

Sara Álvarez Sarrat – Innocent and Invisible: Women Behind Bars in Animated Documentaries

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Worldwide concern over the recovery of historical memory or the fight for human rights – including, of course, women's rights – has led to an increase in the number of productions dedicated to this genre in animation. The animated documentary seems the perfect media for animated films based on historical figures or events, but also for stories that allege unfair situations. The use of animation can thus be necessary for a number of reasons, including a lack of documentation, to preserve the identity of the protagonists, or to express experiences that can hardly be captured by the camera; for example, emotions or personal experiences. As Volker Schlecht argues, “great documentaries continue to be produced with real images, but animation offers another way of thinking, of seeing the world, which can sometimes work better” (in Ayuso, n.p.).

Recent animated documentaries include the Spanish films, *Another Day of Life* (Raúl de la Fuente & Damian Nenow, 2018) or *Buñuel en el laberinto de las tortugas* [Buñuel in the Labyrinth of the Turtles] (Salvador Simó, 2018).^[1] With very few exceptions, documentaries or biographical films largely tell the stories of men. *Another Day of Life* narrates the nightmare of the 1975 war in Angola through the eyes of one of the greatest journalists in history: the Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuściński. Similarly, the film *Buñuel en el laberinto de las tortugas* portrays a turning point in the career of the *genius* who created *El perro andaluz* [An Andalusian Dog] (1929) or *La edad de oro* [The Golden Age] (1930). However, animated films – and especially biographical films – only rarely tell the stories of great women. Women have been systematically overlooked, even when they, historically, have achieved great milestones in science, literature, art or politics. This oversight, combined with the proliferation of the feminist movements of the time, boosted Women's Studies in the late 1960s as an independent academic discipline, wherein women began to be considered as both *subjects* and *objects* of investigation; that is, women became the people being studied as well as the goals of the study. Nevertheless, nearly sixty years after the advent of the discipline, when equality should be a *fait accompli*, the worldwide lack of progress in women's rights and the demand to restore their continually eroded rights demonstrates that there remains a great deal of work to be done.

If obscurity has been a constant for women throughout history, in instances of political conflict they are subject to a double marginalisation; that is, they are invisible both as victims and because of their status as women. This obscurity is the central theme of the feature film *The Breadwinner* (Nora Twomey, 2017). Twomey's animated feature film tells the story of Parvana, a young Afghan girl who lives under the Taliban regime and is forced to disguise herself as a boy when her father is unfairly imprisoned. Disguise seems to be the only way a woman can work and take care of her family under a regime that deems being a woman to be another “sin” to be added to the list. In this vein, Nina Paley denounces in her film *Seder-Masochism* (2018) the structures of patriarchy that prevail in religions, which systematically void women, policing their behaviour on the basis of the

always “advantageous for men” interpretations of the *Holy Scriptures*.

Unlike heroic stories featuring men, in animated documentaries starring or directed by women we enter into what remains in the shadow of hegemonic history, what exists in the intra-history;^[2] that is, everyday life, family dramas, the forgotten – the histories that do not appear in books. Some examples of this kind of productions are the short film *Silence* (Orly Yadin and Sylvie Bringas, 1998), and two short films by Spanish director Begoña Vicario, *Haragia* (2000) and *Areka* (2017). *Silence* portrays three generations of women – a grandmother, a mother and a daughter – through the voice-over of the protagonist herself, Tana, a survivor of the *Theresienstadt* concentration camp in the Czech Republic. Similarly, *Haragia* (2000) revolves around the people who have been politically disappeared and the distress of their friends and relatives. This short film continues in a subsequent film, *Areka* (2017), in which the lead character, after many years of searching for his missing father, manages to experience the moment they open the grave in which he lies. These last two short films step away from realism and propose alternative solutions that allow new meanings to be added to the use of the technique. The symbolism inherent in animation provides a unique capacity to make us understand the reality of others, as Annabelle Honess Roe proposes in *Animated Documentary* (2013). According to Honess Roe, animation “invites us to imagine, to put something of ourselves into what we see on screen, to make connections between non-realist images and reality” (p. 6). Moreover, as she asserts further, the genre of animated documentary “has the capacity to represent temporally, geographically, and psychologically distal aspects of life beyond the reach of live action” (p. 22).

Delving more deeply into animated documentary and representation, I will examine three short films that constitute a testimony of women as victims: women as political prisoners in a concentration camp, women caught trying to flee poverty and violence in their country, or women trapped within the four walls of their own homes resulting from the actions of men. The plots of the three short films are also set in three countries connected by an indelible political past: Germany, Spain and Argentina. Dictatorship, violence and human rights violations are a common backdrop for the women portrayed in these short films: *Kaputt / Broken – The Women’s Prison at Hoheneck* (Volker Schlecht and Alexander Lahl, 2016), *Makun (no llores) dibujos en un C.I.E.* [Makun (Don’t Cry). Drawings in an Immigrant Detention Center] (Emilio Martí, 2018) and *Padre* [Father] (Santiago Bou, 2013).

The grey memory

Kaputt / Broken – The Women’s Prison at Hoheneck (2016) portrays the story of two survivors of this prison, who tell of the torture and forced labour to which they were subjected while the goods they produced generated significant profits on both sides of the Iron Curtain. This short film is based on the testimonies provided by the recordings of the voices of the protagonists themselves. The directors opted for a conceptual approach to the visual style which, on the one hand, introduced a certain distance, as a way of respect, and, on the other, evoked the idea of being *blurred* by erasing again and again a drawing on the same piece of paper. The traces drawn show each position of the action, and the intermediate drawings intermingle and blur, referring to the work of William Kentridge. The whole film is grey, like the memories of the survivors. In an attempt to retrieve their lost identity and dignity, the only colour that appears from time to time is red – on lips painted using matchsticks, in the absence of menstruation as a result of the trauma they suffered,

or in the fabric that the inmates manufactured under a slave regime.



Kaputt / Broken – The Women's Prison at Hoheneck. Used with permission.

Seventy-five years have passed since the liberation of the Nazi camps. Volker Schlecht, the co-director of the short film, was deeply moved when one of the protagonists confessed that it was only after participating in the film that she was able to explain this story to her daughter. Up until that moment, she had been unable to do so. In this instance, animated documentary thus becomes a way to break the silence, to recount history from other perspectives than the dominant ones.

Testimonies on the wall

Makun (no llores), dibujos en un CIE plunges into the intra-history through the stories of historically marginalised collectives, in this case migrants, and connects with the oral tradition and the life stories. This arose from a previous collaboration between the director, Emilio Martí, and the artists Patricia Gómez and María Jesús González, on *À tous les clandestins*.^[3] The thousands of messages and drawings left by migrants on the walls of the Immigrant Detention Centre (IDC) in Mauritania (Africa) are the starting point to recover the experience of their travels, their motivations and their desires. Despite the fact that IDCs are officially considered to be public non-prison establishments, *Makun* shows that an IDC is a *de facto* prison. The fact it is impossible to film or photograph life in the IDCs in Spain makes this short film especially relevant, as it offers an accurate portrayal of day-to-day life in such institutions. The short film delves into the added danger of being both a woman and a migrant. Everyone suffers, but women are often victims of trafficking and rape. In fact, *Makun* shows “a rape without recourse to pornographic images, using a black cloud, which traps, surrounds and suffocates Vivian, to capture the anxiety and horrors suffered by a trafficked person. This scene is one of those with a more overwhelming and unsettling sound, something the frames themselves, obviously, can't

show” (Martí 2020, p. 31).^[4] The jury of the FICiP Argentina – the International Political Film Festival – after awarding first prize to *Makun*, highlighted “the respectful point of view of the director that avoids paternalism and the approach to the systematic violence suffered by the female character for being a woman and not having a hegemonic sexual identity.”^[5]



Makun (no llores), dibujos en un CIE. Used with permission.

The film follows in the footsteps of documentaries such as *It's Like That* (Southern Ladies Animation Group – S.L.A.G., 2003) ^[6] or the short films *Hidden* (2007), *Slaves* (2008) or *Sharaf* (2012), the trilogy by David Aronowitsch and Hanna Heilborn.

Home as a prison

In *Padre* (Santiago Bou, 2013), the film uses a grotesque and realistic style to portray the two sides of the same coin: perpetrator and victim. The documentary part of this film is limited to archival material: press, radio and television, which includes the protests and demonstrations of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. In contrast to these voices, we find the absolute silence of the daughter of a former military commander of the Videla dictatorship. In 1983, during the full transition towards democracy in Argentina, the daughter of this officer finds herself imprisoned in her own home, struggling to avoid dementia and dedicated body and soul to caring for her bedridden father.



Padre. Used with permission.

From the title onwards, the man is omnipresent, despite being shown on-screen. The daughter has a grotesque face and a scrawny frail body, not unlike the roses that she regularly places into a small delicate white porcelain vase, which symbolises her fragile mental health. The antagonist, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, sneaks into her jail-refuge through the media, crying out against the disappearances and claiming that justice must be reached for crimes against humanity. *Padre* thus portrays a recent and still open wound in the history of Argentina and gives visibility to the *other victims* who usually go unnoticed. While men impose dictatorship and occupy positions of command and power (the History), women take care of the sick and fight for justice for the victims and the *desaparecidos* (the intra-history). *Padre* shows us the tragic consequences of conflict in everyday life, and the double victimisation of women due to the roles assigned to them by society. The woman in the role of caregiver is doomed to absolute solitude and isolation. *Oh, I'm so Happy* (Cecilia Lundqvist, 1998), in which a middle-aged woman similarly lives trapped in her role as a housewife and – although she has largely lost her mind – tries to convince us of her *happiness*.

Conclusion

History has ignored women across the board, so to speak. In war time or during political conflicts, they undergo additional physical and psychological suffering simply because they are women. While many animated documentaries still feature mens' stories, relating their glorious deeds and paying homage to the ideal of a heroic male figure; when the genre is used to tell womens' stories, the films explore personal and everyday stories, or, the *intra-history*.

Symbolic images in animated documentary function as an entryway into the innermost and emotional parts of the characters. This becomes crucial – particularly for victims of

political, social or religious conflict – as protecting their identity helps them to break the silence caused by the trauma and engenders audience empathy. Animation thus generates a filter which makes it easier for the viewer to recognise, via the stories that are told, the situations that are close to them: family relationships, feelings, the loss of loved ones. As the films examined in this paper make manifest, a woman's race, gender or creed are deprioritized to represent the "human being" that lies behind the physical appearance.

There has been an increase in the number of productions directed by women in recent years, particularly on the independent production circuit, such as *Guaxuma* (Nara Normande, 2018) or *Carne* (Camila Kater, 2019). Even when these films are mainly limited to being shown at festivals and as such are not easily or publicly accessible, they still empower female voices. Fortunately, these films are becoming increasingly appreciated by both audiences and critics, as the acclaimed feature film *Crulic, The Path to Beyond* (Anca Damian, 2011) indicates. The increase in the production of documentary stories told by and starring by women may represent a turning point that contributes to the review of History, vindicating the place of women among its protagonists to advance the defence and recovery of universal human rights.

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Notes

[1] An adaptation of the graphic novel of the same name by Óscar Pantoja

[2] The term intrahistory [intrahistoria] was introduced by Miguel de Unamuno. The term is understood here as referring to the “traditional life that permanently underlies the visible and ever-changing history”. RAE - Real Academia Española:

<https://dle.rae.es/?id=Lynu9Mx>

[3] Patricia Gómez y Maria Jesús González: <https://www.patriciogomez-mariajesusgonzalez.com/A-tous-les-clandestins>

[4] Emilio Martí (2020), *Con A de animación*: “mostramos una violación sin tener que recurrir a imágenes pornográficas, usando una nube negra, que atrapa, rodea y asfixia a Vivian, para plasmar la ansiedad y horrores que sufre una persona víctima de trata. Esta escena es de las que tiene un sonido más abrumador y desasosegante, algo que obviamente los fotogramas no pueden mostrar” (p.31).

[5] The awards of the 9th International Political Film Festival FICIP (Argentina): <http://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2019/05/22/argentina-todos-los-premios-del-9o-festival-internacional-de-cine-politico/>

[6] The Southern Ladies Animation Group (S.L.A.G) is a collective comprised of Louise Craddock, Susan Earl, Sally Gross, Emma Kelly, Nicole McKinnon, Elizabeth McLennan, Sharon Parker, Dell Stewart, Sophie Raymond, Yuki Wada, Justine Wallace and Diana

Ward.

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