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### **Watershed November 2008 Podcast**

When cinema was born - just over 100 years ago – its two great creative strengths were immediately apparent. The first was its ability to record and represent reality. Indeed it is thought that the roots of the moving image came about as a result of trying to prove whether when a horse was running all its hooves were, at one point, off the ground. Pioneering photographer Eadweard Muybridge, supported by wealthy businessman and horse breeder Leland Stanford, set up a series of stills cameras in Stanford's racetrack in California. Fine silk threads ran across the course. The horse triggered the shutters as it passed by. The resulting series of images revealed that indeed the horse did at one point have all four hooves off the ground. An equally significant if not more momentous by product was that these images had also captured movement over real time – a precursor for cinema. This ability of the camera to capture the real event was at the core of one strand of the new medium's potential.

Capturing these images together in one continuous mechanism and then projecting them began to attract attention. I'm not going to reignite the debate over who or where cinema was invented but jumping over to France the Lumière Brothers were experimenting with this new technology. Their experiments involved capturing real events – 'actuality films' as they have been called. The most dramatic was a train arriving at a station. Which according to legend had, when projected, audiences heading for the exits thinking that a real train was about to come through the screen. Other actuality films included workers leaving the factory. In the UK the Blackburn based Mitchell and Kenyon film company were going into towns recording real events during the day and, in the evening, playing them in fairground tents, town halls and music halls under slogans like "see yourselves as others see you". These are early examples of documentary as entertainment – a precursor perhaps of television's fascination/obsession with "real" peoples' lives.

The other unique creative strength of the new medium of moving image used the prerequisite of frame by frame to the complete opposite effect. Rather than capture reality, if those frames could be manipulated, then all sorts of fantastical things could happen. One of the early pioneers of this was the Frenchman George

Méliès. Méliès, who was a theatrical showman and interested in illusion and magic tricks, was in the audience in December 1895 when the Lumière Brothers unveiled their new moving image spectacle. Méliès got his hand on a camera and started filming himself. Again as legend has it when he was filming a street scene the mechanism stuck. He fixed it and continued filming. The printed and screened results showed people and objects to have magically disappeared or appeared or changed into other things. Méliès, being a showman and illusionist, jumped at this potential and where others were showing the everyday he ended up taking audiences to the moon. Animation was born and with it the documentary potential of cinema had a playful twin: illusion.

I recount this because as these parallel creative urges of cinema established themselves as documentary and fiction – live action and animation – they seemed destined never to meet. However it seems to me in recent times an interesting convergence is taking place which blurs these boundaries to powerful effect.

The new feature film **Waltz with Bashir** has been described as the first feature length animated documentary. One night at a bar, an old friend tells director Ari Folman about a recurring nightmare in which he is chased by 26 vicious dogs. The two men conclude that there is a connection to their Israeli Army mission in the first Lebanon War of the early eighties where the Israeli army invaded South Lebanon. Ari is surprised that he cannot remember a thing anymore about that period of his life. He decides to meet and interview old friends and comrades around the world. He needs to discover the truth about that time and about himself. As Ari delves deeper and deeper into the mystery, his memory begins to creep up in surreal images. The use of animation allows the director to heighten the nightmare, chaos and surrealism of the war to remarkably powerful effect and to capture the peculiar fragility and terrifying reality of memory. There is also a firm grounding in the real consequences of war which makes for emotional viewing.

**Waltz with Bashir** has an advance preview as part of the Encounters Short Film Festival on Tue 18 Nov before opening at Watershed on Fri 21 Nov.

In a way animation is delivering fully on John Grierson, the founding father of the documentary movement's, dictum that documentary is the creative manipulation of reality. There are a couple of excellent short films in this year's festival which use

animation to convey a strong message more associated with documentary. In the South West programme Sarah Cox's **Don't Let it Unravel** is an animated plea to stop the self-destruction of the planet. Lindsay Knight's **Not for Good** in the Best of British Programme Three tells of the plight of 16 year old Jessica kicked out of her home after a family argument. Rather than detract from the seriousness of her story the animation gives the film added emotional weight and authority. Eamon Little's **Nobody Home**, shown in the Irish Shorts programme, is a fine example of the manipulation of the stop frame discovered by Méliès.

As I hinted at the beginning – the birth of cinema is still a contentious subject and the great thing is that work is still being discovered which adds to our understanding of how the medium developed. There is a focus this year at Encounters on Russian animation and a rare opportunity to discover the work of Russian pioneer Alexander Shiryayev. Shiryayev was born in 1867 and died in 1942. He was the leading character dancer and ballet master at the Imperial ballet theatre in St. Petersburg. Between 1905 and 1909 he experimented with film to explore body movement and record dancers' movements along the lines of Muybridge's studies. He also explored movement through the use of puppet animation. His work is a revelation and following its restored premiere at Pordenone's Giornate del cinema Muto in Italy some of the work will be screened on Wed 19 Nov, introduced by Aardman's very own pioneer of stop frame animation Peter Lord.

For more information on encounters go [www.encounters-festival.org.uk](http://www.encounters-festival.org.uk)

To view some of the Muybridge experiments go to

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muybridge>

To view some of the Mitchell and Kenyon work and find out more go to

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/mk/>