

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
March 2017

Life, Animated (dir. Roger Ross Williams, 2016)

Off Camera

Writer/Director: Roger Ross Williams: The first African American filmmaker to be nominated twice for directing (in Documentary Feature and Documentary Short)

Cinematography: Tom Bergmann: currently shooting a documentary about Marsha P. Johnson, one of the transgender activists who initiated the Stonewall riots in 1969

Film Editing: David Teague: highly esteemed editor for several documentary features and shorts, including Oscar-nominated *Cutie and the Boxer* (see below)

Other features directed by Roger Ross Williams...

Music by Prudence (2010) – This Oscar-winning half-hour documentary, co-funded by HBO, tells the story of a 24-year-old Zimbabwean musician and her backup band, all disabled as well

God Loves Uganda (2013) – Documentary about the missionary campaigns of white American evangelicals in Uganda, and their role in the rise of virulent homophobia in that country

If you liked *Life, Animated*, you might also enjoy...

Cinemania (2002) – Hilarious but weirdly touching human-interest documentary about real New Yorkers who attend movies to obsessive degrees, understanding their lives through that prism

In the Realms of the Unreal (2004) – Documentary about “outsider artist” Henry Darger, a reclusive and mysterious artist who created an entire alternate world through his paintings

Ryan (2004) – Oscar-winning short documentary that innovated an entirely new style of animation to tell the life story of a Canadian animation wizard losing his career to alcohol and addiction

Autism: The Musical (2007) – Documentary covering six months behind the scenes of a theater production created by and starring five young autistic kids in Los Angeles; won two Emmys

Waking Sleeping Beauty (2009) – Documentary about the triumphant resurgence of Walt Disney Studios from an early-1980s low point through the hits *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King*, directed by the producer of two of those features

Mary and Max (2009) – Quirky, tonally complex stop-motion animation film about two unlikely pen-pals (voiced by Philip Seymour Hoffman and Toni Collette), one of whom has Asperger’s

Marwencol (2010) – Unforgettable documentary about an artist living with brain damage who creates an elaborate, sprawling scale model of a World War II-era town as private therapy

Cutie and the Boxer (2013) – Colorful documentary about the curious marriage of Ushio Shinohara, a Japanese artist who works by punching his canvas with paint-soaked boxing gloves, and his wife Noriko, an artist in her own right, unwilling to inhabit Ushio’s shadow

Facts about *Life, Animated* you may appreciate...

Williams had known Ron Suskind for over a decade before the latter wrote *Life, Animated* about their experiences with Owen. (They had worked for *Nightline* at the same time, in different capacities.) Williams told *The Guardian* he was looking for a more upbeat story to explore after the draining experience of making *God Loves Uganda* and decided Owen was the perfect subject when he heard the detail about the Disney club Owen had founded at his school.

Williams, a gay African American man from Easton, Pennsylvania, felt like an outsider growing up—or what he now calls a “sidekick.” Partly in response to his identity and circumstances, his favorite Disney movie was *Peter Pan*. Williams felt like an outsider again when he won an Oscar but still had trouble securing work in a mostly white profession. (That standing has changed substantively; Williams peers recently elected him to the Academy’s board.)

Documentaries often employ multiple cinematographers, and sometimes more people who actually operate the camera, especially if they are trying to ensure as much “coverage” and as many angles as possible of important events as they occur. Because of Owen’s autism, however, and his desire for routine, *Life, Animated* employed only one cinematographer who also operated the camera himself, establishing trust with Owen and becoming part of his day-to-day quickly.

Another key tool in filming *Life, Animated* was the “Interrotron,” a camera invented by Errol Morris (director of *The Thin Blue Line* and *The Fog of War*) that projects an image of the director’s face in front of the camera lens, so that interview subjects can make eye contact with the picture of someone they know well and talk naturally to the audience via the camera. At times, Williams projected scenes from Owen’s favorite Disney movies on the Interrotron, so that we see Owen reacting in real time to those clips, without anybody else being in the room.

Realizing they already had five strands to maintain (day-to-day life, interviews, Disney clips, home movies, and new animated sequences), the filmmakers cut a sixth strand during the editing process, which would have kept up with current research on autism and utilized yet a different kind of animation (3D) to simulate how the autistic brain operates and responds to therapy.

Williams described to *Variety* his work with the sound designers and the 23-year-old composer (hired in part because of his own intense devotion to Disney). The sound team often superimposed clips from multiple Disney films at once, because Owen says this is how he “hears” them in his head, and added semi-subliminal sounds of VHS tapes being rewound or advanced.

Philippe Sonrier, the Parisian lead animator, told Williams in an early meeting that his goal was to make sequences so beautiful and imaginative that every viewer “will wish they were autistic.”

For his next film, Williams has returned to his Pennsylvania home town and is interviewing several high school classmates who have ended up for various reasons in the prison system.

In response to the Suskinds’ experience, researchers of autism in North America and Europe have developed a new field of “affinity therapy,” changing the perception of autistic people as unhealthily or distractingly obsessed with certain objects or hobbies and considering those instead as passionate attachments that might facilitate communication and socialization.

Resources related to *Life, Animated...*

<http://www.lifeanimateddoc.com/join-us/> - As part of the film's release, the team created an online Curriculum Guide for how to teach and discuss issues related to autism

<http://sidekick.com> – Ron Suskind has played a key role in developing this new app that helps kids on the autistic spectrum work on conversational responses and socialization skills, in tandem with a talking “sidekick” of the kind that proved so crucial for Owen

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/> - The Autism Speaks website is a major online hub for news and information related to autism ... especially in April, which is World Autism Month!

Broad conversation topics...

Genre Mixing: Have you ever seen a documentary that utilizes this much animation as part of its storytelling strategy? Did you like the mix of life recorded “as is” and the artistic elaboration of the animated scenes? What did these scenes add most to the film? Did you ever feel that the sense of truth in the film had been compromised in any way by the use of animation?

Subject/Object: Williams has said many times that he was less interested in telling the whole story of Owen and his family than in giving an idea of what it feels like for Owen to inhabit the world—evoking both his autism and his fertile imagination. Another way to say this is that *Life, Animated* wants to make sure that Owen is not an “object” in the film, held up for our voyeuristic curiosity, but the “subject” of the film, whom we come to know and identify with. Did you feel the film was successful at giving you access to Owen’s experience? Did you ever feel that it lapsed into treating him as a case study or spectacle, inviting us to “stare” at him?

Framing and Context: Would your reaction to the film have been different (or do you think it was different) if you knew that Ron Suskind is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and speaker, or that his own book inspired the movie? Did you want to know more about how much “say” Disney had over the storytelling, having agreed to the use of so much Disney footage? Did you feel the film said enough about the contexts and very particular resources that made not only the film but Owen’s recovery possible, including the Suskinds’ own wealth? Or do you think this kind of information was irrelevant to the approach the film took to Owen’s story?

Brand Burnishing: *Life, Animated* has attracted extremely laudatory reviews from critics, audiences, and festivals. Among the relatively rare dissenters, one charge is that the movie plays too much like a commercial for Disney, romanticizing the power of their films as healing tools. Did you feel that way? Do you think that view grants enough nuance to the movie?

Sexuality: Cinema of all kinds, documentary or fiction, has been chronically unwilling to delve into the sexual lives and desires of the mentally or physically disabled. In that way, this movie’s frank talk about the complex problem of Owen’s budding sexuality may feel like an advance. On the other hand, some disabled people and scholars of disability have expressed that non-disabled people seem entirely too interested in prying into that aspect of their lives, out of proportion to other issues. Did you feel the film made too much of this question?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Old Habits: On second viewing, it registered more strongly with me that Owen still watches all of his Disney movies on VHS tapes, which he pulls out of those old, big, white plastic clamshells which are now virtual collector's items. I assume this has to do with his anxiety about changing routines and desire to keep experiencing these movies in exactly the same way.

Emily: Around three minutes into the movie, we see a tight close-up on Emily in the foreground, with Owen out of focus in the far background of the shot. Later, after tracking their romantic relationship and its dissolution, I got more interested in seeing how the film shoots Emily—even before we understand her role in Owen's life—as both *linked* to him (they're in the same shot) and *separate* from him (in this case, she's primary, and he's blurry). A different kind of film might spend a little more time with Emily so that we understood her life or her feelings, separately from Owen. Why do you think *Life, Animated* opts not to do this?

Editing: The first animated sequence we see of Owen coincides with his parents recalling how he effectively “vanished” during the year he was three. It was interesting to me how the film introduced this risky device of including so many cartoon drawings of Owen’s life at exactly the moment when Owen’s capacities for conventional communication seem to evaporate... perhaps setting the scene for animation as a *substitute* for those other modes of expression.

Costumes: Obviously, documentaries don’t have “costume designers” in the same way a feature film does, but I still learned something from tracking the characters’ clothes. Ron seems to have offered the most information in single sittings, with the fewest changes of outfit or background. Cornelia’s talking-head interviews seem more spread out across different days, and Owen’s *much* more spread out, signaling that he could not sit still for long or sustain long bouts of continued conversation . . . as would make sense for someone with ASD.

Framing: Given how much of *Life, Animated* is about the united front that Ron and Cornelia form in relation to “rescuing” their child, I was struck how they are never questioned at the same time, and never framed in the same shot for their interviews. I wonder if Williams was curious if he would get different or more honest answers from each if they were confiding separately, though the editing often underscores their common beliefs and similar memories of key events.

Color: I think the animators for this film kept all their illustrations in strict black and white until the bright red Iago puppet appears—and becomes a beacon of more communicative possibility.

Framing: How did you react to the scenes when we essentially adopt the visual point of view of the television, while Owen looks straight into the camera (and thus, right into our eyes, as film viewers?) and reacts so emotionally to film scenes he has seen so many times? Did you feel you understood him better through these scenes, or did he become a strange sort of spectacle?

Therapists: I was interested in how the conversation therapist becomes the voice through which the film injects some doubt about how well the Disney movies can serve Owen, if they allow him to believe that life mostly obeys familiar scripts. I was also a little shocked at how freely she seems to allow herself to read Owen’s history of texts with Emily—very likely an effect of editing, but still suggesting he doesn’t have much leeway for privacy in this relationship.

Editing: It seems noteworthy that the first time we actually see Owen drawing his versions of Disney character's he is drawing Quasimodo from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*—not just because he turns out to be such a key symbolic figure for Owen, but because he might be the only character Owen draws who is not a “sidekick” per se. What do you make of that choice?

Walt: The Suskinds are all interviewed by themselves, but the shot of older brother Walt outside their cabin or lakehouse, fretting about what the future holds for him and Owen together, is maybe the only time in the movie when we pause to observe a character who *isn't* Owen in a sustained moment of private reflection. Why do you think the film made an exception here?

Finale: I thought it was interesting that *Life, Animated* ends with a shot from *The Lion King*, and specifically the shot of Simba climbing to the edge of the high rock cliff in the rain, rather than the more grand and optimistic shots of Simba in the same place, under bright, triumphal sun. How does this image of a proud character amidst rain and gray skies complicate your reading of the movie's ending as something other than just “happy”?