

Animations Capacity To Depict Historical Narratives, In Comparison To Oral Storytelling

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Abstract

“Animations Capacity To Depict Historical Narratives, In Comparison To Oral Storytelling” is an exploration on how animated film depicts historical narratives. Oral storytelling is brought in as a comparison medium as the author believes both mediums share a quality that enhances their ability to engage an audience in a story set in the past. The thesis discusses four films whose historical elements range from a fully fictional tale in an historic setting, to biographical films set within the last 50 years. The author's study of these films leads to his assessment on animation and oral storytelling being confirmed. In some ways it is done so through direct demonstration of the films visible design elements, in others a less obvious approach is taken. In one film, the author has to examine the content within the films and extrapolate a connection to oral-storytelling from its narrative elements (A subject within the film demonstrating the author's point rather than the film itself), whilst another one draws medium comparison in its production rather than final product. Through this method the author finds a greater understanding in why he discovered the connection between animation and oral storytelling but also in how that connection can be utilized in future in ways both beneficial and malicious towards how storytellers and audiences engage with history in film.

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Introduction

Be it entertainment or documentary, film has a long established tradition of basing tales on historical settings and events, be it fictionalizations of recorded events or baseless tales set in a prior period of time. These films found appeal in capturing a period once lost to time and reanimating it for a new audience. However, with the telling of any story comes along biases and with biases, artistic license. This thesis believes that **through Animations design elements, depictions of historical narratives are enhanced by this artistic license, in a manner comparable to Oral storytelling's ability to do so.** Despite these historically set films having the backdrop of the real world we occupy, they often stretch, omit or misrepresent events in the service of narrative, be it for good storytelling or propaganda. With time people became more acutely aware of this aspect of filmmaking and with time, became more critical of these films and how they present the past, especially when claims of “accuracy” are brought to the discussion of any given piece. Research discussions on most historically set films and you wouldn't have to read for long before finding debate on choices made regarding any specific films historical accuracy, only to be counter argued and re-counter argued ad-infinitem. In fact, in 2009 the magazine *American Historical Review* temporarily suspended film reviews from publication for being unscholarly¹

¹ K. A. Morey. *History to Life Through Film : The Art of Cinematic Storytelling*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Incorporated, 2013, pp.8

No one source, be it primary or secondary, is an inscrutable true depiction of the past. It's why "history" isn't considered one single truth but an umbrella term for both the collection of, study and interpretation of past events from multiple sources of evidence. Even historians have to debate the narratives they create as they remember or emphasize different aspects to their peers²³. The fact we are a human being with individual ways of viewing, born from years of growing in an environment unique to us (even a child who can engage with the world has a minimum of a day to have an opinion on how the world works) means every depiction of history, even documentary, is unique to the person giving that depiction. This aspect of the human condition, whilst considered a negative in the pursuit of historical documentation, can work to the benefit of storytelling of narratives set in the past.

This inescapably biased and "unique-to individual" style of expression is a corner stone of the oral-storytelling medium. Oral storytelling is known for being one of, if not the oldest forms of exchanging narrative. This thesis will explore more characteristics of the medium later, but for the sake of introduction all that needs to be highlighted is it's inherent subjectivity. Most people immediately understand that an oral story is words being spoken to create narrative, and that visualization of the narrative takes place entirely in the imagination of the storyteller and audience. No one partaking in the experience is under the illusion that this medium is documentary in the same way text or live-footage would be and thus the narrative.

For the sake of the thesis, this space for fiction created by a lack of emphasis on fact will be referred to as "artistic license". "Artistic license" is a euphemism for

² J.H. Arnold. *History: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2000

³ M.R. Trouillot. *Silencing the Past*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1995, pp.49-58

when “truth” is distorted for the sake of one’s art. In this thesis, artistic license will refer to the amount of leeway a films crew receives in applying fiction to their historical settings for the sake of narrative. For example: A protagonist may experience a historical event but come from it with growth, a happy ending or at least portrayed as a victor for surviving, meanwhile real-records say they both died separately in meaningless fashion long after the events the film is adapting. For instance, the film *Anastasia* depicts the historical figure Rasputin brought back from the dead as the villain of the story whom is defeated by the titular character whilst in historic reality little is known about Rasputin's death other than being shot in the head. Obviously didn't come back back to life via demonic intervention and was barely related to the historical Anastasia Romanov whom was executed in 1918, who’s story in the film takes from the trend of various imposters claiming to be her escaped from the execution⁴. The artistic license granted here is in how these two figures have been placed in positions of winner and loser for the sake of a narrative. The gauge of how much artistic license has been given will be determined in the critical reception of a work's historical inaccuracies .

The leeway in question has to be granted by the audience. This isn’t done via spoken or written agreement but rather a phenomena known as the “suspension of disbelief”, an experience an audience undergoes in watching any piece of media. When engaging with a fictional world one has to abandon the desire to rationalize what they’re perceiving. We ignore that the actors are acting and treat the characters' experiences as real events in the world of the film, rather than events recorded in our

⁴ M. Knollmueller, “Anastasia(s)”, *History to Life Through Film : The Art of Cinematic Storytelling* . Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Incorporated, 2013, pp.14-29

world. The suspension of disbelief however is not a binary condition (separable by states of “suspended” and “not suspended”) and how much we suspend often varies from film to film due to the influence of its setting, quality as a piece of craft and in the case of animation, design and medium. From this we find the argument made at the start of this thesis, that through Animations design elements, depictions of historical narratives are enhanced by suspending the audience's disbelief, in a manner comparable to Oral storytellings ability to do so.

The author, from his own experience, believes to have found similarities in how both Oral Storytelling and Animation establish a suspension of disbelief and are granted artistic license in depicting historical narratives. If one was to distill the “point” the author wishes to communicate in this text, they would be that (1.) Both Animation and Oral storytelling requires a suspension of disbelief to be engaged with (see thesis proposal on what defines “suspension of disbelief”) and (2.) Both mediums automatically grant this by nature of their mediums. Such similarities will be discussed as we progress through the thesis but such a discussion cannot be held without establishing context on what animated historical narratives are and how they compare and contrast with oral historical narratives. The author will introduce films such as *Flee* (2021), *Persepolis* (2007), *The Sinking Of The Lusitania* (1918) , and *Wolfwalkers* (2001), discuss how they approach history and refer back to how this compares to oral storytelling.

The author having a raised familiarity (he grew up in the culture in which it is traditional) with the Irish oral-storytelling tradition and thus when comparing and referring to oral storytelling, he will be doing so in that context with the assumption that, when he refers to “oral storytelling”, the reader will understand he means “the

Irish storytelling tradition and its culture”. That being said, there are a number of countries that have strong oral storytelling cultures such as New Zealand, Hawaii’, Japan, Native American tribes in the USA ect. When discussing Oral storytelling other academics such as Vito Crassi, Kevin Wren and Rosemaire Somiah will be referenced in the explanation and validation of certain points. Another academic that will be brought into discussion will be that of Paul Wells. This is in purpose of providing a more in-depth dissection and discussion of the animated aspects of this thesis.

With this established, we can begin to discuss our topic by defining further traits of Oral storytelling and animation.

Chapter 1:

Characteristic differences and Similarities in

Oral Storytelling and Animation.

The similarities between Oral Storytelling and Animation become much more apparent and interesting to discuss once their differences are established.

The first one is obvious to anyone with the physical capacity to see it, or rather, see it in animation alone as it is a medium with an emphasis on its visual aspect. To witness a piece of animation is to use your eyes, undergo the optical illusion of movement caused by a rapid display of images and mentally process the illusion as if it was truly moving within the viewing portal, be it on film, digital or physically traditional (flipbooks, zoetropes, ect.). Whilst sound often plays an important role in conveying an animations narrative, it is considered something attached to the medium rather than being *the* medium. Aural communication is often treated an enhancement to an animated work with most works maintaining their ability to convey narrative with the sound removed (this is debatable with modern mainstream film and television works, and arguably isn't applicable to any of the work that'll be discussed further in this thesis) rather than essential to the animated experience, with exception to animated dialogue and other aural situations.

Meanwhile the key sensory experience of Oral story can be found in its name, the oral experience of the storyteller and aural experience of their audience, Sound as the unifier of these two experiences coming together to partake in the experience of storytelling. As if an inverse similarity how sound enhances animation, oral story telling treats visual means as an enhancement rather than an essential component (as opposed to the narration of a live stage performance, which whilst considerable as “oral storytelling” exists to narrate another experience within a different medium of

art and performance). An oral story is engaged with once the imagination fills in the missing visual information, be it the story teller drawing from their own to create the tale in the moment or the listener granting artistic license in using their imagination to process the information.

This leads into another difference between Oral Storytelling and Animation, that being the difference of live production. When one engages with an oral story, it is new and unique to the moment in which it is engaged with. Even if one were to simply recount what they heard before, the fact they are telling it to an audience and connecting with them in the experience influences how the recount would be recounted, they may hit all the story beats and include ideas, and characters consistent to other tellings of the story, but it'll be done word-by-word in a new way once the audience is considered. In *Oral Storytelling: Negotiating Text, Performance, and the Porous Story* by Rosemarie Somaiah, she states “In America, the National Council of Teachers of English states “Storytelling is not the same as reading a story aloud, reciting a piece from memory or acting out a drama...The storyteller looks into the audience, uses his or her own words, and together they compose the tale”⁵. When we take this statement and consider that an “audience” is almost ever consistent for an oral storyteller, we can derive from this statement that each instance of oral storytelling is, as stated before, new and unique to that instance in time.

The same cannot be said for Animation. Whilst one can consider a specific audience when creating animation, for an individual work, this can only be decided once and isn't malleable to each viewing of the animation. The work is made at a point

⁵ R. Somaiah, *Oral Storytelling: Negotiating Text, Performance, and the Porous Story*, BOOKBIRDINC , 2013.

in time, to be viewed and reviewed at a separate point in the future, unchanging as a result of time passed between fixed creation and viewing, critical hindsight and physical degeneration of the technology used to display the animation asides.

In Vito Carrasi and Kevin Wrens *The Irish Fairy Tale : A Narrative Tradition from the Middle Ages to Yeats and Stephens*. Crassi introduces the idea of an “open system” in regards to Oral Storytelling as ““It’s aspects as an open system, in my (Crassi’s) view, most clearly characterizes the narrative tradition in it’s oral and popular dimensions. On the one hand, the elements that make up such a system are not fixed in the sense that, in the course of time, they may change form or leave the system never to return, perhaps being supplanted by new elements. On the other hand, the system is substantially accessible to anyone and to any exigency that is oriented toward sharing its elements with what is external to it or, in the final analysis, can be absorbed within it.” Since it is an open system, the traditional tale is destined to continual evolution, to continual transitoriness. The more or less faithful transmission of its original patrimony is entrusted completely to the nature and goodwill of those who, through storytelling, allow a message deposited into collective memory to become a tale - or rather the verbal object necessary for the perpetuation of an otherwise mute tradition. A lack of storytellers poses a continual threat of extinction for any traditional tale.” states Crassi’s analysis of the merits of oral storytelling in the context of Irish oral-prose. This one is on it’s nature as an “open system” of storytelling, Open as in open to redistribution and change without permanent marks of makership left by the initial storyteller, this is prior explained by an excerpt from the Introduction of the book, a hypothetical explanation (itself a story, in a sense) of oral storytellings development as an open system is told. “His tale was not only heard, but received by

his listeners, either with detachment or participation. Ceasing to be the exclusive property of its author or bearer, in one way or another, the tale took possession and entered into the possession of other people, thus becoming communal patrimony. It's destiny was no longer linked to a single creator or storyteller, but to all those who, once having heard the tale, wanted to pass it on. As they did so, they became themselves authors, performing before a new audience another tale, their own, personal version of that already heard. Better or worse, more concise or extended, more entertaining or instructive, a series of versions would gradually have displaced the original.”⁶

If this is an “open system” then a means of storytelling without these traits would exist as a “closed system” and as you can imagine, this chapter of the thesis being what it is, Animation would fall into this later camp. To quote Carassi and Wren again; “Characteristically, oral storytelling follows and continues an ancient tradition that tends toward conservation, albeit subject to perennial, physiological evolution. On the other, written text begins a new tradition, one that tends towards innovation, particularly because it is linked to the absence of a real audience with which to interact in the course of the narration and hence of a marked interference with the intentions of the narrator, who now deals with an unalterable means of expression, no longer linked to the occasion. From the open and direct relationship and a virtual public of readers. And although the author of the written text cannot sever the umbilical cord linking him to preceding tradition, far more than the storyteller, he is responsible for his work since, unlike in an oral performance, it is destined (unforeseen accidents

⁶ V. Crassi, K. Wren, *The Irish Fairy Tale : A Narrative Tradition from the Middle Ages to Yeats and Stephens*, Rome: John Cabot University, 2012, pp.2

apart) to survive him, under his name and no one else's. It is no longer part of an anonymous tradition handed down from generation to generation, in which we can consider authors 'apart from the first, to the same degree the successive narrators of the tale, the representatives of tendencies and collective taste'.⁷ The comparisons to text's inalterability once it is wrote is comparable to the inalterability of a completed animated work. The artists who create animation cannot be divorced from the work they create. The permanence of the final product will always include their trace, unlike that of oral storytelling which changes from teller to teller. Even if an animated piece were to be remade it doesn't anonymise the storyteller the way the passing of an oral tale does at it now stands in permanent contrast to a reviewable predecessor. Every instance of new animation created is a new branch upon a narrative foundation, as opposed to oral storytellings evolving tradition, that remains with it's mediums bounds, regardless of narrative evolution.

These differences in sensory emphasis, live production and system of proliferation would leave one to assume the mediums of Animation and Oral Storytelling are nigh incompatible, let alone similar, however this is very much not the case. Rather, these differences only serve to highlight and examine the similarities in the mediums that remain. Similarities that when examined, provide greater insight into how Animation depicts historical narratives.

One such similarity in the mediums is that, in order to engage with either one, one must suspend their disbelief to a certain degree. Taking the definition established in our introduction and applying it to Animation, we find this happens when the

⁷ V. Crassi, *The Irish Fairy Tale : A Narrative Tradition from the Middle Ages to Yeats and Stephens*, Rome: John Cabot University, 2012, pp.7

audience of a piece chooses to pay attention to the events depicted in an animation work, rather than give that attention to each frame that passes in the process. Paul Wells, professor of Animation at Loughborough University⁸ discusses the differences in orthodox (his term for the “mainstream” look of 2D animation pioneered by Disney Studios) and experimental animation, stating “Rarely does it (the orthodox cartoon) tell the audience of it’s interest in the colour, design and material of its making, instead, it prioritizes its content, concentrating specifically on constructing character, determining comic moments and evolving the self-contained narrative. This is not to say that the colour, design and so forth are irrelevant, but that they constitute a particular kind of style which merely reinforces the ‘cartoon-ness’ of the animation and thus, the invisibility of it’s aesthetic achievement and industrial context.”⁹ He explains that, when an “orthodox cartoon” is storytelling, it often asks you to prioritize it’s narrative over paying attention to the fact you are witnessing animation in the technical sense. This is the process of suspending disbelief during media engagement in action. This process also applies to Oral storytelling. Somaiah brings this up when describing her experience in engaging in Oral storytelling, saying “*The oral storytelling sessions were a sweetener to give teachers the idea about using the books more effectively. The performances triggered the imagination, were very interactive, and included lots of audience participation. These sessions helped stimulate empathy for the characters and excitement about the ideas so that the children and teachers began to see the*

⁸ Paul Wells. www.lboro.ac.uk. Loughborough University. <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/schools/design-creative-arts/people/paul-wells/>. Accessed 01 Jan 2024.

⁹ P. Wells, *Understanding Animation*, Leicester: De Monfort University, 1998, pp.34-36

*value within the stories.*¹⁰ In this instance she did use oral storytelling to promote a different closed-system medium, literature. Nonetheless, there is anecdotal evidence for a suspension of disbelief taking place in the Oral process, the audience suspended their disbelief in listening to Somaiah, and when formulating stories themselves to recount to each other.¹¹

Whilst the suspension of disbelief is a requirement to engaging with Animation and Oral Storytelling, another similarity in these mediums is that both, by nature of their medium, grant this automatically. On this subject Crassi states: “The tale, moreover, responds to the “ “radical need for fabulation intrinsic to the human subconscious” a phenomenon that, by its very nature, does not tolerate barriers between individuals, nor allow for social, economic, cultural or other discrimination. Rather, this need is a typical agent of aggregation: around a good tale and good storyteller, there will always be people willing to stop and listen.”¹² Most of the visualization of the tale is happening within the mind’s eye of the storyteller and audience and this exercise suspends disbelief for the duration of the tale. The same phenomenon has been observed by Wells, he writes “Sturges uses the cartoon to promote the idea that it’s very language represents the world in an intrinsically different way.” The animated film creates a narrative space and visual environment radically different to the live-action version of the world”¹³ “Struges” referring to *Blackboard Jungle(1955)* nonetheless it demonstrates how animation forces a

¹⁰ R. Somaiah, *Oral Storytelling: Negotiating Text, Performance, and the Porous Story*, BOOKBIRDINC , 2013.

¹¹ R. Somaiah, *Oral Storytelling: Negotiating Text, Performance, and the Porous Story*, BOOKBIRDINC , 2013.

¹² V. Crassi, *The Irish Fairy Tale : A Narrative Tradition from the Middle Ages to Yeats and Stephens*, Rome: John Cabot University, 2012

¹³ P. Wells, *Understanding Animation*, Leicester: De Monfort University, 1998, pp. 34-36

suspension of disbelief only creatable within its medium, something that would be lost in live-action film.

Chapter 2:
The Sinking of The Lusitania,
Wolfwalkers,
And depicting an impersonal past.

When it comes to discussing animation's capacity to depict historical narratives. Winsor McCays *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918) is unavoidable. The film recounts the titular events that took place 3 years before. The film is relevant to our discussion as the actual sinking didn't have any photographic or filmed evidence of it taking place. All records take the form of written letters and newspaper reports. Live recorded footage of the ship does in fact exist, just not of the specific incident.

McCay utilized the artistic license granted by the animated medium to depict the sinking with stylistic elements that both suggest real footage and intentionally evoke feelings of anxiety. When the animated portion of the video begins we see the German submariners atop the sub, waving to the camera before descending beneath the waves. This silly bit of humor allows us to relax and accept fiction we are about to witness with a reduced scrutiny. In other words, we grant McCay artistic license to suspend our belief in a safe environment via comedy, lowering both our rational and emotional guard. With this set up the events that unfold read as all the all the more horrifying, the scene of the explosion is a long shot that eventually consumes the entire screen in it's smoke. As intertitles exposit dramatic prose of the tragedy, we see the passengers of the ship fall into the sea, according to J.P. Tellote in his book *Animating Space: From Mickey to WALL-E* " We see the almost abstractly rendered blank surface of the sea-essentially a sea of white space that is as well the nearly undifferentiated space of frame-swallow up the carefully drawn and detailed victims

of the attack, fashioning in it; s collision of styles an effective visual anxiety and suggesting a dangerous void.”¹⁴



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Fig. 1. Lifeboats and faces struggling to stay afloat in the ambiguous, undefined sea. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *The Sinking Of The Lusitania* (1918). Directed by Winsor McCay.

The blank space of the water means we cannot visualize what horrors lie beneath the waves and thus the artistic license given allows the heightened feelings of horror to persist in a way only possible with animation’s ability to suspend our disbelief. This can also be said for the scenes in which our view of the incident is obscured above the water’s surface by smoke, showing a detailed rendering of the ship suddenly disappearing evokes a sudden feeling of dread.

Due to how Winsor McCay derived the events of the film from newspaper reportings (we can assume this from his career as a newspaper illustrator at the

¹⁴ J.P. Tellote , *Animating Space: From Mickey to WALL-E*, University Press Of Kentucky, 2010. pp. 49

¹⁵ Film Still, *The Sinking Of The Lusitania*, Dir. Winsor McCay. (Universal Films., 1918)

time¹⁶, along with a depiction of himself within the film doing so) it may seem hard to relate this to Oral storytelling but this is not the case. When we reference how the event was recorded, we see in multiple newspaper instances that a lot of the reporting is in recording oral testimony, “In reply to Mr Rose-Innes, witness said he was not aware that two of the boats sank after they reached the water owing to their leaky condition”¹⁷ “We heard a terrible crash. The vessel trembled first, and then listed to one side”¹⁸ “A graphic narrative of the disaster was furnished by Mr Patrick O’Donnell of Dungloe, Co. Donegal, to a representative of the “Daily Express. Mr. O’Donnell who is a merchant in New York, said the first he heard of the disaster was a grating noise followed by a big cloud of smoke and steam.”¹⁹ These are people's recollections of events, stories of the Lusitania sinking. In spite of the close-system nature of written report, the nature of said report allows open-system oral storytelling to survive in a sense. You can argue that this calls in to question if we can consider these recordings “open-system oral stories”, in the same way a folklore tale would be. To recount what we’ve said in chapter 1, Crassi explains, “_It’s destiny was no longer linked to a single creator or storyteller, but to all those who, once having heard the tale, wanted to pass it on. As they did so, they became themselves authors, performing before a new audience another tale, their own, personal version of that already heard. Better or worse, more concise or extended, more entertaining or instructive, a series of versions would gradually have displaced the original”²⁰. The

¹⁶ J. Canemaker, *Windsor McCay: His life and art*. University of California, 2010.

¹⁷ *Captain and crew give evidence at Lusitania sinking inquiry*, The Guardian, 18th Jun 1915.

¹⁸ *How The Great Cunander Went Down*, The Daily Express, 10th May 1915

¹⁹ *How The Great Cunander Went Down*, The Daily Express, 10th May 1915

²⁰ V. Crassi, *The Irish Fairy Tale : A Narrative Tradition from the Middle Ages to Yeats and Stephens*, Rome: John Cabot University, 2012, pp. 7

part that specifically references a lack of specified authorship isn't present as the recounter is specified in recounting their tale; "Mrs Cox , Winnipeg, who is a native of Dublin, and was coming with her seventeen months' old baby on a visit to her friend - - and gave a most interesting account of her dreadful experience to our representative last evening"²¹ . When this aspect is lacking, the system can't really be considered open, and when the system isn't open, does it truly fall under the umbrella of oral storytelling? Maybe not, but the papers have reported many differing perspectives, differing versions of a shared event. If there are many ways of the same event being told, this sounds similar to open-system change. A story without author changing from teller to teller, all the way up to the current day. It may sound like I am arguing against his research, however Crassi writes "However, as mentioned above, the spoken and the written word cannot proceed in separate compartments. They share, in one way or another, a common patrimony, to the degree that nothing prevents their reciprocally influencing each other. This is even more so in those cases in which the bard is also a reader, or when the writer has the possibility of hearing the tale from the living voice of an authentic storyteller"²². An admission that in our modern world of storytelling, where, with social media and instant access to publicly created video, oral and written/animated storytelling can no longer exist separate to each other. Writers (and in MacKays case, animators) will take inspiration from oral tales told to them, and oral storytellers will take on ideas brought to them by animation. This will happen consciously and subconsciously which leads back to how these mediums will serve as mediums to tell historical tales.

²¹ *How The Great Cunander Went Down*, The Daily Express, 10th May 1915

²² V. Crassi, *The Irish Fairy Tale : A Narrative Tradition from the Middle Ages to Yeats and Stephens*, Rome: John Cabot University, 2012, pp.9

What we can say for certain however, is that within these stories can be found aspects that evoke a suspension of disbelief in the same way McCay does in his film. Language that reminds us that these are eyewitness recordings (witness said, we heard, I saw ect.) and thus we treat the text conversationally, this casualty allows us to treat the reports with less scrutiny as we mentally recount the text like we would listening to a friends tall tale. In a sense, this is another form of artistic license, just in a context in which we don't expect it, thus our belief is suspended once more jingoistic language is brought in; “ “No more sea for me” said Davis “I have finished with it. My place in the future is in the trenches to find and punish the race of hell hounds who were responsible for the most cruel, cowardly, and most dastardly outrage on record” His sentiments were heard and shared by others about his table, and from Fridays work there will be many a new soldier in the ranks”²³

The film insists it's retelling is record with it's opening live action segment, intertitles that insist McCay “decides to draw a historical record of the crime that shocked humanity” yet it divulges into propaganda by the end with the final intertile reading; “the man who fired the shot was decorated for it by the Kaiser! - AND YET THEY TELL US NOT TO HATE THE HUN”. For as propagandistic the animation is, it does suggest McCay understands the power of artistic license suspending one's disbelief when engaging with an animated historical narritive.

In Contrast to McCay positioning *The Sinking Of The Lusitania* as an animated record of history, we find *Wolfwalkers* (2021) positioned as an entirely fictional tale, based in a setting that is otherwise historical in foundation.

²³ *How The Great Cunander Went Down*, The Daily Express, 10th May 1915

Wolfwalkers is a tradigital (2D animation created in digital programs, but otherwise animated as if it were using traditional mediums such as pencil and paper) film directed by Tom Moore and Ross Stewart. The film is about two girls from differing backgrounds forming a friendship that ultimately liberates one of them, Robyn, from their oppressive society. The other girl, Mebh is a creature known as wolfwalker. This plot element, by virtue of it's mythological aspect, removes the film from the concept of historical accuracy in it's plot but nonetheless is worth discussing. Whilst not explicitly stated we can assume the wolfwalkers are based on the myth of Laignech Fáelad, a legendary warrior who could transform into a werewolf in the kingdom of Ossory, a kingdom in which modern Kilkenny resides. Go far back enough in Irish history and mythology and history become inseparable. Crassi, in reference to this history states; "despite growing cultural persecution on the part of the invaders, an enormous patrimony of traditional irish tales was conserved, unequaled in the rest of Europe. This patrimony was transmitted particularly in the cottages of the Irish countryside, where tenacious efforts were made to keep alive a glorious past and where storytelling was the only means of preserving an extremely marked sense of identity."²⁴

"Myth is an intrinsic aspect of our understanding of the past, and so cinema should not hide this fact from the audience" argues Mikhail Skoptsov in his essay *Evoking History through Fantasy: Pirates of the Caribbean and the Myths of the Golden Age*²⁵ and it applies here too.

²⁴ V. Crassi, *The Irish Fairy Tale : A Narrative Tradition from the Middle Ages to Yeats and Stephens*, Rome: John Cabot University, 2012, p7.

²⁵ S. L. Mikhail, "Evoking History Through Fantasy" ,*Bringing History to Life Through Film : The Art of Cinematic Storytelling*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 2013. p194.

So how is artistic license granted in how historic elements are depicted in *Wolfwalkers*? Well as previously discussed there are the titular creatures. The wolfwalkers in both human (of which we only see 2, Mebh and her mother) and wolf form are drawn in a style that suggests light pencil work, this contrasts how the townsfolk are drawn, with inky lines that are as bold and thick as their relation to the towns conformity (Guards are very bold, citizens not as much as much as that, ect.) If the plot didn't give it away, the design certainly sells the dichotomy and opposition of these parties. This can even be seen in Robyn and her fathers transition to the wolfwaker lifestyle, they get bitten by the wolves and their lines begin to dissolve. Defined lines are the marker of uniformity and the town, who in the narrative, is the antagonist.



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Fig. 2. Mebh, her mother and the wolves, we can see the similarities in there pencilwork and design motifs such as curves with thin edges. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *The Wolfwalkers* (2021). Directed by Tom Moore and Ross Stewart.

²⁶ Film Still, *Wolfwalkers*, Dir. Tom Moore. Dir. Ross Stewart. (Cartoon Saloon., Apple TV+., 2021)



Fig. 3. Shot from *Wolfwalkers* (2021); Pictured: Robyn and her father, observe the clean, inked “town” linework. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *The Wolfwalkers* (2021). Directed by Tom Moore and Ross Stewart.



Fig. 4. immediately after Robyn is bit, her linework becomes more pencil-like. Notice it’s similarity to the wolves linework. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *The Wolfwalkers* (2021). Directed by Tom Moore and Ross Stewart.

²⁷ Film Still, *Wolfwalkers*, Dir. Tom Moore. Dir. Ross Stewart. (Cartoon Saloon., Apple TV+., 2021)

²⁸ Film Still, *Wolfwalkers*, Dir. Tom Moore. Dir. Ross Stewart. (Cartoon Saloon., Apple TV+., 2021)

Another design choice is the contrast in flowing curves versus thick straight edges. Nature in the story is not only loosely defined like the wolves but the designs of plants and the landscape are built around long flowing curves, these curves are used to give the environment a feeling of depth, something the flat and even shot composition of the town lacks, it's thickly lined cornered shapes representing an immovable, predestined oppression whilst evoking imagery of plantation-town maps. Thus curves become shape language for freedom and liveliness, which then circles back to the curved designs of Mebh, her mother and the wolves.



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Fig. 5. Woodland consists of ill-defined lines, curved arrangements and depth. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *The Wolfwalkers* (2021). Directed by Tom Moore and Ross Stewart.

²⁹ Film Still, *Wolfwalkers*, Dir. Tom Moore. Dir. Ross Stewart. (Cartoon Saloon., Apple TV+, 2021) pp. 29

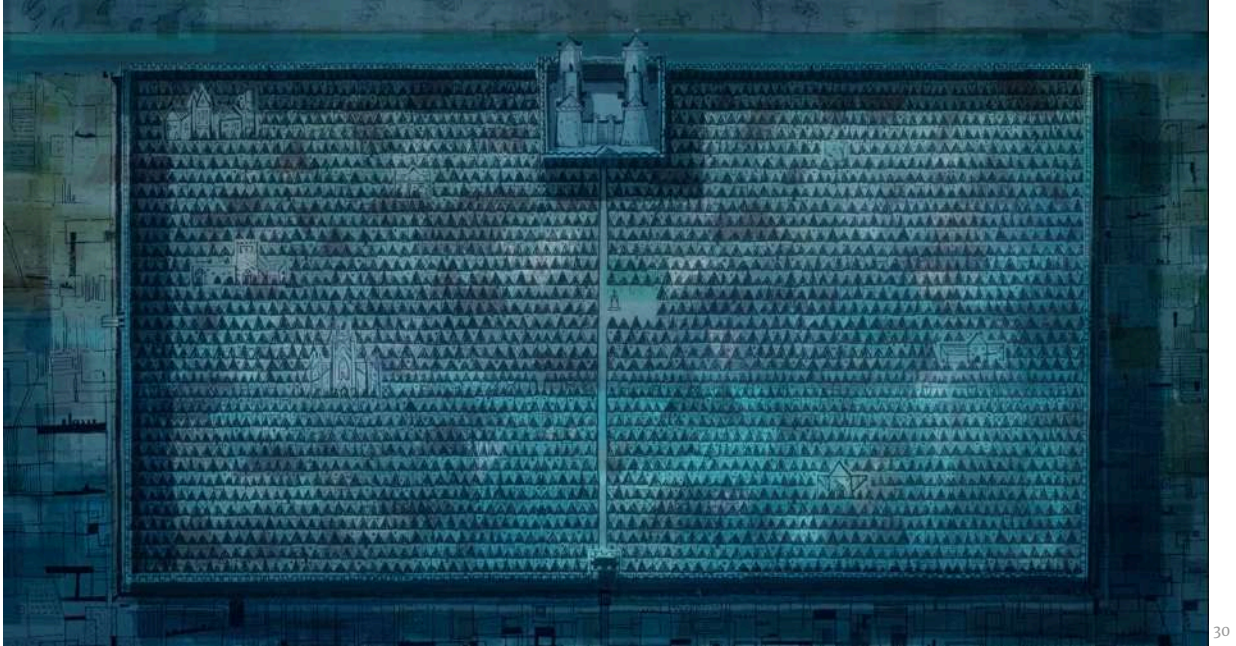


Fig. 6. In contrast to the forest, the town lacks depth and consists of straight edges and sharp angles, evocative of a plantation era town map. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *The Wolfwalkers* (2021). Directed by Tom Moore and Ross Stewart.

³⁰ Film Still, *Wolfwalkers*, Dir. Tom Moore. Dir. Ross Stewart. (Cartoon Saloon., Apple TV+., 2021)



Fig. 7. Section of a town map of Derry-Londonderry from 1622 for comparison. Illustrated by Thomas Raven. Lambeth Palace Library. Image lifted from *Reading the Maps; A Guide To The Irish Historic Maps Atlas* by Jacinta Prunty and H.B. Clarke.

³¹ J. Prunty, H.B. Clarke, *Reading the Maps; A Guide To The Irish Historic Maps Atlas*, Royal Irish Academy, 2011, pp. 199

This can be contrasted by the design of the lord protector whom is near exclusively built of inky sharp lines and pointed angles. He is also very large and square in build, common shape language for a character being inflexible, strong and weightful, therefore imposing.



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Fig. 8. Shot from *Wolfwalkers* (2021); Lord Protector's design consists of thick sharp and defined lines, with shape language that suggests strength and inflexibility. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *The Wolfwalkers* (2021). Directed by Tom Moore and Ross Stewart.

Whilst we're on the subject of the Lord Protector, we should explore how he's depicted in the film's plot. Whilst the name is said aloud we know the Lord Protector to be Oliver Cromwell. Not only is the title of Lord Protector one Cromwell used during his conquest but he often talks about how "I have been sent here the the Lord himself to conquer the wild. And I will show you it can be tamed" a true aspect of his strategy to, according to K.R. Hickey in *A geographical perspective on the decline and extermination of the Irish wolf canis lupus— an initial assessment* "eliminate them from

³² Film Still, *Wolfwalkers*, Dir. Tom Moore. Dir. Ross Stewart. (Cartoon Saloon., Apple TV+., 2021)

the Irish landscape. This was achieved by habitat change particularly deforestation and the creation of new permanent agricultural land, by legislation and the offering of bounties particularly in 1652 and probably aided by the activities of a few professional wolf hunters.”³³ (a roll undertook by Robyns father, Goodfellow, at the beginning of the film). This and the fact he rules over the town intentionally portrays him as an oppressive force. Most Irish people hold an opinion on Cromwell as a violent oppressor, so when the film also depicts him as such, artistic license to do so is granted. Suspension of disbelief is created via an exaggerated portrayal of the historical figure confirming the audience bias. This suspension of disbelief is utilized as the film progresses and the Lord Protector becomes actively antagonistic to the wolfwalkers. He captures and cages Mebhs mother with the intent of public execution as a demonstration of his power. This intent serves a metaphor for Cromwells active slaughter of catholic rebels as a demonstration of his power over the subjected irish, a metaphor that is actively carried by the suspension of disbelief that the wolfwalkers even exist, let alone have only 3 attract the ire of one of Irish history's most vilified figures. Thus when the execution is thwarted by Robyn and Mebh, another English character who embraces the wolfwalker way of life and her native friend, the artistic license granted pays off in the form of catharsis for the audience. On a narrative level our protagonists have reunited and saved the mother from death, embarrassing the antagonist and on a metaphorical level, Cromwells English forces have been rendered inept to deal with two young children. Whilst our belief is suspended, artistic license allows one level to enhance our enjoyment of the other. In the background of the

³³ K.R. Hickey, *A geographical perspective on the decline and extermination of the Irish wolf canis lupus— an initial assessment*, Department of Geography - National University of Ireland - Galway (NUIG), 2007

scene, a tapestry depicting the Lord Protector's victory over the land is destroyed, not only enhancing the victory through the animation but establishing a visual that is contrasted later as the fight against the Lord Protector is taken to the forest.



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Fig. 9. The tapestry mentioned in the above passage, depicting an English soldier defeating a wolf. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *The Wolfwalkers* (2021). Directed by Tom Moore and Ross Stewart.

³⁴ Film Still, *Wolfwalkers*, Dir. Tom Moore. Dir. Ross Stewart. (Cartoon Saloon., Apple TV+, 2021)



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Fig. 10. Shot from *Wolfwalkers* (2021); Goodfellow defeats the Lord Protector, contrasting the tapestry. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *The Wolfwalkers* (2021). Directed by Tom Moore and Ross Stewart.

What happens is that Goodfellow becomes a wolfwalker in an incident similar to Robyn herself at the start of the film and takes on a wolf form to defeat the Lord Protector whom drops himself of a cliff, implicitly to his death (he fades into a foggy abyss surrounded by sharp rocks, never to be seen again). Rather than a tapestry depicting his victory, the reality of the animation has the wolf towering over him, trapped in the wolf's grasp till he falls. In reality historians agree Cromwell died of an illness, in England. However, as the animation has allowed audience to grant the artistic license needed to suspend disbelief, we go along with the outcome of the protagonist defeating the antagonist by embarrassing Irish mythology over English oppression, a once more cathartic moment of victory for our heroes and audience enjoyment of a controversial historical figure meeting their end.

³⁵ Film Still, *Wolfwalkers*, Dir. Tom Moore. Dir. Ross Stewart. (Cartoon Saloon., Apple TV+., 2021)

In the end Robyn, Mebh and their parents ride off with the wolves into a colorfully peaceful wilderness, it is a “happily ever after ending” in spite of the historical reality of what's to come (Cromwells successful deforestation of the land) but as the audience's belief is suspended, we simply do not care and allow ourselves to enjoy the animation as the credits roll.

**Chapter 3: Flee,
Persepolis
And Engaging With Personal Histories.**

So far in this thesis we have explored the idea of Animation and Oral storytelling together suspending our disbelief in order to enhance the telling of a historical narrative. We demonstrated this in highlighting examples found in *The Sinking Of the Lusitania* and *Wolfwalkers*, both of which were depictions of history that the artist creating the film were not present for (for the sake of writing, I have called this “impersonal histories”). Of course, where there are films that construct events based on recorded history disconnected from the project, there are films that directly have a source to the events they depict, and do so through depicting the personal history of the source. These types of film are just as important to our discussion as, whilst they differ in how they deliver a historical narrative, personal histories being more so about depicting specific real-person's journey through what is incidentally a historical event/period rather than either the event itself and/or a fictional narrative set within it, they still produce the effect this thesis is focusing on. That being the suspension of disbelief which enhances our viewership of a historical narrative, which we can then compare to Oral storytelling. Two of these films in particular being *Flee* (2021) and *Persepolis* (2007).

Flee (2021) is an animated film directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen. It follows a man named Amin Nawabi as he discloses his past of fleeing Afghanistan to the films' director in his new home country of Denmark. The film is interesting and vital to this

thesis as it, like *The Sinking of the Lusitania*, positions itself as a documentary. One could argue against the category of film called “animated documentary” by nature of animation not being a recording, depiction that has unavoidably been passed through a humans unique biases rather than that of raw footage. Whilst I understand one is always biased in how they choose to depict an even in drawing, not matter how honest to their experience, due to how *Flee* presents it’s information I don't agree that the medium diminishes it’s documenterical capacity . In the case of *Flee* we can excuse it’s use of artistic license more liberally than a propaganda piece as it does truly demonstrate an attempt at honesty, It includes not only Amins lived experience (unlike McCay who we assume took all his information from newspapers as he was known to work at a publication but we have no evidence he interviewed anyone during his films development), but also archival footage of the historical events and settings Amin describes, there also isn’t an obviously propogandistic slant to it, it asks us to consider the plight of the refugee over hatred toward an enemy force, no one asks to “hate the hun”. As Paul Wells puts it in describing the art direction of Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) “Indeed, the very subjectivity involved in producing animation, as it is played out through the mediums intrinsic capability to resist realism, means that any aspiration towards suggesting reality in animation becomes difficult to execute. For example, the intention to create ‘documentary’ in animation is inhibited by the fact that the medium cannot be objective. Having said that, the medium does enable the film-maker to more persuasively show ‘subjective reality’ ”³⁶ by virtue of the medium, animation has to take on a certain amount of artistic freedom and subjectivity in order to be produced at all.

³⁶ P. Wells, *Understanding Animation*, Leicester: De Monfort University, 1998, pp. 34-36

The formatting of the narrative as an interview being told to us over several days and inclusion of live-action archival footage holds interest as, at first, it seems like it is trying to maintain material reality, to avoid it's own nature as animated film that utilizes the medium's ability to suspend our disbelief, to be taken as "seriously" as live-action documentary (possibly contributing to the films themes of admitting aspects of yourself society fails to take seriously such as being a refugee in europe or gay in 90's Taliban-controlled Afghanistan) Nonetheless the suspension still takes place, but not through what the animation portrays but by a contrasting the inherent unreality of an animated visual with cuts to documentary footage and audio from Amins real interview. Rather than process the cognitive dissonance of these elements, we as audience avoid that exercise in order to follow the narrative and thus, from contrast is born suspension.

With this in mind we should discuss specific design elements and moments within *Flee* that cause this effect. The movie opens with a shot of people escaping war, gunfire, screaming and an understated violin score can be heard as sketchy-undefined figures run in panic. After the title card the interview begins, Amin is shown positioning himself before a camera in front of a patterned background, listening to the interviewers instructions. The acting is stilted, calm and professional in tone. There is no non-diegetic music and Amin is rendered in a style that observes the laws of light (he has shadows and highlights in accordance to where light is coming from) with defined lines in how he is drawn. In contrasting this with what we saw before, the rendering style of the interview is positioned as the style of "reality", we even discover the "pattern" behind him is from a carpet he is laying on top of, the seemingly abstract setting becomes a prop grounded in material reality. changes in

rendering style becoming that of imagination, as we see in scenes where Amin is too young to properly remember or is visualizing something being explained to him. Therefore when scenes of the past are depicted in the reality-style, backed up by the aforementioned archival footage of the times and places he describes, we suspend our disbelief in possible biases as we take the style to signify a moment as real, which allows an enhanced feeling of empathy to Amin's struggle. This extends into how the audience invests in present-Amin's struggle with being open with his husband, these scenes feel real to the audience as we've been signified that the style the scenes take place in are that of real/material reality. Only occasionally does the reality-style do something that is obviously not-real, which in every case is a repeated visual gag of attractive masculine men in the media winking at Amin, however these gags are only used to mean one thing and in one way (Amin is gay, thinking about men is one of the few ways he finds levity in his harsh reality in spite of the implicit homophobia that surrounds him) and thus don't threaten the style's position as a signifier of reality.

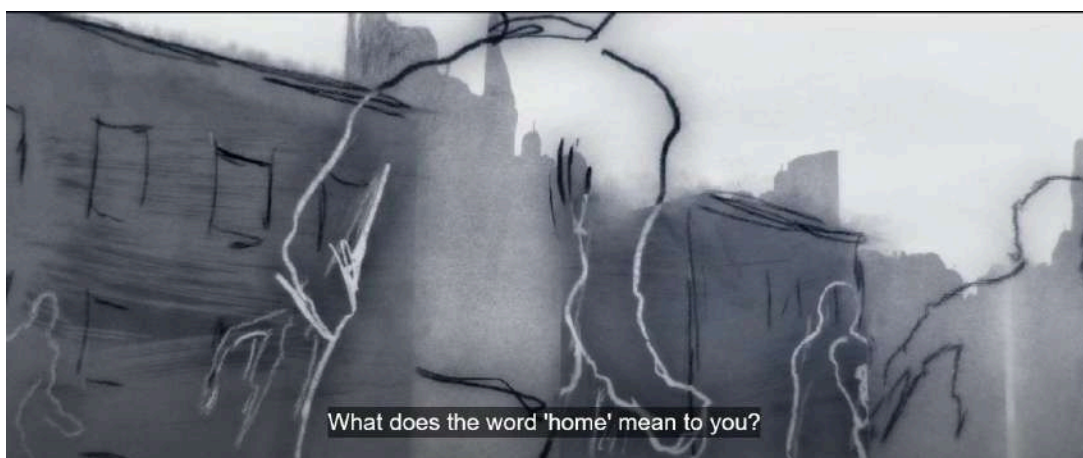
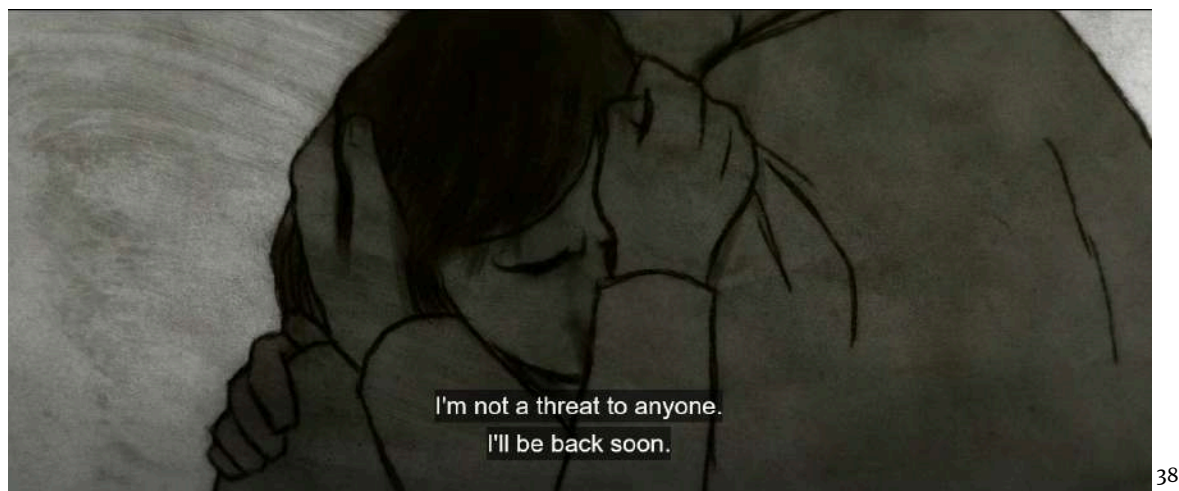


Fig. 11. Shot from the opening scene of *Flee* (2021), the scene is sketchy and undefined, it isn't a moment happening in reality but communicating that the film will be about the hardship of fleeing home.

³⁷ Film Still, *Flee*, Dir. Jonas Poher Rasmussen. (Vice Studios., Sun Creature Studio., Neon., 2021)

Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *Flee*(2021). Directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen.



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Fig. 12. Amin is told the story of his fathers arrest, it is not Amins reality so it's depicted in the sketchy style of the opening. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *Flee*(2021). Directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen.



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Fig. 13. Amin being interviewed with a typical “head and shoulders” shot we’re used to seeing in documentaries, an instance of “reality style”. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film

³⁸ Film Still, *Flee*, Dir. Jonas Poher Rasmussen. (Vice Studios., Sun Creature Studio., Neon., 2021)

³⁹ Film Still, *Flee*, Dir. Jonas Poher Rasmussen. (Vice Studios., Sun Creature Studio., Neon., 2021)

Flee(2021). Directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen.



Fig. 14. Amin's past is rendered in the "reality style". Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *Flee*(2021). Directed by Jonas Poher Rasmussen.

Whilst *Flee* suspends our disbelief by establishing a style of reality, *Persepolis* (2007), directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud does so through more established methods mentioned before. The film is an adaptation of a book series by the same name written by Satrapi which is a biographical comic of her life till 1996, which incidentally captures the lives of women in Iran growing more and more oppressed by the post-revolution government of the time. Whilst this is an adaptation

⁴⁰ Film Still, *Flee*, Dir. Jonas Poher Rasmussen. (Vice Studios., Sun Creature Studio., Neon., 2021)

of a book series, unlike our other 3 films who's screenplays were made for-film, It is worth noting that with Satrapi directing both, the film remains within the sphere of a personal history being the driving factor in how history in the film is sourced. (You could argue that *Persepolis* is both an adaptation and not one by virtue of the author retelling her story as a director)

Satrapi's choice to direct an adaptation of her own biography places her in the position of subject and artist, the rolls of Amin and Poher Rasmussen respectively to draw a comparison to *Flee*. For the sake of further discussion, we will use Satrapi to discuss her as a director, writer and artist, and use "Marji" (as she is addressed in the film) to specify her as the film character.

When it comes to how *Persepolis* suspends our disbelief, the most obvious means in which it does so is via the nature of it's art style. The first element worth discussing would be the lack of colour. Outside of opening, ending and 1 scene mid film it is solely rendered in black and white, with the exception that the coloured scenes only signifying a scene as happening in the present airport from where Marji recollects her experience. The back and white's visual contrast is reminiscent of a monotone photograph from before-colour photography despite colour photographs existing decades before the films events. Nonetheless the montototality suggests a past that, whilst still in living memory, hails from a long-gone historic age. This divorces the audience from a need to view the history as recent and we're able to suspend our disbelief as we see the history play out on screen but through the eyes of "this was ages ago, nothing I can do now" which is then contrasted in the few shots we do get of the modern airport. Both *Persepolis* and *Flee* use colour to signify material reality but where *Flee* uses it throughout its run to confirm events as real, *Persepolis*

uses it as an unspoken twist, to remind the audience how we view the past shouldn't stop us from considering how recent Marji's past is, even if it is a black and white photo in our minds. Then again, the Black and white presentation could be symbolic of how long troubles within Iran have been going for and/or simply just their to be evocative of the comics art style. However these arguments are an Occams razor that dismisses a greater reading of the works themes and messages, like saying Daisy's (from *The Great Gatsby*) green light is just a light that's green. What survives through all these interpretations however, is a demonstration of disbelief being suspended in a manner which enhances our enjoyment and enhancement of *Persepolis*' historic elements.

The Monotone style does more than simply suggest the past however, and in ways that elevates our engagement even further. Black and White are not only known for how effectively they contrast each other, but also in how they simplify whatever subject is being depicted, possibly to the point of inseparability from another, similar subject. This is something Satrapi demonstrates clear understanding of in how she visually represents the veil. The veil is never shown to have any line-art within it's borders, only black negative space, this is used to symbolize the stripping of individuality by the government as, once the veil is on, character designs immediately become harder to distinguish. This visual representation of a lack of individuality is then pushed further as veiled women occasionally fuse into a single shape. In one scene where Marji is pursued by the morality police, four women drawn as a black mass with for necks for each head, contrasts Marji who, whilst also veiled, is wearing a white jacket, her individuality splitting her from the nagging mass. This signifies to the audience that, once the individuality is stripped from the women of Iran, they're

just another cog in the oppressive machine that seeks to incorporate Marji, something that occasionally happens as she becomes suffocated by her surroundings. Of course we as the audience know the world doesn't become a black mass that aims to target and dissolve a specific anyone, but as our belief is suspended by the simplistic contrast in black and white we immediately pick up on this metaphor, enhancing our viewership of the film.

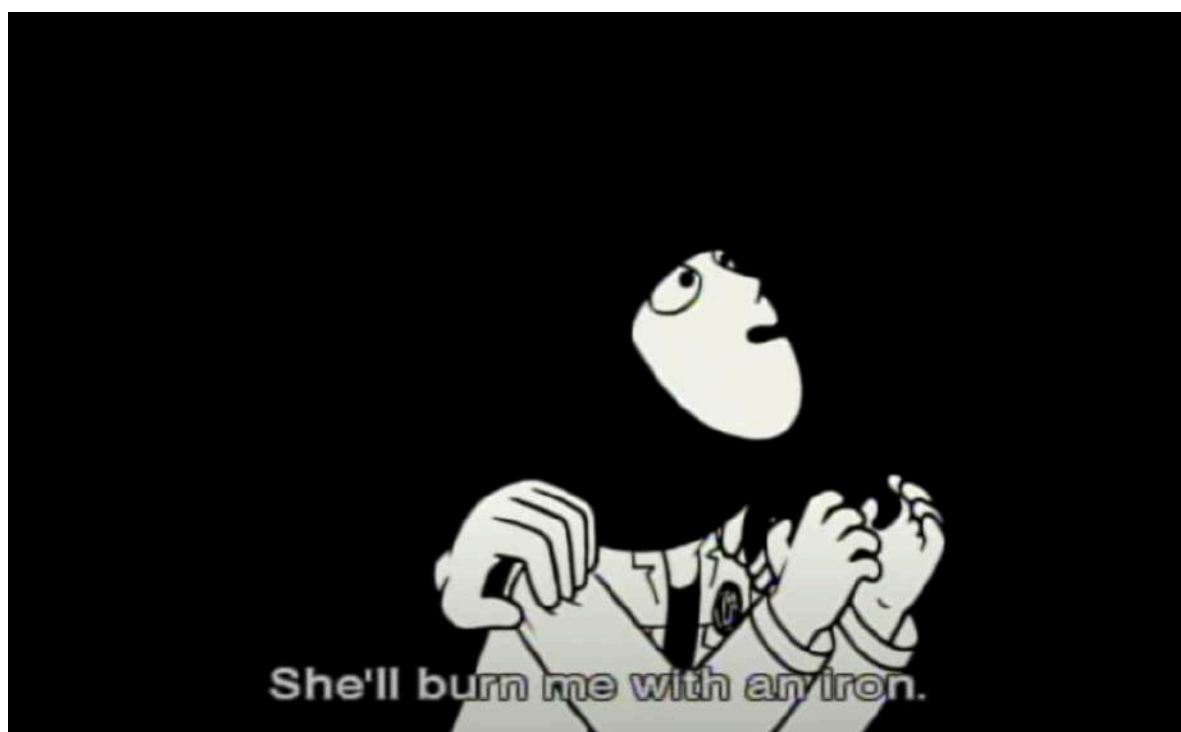


Fig. 15. Marji's jacket is the only thing splitting her from blending into the background entirely, meanwhile the veil around her head is actually causing this effect. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *Persepolis*(2007). Directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud.

We are able to go along with this depiction of the veil through another design element that suspends our disbelief, the simplistic line-art. It's simplicity is evocative of childhood drawing. Not only does the connection to childhood emphasize the

⁴¹ Film Still, *Persepolis*, Dir. Marjane Satrapi. Dir. Vincent Paronnaud (Celluloid Dreams., Sony Pictures Classics., 2007)

feelings of the past we've already discussed but it also evokes the suspension of disbelief as the style is used to depict the world worsening around Marji. The subjects are grim, but as a child you need to view the world in a way in which such horrors are digestible if you want to survive, and thus the audience does so too, making the moments in which Marji dream of God less ridiculous, as on top of the scenes taking place in a dream (a space we immediately know to suspend our disbelief in, due to our knowledge of dream-space not being material reality) they are rendered in the same simple childlike style. When eventually we do start seeing more horrific imagery in this style, our suspension of disbelief is momentarily shattered and we are brought back to reality by the powerful contrast in subject versus artstyle.

The line-art only changes twice and, like in *Flee*, its for moments where Marji isn't present, when she listens to her fathers stories. These tails are rendered in an iconic paper-cutout style that emphasizes the fiction of the moment, and allows for some humor in how the historical stories are depicted as childhood tales of whimsy, and suggests Marji's father may not be telling us the whole story. Interestingly however is that we as the audience go along with these stories, whilst they're more obviously fictional, they are a story within the story, animation within the animation. Our belief is suspended by other aspects of the films animation so, for as silly as it is,

we go along with what Marji's father is telling her and don't question it.

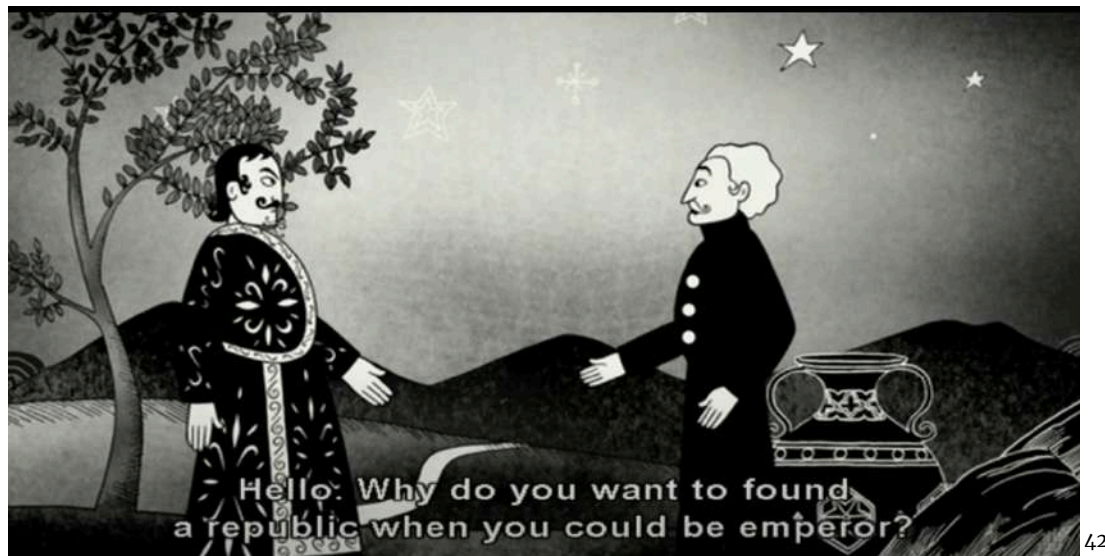


Fig. 16. The shift in artstyle to something puppet-like suggests a naivety to the story Marji is engaging with. Screenshot taken by thesis author Sean O Boyle of the film *Persepolis* (2007). Directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud.

Whilst *Persepolis* and *Flee* vary in their storytelling, they share a place in the discussion of how Animated film compares to Oral storytelling in depicting historical narratives. These films are personal histories, unlike *The Sinking of The Lusitania* and *Wolfwalkers* they have a historical source in someone who was actually present in the moment depicted, both of whom are still alive at the time of writing this thesis. This person gives it a more realistic and detailed depiction of the reality of the time than what we would get from *Wolfwalkers* as one is a history and the other a fictional tale within a historical setting. The nature of having a primary source recount their experience also divorces it of the propagandistic slant found in *The Sinking Of The*

⁴² Film Still, *Persepolis*, Dir. Marjane Satrapi. Dir. Vincent Paronnaud (Celluloid Dreams., Sony Pictures Classics., 2007)

Lusitania (It could be argued the newspaper McCay presumably used to research his films events were also primary sources, but as this is a presumption we could also argue otherwise). As demonstrated earlier by quoting the *The Daily Express*, primary accounts have the capacity to be just as jingoistic as any other source, “I have finished with it. My place in the future is in the trenches to find and punish the race of hell hounds who were responsible for the most cruel, cowardly, and most dastardly outrage on record”⁴³ but *Flee* and *Persepolis* do avoid the issue in their sources not approaching their recounts with intent of comendating any side of the conflicts they experienced. Once again we find issue in the fact that these personal histories go against the element of open-system storytelling that could link them to Oral storytelling. In discussing *The Sinking Of The Lusitania* we reconciled this with the conclusion that given the events were reported on by multiple various perspectives who McCay could’ve based his adaptation on, that we could consider it open-system as these multiple perspectives make up the whole story, lacking a single author by virtue of many, and has resulted in the story changing as it’s been passed down from one storyteller to the next akin to open-system narrative evolution. This doesn’t work out as well when applied to *Flee* and *Persepolis* as they are very much coming from a named perspective, marked makership (authorship in the case of Satrapi) and alive one’s at time, their stories haven’t been passed down with time, they still own it. If these animated films stand as perfect examples of closed system storytelling then we’d need to look elsewhere in discussing their relationship with oral storytelling.

Perhaps we don't need to, maybe we can accept that whilst there are demonstrable similarities between animation and oral storytelling, these films are not

⁴³ *How The Great Cunander Went Down*, *The Daily Express*, 10th May 1915

examples of such but where their similarities lack, their contrast in relation to depicting historical narratives still demonstrates an enhancement in depicting historical narratives, after all, both films contain instances of oral storytelling, in the way we've established, in them.

As an example we'll revisit the end of our exploration of *Persepolis* visual methodologies in creating the suspension of disbelief. That portion of the thesis ended with a brief mention of when the line-artstyle changes. In every instance of it, it happens when an Oral story is being spoken to Marji. First her fathers story of how the Shah came to be, The artstyle in question is more iconic than that used to depict the real world of Marji's memories and animates in a cutout/puppetry style, unlike the real world which goes for a frame-by-frame (movement being created by new sequential drawings) approach. Aesthetically it comes across as simplistic, childish and fanciful. This causes the audience to question the intent of Marji's father in this moment, is he being malicious in how he describes the past or is he just catering a complex history to be digestible for a young child in the form of oral-story. Either way he is, demonstrating the power of oral storytelling to enhance his childs engagement with a historical narrative, the fact the art style changes at all in accordance to what Satrapi remembers, rather than remaining in the moment of her father speaking at her, is proof of this. The demonstration of Oral storytelling capacity to suspend our disbelief via animations ability to do so.

Animation serving as an enhancement to oral storytelling is, arguably, the basis on which *Flee* was made. Discussing whether a spoken account of one's personal history counts as oral storytelling asides, what happens in *Flee* isn't the journey of Amin, but his recount of that journey to the director. According to a press release for

the film, wrote and distributed ahead of the film's premier at the 2021 Sundance, the interviews Amin undertakes in the film are reflective of the actual film's development. According to Jonas Poher Rasmussen "Having made radio documentaries before, I used the interviewing technique I've employed for years, in which subjects lie down and close their eyes, remembering how things looked and smelled and felt, so their memories become strong and immediate as though they were unfurling in the present tense" "Over the course of three or four years, we did more than a dozen interviews together, each one stemming from an initial three-day session where Amin poured out his life story in often graphic and heartbreaking detail"⁴⁴ In animating Amin's oral history, his story exists in closed medium to be preserved and shared forevermore, enhanced by the visuals as discussed earlier in this chapter. Revisiting Crassi's assessment on modern oral storytelling, the statement "*the spoken and the written word cannot proceed in separate compartments. They share, in one way or another, a common patrimony, to the degree that nothing prevents their reciprocally influencing each other. This is even more so in those cases in which the bard is also a reader, or when the writer has the possibility of hearing the tale from the living voice of an authentic storyteller.*" that we used earlier in this thesis rings truer than ever in the case of *Flee*. The writer (in this case, director) has heard the tale of our storyteller and has from such produced a work in which Oral storytelling and animation share a common patrimony that goes on to enhance the historical narrative that is Amin's experience.

⁴⁴ L. Hancock-Piper, L. Snapper, *Flee wip-press-notes*, Perthfestival.com.au, 2021. https://www.perthfestival.com.au/media/rimnoogc/flee-__wip-press-notes.pdf , Accessed 16 Feb 2024.

This is evident in how for the films credits, Amin is given one as assistant screenwriter⁴⁵, not just interviewees.

⁴⁵ L. Hancock-Piper, L. Snapper, *Flee wip-press-notes*, Perthfestival.com.au, 2021. https://www.perthfestival.com.au/media/rimnoogc/flee-__wip-press-notes.pdf , Accessed 16 Feb 2024.

Conclusion.

This thesis began stating “**through Animations design elements, depictions of historical narratives are enhanced by this artistic license, in a manner comparable to Oral storytellings ability to do so.**” With the idea that “comparable” would mean, in the eyes of the author, one for one similarity. Through writing, researching and re-assessing the works chosen to analyze in thesis however, the thesis ends with a conclusion which is similar to that initial idea, but significantly different. The constant through-line that distributed the idea of exact similarities was the conflict between the open-system nature of Oral storytelling and my chosen films. Of course the nature of animation as a medium means it could never have been considered an open system but even when we bypass that aspect and tried to apply it to the historical sources that the films were based upon instead of the medium, the conflict still arose. *Wolfwalkers* got away with it as it’s story focused more so on it’s folklore, an historical phenomenon closely founded within the canon of oral-storytelling. It’s historic elements are found within it’s setting and inspiration for it’s main villain of it’s ultimately fictional story, rather than attempting a depiction of an historic event. We had to argue the open-ness of *The Sinking Of The Lusitania* by stretching what counts and backing it with an academic quote stating the impossibility of purely (as in, divorced from influence from other mediums) oral-storytelling in the modern world but were unable to apply this to the “modern personal histories” of *Flee* and *Persepolis*.

Whilst this may come across as the author failing to prove his thesis statement, it’s merely a case of a single aspect of medium specificity being in contrast. As stated

in chapter 1 the mediums of animation and Oral storytelling share in other aspects that are critical to the thesis statement, those being the suspension of disbelief required to engage with the mediums and how the artistic license applied in creating narratives within these mediums automatically grant this. This is of course critical as, when focusing on this similarity, we're able to unify all four films in a relationship with oral storytelling in a manner that is demonstrable and effective. When artistic license allows storytellers to make oral or visual choices that suspend our disbelief, the story in question is enhanced. In the case of historical narratives we're inclined to go along with whatever inconsistencies may exist in the process of filmmaking, we become further engrossed in the artistry of the animated work and as result, empathize greater with the subjects of the film and engage with the history around them to a greater degree than live action may allow.

The author acknowledges that there are some limitations to this thesis. In discussing depictions of history one is tempted to spend more time tangentially spelling about the historic subjects depicted, informative but ultimately diluting and possibly missing the point of the thesis. In avoiding this dilution however the author feels anxious of missing vital points or context, information that could reshape their understanding of the films discussed. One could infer that the authors praise of artistic license stands as approval in misrepresenting history in the name of animation or commendation of the use of animation in the pursuit of propaganda, *The Sinking of the Lusitania* ends on a rather jingoistic note after all. If this is the case then it should be made clear that this isn't the author's intent. McCays depiction of the titular tragedy arguably brings justice and exposure to a disaster he was encouraged to downplay by his newspaper editor but unfortunately also captures the

jingoistic attitude towards war at the time. This isn't the impression one gets watching *Flee* or *Persepolis* however as Poher Rasmussen depicts the tragedy of Amins early life without calling for a certain side to "win" the conflict he flees from, only depicting his desire to find peace. Satrapi on the other hand depicts all of the fighting present in her life as unjust, be it Marji and her friends play-fighting/torturing to make sense of the world, her parents friends accounts of the torture faced in prison or the violence inflicted first by the Shah then the cultural revolution. Whilst the suspension of disbelief created by the artistic license given to these films could be used with pointed effect, to use this power for propaganda lies ultimately in the hands of who creates the power. The artists behind the films must choose to harness artistic license for artistic or malicious intent. Which is what this thesis ultimately is, an acknowledgement of this power but also an appeal to a non-propagandistic use of said power by demonstrating films that do otherwise, to use this power to enhance historical narratives. To, like with historical narratives in oral-storytelling, further engage the audience in the history being depicted and thus, invite us to empathize and understand these moments in time to greater effect.

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