Contemporary animation scholar, Mihaela Mihailova (2017) provides us with a survey of some of the key ways in which the concept of realism in relation to animation has been understood and problematized. With reference to 1-3 animated films / TV produced post 2014, discuss “the idea that animation’s relationship with reality hinges on going beyond the photographic image and into an aesthetic territory accessible only to animation itself” (51).

Beginning as a form of capturing art into a moving image, animation has developed into endless possibilities for storytelling. From creating ‘other-worldly’ fantasies from a drawing or simulating reality in photorealistic 3D animation, “Animated Hollywood has toyed with the impossible as much as it has flirted with the real”¹. These technologies provide a unique aesthetic territory for filmmakers to explore and utilise to portray otherwise impossible stories and realities. Through their context-driven animation aesthetic, the animated films *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*²(2018) and *Loving Vincent*³(2017), utilise these freedoms to strengthen their narratives and uniquely portray themselves within reality. By analysing these films in relation to theories from Mihailova⁴ and other animation and film theorists, this essay will develop an understanding of the aesthetic capabilities of animation that go beyond photorealism and their impacts on film narrative.

As animation technologies have shifted and developed, film theorists have questioned animation’s place within realism and film theory. As the key influence of this essay, Mihailova delves into the history of animation and how its relationship with reality has evolved alongside its technologies⁵. She discusses how the “wealth of existing animation techniques and their distinct aesthetics concerns and characteristics” complicates any theorist’s attempt at developing a singular established concept of animation and realism. Leslie⁶ presents a similar argument by stating how “animation is subversive of itself—ever changing, ever shifting”⁷ and is difficult to position itself in history and reality. Mihailova and Leslie understand animation as a different and diverse genre that cannot itself be truly defined by

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³ *Loving Vincent*, directed by Dorota Kobiela and Hugh Welchman (2017).
⁴ Mihailova. “Chapter 4: Realism and Animation.”
⁵ Ibid
a single theory. This is also reflected by Herhuth, who delves into the aesthetics of animation and how its creative freedoms affect the storytelling and the relationship between film and audience. He focuses on how the aesthetics of animation provide a unique experience for a viewer as it “relies on human concepts to convey motion” whilst also providing a chance for the aesthetic to become a part of the story experience. Herhuth also argues that the ability to convey a reality through the motion of a drawn image or an object creates a complex experience that is “at once unfamiliar and strange and very familiar and natural.” This experience stems from the very existence of animation. Gunning develops a similar theory to this experience and how animation creates not only an appearance of motion but how animation is “in the transformation of stillness into motion.” From these theories, the complexities of the animation can be better understood in relation to the analysis of Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse and Loving Vincent’s aesthetically driven realities.

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse has widely been acknowledged for its artistic direction and unique animation style. Through the combination of computer-generated 3D animation and hand-drawn animation, this film creates a unique context-driven style of a comic book brought to life. To create this unique contextually driven aesthetic, animators added hand-drawn elements to characters to add facial detail or create movement through action lines, which can be seen when first introduced to Miles Morales. Throughout the film, there are also design elements, such as comic dotting, hatching, and line works that imitate depth and texture whilst also creating dynamic lighting. The film also incorporated direct links to comic book pages through the panelling of multiple shots in a single frame that simulates the same format seen in comics. Another direct link is the use of non-diegetic text boxes and action onomatopoeias that pop into frame, again similar to a comic book. These elements create a unique visual environment for audiences to appreciate, whilst contextually linking the film to its comic book origins. This is further developed with the introduction of three variant ‘spider-people’ – Peni Parker, Spider-Noir, and Spider-Ham – which introduce contrasting animation

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styles. Despite existing in this comic-book stylised world, these three characters portray differing styles and obey their own animation laws. Spider-Noir is most obviously unique as he is always coloured in greyscale with dramatic lighting to match the film noir aesthetic of his universe. This is contrasted against Peni Parker, whose character design and movements are reminiscent of anime animations. The most unique character, Spider-Ham, is a direct reference to Warner Brothers’ cartoons. Throughout the film he does not obey the laws of Mile’s universe – for example, floating in the air- which creates a new sense of reality within the film. These three different character designs enhance the context-driven aesthetic of the film as their designs are directly linked to their origins in their universe and their narratives. Through this artistic direction, //Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse// creates a unique animation experience and strengthens its narrative through these context-driven stylisations.

//Loving Vincent// is a unique animation that captures the essence of Vincent van Gogh’s artworks to portray his story and his impact on art history. The film begins with text painted on the screen stating, “this film you are about to see has been entirely hand-painted by a team of over 100 artists”\(^\text{13}\). This decision to make the audience aware of the process taken to create the film is vital in the storytelling of the narrative and its animation style. Throughout the film, there are two distinct painting styles of the scenes, the ‘present’ – which follows Armand Roulin’s investigation – and the flashbacks – retelling the different characters’ stories and Vincent’s life. The flashbacks are designed to artistically simulate the photographic look of 19\(^{\text{th}}\)-century photography technology. Through greyscale paints and smooth paint strokes, the scenes become more photorealistic. To support the flashbacks, a black vignette has been incorporated into the paintings, which is also suggestive of the photographic painting style. In stark contrast, the present is distinguished through the coloured paintings that are directly influenced by Van Gogh’s painting style. Through distinctive brushstrokes that provide texture as well as movement to the paintings, each frame is perceived as if it is a Van Gogh painting itself. However, throughout the film, specific shots are direct links to specific paintings, such as the initial shot of //Starry Night// (1889) that then pans down into the scene. These instances of direct linkages to his own paintings strengthen the relationship between aesthetics and film storytelling, as it depicts the world through Van Gogh’s artistic eyes. Through this

\(^{13} \text{Loving Vincent, 0:01:36.} \)
relationship, the audience is constantly reminded of the focus of the film, which is Van Gogh and his artworks. This artistic direction was chosen as they believed they could not “truly tell Vincent’s story without his paintings, so [they] needed to bring his paintings to life”14. *Loving Vincent*’s unique animation stylisation not only displays Vincent van Gogh’s life and artistry but also portrays the historical narrative through a unique context-driven aesthetic.

Both *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* and *Loving Vincent* portray their stories through context-driven aesthetics to create a unique portrayal of reality. Although *Into the Spider-Verse* is a fictional story, it presents itself within a reality known to the audience, New York City, which is then transformed into a comic-book-style reality. *Loving Vincent* presents a mostly true story set in history but through its unique painting animation, this reality is also transformed. These animated films become different realities or a “different nature” which is “a different kind to the one we inhabit, and yet it is not distinct from it”15. It parallels our human world to stabilise the viewers into the different reality and present the narrative through a new imaginative lens. Through this lens, both films present a still art form – comic books or Van Gogh paintings - in motion and brought to life. By balancing the reproduction and distortion of reality, these films are able to utilise their aesthetics to push their narrative and create a unique relationship between film and audience16. Mihailova and Herhuth both discuss this aesthetic experience and its effect on viewer comprehension of the narrative. Through these unique aesthetics and characters, these two films have allowed their artistry to enhance the dynamics of “sensorial perception and conceptual understanding”17 for the audience. Viewers are encouraged to suspend one’s reality to fully encapsulate the narrative and appreciate the original art form. By holding to their original artistic influences these animations create a stronger emotional connection. This relationship between animation and the audience relates to “our core experience of animation” and the “old fantasy of drawings brought to life”18, where these films have made that desire possible. These artistic possibilities provided by the art of animation strengthen not only the aesthetics of the films but also their emotional connection between user and story. *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* and *Loving Vincent*...
Vincent both utilise their suspension of true reality to aesthetically portray their contextual art form and establish a unique visual narrative.

Through the analysis and discussion of Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse and Loving Vincent and their incorporation of context-driven aesthetics to drive their narrative, a better understanding of the capabilities of animation has been drawn. These unique animated films provide insight into how contemporary animations can explore their aesthetic territory and create unique realities for audiences to experience. The incorporation of stylistic elements to the animation aesthetic allows for both the suspension and extension of reality within animation.
BRINGING ART TO LIFE: THE MAGIC OF ANIMATION

Reference List


