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Emotional truths in documentary making

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PhD by Publication

Media and Communications

Goldsmiths, University of London

30.08.19.

Declaration of Authorship

I (Mark Aitken) hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own.

Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

Emotional truths in documentary making

The abundance of documentary making and instability of 'truths' in the current 'post-truth' era suggests a need to reconsider past and present epistemological claims by non-fiction. Burdens of documentary 'truth' were shed in favour of subjective 'truths' advocated by film makers and subjects. Documentary 'truths' are defined as performative but we should accept the possibility of 'untrue' performance. Audience interpretation of performative 'truths' also proves to be relative to belief and emotions. This unstable plurality of 'truths' calls for renewed trust in film makers, subjects and audiences.

My thesis offers coherence to a ten-year body of work where I sought to understand trauma in subjects. I emphasise often overlooked film maker/subject dynamics and posit this as a location for developing trust. 'Emotional truths' may result from feeling the subject's trauma while acknowledging filters of pain on memory. The process requires a creative exchange based on an empathetic, non-hierarchical encounter. I examine how these 'truths' are constructed through 'performative collaboration' and how they manifest in the work - following consensus between subject and film maker. Apart from my own practice, I cite similar, contrasting, past and recent examples of 'emotional truths' while being critical of films and film makers refusing empathy towards subjects.

Finally, catharsis may occur variably for the subject, film maker and audience as trauma is re-contextualised through performed emotions in the film. Ideally, 'emotional truths' might be experienced by the audience as they feel - rather than merely gain knowledge about - trauma.

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Introduction

In Jean Rouch's and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), Marceline Loridan walks across *Place de la Concorde* into a deserted *Les Halles*.¹ Marceline's sombre tone recalls trauma of incarceration in a concentration camp with her father: he places an onion in her hand; an SS guard hits her; she passes out. Then and now, the scene is a radical documentary construct: a character recording and directing their own performance while negotiating traumatic memories. As French film critic Jean-Louis Comolli comments, 'The body, the word, the text, the character – up to that point, separated elements – became joined'.² Bill Nichols assesses, 'If they had waited for the event to occur on its own so they could observe it, it would never have occurred'.³ Nichols misses the intervention of the subject. The scene was proposed by Marceline and it was her idea to conceal the microphone and recorder under her coat. A process of collaboration that Rouch was beginning to develop - inspiring Marceline to claim, 'I understood how one could act

¹ *Chronicle of a Summer*, Directed by Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin. London: Criterion, 2013. DVD, @ 00:57:12 – 01:00:47.

² Jean-Louis Comolli, 'L'oral et l'oracle, séparation du corps et de la voix,' *Images documentaries, La voix* no. 55-6 (Winter 2006), pp.36-7.

³ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 118.

oneself. I understood how one could use emotion and look good on film'.⁴

At the end of *Chronicle*, Rouch and Morin assess how 'truthful' the work is. Morin suggests Marceline performed 'her most authentic side'⁵ while Rouch claims she wasn't acting. They considered their work to be a failure in terms of it not being, 'true to life'.⁶ Winston, Vanstone and Chi disagree with Rouch and recognise the element of performance here, 'What the participants lived was not their lives but their lives while being filmed'.⁷

Performative 'lives while being filmed' are located by Stella Bruzzi within a 'collision between apparatus and subject'.⁸ I introduce Rouch's film to illustrate that awareness of this 'collision' between film maker and subject isn't new. Marceline's scene and our knowledge of its construction offers key insights and evidence of what I'm proposing as 'emotional truths in

⁴ Brian Winston, Gail Vanstone, Wang Chi, *The Act of Documenting* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 101.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Chronicle of a Summer*, Rouch, Morin, @ 1:21:00.

⁷ Winston, Vanstone, Chi, *The Act of Documenting*, 88.

⁸ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1st ed. 2000), 7.

documentary making'. Contested ideas of 'truth', 'truths' and 'authenticity' in documentary have largely subsumed potential analysis of how filmmakers and subjects work together. I contend that downplaying the experiential nature of documentary making constitutes a blind spot in our knowledge of the form – especially when negotiating memory of trauma. I'll attempt to redress this imbalance, beginning with key examples and arguments regarding the form's relationship to 'truth' and 'truths' in an era of 'post-truth'. While I have no interest in staking claims of singular documentary 'truth', I also need to emphasise awareness of the potentially problematic return to the term 'truths'.

In Part One, I posit 'emotional truths' firmly within an empathetic encounter between film maker and subject recalling trauma. I cite examples from films and analysis to do so. I argue that use of the word 'truths' is relevant because the subject recalls events from their past - albeit from a 'palimpsest'⁹ of trauma – that validate how they feel. This validation is more than anecdotal – as in Marceline's revelation about acting – as it is evident on screen, resulting from what I will define as 'performative collaboration'. Both film maker and subject may verify the 'emotional truths' of

⁹ Linda Williams, 'Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History and the New Documentary,' *Film Quarterly*, Volume 46, Number 3 (1993): 9-21, 15.

their collaboration when assessing the completed film – just as Morin, Rouch and Loridan did. And finally, recognition of ‘emotional truths’ by the viewer suggests that we might *feel* rather than just *think* documentaries.

Part One

How did it feel?

Rouch's *Cinema Vérité* ruptured the dominance of objective documentary 'truth'. *Chronicle* expanded the form in that it overtly allowed for 'mediation'¹⁰ and refused the 'burden of objectivity taken up by Grierson and made even heavier by Direct Cinema'.¹¹ The latter's hegemony was upset again by Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) - after which he suggested, 'Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything'.¹² This isn't to say that Morris denies the existence of objective 'truth'. Morris rightly confirms the reality of a man facing the electric chair while pleading innocence.¹³ But in the film, he achieves 'the seeking of truth through lies'¹⁴ by re-enacting various scenarios of a murder. Forensic subjective 'truths' cause us to believe and doubt in

¹⁰ Brian Winston, *The Documentary Film Book*, Brian Winston, Ed., (London: British Film Institute 2013), 24.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 5.

¹³ Errol Morris - Investigating with the Camera, accessed 1st March 2019, <http://guru.bafta.org/errol-morris-annual-film-lecture>.

¹⁴ Wang Chi and Gail Vanstone and Brian Winston, *The Act of Documenting*, 91.

equal measure. Charles Musser suggests a 'legal film truth'¹⁵ at work here – opposing a judicial truth that Morris challenges with many subjective truths. One of the latter arose from Morris's perception of the trauma of parental rejection and a desire for revenge that shaped the character David Harris's persona.¹⁶ Morris and Harris ultimately arrived at his confession to the murder due to the former's understanding of the latter's emotional make-up – truths emanating from their encounter that in this case led to confirming Musser's 'legal film truth'.¹⁷

The Thin Blue Line engages with the truth of a man on death row by undermining the conviction with 'truths'. Its power resides in what Linda Williams refers to as a 'palimpsest of memory' 'reverberating between events'.¹⁸ Winston, Vanstone and Chi claim that the documentarian processes 'only what is witnessed'.¹⁹ Yet when they witness a subject in trauma, what is processed arrives through specific filters. Both Marceline and Harris expressed themselves through a reverberating palimpsest – recalling incarceration or parental rejection. These memories

¹⁵ Charles Musser, 'Film Truth in the Age of George W. Bush,' *The Journal of Cinema and Media*, Volume 48, Number 2 (2007): 9-35, 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷ Musser, 'Film Truth in the Age of George W. Bush,' 9.

¹⁸ Linda Williams, 'Mirrors without Memories', 15.

¹⁹ Winston, Vanstone, Chi, *The Act of Documenting*, 23.

raised subjective 'emotional truths' from the past that we wouldn't be privy to if not for the film maker and subject's encounter. We invest trust in Rouch and Morris and their subjects due to the outcomes of their collaboration. But before returning to specifics of 'trust' and 'collaboration' I need to highlight the potential for misplaced trust.

Morris's scepticism of documentary 'truth' can be extended to audience perception - what Carl Plantinga describes as: '*seeing itself is subject to interpretation*'.²⁰ Yet perhaps paradoxically, Plantinga reaffirms the documentary indexical 'footprint' or Barthes's 'referent'²¹ by stating that, 'if we have reason to trust the film makers'²² then we might take a 'film's images as evidence'.²³ He values trust as being related to the film maker's pedigree and that of vested interests but I contend that 'we' the audience 'trusting' the film maker leading to 'evidence' is potentially contentious. I argue 'potentially' because I think there is opportunity to trust the film maker but only when attention to certain responsibilities allows for it.

²⁰ Carl Plantinga, "I'll believe it when I trust the source': Documentary Images and Visual Evidence," in *The Documentary Film Book*, Brian Winston, Ed., 45.

²¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1984), 77.

²² Plantinga, *The Documentary Film Book*, 46.

²³ Ibid.

In an age of digital manipulation, there is ever more opportunity to tamper with Plantinga's 'evidence'. Many viewers believed in Discovery's *Megalodon* (2014) monster shark or Peter Jackson's *Forgotten Silver* (1996) featuring fake archive of New Zealanders flying before the Wright Brothers. It may be that these films are deemed irresponsible or playful, leading John Corner to suggest that the form has evolved towards 'post-documentary'²⁴ where evidence needs to be determined through a 'relation between film and audience'.²⁵ But what happens when this 'relation' exists in a context of emotion being the driving force behind what they perceive – what Plantinga describes as audience 'self-interest and inertia'?²⁶

Audiences subscribe to Plantinga's 'structured rhetorical discourses'²⁷ just as film makers and audiences falsify historical or scientific truths. It follows that both parties can be irresponsible towards what they choose to construct and believe – whether it be holocaust denial films or reactionary condemnation of 'fake news' fuelled by open-sourced social

²⁴ John Corner, 'What can we say about documentary?', *Media, Culture & Society*, (22 September 2002): 687-8.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Plantinga, *The Documentary Film Book*, 46.

²⁷ Ibid.

media 'truths'. Audience interpretation may be determined by emotional responses that have little to do with 'evidence'. This 'post-truth' context of destabilising evidence and lack of audience scrutiny calls for a renewal of trust in the film maker. I want to propose this trust be rooted in an understanding of ethical responsibilities towards the subject. Otherwise the form will potentially exist within a fictional realm and 'the whole documentary project would be impossible'.²⁸

Rouch and Morris were acutely aware of their responsibilities towards subjects. I've argued that the dynamics of these relationships produced 'emotional truths' from the subject's trauma developing from what Musser calls, 'a more intimate and empathetic relationship to them'.²⁹ He's referring to a slew of films that appeared during the second US led invasion of Iraq – offering 'an emotional truth of their wartime experience'³⁰ that challenged government propaganda. Due to empathy with trauma, they are 'ethically charged works'³¹ requiring, '... openness and mutual receptivity between film maker and

²⁸ John Ellis, *Documentary – Witness and Self-revelation* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 106.

²⁹ Musser, 'Film Truth in the Age of George W. Bush,' 30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

³¹ Michael Renov, *The subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 130.

subject...'.³² Michael Renov suggests an intersubjectivity that sociologist Les Back calls an 'interpretative device'³³ - something that 'becomes a means to try to shuttle across the boundary between the writer and those s/he is writing'.³⁴ This sense of crossing boundaries echoes Morin's aspiration when he asks, 'Can't cinema be one of the means of breaking the membrane that isolates each of us from others?'.³⁵ This goal of empathetic intimacy with the 'other' is entirely different to the old quests for documentary 'truth' and 'knowledge'.

Belinda Smail posits the limitations of Nichols's 'discourses of sobriety' as 'downplaying the experiential and the subjective'.³⁶ We might consider subjective 'emotional truths' resulting from what Emmanuel Levinas described as 'a mode of thought outside the domain of rationality, one that is "better than knowledge"'.³⁷ Importantly, this way of thinking might 'be put in relation to the event of meeting and dialogue'³⁸ - an event that inhabits

³² Ibid.

³³ Les Back, *The Art of Listening* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 159.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Geneviève Van Cauwenberge, 'Cinema Vérité Revisited,' in *The Documentary Film Book*, Brian Winston, Ed., (London: British Film Institute 2013), 191.

³⁶ Belinda Smail, *The Documentary – Politics, Emotion, Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 4.

³⁷ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 149.

³⁸ Ibid., 151.

Bruzzi's 'collision'.³⁹ Trust in the film maker might be founded on evidence of their empathy towards the emotional complexity of the concentration camp victim, murderer, soldier or wartime civilian. An encounter with the 'other' in terms of 'seeing oneself' that 'respects both separation and proximity'⁴⁰ as reflected in Herzog's view when he talks of subjects in his films, 'There is something of what constitutes them inside me'.⁴¹

Renov goes on to suggest that 'the quality of the encounter'⁴² might be related to Nichols's 'performative mode' in as much as the film maker and subject are openly engaged. A reflexive consequence being, 'the viewer is far more likely to understand the formal and ideological conditions within which the process of production occurs'.⁴³ Bruzzi exhaustively criticises Nichols's 'Darwinian'⁴⁴ documentary modes as overly simplistic but heralds the performative as that which reclaims 'authenticity' from the Grierson/Direct Cinema hegemony. She describes

³⁹ Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 5.

⁴⁰ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 151.

⁴¹ Werner Herzog, *A guide for the perplexed, Conversations with Paul Cronin* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2014), 80.

⁴² Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 152.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 3.

'performative acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming'.⁴⁵ Bruzzi's 'truth' is more 'authentic' than documentaries that attempt to disguise or deny the 'acts'. She correctly insists that 'authentic documentary representation is... impossible and is always compromised'.⁴⁶ The 'truth' is the performance - no more nor less - yet understanding how this 'truth' is constructed is another matter.

Bruzzi pays much attention to performing directors such as Nick Broomfield but very little on the impact his performances have on subjects and how the latter are performing themselves while 'colliding with the apparatus'.⁴⁷ However, she is critical of Molly Dineen and her approach to Geri Halliwell in the film, *Geri* (1999). She sees Dineen as being disingenuous: 'Wresting control from its subject without telling her, obviously, that this is the intention'.⁴⁸ But the Neo-Nazi Eugene Terre'Blanche (in two of Broomfield's films) or for example, the extremist subjects of much of Louis Theroux's television output don't appear to warrant ethical encounters from their directors. Perhaps there is a co-existing antipathy shared by film makers and audience that

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁶ Stella Bruzzi, 'The Performing Film-maker and the Acting Subject,' in *The Documentary Film Book*, Brian Winston, Ed., 48.

⁴⁷ Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 7.

⁴⁸ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 164.

enables a lack of ethical concern. However, disingenuous subject/film maker relationships do not engage 'mutual receptivity'⁴⁹ and deny openness, regardless of how 'authentic' the performance. This suggests that the 'authenticity' of performances pivots on audience perception of the subject that in turn has been constructed by the film maker - the 'truth' of Bruzzi's performance being one of many possible 'authentic sides'.⁵⁰ In Part Two, I'll discuss how a lack of 'mutual receptivity'⁵¹ between film maker and subject might limit our understanding and possibly circumvent empathetic responses.

Small adds to Bruzzi's 'truth' in performance by suggesting how we interpret this: 'Emotion is key to the representation of filmic subjects'.⁵² But this understanding of 'truth' and 'emotion' in performance is complicated by the caveat of 'inauthentic behaviour authentically reveals him or her as effectively as sincere behaviour does'.⁵³

'Authenticity' exists within performance while the subject may be

⁴⁹ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 130.

⁵⁰ Winston, Vanstone, Chi, *The Act of Documenting*, 101.

⁵¹ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 130.

⁵² Small, *The Documentary – Politics, Emotion, Culture*, 19.

⁵³ Winston, Vanstone, Chi, *The Act of Documenting*, 98.

lying. This isn't necessarily problematic. The instability of truthfulness in performance can assist us in scrutinising the form. Useful examples include Andrew Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), Sarah Polley's *Stories we tell* (2012) and Kitty Green's *Casting JonBenet* (2017). The latter two films employ actors to perform and interpret testimonial while *Friedmans* has subjects performing in home movies as a counterpoint to much darker family truths that never become fully clear. By highlighting the fictive or contrary aspects of performance, these films suggest 'performative truths' to be experienced by the viewer emotionally and then interrogated later in terms of how 'truthful' the subjects are. If we are to trust film makers, as Plantinga suggests, then we need to take opportunity to distrust the performances they offer us and accept the 'possibility of the untruthful'.⁵⁴ This points us towards what might define the parameters of collaboration between film maker and subject.

Nichols succinctly clarifies the distinction between actors and documentary subjects in terms of performance, 'But what if the invitation is not to act in a film but to *be* in a film, to be yourself in a film?'⁵⁵ This suggests that for the subject to 'be'

⁵⁴ Smaill, *The Documentary – Politics, Emotion, Culture*, 12.

⁵⁵ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 6.

themselves, the film maker must allow for new awareness of that self - the 'other' - and relinquish some control. As director Joris Ivens put it – 'Don't ask a farmer to milk an empty cow'.⁵⁶

Nichols's invitation implies what Claire Bishop describes as, 'an active subject, one who will be empowered by the experience of physical or symbolic participation'.⁵⁷ Bishop also speaks of 'collaborative creativity',⁵⁸ ceding some or all authorship, 'regarded as more egalitarian and democratic'.⁵⁹ Marceline's scene is an example of 'collaborative creativity' that encourages shared authorship along the lines of Bishop's description. Yet *Chronicle* is still Rouch and Morin's film. Only some of the authorship is ceded and not to the degree of participatory film making as in the activist 'Fogo Process'⁶⁰ or for example, the ongoing web based *Hollow* (2011) where the film maker is reduced to being an 'enabler'⁶¹ and the subject makes their own film while 'taking active control of content'.⁶² For this reason, I

⁵⁶ Joris Ivens, 'Collaboration in Documentary'. *Films 1*, no. 2, (1940), pp. 30–42.

⁵⁷ Claire Bishop, *Participation*, Claire Bishop, Ed., (London: Whitechapel Gallery/MIT Press, 2006), 12.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Winston, *The Documentary Film Book*, 20.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Winston, Vanstone, Chi, 105.

avoid the label of 'participatory film making' in my work - preferring to suggest 'performative collaboration' developed between myself and subject.

The parameters of this collaboration arise from the film maker and subject's 'mutual receptiveness'.⁶³ This necessitates a flattening of hierarchies - challenging Winston's unqualified claim that 'film makers more obviously benefit from a documentary than do their subjects'.⁶⁴ Perhaps this is true regarding money (assuming the film maker is paid) but what of the benefits of catharsis relating to trauma or in the case of the first film in Part Two I discuss where a father and daughter are reunited during film making? While Nichols rightly questions 'how power circulates in documentary discourses',⁶⁵ we may speak of benefits in terms of establishing 'emotional truths'. I want to discuss how 'mutual receptivity'⁶⁶ might profoundly benefit subjects, film makers and audiences alike by influencing how we interpret and empathise with their trauma.

⁶³ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 130.

⁶⁴ Winston, *The Documentary Film Book*, 11.

⁶⁵ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 12.

⁶⁶ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 130.

Renov's 'mutual receptivity'⁶⁷ suggests relationships where identities are 'decolonised' of hierarchies. I invite 'performative collaboration' to facilitate a filmed encounter – a process that Édouard Glissant in his 'Poetics of Relation' posits as, 'every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other'.⁶⁸ This doesn't mean that the outcomes of the process will be one and the same. Differences with the 'other' remain but a willingness to encourage the subject to 'be' while in front of the camera 'indicates a negotiation between the capacity for the subject to speak and the context in which that speech is enabled'.⁶⁹ This is especially relevant to subjects emotionally enmeshed in trauma.

Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel published his recollection of the camp in *Night* (1960). When questioned by a Rabbi about truthfulness in his book he commented, 'Some events do take place but are not true; others are - although they never occurred'.⁷⁰ The Rabbi accused Wiesel of lying and technically he was. However, Wiesel's memories were affected by his emotions

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Édouard Glissant, 'Poetics of Relation//1990,', in *Participation*, Claire Bishop, Ed., 71.

⁶⁹ Smaill, *The Documentary – Politics, Emotion, Culture*, 20.

⁷⁰ Wikipedia, accessed August 1st 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Night_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Night_(book)).

- a case of 'too much trauma blocking memory'.⁷¹ Did Marceline's father place an onion in her hand? Does it matter if it happened or she imagined it? I advocate the responsibility of the film maker in this context warrants an 'ethical encounter, directing our consideration to moral concerns rather than to the more familiar terrain of ontology and epistemology'⁷² - an encounter that Renov sees as being 'capable of plumbing the depths of the soul'.⁷³ He goes on to describe elsewhere what could be described as 'emotional truths' resulting from performance when SS officers in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) 'impugn themselves through the tiniest inflection of tone or usage, to watch as traumatic memory beats its way to the surface'.⁷⁴ Memory of the past exists in relation to it. The past is an 'other' in a similar way that the subject may be to us. Any encounter with the past invites a new relation towards it - an extension in the same way that Glissant's encounter with the other extends identity. The inflections of the guards are Williams's 'reverberations' of the past with the present - 'not of absolute truth but of repetition'⁷⁵ of truths resurfacing as

⁷¹ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 161.

⁷² Ibid., 167.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 128.

⁷⁵ Williams, 'Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History and the New Documentary,' 18.

emotions just as their words attempt (and fail) to lead us elsewhere.

In Part Two I return to *Shoah* and differentiate between treatment of victims and perpetrators of trauma. Lanzmann insistently pushes victims to remember the past. Rouch however, collaborates with subjects who, 'choose to probe memory and emotion *for*, rather than *in spite of*, the camera'.⁷⁶ Lanzmann sees his subject and we continue his gaze while viewing. Rouch sees his subjects but they also see themselves, just as we see them. 'Emotional truths' emanating from trauma are evident in both films but Rouch's approach seems far more ethical due to the collaborative receptiveness between film maker and subject. Rouch doesn't appear to condemn the people he encounters. I'll now conclude by considering how such ethical considerations might impact on subjects and audiences when viewing films.

Renov suggests that receptivity between subject and film maker may be extended to the audience - 'Open exchange may begin to replace the one-way delivery of ideas'.⁷⁷ This offers an alternative to what Nichols narrowly describes as 'argument'

⁷⁶ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 178.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

being 'the defining condition of all documentary diegesis'⁷⁸ advocating '*what you do* with reception rather than how the film is received'.⁷⁹ Mutual receptivity requires empathy, which suggests an audience might recognise how they *feel* as well as what they *know* after viewing a film.

Catharsis has long been recognised as something shared between artists, art and audiences. Smaill adds to this by suggesting, '...emotions exist relationally between subjects in ways that bind them to one another, including film makers, critics, viewers and social actors...'.⁸⁰ Catharsis may be equally important for the subject as they too have invested emotion and been receptive to Glissant's extension of identities. This is especially acute in relation to trauma and catharsis may only be felt when the subject sees the film – a variable 'benefit' that's difficult to qualify.

On viewing themselves, Ellis cites potential anxiety from the subject, 'They will be judged by people both known and unknown'.⁸¹ But what of the subject's response to the film? Jean

⁷⁸ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 178.

⁷⁹ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 98.

⁸⁰ Smaill, *The Documentary – Politics, Emotion, Culture*, 6.

⁸¹ John Ellis, *Documentary – Witness and Self-revelation*, 71.

Rouch was accused of colonialist perceptions from Africans after they viewed *Les Maîtres Fous* (1955). Rouch went on to develop a far more collaborative practice. When Winston, Vanstone and Chi conclude, 'The film maker speaks to the spectator via the screen as much as he (sic) has previously done directly to the filmed', ⁸² they negate the possibility of the subject 'speaking' and bearing witness to their performance. I'd argue that Marceline 'speaks' to us just as much as Rouch when we see her on screen and continued to do so articulately after the film.

Revov's 'open exchange' between film maker, subject and audience also offers opportunity to counter construction of audience perception by marketing interests. I disagree with Ellis when he assumes, 'Within our self-aware media environment, there are practically no naïve viewers or naïve documentary participants...' ⁸³ Most audiences in the world do not exist in a 'self-aware media environment'. I'll be discussing first screenings of my films within that context.

Cultural context also plays a role in interpretation of a film - as director Fred Wiseman states, '...the way somebody will respond

⁸² Winston, Vanstone, Chi, *The Act of Documenting*, 152.

⁸³ John Ellis, *Documentary*, 99.

to the film will depend on the values they bring to the events they're assessing'.⁸⁴ However, if a film stimulates an empathetic encounter with the 'other's' memory of trauma, then the film maker will have gone some way in recalibrating or at least refreshing the audience's pre-conceived values. We are that much closer to the 'other'. I don't think we can ask for more from a documentary.

Summary

While not wishing to add to Winston's 'burden of objectivity',⁸⁵ I've necessarily concurred with the existence of an objective truth as stated by Morris.⁸⁶ This leaves the question of whether documentary subjective 'truths' are relevant in a 'post-truth' era. The films I cite earlier negotiate trauma through Williams's 'palimpsest of memory',⁸⁷ although Rouch collaborates with his subject in ways that Morris doesn't. The latter results in what Musser calls a 'legal film truth'⁸⁸ derived from uncertain

⁸⁴ Thomas R. Atkins, *Frederick Wiseman* (New York: Monarch Press, 1976), 37.

⁸⁵ Winston, *The Documentary Film Book*, 24.

⁸⁶ Errol Morris, <http://guru.bafta.org/errol-morris-annual-film-lecture>.

⁸⁷ Linda Williams, 'Mirrors without Memories', 15.

⁸⁸ Musser, 'Film Truth in the Age of George W. Bush,' 9.

subjective 'truths'. I suggest Morris utilised empathy to investigate trauma and emotional depth of character.

Trust in film makers and audience perception is problematic in what Corner describes as a 'post-documentary' age⁸⁹ – despite Plantinga's proposal that we might 'believe film makers and evidence'.⁹⁰ I counter by suggesting a renewal of trust within parameters of Renov's 'mutual receptivity'⁹¹ and Levinas's desire for 'better knowledge'⁹² when empathetically encountering the 'other'. When recalling trauma, I propose the film maker and subject 'extend identities' within Glissant's 'decolonised hierarchies'.⁹³

Bruzzi posits 'truth' and 'authenticity'⁹⁴ within filmed performance, while Smaill adds an 'emotional experiential'⁹⁵ component for film maker, subject and audience. This 'performative emotional truth' differs greatly from Nichols's

⁸⁹ Corner, 'What can we say about documentary?', 687-8.

⁹⁰ Plantinga, *The Documentary Film Book*, 46.

⁹¹ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 130.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Glissant, 'Poetics of Relation' in *Participation*, Claire Bishop, Ed., 71.

⁹⁴ Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 10.

⁹⁵ Smaill, *The Documentary – Politics, Emotion, Culture*, 19.

'sober discourse' – especially when it might be 'untruthful'⁹⁶ as Smaill and Ellis suggest.⁹⁷

Returning to the empathetic encounter, I propose a performative collaboration that relates to Bishop's 'collaborative creativity'⁹⁸ that differs from many participatory practices. I stress that for renewed trust, collaboration requires ethical parameters, although this doesn't preclude the relevance of film makers who exercise moral authority over their subjects. My emphasis on an empathetic encounter extends to what Renov describes as an 'openness'⁹⁹ to audiences who ideally feel emotional truths emanating from the performative collaboration rather than merely accumulating knowledge about the subject.

⁹⁶ Smaill, *The Documentary – Politics, Emotion, Culture*, 12.

⁹⁷ John Ellis, *Documentary – Witness and Self-revelation*, 51.

⁹⁸ Bishop, *Participation*, 12.

⁹⁹ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 98.

Part Two

Emotional truths in documentary making

I come to this enquiry as a practitioner and as such, offer three films, a 'making of' book and a photo series for analysis. This is an opportunity to consolidate what I have been doing and consider what and who these works are for. It is also an opportunity to posit what is essential to my practice and set this alongside similar and contrasting examples.

The Introduction offered an illustration of what I described as 'emotional truths' in documentary film making. I also established the potential problems of using the word 'truths' when any epistemological claims documentary might have in a 'post-truth' era are contested or perhaps redundant. Part One explored these problems and concluded by locating 'emotional truths' within the empathetic encounter between film maker and subject – potentially restoring trust in the former. 'Emotional truths' stem from feelings performed while recalling trauma. Ultimately, the viewer may gain insight and empathy towards the traumatised 'other'.

In Part Two, I explore and locate 'emotional truths' in my practice. I begin with the most recent film because this work exemplifies my thesis more than those made prior to it. The relationship forged between myself and the subject was my most consummate collaboration. It's also the film that prompted writing this analysis and in turn, motivated me to trace the thread of my methods back through earlier works.

I conclude with a brief summation of 'emotional truths' in relation to critical analysis and definitions of 'truth' and 'truths' in documentary.

I suggest readers view the works offered for analysis.

Dead when I got here (2015)

<https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper

Forest of Crocodiles (2009)

<https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/forest-of-crocodiles/>

Until when you die (2007)

<https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/until-when-you-die/>

Sanctum Ephemeral (2017)

<https://www.thedeepriver.org/>

Asylum from the madness (2016) Book Text & Cover PDFs

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/shndi8g3rtxw6px/AFTM%20Pages.pdf?dl=0>

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/dww17entsej3bxf/AFTM%20Cover.pdf?dl=0>

Dead when I got here (2015)

<https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper

Synopsis

Compassion is discovered by Josué, a former drug addict who manages a psychiatric hospital run by its own patients in Juárez, Mexico, the world's most violent city. Six years previously, Josué arrived at the hospital unable to walk, infested with gangrene. Finding the will to live, patients assisted his recovery. Now, Josué cares for those who helped him.

Josué dreams of his estranged daughter in California – who he last saw 22 years ago. He asks the film maker to look for his daughter, who posts a film trailer on the internet. Josué and his daughter make contact. The itinerant father knows he cannot excuse his absence, but perhaps forgiveness can lead to a new beginning.

Collaborator as film maker

Following research, I visited the hospital with a camera in 2011. I worked for three weeks and filmed what could be described as an observational portrait of the day to day functioning of the hospital. It was a very enigmatic place rich in ambiguity and raw emotion. I was offered complete access and wasn't monitored in any way. The official name of the hospital was, *Vision and Action – Shelter for the Mentally Disabled*. The word 'shelter' connotes homelessness, which was correct in as much as most of the patients had lived on the streets of Juárez. I frequently referred to the hospital as an 'asylum' in the book, *Asylum from the madness* due to the relative security the facility offered from the dangers of the city. However, the term 'mental asylum' has been supplanted by psychiatric hospital in Britain and elsewhere so I will use the latter in the context of this thesis.

After returning to London, I edited the material as a 'day in the life' observational piece. There was no dialogue, voiceover or explanation of any kind. I tested the film on a range of people and the consensus was that a story was needed to contextualise the hospital. People found the material uncomfortable to watch and none of the many questions it prompted were answered.

I was also concerned about the ethics and responsibilities entailed in filming mentally ill people. I could have offered a film about this hospital and its inhabitants as some sort of metaphorical cypher as utilised in Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (1932).¹⁰⁰ This was perhaps the direction I had taken with this initial oblique edit. I decided that the film needed its own 'voice'.

I'd been offered blanket consent by the hospital's founder, *El* Pastor Galván. As with Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967), consent was attached to an agenda. The psychiatric hospital in Wiseman's film was run down and underfunded. The superintendent wanted to raise awareness to those with influence.¹⁰¹ So it was with the Pastor who sorely lacked support from the state and donors. However, legal consent only satisfied basic film making permissions; a foot in the door that enabled me to work. As Winston, Vanstone and Chi state bluntly, 'signing a consent form is not so much collaboration as surrender'.¹⁰²

I had privileged access – any access with a camera is privileged – and I was filming what I'd never seen before. 'In a democratic

¹⁰⁰ Pratap Rughani, in *The Documentary Film Book*, 105.

¹⁰¹ Thomas R. Atkins, *Frederick Wiseman*, 64.

¹⁰² Winston, Vanstone, Chi, *The Act of Documenting*, 112.

society stories about the world are crucial – so much so that telling them is indeed a right'. ¹⁰³ And with that right comes responsibility. 'Power *and* responsibility reside in knowing'. ¹⁰⁴ I was very aware of the censorship and legal battles Wiseman entered after *Titicut* was first screened. Apart from that, I was concerned about my own incomprehension which not only limited my potential for knowledge but the viewer's as well.

After the first day of filming I wrote,

No one seems to mind the camera. These people lack self-consciousness. They're unmasked. I'm finding everything interesting but I understand little. ¹⁰⁵

I'd never filmed people who were so emotionally uninhibited. In one sense, it was invigorating – raw emotion being documentary grail. But I had no sense of how my camera was comprehended. I was wary of assumptions, as in the case here regarding a scene from *Titicut*, 'the disturbed pacing of the naked man... seems to lack all marks of presentation... he could not be unaware of being observed by his guards if not by the camera'. ¹⁰⁶ Imposing

¹⁰³ Ibid., 171.

¹⁰⁴ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 41.

¹⁰⁵ Mark Aitken, *Asylum from the Madness – The making of the film 'Dead when I got here'* (London: Tacit Ltd, 2016), 12.

consciousness on mentally ill people is ethically problematic – especially by those who aren't specialised in the field and more so when justification for the presence of a camera is in question. However mysterious, these people still adhered to Nichols's broad definition of documentary subjects, 'People are treated as *social actors*. They remain cultural players rather than theatrical performers'.¹⁰⁷ Despite my reservations, there was a culture in the hospital and this is what I needed to understand and convey. I was collecting evidence. 'The evidence is assembled for our inspection. The footage is at once real and textual, and is therefore open to both emotional empathy and critical judgement'.¹⁰⁸ The challenge was to discover an opening for empathy towards subsequent understanding.

Rather than rely on the one-sided ethics of consent forms, I considered what Winston more realistically describes as, 'an ethic of production and an ethic of reception'.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately my production ethics would be reflected in how the film was received and I'd already experienced audience discomfort from a purely observational portrayal. Wiseman became embroiled in a dispute

¹⁰⁶ Chi and Vanstone and Winston, *The Act of Documenting*, 99.

¹⁰⁷ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ John Ellis, *Documentary – Witness and Self-revelation*, 101.

¹⁰⁹ Winston, *The Documentary Film Book*, 12.

about legal consent but Winston points towards his apparent aversion to a 'moral duty of care'.¹¹⁰ The challenge of being met with incomprehension while filming imbued my ethical responsibilities with acute awareness and reflexivity. The lack of allowance for subjects to refuse the camera caused me to work harder to comprehend what filming mentally ill people would mean to an audience. The answer lay in what I observed as emotional truths from the patients - centring on compassion. Of course, a large spectrum of emotions emanated from the hospital but the latter allowed for ethical production values that might encourage empathy rather than discomfort.

The mysterious place I'd documented required a guide of sorts. If I was to meet the request for a story, I'd need characters. I was adamant that the 'voice' of the film be from insiders. Characters who speak 'in' the film rather than 'for' the film.¹¹¹

My first encounters with Josué left an impression of a very articulate man who wanted to reflect on his life. Unlike most patients he wasn't mentally ill and had recovered from life-threatening heroin addiction. Before completing the first shoot, I filmed Josué watching archive footage of his arrival on a

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 46.

stretcher. What Waugh refers to as, 'replays as a personal or ideological screen-mirror, a reflex or catalyst for their protagonists'.¹¹² He cried while watching the footage and held up his mutilated hand referring to a close-up of the same hand in the archive. Waugh's 'screen-mirror' was clearly evident; establishing a past/present dynamic of Josué's character. Without stating as much, mutual curiosity had been stimulated and Josué and I had established our contract to make the film.

I spent a few evenings with Josué recording him off camera talking about his past. I didn't need to ask many questions. Josué's emotional intimacy was palpable. At the time, I wrote,

His voice flattens and becomes conversational but then suddenly he pauses as if reliving a moment. The timbre changes as feelings infuse.¹¹³

Josué's story of leaving the city of death; finding the will to live; helping those who helped him... had elements of a hero's quest or 'heroic arc of character'.¹¹⁴ Josué had dealt with his inner demons and now wished to make a constructive impression on

¹¹² Thomas Waugh, Citing Joris Ivens (no ref.), *The right to play oneself*, 185.

¹¹³ Mark Aitken, *Asylum from the Madness*, 75.

¹¹⁴ Dara Marks, *Inside Story – the power of the transformational arc* (London: Three Mountain Press, 2009), 187.

the external world. I couldn't film Josué's recovery but a collective 'screen-mirror' could be that of other patients recovering. Josué's voiceover telling his story could be superimposed on the present. On returning to the hospital for the second shoot, I explained as much to him.

I set up interviews with patients. To varying degrees, every attempt failed. These people were suffering severe trauma and mental illnesses. They were very inhibited when faced with an outsider and a camera. I suggested Josué take over my role of inquisitor while I film him doing this.

Josué confronts a young man about biting another man's ear off (Fig. 1).¹¹⁵ He implores the man to apologise and express remorse to his victim. Josué also tests the perpetrator's capacity for empathy by asking him how it felt to do such a thing. Josué was doing his job but he was also collaborating with me. Put simply, he was better equipped to speak to patients than I was. His role as a carer neutralised potential voyeurism from my gaze – especially regarding the horror in this scene. My gaze was 'transmitted' through Josué.

¹¹⁵ 00:07:26 – 00:08:28, <https://vimeo.com/124941282>, PW: deeper.



Fig. 1: Josué attempting to engender remorse from a violent patient. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

Josué's collaboration was an extension of our initial contract. Trust had already been established through Josué's willingness to open his heart to me. Unlike Geri Halliwell with Molly Dineen, Josué harboured no suspicion of my motives. And like Marceline in *Chronicle of a Summer*, he was inclined to assist and become involved in the work process. Part of Josué's role while interviewing patients was to be my surrogate.

Terry Zwigoff took a similar approach in *Crumb* (1994) where he had Robert Crumb question his brothers about their complex childhood. 'Crumb takes a more reflective attitude toward himself and a more probing attitude toward his brothers...'.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 119.

Working relations and trust are deepened between film maker and subject by sharing problems and solutions towards the common goal of establishing emotional truths.

Themes of suffering and loss of family are explored through empathetic conversations with patients. Josué says, 'When I look at you it's like looking in a mirror' (Figs. 2, 3).¹¹⁷ I became aware that I was working with someone employing the same techniques as I would to gain access to people's feelings. As Marceline said of her role in *Chronicle*, 'During that scene I became a film maker'.¹¹⁸

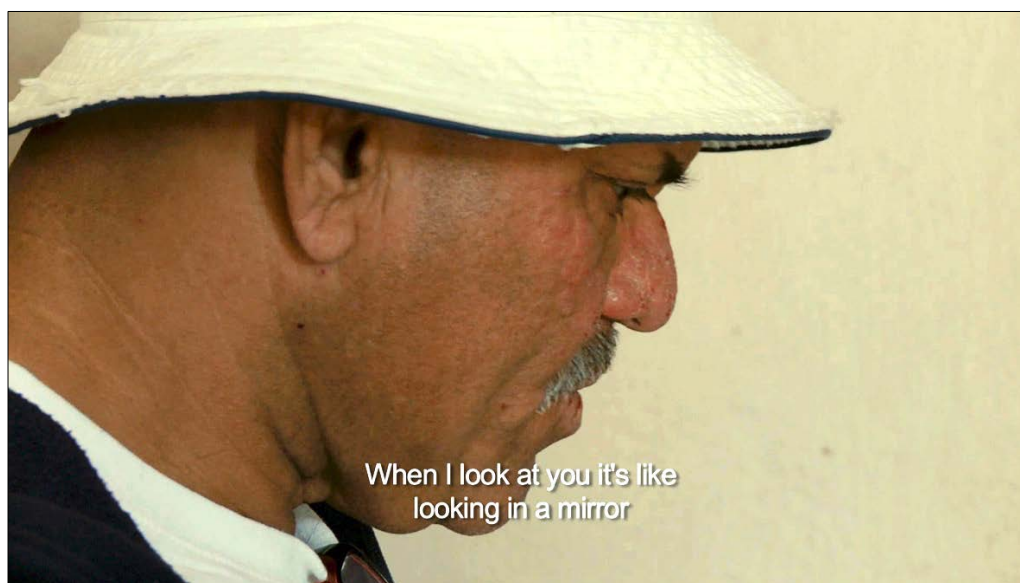


Fig. 2: Josué utilising empathy while speaking with a patient. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

¹¹⁷ 00:05:03 – 00:06:16, 00:38:08 – 00:39:48, <https://vimeo.com/124941282>, PW: deeper.

¹¹⁸ Joram ten Brink, ed., *Chronique d'un été: Marilene Loridan Ivens – Building Bridges: The Cinema of Jean Rouch* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 147.



Fig. 3: A patient listening to Josué describe past tribulations. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

But collaboration can be misplaced if it lacks a foundation of plausibility and truth. I proposed filming Josué and Pastor speaking to patients about their drug intake and wellbeing. Suddenly the two of them didn't know what they were supposed to be doing. They both said they never go around asking patients about their drug intake. Ironically, contrived or set-up scenes need to be grounded in a reality familiar to the subject. Otherwise, they simply collapse into insincerity like Ivens's empty cow. It's absurd to ask people to appear natural when performing unnatural tasks. In effect, this is a breach of contract as the binding trust between film maker and subject is inherent to the subject *being* themselves and the film maker having done

their homework. However, there are many diversions and contradictions on this path.

Josué's role as surrogate inquisitor was inverted when he became the subject of interrogation. Four heavily armed policemen arrive at the hospital after a patient has died (Fig. 4).

¹¹⁹ They question Josué about the death and the hospital itself. Their tone is a contrasting mixture of deference, curiosity and hostility. Josué not only rises to the occasion but dominates the scene with calm authority.



Fig. 4: Josué taking authority over inquisitive police. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

¹¹⁹ 00:09:32 – 00:12.26, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

Prior to filming this scene, I had been struggling with trying to encounter or construct an event whereby outsiders were introduced to the strange world of a psychiatric hospital run by its own patients. I wanted outsiders to ask the kind of questions an audience might ask on arrival. 'Viewers will often frame their views in terms of what 'other people' might think...'.¹²⁰ Here, the other people were judging Josué negatively.

In the following sequence, the audience is asked to see the hospital in a different light¹²¹ – offering a stark choice between reactionary judgement and an insider's understanding of rejection and needing to belong somewhere (Fig. 5). The insider representing what Nichols terms, 'history from below' as lived and experienced by ordinary but articulate people rather than 'history from above'.¹²²

¹²⁰ John Ellis, *Documentary – Witness and Self-revelation*, 104.

¹²¹ 00:12:26 – 00:13:20, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

¹²² Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 33.



Fig. 5: A patient drawing a long-lost home as described by the woman who lived there. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

Inadvertently, my long recordings of conversations with Josué transpired to be rehearsal for how he described himself to the police.

But to leave here is to be a coward, that's how I see it.'
To which the policeman responds, 'It depends on the type of person.'¹²³

Josué had already stated this position in the same words to me. Our recorded conversations were a form of scriptwriting. He was taking opportunity to put the words into action. Not unlike the men in Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934) when described years later by a widow justifying life threatening circumstances of the shoot

¹²³ 00:12:26 – 00:13:20, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

when going out in rough seas in a small boat, '... they wanted to go for they had taken the film over. It was a film to show the world what manner of men they were'.¹²⁴ Flaherty had paid the men to risk their lives and was criticized for this. However, the main character, the 'man of Aran' refused payment.

Josué's choice of words had everything to do with awareness of not only his role in the film process but also how to perform his role. What Waugh describes as, 'representational - acting naturally - the documentary code of narrative illusion, borrowed from the dominant fiction cinema'.¹²⁵ Another way to describe the roles Josué and the police perform is that of ambassadors. The meeting was something of a diplomatic stand-off but unlike the police, Josué elevated his corner to a highly personalised position.

Consciously representing oneself to the camera is no guarantee of expressing emotional truths. Let's examine the role of the police in this scene and contrast my relationship with them and Josué. Off camera after the scene, the police told Josué how

¹²⁴ Brian Winston, Gail Vanstone, Wang Chi, *The Act of Documenting*, 161.

¹²⁵ Thomas Waugh, *The right to play oneself*, 76.

much they admired him. Perhaps because they had no emotional investment, they didn't reveal these feelings while being filmed. However, Josué's sincerity had affected them. Variation of sincerity on and off camera between Josué and the police is revealing and instructive. The police were uniformed men doing their job while conscious of being filmed. On camera, one of them throws the rulebook at Josué. There's nothing insincere about this. But there is a lack of *emotional* sincerity on camera as they only revealed their feelings in private.

Jean Rouch suggested that, in Cinema Vérité, people's reactions are 'infinitely more sincere' on camera than off 'because they begin to play a role'.¹²⁶ I would argue that it's not *just* the presence of the camera that encourages sincerity. To re-iterate Morris – there are no guarantees; no formulas. 'A good performance doesn't come from imitating something external to yourself... It comes from something inside, of bringing something inside of yourself forward'.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Roy Levin, *Documentary Explorations: 15 Interviews with Film makers* (New York: Doubleday, 1971, 288.

¹²⁷ Matt Zoller Seitz, 'Errol Morris on *Wormwood*, Fake News, and Why He Hates the Word 'Re-enactment,' *The Vulture*, accessed August 1st, 2019, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/12/errol-morris-wormwood-interview.html>.

There must be a desire from the subject to be emotionally sincere on camera. And if this is encouraged by the film maker then the sincerity might be even more secure for the film. I would add a caveat to Rouch's suggestion by stipulating that sincerity in a performance requires emotion to achieve Ivens's 'real characteristics'.

Collaboration with Josué evolved into tacitly directed performance. Voiceover was laid over in the edit but at the time of filming, Josué was fully aware of me 'filming him thinking' as he stared into space (Figs. 6, 7).¹²⁸ We had spent hours together talking about his feelings. His performance for the camera took on a knowing reflective style – so much so that he would only snap out as an actor might after I lowered my camera.

¹²⁸ 00:52:43 – 00:53:33, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.



Fig. 6: Josué performing his internal monologue. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

With the primacy of voice in documentary – that of the film maker, subject or narrator – there is little consideration for filming thoughts. Yet this is a staple in drama performance and a potent signifier for audience engagement. Perhaps this oversight is due to persistent reliance on documentary tropes of ‘factual’ evidence and unambiguous testimonial.



Fig. 7: Josué consciously working with the camera while not speaking. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

Josué's attention to performance and awareness of the power of remaining silent while being filmed further signified his commitment to making the film. And consciously or not, he was utilising sophisticated performance techniques and grammar. Josué was apparently aware of what Geoff Dyer asks of photographic enigma, 'Or does it's (the camera's) power derive, in fact from what *can't* be seen?' ¹²⁹

The talking head is a staple device in documentary but what of the silent head? One possibility for the latter is to offer reflective psychological insight - either through voiceover or projected thoughts and feelings from the viewer. Josué's conscious silent

¹²⁹ Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005), 61.

and reflective performance is a simple yet subtle device to compound his emotional make-up – suggesting what Bruzzi posits as a ‘constituent part’ of the ‘negotiation between the film and its subject’.¹³⁰



Fig. 8: Performance as a hybrid of the presentational and representational. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

When discussing ‘the right to play oneself’, Waugh describes the differences between representational modes and presentational modes of performance (Fig. 8). The latter supplants ‘don’t look at the camera’ with ‘look at the camera’.¹³¹ Waugh sees the ‘presentational’ looking at the camera as a ‘basic necessity’ of collaboration between film maker and subject. The necessity

¹³⁰ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 65.

¹³¹ Thomas Waugh, *The right to play oneself*, 92.

being recorded evidence of the subject acknowledging the camera-eye. I fail to see Waugh's presentational mode - a Brechtian shattering of the fourth wall - as a necessity. Josué's performance evolved through collaboration. His gaze was off camera but his feelings were on point. He was playing himself or at least a version of his persona. This was his construction as much as mine. Our approach was closer to what Waugh describes as a hybrid of presentational and representational forms - 'Social actors dramatize representationally their collective history, contextualised presentationally'.¹³²

Re-enacting the past

While Josué's empathy with fellow patients could be described as a transference of his past experiences to the present, there are also varied examples of re-enactments in the film. When using the term 're-enactment' I concur with Errol Morris describing a 'version of events', 'a belief about what transpired, rather than what actually transpired'.¹³³ Later I'll also refer to *enactments* - that being a version of events yet to happen or those that might only be imagined.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Matt Zoller Seitz, 'Errol Morris on *Wormwood*'.



Fig. 9: Josué re-enacting his near-death experience with Memo who struggles to remember coherently. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

Josué reflects on his early days in the hospital when he teetered on the brink of death (Fig 9).¹³⁴ The scene was shot in the room where Josué nearly died, accompanied by Memo - a fellow patient who watched over him at the time. Again, Josué assumes the role of inquisitor but this time, the memory in question is of his own survival. Memo's memory is ambivalent. For Josué there can be no doubt as to what happened. He's spurred to re-enact the memory by lying on the gurney, prompting recognition of the situation and concluding with the declaration, 'I love you like a brother Memo'. Here, Josué attempts to utilise empathy from another person as a baseline for triggering memory of his own struggle. Memo's mental state suggests his recollection to be

¹³⁴ 00:16:39 – 00:19:33, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

unreliable but given Josué's declaration, his status as a witness remains undiminished.

Josué's emotional investment in the film is more powerful due to his performance and choice of words, 'Everything was dark as if someone switched off the sun. I'd wake up scared. I felt like I'd fallen into an abyss'.¹³⁵

The subject's performance for the camera becomes a collaboration, a stake in, and a contribution to the work of art. Performance becomes a gauge of the ethical and political accountability of the film maker's relationship with subject.¹³⁶

Herzog's *Little Dieter needs to fly* (1997) set up re-enactments of pilot Dieter Dengler's imprisonment by North Vietnamese soldiers in a Laotian jungle, albeit without all the original characters but towards a goal of reviving emotion - 'Perhaps it was his way of chasing the demons away'.¹³⁷ As with Wiesel's account of Auschwitz, here is an element of catharsis in re-creating the past – especially when the experience was traumatic.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Thomas Waugh, *The right to play oneself*, 87.

¹³⁷ Werner Herzog, *A guide for the perplexed*, 321.

In Josué's case, catharsis was prompting latent skills in lyrical performance. Nichols describes feelings revived through re-enactment of a miner's strike, referring to *Borinage* (1934) by Joris Ivens. Interestingly, Ivens witnessed the miners' strike on location with his crew but chose to set up a re-enactment. Not being bound by Direct Cinema dogma, I suspect Ivens desired more control of filming conditions for maximum affect. Ivens '...blurs the distinction between history and recreation... in ways that point to the formative powers of the documentary film maker'.¹³⁸ Nichols fails to acknowledge the collaborative 'formative powers' of film maker *and* subject. Ivens was less disingenuous when he acknowledged after the film that, 'the reconstruction was absorbed by reality'.¹³⁹

Jeremy Deller and Mike Figgis carried out a similar re-enactment with *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001). There was a gap of 17 years between the actual event and the film, featuring 280 social actors – miners who had been present at the conflict in 1984. Deller and Figgis spent two years preparing the single day shoot to ensure the performer's trust and awareness of their cathartic contribution.

¹³⁸ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 151.

¹³⁹ Bert Hogenkamp, 'The Radical Tradition in Documentary Film making, 1920s-50s', in *The Documentary Film Book*, 175.

One of Nichols's definitions of documentary holds that, 'History and memory intertwine; meaning and action, past and present hinge on one another distinctively'.¹⁴⁰ The hinge is the mechanism for re-enactment. In another scene, Josué returns to his old house in Juárez, only to find it demolished - a clear metaphor for the disintegration of his past life. He had dossed in the house with other drug addicts, thieves and murderers. Talking out loud to himself - performing for the camera - he reflects and paces out the geography of the house through the rubble. The past significantly creeps into the present when he picks up a discarded syringe that he might have used as a heroin addict. A dog appears while he talks of the dog that befriended him in those desperate times. Bruzzi's 'negotiation between the film and its subject' seemingly conjuring up spectral elements from Josué's past (Fig. 10).¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 1.

¹⁴¹ 00:25:08 - 00:27:37, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.



Fig. 10: Josué conjuring evidence from the ruins of his past. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) utilised an instructive orthodoxy by refusing archive and emphasising the continuity of past and present through a sense of place defined by present emotion. He stated, 'The film is the abolition of all distances between past and present; I have relived the whole story in the present'.¹⁴² The reliving is an emotional experience akin to waking up feeling that a dream happened. The past *being* now. Returning to the room where he nearly died or the house where he lived as a vagabond offers emotional truths that always exists in the present for Josué – just like his mutilated hand. His feelings exist in the present – performed physically, psychologically and technically.

¹⁴² André Pierre Colombat, *The Holocaust in French Film* (Metuchen) (New York & London: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 302.

In the next scene, Josué offers more of Lanzmann's continuity, adding a desire for time-travel. He meets his old friend, Horacio and states, 'If I could return to the past as I am now... imagine...' (Fig. 11).¹⁴³



Fig. 11: Josué considering how much he's changed while visiting old friends. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

Here, Josué dreams of his renewed self overcoming self-destruction. He continues and re-enacts the story of his struggle with death alluded to with Memo previously. This time, we witness a visceral recreation of him pulling off his gangrenous fingers with pliers. Josué performs his tale of survival with bravado before we discover the real reason he's visiting his

¹⁴³ 00:27:38 – 00:30:17, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

friend. He picks up a forty-year old photo of Horacio and his brother and grins in short lived reverie (Fig. 12).¹⁴⁴



Fig. 12: Josué recognising the loss of his brother. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

The next scene finds Josué speaking with a woman in the street who informs him how bitter his brothers feel towards him (Fig. 13).¹⁴⁵ Josué's deeper trauma relates to longing to reconnect with family who have abandoned him. Memory not only prompts performance but is the key to bringing emotional truths into the present. Not only was Josué reliving his story but he was also exploring the loss he feels presently – something he had described at length with me in recorded conversations (Fig. 14).¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ 00:30:24 – 00:31:02, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 00:31:44 – 00:32:22.



Fig. 13: Josué hearing confirmation of his brother not wanting to see him.
Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

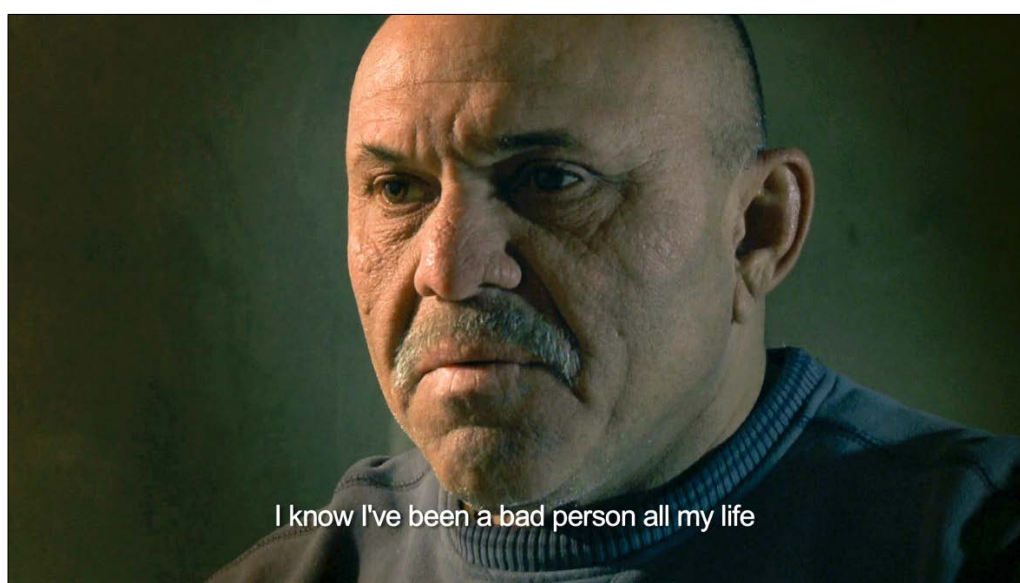


Fig. 14: Josué coming to terms with the loss of his family. Image source:
Dead when I got here. ©Tacit 2015.

Josué's desire to re-connect with family exists very much in the present.

Although there are similarities in recalling past traumas into the present, the outcomes of *Shoah* and *Dead when I got here* are diametrically opposed. Lanzmann and his subjects utilised memory to restore annihilation of life to the present. Josué and I utilised memory to restore renewal of life to the present. Josué's memories suggest heroic survival from near self-annihilation. *Shoah* confirms tragic loss – 'a repetition that necessarily entails reliving the horrific fear of their own extermination'.¹⁴⁷

Enacting a past that never was

One of the handful of documentaries made in psychiatric hospitals was Nicolas Philibert's *Every Little Thing* (1997). The film was structured around the patients preparing and performing an absurdist theatrical play. The event offered narrative progression as well as action for Philibert to film. Importantly, the patients weren't re-enacting an event. Rather, they were enacting a performance that resonated with their feelings and mental state. A performance that could be said to be based on emotional *foresight*. 'I needed to go beyond a mere description of daily life... a way of getting to something

¹⁴⁷ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 114.

more essential; but at least I had a real thread'.¹⁴⁸ Philibert's desire to scratch beneath the surface for the essential might be defined as a subtext – what isn't seen or performed but rather felt by the subject. The 'real thread' being the correlation between mentally ill subjects and the absurdist play.

I was in Mexico over Easter and had researched the tradition of burning effigies on Easter Sunday. The Pastor, Josué and I decided that the patients would construct an effigy of the devil and we would burn it in Juárez. This wasn't a normal occurrence at the hospital and was entirely initiated by myself. It's not clear if Philibert contrived the play for his film or not. For me in Juárez, Philibert's 'essential' feeling translated as rejection. The patients and Josué had been rejected by the city of death and they would return to exorcise the devil.

I was clear as to how the event could be employed to express a theme of renewal. And this kind of symbolism wasn't unfamiliar to anyone taking part in the film. The event offered an 'organic' quality that binds people when they share a tradition, culture, or common goal'.¹⁴⁹ This wasn't a re-enactment of the past. I was setting up a

¹⁴⁸ Patrick Leboutte, 'How to Avoid the Folkloric, Picturesque Aspect of Madness?' *Sabzian*, accessed August 1st 2019, <http://www.sabzian.be/film/la-moindre-des-choses>.

¹⁴⁹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 142.

ritualised enactment that bonded community through a pre-determined need. I imagined how it would play out before it happened. I was attempting to direct a contrivance for the film – action and location employed to express emotional truths – but located in a present and unpredictable context – ‘... a performative of a dynamic environment that is the stake in livelihood, struggle, and transformation’. ¹⁵⁰

Josué sets fire to the devil effigy and the patients stamp and dance on smouldering ashes (Fig. 15). ¹⁵¹ As with Philibert’s play, emotional response through enactment was based on foresight between subjects and film maker. A contrived scenario that drew out latent emotions.

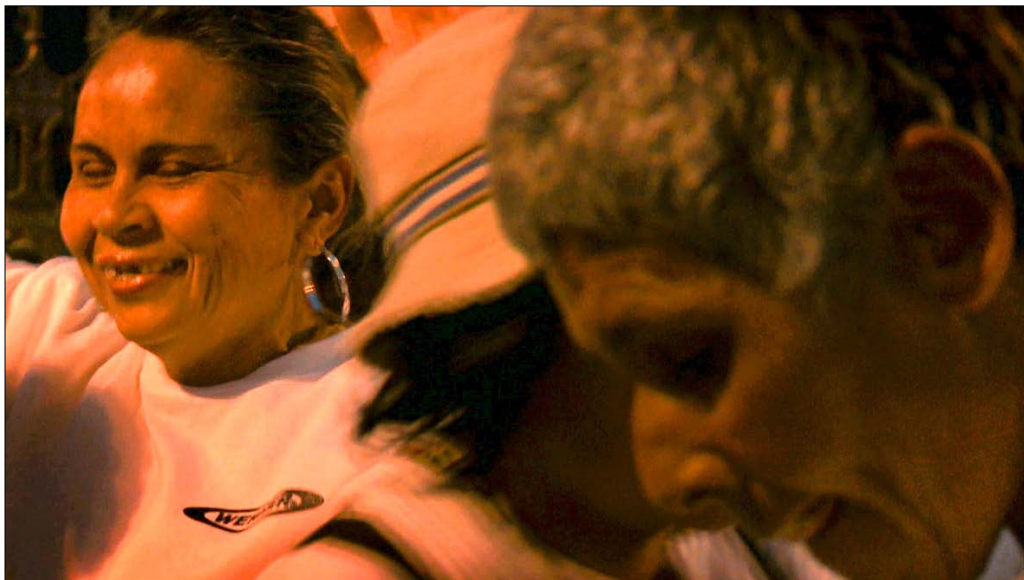


Fig. 15: Psychiatric patients publicly exorcising the devil of Juárez. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Waugh, *The right to play oneself*, 182.

¹⁵¹ 00:46:09 – 00:47:28, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

Enacting moral authority over the subject

Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) also devised enactments with subjects based on emotional foresight. The title of the film is instructive: we repeatedly watch men acting out the process of killing people. They're furnished with costumes and sets from Hollywood musicals and gangster films while indulging their fantasies. In *Dead when I got here* we see Josué solemnly setting fire to the devil effigy – literally exorcising his demons. *The Act of Killing* presents its subjects as grotesquely demonic.

Oppenheimer's subjects are similar to Josué and Marceline in *Chronicle* in that they collaborate extensively as willing film makers and performers. What is striking about *The Act of Killing* is that the subjects appear to be enjoying their reminiscing and invention of murderous enactments. The overt sense of impunity suggested by the pleasure they take offers an unedifying spectacle that is at once horrifying and mesmerizing. Our experience feels voyeuristic due to the intimate and detailed performances of acts we would never be privy to. A guilty pleasure is aroused that requires atonement for the indulgence of giving these men our attention. Relief finally appears in the film's denouement, of which I will discuss shortly.

BBC commissioner Nick Fraser was one of *The Act of Killing's* few critics after the film was showered with acclaim and awards. He pointed towards what he considers the moral obligations of documentary film makers when stating, 'Instead of an investigation, or indeed a genuine recreation, we've ended somewhere else – in a high-minded snuff movie'.¹⁵² I'm not so interested in moral obligations or 'genuine recreations' as I am in considering the film maker's relationship to the subject. I want to posit this relationship as the mechanism behind Fraser's assumed moral deficit. And furthermore, I want to ask how these relationships might differ from the subject being victim or perpetrator. What choices were made when approaching these two types of subjects?

Oppenheimer wasn't trying to make a film promoting genocide but were his subjects aware that he was attempting to expose how monstrous they were? Given that these men were merciless killers, I can't see that they would have collaborated with him if they knew his intentions of condemnation. Oppenheimer was duplicitous in his collaboration. The emotional truths of the work process were rooted in a deceit, albeit one which fully engaged

¹⁵² Chi, Vanstone and Winston, *The Act of Documenting*, 185.

enthusiastic participation from the film's subjects. Perhaps Oppenheimer's deceit was acceptable as the subjects are morally ambiguous. If this is the case, then he was making a clear moral judgement by deeming his subjects not worthy of a trusting relationship. And in turn, the audience was offered a morally simplified version of these killers. Not so much a moral deficit as an assumed moral authority vicariously transferred through the director.

As with Lanzmann filming unrepentant Nazi guards in *Shoah*, 'They can be filmed with no obligation to alert them to the possible consequences of their naivety'.¹⁵³ A moral judgement has been passed by the film maker over their subject. This is a prejudiced film maker/subject dynamic that favours the film maker. What's more, they are denying themselves and ultimately the viewer an opportunity for discovery. As Wiseman observes, 'Before the film the tendency is to simplify. The discovery is that the actuality is much more complicated and interesting'.¹⁵⁴

Interestingly, both Oppenheimer and Lanzmann shared alternate film maker/subject dynamics when working with victims. In

¹⁵³ Ibid., 164.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas R. Atkins, *Frederick Wiseman*, 48.

Oppenheimer's follow up film, *The Look of Silence* (2014), a man who has lost his brother revisits the trauma by confronting the killers. The subject was forced to go into hiding after the film was released – trauma not only being relived but projected into the future. Lanzmann was even more forceful with survivors reliving trauma, 'You have to do it. I know it's very hard. I know and I apologise'.¹⁵⁵ The death camp survivor begged not to go on but Lanzmann persisted. 'Lanzmann asserting undue influence over a clearly vulnerable interviewee to the point of re-traumatising him'.¹⁵⁶

Lanzmann and Oppenheimer didn't persist with investigating the feelings of perpetrators yet they did so with victims. Regarding perpetrators, moral judgement appears to have overwhelmed curiosity, empathy and investigation. And because we were invited to collude with the moral judgement, we are none the wiser as to knowing how killers feel about the atrocities they've committed. I'm not suggesting Lanzmann and Oppenheimer should have made different films but their relationships with subjects are clearly variable as to them being victims or villains. This may be contrasted with Herzog's approach in *Into the Abyss*

¹⁵⁵ Wang Chi and Gail Vanstone and Brian Winston, *The Act of Documenting*, 161.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

(2011). When we meet the first murderer on death row, Herzog introduces himself:

When I talk to you it does not necessarily mean that I have to like you but I respect you and you're a human being.¹⁵⁷

The condemned man pleaded not guilty to a horrific crime. Herzog offers his subject a certain dignity and this establishes their relationship. The approach also challenges the audience to consider what fellow human beings do to each other. There are differences in contexts between the three films – notably in that the murderer here is condemned by the state while the other films exemplify impunity. Lanzmann and Oppenheimer assume a similar role of condemnation while Herzog offers empathy.

Unlike Oppenheimer and Lanzmann's perpetrators, Josué was of reflective mind and wanted to mend his ways. This made it somewhat easier when confronting his moral ambiguity - where the hero (and victim of self-destruction) was also a perpetrator of pain and suffering as a murderer and itinerant father. Josué was clearly on a redemptive path and this enabled our collaboration in specific ways: he wanted to look his best while

¹⁵⁷ *Into the Abyss*, Directed by Werner Herzog. London: Revolver Entertainment, 2012. DVD, @ 00:09:28 – 00:09:37

acknowledging his own detriment and suffering he'd caused others. Even if I'd wanted to, there was no justification in condemning Josué as he would have got there first. I don't know if I could work with Oppenheimer's or Lanzmann's killers. My working methods would require degrees of empathy and trust and if this were not possible then I would struggle to progress with them.

Josué's performance and our collaboration entered its most complex phase following the point of his estranged daughter, Vanessa, contacting me. I'd posted a trailer online. Vanessa had randomly found it and asked me what her father was doing in a psychiatric hospital. She'd been told he was dead. I contacted Josué and told him the news. Soon he spoke with Vanessa via video link. As the trailer had been a catalyst for their reunion, I felt enabled to try and include their actual meeting in the film. However, Josué and Vanessa reserved the right to say no and I informed them as much. I suggested we arrange a physical reunion. Before that I visited Vanessa at home in Los Angeles to film an interview before she met her father again. I also felt it important to establish trust between us. None of this footage was included in the final edit but my contact with her gave me an idea of the pain she had endured due to her father's self-destruction. She was very forgiving but I provoked her on

camera to ask difficult questions about Josué and his absence in her life.

The third and final shoot at the hospital culminated with Josué reuniting with Vanessa. They both travelled to Tijuana on the US/Mexican border. Josué was buoyant at the prospect and explicitly expresses awareness of the film as a catalyst in three consecutive scenes. They're perfect examples of Waugh's hybrid presentational/representational form (Figs. 16, 17).¹⁵⁸



Fig. 16: Josué presenting his elation for the camera as he plans to present himself to his estranged daughter. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

I had no intention of denying Josué's jubilation but I was aware of his daughter's pain. Apart from this, I was also aware that

¹⁵⁸ 00:55:16 – 00:55:50, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

Josué had participated in drive-by killings in Los Angeles and had served time in San Quentin with Charles Manson for murder. Again, I used the film as a catalyst to draw out emotional truths.



Fig. 17: Josué sharing his joy while holding a bus ticket that will end 25 years of estrangement from his daughter. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

I showed Josué edited footage of Vanessa expressing her anger and pain about his past and filmed his reaction. This was another example of Waugh's 'screen mirror' but more elaborate and convoluted. Josué viewed footage of Vanessa responding to footage of him seeing archive of his arrival at the hospital – four pairs of eyes viewing four layers of dislocated time. The past layered as prismatic emotional mirrors.

... a tunnel of multiple self-reflections. Often we see in the picture not what is actually there but only what is reflected

within the frame of that surrogate camera, the mirror. The mirror remembers, bears witness and grudges.¹⁵⁹

I was utilising the camera as a mirror for two people to reflect on one another. I prompted Josué to respond and then filmed his reflection.

I know my daughter's going to ask a lot of questions. I'm afraid of that. If she only asks me why I left her behind, she's going to destroy me. Because behind the questions there's answers and they're all bad... I'm going to take it like a man and ask her to forgive me.¹⁶⁰

Clearly I had encouraged Josué to consider remorse and possible rejection.

I had confronted both the perpetrator and victim of trauma. Josué and Vanessa embodied these characteristics and had revealed as much to me but only after my persistence. They had both wanted to stress the joy of their reunion and lay the past to rest. Here I was encouraging them to examine it. I was enabled by utilising testimonials I'd filmed with both subjects to engender further emotional truths. My motives were driven by curiosity rather than moral obligations of judging Josué as a bad father,

¹⁵⁹ Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment*, 66.

¹⁶⁰ 00:56:05 – 00:57:10, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

murderer, drug addict, etc. Rather than offering assumed moral guidance to the audience, I was concerned about a deficit within the film maker/subject dynamic. If I had passed judgement, my questions about Josué's fears wouldn't have been asked - ditto my questions about Vanessa's anger and pain. This speaks of intimacy and the durability of our trust.

Lanzmann and Oppenheimer felt no need to develop trust with their unrepentant killers and we'll never know if they might have shown remorse or offered us any sense of why they had committed atrocities. Curiosity about a subject needn't be motivated by seeking confessions (that may be nothing more than hubris) but it always leads us towards knowing more.

Assumed moral authority sabotages this potential. Given, there is a significant moment at the end of *The Act of Killing* where the main character Anwar Congo loses composure and wretches – supposedly displaying remorse. The denouement comes as an audience payoff for enduring the grotesque indulgencies of the director and his subjects. Errol Morris, one of the film's executive producers, asked Oppenheimer if Congo might have been performing as a requirement when showing remorse.

Oppenheimer responded by saying that it's 'almost too chilling for me to contemplate' and if that was the case, 'it's very

disturbing'.¹⁶¹ Considering the deception employed by Oppenheimer towards his subjects, perhaps Congo was doing what was expected of him. A display of remorse being just another performed 'truthful' moral signifier for Oppenheimer's thesis on genocide.

Film maker as catalyst

The final days of working with Josué revealed a new dynamic between us. We collaborated on how he was going to present himself to his daughter who had last seen him when she was five years old. Before leaving the hospital, we packed his bag together, selecting a range of outfits from a limited costume department. He demonstrated his nervous insecurity while preparing how to present himself in a comfortable hotel room in Tijuana (Fig. 18).¹⁶² Off camera, he asked my opinion on what to wear.

¹⁶¹ Jill Godmilow, 'Killing the Documentary: An Oscar-Nominated Filmmaker Takes Issue With 'The Act of Killing,'" *IndieWire*, accessed August 1st, 2019, <https://www.indiewire.com/2014/03/killing-the-documentary-an-oscar-nominated-filmmaker-takes-issue-with-the-act-of-killing-29332/>.

¹⁶² 00:59:56 – 01:00:18, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.



Fig. 18: Josué taking direction on how to present himself to his daughter.
Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

Vanessa had arrived at the hotel and was waiting in the lobby while I filmed Josué pacing impatiently in his room. She had asked me not to film them in the public lobby as she wanted to avoid spectacle. This suited me as it eliminated the danger of anonymous spectators and lobby muzak infiltrating the soundtrack. While I felt I was manipulating the reunion, both Josué and Vanessa asked for direction. 'What swung it in the end was me *telling everyone where and when they had to be*'.¹⁶³ This enactment moved beyond ritualistic burning of an effigy. Our foresight of emotional truths was operating in uncharted waters. No one knew how they were going to feel.

¹⁶³ Mark Aitken, *Asylum from the Madness*, 179.

Displays of emotion are frequently mediated by TV shows that reunite long lost family and friends – ‘... the public narrativisation of traumatic events or experiences’.¹⁶⁴ As with those forerunners of reality TV and Rouch’s *vérité* discoveries, the camera and my direction was a catalyst for emotional truths. And in a similar way, I had primed both my subjects before the moment of physical contact. This was another example of unified psychological, physical and technical performance. Yet I was wary of ‘happy resolutions’ following a reunion. The brutal realities of trauma in Juárez shouldn’t be glossed over with sentiment. This would ring falsely with Josué reliving his struggle throughout the film. My pro-active role in prompting doubts from father and daughter required further invention.

I was faced with *pre-determining* action for the end of the film based on how I knew the characters felt about each other. Flaherty contrived his final scene sending his characters out in high seas in *Man of Aran* for similar reasons. Neither he nor the islanders wanted audiences to think that the islanders lived on a romantic idyll. They were obstructing a sentimental resolution and took it upon themselves to enact their chosen emotional truths. Like Flaherty, I had no interest in the false dilemma

¹⁶⁴ Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV, Realism & Revelation*, 95.

experienced by Direct Cinema film makers who – ‘also desired and sought ways of imposing closure on their ostensibly *undetermined* action’ (my italics).¹⁶⁵

In Los Angeles, I had asked Vanessa to compile a photo album of her life to present to Josué. When filming them flicking through the pages, the painful absence of shared history is clear. Rather than a shared past, they only have the present and future to contend with. This foresight had been established with Josué through many discussions I’d had with him.

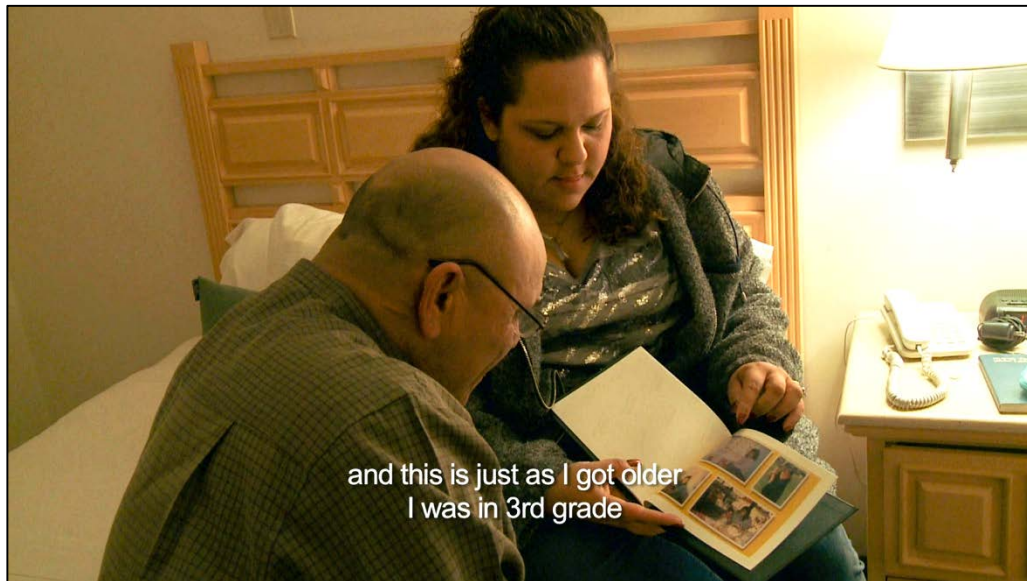


Fig. 19: A reunion constructed for the camera. Image source: *Dead when I got here*. ©Tacit 2015.

¹⁶⁵ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 100.

Vanessa expressed her pain without words. Josué begged forgiveness (Fig. 19).¹⁶⁶ Josué setting fire to his demons was rooted in universal symbolism and emotion – easily referenced from an effigy burning ceremony - as if plucked off a shelf. The scenes with Vanessa and Josué were engineered in many ways by myself – unpalatable emotions forced out in front of the camera. Not so much off the shelf as constituted for the sake of the film. Perhaps this is evidence of Rouch's 'infinitely more sincere' performance for the camera or even the camera creating a 'staged space for characters'.¹⁶⁷ Again, I would argue that it had more to do with the relationships I'd established with the subjects. But we'll never know how the reunion would have happened or if it would have happened at all if the camera hadn't been there.

As a film maker, I was a catalyst to the father/daughter reunion but without their collaboration this would have amounted to nothing.

These social actors become such memorable film actors because their clearly inscribed awareness of the camera amplifies their performance and transcends the representational pretence of vérité observation.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ 01:03:15 – 01:04:59, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

¹⁶⁷ Pratap Rughani, in *The Documentary Film Book*, 107.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Waugh, Citing Joris Ivens (no ref.), *The right to play oneself*, 80.

In this case, the catalyst for meaning in the completed work occurred during production. The emotional truths that Josué and myself had collaborated on explored and revealed themes of personal renewal, compassion, empathy and a desire to be forgiven and accepted into a family – both that of the hospital community and his own. This desire was consummated when Josué physically met his daughter in the actual film.

When process supersedes completion

Two and a half years later I screened the completed work at the hospital to an audience of patients and Josué. Ellis suggests that, 'Contemporary publics know more about the processes behind image production because they had experienced it for themselves'.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps this is increasingly true but the processes are far more complex than filming on a mobile phone or camcorder and many people do not have access to these. I would count all the patients in the hospital within this group.

'The people I film are always the first to see the film... But you never know what... especially, maybe with psychiatric patients'.

¹⁶⁹ John Ellis, *Documentary*, 24.

¹⁷⁰ Like Philibert, my participants are always the first viewers and I was faced with the same dilemma regarding this screening. Many of the patients were now dead and one woman who had lost her sibling was prodded every time her sister appeared on screen. I was told later that the woman had yet to acknowledge her loss. The film for better or worse had failed to offer her catharsis (Fig. 20).



Fig. 20: Audience engagement was moving and mysterious. Image source: *Mark Aitken 2015*.

¹⁷⁰ Geoff Andrew, "Nicolas Philibert interview: 'You can make a great film with a very tiny subject,'" *BFI*, accessed August 1st, 2019, <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/interviews/nicolas-philibert-interview>.

I was also aware that my relationship with Josué was coming full circle. The process of the edit and presenting the completed film had dislodged the working dynamic between us. 'Film makers... have to separate and regard their footage as 'material'... what happened becomes invested with meaning by the application of hindsight'.¹⁷¹

I asked Josué what he thought of the film. He told me that the film was about him finding his daughter. I would argue that it was about other things as well but these were the emotional truths that resonated strongest for him and for obvious reasons. The rich working dynamic we had established was now redundant. Bruzzi quotes director Chris Terrill, 'The number one of observational documentary film making is not narrative or equipment, it's relationships'.¹⁷² Our relationship was effectively over but it had been a powerful catalyst for the film, which was now being transferred to the audience.

'...Events are not yet over until the documentary is finished and shown. There is no closure for the subjects of documentary film until this has happened.'¹⁷³ Josué's response to the film seems

¹⁷¹ John Ellis, *Documentary*, 68.

¹⁷² Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 95.

¹⁷³ John Ellis, *Documentary*, 71.

to contradict Ellis's notion of 'closure' for the subject. His experience from the film was ongoing. The film signified a new beginning. The final line in the film is, 'Now I'm alive, it's going to be easier'.¹⁷⁴ As stated before, the catalyst of our relationship – which would normally be the film – had been subsumed by reuniting with his daughter.

I believe that Josué and I achieved such tangible emotional truths from our relationship because we were both open to all possible outcomes. Neither of us had any idea that his daughter would appear as a result of making the film. It seemed impossibly far-fetched when he asked me to look for her in California and miraculous when she found my footage online. But I don't think it was only Josué that motivated my persistence in understanding his emotional complexity. It was also the overwhelming mystery of the people in the hospital of which he was a part of. I was forced to re-calibrate my values and subsequent judgements.

The subjectivity of another does not simply constitute a different interior attitude to the same exterior facts. The constellation of facts, of which he is the centre, is different.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ 01:08:43 – 01:08:53, <https://vimeo.com/124941282> PW: deeper.

¹⁷⁵ John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man* (London: Verso, 2010), 98.

Josué and the hospital patients had consistently forced me to challenge my assumptions. Even as I attempted to assimilate Berger's constellation of facts, I was aware of the futility of trying to feel hunger, madness or death in any way near that of Josué and the patients. Acknowledgement of this distance between us further enabled trust between myself and the people in the hospital. I learned the limitations of empathy and the value of sympathy. The film was a 'closure' equally as much as a continuation of our experiences. 'I sense Josué wants to move on from his reflection... He's now training for official mental health nurse status. Soon he will receive a certificate that says as much'.¹⁷⁶

Unifying perception through emotional truths

While it's not possible to determine or even confidently predict audience response, I gauged reactions at public screenings. One unprompted keyword that materialised was 'compassion'. Despite the horror and trauma, compassion was the tool for survival in the hospital. For the audience, compassion was a universal emotion that erased – at least momentarily - the

¹⁷⁶ Mark Aitken, *Asylum from the Madness*, 197.

distance between 'us and them'. The distance that had been evident when viewers felt uncomfortable on seeing my initial observational film of a day in the life at the hospital. 'To witness distant individuals and to recognise them as persons is inevitably to see them as "like us"'.¹⁷⁷

Observer journalist Ed Vulliamy said of the film, 'They are us and we are them. This film is about Mexico, but also about all of us'.

¹⁷⁸ Compassion had been the catalyst for the film and now it had become the catalyst for meaning as determined by the audience.

And the film existed because it was, 'not only *about* people engaged in these struggles but also *with* and *by* them as well'.¹⁷⁹

The central theme of compassion in *Dead when I got here* was selected from many possible themes. With unadulterated access to the hospital I could have selected the theme of suffering and compounded the 'us and them' dynamic. This was a political choice on my part. Countless documentaries encourage us to pity the less fortunate. Pity obstructs the possibility of feeling what life is like for these people and at its worst, simply serves the

¹⁷⁷ John Ellis, *Documentary*, 129.

¹⁷⁸ 'Preview Screening: Dead When I Got Here + Q&A,' *Frontline Club*, accessed August 1st 2019, <https://www.frontlineclub.com/preview-screening-dead-when-i-got-here-qa/>.

¹⁷⁹ Thomas Waugh, *The right to play oneself*, 6.

status quo. People existing in struggle cannot afford the luxury of pity. Josué and the people of the hospital forced me to consider how I might cope in such circumstances. Admiration arose from this question. They stimulated my curiosity. It was the truth I selected for scrutiny and Josué ably colluded with me. His persona in the film was defined by compassion and this in turn, was transferred to the audience. 'Contemporary viewers seem to value above all else the moments where the 'real' person peeps through'.¹⁸⁰ The tantalising 'real' person in *Dead when I got here* was determined by myself and Josué from myriad possibilities. Making the film was the means we had to frame the persona you experience.

Before and since my arrival at the hospital, news crews and the Vice channel made short films there. They all have either the Pastor or Josué asking for donations. It's not that they don't need money but we are asked to pity these people and this desperate place. Like me these film makers made their choices. Unlike me, they were led by corporate interests and agendas. My initial agenda was to collaborate with Josué to discover and film compassion in the hospital. Unexpectedly, in Josué I also found a reflective soul that revealed talents of an actor and a poet.

¹⁸⁰ John Ellis, *Documentary*, 52.

One night after a hard day of not achieving much, we sat on his bed. He asked me how it had come to be that this *gringo* from England was making a film about him. I didn't know what to say but for a short time, the making of the film had ensured we were *compañeros* (Fig. 21). The photographer Diane Arbus commented, 'it's impossible to get out of your skin and into someone else's. That someone else's tragedy is not the same as your own'. Later she added, 'Every difference is a likeness too'.¹⁸¹ Perhaps I would respond with Arbus's quote on returning to Josué's bedroom.



Fig. 21: Mark Aitken and Josué Rosales after viewing the film. Image source: *Molly Molloy 2015*.

¹⁸¹ Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment*, 60.

Forest of Crocodiles (2009)

<https://www.thedeepriver.org/past/film/forest-of-crocodiles/>

Synopsis

What choices do white South Africans make when addressing fears of crime and violence? Some are well resourced while others are ingeniously resourceful. The consequences are regression and isolation or freedom from fear.

Like crocodiles, fearful and well-resourced people can survive without evolving. But some people refuse to submit to their fears. For them, the future is an unknown country to be explored.

How does this divided community co-exist? These people are being pushed to the limits of their imaginations. To understand them is to feel their fears and walk in a forest of unknown things.

Underpinning racism

In 2008 I read Ryszard Kapuściński's *The Soccer War*; one of many accounts from African countries by the Polish reporter. In the afterword, he speaks of 'the forest of things, as I've seen it, living and travelling in it. To capture the world, you have to penetrate it as completely as possible'.¹⁸² My forest at the time was South Africa, the country where I spent formative years during the Apartheid era. I was visiting my mother who lived in a rural mining area. The country was experiencing its first power cuts, an ongoing crime wave and farm murders. The white 'community' talked ominously of being plunged into darkness.

I use the word community here as a reference to territorial space. Apartheid insisted land be owned and segregated along racial parameters and these territorial lines remained largely intact.

Racism is a spatial and territorial form of power. It aims to claim and secure territory, but it also projects associations on to space that in turn invest racial associations and attributes in spaces.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Ryszard Kapuściński, *The Soccer War* (London: Granta Books, 2007), Afterword, final page.

¹⁸³ Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, 51.

Back's territory is London, where the stakes are different and in many ways, significantly higher in South Africa. White people are a minority who either own or deny a mantle of brutal institutionalised racism. But despite these differences, Back identifies certain critical approaches to issues of race that might be utilised when discussing *Forest of Crocodiles*. If anything, this shared critical space demonstrates the universality of the constructs of racism.

The threatened territory that interested me was wide-open farmland. Isolated houses corralled by razor wire and electric fences glinting under security lights at night. White occupants not sitting in front of windows in fear of those watching from the darkness. The intruders were always black men. The vested racial associations of the land locked down with spiralling fear.

“Farm murders” tamper with the boundary between acquisitive crime and racial hatred.’¹⁸⁴ Victims would often be tortured before being murdered. The stories were as sensational as they were real. For the white community, these crimes confirmed post-Apartheid African vengeance and revived ancient fears of savagery lurking in the bush.

¹⁸⁴ Jonny Steinberg, *Midlands* (Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball, 2002), vii.

Wendy woke up to find herself face-to face with a demon from her darkest subconscious: a huge black man with bulging muscles, standing at the foot of the bed with a bloody claw hammer in his fist.¹⁸⁵

The fears multiplied with every recount and the white *laager* mentality of digging in prevailed.

White South Africans have long been a trope of ridicule amongst liberals. Whether it be villains in *Lethal Weapon II* (1989); the oafish white supremacist Terre'Blanche in two of Nick Broomfield's films and even *Spitting Image* puppets in the 1980s. Perhaps because of my background I was aware of the many paradoxes and contradictions that remained unexplored in these caricatures. I was also aware of the stigma of racism felt by white South Africans and regardless of ideological beliefs, race was always a sensitive issue. Merely finding a way into the subject without closing it down was a challenge.

I saw my task as that of doing something different than to analysing and deconstructing the 'odious and pernicious views' of racists.¹⁸⁶ I wanted to construct an imaginative enquiry. If fear was a common denominator amongst this community, then this

¹⁸⁵ Rian Malan, *My Traitor's Heart* (London: Vintage, 1991), 186.

¹⁸⁶ Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, 155.

might be my focus. Discussing race along ideological lines only generated tired and rehearsed moral polarities. As Orwell said of challenges to anti-Semitism, 'If a man has the slightest disposition towards anti-Semitism, such things bounce off his consciousness like peas off a steel helmet'.¹⁸⁷ Orwell goes on to ask critics of anti-Semites to step down from their moral high ground and consider the appeal of prejudice. An empathetic enquiry from 'people who know they are not immune to that kind of emotion'.¹⁸⁸ Orwell's tact remains refreshingly self-effacing and honest.

Since democratic rule came to South Africa in 1994, white people had used crime as a euphemism for black people. Censored by a thin veneer of post-Apartheid political correctness, the climate of fear in 2008 presented an opportunity to explore emotional truths underpinning racism. If I wanted to make a film and penetrate this world, there was no point in being judgemental. My curiosity would be hampered. The dynamic established with my subjects would be nothing less than patronizing.

¹⁸⁷ George Orwell, 'As I Please – 11th February 1944,' Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, eds., *George Orwell: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: Volume 3* (London: Penguin Books, 1970/ 1941), 387.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

Nobody can say they are immune to fear. If fear was driving prejudice, then I would have to admit to being susceptible to it. Empathy would be my primary tool for enquiry. I was also aware that the privileged position of white people in South Africa had been and still often is preserved through violence and fear. As Steve Biko succinctly noted, 'This interaction between fear and reaction then sets on a vicious a cycle that multiplies both the fear and the reaction'.¹⁸⁹ What had changed since Biko's death in 1977 was that there wasn't a state apparatus protecting white people anymore. I don't think the nature of fear itself had changed much but the way it was negotiated was different. This was of interest to me.

Every film has its boundaries by design – be they geographical, thematic or otherwise. Errol Morris claims, 'my theory of art is to set up a series of arbitrary rules, and follow them slavishly'.¹⁹⁰ My conditions were that I wanted to portray a spectrum of fear amongst my subjects to form the narrative of the film. The polarity would range from people trapped by fear to those liberated by it – from paranoid to carefree. I also limited my research to white people. Of course, black people have fears and

¹⁸⁹ Steve Biko, *I write what I like* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1979), 77.

¹⁹⁰ Matt Zoller Seitz, 'Errol Morris on *Wormwood*'.

the levels of crime and violence they experience in South Africa are on a much greater scale than the white minority. However, I was interested in what underpinned white racism and as a white person myself, I wanted to understand how my own fears might play out in this context. Unlike Morris, I wouldn't say my rules were arbitrary and I suspect his are very considered. I'd add to Morris's dictum that being open to breaking the rules is part of the game and this is exactly what ensued during an interview I'll analyse shortly.

The regression into fear I witnessed inspired the metaphor of a crocodile to populate Kapuściński's forest. Crocodiles can appear heroic and stubborn – ancient survivors that have had no need to evolve. There was a deeper analogy here in that the local African nation in the region was called the *Bakwena* – people of the crocodile. I wanted to ask if the white people might see themselves in this way. I wanted them to consider their role in this fearful world – what Back asks when echoing Orwell – 'why racism appeals to people and what they need it for'.¹⁹¹ To this end I invented an African folktale about white people metaphorically presented as crocodiles. Herzog wrote prose for *Lessons of Darkness* (1992) and falsely credited it to the mathematician philosopher Blaise Pascal. I saw no need in

¹⁹¹ Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, 157.

crediting anyone but I did employ a young African woman to perform the lines that suggested a folktale reference. The tale is spoken over footage of adult crocodiles eating their young – a perhaps pessimistic yet challenging metaphor for perpetuation of fear in the white community. I sought to ring fence my line of enquiry with this fictional device, signifying Africans mythologizing white people as an 'other'. Rouch carried out a similar ethnographic role reversal in *Petit a Petit* (1971) when his African characters literally measured up Parisians to determine how they lived.

A contract stimulated by provocation and empathy

During early research, I invited subjects to take part in a conversation rather than to oblige me filming them. This meant discussing fear and its consequences. Focusing on emotions rather than race altered the frame of reference or what Nichols describes as, 'the ethics and politics of encounter'.¹⁹² The 'performative exchange'¹⁹³ I was initiating involved a discussion that not only included defining what type of crocodile the subject might be but also how I might deal with the fears they were

¹⁹² Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 149.

¹⁹³ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 10.

confronted with. Following setting up a frame of reference for discussion, my participation engaged empathy and sympathy for living such fearful lives. This pre-empted a more recent film, *I Afrikaner* (2013) by Annalet Steenkamp. In this case the subject was Steenkamp's own family and she made the film over nine years. The films share an empathetic response to the fears of the subject. Where they differ is in my dissection of fear into different responses and actions from a spectrum of rural white people.

Forest of Crocodiles features an ensemble cast who existed in what Thomas Waugh described as 'everyday space'¹⁹⁴ – the house, the church, the shop, the office. However, all these environments were stigmatised by what Caroline Knowles described as a 'social texture of space'¹⁹⁵ generated along racial lines.

Everyday space is socially reflective. This space may be shared, such as the church where the same space was utilised in entirely different ways by white and black worshipers. Or the space might be exclusive whereby everything from architecture to

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Waugh, *The right to play oneself*, 187.

¹⁹⁵ Caroline Knowles, *Race and Social Analysis* (London: Sage, 2003), 105.

ornaments speak volumes of the occupants in terms of their fears and insecurities. Nicholas Barker's *Signs of the Times* (1992) TV series drew attention to the inter-relationships between subjects and habitats. 'The close-ups of accessories, ornaments and fabrics function as weighty metaphors for the conflicts they symbolise.'¹⁹⁶ What's curious about these worlds apart is how people reference their sense of security through objects. Possessions speak of belonging. The ensemble in *Forest of Crocodiles* existed in contrasting habitats: fortified, tranquil or chaotic. Their varied living and work spaces as evidenced in the film challenged the sense of a homogenised community – one that 'denies the difference within and between subjects'.¹⁹⁷ The reinforcement of stereotypes as championed by liberals would be denied by evidence of differences between these rural white South Africans.

The people in *Forest of Crocodiles* are distinguished by the way they negotiate their struggles. Dai Vaughan questions if being 'fair to the people as individuals'¹⁹⁸ should be a pre-requisite in the edit. I think fairness should be established from initial

¹⁹⁶ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2000), 192.

¹⁹⁷ Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, 57.

¹⁹⁸ Dai Vaughan, *For Documentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 70- 71.

encounters with subjects. Fairness isn't about being 'nice'. Comparing a disparate community under siege to crocodiles was a provocation of sorts. I asked subjects what they thought of my analogy and it became a talking point.

The closest relationship I had was with Margaretha who suggested painting a crocodile while she mused on its symbolism. This action established a contract and I also paid money for the finished work. Although I didn't script Margaretha's lines, her obvious collaboration signifies an investment in the film beyond an interviewee.

Margaretha was very perceptive regarding priorities of film making when she was attacked and robbed in her home. On the second shoot of the production she called me at 4 a.m. to say someone was breaking in. She sounded very afraid, screamed and then the line went dead. I rushed over to her house. By the time I arrived, neighbours and police were there and the first thing Margaretha asked me was where my camera was. Of course, I'd considered bringing it but I had allowed my relationship to become more important than the film. Margaretha was reminding me what my priorities should be. She was also taking an active role in the production, much like Marceline in

Chronicle. Later, when re-enacting the attack, we both knew I'd missed a more dramatic opportunity (Fig. 22).¹⁹⁹



Fig. 22: Margaretha describing being attacked in her home. Image source: *Forest of Crocodiles*. © Flux Film 2010.

Back refers to 'allowing' for subjects to be 'complex, frail, ethically ambiguous, contradictory and damaged'.²⁰⁰ He doesn't include himself in this demographic but I knew that like the characters in *Forest of Crocodiles* I was emphatically all these things - perhaps not all at once but at least some at any one time. Back needn't be concerned about allowing people to be complex. I don't know how I'd behave if I was attacked in my

¹⁹⁹ 00:20:59 – 00:21:42, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/forest-of-crocodiles/>.

²⁰⁰ Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, 157.

bed. It's possible I'd also become as fearsome and intransigent as a crocodile.

From a film maker's perspective, it's worth quoting Max Ophüls here, 'So you must always be prepared not only to surprise other people but to surprise yourself'.²⁰¹ Ophüls made *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969) and *Hotel Terminus* (1988) – films about collusion with Nazis that leave no doubt as to whom the criminals were. He wasn't neutral with his principles but he stipulates the need for open mindedness from the filmmaker. Another form of this could be what Les Back describes as active listening – an engagement that 'challenges the listener's preconceptions and position while at the same time engages critically with the content of what is being said and heard'.²⁰² Back continues by suggesting a need for critical dialogue with 'enemies as well as allies'. Perhaps he's thinking of ideological enemies here and if so, there was no shortage of these when asking rural South Africans about their fears.

My enquiry required that I shelve my ideological differences. I had no interest in making a film that attempted to prove the

²⁰¹ Kurt Jacobsen, 'Memories of Injustice: Marcel Ophüls's Cinema of Conscience,' *Film Comment* 32:4 (July–August, 1996), 62.

²⁰² Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, 23.

wrongs of racism. I consciously avoided the ideological premise of encountering 'friends' or 'enemies'. I considered anyone a friend who would give me the time of day when making a film. My focus on fear enabled opportunity to shunt perceptions of ideological enemies and allies aside and enable empathy.

Both Ophüls and Back are concerned with principles and the need to reserve judgement. I aimed to more explicitly confound my principles – such as they are mired in doubt and ambivalence – and find judgement even more difficult than my preconceptions allowed for. As Wiseman enthuses, 'Each time I go out, it's a kind of voyage of discovery'.²⁰³ Non-judgemental curiosity enabled the fluid contracts between myself and the subjects in the film. I needed to be open to 'the life narrative that is told to-camera' drawing on 'common mythic themes' that are culturally significant to subjects.²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Thomas R. Atkins, *Frederick Wiseman*, 34.

²⁰⁴ Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV, Realism & Revelation*, 72.

The interpretative voiceover

Robert Drew's Direct Cinema dogma was often as uncompromising as his films could be riveting. His condemnation of voiceover or narration: 'What you do when you fail', is no exception.²⁰⁵ Despite this I chose to have my subjects narrate *Forest of Crocodiles* through voiceover. My strategy was to use words to interpret images, partly akin to Waugh's 'voice of a witness participating in a discourse extracting the meaning hidden by the image'.²⁰⁶ Waugh's hidden meaning refers to the voiceover bringing greater reflection and wisdom to images from the past. Though in contrast to Waugh, I found images too often overloaded with meaning and I sought to reign these in. Perhaps this related to my concerns of stereotypical preconceptions of white South Africans. I saw the voiceover as a device to direct or at least suggest interpretation of images.

²⁰⁵ Robert Drew, 1983, 'Narration can be a killer'; reprinted in Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins, eds., *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 271.

²⁰⁶ Thomas Waugh, *The right to play oneself*, 114.

The voiceover of Lee-Ann establishes her fear (Figs. 23, 24): ²⁰⁷

V.O.: The moment you say that you've got fear inside of you, then anything can happen. You open all doors –



Fig. 23: Living behind bars and trapped in fear. Image source: *Forest of Crocodiles*. © Flux Film 2010.

V.O.: So anything that you are afraid of... or it starts as an idea in your mind and then it starts growing and then you start speaking it and... then it happens.

²⁰⁷ 00:00:24 – 00:00:41, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/forest-of-crocodiles/>.



Fig. 24: Using voiceover to interpret images. Image source: *Forest of Crocodiles*. © Flux Film 2010.

The pair of shots underneath Lee-Ann's voice feature banal domesticity. The voiceover invokes nightmares and prophecies of doom. Put together, the elements focus each other. A collusion occurs when it feels either as if the baby is vulnerable or perhaps having the nightmare himself. The voice interprets the images.

Bruzzi rightly counterattacks the Direct Cinema dogma of anti-narration (or voiceover) by saying that documentaries can't represent truth in an unadulterated way, they 'can only do so through interpretation, which in the case of narration is of the most overt and blatant kind'.²⁰⁸ Although the mechanism of

²⁰⁸ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed., 56.

interpretation remained intact, I used voices that were 'more idiosyncratic, personal and probing'.²⁰⁹

As a rule, I was recording all voiceover off camera. I wanted to challenge the interview talking head format and be more conversational with subjects during recording. My orthodoxy fell apart with the revelatory performance of a woman who had suffered great loss and was gripped by irrational fear. This led me to appreciate the value of a talking head as an intimate performance, fulfilling the needs of both subject and film maker in unexpected ways. The subject compounded the challenges I was faced with regarding my conflicts between racist ideology and empathy. Conflicts that I suspected would be passed on to the audience. However, the performance of this subject and my role as a film maker clearly defined my goal of deriving emotional truths from our dynamic.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 65.

Talking head as therapy

Chantelle tells the horrific story of her husband being shot and dying in her arms (Figs. 25, 26, 27).²¹⁰ Initially I was to film Chantelle's mother talking about the murder but she wasn't at the shop premises as we'd arranged. I asked Chantelle to oblige and she refused, without explaining why. I persisted and she agreed so long as I'd wait for her to apply make-up, even though I said I was only using a microphone. This contractual agreement pointed to her concerns about appearances – more of which later.

We sat on her bed in the house behind the shop and Chantelle told me the story. About half way through, I interrupted and asked if I could film her speaking as her performance was so powerful. She started the second take from the top of the story and matched her words and emotional intonations as an actor might. I asked her about this and she said it was the first time she'd told her story and that it was therapeutic. The retelling made her feel better – 'the subject will say that they feel better for having spoken out'.²¹¹

²¹⁰ 00:16:15 – 00:18:20, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/forest-of-crocodiles/>.

²¹¹ John Ellis, *Documentary*, 59.



Fig. 25: Performing trauma as therapy – sequence.
Image source: *Forest of Crocodiles*. © Flux Film 2010.



Fig. 26: Performing trauma as therapy – sequence.
Image source: *Forest of Crocodiles*. © Flux Film 2010.



Fig. 27: Performing trauma as therapy – sequence.
Image source: *Forest of Crocodiles*. © Flux Film 2010.

Unlike a therapist, my role in this exercise was far from neutral and I was now assuming responsibility for the recording of my subject's trauma.²¹² Waugh described the close-up talking head as when, 'The individual confronts trauma first and foremost in isolation'.²¹³ He continues by suggesting that retelling on camera is a 'religiocultural confession'. At this point in Chantelle's performance, she was unburdening painful feelings. I'd like to draw a distinction between a therapeutic act and a confessional. Confessions are performed within a context of moral judgement and the act is designed to alleviate sins and be forgiven by a higher power. Therapy offers no rights or wrongs and there is no judgement. A lack of judgement is designed to encourage self-empowerment and clarity of emotional responses.

Foucault argued that there was 'an uneven distribution of power between client and institutional practitioner' during an interview.²¹⁴ As with the limitation of Waugh's analogy, I'd counter that the power dynamic may be flexible and swing either way in an interview context – especially in the case of Chantelle. In a lighter hearted but no less personal way, Ross McElwee

²¹² Ibid., 54.

²¹³ Thomas Waugh, Citing Joris Ivens (no ref.), *The right to play oneself*, 258.

²¹⁴ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 122.

expresses his insecurities and failings in *Sherman's March* (1986) and it's clear he's analysing himself in the process. No-one would accuse McElwee of maintaining a power imbalance between himself and his camera although it could be argued that his immodesty serves a purpose to attract women on his quest. Like McElwee, I also had reasons for my subject to reveal their feelings but unlike him, I felt no need to appear in the film.

I don't dispute that a power imbalance can occur, especially when the subject is vulnerable or they are confessing misdeeds. However, as a film maker I'm also performing a role and I have choices as to how I exercise my power within that. In this example, I stumbled into a dynamic where my role was therapeutic and the subject was empowered, contrary to Foucault's dichotomy.

Where I do agree with Waugh is his description of an 'absence of performance', as discussed in the introduction. Chantelle's ability to recall her traumatic story with almost identical emotional intonation suggests a 'natural ability' – ironically like the performances in Direct Cinema documentaries with Brando, Kennedy, Dylan, etc., 'their success as film performers predicated upon their ability to appear natural and at ease when

being filmed'.²¹⁵ Yet clearly, in the case of retelling a traumatic experience to camera, Chantelle required no previous experience.

Beyond the nuances of performance, the camera is serving as a 'cathartic device' and a 'friend that would listen'.²¹⁶ Barker is referring to the BBC *Video Diaries* (1992) series where subjects filmed themselves and felt purged of nightmares. It would seem the distinction between the camera and myself as facilitator for Chantelle's therapy was paper thin as I didn't ask questions – only offering a pair of eyes to talk to as opposed to a monocular lens. Her use of the word 'therapeutic' shows a popular awareness of psychoanalysis and perhaps my role (and the camera's) was nothing more than 'one more stage in coping, facing and working through of an individual distress'.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed., 159.

²¹⁶ Paul Barker, 1983, 'The Rise of Camcorder Culture,' reprinted in Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins, eds., *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 352-7.

²¹⁷ Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV, Realism & Revelation*, 90.

Talking head as confessional

Following what was inadvertently a therapeutic release for Chantelle, she turned to a confessional mode. I asked her how she was going to live with her fears. The emotional truths I sought lay in the aftermath of her ordeal. Chantelle relays her irrational fears of thirty million black people. At this point she is concerned about being judged or how she will appear.

I don't fear white people, Indians, Asians but Black people - sounds horrible, really sounds horrible.²¹⁸

Admitting to prejudice as 'horrible' denotes a confession of sorts.

Chantelle elaborated much more on who she feared and why and fell into familiar racist dogma. I only selected as much as was required in the edit to offer a counterpoint with a white man who sold goods to black men without fear in a taxi rank (Fig. 28).²¹⁹

²¹⁸ 00:07:58 – 00:08:32, 00:41:19 – 00:41:45,
<https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/forest-of-crocodiles/>.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 00:39:46 – 00:43:05.



Fig. 28: Counterpointing irrational fears. Image source: *Forest of Crocodiles*.
© Flux Film 2010.

Rather than offering judgement on Chantelle's confession, I sought to demonstrate the irrational nature of her prejudice and have her question it herself:

So when you say to me that this guy is selling products there and they are not doing anything to him, that's awesome.²²⁰

By invoking a counterpoint, I used the power instilled in my role as a film maker to suggest a rationale for her fears – as described by a member of her own community. Foucault's 'power' was redistributed back into the film to function as a catalyst. Chantelle's sincerity and acknowledgement of an

²²⁰ Ibid., 00:07:58 – 00:08:32, 00:41:19 – 00:41:45.

alternative to her fears had expanded the possibility to understand the complexity of Back's 'damaged' subject.

My encounter with Chantelle wasn't dissimilar to scenes in *Chronicle of a Summer* where a young Italian woman, Mary Lou confessed to feeling depressed and drinking too much. She is emotionally fragile and admits to fears of loneliness. Mary Lou later tells us she has found love and we see her with a boyfriend. We move from a therapeutic release to a confession and finally to better awareness. All the while with Rouch and his camera cathartically drawing out these feelings.

Another series of confessions occurs in Nicholas Barker's *Unmade Beds* (1997). Apparently cast from a thousand candidates, four New Yorkers seek new partners and we follow them on their quests. Barker filmed interviews with his characters and then transcribed and edited them. The resulting script was then performed by his protagonists in a highly mannered and stylised film.

Like Barker, I desired strong performances with a character saying specific things. I also asked my subject to repeat their lines except I didn't direct the performance. Paradoxically, Chantelle's emotions are spontaneous but repeated on cue. I

exploited the documentary moment and then edited the material later. Barker edited the moment to produce new moments for further editing. Perhaps the dynamics Barker and I experienced through contrasting work processes related to, 'people being filmed are no longer subdued by it, but ready to have their say'.

²²¹ Having one's say within the ethics of Judeo-Christian cultures is likely to make you feel better and often but not always, this involves confession.

I should add that even though my work process was less layered than Barker's in *Unmade Beds*, the results were no less manipulated. A certain tension between image and voice occurs and this engages us. We see a black man entering Chantelle's shop while she narrates the story of her husband being murdered (Fig. 29). ²²² The initial affect of image and narration provokes the question of whether the man is the murderer. Gradually it's revealed he's just another customer. Apart from creating tension, we're encouraged to consider Chantelle's fear of the banality of customers in her shop.

²²¹ Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London & New York: Routledge 2007), 253.

²²² 00:16:52 – 00:17:34, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/forest-of-crocodiles/>.



Fig. 29: Offering tension between voiceover and image. Image source: *Forest of Crocodiles*. © Flux Film 2010.

Chantelle was the last person I filmed on this production. Our intense encounter lasted no longer than an hour. It offers a contrary take on ethnographic film making methodology or 'participant observation' – 'open-ended inductive long-term living with and among the people to be studied'.²²³ I can't imagine that moving into Chantelle's house would have offered a more emotionally true performance than our brief meeting. It could be argued that the lack of planning and prior intimacy engendered spontaneous sincerity. Chantelle appeared as surprised as I was when she performed her story twice like a professional actress. The camera provoked her performance, as in Barnouw's description of Rouch, 'enabling people to talk about

²²³ Signe Howell, 'The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Anthropology, University of Oslo,' accessed August 2nd, 2018, <http://doi.org/10.29164/18ethno>.

things they had previously been unable to discuss'.²²⁴ One could say the same about the characters in *Chronicle* and *Unmade Beds*. I feel the subjects are also motivated by a desire to offload emotional burdens, to confess and potentially gain better awareness. The benefits felt by the subject are shared by the director and ultimately the audience. Increased self-awareness being a dividend of the emotional truths shared between subject and filmmaker in these three examples.

The success of our fleeting relationship was based on shared needs. After Chantelle's first refusal to be recorded, I commented that she was the only person I'd encountered to have suffered such a tragic loss and for this reason, her story was important. Perhaps this triggered a desire to relieve trauma. The outcome of Chantelle's performance offers complex emotional truths far away from caricatures of racist white South Africans. As with Ophüls's quest, my approach was 'simultaneously resisted and welcomed' by the subject.²²⁵

My intention was also to complicate that other trope of ethnography whereby individuals become cultural ambassadors

²²⁴ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary – A history of the non-fiction film*, 254.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

– ‘Along with ‘national identity’ comes ‘national character’ as a reductive melting pot idea’.²²⁶ It’s impossible to control or even ascertain how an audience would perceive Chantelle. They may indeed see her as a ‘typical white South African’. Perhaps to some extent we are all ciphers for our caste in the eye of the camera. Yet Chantelle’s acknowledgement of a member of her caste not being afraid of Africans points towards Rouch’s idea of the camera being both a mirror and a window ‘opened to the outside’ - or what Renov described as ‘a reflective surface that reintroduces us to ourselves’.²²⁷ In Chantelle’s case, this is a rational self, outside of her overwhelming irrational fears.

National Portrait Gallery curator Philip Prodger points to the construction of emotional ‘types’:

This is not “identity” so much as it is “image.” It is the same formula whereby the tortured writer becomes heroic, the tireless nurse compassionate, or the evil villain dastardly.²²⁸

²²⁶ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 150.

²²⁷ Michael Renov, *The subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 197.

²²⁸ Alexander Strecker, Phillip Prodger interview, ‘Fleeting Truths: Thoughts on Portrait Photography,’ *Lens Culture*, accessed August 2nd 2019, <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/national-portrait-gallery-fleeting-truths-thoughts-on-portrait-photography>.

Reductive identity analogies superimposed on Chantelle might be challenged by us witnessing discovery of fearlessness in her community.

The magic of fear

Perhaps because of the intensity of feeling from subjects, there was no talk of concerns about how they might appear to an audience. Chantelle's expression personified the complexity and trauma of her world. Her experience reminiscent of Italo Calvino's earthly interpretation of judgement day, that of:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live today, that we form by being together. ²²⁹

The short relationship we forged was an invitation to Chantelle's inferno. Her consequent confessed fears were open to judgement and she was aware of this. If she had asked what I was going to do with her 'horrible' confession I would have said that whatever her fears, they would be contextualised with her tragedy.

²²⁹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (USA: Harcourt Brace, 1972), 165.

Later in the film we meet religious mission worker Rina who listens to Lee-Ann talking about her fears. There's an element of therapeutic guidance from Rina as she advises Lee-Ann on how to cope with her feelings. However, they both subsume to their faith in the Almighty when praying at the end (Fig. 30).²³⁰ Perhaps one could draw a parallel here between faith in God and the film maker in terms of outcomes. In the case of Chantelle and Lee-Ann, empathy rather than judgement enabled access to their feelings. Neither of them asked how they might appear in the completed film. There was tacit agreement that their feelings fell in line with my enquiry about fear. They expressed these feelings to me the same way they did in prayer.



Fig. 30: Expressing feelings in prayer. Image source: *Forest of Crocodiles*. © Flux Film 2010.

²³⁰ 00:37:10 – 00:39:34, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/forest-of-crocodiles/>.

A dramatic confession plays out in a scene near the end of *The Overnighters* (2014) when Pastor Jay Reinke reveals to his wife that he's gay. It's a painful scene to watch and there's no precedent. In an interview after the film, Reinke claims that he hadn't planned for his confession to be on camera but because the film maker had become so intimate with the family it had worked out that way. He concluded by saying that he hoped the scene assisted others with their burdens.²³¹ Perhaps ironically, this was a pastor confessing. The dynamic between subject and film maker and their trust in striving for emotional truths overrode the subject's concerns about how he would appear in the film. I think Chantelle and Lee-Ann had similar motives in sharing their burdens to relieve others of theirs. Importantly, none of these characters offer solutions to the existential forces they face. They're all muddling through their struggles.

Editor Dai Vaughan rightly asks, 'How much should a film maker indulge the mistaken beliefs of a particular subject about how they will appear in the eventual film?'²³² My answer is to indulge as little as possible and to focus on productive relationships. This

²³¹ PBS, 'The Overnighters,' *An update from Jay Reinke*, accessed August 2nd, 2019, <http://www.pbs.org/pov/theovernighters/video/an-update-from-jay-reinke/>, Timecode: 21.49.

²³² Dai Vaughan, *For Documentary*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 70, 71.

wasn't a problem when making *Forest of Crocodiles* once subjects realised I wanted to listen rather than judge.

While editing the film at home in London, I was threatened by two men with a gun at my front door. The event drew an uncanny parallel with Lee-Ann's story, when men entered her house with guns and terrorized the family.²³³ When I visited her with the completed film, she refused to believe that similar violence happened in other parts of the world. Les Back talked of the value of experiential knowledge to blur boundaries between writer or my case film maker and subject.²³⁴ Here, we literally fulfilled 'common likenesses and by extension, contrasts'²³⁵ with similar experiences in different countries. Yet by now, the working dynamic between Lee-Ann and myself had reverted from an empathetic bond back to being relative strangers. Her story in the film was enough and our lives had moved on, even though her fears had reverberated into my own life via the film.

²³³ 00:14:35 – 00:16:15, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/forest-of-crocodiles/>.

²³⁴ Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, 159.

²³⁵ Ibid.

Forest of Crocodiles was broadcast internationally in 2010 when South Africa hosted the World Cup. In April that year, a farm worker murdered the Afrikaner white supremacist Eugene Terre'Blanche. This event triggered a sale to a Dutch TV channel who cut the film down to a sensationalised 20 minutes about white people living in fear of vengeful blacks. Viewers of this truncated version contacted me with accusations of being racist and 'unbalanced' as I hadn't included opinions from black people. Judgements from viewers can't be controlled and it was an interesting albeit rather depressing experiment to see my hard work in the edit hacked down to a sensational news story. This was an extreme example of what Ellis terms the audience as 'producing variant understandings that can develop into doubts or disputes about the overall organisation of the film text'.²³⁶ In this case, I had become part of the audience as a stranger had recut it. My efforts to portray a nuanced representation of a community negotiating their fears were lost.

The experience was instructional in terms of realising how fragile the notion of a film being a catalyst for meaning was when you forfeit control over how it is presented. A pertinent reminder of how transient meaning can be. But there were many other broadcasts and screenings and one of in London that raised

²³⁶ John Ellis, *Documentary*, 102.

funds for an African community centre suggested by the singing white Pastor Johannes Kelber.

Regardless of my ideological differences with the subjects in *Forest of Crocodiles*, I fostered admiration for all of them. I'll take the liberty to adjunct Kapuściński's forest of things with comment from Sartre when he says, 'the relations between things and their potentialities were not governed by deterministic processes *but by magic*'.²³⁷ These stubborn crocodiles in their forest made choices for better or worse in believing what kind of magic governed their lives.

²³⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for the Theory of the Emotions* (London: Methuen, 1962), 62.

Until when you die (2007)

<https://www.thedeepriver.org/past/film/until-when-you-die/>

Synopsis

A Vietnamese woman called 'Auntie' recounts the story of her life. Orphaned at eight-years old and working in a brick factory without schooling, she married a Chinese Vietnamese man. The Sino-Vietnamese war forced them to flee as refugees, making a perilous boat journey to Hong Kong and eventually settling in London. On returning to Vietnam, Auntie is reunited with old friends who believed she had drowned twenty-seven years ago.

The persistence of absence

This film came about through a request from a charity to interview Vietnamese people at a community centre in south London about their experiences of crime. The Vietnamese told me crime wasn't a problem and they were happy to be here. Most of them had come to the UK as refugees and told incredible stories of reaching these shores. Back's 'territorial space' defined not only in terms of the presence of a community but also by

refugee heritage – referring to an absence of territory. It was this loss of territory in extreme circumstances and how they'd claimed new ground that interested me.

Funds were raised and I travelled with Auntie, one of the women at the refugee centre, back to Hanoi. We retraced her history, visiting locations and people – most profoundly when she met old friends who had been told she was dead. Halfway through the production, Auntie requested that her face and name not be used in the film due to fears of retribution from communist authorities in Vietnam.

I independently followed her route to the UK via south China and Hong Kong. We then visited people and places Auntie encountered after arriving here in 1979, eventually landing at her house in London where she lives with her husband who has never returned home.

Sadly, with cruel irony, Ken Hong who worked at the refugee centre and assisted greatly as a go-between was murdered outside his house in 2006.

Until when you die attempts to connect the past with the present through a physical journey of its protagonist bearing witness.

The following analysis engages the themes of history, territory and memory on a personal and global scale. The emotional truths of the film bring about two transformations of history – one personal and one communal. These unexpected changes arose from the subject/film maker dynamic during and after production, 'Defining the journey embarked upon as a fluid performative act'.²³⁸

Comparable to *Dead when I got here*, the film is structured as a portrait of an individual's life within a specific community where a life changing transformation occurs. However, the working dynamic and the resulting film as a catalyst for the community was entirely different. *Until when you die* offers a clear example of how trauma from the past, present and potentially the future can influence and stimulate film making.

Although most Vietnamese in the community centre had experienced hardships as refugees, Auntie was the most vociferous when recounting her story. As with Josué in the psychiatric hospital, I needed to work with someone who was articulate and could perform a personal yet archetypal role.

²³⁸ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed., 118.

Our initial contract involved me paying Auntie's fare to Hanoi on agreement that she would retrace her life there for the camera. Several days into filming, Auntie insisted on the caveat of not showing her face or voice in the film. She was concerned about the camera drawing attention from the same authorities who had evicted her family twenty-seven years ago.

Obviously, this intervention complicated my film making tasks and our working dynamic. My first reaction was to haughtily try and claim my film maker 'rights' as I had already shot footage that featured Auntie's face and covered costs of her fare. I also doubted Vietnamese officials would ever see the film. However, Auntie was insistent and I had to find practical solutions. On reflection, these circumstances and outcomes offer opportunity for insight.

Pratap Rughani moves beyond problematic 'moral' documentary ethics or those rooted in the Nuremburg Protocols by suggesting appropriate responses to specific questions that may arise during film making. One such question, 'What is the maker's relationship and responsibility to subjects?'²³⁹ prompts many possible responses but regarding the resetting of our contract

²³⁹ Pratap Rughani, in *The Documentary Film Book*, 106.

outlined previously, the paramount issue was 'the possibility of harm being caused to those filmed by publicly exposing them'.

²⁴⁰ The absence of territory was now personified by an absence of identity – motivated by palpable fear.

Auntie's foresight evidenced a stark difference between film maker and subject – what Ellis refers to as, 'witnesses, see it within a radically different framing'. ²⁴¹ This difference would persist and demand attention until the film's first public screening. Auntie's boundaries of concealing identity were set to avoid potential trauma. In turn, these boundaries changed the film maker/subject dynamic, leading to a shift in how emotional truths were established and perceived in the film.

Earlier I noted that Lanzmann and Oppenheimer had subjects relive trauma and even project further trauma into the future by endangering lives after appearing in a film. Even Rouch inadvertently caused the sacking of the character Angelo in *Chronicle of a Summer* when he filmed him at work (although he later found him a job elsewhere). There was no question of endangering Auntie. Our working relationship would be

²⁴⁰ Chi, Vanstone and Winston, *The Act of Documenting*, 156.

²⁴¹ John Ellis, *Documentary*, 62.

subsumed by her fears and my anxiety. Instead, I realised that not seeing her face might offer specific enigma to the film.

Fellow refugee Walter Benjamin stated in his last essay, 'it is more difficult to honour the memory of the anonymous than it is to honour the memory of the famous'.²⁴² If the difficulty of anonymity was posited as an obstacle resulting from fear, then it offered a sense of not only Auntie's life as a refugee but others who fled under similar circumstances. In this respect, Auntie could never return home – at least while recorded on camera. Yet ironically, this journey and recognition of her face off camera by her adopted family offered a dramatic counterpoint to anonymity: recognition.

The absence of Auntie's voice was relatively easy to solve. I simply employed a Vietnamese woman to read a voiceover script I wrote based on Auntie's life-story. More interestingly, viewers would be required to imagine the subject's face – a very clear example of the film being a catalyst for meaning outside of the intimacy of the subject/film maker dynamic. As is stated in the film, Auntie was one of many refugees so her anonymity might offer 'a gateway to a community' identity like Flaherty's *Nanook*

²⁴² Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, 34.

of the North (1922).²⁴³ But unlike Flaherty I selected the point of view of my subject. Rather than looking at, we were looking through. Utilising a point of view to establish and develop empathy is a common enough technique. But as we'll see, Auntie's anonymous face determined a specific catalyst for meaning with the Vietnamese refugee community in London.

Absence as affirmation of life and death

Until when you die is prefaced by text influenced by Lanzmann's *Shoah* – 'Facing the present while imagining the past brings life from memory'. The sentence is as much a declaration of my film making intentions as that of how I believed my subject to be recalling her past.

I consciously adhered to Lanzmann's avoidance of using archive footage because I considered my subject to be negotiating her history in the present. But I refrained from asking Auntie to re-enact events as Lanzmann did with his subjects. Of course, there are many contextual and other differences between the Holocaust and 'boat people' along with the modest scope of my

²⁴³ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 150.

film compared to the epic ensemble that is *Shoah* but let's dwell on similarities and the specific differences regarding subject/film maker dynamics.

I maintain Lanzmann as a seminal influence – both films feature victims of persecution, omit archive and recall memory in present tense locations relevant to past personal and social histories. But the difference in how we worked with our subjects offers insight towards the very different outcomes of these two films.

Ophüls comments on Lanzmann's effort 'to erase time to re-create a continuous reality'.²⁴⁴ In the first hour of *Shoah*, Lanzmann has a Polish train driver in a hired locomotive re-enact a journey to a concentration camp while running a finger across his throat. This is bringing history into the present time – the present being Lanzmann's film. It is an affirmation of history as recalled by the subject. The dynamics between subject and film maker clearly defined in terms of Lanzmann constructing the past through re-enactment. Let's compare this approach to a key sequence in *Until when you die*.

²⁴⁴ Marcel Ophüls, 1985, 'Closely watched trains,' *American Film* 11:2 (November), 19.

We visited the village where Auntie grew up. My agenda was to return to the physical location of my subject's past life and film it with her in the present. I was dependent on my subject recollecting her past by revisiting a resonant location – as with Josué when he visited his old house in Juárez. Like Lanzmann, I wanted to affirm history as recalled by my subject. I only learned afterwards that Auntie hadn't visited the place since she'd fled. But rather than merely reaffirming the past, the performative act of filming caused a profound change in how it was going to be remembered. Auntie's adopted family and friends thought they were seeing a ghost. Twenty-seven years of false history was erased in a moment (Fig. 31).²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ 00:25:04 – 00:25:53, <https://www.thedeepriver.org/past/film/until-when-you-die/>.



Fig. 31: Changing history. Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.

While the absence of Auntie's face in the film suggested identification with a broader refugee community, the sighting of her face while filming confirmed her presence as being alive. This wasn't so much reliving history as rewriting it. And within this transformation a rebirth occurs – the antithesis of *Shoah*. Auntie's arrival in the village affirms Jean Améry's observation that 'time is always within us so long as we are still alive'.²⁴⁶ Filming someone recalling their past is a means to reconstitute time and 'bring life from memory'. However, seemingly bringing

²⁴⁶ Jean Améry, *On aging: Revolt and Resignation* (Bloomington Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 11.

someone back from the dead through the act of filming reconfigures time. Auntie's timespan of survival was no longer just within her but now shared with her adopted family. Unlike Lanzmann, I didn't attempt to predetermine this reconfiguration of time by reliving past events. It all happened in the present. The moments of recognition by her friends are filmed as physical interaction – live flesh on live flesh. Moments that epitomise the dramatic value of Direct Cinema as described by Bruzzi earlier.

Auntie's encounter and recognition from her friends was entirely spontaneous and became the heart of the film. There is also life-after-death affirmation in *Dead when I got here* when Josué and Vanessa meet, although this is a pre-arranged set-up. What the films share is the fact that the presence of the film maker and subject working together and the resulting dynamic produced emotional truths that might not have otherwise occurred. The contrast with *Shoah's* outcomes being that Lanzmann was confirming something we already know and he harnessed his subjects to effectively confirm this.

Another example of unexpected outcomes from revisiting past locales may be cited in relation to an immigrant/host dynamic.

Auntie revisits her initial hosts in Wales (Fig. 32)²⁴⁷ and unlike the racial tensions experienced by Vietnamese families in London as described by Back,²⁴⁸ these encounters between immigrants and locals are full of curiosity, humour and hospitality. An actual parallel universe evidenced beyond fantastic *Daily Mail* headlines.



Fig. 32: Auntie visiting friends she made when first arriving as a refugee.
Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.

The performative act of filming offered a counterpoint to immigrant/host tensions – real or imagined. The interactions between Auntie and her old neighbours on camera providing

²⁴⁷ 00:19:05 – 00:21:10, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/until-when-you-die/>.

²⁴⁸ Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, 65.

emotional truths not found or at least promoted in mainstream media. Lanzmann and I were both working with subjects through multi-faceted performance dynamics yet I am neither driving an agenda of moral judgement nor requesting re-enactments of crimes or events. I can claim no credit for revelations as it is only what my subject led me to.

Until when you die could be described as a 'personal portrait' documentary as defined by Nichols along with the taking up of social issues he associates with this genre.²⁴⁹ If we had encountered hostility from Auntie's former neighbours then perhaps the question of social issues would have been more paramount, although I'd argue that this is only because emotional and ideological tensions would have arisen. Lacking tension and ideological polemic, social harmony offers a different sort of issue. Perhaps this result is rooted in the premise of not intending to condemn anyone in the film but rather to focus on the resilience of the subject.

Like *Shoah*, *Until when you die* is a journey film in a physical sense that occurs over time.²⁵⁰ Both films also stimulate and

²⁴⁹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 164.

²⁵⁰ Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 104.

perpetuate memory through the device of revisiting locations to be utilised as performance spaces in the present. They part company in respect of trains leading victims of persecution to death while boats and planes lead victims to a new life.

Winston's theory on chronological journeys solving potential problems of narrative closure is apparent in both films yet the outcomes stand in stark contrast to one another.

Association and emotional truths

Not only journey outcomes but the dynamic between subject and performance space differs in *Shoah* and *Until when you die*. And this dynamic has much to do with choices made by the film maker in relation to the subject. Similarities exist in the selection of locations pertinent to the subjects and their pasts. Differences begin when comparing how subtle or not the staging is. In *Shoah*, a concentration camp barbers is restaged by placing Abraham Bomba in a present day Israeli barbershop. After dispassionately recounting cutting the hair of women facing the gas chambers, Bomba traumatically breaks down fourteen minutes into the eighteen-minute scene. Lanzmann insistently persuades Bomba to continue and eventually he does so. I sought far subtler emblematic connections with the past partly

because my relationship with Auntie and the contractual boundaries set by her determined this methodology. Lanzmann often pushes subjects insistently from the front, whereas I'm literally following from behind.

It could be argued that whenever a character is filmed the shot has been 'staged' – even merely in the sense of the subject being caught in the viewfinder. They occupy a performance space and there is association between the two within the frame. This occurs even if the subject is unaware of being filmed although the dynamic with the film maker is consequently weaker or even non-existent. The constraints set by my subject led me towards finding present day elements that I could associate with her story.

Auntie speaks of working in a brick factory as a girl and not having money to buy a bike for commuting (Figs. 33, 34).²⁵¹ The single static shot features girls, a pile of bricks and a bike. Elements that may be associated with the voiceover. None of this was staged. I want to contrast my associative elements with Lanzmann's pre-determined staging. My point here isn't qualitative. I see this divergence as different approaches

²⁵¹ 00:05:34 – 00:05:55, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/until-when-you-die/>.

stemming from the same starting point. The source of this divergence being the different dynamics between subject and film maker.



Fig. 33: Present day associations with the past - sequence. Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.



Fig. 33: Present day associations with the past - sequence. Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.

As stated earlier, I avoided recourse to archive to bring Auntie's story to life. I wanted to reconstitute the past – a past *being* in the present. Apart from my main character appearing faceless, I also filmed the journey from Hanoi to Britain via Hong Kong without her. I was equipped with Auntie's story and place names. Her history now existing in my memory and notes. Our working dynamic had transformed into the subject offering an instruction manual to seek images and sounds like so many 'found truths'. I believe this was enabled partly by trust between us but also by the pragmatism of doing what film makers do. As Bruzzi says, 'the "truth" depicted on screen only comes into being at the

moment of filming'.²⁵² The actuality caught in the frame was now put to work to relate to the emotional truths in Auntie's story. I was free to illustrate her words or interpret them through metaphor.

While filming and in the edit, I was conscious of discovering emotional connections sequestered in sounds and images relating to Auntie's story. I'd now like to analyse a selection of these connections and argue again that contrary to Nichols's singular categorizations, a cocktail of portrait, social issue, historical, observational, performative and poetic forms can co-exist in the same film. And before doing this I should preface by saying that the only effort required to achieve this heady mix is to be free of the orthodoxies of the problematic evolutionary lines established by Nicols and usefully blurred by Bruzzi. In short, I want to analyse my 'own performative agenda' that was determined through the act of filming itself.²⁵³

I'll dissect the images and sounds over two static wide shots and tally what I consider to be emotional truths relating to the subject that are potentially established by association (Figs. 35,

²⁵² Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed., 222.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 252.

36).²⁵⁴ Note that in this written context, my associations appear prescriptive. Once the film is viewed, these truths and related associations may or may not be made by an audience.

V.O.: In 1968 I married a Chinese Vietnamese man.²⁵⁵

An alleyway decorated with communist flags. We see a woman standing in a doorway. She looks at the camera and then looks away. In the distance a figure approaches on a bike.

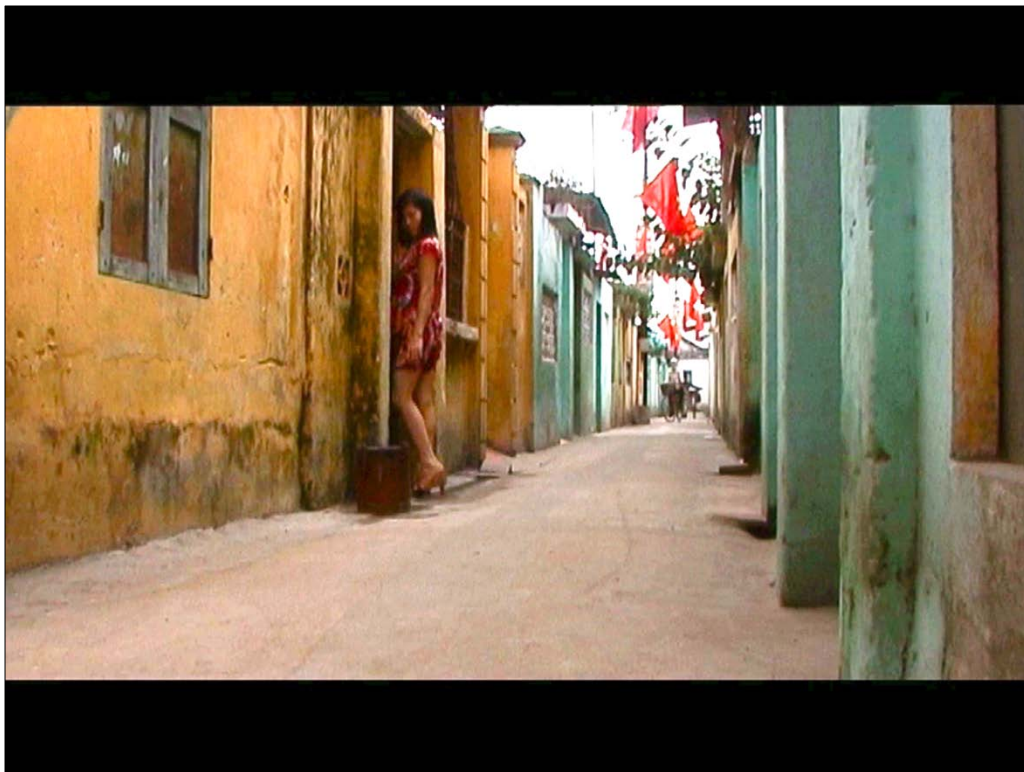


Fig. 35: Present day associations with the past - sequence. Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.

²⁵⁴ 00:06:50 – 00:08:20, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/until-when-you-die/>.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

V.O.: I was twenty-four. ²⁵⁶

The woman in the doorway steps inside a house.

V.O.: We were told about each other. Then we met. Then we got married. Just like that. Sirens went off during the marriage. It was during an American bombing raid and... ²⁵⁷

The figure on the bike continues to approach. The woman reappears in the doorway. The figure on the bike wipes the frame. The sound of horns blaring is heard.

V.O.: We had to run for shelter in my wedding dress. ²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.



Fig. 36: Present day associations with the past - sequence. Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.

Bikes and motorbikes cross the frame and enter a platform on a boat moored on the shore of a large river. The horns appear to emanate from the traffic. High pitched squeaking can be heard.

V.O.: In February 1979, there was war between China and Vietnam. Chinese people in Vietnam were asked – ‘when are they leaving?’ They ask my husband – ‘when is he leaving?’ They never asked me because I am Vietnamese. ²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

More and more bike riders stream onto the boat. The high pitch continues.

V.O.: People were spreading rumours on the street. They say that all the Chinese people were leaving on boats. They say they are leaving now. ²⁶⁰

The boat is full of people and begins to leave.

Independent of voiceover, these two shots are banal. They maintain tension chronologically rather than dramatically. The sounds of horns and squeaking brake pads are equally commonplace and of no dramatic relevance. This is pure observational film making or what Nichols refers to as 'present tense representation' ²⁶¹ and what Ellis describes as 'the integrity of a unified shot'. ²⁶² The performative tension and drama is introduced and evolves without editing. The voiceover is laid over the shots and the sound is treated in an impressionistic way.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 38.

²⁶² John Ellis, *Documentary – Witness and Self-revelation*, 97.

The relative long duration of each shot assists in allowing associations to be made between what is seen and what is heard. These associations operate on a metaphorical level. We have opportunity to project Auntie and her story onto what we see and hear. Both shots refer to journeys – the first ends with one bike wiping the frame. Perhaps this is Auntie leaving. Horns can be heard – perhaps these are air-raid sirens. The second shot has hundreds of bikes leaving – perhaps these are Chinese refugees. The high pitch perhaps denotes tension.

When in Hong Kong, I had very few details of where events occurred so again, I gathered observational impressions that served as metaphors. In one scene, we find an example that was as banal as it was difficult to decide upon (Fig. 37).²⁶³ Auntie told me that a man had drowned while hopping over boats in the harbour of Macau. I travelled to the island and couldn't find anything that related to this tragic story. Eventually, I filmed a submerged plastic bag floating in the water that could have been filmed anywhere.

²⁶³ 00:15:10 – 00:15:40, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/until-when-you-die/>.



Fig. 37: The banal acting as metaphor for history. Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.

Later, we see a sequence that transfers Auntie from Hong Kong to Britain (Figs. 38-41).²⁶⁴ The images and sounds exemplify what Back refers to as a 'global sociology' where the sky itself is no longer domestic but laden with human traffic seeking refuge.

²⁶⁵ When breaking the sequence down we see and hear:

V.O.: I sent a letter home to Vietnam to tell my family that we're still alive.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 00:16:49 – 00:18:02.

²⁶⁵ Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, 48.

²⁶⁶ 00:15:10 – 00:15:40, <https://www.thedeepriever.org/past/film/until-when-you-die/>.

A block of flats dissolves into white cloud and interior sounds from an aeroplane. Another push forward on the journey.



Fig. 38: Interpreting impressions of refugees in transit - sequence. Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.

V.O.: Too many people want to go to America, Canada, Australia. They tell us we can move to Britain. The Americans bomb us in Hanoi so we choose Britain. My husband had a brother living in Britain as well. ²⁶⁷

An aeroplane wing seen from a passenger window while airborne. We hear sounds of cabin announcements.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.



Fig. 39: Interpreting impressions of refugees in transit - sequence. Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.

V.O.: On the 14th February 1980 – nearly one year after leaving Haiphong, we arrived at Heathrow.²⁶⁸

Passengers at airport arrivals; people waiting for passengers; sounds of airport security announcements; floor escalators at the airport – a final push forward on the journey ends the sequence.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.



Fig. 40: Interpreting impressions of refugees in transit - sequence. Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.

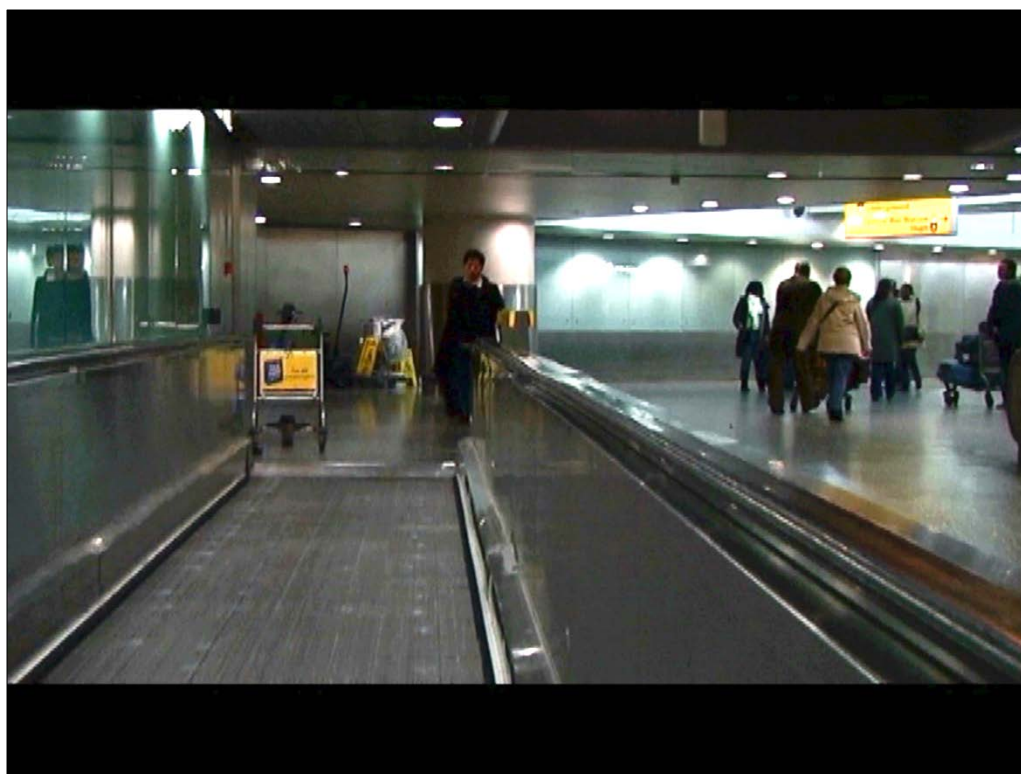


Fig. 41: Interpreting impressions of refugees in transit - sequence. Image source: *Until when you die* © polkadotsonraindrops 2007.

Again, none of these observational shots are extraordinary yet they take on metaphorical significance with Auntie's voiceover. We discover later that the letter Auntie sent never arrived but here it serves to lift her from Hong Kong into the sky. The plane wing is at once her transport and a reference to why she didn't choose to immigrate to North America. The three shots at Heathrow offer first impressions from an immigrant's point of view – the strangeness of it all – and the ubiquitous security alert we might associate with terrorists.

There are no guarantees a viewer would make associations between sounds and images to create a 'metatextual' reading of the film. They were loosely pre-determined in production and constructed in the edit – no less so than Lanzmann's choices and decisions. Auntie's absence offered me freedom to interpret her story. For those still alive, Lanzmann ensured that subjects were present to tell their story. These contrasts of absence and presence within a performance space lead towards comparisons of how the past might be referenced or re-enacted respectively. *Until when you die* proffers how meaning might be alternately conjured by participation of the viewer through association.

In *Shoah*, the emotional breakdown of Bomba the barber is powerful, personal and an overt outcome of the subject/film

maker dynamic. In *Until when you die*, the associations required to form an emotional connection to the subject are far more abstract and indirect. Both films offer emotional truths but the subject/film maker dynamics determined entirely different approaches to representing the past. I imagine Lanzmann would argue a hierarchical superior value of 'truth' due to his insistence on actual testimonial and re-enactment. To counter this, I refer to Errol Morris when he describes re-enactment as nothing more than claims of what people saw. I would argue that the different approaches of these films along with Morris's doubts of 'truth' in his work: 'They're illustrations of lies. They're all ironic. They hopefully, teach you how images can't embody truth', are all valid.²⁶⁹ Of course, differences can be found between film makers and films but each film maker also has distinctly different working dynamics with subjects when approaching recollections and restaging of the past.

Lanzmann persisted with his subject despite traumatic results. Auntie deflected trauma by barring her face from the film. What I didn't know at the time was how trauma would manifest after the film was completed.

²⁶⁹ Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV, Realism & Revelation*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 87.

Audience as catalyst

Although Auntie maintained a certain distance from the film making and how she appeared, this absolutely changed when she first saw the film. We viewed the completed work at her house in silence. After it was over, she was visibly upset and stated she wished I'd never made the film. The portrayal was a reminder of how sad her life had been. Witnessing the account had caused her to relive trauma and shed tears.

On reflection, Auntie's emotional response must have related to the emotional truths in the film – meaning it was authentic – much like Bomba breaking down in *Shoah*. But like Rouch after hearing Africans accuse him of being a colonialist, I was sensitive to my contribution as an interloper. This wasn't an unreasonable concern, especially as I had no real idea of the weight of sadness embodied in Auntie: 'Tragedy is more real to him than explanations'.²⁷⁰ Empathy offers no guarantees: 'Thinking, talking and describing is always a betrayal – albeit a necessary one'.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man*, 115.

²⁷¹ Les Back, *The Art of Listening*, (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 4.

I return to Ellis suggesting a 'closure' for the subject once the film is shown.²⁷² I agree in the superficial sense of the film being a completed artefact but the subject's personal tragedy was all too evident here and would remain so regardless of any film. I didn't feel I had a right to show anyone else the film if Auntie was so unhappy with her portrayal. But I explained that neither of us knew how other people would interpret her life-story. Perhaps they would see it as something other than sad. In terms of being a catalyst, the film needed to be presented to people who existed outside of the subject/film maker dynamic. Beyond what Ellis describes as conversational and material entities.²⁷³

As with the audience at the psychiatric hospital in Juárez, Ellis's assumption of cinema savvy from viewers in the digital age proved unfounded.²⁷⁴ The first public screening of *Until when you die* was to elderly Vietnamese people who had never been inside a cinema. This version of the film was in Vietnamese as many in the audience didn't speak English. Auntie took part and following the screening, each member of the audience queued up to thank us personally for telling their story - stating that no-one

²⁷² John Ellis, *Documentary*, 71.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

had ever told it before. This was an extension of Ellis's additional audience emotional involvement due to their knowledge of documentary characters existing beyond the film.²⁷⁵ The audience *were* the characters in as much as the absent face was their surrogate. Rather than fulfilling Waugh's 'right to play oneself' – they claimed to see themselves on the screen.

Auntie told me she understood the value of the film and that it wasn't only her story: 'Screening circumstances alter meaning and impact on ethics for all parties concerned'.²⁷⁶ This was the moment our relationship changed and the film could serve as a catalyst resulting from our flexible dynamic.

Perhaps the film did correlate with a unified sense of community²⁷⁷ albeit through a tale of tragedy and survival defined by absence. The cinema in south London with this Vietnamese audience was 'the place from which the world can be founded'²⁷⁸ - a non-geographical home as fluid as the moving frames on the screen.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 102.

²⁷⁶ Chi, Vanstone and Winston, *The Act of Documenting*, 27.

²⁷⁷ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 150.

²⁷⁸ John Berger, *And our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 55.

Sanctum Ephemeral

<https://www.thedeepriver.org/>

The near and far distance between us and them

The time, and therefore the story, belongs to them. Yet the meaning of the story, what makes it worth being told, is what we can see and what inspires us because we are beyond its time.²⁷⁹

Berger suggests an 'us and them' dichotomy as a complementary relationship divided by time. A relationship that brings us closer together. The meaning – as perceived by the writer or artist – transcends time. Our time and their time – meaning and memory – becomes irrecoverably and manifestly whole. Barthes describes the same process by saying, 'the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation'.²⁸⁰ The process of 'authenticating' meaning and memory may happen within distinct empathetic parameters during the encounter with the subject. In this case, a performative collaboration occurs between the photographer and subject. The following three examples exemplify how emotional truths correspond to encounters and outcomes.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 30.

²⁸⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 89.

I made the photograph below with Phylis Frith in her house (Fig. 42). The time we spent together conversing while we worked had much to do with the resulting picture. We spoke of our common British colonial roots and the stark differences she embodied due to her slave ancestry.



Fig. 42: *Phylis*. Image source: Mark Aitken © 2017.

Phylis has no way of tracing her African genealogy because of Europeans in her bloodline. She flatly stated, 'I have many layers

to my skin'. When looking at the picture I can see these layers resonating through objects in the room.

Of course, viewers aren't privy to my work process and I have no way of determining whatever meaning they might discover in the picture. The physical distance between myself and Phylis is only a few metres and the residue of our conversation hangs in the air. The camera, my privileged access and even the picture itself is subsumed by Phylis's story. A story that stretches back hundreds of years. Her story brought me closer to her and in doing so, assisted in creating a picture.

The portrait is from a photo series called *Sanctum Ephemeral* produced after *Dead when I got here* was completed. The physical location is a housing estate in south London where I lived. The homes have been blighted by the local council for demolition. The pictures were installed as large prints on exterior walls. Their display drew smiles of recognition from fellow residents. They told me they were proud to live there. Despite the siege imposed by property 'developers', the photographs commemorate our complex and variable histories. They modestly state we exist.

While taking the photographs, I used the same methods of working with subjects as I do in film making. Photography's 'colliding apparatus' being a lot less invasive and time consuming than film making equipment and personnel. The resulting work was derived from the same subject/artist dynamics. My camera and encounter with Phylis becoming Les Back's interpretative device, enabling a shuttling across boundaries.

Diane Arbus insisted 'the subject of the picture is always more important than the picture'.²⁸¹ Arbus wrote insightfully about her work processes and frequently stated her affiliation to subjects. In as much as we can never know the exact dynamics of these relationships, we can't prevent viewers making their own assumptions. Perhaps this is the point where inevitably, Arbus's work becomes more important than the subject. After all, the viewer can only ever know the picture.

Dyer flips Arbus's emphasis by suggesting that the artist and subject define each other: 'Conceding the primacy of the subject affirms the distinction of the artist'.²⁸² There is always a relationship between the two. In Arbus's case, viewers are confronted by tragic emotional truths emanating from the time

²⁸¹ Geoff Dyer, *The Ongoing Moment*, 123.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 132.

she spent with her subjects. Tragedy being a central trope of Arbus's work that's difficult to disconnect from her mythical status as an artist who took her own life.

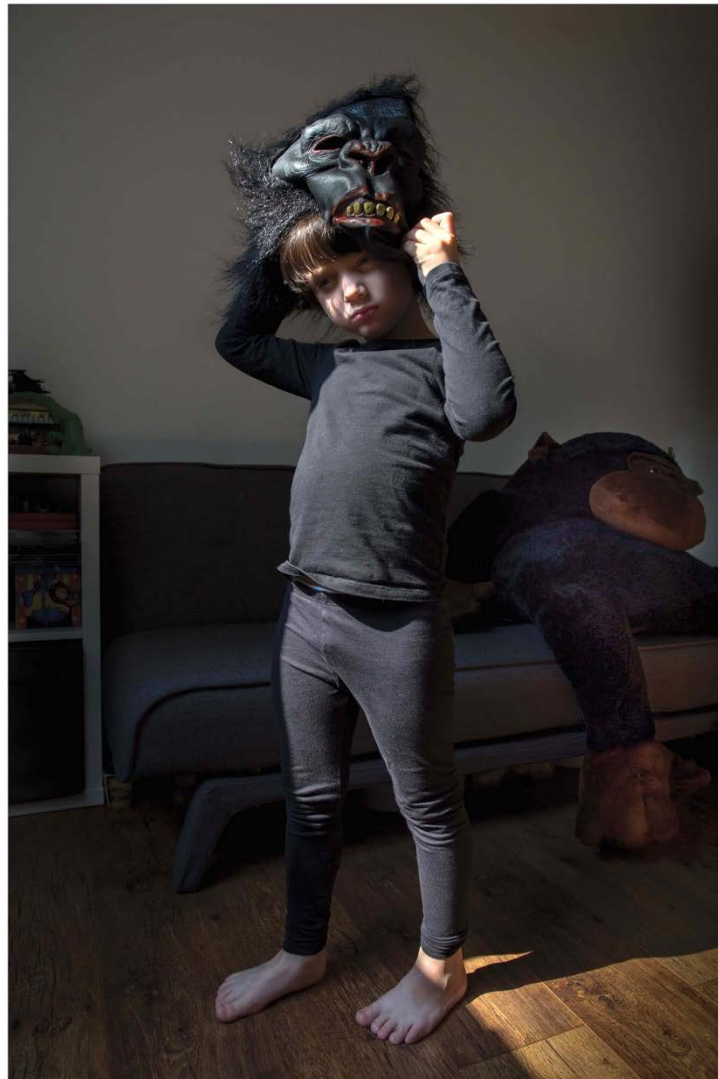


Fig. 43: *Danny*. Image source: Mark Aitken © 2017.

This picture of 6-year-old Danny from *Sanctum Ephemeral* was produced from a session where I photographed him many times with the mask over his face (Fig. 43). My experience of working

with children tells me to treat the experience as a game and to keep playing until they reach near exhaustion. As with adults, there is a point when the mask slips. Here, the mask is literally pulled off and Danny shows discomfort with being hot and bothered. The moment reveals emotional truths in as much as we see how he feels in that 80th of a second. Danny wanted to remove the mask earlier but I pushed to keep the game going. The moment was created by both of us. Danny is too young to reflect on his life but perhaps in the future, he might return to the picture and consider what has happened in the interim.

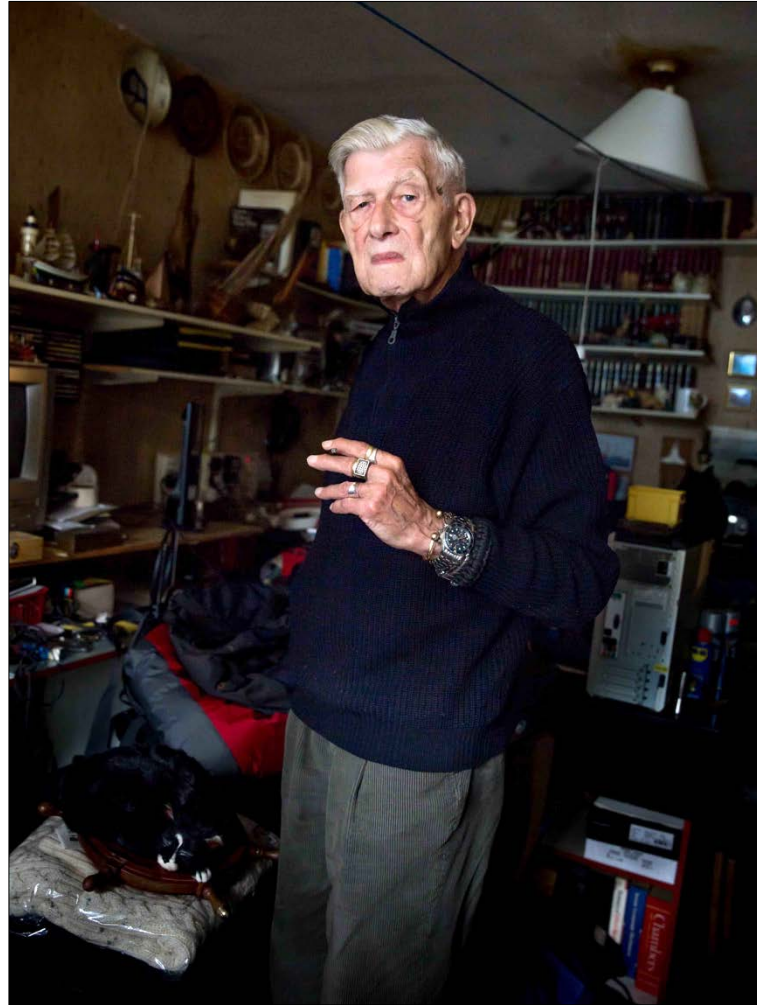


Fig. 44: *John*. Image source: Mark Aitken © 2017.

The unpublished picture above from the same series is of John Sergeant (Fig. 44). His house was packed with memorabilia infused with softly spoken stories from his 89 years. John dodged working in a coal mine by joining the navy underage during the war; worked as a logger in Canada; sold vacuum cleaners in Australia and in 1990, inherited the title 'Lord of Kirkham', dating back to 1269. But more than John's adventurous life, I was enamoured with his poise. I kept

returning and he patiently worked with me as we persevered to discover something other than what we were achieving.

As is often the case, I don't know how to articulate what I want but dissatisfaction is a great motivator. I want to move from what Barthes calls the *studium* to the *punctum*.²⁸³ From a general representation to something that pricks or bruises me. Barthes talks of his engagement as a spectator and he describes the photographer as an 'operator'. At the point of making the picture I'm seeking a rupture in the *studium* - only I'm operating intuitively. A phenomenon that tells me something either feels right or not. Arbus put this another way when noting her process of seeking what is beyond Barthes's *studium*. She considers how we want to be seen and how we can't help what's being seen - 'the gap between intention and effect'.²⁸⁴ It's in this gap that a revelation occurs.

On the fifth session, we moved into John's kitchen and the picture below materialised. Something less literal and more emotional is at work here - what Barthes describes as

²⁸³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26-27.

²⁸⁴ Diane Arbus, *diane arbus* (New York: Aperture, 2011), 1-2.



Fig. 45: *John*. Image source: Mark Aitken © 2017.

contrasting critical and expressive languages.²⁸⁵ I felt that John's demeanour or at least what interested me, was expressed in this image and it was published (Fig. 45).

Unlike Danny, we look at John and consider a life lived. I don't think there is tragedy in this picture – as in what Arbus sought – but there is something else going on that fills the gap between

²⁸⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 8.

intention and effect. I think this defines the difference between the two portraits of him. The close and specific scrutiny we achieved in the second picture allowed for something fantastic to occur that was a revelation of sorts.²⁸⁶

Taking the three people in these photographs, a spectrum could be drawn from Berger's symbiosis of shared memory between subject and artist. The time of their stories stretches back hundreds of years; considers the future and then reaches towards a rich life that's almost over. Barthes also talks of the spectrum of the photograph, delving into the root of the word: 'A relation to spectacle. The return of the dead'.²⁸⁷ But also, a return to life, in the sense that we need to be alive when looking at these pictures. They generate the fundamental question asked by Barthes: 'Why is it that I am alive *here and now*?'.²⁸⁸

I began learning to take photographs 35 years ago and as with film making, the camera has always served as a licence to diminish Edgar Morin's membrane between myself and the subject. I have no wish to be prescriptive in my methods but it's

²⁸⁶ Diane Arbus, *diane arbus*, 2.

²⁸⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 9.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

encouraging to read this by M.A student Kelly O'Brien: 'Through my interactions and spending time with the people I'm working with, the images come to my head', she explains, 'I take my environment in, the feelings, my own experiences and bring that all together'.²⁸⁹ I would say O'Brien is working with emotional truths. Her description has everything to do with a desire to find meaning in her subject's story from another time. An attempt to get closer to something beyond ourselves 'and bring all that together'.

Italo Calvino reminds us: 'The life that you live in order to photograph it is already, at the outset, a commemoration of itself'.²⁹⁰ The documentary film or photograph can extend that commemoration. How this is achieved is a question of how far or near the distance is between us and them.

²⁸⁹ Sophie Wright interviews Kelly O'Brien, 'British Journal of Photography,' *The Education Issue* 7874 (August 2018), 29.

²⁹⁰ Italo Calvino, 'The Adventures of a Photographer,' reproduced in *The Short Story and Photography, 1880s-1980s: A Critical Anthology* (USA: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 180.

Part Three: Conclusion

Over ten years of documentary film making and photography, I forged intense and intimate relationships with relative strangers who appeared in my films and photographs. Why had they trusted me with painful memories while permitting my invasive camera into their lives? There's no single answer to this but as my practice developed, the recurring question asked to those I encountered was: how did it feel?

Asking about feelings suggests an empathetic enquiry functioning on emotional dynamics. On analysis, Bruzzi's 'collision'²⁹¹ and Renov's 'mutual receptivity'²⁹² pointed towards a location and process for my method. Levinas's thinking on 'modes of thought outside the domain of rationality'²⁹³ seemed especially apt given Williams's fragmentary 'palimpsest'²⁹⁴ of recalling trauma.

²⁹¹ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 7.

²⁹² Michael Renov, *The subject of*, 130.

²⁹³ Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 149.

²⁹⁴ Linda Williams, 'Mirrors without Memories', 15.

It could be said that in our digitally manipulated, subjective 'post-truth' age, any relationship documentary has with 'truth' or 'truths' is so problematic as to be redundant. I've sought to challenge this possibility by asking for a renewed trust in film makers based on how we approach subjects while making films.

I've specifically focused on subjects with history of trauma as it's not only appropriate to my work but also begs the question: what right do we have to ask people to relive their painful pasts? My answer is that if the approach is considered ethically and empathetically, then we might all benefit from the encounter. Because of an emphasis on the possibility of feelings being truthful, I've sought to differentiate from 'truth' and 'subjective truths' and suggested the seeking of 'emotional truths' between subject and film maker as intrinsic to my practice.

As Musser noted in 2007, many film makers are now more attentive to empathetic relationships with their subjects.²⁹⁵ I place my practice within this framework. But I've stressed from the offset that this ethical encounter isn't new by highlighting Marceline's scene in *Chronicle*. However, this approach remains largely downplayed in prior analysis, although it's encouraging that Smaill reminds us that emotion is key to reception of the

²⁹⁵ Musser, 'Film Truth in the Age of George W. Bush,' 30.

'truthfulness' or possible 'untruthfulness' of subjects ²⁹⁶ and Bruzzi categorically states that the only 'truth' lies in performance. ²⁹⁷ But how are the emotions of this performative 'truth' constructed? The therapeutic relief Chantelle feels in *Forest of Crocodiles* when recalling her husband dying in her arms infuses her story and the telling. We witness something other than 'sober discourse'. In as much as there is an objective truth of her husband being murdered, there are 'emotional truths' evident in Chantelle's recalling of her nightmare during our encounter.

I've championed Bishop's 'collaborative creativity' ²⁹⁸ forged between artists and subjects and defined my working method as 'performative collaboration'. Collaboration between subject and film maker is often ignored, dismissed or overshadowed in favour of formal, moral or political documentary agendas. I suggest collaboration while working might be an opportunity for creativity to be exchanged between subject and film maker, fuelled by mutual curiosity and Glissant's 'extended identities' ²⁹⁹ – a creative

²⁹⁶ Smaill, *The Documentary – Politics, Emotion, Culture*, 19.

²⁹⁷ Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 3.

²⁹⁸ Claire Bishop, *Participation*, 12.

²⁹⁹ Édouard Glissant, in *Participation*, 71.

act in itself. I posit the 'decolonised'³⁰⁰ film maker/subject encounter as pivotal to establishing performative collaboration. Reverberations with troubled pasts reducing the gap between Berger's 'our time' and 'their time'.³⁰¹ In doing so, Auntie in *Until when you die* encountering a neighbour when they thought her dead for twenty-seven years becomes an event that alters history.

I've criticised films and film makers where I feel an ethical encounter is lacking primarily because I want to know how a murderer feels rather than reaffirm a film maker's judgement. But although I sense compromise by film maker, subject and audience here, lacking empathy with subjects can still offer engaging outcomes as in Broomfield's entertaining ridiculing of Terre'Blanche or the exemplary *Shoah*. Bruzzi's 'truth'³⁰² in performance persists regardless of ethics yet I'm more concerned with the emotions determining that 'truth' and the circumstances under which they arose.

Performative collaboration engages specific shared authorship through 'mutual receptiveness'.³⁰³ Although this doesn't extend

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ John Berger, *And our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, 55.

³⁰² Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, 3.

³⁰³ Michael Renov, *The subject of Documentary*, 130.

to editorial control, I place consummate importance on showing completed films to subjects and listening to responses. I think this is ethically fair but perhaps more importantly, the event offers opportunity to reflect on our encounter and how this might manifest in the film. At this point, I'm asking, 'how does it feel?'

Winston rightly claims that 'the reception of the image by the audience is the final determinant of its status'.³⁰⁴ I define 'status' by asking how audiences feel and if there's correlation with the subject's performed emotional truths then I believe we have achieved something. This was especially apparent with the challenging task of making *Dead when I got here* – patients and audiences agreed that compassion was the strongest feeling emanating from both the hospital and the completed film.

We are increasingly immunised to the 'other's' trauma through over exposure, sensationalism and pathological self-interest. Yet, if we are to persist in being receptive to the 'other's' trauma and reverberating their time with our own we need to somehow feel their pain rather than just know about it. At the start of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission proceedings in 1996, Nomonde Calata famously emitted an almost inhuman cry

³⁰⁴ Brian Winston, in *The Documentary Film Book*, 9.

that brought proceedings to a halt. The poet Antjie Krog was present and stated later that,

To remember the past of this country is to be thrown back into a time before language... to be present at the birth of language itself.³⁰⁵

Underpinning the millions of words of the Commission's testimony, there are as many emotional truths articulating unimaginable pain. Krog's insight challenges us to listen and create new languages to interpret and express the feeling of Calata's cry.

³⁰⁵ Jacqueline Rose, 'One Long Scream,' London Review of Books, accessed 27th June 2019, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v41/n10/jacqueline-rose/one-long-scream>.

Impact overview of published works and research

Archive available at www.thedeepriever.org

Lectures

Emotional truths in documentary making

Parnu Doc Fest, Estonia 2018

Doc Nomads, Lusófona University, Portugal, 2018

Sanctum Ephemeral (2017)

Awards

National Open Art 2017, 1st prize Photography

Portrait of Britain

Exhibitions 2017

Street Level Photoworks, Glasgow, 2019

Portrait Salon, London; Royal Photographic Society 160

On-site installation, Cressingham Gardens

Photofusion Gallery, 2018

Elsewhere group show, Peckham 24, 2017

Reviews & Interviews

Zelda Cheatle review in Photomonitor

Kim Shaw interview in Photomonitor

Press

The Guardian, The BBC, The Times, The i, The Daily Mail,

The Daily Mirror, The Culture Trip, Loupe Magazine

Resonance fm

Academic

Unmediated Journal, LSE, 2019

Presentation at Accademia Di Belle Arti, Florence, 2018

Dead when I got here (2015)

Awards

Parnu Doc Fest, Estonia 2017 - Grand Prix & Best Art Film

Grand Prize, Scottish Mental Health 2015

Special mention: Docs DF 2015, Mexico

Nominee: One World Media 2016

Broadcast

IKON, Netherlands, YLE, Finland

Film festivals

Parnu, Estonia, 2017, DOK.fest, Munich 2016, Riga
CineScapes, Latvia 2016, LASA, New York 2016, Big Sky
Doc Fest 2016, USA, Cork Film Festival 2015, Dok Leipzig
2015, APHA 2015, USA, FAS 2015, Finland, Plaza Classic
2015, USA, DocFest 2015, San Francisco, Medfest 2015,
London

Other screenings

Soho House, Barcelona, Oxford University, Goldsmiths
University, CEU San Pablo University, Madrid, SOAS,
Ritzy Cinema, Frontline Club, Lorenzen Centre, USA,
Mesilla Valley, USA, Vision & Accion psychiatric hospital,
Mexico, Maudsley Foundation, UK

Academic Screening/lecture:

Parnu Doc fest, Estonia, 2018
Doc Nomads, Lusófona University, Lisbon, 2018
Universidade da Beira, Covilhã, PT, 2018

Asylum from the madness:

The making of 'Dead when I got here'. (2016)

201pp, Tacit Ltd, 2016.

Copies held in the British Library, Goldsmiths University,
SOAS, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Forest of Crocodiles (2009)

Festivals

Documenta Madrid, Tri-Continental (S.A.), Beeld voor
Beeld (Netherlands)

Broadcast

BBC World, TV3 Spain, RTE Portugal, MNET SA, SVT,
Sweden, Netherlands, Distributed by Journeyman Pictures

Until when you die (2006)

Awards

Silver Cub Nominee, IDFA, 2006,

Festivals

Crossroads of Europe (Poland), True/False (USA),
Mosaiques (UK)

Screenings

Ritzy Cinema, London

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[bfi/interviews/nicolas-philibert-interview](http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/interviews/nicolas-philibert-interview). Accessed August 1st, 2019.

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