing act. What is significant here is that a double boundary transgression takes place: the actual real embedded in the fictive is changed to the emblematic, while the indeterminate imaginary is attributed to a determinacy within the fictionalizing act. The imaginary becomes real in the act of fictionalizing, or as Iser points out:

> [The act of fictionalizing] leads the real to the imaginary and the imaginary to the real, and it thus conditions the extent to which a given world is to be transcoded, a nongiven world is to be conceived, and the reshuffled worlds are to be made accessible to the reader's experience.[8]

According to Iser, this triadic structure fulfills an epistemological function since it recomposes the real in the fiction and makes an alternative model of reality in fiction

experienceable, as is also the case in *Life, Animated* with the integration of animated Disney sequences. The imaginary serves as the driving engine of this cognitive process. The animations are a disguise for the experiences of reality.

3_Animadoc: Playing with Genre Conventions

The hybridization of documentation and animation, which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, is not a contemporary phenomenon, but can rather be observed in avantgarde aesthetics and early experimental cinema, which integrates animation into its pro-filmic[9] footage. This technique is used, for example, in René Laloux's 1964 short film *Les Temps morts*[10] to denounce humanity's longing for death and the vicious circle of violence that leads from brutality to war and crime and, according to the film, ends with the death penalty. Brutal killing scenes are portrayed through drawings but also through the juxtaposition of pro-filmic material. Laloux's film *Les escargots*[11] also takes up the subject of mental illness and the associated traumas in animated images.

With emerging digitization, the DOK-Fest Leipzig shaped the concept of *animadoc*[12] in 1997 as a category of this hybrid fusion between documentation and animation. Upcoming events such as the Animadoc Festival in the Polish city Łódź,[13] which will take place under the title *Rising of Lusitania* — an allusion to the first animated documentary by Winsor McCay from 1918 entitled *The Sinking of the Lusitania*[14] — point to the relevance of this contemporary hybrid format. In this context, digitalization has led to new forms by merging documentary films with other non-fictional formats and animation, and has expanded the perspective on non-fictional films as representations of reality. But it must be borne in mind, that the animated documentary and the documentary with animated sequences differ from each other: while the former represents an (almost) equal coexistence of the two genres, the latter often merely serves to complement the camera shots, for example in educational films.[15] The numerous examples of animated documentaries are evidence of this additional dimension added by animated sequences that do not contrast with the documentary film's claim to truth. Many of them like Ari Folman's successful film *Waltz with Bashir* (Israel, France, Germany 2008) deal with traumatic dimensions and historically or politically sensitive topics such as war experiences, and they aim at reconstructing possibly forgotten and repressed images or creating images where simply none are available. In

doing so, however, they do not simply reconstruct forgotten memories but rather symbolically condense the experiences and resulting psychological troubles of their characters, whose individual fate and way of dealing with a crisis situation is often the focus of these films. With the animated puppets in their film *La Casa Lobo* (Chile 2018), directors Christóbal León and Joaquin Cociña for example grant access to a psychic space with a great pulling effect. They combine archive footage of the children traumatized by abuse in Colonia Dignidad with stop-motion animations of María, who is in the focus of the film. María is punished with solitary confinement and mentally escapes from it by retreating into a house in the forest while symbolically threatened by a wolf, her tormentor. She is permanently exposed to the danger of the lurking wolf, which tries to enter the house and constantly talks to her. This is reinforced by the observing eyes of the animation on the walls of the house, which, inspired by María's emotional world, is subject to constant change. The lack of a visible cut and the fragmenting dissolution of some of the implied figures strengthen the impression of a staged stream of consciousness. In order not to lose her mind, María creates an illusory world for herself in which she brings objects to life and raises a few pigs to become persons to interact with her. Eventually, however, she fails, and the beloved animals turn against her, so that María sees no other option than to seek supposed protection from the wolf, which destroys the house and enslaves her once again. The film uses the symbolic power of animation to impressively visualize complex inner processes that would be difficult to depict through documentation: due to the psychological wounds caused by her abuse, María does not succeed in freeing herself from her situation. Even the escape into herself as the seemingly only way out does not allow her to calm down and changes into a horror scenario. León and Cociña give the unrepresentable and often invisible abuse a symbolic face through animations. Animated sequences are often found where profilmic images would be unable to reflect the extent of a traumatic experience,[16] where taboos are addressed,[17] and/or mental images in general are to be translated into filmic images.

Although *Life, Animated* is not as classic as *Waltz with Bashir* or *La Casa Lobo* as examples of an animadoc, the animations in *Life, Animated* do more than "just" visually process what is explained through interviews like is the case in educational films. Paired with animated sequences, the smooth transition between home videos of the family, excerpts from Disney films, and interviews create an overall narrative in which

the individual clips seem to respond to and complement each other. This becomes clear, for example, when the family talks about Owen's moving out; initially, the family sits at the table, and Owen's parents ask their son about his well-being, also with regard to the fact that he will soon be moving away. The answer is followed by a scene in which Owen puts the video cassette of Disney's *Peter Pan*, the story of a boy who will never grow up, into his recorder. The camera moves from the boy to his television, then the scene changes to a fade-in of the Disney film. "I have to grow up tomorrow," says Peter Pan and, as the scene progresses, he expresses his worries about becoming an adult. Thus, the animated Peter, rather than Owen himself, answers the parents' question. At this point, the documentary underlines Owen's high degree of identification with the characters as well as his way of communicating his feelings through its narrative structure, which is determined by the interweaving of different scenes. The figures, with their clearly defined characteristics, serve as metaphorical placeholders for his emotions. Moreover, this effect is intensified as the sequence progresses: Owen is shown in a long shot as he sits on his bed in front of the TV and imitates the speech of the characters and their movements. The rapid interweaving of Disney film scenes and Owen's imitations blend the characters into one another. Then, the film turns into a home video, which shows Owen as a three-year-old fighting with his father in the garden. The boy himself plays the role of Peter Pan, while his father Ron plays Captain Hook. This is followed by an interview with Ron, who talks about the change in character that his son underwent at a young age: "Owen disappeared when he was three." Thereupon, the viewer sees another flash of the home video, in which the father says goodbye to his son with the words "Bye, Peter Pan," and the animated Peter Pan disappears in the following Disney scene. On the one hand, the beginning of a new phase of life is allegorically underscored here by the parallelization of Owen and Peter Pan, while on the other hand, the overlapping of scenes and thus of times also emphasize that Owen will never achieve the independence of an adult. Even if the parents metaphorically bid farewell to Peter Pan, he remains present.

The documentation thematizes these parallelizations as moments of mental processing. When Owen is asked to pack his household goods for moving, he watches three scenes from Disney's *Dumbo* — the packing scenes. When he sleeps in his new apartment for the first time, he watches *Bambi*, fading into the scene in which Bambi

loses his mother. After the separation from his girlfriend Emily, Owen tries to find answers by crying alongside Ariel and her friends from *The Little Mermaid*. In addition, the social actor[18] is often filmed from an observational perspective reminiscent of direct cinema as he walks up and down the street and recites Disney films as if he had to think through a situation with the help of Disney.

Hybrid cinematic forms always raise the question of genre conventions, which, from a conventional point of view, determine the ontological status of what is depicted. Even if Bill Nichols, speaking of "blurred boundaries," already states that "[…] documentary fails to identify any structure or purpose of its own entirely absent from fiction or narrative,"[19] the documentary and animation genres primarily appear as mutual antagonists. Against this background, animated sequences are subject to the most extensive filmmaking intervention possible. Animations do not depend on camera perspective, image selection, and montage; furthermore, they do not depict a pro-filmic actuality but rather show a highly artistic, guided image. The world creation seems to contradict the observational camera approach of documentary film; in this context, the animated sequences represent a closed diegetic universe with its own laws, while the diegesis of the documentary is extended into the reality shared by social actors and viewers. Then, how can they do justice to the (supposed objective) claim to truth of the documentary, which, in its enlightening function, aims to bring us closer to the boy's autism in the chosen example?

To answer this question, it is necessary to take a closer look at the general discussion of fact and fiction in documentary film — not only limited to the integration of animated sequences — which is, besides the always upcoming issue of referentiality to reality, a recurring theme in film studies.

4_The Crisis of the Documentary Film: Blurred Lines between Fact and Fiction

Margrit Tröhler offers a comprehensive overview of the various theories and concepts of fiction and nonfiction in interaction with cinematic narration.[20] She highlights the problem of referentiality and the aspect of the socioculturally — influenced understanding of fiction and reality. In this context, Tröhler ventures the idea that — referring to Umberto Eco[21] — the worlds that the documentary film creates are "small worlds," i.e., universes that are semantically constructed, like fictional worlds, through reduction on certain scenes as well as their organization. The discursive dynamic reorients the

contents.[22] Thus, a documentary film is always subject to strategies of fictionalization, regardless of whether it explicitly integrates fictionally marked elements such as animation.

Moreover, the narrative order also witnesses fictionalization. According to Tröhler, documentary films tell and shape a story, even if they do not invent the narrative content. A dynamic enunciative process, as Tröhler says, organizes the narrative and gives narrative blocks a spatiotemporal order.[23] The narrative thus appears as a mode of discourse that organizes semantic content and presents it as a story in a larger context.[24] In a further perspectivation of the status of audiovisual representation, the documentary film, like the feature film, can even be regarded as completely fictional since it is subordinate to the form of the discursive and thus to the selection of scenes, the staging, arrangement, orientation, and addressing.[25] In *Life, Animated* the enunciative process becomes clear through the narrative structure. The documentary shows how Owen tries with all his strength to lead a normal life, how he laboriously learns the rules of everyday life — for which he lacks intuition — at school and in his therapy and finally isolates himself from his parents to live as a nearly independent adult in the world. The movie's feature-like tension curve keeps the audience's interest alive by following this personal story. Thus, the exhibition shows the joyful Suskind family, whose peaceful coexistence is testified by photos and home video recordings frozen in drawn pencil stills in the opening credits, as if one wanted to capture these moments forever. It is portrayed as a large, happy, "normal" family with whom one likes to identify as a viewer. In an arousing moment, a catastrophe follows: Owen changes, retreating into himself and not speaking. His parents no longer know what to do; accordingly, the home video recordings are distorted and reflect the parents' lost connection to their son. Dramatic music swells as the parents recall the diagnosis in interviews, which are visualized by drawn animations in a manner of mental meta-diegesis. The parents are worried: how will this developmental disorder restrict their son in the next phase of his life? Will he ever be able to speak again? Hope springs up when one day, while watching Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, Owen utters the faded and, for a silenced child, very pathetic words, "Just your voice." However, the excited parents are slowed down in their exuberance by the therapists, who diagnose Owen's parroting as echolalia[26] — another setback for the family. A second key experience finally opens the door to the "autism prison," as his parents describe their son's introversion: at his big brother's

birthday party, Owen suddenly makes the cognitively challenging remark, based on observations, "Walter doesn't want to grow up like Mowgli or Peter Pan." Thereupon, his parents approach him via the Disney universe, and the father playfully communicates with Owen over his hand puppet of the parrot Iago from *Aladdin*. These hopeful expectations are also reflected acoustically by the swelling and advancing music and the rapid euphoric editing of the images. The father asks Owen the all-important question: "How does it feel to be you?" to which his son answers, "Not well, I have no friends." In cinematic aesthetic terms, the retrospection of this experience is processed through animated drawings that only slowly take shape when remembered. The interviews with the mother, father, and Owen himself are repeatedly placed as voiceovers for the animated memories and cut into each other in such a way that the social actors take over the speaking part for themselves in the remembered scenes. Thus, the above-mentioned question "How does it feel to be you?" is spoken by the father in the interview with the distorted voice of the parrot Iago, while Owen's answer follows a cut to the 23-year-old, who lets his younger self speak in the memory. Past and present are merging into one another, indicating that Owen, as a person with a mental illness, still suffers from social exclusion.

In this discussion about fact and fiction in documentary, like Tröhler, film scholar Frank Kessler also emphasizes, from a pragmatic point of view, that the documentary is not a simple reproduction of raw facts but must be understood as part of a discourse about reality and is organized within it.[27] According to Kessler, in this context, the indexicality of the images presented is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for producing a documentary reading.[28] It is much more decisive, he argues, that the particular film conveys appropriate instructions for the reading mode through contextual and paratextual factors.[29] The documentary reading attempts to reconstruct the profilmic starting from the screen image, which usually leads to forming judgment about certain characteristics or events in the afilmic world.[30] Against this background, Kessler believes that serious statements about the afilmic world would also be conveyed by animated images, even if he does not take a differentiated stand on the degree of abstraction of these animations. *Life, Animated* also frames itself as a documentary through the high amount of interviews and footage material, thus establishing the reading mode of the film. However, this is not always the case to the same extent in animated documentary formats, which can cause irritation in the reception process.

5_Documentary's Claim to Truth and Animation as 'Creative Treatment of Actuality'

Starting from the manipulability of the image, scholar Linda Williams deals with the documentary film's claim to truth in her essay "Mirrors without memories. Truth, History, and the New Documentary," which, according to her, seems to oscillate between documentary, truth, and fiction. Similar to Kessler's view of fact and fiction in this genre, she argues that the documentary film should not be understood as true in essence and should not be torn between the idealistic belief in documentary truth and the cynical recourse to fiction. Since there is no objective observation of truth but always only an interested participation in its construction, Williams proposes to define the documentary film as a set of strategies from which to choose truths against a background of relative and contingent truths. This opinion matches the view of the documentary film as part of a discursive construction, as Tröhler suggests. Further, Williams believes that the strategies of fiction can be supportive to comply with relative truths. In this sense, she appeals for documentary films to make use of fictional strategies to construct truths, as it is the case in *Life, Animated*. If photographs and films are not mirrors of memory in times of crisis of representation but rather cabinets of mirrors, Williams concludes, then as many mirrors as possible should be illuminated to approach a truth.[31]

Applying this background to the closer context of animadoc again, in his introduction to an issue on "Contemporary Theories and Practices in Documentary Animation,"[32] Jeffrey Skoller emphasizes that the world around us, with its digital technologies, does not always depict visible realities. At the same time, animations have an increasing influence on our everyday life[33]; thus, Skoller's hybrid forms show us that the meaning of "the events that structure our present [are] unclear, and that documentary evidence is not always possible, revealing or clarifying. Meanings and occurrences at times can only be pointed to through speculation or active imagination."[34] In this context, Annabelle Honess Roe considers animated documentary film not only as a filler of the missing image but even as an enrichment of the film — an "aide-imagination"[35] that goes beyond the boundaries of the documentary:

> Rather than questioning the epistemological viability of documentary […] I propose that animation broadens and deepens the range of what we can learn from documentaries. […] It invites us to imagine, to put something of ourselves into what we see on screen, to make connections between non-realist images and reality. Animation enriches documentary and our experience of viewing it. Animation

is, quite simply, doing something that the conventional live-action material of documentary cannot.[36]

One could also say that animation extends the diegetization and thus the fictionalizing activity of the audience, evoking an oscillation between the reception of factual knowledge and an emotional as well as subjective presentation. The animated documentary film requires the recipient to switch between animated sequences and original material, or to follow a parallel reception of the documentary and the animated in the case of overlapping formats.[37] It stimulates thought processes by creating empathy (especially when we think of animations with their initially entertaining function for children), enables a comprehension of (inner) states of being, and opens up an alternative perspective on reality. The animated documentary intensifies the emotional mode of the represented world by creating a metaphorical version of reality and thus relates to John Grierson's understanding of the documentary as a 'creative treatment of actuality.' According to Paul Wells, the objective documentary undergoes a transformation, through the integration of animated scenes, from a 'film of records' to a 'film of recognition' that presents hidden structures of what is normally shown by the image of the camera.[38]

6_Documenting the Undocumentable: Fiction as Vehicle to Communicate Inner States

Particularly in documentary film dealing with mental disorders, this perspective on the connection between fictional images and (pro-filmic) reality is crucially important. As disorders of the mind, mental illnesses are difficult to document[39] in their manifestations. To the outside world, it is often only the reaction of the patient to the feelings or delusions triggered by the illness that is revealed. Even if the feelings resulting from the illness are real, the pathological conceptions that produce these emotions deviate from what one would generally understand by the notion of reality, or to use Hans Jürgen Wulffs's words, pathological perceptions are a conceptual area of an external reality.[40] Hybrid formats and especially the animadoc format open up the possibility of using animated images to enter these inner worlds encompassing facts of consciousness, memories, fears, and unfamiliar ways of thinking that are real to the person affected by mental illness. Filmmaker Gamma Bak, who herself is affected by psychoses, describes her psychotic states in her long-term biographic documentary *Schnupfen im Kopf* (Germany 2011) from the perspective of a patient and emphasizes the term of a

conceptual area of an external reality as follows: "It's actually like stepping out of reality or being on a drug trip without actually having taken drugs."[41]

It is not only animated sequences that shall give us an insight into Owen's perception: Recorded home videos from days gone by, in which Owen's father repeatedly calls for his child as if reaching out to him in his world, visually and acoustically blurred by overlaying effects, which intend to imitate the distorted perception of the boy's environment. All stimuli immediately seize Owen's perception, and he is not able to filter them. The documentary gives the viewer the opportunity to identify with the boy through distortion effects — a technique often used to imitate a deviating perception of the world.[42] Furthermore, the film presents multiple perspectives on life with a developmental disorder like autism, from the affected person's and relatives' point of view: On the one hand, it is Owen himself who comments on the reaction of his peers to autism; on the other hand, it is the helpless parents who only gradually grow into the new and always challenging situation. Therefore, Owen's brother Walter also expresses his worries about the future, in which he will have to bear the responsibility for his brother if his parents are no longer able to support their son. To fulfill an educational function, it is conducive to involve the viewer in this process of dealing with the mental disorder, instead of just showing a serene family that already knows how to handle the problems related to the illness. In this way, the viewer is taken by the hand and given easier access to this new unknown world. Furthermore, this narrative structure evokes compassion, as well as a higher level of empathy, on the part of the viewer.

The difficulty of communicating between two worlds is further highlighted in *Life, Animated* by the visualization of the short story *The Land of the Lost Sidekicks*, written by Owen, which is integrated into the film. As a reaction to being bullied by his classmates, the boy, withdrawn in the family basement, invents a story about Disney's side characters who are in search of a hero and protector. The integration of the story animated by the filmmakers follows a feature film narrative. While Owen begins to tell the story, the film glides into a visualized meta-diegesis: a little boy flees his room at night from a thunderstorm. Fireflies lead him to a clearing where he meets Iago, the parrot from Disney's *Aladdin*, and Sebastian, the crab from *The Little Mermaid*. Darkness threatens to swallow the three, and evil creatures emerge. However, the boy manages to save the secondary characters from the monsters and is awarded a medal as Protector of Sidekicks. While Owen's initial voiceover as the story's narrator slowly

fades away, the acoustic background music gains the upper hand and increases the dramatic quality of the scenes. Strikingly, the familiar sound of Owen's father calling for his son repeatedly fades, which the viewer already knows from the home videos. Ron repeatedly calls out the name of his son, the animated boy, but in the story, he does not respond to his father's calling. He is completely trapped in his universe, which does not allow him to communicate with the outside world.

Against the background of its educational mission and its duty to de-stigmatize, it is obvious that the documentary film uses fiction to visualize these images of consciousness and to allude to the interrelationship between external and internal reality. In doing so, it obviously moves only within the framework of a rough approximation of the actual thought of the patients. This approach can also be observed in relation to Owen's mechanisms of world perception. He perceives his surroundings by parallelizing them with Disney scenes, while in turn, the documentary attempts to approach Owen's mental world through animation. The animation becomes a common code of understanding between the person with autism and his outside world, which includes the audience. At the same time, *Life, Animated* reveals at least the limits of the fictional Disney universe as a medium of communication:

At the climax of the film, which is represented by Owen communicating through the Disney films, the euphoria flattens out. Owen experiences setbacks at school and retreats into his fantasy world of lost sidekicks. The recurring defeats also show that the limits of the Disney film lie where it does not provide images for real situations. It should be borne in mind that the Walt Disney Company has acquired the status of a cultural institution, and in this sense, it has a decisive influence on early childhood development with its simple accessibility and the characters' expressions of emotion, which anyone can identify with irrespective of cultural background or place of origin. Its films convey values and virtues and influence the way children and later adults think about contexts and how they evaluate them.[43] In their clear readability, Disney films create convincing role models whose ways of acting are adapted by children. Especially in the early days, Disney created the image of an ideal child with films such as *Alice in Wonderland* (USA 1951) and conveys a simplified moral concept of good and evil until today. The films seem to lose themselves in the conservative portrayal of these extremes, which are reinforced by the physical design of the characters as well as by the

music, and only rarely find a balance in their stereotypical attributions. Although Disney also conveys valuable virtues such as selflessness and helpfulness and addresses difficult challenges in life such as loss and grief, the values and role models conveyed, as well as ideals of beauty, require critical reflection against the backdrop of the great impact that the Disney Dream Factory has had on collective values. After Owen's separation from his girlfriend Emily, it becomes clear that Disney films, with their black-and-white presentation of the world, do not find an answer for every life situation. Although the characters separate, they always find a happy ending. Owen, who does not have the ability to critically reflect on the films, has difficulty understanding why the situation with his girlfriend Emily does not end happily after the setback.

However, through the superimposed reading modes of non-fictional and fictional content, which are produced by the intertwining and mutual responses of the different sequences, as described above, the documentary unfolds its epistemological potential — to speak with Roe — through the extension of documentary expressions. The film invites us to dive into foreign (mental) worlds that go beyond the limits of what is, in a pro-filmic sense, documentable.

7_Between Normality and Divergency: Stigmatization, Labeling, and Exclusion

It is striking that scenes of mental processing in *Life, Animated* (as mentioned below, scenes in which Owen watches or recites Disney passages textually linked to his living situation) precede episodes in which Owen learns about the world and the regularities around him. For example, when Owen walks up and down the street in front of his school and talks to himself in Disney dialogs, the scene is followed by a sequence in which the teacher explains to her students, who are in their early twenties, that an upright posture in traffic prevents dangers — a fact that other people intuitively master. In this way, Owen's monologues and the teaching of basic everyday things that are fundamental to coexistence further underscore the contrast between normality and divergency.

The examination of these contrasting concepts is repeatedly realized in recent documentary films and is also and above all addressed by the people affected by mental illness, as if it were necessary to permanently reassure themselves of the reality defined as normal by society. This is the case, for example, of *Tarnation* (USA 2003), *Dialogues with Madwomen* (USA 1994), *Andere Welt* (Germany 2013), and *Raum 4070* (Germany

2006). For those affected, there seems to be also an urgent need to establish coherence between the subjective inner world and the outer world. In Owen's case, this is not done through self-reflection in front of the camera but by watching Disney films.

Within this context, Markus Fellner's discourse-analytical approach to proto- and flexibility normalism in his dissertation on the construction of mental disorders sharpens the term "illness" as instrument of exclusion and opposition to those affected by mental disorders in society.[44] Despite his loving family, Owen, who is trapped in his illness, also feels isolated. Toward the end of *Life, Animated*, this aspect of exclusion emerges when he speaks to a group of researchers at an autism congress in Rennes, France and tries to correct the prejudices about people with autism: they want to have friends, too. "In truth, autistic people want the same thing as everyone else," he says, "but sometimes we get confused." According to Fellner, with regard to the construction of the notion of mental illness as a concept of exclusion, it is particularly important to consider how discourses produce a notion of normality, which is also significantly influenced by films as discourse-creating media.[45] The concept of illness is thus constructed by the discourse, which also shapes the concept of normality — primarily in contrast to the deviant.[46] Fellner speaks of an expansion of flexibility normalism in the course of a normality crisis within late-modern social structures, which includes the maximum expansion of normality boundaries in contrast to the boundary-giving protonormalism. On the one hand, this expansion would give the subject greater scope for identification, but it would also require them to increasingly locate themselves in a "flexibilized world without predefined instructions for behavior," which would in turn lead to an oppositely stronger attachment to concepts of normality.[47] In this perspective, the concept of illness must be seen as an effect of social conditioning, against the background of the labeling approach as a social attribution in the tension between normality and divergence.[48] Fellner thereby relies on Foucault's explanations in his work *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la Folie à l'âge classique* (1961), where the philosopher also describes a history of segregation and the exceptional relationship of people with mental disorders to the others as well as the social intolerance of otherness in connection with mental illness. He embeds the concept of insanity in a sociological-cultural dimension and considers the historically developed distinction between mental health and illness. Foucault declares the field of reason to be the origin of madness and discusses the establishment of an institutionalized moral order that makes madness a social

issue. The subject of social exclusion is mainly addressed by Owen being bullied in the new school and the lack of understanding of his seemingly strange behavior. However, in Owen's case, the environment of institutionalized power is benevolent and supportive toward social inclusion measures, although in many contemporary documentary films, such as the ones mentioned above, this is more a critical examination of this state of power. Even though mental health issues are increasingly becoming the focus of the public attention and thus of social discourse, as mentioned above, mental disorders are still subject to stigmatization and taboo and therefore social exclusion.[49] In contrast to Raymond Depardon's *San Clemente* (Italy 1980) or John Huston's *Let There Be Light* (USA 1942), the contemporary documentary film on mental illness, which often deals with the portrayal of individual destinies rather than a non-profile mass of nameless patients, has the potential to be an enlightenment film that undermines stereotyping with its multidimensional, realistic, and fictionalizing strategies to find modes of representing mental illness.

Finally, even if Owen and his girlfriend do not get back together, the documentary film ends with a feature-like happy ending and describes the metamorphosis of a Hunchback of Notre Dame, as Owen sees himself, who is loved by everyone after a long and arduous journey. Thus, in this case, the film clarifies the consequences of exclusion through mobbing and lack of understanding of the illness from the perspective of the person affected, and at the same time, it creates a contrasting foil in the loving and benevolent outside world of the family, therapists, caretakers, and accommodating employers as well as interested researchers as an exemplary model of behavior toward a person with a mental illness. The disorder is illuminated in its numerous facets — mentally animated as well as pro-filmically depicted — in relation to the everyday life of an individual patient. The film thus creates understanding, reduces fear of contact, and calls for more openness and attention to those affected by mental illnesses.

We can consider *Life, Animated* as a hybrid documentary that joins the documentary's claim to enlightening. The filmmakers do not try to create understanding of the illness by moralistically forcing the acceptance of Owen's mental disorder but rather by winning an audience for the boy and his life story through sympathy guidance.

The film's strategy of bringing other worlds closer to us is reminiscent in certain aspects of the principle of therapeutic storytelling,[50] which aims to stimulate discussion

about problems, their causes, and possible solutions through parables. Therapeutic storytelling promises to address the unconscious by referring back to metaphors and leaving the solution of a problem to the unconscious, instead of rational thinking. The Disney film and Owen's recurring reference to certain Disney scenes, as well as his own short stories animated by the filmmakers, become his therapeutic narrative, which provides solutions for everyday problems. In a certain way, the viewer is also "therapeutically treated," in that the fictional stories inject him with a new perspective on a developmental disorder — in this case, autism.

8_Concluding Remarks

To sum up, we can state that new hybrid forms of the genre have emerged within the crisis of representation, opening up innovative spaces to represent reality and make reality tangible. With regard to partly or completely animated documentaries, the crisis can be understood more as a change or even as an enriching extension of a discursive view of reality. Films such as *Life, Animated* or *La Casa Lobo* want to make conditions, which are completely unknown to most viewers or in which the viewers as affected persons possibly find themselves, immersively experienceable. They let the affected people themselves and the fictional images speak for their inner states. In this case, Owen's view of the world is reflected back to the viewer through the integrated animated sequences. *Life, Animated* as well as other film examples show that serious statements about the afilmic world can also be conveyed by animated images.

In the sense of an anti-stigma movement, these documentaries create an understanding of traumatic experiences, psychiatric disorders, and sometimes the unspeakable and unrepresentable. They open the door to another world by integrating fictional content and by encouraging the viewer to fictionalize, inspired by their narrative filmic structure but without losing their claim to truth.

The documentary *Life, Animated* is not only exemplary for integrating fiction as an instrument for processing mental states, it also illustrates how fictional narratives serve as a medium of communication for the young man affected by autism and how they have a decisive influence on his perception of the world. Disney narratives become part of his self-expression and represent a way of dealing with his illness that allows him to participate in everyday life. Thus, the documentary shows how the relationship between illness and narrative can be seen as mutually constitutive.

As part of a whole field of documentary films about mental disorders, *Life, Animated* thus contributes to a pluralistic picture of mental health and represents, to echo Williams, a perspective on the truth of the big picture. *Life, Animated* shakes up the ideas that we have about the world through its accessible portrayal of a single fate. It contributes to a discursive construction of reality about mental health and thus influences our view and our understanding of normality by addressing the problem of demarcation. Especially in times of the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic and the unfortunately expected increasing number of people affected by mental illnesses, the visualization of mental health gains importance to sensitize society for this topic and to prevent further stigmatization.

_Endnotes

[1] Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser, "Mental Health," (2018), accessed December 10, 2020, <https://ourworldindata.org/mental-health>.

[2] "Documentary film has a kindship with those other nonfictional systems that together make up what we may call the discourse of sobriety." Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Nichols 1991').

[3] Autism, in a broader context designated as a mental illness and specifically as a "pervasive development disorder" (ICD-10 F84) in the currently applicable ICD-10 of the WHO (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems), is "characterized by qualitative abnormalities in reciprocal social interactions and in patterns of communication, and by a restricted, stereotyped, repetitive repertoire of interests and activities." While the ICD-10 still lists different subtypes of autism, in the upcoming future (ICD-11, valid from 2022) one speaks only of a general autism spectrum disorder, in which milder and stronger forms of autism are unified.

"ICD-10 Version:2016," accessed May 10, 2021, <https://icd.who.int/browse10/2016/en#/F84.5v>. In the following I will therefore talk about autism in a broader context as mental illness or disorder or specifically as developmental disorder.

[4] With the advent of digital formats at the end of the twentieth century and the related possibility of image manipulation, the status of images in terms of their reliable representation of reality was called into question. Even though theorists such as Tom Gunning point out that even analog film footage is susceptible to manipulation (Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? Or, Faking Photographs," in *Nordicom review 25* [2017], 40f.) film scholar Laura Mulvey claims that the digital revolution is leading to a crisis of documentary film, as the indexical status is being lost and, in this way, entails an uncertainty regarding the documentary's depiction of reality (Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* [London: Reaktion Books, 2006], 54f.). Bill Nichols, similar to Gunning, has a different point of view: the claim to the indexicality of the image in the documentary is based on the assumption of the audience, but it is not the only criterion for evaluating the documentary's closeness to reality. Aspects such as the validity of the argumentation and the resulting interpretation also play a decisive role for Nichols in this respect. If individual

images of a documentary film display indexicality, they can serve as evidence that supports the interpretation of reality (Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010], 30f.). Hybrid documentary formats that merge factual and fictional representations, as will be shown in the following, refer to this discussion of the crisis of the documentary film with its claim to represent reality and raise questions about the possibilities of representing inner states within documentary formats.

[5]   Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (London: Routledge, 2009), 59.

[6]   Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1993), 3 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Iser 1993').

[7]   Iser 1993, 3.

[8]   Iser 1993, 3f.

[9]   The terms pro-filmic and afilmic are a terminological product of the *Ecole de Filmologie*, which distinguishes the different aspects of the cinematic universe. In the following, with reference to Etienne Souriau, everything that is captured by the camera is understood as pro-filmic. Afilmic, on the other hand, is to be understood for the following text as a reality outside the cinematic universe that can only serve as a point of reference for cinematic discourse. The pro-filmic can thus refer to the afilmic, which is not captured by the camera.

[10]   René Laloux, "Les Temps Morts," (France: 1964), accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXnIHbNXuYk>.

René Laloux, "Les Escargots," (France: 1965), accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITqcqvbFlpM>.

[12]   The animadoc category is a hybrid form of animation, conventionally more associated with fiction in children's entertainment, and documentary, which is defined as an explicitly non-fictional film form and bound to a specific reality. In this context, only parts of the animadoc, but also the entire film, can be animated.

[13]   "Rising of Lusitania: AnimaDoc Film Festival," *Animation Festivals*, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.animation-festivals.com/festivals/rising-of-lusitania-animadoc-film-festival/>.

[14]   Windsor McCay, "The Sinking of the Lusitania," (USA: 1918), accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wq7hMuiz1mI>.

[15]   Florian Mundhenke, *Between Documentary and Feature Film: On Representation and Reception of Hybrid Forms* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2017), 222 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Mundhenke 2017').

[16]   Excluding representations as scientific experimental setups and models.

[17]   Not only in relation to mental illness but also, for example, to sexuality, as in *Private Parts*. (Anna Ginsburg, "Private Parts," [UK: 2016], accessed December 10, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/185711393)>.

[18]   Nichols 1991, 120. Nichols calls the people in front of the camera in documentary films "social actors" because they stage themselves either consciously or unconsciously.

[19]   Nichols 1991, 6.

[20]   Margrit Tröhler, "Of World Constellations and Text Buildings: Fiction — Non-Fiction — Narration in Feature Films and Documentaries," in *montage/av* 11.2 (2002), 9–41 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Tröhler 2002').

[21]   Umberto Eco, "Small Worlds," in *Versus* 52.53 (1989), 53–70.

[22]   Tröhler 2002, 17.

[23]   Tröhler 2002, 27.

24   Tröhler 2002, 31.

25   Tröhler 2002, 33f.

26   Echolalia is a speech disorder that is limited to repeating pre-said words. It often occurs in the context of an autism spectrum disorder.

27   Frank Kessler, "Fact or Fiction? On the Pragmatic Status of Documentary Images," in *montage/av* 7.2 (1998), 63–78, here: 71 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Kessler 1998').

28   Kessler 1998, 77. According to Kessler, the extratextually justified intention of the assertion must be replaced by the question of the reading mode.

29   Kessler 1998, 76.

30   Kessler 1998, 71. An afilmic reality is understood as a given beyond the cinematic universe, to which films can only refer, while everything in front of the camera belongs to the realm of profile mixing.

      Frank Kessler, "Afilmisch," (2012), accessed December 10, 2020, <https://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/index.php?action=lex-ikon&tag=det&id=3906#:~:text=In%20einer%20von%20Etienne%20Souriau,mit%20die-sen%20betrachtet%20werden%20kann%E2%80%9C>.

31   Williams 1993, 20.

32   Jeffrey Skoller, "Making It (Un)real: Contemporary Theories and Practices in Documentary Animation," in *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journa*l 6.3 (2011), 207–214, here: 207 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Skoller 2011').

33   For example, the animation explaining the use of a coffee machine.

34   Skoller 2011, 207.

35   Annabelle Honess Roe, "Absence, Excess and Epistemological Expansion," in *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6.3 (2011), 215–230, here: 228 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Honess Roe 2011').

36   Honess Roe 2011, 217.

37   Mundhenke 2017, 226.

38   Paul Wells, "The Beautiful Village and the True Village: A Consideration of Animation and the Documentary Aesthetic," in *Art & Animation* (London: Academy Editions, 1997), 40-45, here: 44.

39   To give the disease a somatically detectable face, medical imaging procedures or an analysis of the gene structures may be available, as is the case in the documentary *Das dunkle Gen*. (Miriam Jakobs and Gerhard Schick, "Das dunkle Gen," [Germany, 2015]).

40   Hans Jürgen Wulff, "Conceptions of Mental Illness in Film: A Contribution to the 'Structural History of Learning'," (Münster: MAkS Publikationen, 1985). Chapter "Heterogenity".

41   Gamma Bak, "Schnupfen im Kopf," (Germany: 2011), TC 00:35:14 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Bak 2011').

42   Distortion effects are, for example, used in the following documentaries about psychological illness to reinforce the impression of a world removed from reality: Jonathan Caouette, *Tarnation* (USA: 2003); Niels Bolbrinker, *Fluten: Wie man wahnsinnig werden kann* (Germany: 2004); Mischka Popp et al., *Kopfleuchten* (Germany: 2008).

43   Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock, *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 48.

44   Markus Fellner, *Psycho Movies: On the Construction of Mental Disorder in Feature Films* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2006) (hereafter abbreviated as 'Fellner 2006').

[45]   Fellner 2006, 37.

[46]   Fellner 2006, 35.

[47]   Fellner 2006, 30.

[48]   Fellner 2006, 33.

[49]   The anti-stigma study of the *Action Alliance for Mental Health* points out the different forms of stereotyping of mental illnesses, such as the exclusion of patients, which contributes to the worsening of the course of the illness (Wolfgang Gaebel et al., "Conceptualizing and Implementing of Interventions to Destigmatize Mental Illness: Recommendations and Results from Research and Practice," accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.seelischegesundheit.net/images/stories/publikationen/konzeption-und-umsetzung-von-interventionen-zur-entstigmatisierung-seelischer-erkrankungen.pdf >).

[50]   Stefan Hammel, *Handbook of Therapeutic Storytelling: Stories and Metaphors in Psychotherapy, Child and Family Therapy, Medical Treatment, Coaching and Supervision* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2018).