

María Lorenzo Hernández

Through the Looking Glass

The Self-Portrait of the Artist and the Re-Start of Animation

Originally, the self-portrait was a pictorial subgenre of portrayal, in which the artists became the model for their own paintings. However, it is also present in mediums such as cinema, when directors appear in their films, from ephemeral manifestations, like the Hitchcockian cameo performance, to the assumption of a protagonist role like Takeshi Kitano in *Takeshis'* (2005). Equally, the self-representation of animators establishes a privileged association between the artist and the animated film – a *fabricated* world that depends on its creator and demiurge. Moreover, self-representation has accompanied key moments in animation history, such as the early endowment of comic strip characters with motion. Here, the animated self-caricature of pioneering American animators is often apparent, and, in a more contemporary context, the advent of CGI has established new relationships between authors and their 'creatures' in a virtual environment.

The first self-portraits of animators, notably Winsor McCay in the live action scenes of *Little Nemo* (1911) and *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), helped to position the audience towards a new form of entertainment, as well as to consolidate the emerging profession of animator. Though these films were midway between comedy and documentary genres, the appearance of the draftsmen in their own films soon evolved to become a standardized representation, a stereotype for animated comedy, where the now *fictional* author is embedded in the cartoon universe, as in the Fleisher Brothers' series *Out of the Inkwell* (1921-1927) or Guido Manuli's short film *Solo un bacio* (1983). More recently, the self-portrayal of animators has recovered autobiographical aspects, due to a renewed interest in animation as a means to express more serious concerns.

Despite excellent studies on interactivity, intertextuality and self-reflectivity in animation, such as Lindvall and Melton's essay "Towards a post-modern animated discourse: Bakhtin, intertextuality and the cartoon carnival" (1997), the self-portrayal of animators is under-addressed in Animation Studies. This article will consider the animated autoportrait from an interdisciplinary point of view, relating it to both painting and literature. Equally, the relationships between animators and their own representations will be elucidated by considering self-portrayal in Jacques Derrida's prominent essay *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (*Mémoires d'aveugle: L'autoportrait et autres ruines*, 1990), in which he formulates the *Abocular Hypothesis*; that is, the self-portrait as a ghosted image between artists and their reflection, or a falsification of the self, because artists cannot look directly at themselves while painting, but rather to a reduplicating object and remaining necessarily blind for themselves (1990, p. 44).

Following this premise, this paper will analyze three study cases that illustrate the progressive *construction*, *disarticulation*, and *re-assembling* of the author's image in the history of animated film: Winsor McCay's seminal self-representation of the animator in *Little Nemo*; Chris Landreth's questioning of the fictional author at the emergence of 3-D animation in *the end.* (1995); and the restitution of personal concerns in the animator's self-portrait, detached from the dialogue with Ryan Larkin in Chris Landreth's *Ryan* (2004).

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1. The Early *Making Of* and the Paradigm of Author

If a portrait consists of the graphical depiction of a personality, looking for a physical and/or intellectual resemblance, the self-portrait embodies another dimension, since model and portrayer are the same person. In opposition to commissioned works, self-portrayal is almost exclusively aimed at satisfying the artists' wishes, representing the author's explicit mood, or a demonstration of special skills. Therefore, autoportrayal has evolved enormously over the last five centuries, according to the consideration of the artist's role in society and their autonomy as creators.

During the Renaissance, painters such as Durer or Hans Holbein used to portray their customers from a professional point of view, often introducing into the picture specific tools related to their career, or clothes that reflected their social status. These objects became the visual attributes of the portrayed person. For instance, a compass and a map would be the symbols for a navigator, but also for an astronomer, depending on the model's clothes. Undoubtedly, such a rhetorical resource was inherited from Classic and Medieval times, when it was necessary to characterize mythological and religious characters through their iconographical attributes, i.e. Hercules' helmet made of a lion's skin, or Saint Peter holding the keys to Heaven. Equally, the self-depiction of painters originated in the Renaissance (and became consolidated during the Baroque period) was conditioned by their professional view, resulting in a specific iconography, with the artist's workshop as the background. This resulted in the fashioning of an idealistic image of artists, who often appeared in the act of painting themselves at the easel, looking to the front as if they were studying their reflection on an imaginary mirror.

In the case of animators, their early self-portraits tended to exclude personal aspects to centre attention on their professional exercise, with the animation studio as the scenery and the making of a cartoon as the main plot, which generates a noticeable self-reflectivity. This section will illustrate the construction of the professional paradigm of animators at the beginning of the twentieth century, considering Winsor McCay's movie *Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonist of the N.Y. Herald and His Moving Comics* (1911) – best known as *Little Nemo*.

Nowadays, *Little Nemo* can be regarded as a stylized "Making Of," or, a selective representation of animation making processes aimed to create even more fascination for the final product. Winsor McCay, who had a reputation as a newspaper cartoonist and as vaudeville performer, becomes the protagonist of the live action footage that embraces, like a chrysalis, the mesmerizing final animation scenes. *Moving Comics*, as the first title of the film proposes, is a pioneering definition for animation that established an inflexion point between press cartoons and this emerging art.

As someone must turn the camera's handle, filmic self-portrait entails the fact that someone else must shoot the footage. In *Little Nemo*, for example, live action scenes were filmed by J. Stuart Blackton. However, McCay uses the camera as an object that duplicates his image, not unlike the painters forced to look at themselves on a mirror while painting their autoportraits. In both cases, the result is an idealistic construction or simulation. In *Little Nemo*, the scenery, the development of the plot and, above all, McCay's self-presentation as an animator-and-gentleman, were specifically thought to legitimate animation as a precious, unique and skilful career.

Little Nemo is the tale of a challenge. The film starts with the following statement: "Winsor McCay agrees to make four thousand pen drawings that will move, one month from date." Noticeably, it says, "drawings that will move" – but not *characters that will become alive*. The animator is not an alchemist, nor an obscure wizard, but rather a theatrical prestidigitator. McCay

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plays the lead role, presenting himself as an artist able to draw large amounts of material, making it evident that animation is a time-intensive activity that demands patience and great talent, though the results only last for a few seconds. From the beginning of the film, McCay makes it explicit that animation is a demanding task, but he does this labour *elegantly*, quickly, and apparently effortlessly. McCay works between jokes and bets, surrounded by other gentlemen in the club; in this scene, close-up shots focus on McCay rapidly drawing the four characters for the animated cartoon, because this exhibition of his skills as a draftsman is an essential part of the film audience's entertainment, as in his own vaudeville show "The Seven Ages of Man" (1906).

After having demonstrated his gift for caricaturing, in the following scene McCay demonstrates his perseverance working at his studio. McCay does not only show himself *being*, he also shows himself *making*, suggesting an allegory of animation: the animator seems absorbed by his labour, while hundreds of drawings are piled on his desk. In the meantime, several workers enter carrying tons of paper and ink barrels. Those hyperboles, though comical, are destined to underline the effort required in the production of animation, which becomes an iconic image of animation production; a stereotype that, despite the use of new technologies, is still valid in a contemporary context. Other comedic situations come from the interaction with secondary characters, such as McCay's young assistant, who wants to flip the drawings on the Mutoscope, a rotating drum. The presence of technological elements like this testing machine or the cinematographic film camera in the following scene are part of the iconography of early animation, as much as the easel or the canvas are for painting, and is aimed at getting the audience familiarized with this new form of art.

Although the film is true to reality by exhibiting the development of animation production, the process that makes drawings move (shooting them with a camera) actually remains hidden, increasing its mystery through a purposeful strategy of revealing-and-concealing animation tricks. After one month, the promised 4000 drawings are ready to be shot, but, instead of witnessing how animation is recorded, the audience will directly see the resultant film. The animated scene works here as a Derridean conjecture of pictures as a *blind object* that only exists for the eyes of the viewer (1990, p. 63). Since McCay deliberately withholds the depiction of the shooting process, the eyes of the audience figuratively replace the camera when they view the finished animated scene, metaphorically becoming the mould where the illusion of movement is forged.

However, this blind object – animation – results in a universe with noticeable autonomy, where characters enter the frame in genuine *animated* ways, by joining body pieces, or created from a myriad of floating lines; this is how the young Nemo appears on the screen. Furthermore, this environment shows a tendency towards self-reflectivity, echoing their author's creative activity. Nemo, the most human-like character, holds a certain control over the other animation creatures in the diegetic world, squashing and stretching them like reflections in a distorting mirror. Moreover, Nemo himself is *an animator*; he makes the Princess of Slumberland, come to life from the lines he has drawn onto the blank space, prefiguring a convention that would become central in the cartoon universe: simulations such as drawings, models or reflections can be eventually endowed with the *anima* – the spark of life – within the animated fiction.

McCay's self-representation assimilates two traditions: on one hand, vaudeville's code of appearing with theatrical costume is aimed "to promote the illusion that the animator is a magician" (Crafton, 1982, p. 57). On the other hand, when the film shows McCay working at his studio, it anticipates the future symbolic image of animators, who will generally appear developing their creative tasks. No personal effects are depicted in this autoportrait, save those pertaining to his career exercise and to his excellence in the development of his art, making the

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film a piece of self-advertising. Ultimately, *Little Nemo* cannot be categorized in a middle position between documentary and fantasy film, since it generates something new, an unexpected product detached from Baudrillard's evil seduction of images: the truth absorbing the potency of falseness produces the *simulation* (1983, p. 7), in this case, a false documentary, or, more properly, a *documentary fable*.

2. The Animated Animator and the Death of the Author

Although the interaction between creators and their animated characters soon became stereotypical in the cartoon world, though often relegated to the position of absurd comedies, the presence of authors in their own films generally hints to a sort of Metaphysics (of Comedy), since thinking about creators of fiction can be a metaphor of thinking about our own 'Creators;' the philosophical and even religious dimensions are inherent to this cliché. The interaction of the draftsman with his creatures parodies the relation between God and human beings, as well as legendary human creations like the Golem, or pseudo-scientific attempts like Paracelsus' Homunculus, were degraded images of the Divine Creation. As in those myths, the re-animated being would immediately start a rivalry with his animator, not unlike Dr. Frankenstein's creature, demanding dignity and autonomy from the Modern Prometheus.

The animated cartoon has echoed this Promethean conflict between creatures and their authors. For instance, Ko-ko the Clown continually mocks director Max Fleisher in the *Out of the Inkwell* series, blurring the limits between the real and the imaginary. Animation becomes a heterogeneous, hyperreal¹ space wherein the self-representation of cartoonists is, in Derridean terms, emerging *from* a frame, and *within* the frame (1990, p. 92), like the hand of the animator in films such as *La Sexilinea* (Osvaldo Cavaldoni, 1977) or *Manipulation* (Daniel Greaves, 1991). Moreover, the presence of *animated animators* in their own fictional universe transforms them into fictional authors, alienated from the *real* author. Ultimately, the self-portrait of animators does not vindicate their demiurge-like supremacy of creators, but rather exposes their limitations, especially when they are scorned by their creatures. In this way, it can be said that the questionability of authors – or, as expressed by Barthes, their death – is the ironic consequence of authors' self-consciousness during the twentieth century.

Furthermore, the *animated animators* precede the advent of the hyperreal from the beginning of that century, indeed, from the beginning of film animation. As Alan Cholodenko appreciates, "insofar as animation has to do with endowing with life and with motion, it bears a privileged relation to the beginning" (2000, p. 9). This way, the fantasy of the beginning, or rather re the reanimation of an existing situation, is inseparable from the notion of authorship, resulting in the periodical return of animation to self-reflective aspects.

Let us return to a literary precedent that demonstrates the astonishing balance between the early twentieth century and its end. Many decades before features such as *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) or *Stranger Than Fiction* (Marc Foster, 2006) were filmed, the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno published his most disrupting book, the meta-novel *Mist* (*Niebla*, 1914). Its open-structured narration attempted to create a new genre, called *nivola*, where philosophical reflection prevailed over narration, pointing to the limits of fiction instead of hiding its framework. The book relates how Augusto Pérez acquires a consciousness of reality through a series of unfavourable experiences. When, after a humiliating mismatch, he decides to kill

¹ In the opinion of Jean Baudrillard, the real does not vanishes to favor the imaginary, but rather to increase the "more real than the real: the hyperreal". Equally, simulation is "truer than the truth" (1983, p. 9).

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himself, he travels to Salamanca to meet his admired writer – no other than Miguel de Unamuno himself – to ask him why he should continue to live. The writer replies as follows (Unamuno, 1914: 261):

– Well; dear Augusto, the truth is – I said to him using my sweetest voice –, that you cannot kill yourself because you are not alive, and that you are neither alive nor dead because you don't exist...

– That I don't exist? – he cried.

– No, you just exist as a fictional being; poor Augusto, you are nothing but a product from my fantasy and those of my readers that read the tale of your pretended adventures and misfortunes, as I have written them; you're nothing but the character from a novel, or a *nivola*, or however you wish to call it. Now you know your secret. (trans. a.)

At the climax, the fictional character demands to rule his own destiny, or, in other words, be the author of his own ending. When Augusto returns home, he submits to an absurd death, killing himself by eating too much. The reader cannot discern if his passing away was accidental or purposely executed; moreover, Unamuno does not cast any light on this mystery, since he is just another character from the book, spreading even more confusion about the novel's outcome.

Anticipating Roland Barthes' conclusions in "Death of the Author," Unamuno's dialogue with Augusto points to a third maker: "those of my readers that read the tale of your pretended adventures" (1914, p. 261). Nonetheless, this ultimate 'shaper' is not the reader as an individual (as the writer is) but always a group because their multiple, divided, multiform fantasy has made Augusto true. For Unamuno, fictional beings acquired a life of their own, not unlike Don Quixote and Sancho Panza when they get incorporated into the collective imagination: "The dream of only one person is the illusion, the appearance; the dream of two people is the truth, the reality" (ibidem, p. 210).

When authors do not appear more consistent than their own characters, not only the fictional universe appears as questionable, but also the author's sphere, which becomes obviously fictional. Augusto dares to question (the fictional) Unamuno: why should his own existence be put in doubt, if his perception of reality is as strong as the writer's? The self-portrait of the author, or, the reproducibility of the author as a written line, a graph, a trace, constitutes a double that steals *authority, autonomy, authenticity* to authors. The *animated animator* is another Golem, an automaton created for a hilarious inversion of terms: the mechanization of fiction, the exposure of the narrative trace that inescapably inverts the borders of reality as a maleficent mirror: the fictionalization of reality.

Due to the flourishing of CGI, the last fin de siècle has witnessed an extraordinary *re-start* of animation as an expressive means. The animation industry has been expanded to include unexpected fields, uses and applications, thanks to its ability for simulation. Digital technology also involves a new form of thinking, by which the multiplicity of interfaces, the reversibility of facts, and the interactivity between user and software prevails. But, above all, the hyperreality – "more real than the real" (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 9) of 3D CGI animation has re-activated the fictionalization of reality that remained latent in Western culture since *Mist*.

The eventual appearance of a fictional animator becomes the turning point of a CGI film such as Chris Landreth's *the end.* (1995). Being its author's debut, this open-structured film is focused on the making of the film itself, featuring a meta-filmic dialogue between two astounding CGI creatures and the voice of their animator, whom they initially mistake for God. *the end.* is divided

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into two parts; the first takes place in a fictional CG space where two cyber-dancers execute a convoluted choreography, sprinkled with intricate metaphors and dislocated dialogue, obscure and empty. This embodies a caricature of postmodern contemporary art, particularly of some computer animation pieces created in the 1980s and early 90s, which, for Chris Landreth, “were often very abstract and obtuse pieces of computer art” (Landreth, 2005). Then, mimicking the theatre, the lighting on the stage switches off and the performance stops. The characters stare at one another, wondering what to say next, until they hear the voice of the animator, “Am I hallucinating or did we just invent God?” says one of them recalling Duffy Duck’s interaction with the invisible animator in *Duck Amuck* (Chuck Jones, 1955). But, unlike *Duck Amuck*, the characters will progressively question the animator’s authority initially hinting at the arbitrary *mise-en-scène* and its symbolism. The animator replies, “I have to make these metaphors obscure so that the audience will spend lots of time analyzing them.” Later, they point to the meaninglessness of the film’s discourse; and finally, they not only deny their fictional origin but, since they are aware of themselves and of their own memories, they suggest the possibility of the author belonging to *their* imagination in a way that almost reproduces word for word Augusto Pérez’s reply to Unamuno.

The second part takes place at the animator’s studio, when a camera movement brings us from the previously represented stage, to the vignettes of a storyboard at the animator’s desk. However, this universe is also a CG environment, and the animator is equally a CG character, though more realistically depicted than his animated characters. The nameless animated animator has features vaguely recalling Landreth’s,² and is talking on the phone, explaining his project to someone else. He ponders different endings of the story, although the voice on the phone rejects the proposals. Then, the relationship between creature and creator re-starts in a circular fashion. The voice on the phone takes control, suggesting that *he* should be part of the film’s outcome. He protests, “That’s a lame idea!” while the words from the phone immediately take effect like a magic spell, altering the animated animator’s physical appearance, changing his race, age and gender, until s/he acquires awareness of him/herself as the origin of his/her own ending, reconciling this animator with the CG creatures’ aspirations. If these characters had invented God, the last words of the animator, by then transformed into an Indian girl) are: “As a work of my own fiction, I can create my own ending.”

On one hand, the mutability of the animated animator, and on the other hand, the invisibility of the authentic demiurge as represented by the voice on the phone, proves the validity of Barthes’ theory. While the author has existed as a cultural construction, the product of a period, of a class, of a gender, of aspirations that are socially determined, as manifest in McCay’s self-portrait, authors have been mediums that focus many voices, references and traditions, keeping only the power of mixing them. It is the language who speaks, and not the author; it is animation, and not the animator, that decides its own ending.

3. The Self-Portrait as a Confession. Animated Documentary and the Portraits of the Ruin

The construction of a professional paradigm for animators, as well as their incarnation in their own films – their “incartoonation,” as Lindvall and Melton highlight (1997, p. 214), has assembled a sort of stereotypical portrait: a universal representation of artists that share the same creative concerns, but not their issues as individuals. Most of these self-conscious images respond to a scarcely personal, rather stylized image, giving as a result a skewed autoportrait.

² To further underline the status of this animated animator as the author’s alter ego, Chris Landreth purposely made him left-handed, he dubbed his own voice, and the number of Perrier water bottles onto his desk prove that the character is as much a teetotaler as Landreth himself.

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However, animators can also produce their individualized self-portraits with the participation of a second figure: a partner or an interviewer as a “Socratic midwife” helping authors to give birth to their memories. Ironically, this indirect reflection of animators on their conversational partners enables a field for private confidences shifting attention to self-biographical aspects, as, for instance, the pioneering sample of Caroline Leaf and Veronica Soul in their film *Interview* (1977). Rimbaud’s aphorism, “Me is another one,” has never been more applicable than in this semi-documental tendency in animation, taking the form of a fruitful dialogue between two artists.

Extrapolating from Baudrillard, animated documentaries come from two opposite focuses: the potency of falseness, and the potency of truth. There is no balance between them, but rather a mutual radicalization. If a *false documentary* is the consequence of truth absorbing the force of falseness, now falseness soaks the properties of truth, giving as a result *true fiction*, a metaphor of reality where emotions, hopes and conflicts purposely generate metamorphosis on both characters’ and scenery – paradoxically, a non-objective representation that serves better for self-biographical and documentary purposes.

One of the most audacious films of this decade, *Ryan* (Chris Landreth, 2004), perfectly illustrates this tendency. Chris Landreth develops what he denominates as ‘psycho-realism’, an Expressionist view that gets inside psychical and spiritual aspects by spectacularly distorting the physical features of animated (real) characters. From the opening of the film, the director justifies this unconventional *mise-en-scène* by penetrating through a looking glass, which transforms the world of appearances. Landreth’s initially hyperrealistic self-portrait enters a strange, uneasy world where personal wounds are displayed on the skin’s surface. There, he will meet Ryan Larkin, an artist that decades ago decided to quit animating. Now he collects coins from the people in the street and spends his time at a shelter for indigents.³ While Landreth’s appearance is lightly degraded, Larkin’s features are terribly eroded – his head appears half-consumed, and only one eye, barely supporting a pair of glasses, can stare at the interviewer.

The film is conducted as a series of encounters with the living myth, a former rising star from the National Film Board of Canada, until he was waylaid by depression and cocaine addiction. Landreth also gathers testimonies from Larkin’s acquaintances. However, the film progressively involves Landreth’s personal regrets alongside his vision of Larkin, becoming his unexpected alter ego.

Ryan contains two animated self-portraits: a hand-drawn youthful picture of Ryan Larkin taken from his film *Walking* (1968), and obviously Landreth’s CG version of himself. As a biographic portrayal, *Ryan* includes fragments from Larkin’s filmography, stressing the intimate connection between the animator’s unconventional lifestyle and his distinguishable visual style after 1968. Larkin’s animated self-portrait, visionary although melancholic, exemplifies his desires of innovation; his silhouette blinks with vibrant colours, while his legs are strangely enlarged, as in a hallucination. Larkin’s walking figure appears at the start and at the end of his own film like a conscious signature. Nowadays, *Walking* can be regarded as the animator’s statement of principles addressed to disrupt filmmaking principles, giving prevalence to animation as a visual joy – a psychedelic experience and pleasure, beyond the requirements of storytelling. Since they provide something essentially different to life, animation and drugs became akin, due to their potency to stimulate imagination.

³ Though Ryan Larkin died in 2007, I prefer to refer the film by using present tense.

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Nevertheless, when the filmmaker is torn between such two energy-consuming addictions, one of them eventually overcomes the other. When any work of art becomes a great passion, it may vampirize its creator, because it *drains blood*.⁴ His producer at the NFB, Derek Lamb, declares during his interview for Landreth's film: "From the first flush of addiction he produced some amazing work. A life can be spent really trying to get that moment back" (Landreth, 2004). The originality of Larkin's work was arguably related to his innate talent, as to his amazing view on living things stimulated by drugs, which shone for the last time in *Street Music* (1972).

Larkin exemplifies all those artists that one day renounced creating artwork; those authors that suddenly said, "I'd prefer not," as in Melville's famous tale, *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853). If there is an inherent guilt in the process of creation, this concerns to a capricious God, as Lars Von Trier suggests in his filmic self-portrait *Epidemic* (1987). The author develops his work at the expense of other people's suffering, the fictional characters experience the effects of a plague. Therefore, the act of creating remains eternally blameworthy; it is not Adam, but rather God, who is responsible for the Original Sin. Only a self-portrait as *re-trait* of oneself, as self-withdrawal, makes artists sublimate their fault.

During their filmic interview, Landreth advises Larkin that he should beat beer – one of the few pleasures still available for Larkin – as he did with cocaine. Landreth continues, "I want to see you thrive," as if Larkin desired to join an animation studio again. Landreth's unfortunate observation starts a chain reaction that finalizes with Larkin's catharsis, destroying more of his already-corroded features. After this embarrassing episode, Landreth delineates with more accuracy his own self-portrait, confessing to the audience his most terrible memory that brought him to say those words – his mother's death from alcoholism when he was two. Landreth's guilt and confession recalls Derrida's observation on self-portraits: "In Christian culture there is no self-portrait without confession [...]. The self-portraitist thus *does not lead one to knowledge*, he admits a fault and asks for forgiveness" (1990, p. 117). Only after his confrontation with Larkin can Landreth see clearly; despite his poverty, Larkin has never lost his dignity. Although Larkin is the mirror in which no one wants to be reflected, his attitude in facing adversity eventually represents for Landreth a model for resilience and growth.

Larkin's legend is endowed with an irresistible fascination because he died after having been successful. Then comes the enigmatic ending to the film: while Larkin asks passersby for some small change, Landreth greets Larkin from the opposite side of the street. Landreth's self-representation has evolved as a metaphor of his own learning process; his features appear almost as destroyed as Larkin's, although his face reflects deep pride. He stares with one eye, raising his hand to Ryan, a moving scene that for me recalls the following lines by Derrida (1990, p. 127):

One can see with a single eye, at a single glance, whether one has one eye or two. One can lose or gouge out an eye without ceasing to see, and one can still wink with a single eye.

Thus, even in misfortune, we can receive nice surprises from ourselves.

Conclusions: The Blind Eye of Animators

There is no self-portrait. It is the world which, through the image, produces its own self-portrait and we are allowed there only out of kindness (but the pleasure is shared).

⁴ Ryan Larkin's vital experience is noticeably similar to another fallen angel's: the Spanish animator and filmmaker Iván Zulueta (1943-2009). His cult movie *Arrebato* (1980) suggests the same personal fight between two addictions, filmmaking and heroine, being finally seduced by the most destructive one: *the film*, which devours its own creator.


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Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or The Lucidity Pact*, 2004: 102

The self-portrait of animators ultimately constitutes an (im)possibility which is at times controversial, and is formulated necessarily as a conjecture – and must never be confused with ‘the real’. Self-perception depends on multiple subjective factors such as the person’s momentary mood, opinion, self-esteem and private circumstances. Consequently, for artists, their identity becomes one of the most *animated* entities, as movable and unstable as memory.

Moreover, visual self-representation is conditioned by duplicating objects that allow artists to study themselves, or to be transferred into celluloid, like the cinematographic camera. Like painters, we use mirrors to see what we cannot look at directly – for instance, ourselves, or the eyes of Medusa. Equally, the shadow offers an indirect representation, the blind outline of the self, as in Georges Schwizgebel’s photographic film *Nakounine* (1986), in which he captures his own shade on the asphalt. The reflection on the mirror, the shadow, the silhouette, even the cinematographic double are simulations that to produce a spectral image, a seductive representation that somehow prefigures the death of the model, like the mythological Narcissus, who dies when he falls in love with his reflection, his (evil) simulation.

Although the notion of authorship is joined to the origins of animation film making, the self-representation of authors also evokes their death as well as the crisis of the artistic medium, which announces a future re-animation. Ultimately, the self-portraits of animators adopting the form of the interview, replacing the mirror by the dialectic with ‘the other,’ imply a new Derridean hypothesis, another form of blindness that uses introspection instead of sight in a way that recalls the clairvoyance of the blind oracle Tiresias: a blindness that turns to the insights or, like for Derrida, “the blindness that opens the eye,” which is not the one that darkens vision (1990, p. 126-127).

The animated self-portrait detached from the dialogue between two artists is today a successful trope, enjoyed by a large audience thanks to the development of self-biographical features like Marjane Satrapi’s and Vincent Paronnaud’s *Persepolis* (2007). This is an adaptation of the female director’s autobiographical graphic novel, appreciably counterpointed by the male co-director. This is also the case in Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* (*Vals im Bashir*, 2008), in which the memories of the protagonist – the director of the film – are re-built by assembling pieces of other war veterans. Despite their approach to reality, the inescapable consequence of the animated autoportraits and autobiographies is the fictionalization of the author’s identity – as the image of the world, like in Baudrillard’s assertion, is inevitably fictional. 

Dr María Lorenzo Hernández is a filmmaker and Animation Teacher at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain. Contact: Departamento de Dibujo, Camino de Vera s/n, 46022 Valencia (Spain). A reduced version of this paper was presented as a poster at Animation Unlimited - The 2008 Society for Animation Studies Conference, The Arts Institute at Bournemouth; July 18th – 20th.

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