Fragments of War and Animation: Dahna Abourahme’s *Kingdom of Women* and Soudade Kaadan’s *Damascus Roofs: Tales of Paradise*

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**Abstract**
In this article, the author addresses the meaning of animated fragments in documentary films. She analyzes a Syrian and a Lebanese film, and illustrates the role and function of the hybrid form as a means through which women are now able to express themselves. Dahna Abourahme’s film *Ein El Hilweh: Kingdom of Women* (Lebanon, 2010) and Soudade Kaadan’s film *Damascus Roofs: Tales of Paradise* (Syria, 2010) are used as recent examples of documentaries addressing taboo issues by way of animated fragments. The author places these films in the wider context of the contemporary developments in animation in the Middle East, paying special attention to women’s contributions in the field. Both documentaries use animation not only for aesthetic appeal but also to enhance understanding and deepen engagement with topics and events that are necessarily situated beyond the knowledge and experience of a transnational audience. The author contends that animation creates a different film experience, and the audience must deal with the seduction of the animation.

**Keywords**
animation, documentary, Dahna Abourahme, Soudade Kaadan, taboo, conflict, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Naji al-Ali

**Introduction**
Over the last decade animation has become central in daily life. It is present in social networking, in advertising, in computer games. As it develops and becomes easier and cheaper to use, animated fragments also feature more often in live-action films and documentaries. In the Middle East, with its young demographic and entrepreneurial digital spirit, animated films are becoming more popular and, more importantly, more viable financially. Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2007), Ari Folman’s *Waltz with Bashir* (2008)
and Ali Samadi Ahadi’s *The Green Wave* (2010), for example, are just three examples of feature-length documentaries from the Middle East that use animation (to different degrees) and have garnered critical recognition.

In this article, I examine the presence and meaning of short fragments of animation in documentaries, as opposed to animated documentaries, and illustrate the role and function of the hybrid form as a means through which women are now able to express themselves. I look at Dahna Abourahme’s film *Kingdom of Women* (Lebanon, 2010) and Soudade Kaadan’s film *Damascus Roofs: Tales of Paradise* (Syria, 2010) in the context of contemporary developments in animation and documentary in the Middle East. Remarkably, it is women who are trailblazers in these two underappreciated forms of filmmaking in Syria and Lebanon. The reasons for this are addressed throughout the discussion. Both *Kingdom of Women* and *Damascus Roofs* are documentaries that use the medium of animation not only for their aesthetic appeal, but also to enhance understanding and deepen engagement with topics and events that are necessarily situated beyond the knowledge and experience of a transnational audience.

My approach to documentaries by women from the Middle East is grounded in an essentially subjective interpretation of transnationalism and global spectatorship. Transnationalism is an attitude and therefore depends on the willingness of all subjects involved in the film experience. Worldwide, women are emerging as the most dissident documentary makers. This has been explained by Waldman and Walker (1999) as primarily a consequence of patriarchy: funding is largely absent for women and documentary films require less expensive, more lightweight equipment. These potentially prohibitive circumstances have made experimentation necessary, and subtlety an inherent part of a dissident style. Second, the ethical requirements for a documentary maker seem to me to be based in a transnational solidarity, theorised primarily by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) and explored further by Ella Shohat (2003) for film. Solidarity between director, subject and spectator is, I believe, a necessary tool to establish a mutual trust and engage the subject with the reason for and goal of making the film in the first place. This trust not only refers to the engagement with reality in a documentary, but also to mutual acceptance of the three roles that are inherent to the success of the documentary. I therefore argue for a tripartite communication triangle as the basis for the interpretation and success of a documentary, specifically documentaries by women: an inter-subjective bond between filmmaker, subject and spectator enables all parties involved to present, negotiate and interpret the film.
The Syrian Soudade Kaadan and Lebanese Dahna Abourahme made their films, *Damascus Roofs* (2010) and *Kingdom of Women* (2010), in entirely different contexts. Both films show that negotiations with dissidence and political repression take place on many different levels, and that the Arab uprisings do not represent a sudden change in democratic sensibilities but a consequence of years of repression and dissidence. Both filmmakers emphasise their roles as creators through the inclusion of animated sequences and storytelling techniques in their documentaries. The two films can be read as explorations of the dynamic between aestheticism and activism. Their styles, however, are very different.

Kaadan employed her sister, who is a children’s book illustrator, as the artist for her film. Watercolor animated sequences construct a dreamlike vision of the old city of Damascus. *Damascus Roofs* tells stories, in the tradition of *1001 Nights*, about the beauty of the ancient city, while simultaneously drawing attention to its slow decay and sustained neglect by the government, in spite of it being a Unesco World Heritage site. Watercolors flow through live action shots and illustrate the transience of beauty while emphasizing its lasting presence. Abourahme’s film *Kingdom of Women* tells the story of the women of a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon, Ein el Hilweh, and how they used stories and humor to reconstruct their living space in the camp during and after the Israeli invasion in the early 1980s. Abourahme turned to the emblematic work of Naji al-Ali—Palestine’s world-renowned cartoonist—then had it animated and developed by Lena Merhej. The political implications of using Naji al-Ali’s sloganistic drawings are far more direct than the dreamlike watercolours in Kaadan’s film. Yet the movement and flow, and the sense of construction in the drawings in the documentary narrative draw attention to the accusatory and political potential of art in both films.

Like all film, an animated documentary is a fabrication with no direct indexical correspondence to the world. Paul Ward clarifies this by stating that documentaries claim the real, and animated documentaries *create* the real. He emphasizes that animated documentaries ‘offer a more critically distanced and reflexive form of documentary: documentaries are constructs, but a textual manipulation can also engage with and perhaps reveal some truths’ (Ward 2008). He adds that, even though it is less immediate, animation might also be labeled as more subjective, as the style reflects the animators’ interpretations of the circumstances portrayed. I want to use this dynamic between distance and subjectivity to emphasise that in fragments of animation in a documentary, this push and pull effect is a central characteristic of the spectatorial experience. As with documentary, women
seem to be the most active and effective in the animation industry in the Middle East. The most active studio in Damascus is owned and run by Sulafa Hijazi and her two sisters. In Beirut, Lina Ghaibeh teaches animation at the university level, and she runs the annual film festival Beirut Animated. Ziad Doueiri says that in Lebanon women in general are more involved in the film industry; Lebanese men are expected to earn money, so they do not work in cinema: ‘it’s more acceptable that women make art. It’s a mentality problem’ (Khatib 2008: 44). Reflecting on animated documentary in general, Judith Kriger adds that the technical materials needed for animation are more accessible, smaller, more portable and flexible (Kriger 2012: xiv). As we have seen, Waldman and Walker use exactly these arguments as signs that women find these genres more accessible and therefore flourish in them.

Animation in Documentary

Several functions of animation in documentary have been touched upon already. It compensates, it illustrates, it replaces, and thus it encourages a clearer understanding and deeper engagement with new knowledge. It has, as Paul Ward argues, the potential to represent the unrepresentable.

In an abstract way, animation provides an aesthetic attraction and seduction of the audience. Animation makes documentary a different kind of film, and creates a new experience for the audience. Initially, it attracts and seduces, not only because of its aesthetic appeal and the associations the form has with popular entertainment, but there is an additional seduction incorporated in animation, in the sense of Baudrillard’s simulacra. Film (documentary as well as animation) is an art form that seduces the viewer into thinking it represents reality. What we see on the screen refers to reality, and as viewers we expect to recognise reality in the images. Like all representation that is engaged with reality, animated documentary seduces the viewer into believing it is reality: it pulls them in and encourages a temporary suspension of disbelief.

At the same time, a straightforward classification of animated documentary is not possible. Animated documentary is a hybrid form, and the fragments of animation in largely live-action documentaries emphasise this hybridity even more, and therefore can equally push the viewer away as it pulls them in. Paul Ward shows that animation foregrounds the constructedness of the representation of reality, it negotiates an ontological boundary. He argues that there are modal auxiliaries, relative degrees of certainty
that are always negotiated by viewers of films, but the shift in style in documentaries with embedded animated fragments is obviously meant to be noticed. The hybridity of the form creates confusion and insecurity about the power of the simulacrum: the seduction is incomplete. This then leads to a new awareness of the constructedness of reality, which in my opinion encourages more complex expectations of the viewers and trust that they will engage more critically with the film, and therefore with the reality behind the film. I argue that the audience of a documentary with animated fragments is entrusted with a larger responsibility: after being pulled in through aesthetic pleasure and an engagement with reality, the viewer is pushed away by the obvious shifts, in order to become active in questioning the screen and to construct a critical understanding of his or her own initial seduction by the animation. About this, Ward says that different representational strategies are employed and the audience is trusted to understand them in a new context, through recognizing, negotiating and understanding both style shifts and the relationship with reality (Ward 2008).

As Jeffrey Skoller points out (2011), the popularity and use of animation has grown steadily and exponentially over the last decade. Equally, scholarly interest in the form has increased. The popularity and use of the animated documentary is not new, but as Skoller contends, it is ‘only now seeping into a range of non-fiction media practices, e.g. activist media and advertising, gallery-based film installations, journalism, web-based art and social media’ (Skoller 2011: 208). Annabelle Honess Roe is the foremost academic working on animated documentaries. While Skoller and Honess Roe speak of animated documentaries as opposed to documentaries that use animated sequences, I use their insights into the hybridity of the form. Storytelling devices used in literary cycles, with embedded frameworks and stories, such as 1001 Nights, have become ingrained in Middle Eastern popular culture. Focusing on the visual qualities of storytelling and filmmaking unveils the deceptive quality of simplicity and a more innovative understanding of the structure and form of these films. The cycle of 1001 Nights and in particular individual stories from it are universally embedded in popular culture. The form of 1001 Nights further explains, I suggest, the prevalence of the hybrid, embedded storytelling practices in the Middle East.

The use of fragments of animation in documentary is a form of animated documentary, arguably more ostentatiously hybrid than animated documentary. These experimentations with animated realism have led to what scholars of the form call a hybridization and, most importantly, a revitalization. Instead of a lasting concern with defining genres, this
hybridity emphasizes how artists can work across genres and forms to create something altogether new and more challenging. It is therefore much more important to consider how animation mixed with documentary has the potential for a radical and new cinematic hybrid form that has become ‘aesthetically and politically necessary in this particular cultural moment’ (Skoller 2011: 209). A visualization of new forms of knowledge embodies the idea of movement. By this I mean movement on screen but also across international borders, the movement of the world and the changing conditions in which humans function. First, movement is the basis of animation, it is what makes cartoons or drawings come alive and encourages an engagement with the reality referred to in the filmic experience. The shifts in style and engagement with reality are the second sense of movement one has with animated documentaries, and the fragments of animation embedded in the broader narrative of the live-action documentary make this shifting movement more palpable. In animated documentary there is an unmistakable gap between the signifier and the signified; a gap that is further enlarged in the fragmented animation in a documentary. This shift, according to Paul Ward, reveals the underlying structures and forces determining the dynamics of society (Ward 2008). The movement in fragmented animation then, is present specifically in that it provides access to hidden or obscured relations precisely because its constructedness is foregrounded. The suspension of disbelief is lifted. In other words, the transnational movements of humans and human creations around the world are emphasized in animated fragments. This idea of movement is central to the function that animations have as fragments in live-action documentaries.

Honess Roe creates a framework within which animation and documentary can function together. She looks at animated realism as mimetic substitution, non-mimetic substitution, and evocation. Her categorization is equally useful for the sequential use of animation in documentaries. While in documentary theory many argue against the epistemological potential of film tout court, Honess Roe embraces it. Indeed, many post-modern theorists and philosophers (such as Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Zizek) have come to the conclusion that reality cannot be represented and that truth and objectivity lie beyond human ability. Encouraged by Honess Roe (2011), Ella Shohat (2003) and Stella Bruzzi (2000), I insist that we need to accept that it is marketed function and claim to be dealing with reality, even if this representation is subjective and the reality is created. Equally, it is animation’s long-running association with fairytales and children’s stories that separates it from reality. Nevertheless, in their hybrid form, animated
documentaries and documentaries containing animation claim to be dealing with reality, and the shifts in form and style demand that the audience suspend their disbelief, not in fiction but in documentary.

Honess Roe further implies that the development of animated documentary has been to some extent dependent on global warfare. She eschews a linear development of the animated documentary based on genealogy, and instead looks at the archaeology of the form. She looks at when the genre was used most effectively and it becomes clear that it developed most dramatically during periods of war. In 1915, for example, Max Fleischer invented the Rotoscope and in 1917 he created animated films for the military and again for the navy and the army during World War II. During World War I Windsor McCay’s Sinking of the Lusitania (1918) ‘demonstrates the early use of animation as a substitute for missing live-action material’ (Honess Roe 2011: 219). The film aims to illustrate exactly how a German U-Boat bombed the passenger ship. Also during World War II, Walt Disney produced animated educational and training films as well as propaganda. With this in mind, Kingdom of Women and Damascus Roofs also both deal with the consequences of conflict, war and trauma. The films under discussion employ animated sequences in their narrative in order to clarify, explain, illustrate and emphasize events and objects that determine a narrative of war and offer a manner in which to deal with its devastating consequences.

Animation in the Middle East

In order to more fully understand the function of the animated sequences in Dahna Abourahme and Soudade Kaadan’s films, I want to briefly contextualize animation in the Middle East, and in Syria and Lebanon specifically. Apart from Laura Marks’ scholarly article on calligraphy in animation (Marks 2011) and Mohamed Ghazala’s very compact book, Animation in the Arab World (Ghazala 2011), there is a dearth of information on animation in the Middle East. In spite of its increasingly exhilarating if complex presence, the form has been unjustly ignored. A short overview of what has been done so far follows, and will complement my own research through interviews with studios and animators in Lebanon and Syria.

In the Middle East animation is a form with enormous impact. The most prolific and successful of Syrian animators, Sulafa Hijazi, mentioned in an interview with the Doha Film Institute that 60 percent of the population is younger than 25, and most of the media young people choose to engage
with—games, mobiles and other daily activities—incorporate animation to some level or effect (Hijazi 2012). Historically, animation has been dominated by American or Asian producers and markets, but some animators like Hijazi are starting to assert their Arab identity in their drawing styles and techniques. Arab animation is, however, very young. It is only really in the last decade that young entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa have started to experiment with the potential of the form. New production companies are sprouting everywhere, especially in Lebanon, Dubai and Morocco. Techniques are becoming more manageable, thanks in part to the increasing accessibility of inexpensive, user-friendly technologies.

Ghazala writes that the Middle East is one of the fastest growing media markets in the world, with mobile and Internet usage at an all-time high and more than 700 satellite TV channels available. Ghazala shows that since the 1930s, animation in the Middle East has been dominated by Egypt. During World War II the Egyptian ministry of defence utilized the skills of the Frenkel brothers to create animated short propaganda films to mobilize the people against the Nazis. Their first film, *National Defence*, was created in 1939. It was a film entirely defined and dominated by the presence of war. Since then, Ghazala says, the development of animation in the Middle East has been rather slow paced, due to high production costs and the need for skilled specialists, unavailable in the region until recently. A lack of infrastructure, funds and interest only added to the already fraught relationship Arabs had with cinema and art. Traditionally, Arab art focuses on portraying meaning and essence rather than representing the physical form of things. Decorative arts such as calligraphy, ceramics, architecture, and arts and crafts were far more acceptable than film or painting. There was and is a constant concern that the depiction of the moving human form comes too close to idolatry, as God is the only image-maker.

Marks argues that calligraphy and ancient Arab non-figurative arts have influenced the development of Arab animation. She shows that ‘Arabic animation arose not directly from Islamic art but from Western-style art education and the privileging of text in Western modern art—which itself was inspired by Islamic art’ (Marks 2011: 315). In her interpretation, calligraphic animation emphasizes the performative aspect and the power of the moving trace (comparable to Fleisher’s Rotoscope). The ‘rediscovery’ of the typically Arab art form of calligraphy, she argues, penetrates recent animation from the Middle Eastern region. I show that this is especially true for *Kingdom of Women*, in which Naji al-Ali’s cartoons and calligraphy feature prominently.
Since the golden age of Egyptian cinema in the 1950s, however, inhibitions about figurative or mimetic art have eased somewhat and the growing importance of television since the 1960s has encouraged advertising, which increasingly makes use of the seductive aesthetic powers and escapist tradition of animation. Animation is a commercial venture for young producers in the Middle East, designed to appeal to a growing television audience. Since the 1990s, and since the globalization of the digital revolution, digital filmmaking and especially animation increasingly offer less expensive, easier options for commercially-minded filmmakers.

The new generation of animators in the Middle East started by working with co-producers in the Far East. The reasons for this were threefold: first, the Far East offered comprehensive training opportunities; second, there was an opportunity to make films on a low budget; and third, the transnational co-productions functioned as a statement against the domination of America and Europe in animation. In my interviews with Soudade Kaadan, she said that because education in animation and formal training remained unavailable for a long time, advertising and other commercial uses of animation provided fundamental training opportunities. At the same time, the development of independent studio-based work is shaping individual and regional styles, with tradition and folklore penetrating the new styles of young animators across the region.

The art of animation is often employed as a means to an end: entrepreneurs, politicians and military organizations regularly use it to their advantage, whether this is to earn money or propagate a certain ideal. In addition, as the form continues to prove popular, it is being used increasingly as a medium through which to inform, as it was during the early years of cinema. Moritz explains how Eastern European animators changed their strategies to speak out against oppression, through complex non-linear narratives the viewer must decipher and which the censors cannot ban because ‘there is no individual element that is obviously against the rules’ (Moritz 1997). Allegories and non-linear structures require the reader ‘to question the norm, which is a subversive act in itself’ (Moritz 1997). Likewise, in the Middle East in oppressive regimes where political dissent is prohibited, these tactics are used extensively. Animation can thus on the one hand indirectly criticize the political and social situation, and outwit the censor, as animals and children speak metaphorically about more pertinent situations. On the other hand, animation can draw attention directly to unspeakable situations that cannot be captured on film and are therefore of necessity expressed through the imagination.
Animation in Syria and Lebanon

There has been an animation studio boom in Syria and Lebanon. In spite of adverse political conditions, young people find the courage and energy to create art and animation. In Syria Blue.Dar, Ox Animation, Star Animation, Tiger Productions and ProAction Film are five relatively new animation studios (although due to the present conflict in Syria, they are virtually unproductive). Lebanon has also experienced a boom in animation activity. The country has its own animation film festival, Beirut Animated, started by Lina Ghaibeh in 2010. Several studios, such as Adaimy, Hani Bayoun and Yelo, benefit from the growing artistic profile of Beirut, a prime media location in the Middle East. New courses are being implemented at universities across Lebanon and comic magazines are increasingly making their mark on youth culture as well. It is notable that of this rapidly growing group of animators, a large number are young women. Moreover, it is, arguably, the recent turmoil in the region that has pushed these animators out of Syria and Lebanon, and onto the world stage, because of the changes in and radicalization of their styles.¹ War irrevocably forces the animators into the limelight.

Many of the local Syrian production companies started in animation for entrepreneurial reasons. As the population in the Arab world is overwhelmingly young and booming, the entertainment and aesthetic appeal of animation in games, social networking and on TV is vital to its success. The animation department for the state TV channel retained a propaganda agenda for a long time, until private companies started to garner success on a global scale at international festivals. In the early 2000s the Syrian National Film Organisation (NFO), responsible for censorship, became interested in animation. Several co-productions between state and independent studios were produced. This is how the first two feature-length animated films came about. Razam Hijazi’s The Thread of Life (2005) and Sulafa Hijazi’s The Jasmine Birds (2009) were produced by Blue.Dar and the NFO.²

¹ Sulafa Hijazi’s presence on Facebook indicates a clear shift in style and approach. She is far more politically outspoken and her anger about the situation in Syria is foregrounded. She no longer focuses on children’s films only.

² The Hijazi sisters, Razam, Sulafa and Bahraa, are very active on the animation and documentary scene in Damascus. Sulafa owns several companies that produce and distribute animation around the region. I have met and interviewed the three sisters extensively about their involvement in animation in the Middle East. I suspect the influence of the NFO ensured the educational and didactic nature of their early films, eschewing any direct political or social commentary.
Soudade Kaadan speculates that the large number of young animators and artists in Syria is a result of the quality of its independent studios and channels, like Space Toon (a free-to-air channel owned by the Hijazis) and Star Animation. Kaadan says these two companies in particular offer internships and jobs to young graduates of the art schools, giving them a place to exercise their creativity, which she says is far removed from the bureaucratic, if better-paying, jobs at NFO or state television. Internships and early career jobs offer the opportunity to learn many different forms of animation. This in marked contrast to European or American animation studios, where employees are encouraged to specialize in one particular style. Syrian animators are encouraged to be multi-taskers. Animation is one of the more organized and ambitious film forms in the country. There is no cinema school in Syria, but the private companies with their young staff work hard and fast to develop individual styles.

A closer look at the mission statements of these studios reveals a preoccupation with education and children as well as family-friendly material. Blue.Dar’s mission statement states that their goal is to produce educational TV series, film productions and other media aimed at children and families. Tiger Production produces educational cartoons and TV for children and the whole family that encourages social responsibility and values that reflect Arab sensibilities, customs and culture. Star Animation produces children’s animated media, with an eye for family values and cross-cultural awareness. Children, then, have been these companies’ main target audience.

Ox Animation is different. In 2011 they developed a new technique, called AnMish, and their target audience is internet users with an interest in cartoons, comics, video parodies, e-greetings and content sharing. In our interview, Lunjein, CEO of Ox Animation, said ‘when AnMish first started we thought of it as a new way of making animation accessible to anyone, and we were surprised that a lot of users have used it not only for entertainment purposes but also for teaching, marketing and much more’. He emphasized their desire to entertain. They recently moved from Damascus to Dubai, Lunjein says, for several reasons. First, Dubai has a reputation for good, thriving business investments, and for Ox Animation, animation is an entrepreneurial undertaking with potentially large audiences in the Middle East. Second, their intention to move to Dubai became a necessity when the troubles in Syria began. AnMish is inspired by political satire,

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3 Author’s interview with Ox Animation, January 2012.
a potentially dangerous subject in Syria today. Expressing his point of view as an animator, Lunjein says, became dangerous, especially with AnMish.com. Playing with AnMish easily leads to criticism of the Syrian regime and other world leaders, as the stock characters available cartoonishly portray politicians. A third reason for the move was the continuous interruption of power and internet access throughout the current conflict raging in Syria. As their main channel towards their audience is the internet this move became crucial.

The four studios’ emphasis on ‘wholesome entertainment’ for the family and their explicit adherence to certain moral values directly relates to the Syrian government’s censorship through the NFO. This, in addition to Ox Animation’s move to Dubai, because of the lack of freedom of expression in Syria, illustrates the power of film, and the Syrian government’s problem with criticism of any kind. This does not mean, however, that the animation studios choose to avoid politically-motivated films, rather that their options are limited. Either they produce overtly political films that risk incurring the wrath of the censors and face little or no chance of ever being screened, or they opt for indirect and subtle political dissent. As Sulafa Hijazi said in an interview with the DOHA Institute:

Animation is such a beautiful language, with vivid imagination, and it can translate creative ideas with endless options. There are lots of ideas that I’d like to express through this medium. I am currently working on an animation film for adults on the concept of freedom, reflecting on what we’re going through at the moment. I have a lot to say in that regard. (Hijazi 2012)

Following developments on social media networks reveals that this is something she has not expressed before, and became arguably more urgent in February 2012, when her sister Bahrawa (also an animator) was imprisoned and her brother Mohamed was arrested in November 2012. As a consequence of these events in her family and the political turmoil in Syria, Hijazi is now an overt and strong critic of the Assad government. Her illustrations, available online, attest to this. The conflict in Syria has arguably freed her from her inhibitions and from censors.

The Lebanese studios have very different mission statements and are more corporately minded than those in Syria. Adaimy Studios, for example, regards itself as a trendsetter in motion graphics and television entertainment, and they focus on branding and corporate identity designs. Lebanese animation also seems to have given itself a more politically challenging duty. Future TV’s animation team was a pioneer of daily animated caricatures and developed a style dealing with news and politics instead of children’s stories. Out of this team developed a few innovative corporate
initiatives such as Hani Bayoun and Yelo Studios. The corporate and enter-
preneurial impact of animation sits well in the stereotype generally associ-
ated with Beirut and Lebanon, as the playground for the rich and famous of
the Middle East. Nevertheless, a few female animation filmmakers such as
Lina Ghaibeh, Lena Merhej and Dahna Abourahme have shown the politi-
cal implications of using animated sequences in documentaries that deal
with more serious issues such as war, Palestine and women's issues.

Beirut's academies and universities now offer courses in animation and
graphic design. Many young aspiring animators, however, do relocate to
universities in the United States in order to study animation techniques.
Lena Merhej and Nour Ghassan are two examples of young female anima-
tors currently studying animation in North America. They remain very
involved in Lebanese animation projects, however, as their ideals lie in
creating politically and socially relevant art in the Arab context. Merhej is
an editor of Samandal, a ‘non-profit organization that aims to lift the
stature of comics to that of mature art form capable of tackling more than
superheroes and their baffling hairdos’ (Samandal website). Ghassan is a
puppet maker and stop motion animator who collaborates with artists
from all over the Middle East; she has led workshops at Beirut Animated,
Lebanon's foremost animation festival. Animation in Lebanon is far more
politically motivated, which speaks to the relative freedom of expression in
the country, as opposed to Syria. This is further illustrated below, where I go
into more detail about the specific methods and styles used in *Kingdom of
Women* and *Damascus Roofs*.

**Damascus Roofs** (2010)

At first sight, *Damascus Roofs* is a nostalgic and aestheticized look at a
beautiful city. Yet on closer inspection it becomes clear that Kaadan casts a
critical eye over the many stories of a past fantasy and looks at the reality of
the present in four families’ lives. While certain elements of the film indeed
refer nostalgically to the past through color and music, it is the present that
is subtly criticized and scrutinized through ironically placed animated
sequences. A deep sense of the power of oral storytelling, his or her lack of
accountability and effort to mythologize the city run through the structure
and the narrative.

Soudade Kaadan worked on the animation with her sister Nadine
Kaadan, who is a children's book illustrator. Nadine drew the paintings in
watercolor, and from those paintings they worked with a small animation
studio to animate the hand-painted art. At times in the film, the animation looks explicitly like children's books illustrations, like an illustrated book of tales, the *1001 Nights*. The childlike illustrations in *Damascus Roofs* arguably play on the orientalist impulses in *1001 Nights*, while they also criticize the typically adult styled Orientalist drawings in many editions of *1001 Nights* (sensual women, exotic animals and plants, magical creatures and sexually-inspired events). The film purposefully portrays the city of Damascus as a site of fantasies, stories and memories. They insert animals, absent architecture and natural phenomenon that have been lost. It is not depicted as a city of the twenty-first century. The film explores the history, architecture and people who nostalgically hold on to the myths of ancient Damascus, the protected UNESCO city. Soudade and Nadine chose the color blue to dominate the animation, since it is the dominant color in the existing art and architecture of Damascus. It is not until the very end, in the last few seconds of the film, that the camera turns from the ancient city with low rises that are shot from below, to Damascus as seen from a high wide-angle, long shot where the camera highlights, by contrast, the modern, globalized city with high-rises, office space and bustling traffic.

The film starts with the declaration that every house in this eternal city has its own story. The first family tells the story of the ‘millennial snake’. After reflective nostalgic stories about the great-great-grandfather, the story of the friendly snake changes the tone, structure and fabric of the film. The sudden appearance of the animated snake in the live-action upsets expectations of realism (fig. 1). Moreover, the snake turns into a mythical ouroboros, expressing the sense of something constantly re-creating itself, a cycle that begins anew as soon as it ends, representing the idea of a unity that cannot be destroyed. The childlike paintings, with clear contours and bright colors, display a deceptive simplicity that, presented in contrast with the story that follows, deliver a sentiment of irony about the collapse of reverence and naivety. A snake usually carries implications of threat, deception and seduction, but its depiction here emphasizes childlike innocence and benevolence. Ostensibly added to the live-action to emphasize the constructedness of the image, the animation carries elements of ridicule and irony. The seriousness of the film’s topic contrasts disconcertingly with the style of the animation. With this sentiment, the spectator is carried to a shot of a woman expressing her ambiguous sensibilities, saying that it is not easy to live in Damascus. Everyone has emigrated, but she does not want to talk about it. She says: ‘these times are hard so it is easier to forget. I don’t want any hassle’. The subsequent stories have the same structure and conclusion, with people avoiding more pressing questions.
Only in the story about the Damascene Don Quixote do we find someone who is openly angry and frustrated. This is the story of a man and his young son living in the house that has been owned by his family for over a century. In 1960, the government confiscated a number of the older houses in Damascus with the plan of building a road. That road has yet to materialize. The family living in the house no longer owns it, as the notice of evacuation is still valid and so they are not allowed to renovate the house, even though it is in a terrible state of disrepair. The father of the family calls out in exasperation about this deplorable situation. He has spent his life writing letters to the Assad government asking for clemency and compassion. He is teaching his son how to do this as well and we see a parallel shot of the older and younger man beneath Hafiz al-Assad’s portrait, writing letters requesting that the requisition order be cancelled. The parallel shot and repetition of Hafiz’s portrait looming large over the letter writers both emphasize the many layers of irony in this film. The spectator is called upon to sympathize, and show solidarity with the subjects. This sequence is hardly animated at all, except when the house is turned into one of the windmills against which Don Quixote fought (fig. 2). The older man and his son fight a seemingly futile and never-ending battle against a government they are forced to respect indeed echoes the idea of Don Quixote refusing to give up his idealistic fight. The political message of the film is therefore driven home at the end. The state of the house becomes a metaphor for the state of the nation and a government neglectful of its people.

Figure 1: Ouroborus appears in the courtyard © Soudade Kaadan.
Animated sequences in the documentary were on Kaadan agenda since the conception of the film. The function of animation fluctuates throughout. At times, animation is used to express the nostalgic memories of the city’s houses and inhabitants. It illustrates simply what they remember. The naïve art form seems at odds with their unhappy commemorations. The watercolor makes the scenes look like fairy tales. Kaadan said ‘before the incidents here, Damascenes were deceiving themselves with a fairytale, an urban myth of Damascus, refusing to see the reality around them’.

She points out the gap between reality and myth and foregrounds it in her film. A second role of the animation in the film is to replace what is missing in Damascus: crumbled buildings, richly flowing rivers and exotic animals. In one of the embedded stories in the cycle, the dried up, misused and polluted Barada river is mourned. Imaginary plants and animals, bridges and boats move on screen in the artwork while an old man tells the story of the city’s past fertility. The evidence is absent and the child-like nostalgic texture of the story and the animation contrast with the live-action imagery. As such, the documentary questions its own references to live-action

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4 Author’s interview with Soudade Kaadan, September 2011–March 2012.
5 The 2005 documentary Before Vanishing by Joude Gorani explores the journey of the river and the process through which it dried up. Gorani touches on bad urban planning, pollution and abuse of the Barada River.
reality through style and form. The film challenges its spectators and refuses to answer questions of truth. The audience is entrusted with the interpretation. Third, animation is a way to distract the very strict Syrian censorship at the NFO. The Kaadan sisters claim that at first sight, the animation looks harmless, with implications of children’s and family films. In accordance with many of the animation studios’ mission statements, this ensured that the film could be screened in Syria, as its innocent outlook arguably diverted the NFO. Nevertheless, when the film was screened in Damascus in Kaadan’s presence, she says that the audience was indeed aware of the critical references to the government in the film, and engaged with this fearlessly in the discussion after the screening.

I regard the animation in this film as attractive poetic inclusions that simultaneously bring attention to and divert attention away from the seriousness of the message in the stories. It is a very clever, subtle, almost subliminal message of dissent and accusation, dressed up in innocent-looking, childlike illustrations. While it parallels the animation studios’ mission statements, at the same time it critiques them through the placement of the animated sequences in the documentary. While the film points towards powerful nostalgia for the past and its myths of Damascus as Paradise, Kaadan uses the animation as a means of seduction as much as alienation: they are as aesthetically pleasing as they are uncomfortably ironic. They illustrate and refute the stories and the myths, the way Sheherazade held the Shah’s attention and ensured his entrancement. As in the 1001 Nights, the spectator is entrusted with implied political statements and irony, rather than straightforward expressions of political dissent. It is the tension between the different effects of animation in documentary, the push and pull, the contrast between what is said and implied on the one hand and what is shown on the other, that emphasizes the atmosphere of uncertainty and confusion. In this confusion lies the key for the spectator to appropriate their agency. This then leads to the power to make a more critical judgment.

*Kingdom of Women* (2010)

*Kingdom of Women* explores the power of memory and storytelling, and more specifically oral testimony. The film is part of a larger project on oral testimonies, focusing specifically on women’s stories from Ein El Hilweh,
a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Lebanon that was destroyed by the Israeli invasion in 1982. The men of the camp were detained and the women were left to their own devices to rebuild the camp.

Lebanese history suffers from inconsistencies and gaps, amnesia and ignorance. As Hady Zaccak, a prolific documentary maker from Beirut, has shown in his film, A History Lesson (2009), there is no consensus about Lebanese history in any form. The sectarian divisions ensure that each religious group has its own individual historical narrative. In addition to this, Ein El Hilweh and other Palestinian camps in Lebanon are noticeably absent from Lebanese history. The presence of Palestinians in Lebanon is a sensitive political issue. They retain the status of refugees, and lack basic rights such as ownership of land or other properties. Palestinians are not permitted to work in certain jobs, and have little or no power at all in political matters. Not only do Palestinians in Lebanon suffer the trauma of having been expelled from their country, they also have to accept that they have no immediate prospects in the country they live in and that their presence in the country is at least indirectly a cause of many of the conflicts fought in Lebanon. The stasis of their reality has been illustrated in cartoons by the legendary Palestinian artist Naji al-Ali. Al-Ali grew up and lived in Ein El Hilweh, and his cartoons are used in Kingdom of Women as a symbol of political interest.

Naji al-Ali was born in Palestine in 1937; his family fled the nakba in 1948 and settled in southern Lebanon. Politically active throughout his youth, he started drawing on the walls of the prison he spent much time in. He continued drawing on the walls in Ein El Hilweh and was discovered when novelist Ghassan Kanafani visited the camp (Khader 1999). Al-Ali spent his young adult life between Beirut and Kuwait, working for magazines and newspapers. He invented his most famous character, Handhala, in the 1970s (fig. 3). Handhala is a ten-year-old boy who accompanies most of al-Ali’s cartoons. He has his back turned to the viewer and his hands are on his back, symbolizing the eternal spectator. He is a figure of defiance, of the Palestinian situation, but also of the Arab regimes unable to deal with and find a solution to the Palestinian predicaments. His image is usually accompanied by calligraphic writing, often with the tip of a pen present in the drawing, representing the freshness of his ideas. Al-Ali extensively used calligraphy, the ancient Arab art form, in his drawings, ensuring an

7 Hady Zaccak also inserted animated images of taxi drivers in his latest film Beirut Taxi (2011).
immediately identifiable style. Al-Ali was an eyewitness to many atrocities (e.g., the Sabra and Shatila massacres) and testified about these in his cartoons. He was eventually expelled from Kuwait and settled in London, where he was assassinated in 1987. He has subsequently become a symbol of the Palestinian refugee status, artists and martyrs.

Naji al-Ali’s cartoons were animated (given movement) for Kingdom of Women by Lena Merhej. As in Damascus Roofs, static illustrations and cartoons are therefore used and purposefully animated for the film. The addition of movement into iconic cartoons emphasizes the power of the dynamic between still and moving images and transports the viewer into a new experience of memory and present events. Al-Ali’s style remains largely present in Merhej’s animated versions of his drawings. Handhala is a constant presence in the film, and even in Merhej’s drawings we see the influence of al-Ali’s style very clearly. In my interview with her, Merhej said: ‘I tried to put all my heart into Naji’s work, and was very wary of transforming his works and giving homage to his drawings from Ein El Hilweh’. The film itself is also homage to his legacy as an artist and to his political activism, which remains relevant. Using his cartoons as the basis and inspiration for further animated fragments in the film was a way in which the filmmaker dealt with the lack of archival material. Not only is Lebanese historiography filled with gaps, but Palestinian camps on the maps of Lebanon are also left empty, and the Palestinian film archive that existed in Beirut before 1982 is conspicuous by its absence in Palestinian history as well.

Sarah Wood, a British found-footage video artist, made a film about and with footage from the archive, entitled For Cultural Purposes Only (2009). She explains,

> the Palestinian Film Archive was a homegrown attempt at capturing the diversity of Palestinian experience rather than the self-sameness of much Western footage. The archive was lost in 1982 [during the Israeli siege of Beirut], and only a few films from that period of intrepid filmmaking survive. (McKnight 2010)

The archive was established in 1976 in Beirut, where the Palestinian authority resided in exile. It contained a people’s cinema: anyone documenting events of the period or compiling footage for posterity could submit their work. The films in the archive were collected memories of daily life. Gertz and Khleifi write that it contained ‘the cinematic representation of Palestine’s traumatic history’ (Gertz and Khleifi 2011: 187). Wood continues,

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8 Author’s interview with Lena Merhej, March 2012.
‘it was an archive of political cinema, documenting the Palestinian people’s struggle and resistance movements, as well as images of their everyday lives’ (McKnight 2010). Because of its destruction, no material is available in Lebanon or Palestine to use as historical references. Apart from the few personal photographs Abourahme uses, such as the personal artifacts from the women in the camp themselves, there is no other material available. There is no official record of anything relating to Palestinian cinema before 1982. I would therefore argue that Naji al-Ali’s many drawings serve as a replacement archive, as he has been active as a cartoonist since the 1960s. With Lena Merhej’s help, his is a constructed Palestinian identity in cartoon motion.

Oral testimony is another way in which to address the gaps in a national Palestinian memory defined by trauma and absence. The gaps that exist in both historical narratives are arguably greater because of the traumatic nature of Lebanon’s own history. Visualized oral narratives are crucial tools in helping to rebuild a more complete and inclusive history. As Piotrowska argues in her article on animation and trauma, even in oral testimonies that try to incorporate a measure of respect through animation, language can break down (Piotrowska 2011: 335), and the person delivering the testimony will suddenly be unable to enunciate for the other, an animated sequence in a documentary about traumatic instances can offer the speaker of the testimony a manner in which to re-narrativize, visually instead of verbally, the traumatic instance. She contends, ‘it is difficult to make documentaries about traumatic instances, because of the ethical implications of what the act of giving testimony might do to the witness’ (Piotrowska 2011: 337). In order to elicit the spectators’ solidarity, the subject pulls them in through stories and the director juxtaposes stories with illustrations. A hybrid documentary offers a chance to reflect on what happened in the past and gives these events a different meaning, artistically.

Collaborative animation, in this case between Lena Merhej and Naji al-Ali as representatives respectively of Lebanon and Palestine, and of women’s stories and Ein El Hilweh’s history, therefore ‘offers an opportunity to re-visualize, and offer a different meaning, a chance to symbolize [memories] in some way’ (Piotrowska 2011: 339). A Lebanese woman reconstructing a Palestinian man’s work can be seen as a symbol of reconstructing the absent archive—that which is not there. Showing what cannot be said, Piotrowska says, is attempting to express oneself differently. The

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9 Sarah Wood’s film also uses fragments of animation to illustrate the loss of the archive.
women telling their stories do so non-linearly and with gaps and breaks. ‘Purposefully convoluted narrative structures must be unravelled by the viewer’ (Moritz 1997) which will in turn enhance sympathies for the characters. In addition, in these gaps, Abourahme situates silences filled with animated sequences, showing—not telling—what happened in the traumatic past when the camp was destroyed. The nature of trauma is not open to symbolization, it is situated outside of language. Nevertheless, narrative and linguistic coherence are crucial to the cinematic medium.

The non-literal animated sequences make it possible to tell stories in visual terms without invading the speaker’s intimate painful space, while it also in part creates a fictionalised world in which their traumas were still recognizably theirs but made more distant and therefore more bearable. (Piotrowska 2011: 350)

The animated sequences offer both a practical solution in terms of telling a visual story and a chance for the interviewees to be directly involved in a kind of creative play that arrives at the appropriate visual language. In Kingdom of Women, Dahna Abourahme used iconic images by Naji al-Ali in the opening sequence of the film (fig. 3) and worked with Lena Merhej and the women from the camp to create their individual portraits (figs. 4 & 5). This multi-layered referencing of history and memory illustrates how animation and art can fill the gaps left in history's narrativization.

The seven portraits in the film are the most striking animations in Kingdom of Women. They underscore the individuality of the speakers in animated close-up. Each of the seven portraits brings out key aspects of the personalities of the subjects without turning into caricatures. The animation is juxtaposed with a close-up of the face, and prevents an ‘othering’ of the subject. The animated and the live-action face cannot be disconnected from one another, which would enable the audience to sustain an all-too-comfortable distance between subject and spectator. Instead, the juxtaposition of face and portrait enables sympathy on the part of the spectator. The responsibility of the transnational spectator is emphasized: while we might not be able to identify because we are outsiders, we are encouraged to feel an immediate solidarity as fellow human beings. Both subject and spectator are made to be acutely aware of the construct of the portrait and thus have to acknowledge the event of the filmmaking. This establishes a direct relationship between spectator and subject as addressees of the filmmaker. Abourahme offers us the opportunity to actively engage with the subjects, through humor, by listening, and through the beauty of the unrepresentable.
The film manages to revive lost memory. Instead of re-enactments, the director resorted to graphic art. Here, the animation functions as a self-reflexive indication that Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are neglected and forgotten. Images are unavailable as trauma has created gaps in history and memory, and war has destroyed any available archive. Stories about the past and contemporary graphic art complement each other as they challenge memory. Animation shows things that are unavailable or difficult to confront. The trauma of the Israeli invasion and the Lebanese civil war is revisited in the stories. The animation not only offers re-enactment opportunities of contentious political issues but it also emphasizes the limitations of live-action. It pulls the spectator in, to reflect on the atrocities committed, revealed through personal memories and visualizations. This is also attempted in *Waltz with Bashir*, which deals with the same Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. However, this animated documentary is the animation of traumatic memories that arguably presents a more comfortable distance between audience and story. This is, in my view, explained.

Figure 3: Handhala and one of Naji al-Ali’s images in *Kingdom of Women* © Naji al-Alı.
Figure 4: Portrait of Khadijah © Lena Merhej & Dahna Abourahme.

Figure 5: Portrait of Abla © Lena Merhej & Dahna Abourahme.
by the fact that the animation is told from the perspective of the perpetrator. In this film, the animation makes the film and the traumatic content more digestible. In contrast, it is the dynamic, hybrid mix of animation and live-action documentary in *Kingdom of Women* that confronts the human psyche with its inability and unwillingness to engage with traumatic memories. This only happens in the last few minutes in *Waltz with Bashir*.\(^{10}\) The temporary animations offer the opportunity to understand more deeply the lack of engagement on the part of those who did not experience the events.

An absent archive, active memorialization and traumatic recall are tools that elaborate the use of animated fragments in this documentary. Abourahme has subtly but confidently used intertextual references in order to deal with war-torn circumstances, memories and traumas, as well as physical gaps in the Palestinian archive and history. The collaborative nature of the film and the animation create a multi-layered platform that begins to address oral testimony, women’s experiences of war and the power of the constructed image to engage effectively with voids in historiography and the archive.

**Conclusion**

As the Kaadan sisters have showed with *Damascus Roofs*, childlike animation does not absolutely prevent a critical interpretation. On the contrary, mixing expectations regarding style and context with meaning and form, and the ironic juxtaposition of innocent-looking images in a harsh reality, enable the spectator to discover his or her own critical agency. Equally, using iconic political images such as those by Naji al-Ali, does not prevent an aesthetic appreciation of art and animated fragments in documentary. *Kingdom of Women* poses pertinent questions about what happened to the archive of images, and how historiography can no longer ignore the dearth of illustration and information surrounding the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

Finally, I want to briefly elaborate on Honess Roe’s framework, in which animation and documentary can function together as mimetic substitution, non-mimetic substitution, and evocation. All three functions are relevant and indeed used in the two documentary films discussed here.

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\(^{10}\) Many of the issues in the critical reception of this film relate to the real-life portrayal of the victims and not the perpetrator.
As both *Damascus Roofs* and *Kingdom of Women* show, animation can function as mimetic substitution, non-mimetic substitution, or evocation in documentary: as a replacement of something unobtainable, either contemporary political dissent (*Damascus Roofs*) or historical absences (*Kingdom of Women*). As mimetic substitution, animation can illustrate something that would be hard or impossible to show with conventional live-action, because it is unavailable and needs to be re-enacted. This could refer to the archive of Palestinian cinema that disappeared in 1982, or the destroyed buildings in Damascus. As non-mimetic substitution, animation does not try to create the illusion of a filmed image: non-mimetic animation is a medium in its own right that bears no direct representation of the lived world. In this instance, it has the potential to express meaning though its aesthetic realization. An example is the ouroboros in *Damascus Roofs*. As evocation, lastly, animation replaces representation: abstract notions of subjective states of mind, feelings and sensibilities can thus be imagined from someone else's perspective. Tears in the shape of bombs in Naji al-Ali's drawings in *Kingdom of Women* is one example.

As Honess Roe convinces us, the hybrid amalgamation of animation and documentary is the combination and extension of both worlds and minds. It is the further hybridization of fragmented sequences of animation embedded in live-action that I suggest strengthens the viewers' involvement in the films and makes these films effective transnational experiences and enhancers of solidarity. Dahna Abourahme and Soudade Kaadan have created aesthetically beautiful films dealing with the atrocities of war and traumatic memories. It is precisely the dynamic of pulling in the spectator (through the seduction of reality in documentary) and pushing him or her away (through the juxtaposition of styles and animated and live-action fragments) that makes the films so effective in their expression of dissent. The spectator is entrusted with the power to deeply engage with the issues dealt with on screen, even though it might be outside their comfort zone, their geographical zone or their frame of reference with regard to the complex political situation in Syria and Lebanon.

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