

THE ILLUSION OF LIFE: PUPPETRY AND ITS USE IN THE
DOCUMENTARY GENRE

by

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ABSTRACT

Sports and puppetry are two forms of entertainment that use nonverbal communication to capture our imagination, bring tears of sadness and joy, and have evolved alongside human culture for thousands of years. With the shifting attitudes among modern audiences towards documentaries claim to present truth, puppetry an artistic medium that celebrates the subjectivity of documentaries and provides a fresh way to engage with a film. In this paper, I examine two well-known examples of motion pictures that feature puppets: *Creature Comforts* and *Sesame Street*. Puppetry gives filmmakers a unique opportunity to illuminate complex subjects in an understandable way, harness and take advantage of the humor and subtext within a story, and is an innovated way to represent reality in the documentary genre. My film, *The Power of Play*, is meant to engage audiences through the playful presence of puppets, and highlight why humans love watching other people play to the degree sports fandom has become in modern times. Puppetry and sports seem to have always been part of human culture, so we should take the time to enjoy, understand and celebrate their unique power and presence in the world.

INTRODUCTION

“The part of us that finds life in objects is an aspect of the child’s imagination and instinct that is later hidden or sometimes let go of in adulthood. Puppets awaken that part of us. They bring a part of us back to play.”

— Kenneth Gross

The art of puppetry has been a part of human history for thousands of years. It has taken many forms such as the popular Muppet characters, the fierce Tyrannosaurus Rex in *Jurassic Park*, and Java’s shadowy *Wayang Kulit* where wooden figures are performed behind a lit cloth as shadows (Edwards 1). Some are used to illuminate stories and entertain crowds while others teach lessons and reenact rituals. However, what they all share is their unique ability to reflect humanity in a neutral manner that can engage an audience of any age. This is the true power of puppetry. They can discuss complex subjects or tell heart-wrenching stories from new perspectives that are only limited by the imagination of the storytellers and the audience alike. Puppets can bridge the gap between cultural, religious, political, social, or racial boundaries. They have had a lasting and positive impact on humanity around the world from grand theatrical performances, children’s therapy, college classrooms, and in film and television productions. However, there is one genre of film and television that has not seen an adequate amount of puppetry: Documentaries. Most non-fiction films attempt to objectively present new information or perspectives, and tell compelling stories. Whether or not objectivity is possible in film, however, is a contested topic. Puppetry has an ability to tap into the audience’s subconscious and bridge psychological barriers. This paper will discuss its

unique impact in more detail by examining major film and television productions such as *Creature Comforts* and *Sesame Street*, its groundbreaking application in college classrooms, and the unique way I chose to incorporate it into my short film “The Power of Play”.

When I discuss puppetry, I am referring to an inanimate object brought to life. This can range from the mechanical shark in the film *Jaws* to a simple sock puppet with googly eyes attached to it. I am considering stop-motion animation to be a form of puppetry as well. Some critics believe this style has distanced itself from its more traditional form that took place in real time in front of an audience. Stop-motion surely has taken puppetry to an entirely new level, but at its core, it is bringing a physical inanimate object to life through a different creative approach. I believe puppetry also encompasses some of the elements of what is generally considered animation. Examples of these forms include hand drawn films such as Disney’s *Pinocchio*, 3D animation such as Pixar’s *Toy Story*, or the new developments of motion capture animation from films such as *Avatar* and *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. While some of these styles have been successfully used in documentaries, they will not be included in my discussion of the contribution puppetry has made to the genre. The key characteristic that separates the animation styles I just mentioned from puppetry is the physical presence of the character on screen. Elmo from *Sesame Street* or Wallace from the *Wallace and Gromit* series are simply three-dimensional cloth or plasticine objects brought to life, and do not change form during the post production process. The motion capture technique seen in the main character Caesar in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* uses the movements of a physical actor

to achieve more fluid body movements, but what the audience sees on screen is vastly different from what is originally captured on camera. Due to its similarities to all forms of animation, I am considering the use of puppetry in nonfiction film to be a form of animated documentary.

Puppets are also effective because they are perceived as neutral and approachable, which can be hard to achieve if the audience sees a human being speaking on screen. Scott Cutler Shershow in his book “Puppets in ‘Popular’ Culture” uses theatrical semiotics to make this claim. “Inside the bounds of the theatrical experience, the puppet offered itself up for analysis as a “pure” signifier free from the excess signifying content of the human actor’s biological and psychological life” (Shershow 213). There is a distance that is placed upon human characters on screen regardless of how relatable their story may be to your own. Puppet characters can tell the same story, but can connect with the audience in a different way. Adult audiences know that the puppet they are watching is not a living being, but an inanimate object brought to life. However, their personality, body movements, and words reflect what it is like to be a human. Viewers are then able to see a reflection of themselves with greater ease. “This theoretical privileging of the puppet as “pure sign” reveals an obvious affinity with the postmodernist distrust of the human actor’s “intrusive” personality...” (214). The puppet’s pureness allows for it to remain universal and open for the audience's interpretation. While Shershow is discussing fictional theatrical performances, I believe the basis for his claims can relate to the changing trends in documentary film in the

postmodernist era, and how puppetry can be used to adapt, entertain, and resonate with those changing audiences.

POSTMODERNISM AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE DOCUMENTARY GENRE

John Greison, a pioneering documentary filmmaker who coined the term “documentary,” defined it as the ‘creative treatment of actuality’ (Eitzen 82). This definition has taken root in the postmodernist movement that has caused an epistemological shift in how audiences are watching documentary film and television. This movement is challenging the authenticity of documentaries, making it more difficult, if possible at all, for filmmakers to objectively represent reality. “Now the audience is deciding what is and isn’t interesting. They’re becoming more demanding about what belongs on the stage, they’re more up for experimentation” (Everett 1). Puppeteers have taken advantage of this movement by embracing the creative freedom that comes with bringing an inanimate object to life. Instead of trying to let the image speak for itself, puppetry allows the audience to focus on the representation of the content and reasoning behind the image.

Many maintain the understanding that photographs have the ability to accurately represent reality. However, this idea has become a topic of debate and discussion amongst filmmakers, critics, and audience members. Jessica Hann, in her graduate thesis “A Case for the Animated Documentary,” believes that “reality is a construct, a mixing of the real with our own situated knowledge, concomitantly defined by our societal and personal biases” (Hann 7). The postmodernist movement has adopted this line of thinking and marks an epistemological shift in how audiences view information presented to them on screen. It is now understood that non-fiction films are never transparent, but come with the biases of the filmmaker and the individual members in the

audience. Lucia Ricciardelli claims in her book chapter, *The Impact of Digital Technology on Documentary Filmmaking*, “it is this unprecedented ease of manipulating photographic images via computer and computer software that has undermined once and for all the indexical quality of photographs” (Ricciardelli 11). The recent developments in digital photographic technology, such as color correction software, have perhaps undermined live-action non-fiction film’s claim to objectively represent visual reality. The post-production workflow has become a major, and significant, part of the filmmaking process. These days, filmmakers can acquire audio software that provides tools such as parametric equalizers that gives them control over the audio signal’s frequency content. Color correction tools allow editors to quickly alter the colors, shadows, and highlights within the picture to fix errors or create a specific visual mood for the scene. These can drastically change the way the film is seen and heard, and thus, the way audiences experience the scene is augmented. The new wave of photographic and audio technologies, however, may help audiences accept puppetry into the mainstream documentary genre.

Sybil DelGaudio, in her article “If Truth be told, can ‘toons tell it? Documentary and Animation,” states that animated documentaries are “ultimately re-emphasizing what every filmmaker knows: that every representation, however imbued with documentary significance, remains a fabrication” (DelGaudio 197). Animated documentaries cannot claim to represent reality visually, but can broaden an audience’s perspective.

Documentary filmmakers need to think beyond what is in front of the camera, and look deeper into what the images truly represent. “It is no longer pertinent to question whether

or not conventional documentary and animated documentary can represent reality. Instead, I believe it is more interesting to ask what aspects of reality are being conveyed, and how that is being done” (Roe 23).

The new skepticism of today’s audiences creates new challenges for filmmakers to overcome when crafting a story for their audience. This is especially true for science and natural history films because they often times want to present accurate information in a way that is understandable to a general audience. Many of these documentaries choose a more passive approach by showing an expert on the subject rattle off a bunch of statistics and opinions that ultimately allows little for the audience to do but sit quietly and listen. “Many do not find it easy to learn from hearing information, but prefer to learn through involvement and active engagement of their senses” (Pearce and Hardiman 439). Puppetry is one way to make the subject of the film more memorable, attracting attention and stimulating engagement among people who might otherwise ignore the same material presented in a different way.

BRINGING AUDIENCES BACK TO PLAY

Creating a film that engages and entertains an audience is a goal for any documentary filmmaker. Whether the point of the film is to teach viewers about the migratory patterns of great white sharks or inform them about health and conservation topics such as irresponsible oil fracking or rampant shark finning, filmmakers have been trying to craft films that resonate with a wide audience. Slow motion, time-lapse photography, camera stabilizers and mood intensifying music have all been used to bring stories to life. There is no universal way to effectively communicate to every individual, but there is one way that is commonly overlooked. That is the communicative power of play. Puppetry can be used as a tool to break down the barriers common documentary films perhaps inadvertently present, and reignite the playful side of the audience's' mind.

The article “Puppet Language: The Science of Communicative Play” discusses the effect puppets have on the learning process. The puppet-human dynamic is an evolutionary behavior unique to human play that attracts, harnesses, and mirrors the forces of consciousness inherent in brain processes (Pearce and Hardiman 439). Play is a fundamental activity that people engage in more often at a young age, but can still be enjoyed later in life. In an evolutionary sense, play is a wellspring of learning (2). Humans are always learning new skills, different techniques, or new environments. Documentaries are a common form of communication that adults engage in to learn, stay informed, or be entertained. Using puppets in documentaries can attract the more playful side of the audience, and tap into this underappreciated form of communication.

“Speaking this language, a teacher can personally transform common

barriers—oppositional behavior, negative moods, defensive attitudes—into a windfall of learning benefits and surprises” (2). How can a film about American conservative values effectively communicate with a liberal audience, or explain the psychology of sports fans to people that don’t care about sports? The answer to these questions may lie in proper application of play in the documentary.

In a documentary, there is a communication between the filmmaker, the subject, and the audience. This triangle of communication can take many forms such as narration, on-camera presenter, or a more observational approach that allows the audience to come to their own conclusions. A puppet can be a valuable tool for filmmakers because they engage and interact with the audience in a unique way. “Perhaps more than any other art form, puppetry invites (even forces) the audience to infuse characters and actions with their own meaning” (Everett 2). Each individual is going to come to his or her own conclusions about the information given in the film regardless of how it is delivered. Puppetry offers a more open and non-confrontational invitation to listen and digest the information in the film. By allowing the audience to engage with the story and interact more with the characters, it gives them a feeling of control and understanding at a subconscious level.

Marketing professors at the Western Sydney University have begun to fuse two educational drama activities: hot seating and puppetry. Hot seating is when you have one person sit in front of the room while everyone else gets to ask them quick questions to gain as much information about the person as possible. However, the professor of this class manipulates a puppet to act as a fictional client that the students must engage with

to gain the information necessary to market their product correctly. This creates a controlled environment for the students and allows the professor to facilitate the ‘meeting’ to ensure the correct information is being asked, and challenge the students accordingly. While this is not an example of a documentary utilizing puppets, it is still relevant because of its methods, preparations and outcomes.

In preparation, “students were not told what they were specifically expected to learn during the drama, instead, it was left up to them to form their own expectations and goals” (Pearce and Hardiman 440). By leaving the preparation and goals up to the students, they were not merely participating superficially in the exercise but were instead deeply engaged on a personal level. Taking a risk with this technique proved to work well with college-aged students because it gave them a fresh approach to learning and engaged them in ways that they may have not experienced since they were young children. The comments compiled after the meeting showed it clearly demonstrated the technique's ability to challenge students and shift them out of their ‘comfort zone’, requiring them to reflect critically on their own and other participants’ behavior (Pearce and Hardiman 440). The professors also use different puppets to demonstrate different clients that they might interview in the future. The variety of characters helps engage more students that might respond differently to different situations. The neutrality of all the puppet characters eliminates the perhaps intimidating presence of a real guest speaker, and allows the students to focus on developing their skills as a marketing professional. This new style of teaching allows the knowledge of the professor to be

maintained while his or her physical presence is camouflaged in a way that challenges their students in positive and effective ways.

The uses of puppetry are not meant to ‘dumb-down’ the information or present it only to a younger audience, but give audiences the opportunity to see themselves in the story and hear it from a different perspective. If I were to ask any adult if Kermit the Frog is a living and breathing amphibian, they would probably respond with something like, ‘of course not! Kermit is a felt puppet controlled by a puppeteer off camera’. However, Kermit still has a life and personality that many have grown to watch and enjoy. Puppetry, and other forms of animation, is not meant to trick the audience into thinking that the character is real, but instead meant to reflect humanity in new and relatable ways. If this were not true, popular ventriloquists like Jeff Dunham and Nina Conti would not make audiences laugh, the introduction to Pixar’s film *Up* would not make people tear up, or *Sesame Street* would not have been attracting audiences for almost fifty years. Humans grow up engaging in play from a young age that evolves into other forms as they grow older. It is a part of who we are as a species, a common language that can be ‘spoken’ between anyone in the world, and a powerful communication tool that can be used in the documentary genre.

CREATURE COMFORTS

Animation allows filmmakers to flex their creative muscles more than many other aesthetic approaches in the documentary genre. Animation can express the subject's opinions and contextualize the facts in new ways that, when done well, can have a strong impact on audiences. *Creature Comforts* is an example of a documentary series that uses stop motion animation to explore the opinions of everyday people of England. Topics such as sports, work, sex, living conditions, and the beach are covered in this series by animating animals in their environment and syncing their mouths to the words of different interview subjects. What this series really brings to light is the human condition, and the unique and interesting perspective each individual has on basic human life. The reason this series is so successful is not because they interviewed experts on the topics, asked intriguing questions or recorded groundbreaking answers, but because they successfully used a form of puppetry to illuminate the words spoken by these everyday citizens. Through the use of animation, *Creature Comforts* added subtext, humor, and universality to seemingly mundane conversations, and presented a mirror to their audience to view themselves with an entirely new perspective.

The process of creating *Creature Comforts* begins with the interviews. The content and characters they are looking for requires interviewers to tap into specific skills on interviewing a subject. In an interview, supervising director Richard Golezowski, interviewer Dan Sinclair and executive producer Kit Boss explain how they try to break the standard man-on-the-street style that might be employed for investigative radio shows, and create something that is on the same level as the everyday audience member.

“To just take the time to find people who have nothing on their resume that would make them an interesting feature topic. We wanted normal people who happen to have interesting opinions, or who happen to have really interesting voices” (Broun 3). Everyone has opinions on topics, but often times don’t get to share their thoughts because they don’t have anyone who wants to hear them out. A good interviewer has the ability to listen to the individual and make people feel at ease. “Dan and the good interviewers are the ones who make the person feel like they’re really interested in what they have to say no matter how mundane. It’s so unusual for some people to find anyone who wants to hear them, who really wants to give them the time to say what’s on their mind. A lot of people open up really wonderfully when you do that” (5). This is a skill that can work for any interview subject regardless of if the filmmaker wants to animate the subject in the final film. Humor is often times used when trying to put people at ease before or during the interview. Dan Sinclair believes that it is one of his best weapons to use in an interview. “If you can just make someone smile or chuckle then they automatically warm up to you” (6). A comfortable interview subject that feels they are being acknowledged and heard will often times speak in a much more casual and candid manner. This demeanor will subsequently put the audience at ease because they are spoken to in a calmer, and less authoritative or intimidating, way.

Creature Comforts is also a highly successful television series because they value and implement humor and subtext into their animations. This is done through a variety of tactics. One is a more lateral way of thinking about the interview’s content. Kit Boss does this by “taking things that were meant for one context and ripping them out of that

context and putting them in a new context that gave them a lot of humor, and a whole new level of subtext” (Broun 1). It is a way to find parallels between two subjects that appear to have little to do with one another, but do when you look at them with a different perspective. The first installment of *Creature Comforts*, which also went on to win an Oscar award, depicted animals living in zoo enclosures talking about what it was like to live in small areas, eat the same thing every day, and not have the freedom to live their own lives. To bring these animal characters to life, the interview team found people living in small apartments, retirement homes, and student dorms to try and find out what it is like to give up some freedoms and suddenly start living in a smaller area. The team was looking for “things that were a bit parallel to animals being dissatisfied with their environment” (Mitchell 3). One of the highlights of the episode is a Brazilian student ranting about how he doesn’t enjoy living in Britain because of the lack of space compared to his hometown when he states, “We need space to live. We need space to feel like we are part of the world, and not feel like we are an object in a box” (“Lip Sync: Creature Comforts (Original Short). His voice was animated as a mountain lion sitting on a fake tree in a concrete room at the zoo. This section of the episode is a culmination of a great character talking about something that can relate to how humans feel about their life sometimes, and how some people feel about animals living in the zoo. It opens up a conversation about the human condition, how we are supposed to be living our lives, and what we do to wild animals for the entertainment of the people at the zoo.

Nick Park, one of the writers, directors and animators for the series, initially interviewed people at the zoo and asked them what they thought about animals living in

the cages, but did not get any material that was worth animating. “It was good but people all said the same thing, really: ‘Nice to see the animals, pity they’re locked up’” (Mitchell 3). By looking at zoos from a more basic and fundamental perspective, he was able to come up with the idea to interview people who were living in similar situations and/or dissatisfied with their environment. By doing this and animating it to the interviews, he added a whole new level of subtext and humor that was not there before.

The use of puppetry allows all of these topics to come through in a neutral manner because a mountain lion is saying it, and he is talking about himself rather than a human character on screen specifically talking about this subject. Many documentaries fall into the latter style because they want to present someone with knowledge on the subject to drive their specific point home. However, this confrontational and lecture style of communication creates a more defensive audience because they are being told what to think. *Creature Comforts* trusts its audience to come to their own conclusions. Some audience members might talk about the episode’s subtextual qualities, while others discuss the humor of what was being said and how it was animated or the cuteness of one of the animals. A documentary filmmaker cannot control how the audience is going to react to their film, so adopting a more neutral approach to storytelling, such as puppetry, provides the best opportunity for the information to resonate with them.

Puppetry may not be considered a reputable way to make a documentary because of the obvious recreation of a past event. However, it can be argued that there is a ‘realism’ or indexicality to the sound that does not reside in the image (Roe 27). In the case of *Creature Comforts*, the images are merely validating what is being said, which is

the source of truth in a film. The auditory experience of both live-action and animated styles of documentary can be very similar. Both diegetic sounds and the dialogue during an interview/voice-over can be used in very similar ways. For example, an interview where a scientist describes his/her discoveries in microbiology could be shot on location, or animated. The visual representation of the interview would be vastly different, but the information given by the scientist would remain exactly the same. In this example, “science and scientific language gives animated imagery the additional credibility it needs to make the leap from being iconic to being indexical” (Pinzon 6). The language itself, especially in science documentaries, can validate the film enough to allow for more creative treatment of the subject visually. The same can be said for *Creature Comforts*, despite not being a series about complex scientific topics. The interviewee’s recorded opinions are real and unchanged, which allow it to be considered a documentary despite the obvious creative treatment to their visual representation.

Creature Comforts is a brilliant example of the applied use of puppetry in a documentary form because of the impressive animations, and the fact that they take plain and simple question and answer conversations and make them interesting and funny with sub textual qualities. However, I believe their most recent work focuses more on the humor than the compelling subtext. The example given earlier with the Brazilian student’s living condition being compared to the living conditions of a caged animal presented a topic that may be hard to talk about in an interesting and memorable way. In a way, it gave zoo animals a voice, in the same way it gave average people a platform to explain their opinions on their living situations and how they cope with it. They touch on

this deeper sub textual level a few times later on in the series, but generally use their style of puppetry to bring humor and entertain their audiences, not make them think of themselves and their opinions in a deeper way. Animated films such as *Zootopia*, have embraced the power animation has to present modern and timeless topics to an older audience, while still entertaining the younger audience members. For younger audiences, *Zootopia* is a film about a young woman trying to overcome the obstacles of becoming the first rabbit in the police force, and solving a case with the help of a shifty fox you grow to like by the end of the film. To an older audience, the film represents modern race relations in America, and how many believe racial tensions to be a thing of the past, however, still remains a reality for minorities every day. This is a representation of how powerful puppetry and other animated mediums can be when effectively implemented. They can be about two things at once, and entertain multiple audiences at the same time. *Creature Comforts* has certainly made a name for itself as a groundbreaking use of puppetry in the documentary genre, but it has shifted from the success of its original production of hard-hitting subtext to a more humorous approach. While still a very entertaining and creative series, it has potential that is not being tapped into as much today as it did thirty years ago.

SESAME STREET

In 1966, experimental psychologist Lloyd Morrisett had a conversation at a dinner party that put into motion a unique television show that would change children's educational programming forever. Of course, the show I am referring to is *Sesame Street*. Not only has this show been in production for almost fifty years, but has been developed to be aired in more than 120 countries and won more Emmy awards than any other show on television (Palmer 90). The show is not only one of public television's greatest success stories, but a testament to the power of rigorous interdisciplinary research and puppetry in a television show designed to teach children about more than just numbers and letters, but about their emotions, relationships, and social selves. While puppetry cannot, and should not, be seen as the sole reason for the success of the show, it is not a coincidence that its presence made a considerable contribution. Despite documentary elements included during some portions of the show, it is not considered a documentary. However, the show still presents numerous examples and techniques, such as its unique characters, timelessness, entertainment value, interdisciplinary research, and the balance between comprehension and appeal, that documentary filmmakers could use in their films to generate more attention and success.

As I mentioned before, puppetry engages audiences in unique ways because of its playful representations and ability to relate to a wide audience. This is especially true for child audiences, and is a main reason the art form is so successful among children's programming. Puppets can be important tools for many child therapists to use when treating a patient. Cheryl Hulburd is one that values the element of play, and the effects

it has on young children. “Kid’s heal in the playroom. You feel safe around a puppet. You can’t communicate when you feel threatened” (Johnson 1). The creators of *Sesame Street* certainly took the power of play and puppetry when designing the show in the late 1960’s; however, they took it one step further. They created multiple characters that encompass different emotions, tendencies, and age groups. For example, Elmo is written and performed to be a three-year-old while Big Bird is portrayed as being six (Palmer 90). Through the process of research and collaboration, the writing staff and puppeteers are able to achieve this and allow audiences of different age groups and experiences to relate to individual characters. Positive relationships and emotions are also portrayed through characters such as Oscar the Grouch’s irritable nature or Bert and Ernie’s friendship (Palmer 90). They use Oscar the Grouch’s character to show examples of how to interact with someone who is in a bad mood, and show that it is okay to sometimes be irritated in life. Bert and Ernie’s relationship is unique in that they are two friends living together that have very different moods and temperaments. Sometimes a child might identify with Bert, while at other times Ernie may be more relatable. In the end, the conflict they are having is resolved and teaches children to overcome their differences with others, and work towards a solution.

Puppets are critical for this understanding to happen because of their neutrality. Children do not see them as fellow humans, but as their unique visual characteristics and personalities. It interacts with the child’s mind and imagination in a way no human can because of the intimidating appearance of an older person. Hulburd uses puppets in her therapy sessions because puppet play and puppet shows engage so

much of the mind and senses, it helps get things out the child may not even know were there (Johnson 3). The use of unique characters that resonate with multiple audience types is certainly a key to the continued success of the show, and a technique documentary filmmakers can adopt more often.

Many modern documentary filmmakers do not stress their film's entertainment value over its production and informational value. You can achieve a high production value with crisp sound and 8K slow motion, and get the correct information for a topic by interviewing an expert in the field, but how long is that going to be entertaining for your audience? I have seen countless films that do just that, and they have all begun to blend together in my memory. Filmmakers should be asking themselves: what does my audience positively respond to, and how can I create this response in my film? This is exactly what the creators of *Sesame Street* asked themselves during the early stages of development; and after years of research and collaboration they found the answers to those questions. "We knew that they liked cartoons, game shows, and situation comedies, that they responded to slap-stick humor, music with a beat, and above all, fast-paced, oft-repeated commercials" (Fisch & Truglio xi). With this information, they were able to create a show that not only taught children about numbers, letters, vocabulary, and their emotional selves, but one that entertained them as the same time. "Together, the data suggests that the relationship between comprehension and appeal is actually reciprocal. The appeal of television material can help to draw children to the material and lead to greater comprehension. At the same time, the material is more likely to sustain its appeal if it is comprehensible and tailored to the development level of its target

audience” (Fisch & Truglio 235). The blending of comprehension and appeal is the main reasons for the continued success of the show.

Sesame Street is an example of how researchers, filmmakers, and puppeteers can come together and produce a show that resonates with their audience. It is an example of how education can be fun and entertaining. It speaks to kids from a variety of backgrounds, bridging the gap between poverty lines and country borders. Gary Knell, former CEO of the Sesame Workshop said, “The show was designed to be ‘inclusive,’ calling the series ‘a universal connector’ among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. ‘It wasn’t meant to be exclusive for the lower-income kids’” (Goldstein 18). By using puppets as the main stars of the show, it gave children an opportunity to learn and engage with non-adult educators. The puppet characters are at their level, and acted as their friends who are interested in learning about various topics that would help them develop later on in school and life situations. Yes, *Sesame Street* is a children's show, but that does not mean it does not have techniques that cannot be adopted to cater to adult audiences and stories. As a filmmaker particularly interested in science and natural history topics, this show is a clear example of how one should go about producing a film with educational components in a way that connects to my audience in a unique and memorable way.

THE POWER OF PLAY

“The site of the masked figure, as a purely aesthetic experience, carries us beyond ‘ordinary life’ into a world where something other than daylight reigns; it carries us back to the world of savage, the child and the poet, which is the world of play.”

— Johan Huizinga

Every human being in the world has engaged in play at some point in his or her life. Whether having a tea party with dolls, playing a game of tag, or throwing a Frisbee back and forth, play is an integral and significant aspect of human life and culture. Sports are one of the most popular and well-known forms of play that has been present in human cultures around the world for thousands of years. Sports fandom, or the act of cheering for a particular sports team or individual, has paralleled the development and popularity of sports. My short film, *The Power of Play*, looks at sports fans from psychological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives to try and understand not only what has made humans attracted to sports for thousands of years, but also what it means to be a human being. I chose to use puppetry in my film because I believe in its potential to resonate better with audiences compared to other aesthetic approaches in documentaries, and the surprising similarities between how an audience watches sports and puppets.

Play evolves throughout an individual's life. In its earliest stage, it is based more on improvisation and pretend. It later progresses into a more rule-based form of play, that helps develop the child's social self (Radiolab: “Games”). Sports are the natural next step within the play spectrum and introduce organization, discipline, cooperation, and in many sports, a division of labor. What all of these general phases of play have in

common is the notion of pretend. Johan Huizinga's groundbreaking book *Homo Ludens: A Case Study of the Play Element in Human Culture* discusses the significant impact play makes in humans. According to him, "play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporal sphere of activity with a disposition all its own" (Huizinga 103). When one is in a state of play, most of the rules of real life don't exist for a brief moment in time. It is engaged in during the leisure periods of the day, where one can let loose a little and take a break from reality. Sports represent a more organized and structured form of play that humans not only enjoy playing, but also spend thousands of dollars just to watch and cheer for it. For many, it is an integral part of life. "It adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual—as a life function—and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a cultural function" (104). There are few human activities that consistently bring thousands of individuals together for a common purpose. The feeling of being "apart together is an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game" (106). This form of positively withdrawing from everyday life is not a behavior that is practiced, or was started, by one culture, but a cultural phenomenon shared by all humans.

There is also a sacredness that shrouds the world of sports and sports fandom. Sports can represent a utopian microcosm where two opposing sides compete under equal and fair conditions to see who will come out the better team. This is an

aspect of everyday life that we as humans try to maintain, but see it fall apart on a daily basis. One of the unique aspects of play, most notably in sports, is its orderly form. “It creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection...It is invested with the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony” (Huizinga 105). This enticing participation in rhythm and harmony is one of the main draws of playing and watching sports. When I go to a sporting event, the evidence can be seen throughout the game. Rituals are performed in unison by the fans during a particular time at the event. This act is meant to help cheer for one team, or jeer the opposing team. Each team and their fan base have ritual acts that are specific to that community of individuals. It is through these rituals that a common language can be spoken between fans without literally engaging with each other.

The sacredness fans and player place on sports can also be witnessed when there is a disagreement with the referee, umpire, judge, etc. When a foul is not called, or there is any misconduct that is not noticed by the officials, the rhythm and harmony of the game is under threat. The beautiful and utopian representation of a human society that fans spend their hard-earned money to witness is jeopardized. This upheaval of a sacred act and space has caused intense arguments, violence, and even death threats. For those humans who are not avid sports fans, the intense emotional investment of sports fans can seem strange and alien. In the end, did the Cubs winning the World Series in 2016 actually benefit the fans watching the game at home? On a physical level, it did nothing. But on an emotional and overall societal level, it made a huge difference. My

short film uncovers some of the psychological and sociological impacts sports have on individual sports fans and the community as a whole.

The main distinction my short film has compared to other documentaries is the use of puppets. When researching sports and sports fans in preparation for this film, I began to see the similarities between how humans watch sports and how we watch puppets. As I mentioned before, watching a sport can be seen as watching a representation of human society with its rules, rituals, opposing sides, division of labor, and organization. It is a reflection of a perfect community striving to become the best in the league. In a similar manner, a puppet is a reflection of an individual human. Believable puppetry is achieved when the body movements and speech are performed in such a way that the audience suspends the fact that the puppet is not a living being, and engages with it on a subconscious level. If the puppeteer's arm is suddenly seen underneath the puppet, the illusion is compromised, thus the magic of the interaction dissipates. This is similar to a referee missing a call during a play. The illusion of a fair and just event is suddenly compromised and the rest of the event has less value and significance. It is this illusion of life that has allowed puppetry and sports to remain a constant pulse and attraction within human cultural evolution.

Creature Comforts was a main inspiration during the process of creating this film. Their interviewing style, subject selection, use of subtext and humor took the use of stop-motion animation to the next level. I incorporated some of their techniques into my film such as interviewing professionals that were not experts on sports fandom. Juliana Schroeder is a psychologist that works for UC Berkeley's Haas school of Business. Her

expertise is mainly with social cognition, group organization, decision-making and the importance and effect of human rituals. Matthew Vess is a social psychologist who studies people's efforts to manage existential concerns, including personal identity, meaning, and mortality. My conversational and investigative approach I brought to the interviews allowed for a more candid and conversational interview to unfold. I read their research before the interview and saw many parallels and similarities to the research I had already done on sports fandom. I presented the theories I had learned to them to see if they could find any connection and talk in more depth about it. It didn't always work, but when it did the interview became less of a question and answer style, and more of a casual conversation. Linus Huang is the only interviewee that had some professional experience researching sports and taught a class at UC Berkeley called the Social Institution of Sports. He provided some of the best little-known knowledge and insight into sports fandom and its significant impact on the state of sports today that I believe became integral to the success of my film.

Another *Creature Comforts*' theme that inspired my decision-making was the use of animals as the main characters. I am ultimately trying to provide my audience with a different perspective not only on sports fans but also on human beings. I didn't want to make a film that only relates to sports fans or athletes, but one that uses a very common human behavior as a way to describe humans in a different light. To find this new perspective, I thought it would be humorous to ask not a fellow human being, but an animal that has lived among humans for thousands of years, but in the shadows. I chose rats that live next to the football stadium as my characters because they are common,

recognizable and it makes sense that they would live underneath the bleachers at a football stadium. Natural history documentaries usually have humans talking about other humans or animals. I thought it would be humorous to see what animals have to say about us. Again, my goal is to provide a new perspective on the human behaviors surrounding sports fans, so who would give a more objective answer than three rats that live and spend their time around sports fans?

Sesame Street is known for its groundbreaking interdisciplinary approach to research and production. I wanted to use this method in my film production as well. I interviewed psychologists, philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists to try and get the most well-rounded representation and research about sports fans. This approach is often times overlooked by filmmakers, but it can provide audiences with multiple perspectives that might resonate with a wider group. Another great example of this style of documentary filmmaking is the *Cooked* series. Michael Pollan, famous for his book “An Omnivore's Dilemma”, looks at the human-food interaction in a four-part series focusing on fire, earth, air, and water. The series is a mixture of aesthetic filmmaking approaches, and short vignettes of interesting individuals that are knowledgeable on a particular process such as bread-making, cheese making, or barbecuing. Its anthropological approach provides new perspectives on how we evolved alongside cooking practices and how they have changed or maintained themselves over time. Its interdisciplinary approach provided a well-rounded, relatable, and successful series. This series gave me a great example of how to effectively craft a film about the large and

broad topic, while the research techniques of *Sesame Street* gave me solid examples of the impact interdisciplinary research can have on the end product.

Sports, and the general act of play, have a significant impact and place within individual humans, communities, cities, and countries across the globe. I find it incredible that it is not a more researched and appreciated topic among the soft sciences. When I was an undergraduate working on an anthropology degree, there were classes that focused on an anthropological approach to broad topics like religion, music, food, sex, film and photography. In my research, however, I only found one class that specifically focused on sports from a sociological perspective. Obviously, sports are a highly researched field from more of a player and business perspectives given the twenty-four-hour sports news and analysis that is available and countless sports documentaries. However, looking at sports and sports fans from a more universal and general human perspective was hard to come by during my research. Puppetry is a more researched subject, but I also found its presence in the documentary genre to be lacking. Upon these realizations, I felt compelled to make a film that harnesses the power of puppetry and provides a new perspective not only on sports fans, but also on what it means to be human.

CONCLUSION

Puppetry and sports are two uniquely human phenomena that have captured our imagination, brought tears of sadness and joy, and evolved alongside human culture for thousands of years. Puppetry's neutral presentation of information makes it an underappreciated tool documentary filmmakers should use, or at least experiment with, more in the future. It is not a new creative approach to storytelling, but a proven way to entertain and teach audiences. With the shifting attitudes among modern audiences towards documentaries' claim to present truth, puppetry is an amazing technique that celebrates the subjectivity of documentaries and provides a fresh way to engage with film. *Creature Comforts* and *Sesame Street* are two examples of film and television productions that have successfully harnessed the power of puppetry, and brought unique, memorable, timeless stories to audiences of all ages. Sports and puppetry are two forms of entertainment that use nonverbal communication to grab the attention of its audience. Similar to the variety of puppetry forms, different sports are enjoyed by different populations around the world, but the ways in which we enjoy the act on a very basic and human level remains the same. My film is meant to remind people of their playful side by engaging them through the playful presence of puppets, and highlight why humans love watching other people play to the degree that sports fandom has become in modern times. Puppetry and sports seem to have always been part of human culture, so we should take the time to enjoy, understand and celebrate their unique power and presence in the world.

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