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THE TRANSFORMATION OF OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY CINEMA FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT: THE GENRE OF 'MACHINIMA'

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to analyse the changes in the approach to creating observational documentary cinema, the search for coverage of 'objective reality', modern distribution potential, the transformation of documentary through the hybridisation of genres, and the influence of video games on cinema. To investigate the emergence of the 'machinima' genre, its role, development prospects and influence on modern audiovisual discourse. To outline the formulation of the method of creating an animation documentary film by observing the virtual world. **The research methodology** is based on the application of several scientific methods. The theoretical method focuses on analysing literary sources regarding the history and traditions of observational documentary cinema's creation by various movements and authors, the path to its transformation and hybridisation, the emergence of video games, and the subsequent development of the 'machinima' genre. The empirical method involves researching the development of observational documentary cinema and the subsequent emergence of the 'machinima' genre by retrospectively highlighting essential authors and their works that directly influenced the formation of the genre within the broader cinematic context. The comparative method is used to draw parallels between video games and cinema. **Scientific novelty.** For the first time, the hybridisation of observational documentary cinema and the influence of video games as a medium on cinema are analysed. The details of the origin and development of the 'machinima' genre are established. The impact of the 'machinima' genre on the creation of animation documentary films is outlined by observing the in-game documentary environment. **Conclusions.** The article analyses the approach to

creating observational documentary films, their transformation, and modern cross-genre discourse. The role of video games as part of modern audiovisual art, and their complementary influence on cinema, is defined. The emergence of the 'machinima' genre and its subsequent influence on contemporary observational documentary cinema are examined.

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Problem statement

Documentary cinema has always been a place to search for the true: what can be called 'objective'. Movements of Direct Cinema and Cinema Verite were formed due to the authors' desire to record reality without manipulation, minimising the fictional component. Consequently, observation became one of the primary methods of recording the truth by documentary filmmakers.

With the advancement of scientific and technical progress in the 1990s of the 20th century, video games began to appear in large numbers. Realising the artistic cinematic potential of this phenomenon, player-artists began to record gameplay and create films from it. In this way, a separate genre was formed, which was called 'machinima'.

Later, with the advent of open-world video games, players had the opportunity not only to follow the story component but also to observe a whole animated world. This prompted a documentary exploration of the in-game environment and a renewed interest in the 'machinima' genre. Thus, the phenomenon of animated documentaries created in virtual worlds appeared.

Recent research and publications analysis

P. Johnson and D. Pettit (2012), in the fundamental work 'Machinima: the art

and practice of virtual filmmaking', researched and analysed the phenomenon of the 'machinima' genre, based on their own author's experience and communication with dozens of authors who have at various times worked with the medium of video games in their cinematic practice.

S. Honcharuk, O. Levchenko and N. Tsimokh (2022) in the work 'Mockumentary Genre as a Cinematic Phenomenon of the Postmodern Age' investigated the reasons for the emergence of pseudo-documentary cinema and the development of its popularity during the second half of the 20th – beginning of the 21st centuries.

S. Vseliubska (2022a) in the work 'Infinity According to Florian: a portrait of the artist against the background of an architectural monument' explored interesting trends in the creation of modern documentary cinema, analysing O. Radynsky's feature 'Infinity According to Florian' (2022).

S. Honcharuk and O. Provolovskiy (2020) in the work 'The staged reality of documentary films: manifestations and meanings' analysed the contexts of the presence of staged reality that is formed in documentary film and outlined the manipulative nature of documentary as a medium.

In the work 'Reality in documentary cinema' (2017) investigated the history of observational documentary cinema and questioned the presence of 'objective' and 'true' in the work of a documentary filmmaker.

L. Novikova (2012), in her dissertation *Ukrainian Cinema and Processes of National Identification at the Turn of the 20th–21st Centuries*, I. Havran, M., and Botvyn (2020), in the article 'Documentary Cinema in Contemporary Screen Discourse', examined Ukrainian cinema, focusing on documentary film. O. Bezruchko, M. Stastota (2018) in the article 'Peculiarities and Conditions for Development of the Regional Audio-visua'; O. Bezruchko, K. Kostenko (2019) in the work 'Commercialization of Ukrainian Television in the Modern Informational Space'; Z. Alforova, S. Marchenko, Y. Shevchuk, S. Kotliar, S. Honcharuk (2021) in the article 'Contemporary Ukrainian cinema into the European context (2014–2019)'; O. Bezruchko, N. Kachmar (2021) in the article 'The Development of Contemporary Ukrainian Cinema'; H. Chmil, A. Bielikova (2021) in the article 'Producer Activity in Audiovisual Production: Ukrainian Aspects' analyzed trends in changes in the approach to creating national screen content in the 20th and 21st centuries, describing its distribution potential and festival successes.

E. Fraser (2023) in the work 'What is Cinéma Vérité? A guide to this vital filmmaking technique explores the origin, further development, and flowering of the French Cinéma Vérité group, analysing the authors' manifest concepts in the search for 'truth'.

A. Medvedieva, O. Seredytskyi (2022), in the article 'Special Aspects of the Cameramen's Work at the 'A' List Film Festivals'; I. Gavran, R. Hutsal, D. Kushnarov's (2022) 'Specific Features of TV Journalist's Work at the World Film Events' outlined the challenges and proposed options for their solution for festivals in the era of global crisis. A. Vallejo and C. Taillibert (2023) in the work 'Finding allies in Pandemic

Times: Documentary Film Festivals and Streaming Platforms. Rethinking Film Festivals in the Pandemic Era and Beyond: Researching and Analysing the Important Role of Film Festivals in the Formation of Documentary Filmmakers, Outlining the Challenges, and Offering Solutions for Festivals in an Era of Global Crisis.

R. Ebert (2000), in the work 'Ghost in the Machinima', critically analysed the development of the 'machinima' genre and outlined the prospects for the formation of the genre in the cinematic discourse.

O. Bezruchko and M. Sukhin (2023) in the work 'Animated Documentaries in Modern Cinematic Art: Specifics of Production' analysed the peculiarities of the production of animated documentaries in modern discourse.

P. Solomon, and H. Aldouby (2020), in his work 'Interview with Phil Solomon', asked American avant-garde director P. Solomon about his practice of working with the medium of video games. Analysing his own experience of 'machine' research, Solomon outlined the importance of work in this direction and the prospects for the development of the genre.

Also, the following researchers devoted their work to this topic: M. Manetas (1996-1997), 'Manifesto of Art After Videogames' and 'Videos after videogames'; M. Turner (2019) 'Art within the machine: how machinima turns the camera on videogames'; S. Crane (2023) 'Making movies in video games: why the film world is finally ready to take 'machinima' seriously'; S. Niewalda (2023) 'Against Gravity. The Art of Machinima'.

The purpose of the Article. To study the indicated problems, it is necessary to analyse the changes in the approach to creating observational documentary cinema, the search for coverage of 'objective reality,' modern distribution po-

tential, the transformation of documentary through the hybridisation of genres, and the influence of video games on cinema. To investigate the emergence of the 'machinima' genre, its role, development prospects and influence on modern audiovisual discourse. To outline the formulation of the method of creating an animation documentary film by observing the virtual world.

Main research material

Artistic reality always appeals to authenticity in documentary cinema because any observation, even without the author's influence on the objects of contemplation, is a modified form of reality in which there is a specific intervention. Even if the director consciously refuses to make any artistic changes to the imprint of reality intended for filming and rejects the edit, creating a single-frame canvas, everything remains a specific part of the subjective: what can be called 'artistic reality' because the author clearly selects the place, time and framing of a possible observation, the moment of the start and end of filming. At its core, all this is a meaningful artistic decision that alters the proposed reality through the director's lens. However, filmmakers have been looking for a form of embodiment of 'objective reality' for a long time, appealing to the contexts mentioned above.

The first movements in documentary cinema, in which the reproduction of direct, objective reality was the most essential value, emerged in the late 1950s in Canada and the US, known as Direct Cinema, and in France, as Cinema Vérité. Ukrainian film critic S. Ksaverov in his work 'Reality in Documentary Cinema' (2017) states: 'These directions were born thanks to the technical evolution

of the filmmaking process itself. Cameras had become much lighter, but the main convenience was the emergence of a portable tape recorder, which allowed for recording sound and then synchronising it with the image. Both of these trends aimed to reveal the truth and did so with similar yet distinct methods. It is worth noting that the principles of Direct Cinema greatly limited the directors themselves. This was created to limit the space for any possible manipulation of the documentary environment. For example, filming with only one camera, a complete ban on off-screen voice and music, and the use of artificial lighting. An important aspect was also the author's non-interference in the filming process. S. Ksaverov notes: 'This is probably the main difference between Direct Cinema and Cinema Verite. According to the ideologues of Direct Cinema, the following is guaranteed. If the author (that is, the person behind the camera) does not interfere at all in what is happening, then life unfolds in front of them in its immediate primary form' (2017). Cinema Verite was made possible by the same technical improvements in the film process: lighter cameras and portable tape recorders for sound recording. However, there was one major difference between the movements. In the work 'What Is Cinéma Vérité? A Guide to This Vital Filmmaking Technique', film critic E. Fraser (2023) notes that for the ideologues and founders of this movement, documentary filmmaker Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin, the active position of the author was critical, in contrast to Direct Cinema, which never intervened in the filming process. Thus, the contexts of 'objective' and 'subjective' (artistic) reality in documentary have always been cross-cutting themes

in the reflection on the nature of truth and falsehood in filmed imprints of life.

L. Novikova (2012), in her work 'Ukrainian cinema and processes of national identification at the turn of the 20th– 21st centuries' outlines an interesting tendency that in the 2000s the leading film festivals for the first time shifted their focus to documentary cinema and even went as far as breaking the canon of programming their competition programs, including documentaries along with fiction films. The 57th Cannes Film Festival began this tradition with the screening of two non-fiction films in the official competition, one of which, *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004, M. Moore), received the Palme d'Or, the main jury award.

It is worth noting that numerous international documentary film festivals exist worldwide. For example, IDFA – International Documentary Festival Amsterdam, which is considered the most prestigious international event focused on documentary cinema. Also, a notable phenomenon is the Doc Alliance – a network of the seven largest European documentary film festivals (except IDFA): CPH:DOX (Denmark), Doclisboa (Portugal), DOK Leipzig (Germany), FIDMarseille (France), Ji.hlava IDFF (Czech Republic), Millennium Docs Against Gravity (Poland) and Visions du Réel (Switzerland) (Vallejo and Taillibert, 2023, p.103). Thus, there are now many ways to realise the festival distribution potential for contemporary documentary cinema. Especially for national documentary cinema, the world's increased interest in Ukraine has significantly expanded the breadth of opportunities, which, in today's realities of war and limited funding, is almost the only viable option for film production.

S. Honcharuk and O. Provolovskyi (2020, p.87), in their work 'The staged reality of

documentary films: manifestations and meanings' note: 'Contemporary documentary films are created based on political forces and their reflection. The desire to achieve justice through the disclosure of facts in cinema contributes to the fact that today not only the demand for documentary films as a product is increasing, but also the number of young filmmakers who start their careers in the specified genre'. Thus, it is interesting to consider the reality proposed by the authors in contemporary documentary cinema, specifically through the lens of the search for truth, which in turn can lead to significant socio-political changes. In this context, observation as a form of presentation of the imprint of filmed life is the most appropriate solution. A good example of such a documentary film is the Ukrainian film 'Infinity According to Florian' (O. Radynsky, 2022), where the author masterfully models the portrait of the architect Florian Yuriev, who very archetypically fights for the autonomy of his creation, which is encroached upon by the developers of the shopping centre (Vseliubska, 2022b). Constructing an 'artistic reality' in his observation of Yuriev, Radynsky openly sympathises with the protagonist, which the viewers of the film very much feel. To a certain extent, by creating such an empathetic image of an architect, the director aims to engage the audience in civil resistance against construction arbitrariness. The 'desire to achieve justice' which S. Honcharuk and O. Provolovskyi (2020) noted in their work, is indeed an important factor for reviving the dialogue about the need to create a new social contract, implementing changes by highlighting them through direct observation of life.

In describing the limits of contemporary documentary cinema, it is notable that

a specific cross-genre discourse has become increasingly visible in recent years. Authors who work with documentary, as O. Bezruchko and V. Hryftsov (2025) assert in the article 'Documentary Style in Fiction Film', often integrate certain fictional elements into their works. The concepts of 'docu-fiction' and 'animadoc' are already sufficiently original and are fully considered in the scientific discourse. S. Honcharuk, O. Levchenko and N. Tsimokh (2022, p.185) in their work 'Mockumentary Genre as a Cinematic Phenomenon of the Postmodern Age' state: 'The new 'filter' through which the viewer of the postmodern era is forced to perceive the key ideas of films has been formed from a combination of such characteristic features of the postmodern social and cultural period as fragmentation (at the level of individuals and communities), a consumerist lifestyle, a sense of alienation and a vision of everyday real life as a theater of the absurd, an apocalyptic carnival'. The traditions established by the members of the Direct Cinema and Cinema Verite movements are now taking on hybrid forms and continuing their life in the postmodern discourse. Thus, there is a basis for the emergence of new genres that go beyond the established perception of cinema.

Due to scientific and technical progress in the late 1990s of the 20th century, an entirely new type of media emerged – video games with open worlds. In addition to the main plot, which was often based on the dramatic principles of writing a scenario of a fictional film, there is an opportunity to observe and explore a detailed virtual world. The in-game space must not be a meaningless animated canvas without defined borders and boundaries. Usually, for the creation of the world, real existing places were taken as a reference.

For example, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), produced by Rockstar Games, exploited the real-life space of the American states of California and Nevada, fully recreating three large cities: Los Angeles (game version – *Los Santos*), San Francisco (game version – *San Fierro*) and Las Vegas (game version – *Las Venturas*). It is worth noting that, although the in-game world reflects the real world, the authors were not guided by the desire to replicate it, but rather to create a distinct artistic reality that would resonate with the American socio-cultural order and often satirically critique it.

Thanks to the advent of screen capture technology, players got the opportunity to film the in-game space. This led to the formation of a fascinating context that blended the nature of animation and documentary, a combination that had not existed before. The virtual world is an animated space where the player can observe the interaction of in-game objects with one another. Actually, as follows from the interview of O. Hoisan with S. Vseliubsk (2022b), 'Oleksandr Hoisan: 'A normal person cannot be apolitical today, and cinema is always fundamentally political', it is very similar to the creation of observational documentaries in real life. However, in the above-mentioned context, it is even more precisely sublimated because the player has much more freedom to observe in the virtual world than a person in the real world, since the in-game camera does not involve technical limitations, and in-game objects exist outside the awareness that they are being observed. Interestingly, this manifestation bears a striking resemblance to the principles of Direct Cinema and Cinema Verite. To some extent, it again appeals to the existence of 'objective' reality in the context of documentary filmmaking.

Additionally, it is essential to highlight that video games have provided a new impetus for considering and rethinking the phenomenon of animated documentaries, which previously did not exist in either artistic or scientific discourses. For example, researching a similar context in their work 'Animated Documentaries in Modern Cinematic Art: Specifics of Production', O. Bezruchko and M. Sukhin (2023) consider animation as a new alternative to the presentation of documentary material. However, they do not emphasise the possibility of documenting an animated image in an artificially created virtual space, as one method of implementing 'animadocs'.

With the ability to film in-game environments, many films created inside video games began to appear. This genre received a separate name – **machinima**, from the words 'machine' and 'cinema'. Film critic M. Turner (2019), in his work 'Art within the machine: how machinima turns the camera on videogames', notes that artists, shooting films in the spaces of video games, as a rule, took a more critical position – offering reflections and appealing to the medium, its mechanics, limits and possibilities of imperfect virtual worlds.

One of the pioneers of machinima, artist and director M. Manetas (1996), who successfully contributed to the aesthetisation of the in-game space as a medium that is part of audiovisual art, created a series of works, 'Videos After Videogames' (1996-2002). These audiovisual works have been exhibited around the world, including at Basilico Gallery (New York, US), Galerie Analix Forever (Geneva, Switzerland), Lux Gallery (London, UK), and Antonio Colombo Gallery (Milan, Italy), among many others. Sublimating his experience as a player and observer of hundreds of virtual worlds from 1997

to 2016, Manetas created the manifesto 'Manifesto of Art After Videogames' where he stated that video games are not games, but EVR: extended versions of reality through which the process that started with the poems of Homer, Mahabharata and the Bible, continues. Manetas (1997) believes that artists, having devoted themselves to video games, no longer play, but communicate with them.

R. Ebert (2000), a famous American film critic and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1975, in his work 'The Ghost in the Machinima', notes: 'The key elements in machinima are low cost and artistic freedom. These movies do not require actors, set designers, cinematographers, caterers, best boys, or key grips. They can be made by one person sitting at a computer. This is revolutionary. However, we guess that the films themselves will not be as revolutionary as the techniques used to make them – that out of those basements and bedrooms will come not cinematic art but elaborations on the themes of video games'. Instead, P. Solomon, a prominent American avant-garde director, turning to the machinima in his later works, describes his experience of contemplating the in-game world of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) with great admiration, emphasising his own attention to how the virtual world absorbs him, as an artist, with its detailing and elaborateness. Solomon, contrary to Ebert's scepticism, finds a sure salvation in the in-game space and aestheticises it within the avant-garde film tradition (Solomon and Aldouby, 2020, p.80).

Summing up, M. Turner (2019) notes: 'Machinima is one of the most democratic forms of filmmaking, requiring only a computer for its creation, but without an equally independent archival infrastructure it might easily end up forgotten. Cinema has had more than a century to

reach its current state, whereas games have only had half of that, depending on when it is agreed they began. It would be a shame if something involving the convergence of these two young media did not get its fair chance to grow too'.

At this time, it is crucial to emphasise the significance of the bridge between the video game and cinema worlds. Specific processes are already underway, as many festivals consider video games to be on par with cinema, which requires their own development and separation from the mainstream, multibillion-dollar industry. For example, in a recently published 10-year strategy, the British Film Institute equated video games as an equal partner alongside film and television to 'protect the value of the full breadth of screen culture' (Crane, 2023). Additionally, there has been a recent trend in the selection of films for leading international film festivals. Last year, the Locarno Film Festival (Switzerland), one of the world's most important film festivals, selected the short machinima "Hardly Working" (2022), produced by the Austrian collective Total Refusal, for the international competition program "Pardi di domani." The film received the Best Director prize. Additionally, the film was awarded the European Film Academy's Best European Short Film at the 36th European Film Awards in 2023. This machinima is entirely based on the gameplay of the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018). In 2023, one of the oldest film festivals in the world – the In-

ternational Short Film Festival Oberhausen (Germany) announced machinima as the focus of its main out-of-competition Theme program – Against Gravity. The Art of Machinima (Niewalda, 2023).

Conclusions

Outlining contemporary trends, documentary cinema is increasingly moving away from the contexts of the 'search for truth'. Cinema is being hybridised. The concepts of 'docu-fiction' and 'animadoc' are fully present in the modern cinema discourse, which actively contributes to the emergence of new hybrid forms and presentations.

One of the 'youngest' hybrid genres – 'machinima', which emerged from the filming of virtual worlds – is experiencing a noticeable shift towards academization and is becoming increasingly visible at the world's leading film festivals. Authors actively explore in-game environments and find space for their own artistic expressions outside the dictates of restrictions. This is the primary advantage of machinima: the ability to create a film without requiring substantial financial and personnel resources.

Thereby, in the contemporary film process, the development prospects of machinima are unlimited. Virtual worlds will continue to progress rapidly in the coming years, and their documentary potential will only grow with the development of artificial intelligence technologies.

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ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ СПОСТЕРІГАЛЬНОГО ДОКУМЕНТАЛЬНОГО КІНО ВІД МИНУЛОГО ДО СЬОГОДЕННЯ: ЖАНР МАШИНІМА

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Анотація

Мета статті – проаналізувати зміни в підходах до створення спостерігального документального кіно, зокрема пошуки способів вираження «об'єктивної реальності», а також простежити його трансформацію в умовах гібридизації жанрів і впливу медіатехнологій. Розкрити сучасний дистрибуційний потенціал документалістики, зумовлений цифровими платформами та інтерактивними форматами. Дослідити появу жанру машиніма, його роль у сучасному аудіовізуальному дискурсі, перспективи розвитку та вплив на кінематограф. Окреслити засади формування методу створення анімаційно-документального кіно, побудованого на спостереженні віртуального світу. **Методологія дослідження** базується на використанні низки наукових методів. Теоретичний метод зосереджується на аналізі літературних джерел щодо історії та традицій створення спостерігального документального кіно різними течіями й авторами, процесів трансформації та гібридизації кіно, а також виникнення відеоігор і подальшого формування жанру машиніма. Емпіричний метод передбачає дослідження розвитку спостерігального документального кіно та появу жанру машиніма через ретроспективний аналіз ключових авторів та їх робіт, які безпосередньо вплинули на становлення цього жанру як частини кінематографічного контексту. Порівняльний метод застосовано для окреслення паралелей між відеоіграми та кінематографом.

Наукова новизна. Вперше проаналізовано гібридизацію спостерігального документального кіно та роль відеоігор як медіума, що впливає на кінематограф. Встановлено ключові етапи виникнення та розвитку жанру машиніма, окреслено специфіку його впливу на формування анімаційно-документального кіно через спостереження внутрішньоігрового документального середовища.

Висновки. В статті проаналізовано підхід до створення спостерігального документального кіно, його трансформацію та сучасний крос-жанровий дискурс. Визначено значущу роль відеоігор у розвитку аудіовізуального мистецтва та їх взаємодоповнювальний вплив на кінематограф. Досліджено появу жанру машиніма та його подальший вплив на сучасне спостерігальне документальне кіно.

Ключові слова: документальне кіно; реальність; спостереження; відеоігри; машиніма; анімадок; віртуальний світ



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