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Additional Information

## A Film of One's Own

### The Animated Self-Portraits of Young Contemporary Female Animators

I had come at last, in the course of this rambling, to the shelves which hold books by the living; by women and by men; for there are almost as many books written by women now as by men. Or if that is not yet quite true, if the male is still the voluble sex, it is certainly true that women no longer write novels solely.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929: 47

The autoportrait, a pictorial genre that gives us “an artist’s insight into his or her own personality” (West, 2004: 163), permeates cinema when filmmakers – directors, animators – appear in their own fictional work. Sometimes, these appearances are as ephemeral as the cameo performance or the animator’s self-caricature, making a special nod to the public. In other occasions, they imply a deeper implication from the artist, coming on the scene to defend their ideas about filmmaking, or using the movie as a means of self-examination. However, this paper will not assume the author to be a male figure, but rather will focus on the contemporary animated self-portraits created by young and emerging women in animation.

While the male animator’s self-representation arose at cinema’s beginnings, with the film *Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonist of the N.Y. Herald and His Moving Comics* (Winsor McCay, 1911) — best known as *Little Nemo* — the female animator’s autoportrait is a relatively recent phenomenon – one still significantly underaddressed in animation studies. Its appearance is

related to the increasing number of independent studios, schools and institutions that have guaranteed creative freedom to female animators. Therefore, the female animated self-portrait has been born at a very mature stage of the medium, represented by artists like Caroline Leaf and Veronika Soul (*Interview*, 1977). Differently to their male predecessors, their animated autoportraits delved in the identity of the animatrice by sharing with the audience their creative process, depicted as a personal, almost intimate experience.

The recent blooming of animated documentary –in which we can circumscribe the production of animated self-portraits and autobiographies–<sup>1</sup> has attracted new female animators, such as Diane Obomsawin (*Ici par Ici*, 2006), and artists coming from other disciplines, such as the comic book artist Marjane Satrapi. Her film *Persepolis* (2007) has been a pioneering experience for the French Bande Desinée and will be a focus here.

A key aspect of this article is to elucidate the significant differences between the previous generations of female animators – investigated by Jayne Pilling in *Women & Animation* (1992) – and this new generation, whose self-portraits and autobiographies do not necessarily reflect their artistic work and their relation to themselves as women but appeal more to universal issues and conflicts.

## **1. Things to Learn About Yourself at Work. Characteristics of Animated Female Self-Portraits**

When Virginia Woolf was writing her dissertation on female writers, she refused to just list names and works but rather decided to find the answer to

one very simple question: why there hadn't been more female writers? (Woolf, 1929: 25). As transpires as we read the book, the reason, prosaic but powerful, was the lack of two essential conditions for creation to take place: economic independence and a place to write. If we transfer these limitations to the field of animation, where technological and economic means are more difficult to obtain, it becomes clear why there weren't animated films about the women that created them until the Seventies. We must also consider that, unlike writing, animated filmmaking usually requires teamwork. Although women were recruited in animation industry since it required division of labor, women directors – or women that could create their solo films – were a noteworthy exception for decades. Nevertheless, as soon as opportunities arose, some animatrices thematised the impacts of the feminist cultural revolution in their films, emerging from the creative invisibility that a production's secondary role tended to imply, to eventually become protagonists and designers of their own work. Feminism has encouraged women to investigate themselves in many ways: through their animated self-portraits, animatrices have explored their own identity as women and artists, developing new discourses and models for a subgenre that existed from the early days of cinema animation.

It is important to acknowledge that the late appearance of these women's self-portraits endowed them with distinguishable features that establish a divergence from the self-representation of male animators in films – such as Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* (1911) and *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), where the frame of documentary was still unsteady and blurred with comedy. From the Fleischer Brothers' series *Out of the Inkwell* (1921-27),

self-representation of authors eventually fashioned a cliché for cartoon comedy, where the animator interacted with his drawn creature in a heterogeneous environment – still applicable to later movies, like Guido Manuli's *Solo un bacio* (1983). But, differently to this idea of the animator as a demiurge of such a fictitious universe, women have proposed a model closer to documentary, a sort of essay-film away from fiction and more appealing for a mature audience, showing these main signs of identity: 1) the emergence of a **variety of spatial contexts** where the author lives and works; 2) diversity **of characters' typologies**, that challenge customary female stereotypes; 3) **multiplicity of voices**, since the artist dialogues with her colleagues and relatives during her creative process; and the introduction of **autobiographical elements** that balance the reflection about the medium implicit in self-portrayal.

First, in these movies, the animated *animatrice* does not only appear in her studio: she will also inhabit other spaces, especially her dwelling, her recreational sites, and/or nature. The film *This Could Be Me* (1995), by Michaela Pavlátová (Fig. 1), describes the artist in relation to her spatial context and her personal relationships. Unlike previous male self-portraits,

where the artist limits his self-depiction to himself as an animator, in Pavlátová's autoportrait film, there is no separation between the animatrice and the person. Her self-portrait is structured as a series of metonyms that express the variables of her



Fig. 1

existence: thus appear her city, Prague; her house, where she also works; the pub, where she observes the behavior of people; the photos of her relatives. Pavlátová does not offer an ultimate version of herself because, as it can be inferred from the film, the self is one of the most *animated* of entities: one day we wake up in a good mood and we feel attractive, but the following day we can be depressed, and our self-esteem decreases. This mutability affects the things surrounding any person because even the city of Prague “is big and small at the same time”, as Pavlatova’s remarks in her own movie. So, her self-depiction and artistic style approaches and interprets those fluctuating, fragmentary, ephemeral and spontaneous things, as the willful but incomplete hypothesis suggested by the film’s title.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, another important consequence of women directing their own films has been the creation of a great variety of characters, essentially different from previous stereotypes projected by the male imagination in Early Cinema and Golden Age Hollywood cartoons. Some female characters designed by animatrices appear as thoughtful, inquisitive, fighting women, as a projection of their own creative personality, disrupting the association between femininity and fragility, or femininity and passivity, as we can specially observe in animatrices’ self-portraits – as well as in those women’s films that meditate on the creative process. For example, in her film *L’Atelier* (1988), Suzanne Gervais breaks iconographies such as the painter’s workshop – with the male artist as an active creator, while the woman is represented like inert matter, a mere inspirational model – by proposing a reversed situation: a female artist is painting a young man, declaring clearly the possibility of interchanging their traditional roles.

Moreover, many animatrices have modeled the external design of their characters upon themselves, whether imaged in film through live action or such animation means as pixillation, rotoscoping, and photographic cut-outs – in some cases, recreation of family photo albums is almost a subgenre within animated self-portraits. Representing themselves in their films, animatrices have vindicated the natural body of women of all ages and all sets of features, subverting existing stereotypes of beauty. Equally, in some cases the liberation of their bodies in animated films has freed their characters' physical expression. The result is the image of cheerful women dancing wildly for themselves – like Isabel Herguera in *Spain Loves You* (1988) – but also the woman that weeps, sublimating her pain. In *Touched by an Angel* (2000), the veteran Beatrijs Hulskes depicts herself as a mediating goddess of Nature, an old lady who also contains the seed of the Divine, suggesting alternative nuances to many animators' self-portraits that parody the image of God as a father and creator – previously imaged by the Fleischer Brothers. In this case, as Susana García Rams pointed out in her extensive study on female animation, Hulskes' autoportrait seeks to recover the mythical symbolism of the feminine (2004: 110).

Third, in many films, animatrices make heard a voice that is not unique but multiple. The mutual interview as *modus operandi* – essentially different to looking at oneself in the mirror – reinforces this documentary view. A reflection on animation as a medium, and as a mode of living, is delivered through the dialogue and the mutual admiration of two different authors, Caroline Leaf and Veronika Soul: in *Interview* (1979), the two women represent graphically stylised figures of themselves just the way they are –

their animated doubles facing each other, avoiding the limitations that the male perspective projects on the iconography of the female. They are independent women who work autonomously – but not in creative isolation, since they establish conversation with other artists, other women, while they develop unconventional animation processes. Veronika Soul animates with photographic cut-outs, improvising at home, while Caroline Leaf prefers to work at her studio, where she seems to be married to her absorbing work, painting on glass. In the film, Veronika Soul declares of her own filmmaking experience: “My films begin in the dark like a mystery novel. The pieces fit together at different times for different people”, while Caroline Leaf remarks: “Your films are like the night, and my films are like the day. I make my films very clear because I want to be understood”. Both have divergent views on animation, yet *they can create together*, as the beautiful final scene of the film demonstrates.

Finally, shifting attention from meditation about animation to testimony about their lives and that of their families, many animatrices have introduced rich and complex autobiographical nuances into their self-portraiture. However, when the artist purposely dilutes the real into the imaginary, or unconsciously incorporates these self-biographical aspects into a fictional plot, these self-biographical aspects cannot be categorized within animated self-portraits. Self-biographical films can only be regarded as self-portraiture if they fit in the margins of documentary, with the artist appealing to the audience, talking in first person. As an illustration, in Faith Hubley’s film testament, *My Universe Inside Out* (1996), the animatrice recounts the joys



and traumas of her long existence, serving as an inspiration for later animators of both sexes.

While the *animated animator* was generally a character without psychology – existing almost solely for cartoon fiction –, *animated animatrices* have emphasized plural perspectives over their private and professional sides, creating a polyhedral discourse on life and animation. However, self-biographical films are the result of an evolution of the female animator's status: once that it is not essential to legitimate their positions in the industry – as well as Winsor McCay devised his early self-portraits to vindicate animation as a precious career, when it still was disregarded –, animatrices may focus more extensively in their lives' episodes, inviting the viewer's identification through the exploration of universal matters and concerns, as the female autobiographical animated film *Persepolis* (2007) does, a contemporary feature which adapts Marjane Satrapi's comic, co-directed by herself and Vincent Paronnaud. The movie, which centers attention in the next paragraph, has become a social phenomenon due to its historical and critical perspective, transcending the intimate view to expose a social and political situation that conditions lifestyle and thinking in other countries, specifically, Iran.

## **2. Women Who Animate Live Dangerously: Marjane Satrapi and *Persepolis***

The title of this subsection refers to Stefan Bollmann's book, *Frauen, die schreiben, leben gefährlich* (*Women Who Write*, 2006). In it, Bollmann accentuates the disparity of meaning between *living dangerously* for an

Occidental woman –who decides to dedicate her life to writing – and *living dangerously* for a Middle Eastern woman, for whom self-expression may carry a serious risk of harm (Bollmann, 2006: 17).

The feature-length animated film *Persepolis* is intimately concerned with the *dangerous* living experience of Iranian comic artist Marjane Satrapi: when it was scheduled to have its world premiere at Cannes, the Islamic Republic found this choice offensive, arguing that the movie "presented an unrealistic face of the achievements and results of the glorious Islamic Revolution in some of its part" (Davoudi, 2007: 42), and censored the film exhibition in Teheran.

Marjane Satrapi had been forced to leave Iran twice: in 1984 she moved to Austria, and in 1994, to France. Once in Paris, she joined L'Association, a French collective of comic artists that promotes young authors, whose albums frequently surpass the requirements of the commercial market. Artists from this collective have written notable autobiographical works, such as Philippe Dupuy and Charles Berberian's *Journal d'un album (I Pity You: A Cartoonists' Diary, 1994)*, Lewis Trondheim's *Approximativement (My Circumstances, 1998)*, and Guy Delisle's *Pyongyang (2003)*, comic books which are midway between reflection about writing comics and the influence of this activity on their own lives. In this context, Marjane Satrapi wrote and designed her comic *Persepolis (2000-2003)*, though it had at the same time a far different primary influence: Art Spiegelman's portrait of the Holocaust in *Maus (1980-1991)*, as she underlined in her speech 'Persepolis: A State of Mind' (2008: 44).

When Marc-Antoine Robert and Xavier Rigault suggested adapting *Persepolis* to film, Satrapi accepted on the condition that the movie would be

black and white, traditionally animated, and would never distort the comic's spirit – though it would be the French version of an Iranian drama, animated by French people, dubbed with French voices (Satrapi, 2008: 45). Satrapi's supervision of the project was essential to staying truthful to the story. Although she shared the responsibility of film direction with Paronnaud, Satrapi's artistic style and her experiential view dominate the entire feature. She provides the narrator's viewpoint, and her animated alter ego plays the lead role at the same time; however, despite the autobiographical aspect of the film, when Satrapi talks about her animated double she always refers to her as "Marjane", and never simply as "I" – as she does in Marie Cogné's documentary *La face cachée de Persepolis* (2007) –, keeping a healthy distance with the drama of the film.

When Satrapi was first sent by her parents to Austria to protect her from the war, she constantly had to explain to Europeans what actually happened in her country, where the revolution against Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlevi's secular tyranny had paradoxically established an Islamic religious dictatorship. After her second exile she discovered writing as a perfect means to tell a story without being interrupted by the listeners, and hence decided to write her life, her experience of the revolution and the war she had witnessed, to demonstrate that not all countries have the rulers they deserve (Satrapi, 2008: 46). Despite Satrapi's personal involvement with the story, the passing of time has helped her to reach a historical perspective, a reflection opposed to anger –the seed of extremism and fanaticism. Instead of being solemn and tragic, she wanted to appeal to all audiences through her own experiences, irony and sense of play. She states:

For a long time, the descriptions of the Middle East came with images of violence, sufferance, people crying (...). I had to find a way to write a story about this place which could be appealing for people. The only way to do it, for me, was with the use of humour (ibidem, 45).

Thus, humor becomes a key weapon to expose the absurdity of everyday situations, especially since the search for fun – Marjane’s fascination with Bruce Lee and punk culture, or her parent’s liking for clandestine parties– articulates the contrast between the desire for freedom of the main characters and the oppressive system that denies them such liberty. But this subversive power of laughter is also a specific contribution that distinguish the female viewpoint from some well-known historical animated films by male artists, like Isao Takahata’s *Hotaru no haka* (*Grave of the Fireflies*, 1988) or the recent Ari Folman’s *Vals Im Bashir* (*Waltz with Bashir*, 2008), which are equally based upon real events, but remain more dramatic and solemn than *Persepolis*.

*Persepolis* in both its comic book and filmic modes is a story about identity, roots, their loss and the eventual impossibility of their recovery, delving into the issues surrounding self-portraiture. The comic is amazingly complex in the details and comprehension of each event from Marjane’s life, a complexity the film is forced to abandon. Yet, at the same time, through its condensation and summarizing of episodes, the film becomes more symbolic and fluid than the comic.

The first part of the film focuses on the days of revolution, when Marjane's moral principles are forged. She acquires awareness of the past and the present by contrasting the official, single *truth* spread by the Government – which she learns at the school – with *multiple* voices, starting by her parents, other family members, and their acquaintances. The influence of her uncle Anouche, who is imprisoned and executed, is particularly important for Marjane (Fig. 2). Thus, the young girl becomes the recipient of an inheritance of knowledge and acquires the duty to transmit it in turn.



Fig. 2

The second part of the film is focused on the Iran-Iraq War and its effects on Marjane, who has to leave for a safer place in Europe, where she confronts misunderstanding, dislocation and loneliness. Her feeling of uprootedness will jeopardize her ancestral legacy, her pride of being Iranian. Despite her absence from her homeland, her exile is heir to the situation described by Marguerite Duras in Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959): the tragedy of a young woman, shaved and locked in a cellar of Nevers, is the tragedy of a bomb-ravaged city. The woman is a synecdoche of her entire country; this way, the individual self-portrait canalizes the expression of a collective tragedy, as expatriates are a consequence of war – too often forgotten.

The third part illustrates her own feeling of estrangement when she returns to post-war Iran. There, where the streets have the name of martyrs

and seem like a cemetery, Marjane finds her country unrecognizable. Furthermore, the whole Iranian society seems to be disorientated: the country had oscillated between two extremes: the loss of identity during the Sha's dictatorship, its absorbing of American culture and consumerism; and the extreme retreat into itself, its embracing of nationalism and religious fanaticism, a kind of disease from an over-saturated *self* – that ultimately replaces the previous disease.

Eventually, the film states Marjane's matrilineal inheritance, as each mother resides within her daughter and each daughter her mother – a predominant aspect in animated works inspired in the artists' lives such as Regina Pessoa's *A Noite* (1999) or Lesley Keen's project *Mother of Invention* (1991). Her relationship to her grandmother will be particularly essential, as she becomes Marjane's support and model to follow in moments of crisis. Furthermore, when Marjane comes to realize she will be unable to succeed in Iran as a woman, whether married or divorced, her mother's advice will be decisive, encouraging her to leave Iran to become free and emancipated. This way, Marjane begins the road again, carrying her Persian legacy to start in France anew.

The tragic aspects of her autobiography, delving in her feelings of longing, disenchantment, and at several moments, despair and guilt, somehow evoke Jacques Derrida's notion of the self-portrait as a portrait of ruins, with the artist confessing a fault and asking for forgiveness (Derrida, 1990: 117). Moreover, the experience of death, the loss of her beloved beings, tragically articulates her biography alongside the political and social devastation of her country – a characteristic that can be also appreciated in

*Waltz with Bashir*, which tells of its author's tortured memories of Israel 1982 invasion of Lebanon. For Ari Folman, his film is the result of remembering his fault; for Satrapi, her biography comes from the unpleasant process of recalling sixteen years of her life – which she preferred to forget. However, her story is crossed by an invisible sublimation of pain in the eventual success of Marjane Satrapi's professional career, an unnecessary episode to tell, because it is proved by the existence of the film itself. Even though the story of her life is centred on her miseries, Satrapi is a winner.

### **3. The Post-Feminist Re-Structuring: Putting Together the Male and the Female in Animated Self-Portraits**

*Persepolis* is a film that exemplifies a successful collaboration between a female and a male director, achieving a view on history, human values and intimate concerns that have been understood by people from very different countries and cultures. Nonetheless, before this harmonization between female and male artists took place, it was necessary that women generated critical reflection about their roles in society, and specifically discussion about their functions in the animation industry – having come a long way since women in animation found opportunities equal to those of their male colleagues in the independent production field. This subsection will pay attention to the gradual development and changes of interest in female animated self-portraits – which ultimately reflects the progress of feminist thinking towards collaboration between men and women.

In the Seventies, films such as *Interview*, or Candy Kugel's collective project *My Film, My Film, My Film* (1983), were generated by the will to

express the female viewpoint in and of the creative process, with several animatrices talking in first person. Through comparison between different philosophies, these movies functioned as a means to reinforce the status of women in animation, underlining their plurality and their divergences. However, at a personal level, *Interview* reflected the lack of personal relationships of their makers outside of the animation community. In the opinion of Veronika Soul, “Everybody said it’s going to look like a women’s film not only because we look like lesbians but because there are no people, no people in our lives.” (Pilling, 1992: 46). In contrast to Evelyn Lambart, Claire Parker, or Joy Batchelor, whose careers were associated with or even subordinated to a male partner’s or collaborator’s, Soul and Leaf incarnated for the first time an emerging model of animatrice who worked on her own, finding understanding in and solidarity and even community with other independent women in animation.

In more recent years, the legitimization of a professional status has become less important than the reflection of the animatrice’s personal legacy. This reflection on cultural and familial heritage has opened the field for autobiographical issues, though the accent of the story is displaced to new interests and disrupting views. For instance, in her film *Chrigi* (Chris, 2008), Anja Kofmel depicts herself in relation to her admired cousin, a rather atypical model of behavior for a ten years old girl, since he was a journalist murdered in Croatia at the age of 26 (Fig. 3). The film



Fig. 3



mesmerizes the audience through the young girl's calm melancholy and fascination. In other movies, humor remains essential to establish empathy and communication, as in *Persepolis*. Diane Obomsawin's  *Ici par ici (Here and There, 2006)* portrays the consequences that the divorce of parents have on their children, by the use of a witty self-caricature of the author: the autobiographical main figure transforms herself into a migratory bird to symbolize her childhood and adolescence divided between two countries and two families, delving into the character's feeling of isolation – though the zoomorphic aspect of Obomsawin's self-portrait, remains in a more cartoony style of representation than *Persepolis*'. Likewise, in Louise-Marie Colon's *La poupée cassée (The Broken Doll, 2004)*, she uses black humor to recount a problematic relationship with her handicapped sister during their infancy, offering a bittersweet view of marginalization.

Since the 1980s cinema and animation festivals pay tribute to female filmmakers, programming special sections of films made by women. The Tricky Women Animation Festival in Vienna is even exclusively devoted to animatrices, to stimulate their film production and to display the evidence of a specificity to women's animation. However, the current mushrooming of animated documentary and autobiographical films – by authors of both sexes – makes it necessary to question the validity of too generalist assumptions made about women, and animation by women, such as the opinion that women tend to be more able than men to explore and share personal experience – as Jayne Pilling echoes in her anthology *Women & Animation* (1992: 6). As an ironic consequence, some female animators – for instance, Vera Neubauer – have deliberately avoiding feminist positions, which carry a

serious risk of misinterpreting the issues that they problematise in their autobiographic films (“Vera Neubauer”, Leslie Felperon Sharman, in Pilling, 1992: 90).

Equally, many self-conscious films made by men have assumed some representational characteristics developed in animated female self-portraits. A meta-film such as Chris Landreth’s *Ryan* (2004) evokes the premise of dialogue between two filmmakers – the film’s director, Chris Landreth, and Ryan Larkin as an animated figures – just as in Soul and Leaf’s *Interview*, with the male animators showing a noticeable willingness to share their lives’ bitter vicissitudes beyond recounting Ryan Larkin’s ill-fated artistic career as an animator and otherwise, up to a point that Larkin’s emotional rapture awakes the film’s director most traumatic memory – Chris Landreth’s remembrance of his mother’s death, due to alcoholism, when he was two. Moreover, autobiographical films such as John Canemaker’s Oscar-winner *The Moon and the Son: An Imagined Conversation* (2005) – the notable precedent for which is Faith Hubley’s *My Universe Inside Out* –, can be regarded as the result of accepting the existence of a female sensitiveness within male artists, as Virginia Woolf prophetically asserted:

[It] is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman–manly or man–womanly. (...) Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated. (1929: 62)

As a consequence, the hypothesis of the self also situates gender in the animatic space of the in-between. For instance, Marjane Satrapi has been successful precisely due to her genderless, rebellious attitude. We could say

that Satrapi's conceptual and social way of thinking has both something womanly and manly, as an example of that union between opposite forces which Virginia Woolf pointed out in her essay (*idem*). Significantly, despite the current women's situation in Iran, Satrapi has deliberately avoided talking consciously of herself as a woman: the perspective of *Persepolis* is not imbued by a sexist view, because she is critical of female characters when they act in intolerant ways. In another vein, the film is rich in showing hyperboles and comical metamorphoses that parody more conventional models of female beauty – for instance, when Marjane is gaining awareness of her body's development, as well as the leg shaving scene. Such scenes



recall previous films made by women, like Florence Henrard's *Sortie de bain* (1995), or Gail Noonan's *Your Name in Cellulite* (1995), which one decade ago seriously questioned issues like female consumerism

habits, as well as the acceptance of one's own body during adolescence. However, in Satrapi's film, these representations have become more familiar with Post-feminism and its less pronounced feminist message.

Probably the most noteworthy difference between previous models of animated female self-portraits and more recent ones has been their ironical achievement as the product of collaboration, advice and mutual influence between men and women. For instance, Satrapi was encouraged to tell her story as a comic book when she first met David B., who had published his autobiographical graphic novel *Epileptic (L'Ascension du Haut Mal*, 1996-2003) with L'Association, in which he tells the drama of his family having an

epileptic brother. Moreover, as we can see in Marie Cogne's documentary on *Persepolis* (2007), the film is the product of an intimate collaboration between Satrapi and Paronnaud, up to the point that the male artist could interiorize the experiences of his female colleague –significantly, Vincent Paronnaud's has a cameo appearance in the film, sharing the scene frame with Marjane (Fig 4). As Satrapi explains at the *Persepolis* DVD's commented scenes, she wanted Paronnaud to design the scene of the film in which Marjane attempts to commit suicide, because she was too much involved with this episode of her own life and preferred to keep a distance. Paronnaud developed a poetic mise-en-scène that summed up Marjane's experience of self-consumption and re-activation, without having undergone them as she did, although he could creatively imagine these sensations from equivalent sensations (Satrapi, Paronnaud, 2007). This way, it could be speculated that the interchange between men and women that advances many of the artistic forms of today takes place when people of both genders can identify with each other despite their differences.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4. Towards a Conclusion: A Certain Female Documentary View**

The examples of women's animated self-portraits in this article illustrate how they have evolved in recent decades from the construction of a professional image – to validate women's creative and leading positions within the animation industry – to the development of a documentary mode that conveys an impervious will to self-awareness. This need of self-exploration has coloured with discernible hues women's artistic expression, depicting their different roles in both private life and society – eventually more assorted and

multiform than men's – through a fine perception of their environment, and specifically the *in-between space* of their relationships: between the artist and her labour and/or professional activity; between the daughter/sister/mother and her family members; between women and society; between women and men; between women and other women.<sup>4</sup>

Even in a domestic context, many women assumed the responsibility of documenting their families' chronicles, collecting photographs, composing photo albums, or also recording films. Telling such a familial chronicle sometimes transforms into a compelling need to make films, even when the female filmmaker was self-taught – like the striking case of the Spanish Madronita Andreu, who recorded more than 900 live action reels of 16mm film from 1920 to 1960. The photo album would be a recurrent format for some animatrices, like Isabel Herguera: in her cut-out film *Spain Loves You* she recounts historical episodes that she witnessed alongside observations of her family, such as the TV broadcasting of Neil Amstrong's landing on the Moon (fig. 5), or less widespread events, like an odd encounter with General Franco during an excursion to the countryside.

Fig. 5

As can be observed in movies such as *Spain Loves You*, *Chrigi*, *Ici par Ici* or *Persepolis*, many animatrices do not exhibit a stronger tendency to share personal concerns, but rather have established stronger relationships with – but not dependency upon – their family, as well as with preceding and upcoming generations. Specifically, in their



animated self-portraits, these animatrices search for ways to express their need to find a new place in changing family and professional contexts, and evidence of this as a special motivation is in the debut films of many of these female animators that express these concerns.

One could reflect that making self-portraits may respond to the artist's need of self-affirmation. Significantly, the early animated self-portraits by male artists such as Winsor McCay satisfied the need of cartoonists to validate animation as a professional and artistic activity – and later, female animators would use this genre to confirm their status as creators. While it is important to recognise that the careers of the male directors of those early movies were also an important motivator in their lives – and, therefore, of their self-biographies – the autobiographical aspects were not foregrounded in the films themselves. Inversely, the examples in this article illustrates how some women's contributions to this professional image is focused on the pervasive presence of personal aspects in their creations, as well as the prevalence of the artistic restlessness in their daily lives. As in almost all professions, making animation films is a demanding activity for women, an absorbing task that challenges traditional family life – sometimes replacing the experience of motherhood. Yet the lives of some of these women are not restricted to nor solely defined by work – as, for instance, Marjane Satrapi demonstrates by her refusal to incorporate any reference to her later career as a comics artist in her animated autobiography.

Fortunately, the success of *Persepolis* has contributed to the animated documentary genre's recent gain in popularity in the current commercial film economy. The women's animated self-portrait has surpassed its confinement

in the field of independent short films – and its limited distribution – to reach mass audiences, opening the way for original creations that establish a difference with customary models for blockbuster animation – generally aimed to children and young audiences. The highest accomplishment of a film such as *Persepolis* is precisely its capacity for promoting controversy by sharing personal experiences, becoming a noteworthy precedent for films such as Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*. Both movies have been successful due to their transgressive attitude, revisiting problematic historical episodes of their respective nations. Significantly, in his film, Ari Folman needed to reconstruct his own memories by collecting numerous testimonies of witnesses, evoking the multiplicity of voices in the female animated documentary that were discussed earlier. This way, women's accumulating views on an animated, manifold, unsteady reality offer a democratic model for filmmaking, to stimulate critical judgment and self-knowledge.

The female point of view has appreciably expanded the documentary strand of animation, with films such as *Silence* (Orly Yadin, Sylvie Bringas, 1998), through a wise mixture of reality and dramatization that has been an inspirational example to transmit universal concerns – not matters exclusively confined to women's circles. As a collateral consequence, the success of *Persepolis* has encouraged animation markets to produce subsequent adaptations of remarkable European comic books near to the documentary genre, such as Paco Roca's 2007 *Arrugas* (*Wrinkles*) currently in development as an animated feature. The film will delve into social issues – an old man's struggle against his progressive loss of memory due to Alzheimer's – a theme scarcely regarded in previous long animated features,

or in feature film in general. Through the depth of sensitive treatment of human stories and a special look at the marginal, some films made within contemporary European animation production are able to offer a genuine product, with a significant identity – an identity and communication that diverges from what the American film industry generally provides.

Animated female self-portraits are the product of animatrices' creative independence, the wish for self-realization, and the cultivation of a multiple, fragmentary, intimate perspective. The result of this process of psychological development is the animatrices' discovery of the feminine, which is distinguishable – but not inseparable – from the masculine.

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<sup>1</sup> While self-portrait takes from painting, autobiography has to do with literature. Animated self-portraits imply the iconic appearance of authors in their own works, even when no personal concern is mentioned in the film, as we can see in David Ehrlich's compilation *Animated Self-Portraits* (1989), which includes twenty-seven animated clips by animators such as Bill Plympton or Osamu Tezuka. In these 15 seconds clips, the visage of each author becomes recognizable; but more importantly, we can identify each author through their visual style –for instance, Bill Plympton's self-portrait behaves as *an animation by Bill Plympton*, disassembling and reassembling the features of his face as if they were made of clay, recalling his best-known films. On the other hand, though a wide range of films can be considered self-biographical since they take from episodes from the author's life, we will only consider for analysis those that purposely include the presence of the author, as an animated figure or as a voice over.

<sup>2</sup> According to Jacques Derrida in *Mémoires d'aveugle (Memoirs of the Blind)*, (1990), the self-portrait is always a hypothesis, because artists cannot look directly at themselves while they paint. Therefore, the picture is necessarily proposing a conjecture to the viewer (1990: 24).

<sup>3</sup> Susana García Rams denominates this creative union – or marriage of opposites – as “coniunctio”, the ultimate step towards the expression of Alchemic Gold (2004: 26), that takes place in the work of many women in animation that worked alongside a male partner, such as Lotte Reiniger, Faith Hubley, Gisèle Ansorge, Joy Batchelor, and many others (ibidem, 458).

<sup>4</sup> “Reality can be more interesting than fiction. Reality and relationships. With my parents. With my brother. With my friends. With my grandma. And relations between a man and a



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woman. I like to watch people. I like to observe their faces, to create the stories hidden behind the words.” (Michaela Pavlátová, *This Could Be Me*, 1995).

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