

Dramatic Conflict in Documentary How to Build it Safely?

Andrei TACHE-CODREANU¹

Abstract: Documentaries, as any other film genre, rely on the conflict between a protagonist and the antagonistic forces in order to have a story. With the desire to make a better film, a documentary filmmaker might be tempted to seek for drama within the life of the subject with the cost of hurting him. This could raise ethical problems, especially due to the vulnerability that one has when is exposed on screen, which could transform forced questions during an interview into a traumatic experience. In this study, the author finds in existing literature links between the process of making a documentary to the one of psychoanalysis, and uses them in order to understand how filmmakers might protect their subjects while collaborating on building the story of the film.

Keywords: documentary ethics; documentary storytelling; documentary interview; filmmaking therapy;

Introduction

The principal aim of cinema is and will probably remain telling stories. Even from the first films in 1895, the Lumière brothers sensed that an event must happen in front of the lens in order to be worth rolling the film: workers exit the factory², children jump in the sea³, etc. These situations represent the very first steps in cinematic storytelling, only to evolve through the same authors' film, *L'arroseur arrosé* (The Waterer Watered), to a structure that represents the core of drama: a protagonist has a desire (in the case of the waterer, his desire is of course watering the garden), and he encounters the antagonistic force (the boy who bends the hose), resulting in the waterer being watered when the boy releases it⁴. In the end, as in the classic structure of a fairy tale, the antagonist (the boy who pranks the waterer) ends by being punished, resulting in the win of the protagonist. Therefore, cinema has evolved rapidly from strictly observing daily realities to picturing events that are positioned in the already established logic of fictionalised stories. *L'arroseur arrosé* manages in 45 seconds to include the core of drama as we know it nowadays, in either fiction films or documentaries.

¹ Faculty of Film, National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale" Bucharest, email: andrei.tachecodreanu@unatc.ro.

² Lumière, Louis. 1895. Leaving the Factory [La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon]. France. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEQeIRLxaM4>.

³ Lumière, Louis. 1895. The Sea [La Mer]. France. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAP2_Wq7CZk.

⁴ Lumière, Louis. 1895. The Waterer Watered [L'arroseur arrosé]. France. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2_ioXKuxoQ.

1. Dramatic Conflict in Film

1.1 What is Dramatic Conflict?

If we would make a simple experiment, by asking two people what they did in a certain morning before reaching work, we could easily find out what is dramatic conflict. Let's presume that the first person would say that he woke up in that morning at the expected time, washed himself, dressed up and arrived at work in time.

The second person snoozed his alarm six times before getting out of bed, then he accidentally burned his breakfast, slipped on the ice in front of his house while running and nearly fell, and in the end, he missed his bus to work, having to wait on the street for the next one. I believe that it could be easily said that the second story is more interesting than the first one, and the reason for this is quite simple: the second one contains conflict, which represents the core of drama. If in a film, whether documentary or fiction, the protagonist would not encounter any problem or obstacle on his way to achieve his goal, no one would be interested in watching it, as dramatic conflict is what attracts us as viewers.

1.2 The Ethics of the Dramatic Conflict in Documentary

In a documentary, the filmmaker needs to make use of the real events and drama that happen on field to the main character in order to build the film, and it is observed by John Yorke that as the antagonist becomes stronger, the story becomes even better⁵. Therefore, as unethical as it may sound, a documentary filmmaker is seeking for real dramatic situations that are figuratively represented by the slipping on ice or missing a bus that were earlier mentioned, as Alan Rosenthal also states that powerful journalism happens when pain is uncovered⁶. Therefore, documentaries are unfortunately built based on the real pain of the people that appear in them, and it is the responsibility of the filmmaker to manage the collaboration between him and the people that appear in his films in a gentle and respectful way.

Moreover, due to the fact that people that appear in front of the camera are struggling with certain problems, they will often feel the urge to open themselves and use this context as a healing opportunity. Kevin Macdonald considers the link between the interviewing process and the one of psychoanalysis as an obvious one. People are going to say to the camera and to the crew things that might have been unspoken until then, that have been unknown even for their friends or family. Moreover, they might be surprised or upset regarding how much they shared and betrayed themselves in front of the camera when they see the finished film⁷.

In order to support Macdonald's affirmation, I suggest bringing into discussion *The Bridge*, a controversial documentary made by Eric Steel, as a case study regarding the ethics of the interview. Steel followed together with his film crew for one year The Golden Gate Bridge, which has been known as a very popular place for people jumping from it in order to kill themselves. He captured footage of several suicides. When he first asked the parents whose son's suicide he captured on tape to offer him an interview, he was surprised for how many hours they

⁵ John Yorke. 2015. *Into the Woods – A Five-Act Journey into Story*. New York : Abrams Press, p.8.

⁶ Alan Rosenthal. 1990. *Writing, directing, and producing documentary films*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, p.135.

⁷ Mark Cousins and Kevin MacDonald. 2006. *Imagining reality: the Faber book of documentary*. London: Faber, p. 392.

talked in front of the camera, and they were not the only case. When he was at the house of one of the families, the neighbours greeted everybody happily while passing by. When asked by Steel, the family told him that they didn't let their neighbours know about what happened to their child, but in the same time they were agreeing to tell the story in front of the cameras⁸. As Steel himself noticed after this moment, he understood once again that the camera is able to unlock the most secret or even shameful parts of one's life⁹. This observation may connect to the reason why someone would first agree on appearing in a documentary, as it is observed by Emanuel Berman, that is the wish to be heard, seen, a need for mirroring, for an admiring, sympathetic, empathic and interested eye, all in the same time¹⁰.

2. Psychoanalysis and Documentary

Berman also links the process of appearing in a documentary to the one of psychoanalysis, considering documentary protagonists to be like analytic and psychotherapy patients, that need their story to receive attention, in a respectful, interested, empathetic and sympathetic way. Moreover, they wish that the therapist, or in our case the director, to help them in crystallizing and understanding their own story¹¹.

As we could agree to these similarities, I believe it is crucial to remember that the objectives of these two processes are completely different. While the purpose of psychoanalysis is healing the subject, when a filmmaker may use involuntarily methods similar to this process while interacting with the characters, it is solely because he is interested for that story to appear in his film. Whether the filmmaking experience might become helpful for the subject, it only depends on how the filmmaker manages this relationship.

Due to the fact that there are some similarities between the two processes, the subject of the documentary may end up being hurt if the filmmaker does not address his questions in an unintrusive way. Moreover, as the two encounters may be similar in some aspects but have completely different objectives, the filmmaker may be sometimes carried away by forcing answers from the subjects, risking transforming it into a traumatic experience. Piotrowska concludes her thesis by evoking a simple rule, that as in psychoanalysis, the dialogue in documentary should come freely¹², which is a good remark, but as herself describes in the text the experience that she had on a certain documentary, even if speech came freely during the interview, after it is edited in the film, it may become unrecognizable and very uncomfortable to watch for documentary subjects¹³. How could we address this problem?

⁸ Eric Steel. 2015. „Taboo Subjects”. In *Adventures in the Lives of Others*, ed. by James Quinn, 45-53. London & New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, p. 45-51.

⁹ Eric Steel. 2015. „Taboo Subjects”. In *Adventures in the Lives of Others*, ed. by James Quinn, 45-53. London & New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, p. 51.

¹⁰ Emanuel Berman, Timna Rosenheimer, and Michal Aviad. 2003. „Documentary Directors and Their Protagonists: A Transference / Counter-Transference Relationship?” in *The Couch and the Silver Screen: Psychoanalytic Reflections on European Cinema*. ed. by Andrea Sabbadini, 213-231. Hove & New York: Brunner-Routledge, p. 221.

¹¹ Emanuel Berman, Timna Rosenheimer, and Michal Aviad. 2003. „Documentary Directors and Their Protagonists: A Transference / Counter-Transference Relationship?”. In *The Couch and the Silver Screen: Psychoanalytic Reflections on European Cinema*. ed. by Andrea Sabbadini, 213-231. Hove & New York: Brunner-Routledge, p. 221.

¹² Agnieszka Piotrowska. 2012. *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film*. [Thesis] (Unpublished), p. 261.

¹³ Agnieszka Piotrowska. 2012. *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film*. [Thesis] (Unpublished), p. 232-234.

3. Taking Filmmaking Therapy as an Example

In order to better understand how seeing their speech edited on screen could affect the participants in a documentary, I would refer to a counterexample, more exactly a therapeutic film project made with war veterans in the US. In this study, the participants with post-traumatic stress disorder caused by military-related activities, formed teams and collaborated on making short films based on their traumas. They wrote the scripts, directed, shot, edited and acted in the respective films. Although this project was similar to the one of a documentary interview, in the sense that the subjects were encouraged to tell and live their real but fictionalized stories in front of the camera, it was not reported to be traumatic in any way to the participants. On the contrary, it was proved to be therapeutic, and one of the veterans even reported that the process of editing was especially helpful, as it allowed him to experience from a different angle his past events, by being able to freely assemble all the narrative pieces in a final film¹⁴.

My opinion would be that the fact that the subject of the film feels as he is in control with the way his story will appear in the film might be the reason why this experience is able to heal him. In a classic documentary, the fact that the subject has no control over how he is going to be displayed on screen by the filmmaker may be the cause of his anxiety. As Piotrowska states in her thesis after requesting a set of testimonies from the subjects that appeared in one of her documentaries, we can observe that watching themselves on screen after the film was edited without any input from them has not been the most pleasant encounter, that the film did not represent them accurately, as it seemed as a fictional piece, that they did not create or recognize, and felt to be disturbing¹⁵.

4. The Encounter with One's Double on Screen

I would suggest diving a little more in the reasons why someone might feel affected by his encounter with his double on screen. Dolar describes it as a meeting with a Doppelgänger, more exactly an individual identical to oneself, the outcome being the opposite of happiness. Anxiety appears as the identical other gains independence and is not anymore a reflection.¹⁶

Therefore, the encounter with the double becomes a difficult one when the other becomes independent. But it is my belief that if the subject would not feel that his double is so independent, the encounter would not be so frightening. The filmmaker might offer to the subject a sense that he is part of the process of making the documentary, by listening or even asking for creative input from him. We could learn from Agnes Varda's style while working on *Jane B. par Agnès V.*¹⁷, a documentary in which the filmmaker appears alongside Jane Birkin, forming a 'collaborative' relationship between the filmed and the film.¹⁸ Moreover, Sarah Cooper observes

¹⁴ Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, Benjamin W. Patton, and Charles Drebing. 2018, October 16. „When You Make a Movie, and You See Your Story There, You Can Hold It”: Qualitative Exploration of Collaborative Filmmaking as a Therapeutic Tool for Veterans". *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01954>.

¹⁵ Agnieszka Piotrowska. 2012. *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film*. [Thesis] (Unpublished), p. 233.

¹⁶ Mladen Dolar. 1996. „At First Sight”. In *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. by Renata Salecl & Slavoj Žižek, 129-153. Durham and London: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, p.136.

¹⁷ Agnes Varda. 1988. *Jane B. for Agnes V.* France. Ciné-Tamaris.

¹⁸ Sarah Cooper. 2006. *Selfless cinema? : ethics and French documentary*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, p. 79.

the recognition of the process of filmmaking as offering an ethical dimension¹⁹, and I believe that by 'ethical' we could further understand a more enjoyable experience for the subject during the making of the film and also afterwards, when she encounters her double on screen.

Referring to the therapeutic filmmaking project with the US veterans, I believe that it has a certain connection to Agnes Varda's collaborative approach, as in both cases the subject that is in front of the camera feels that he is included in the creative process, being offered a certain type of control.

5. An Invitation to Collaboration

The 'collaborative' process described might apply also to an interview situation. Referring to Piotrowska's rule of free speech²⁰, this is also a kind of invitation of collaboration from the filmmaker towards the subject, which might help in obtaining a result that would be much easier to encounter on screen afterwards. This remark also connects to Rosenthal's affirmation regarding silence during the interview. If the filmmaker would remain silent and not demand more details, it could have the effect of an important incitation for the subject and make him open himself even more, offering the complete truth²¹.

I also believe that by offering explications regarding each process that we as filmmakers go through would help the subjects become more familiarized with the process of making a documentary, so they could understand that they become on screen a character. By transforming the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject into a collaborative one might help the subject become more comfortable with the process. And this invitation to collaboration might come in all means, from not forcing any answers during the actual shooting of the interview, to being open about discussing the creative direction of the film. The whole point would be offering a sense to the characters that they are part of the creation process, so they might not find the result disturbing or unable to identify with it afterwards.

The interviewing process may be a difficult process for a person if not handled accordingly by the filmmaker. Rosenthal shares his method of breaking the ice through presenting the crew, roughly presenting the film equipment to the interviewee and chatting for ten minutes while having together a cup of tea or coffee before starting.²² What does in my opinion this friendly method called by Rosenthal warm-up is actually including the subject within the film team, offering him a sense that a collaboration is going to take place, which stands at the base of him feeling as part of a team process and that he is not alone.

6. Conclusions

Filmmaking will always be dependent of the existence of conflict between a protagonist and the antagonistic forces. In documentary, which deals with real people that face real problems as part of their life, the director should find unintrusive ways of building the story of his film. Moreover, since the encounter with the independent 'double' on screen can trigger profound

¹⁹Agnieszka Piotrowska. 2012. *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film*. [Thesis] (Unpublished), p. 97.

²⁰Agnieszka Piotrowska. 2012. *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film*. [Thesis] (Unpublished), p. 261

²¹ Alan Rosenthal. 1990. *Writing, directing, and producing documentary films*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, p.133.

²² *Ibidem*, p.129.

anxiety to the subject, the filmmaker could mitigate this feeling by including the subject into the creative process and offering a feeling of control over how his double will look on screen.

We as documentary filmmakers ultimately depend on our subjects, and we should not seek for drama within their open wounds, as because of the connection between such an encounter and psychoanalysis, it could transform their experience into a traumatic one if speech does not come freely within the film. We should instead invite them into a trustful collaborative process, in which they would feel safe to open themselves in front of the camera and offer us their stories, which is what our films depend on.

7. References

Books

- Cooper, Sarah. 2006. *Selfless cinema?: ethics and French documentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cousins, Mark & MacDonald, Kevin. 2006. *Imagining reality: the Faber book of documentary*. London: Faber.
- Piotrowska, Agnieszka. 2012. "Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film." [Thesis] (Unpublished).
- Rosenthal, Alan. 1990. *Writing, directing, and producing documentary films*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Yorke, John. 2015. *Into the Woods – A Five-Act Journey into Story*. New York : Abrams Press

Articles in Books

- Berman, Emanuel, Timna Rosenheimer, and Michal Aviad. 2003. "Documentary Directors and Their Protagonists: A Transferential / Counter-Transferential Relationship?" In *The Couch and the Silver Screen: Psychoanalytic Reflections on European Cinema*, ed. by Andrea Sabbadini, 213-231. Hove & New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Dolar, Mladen. 1996. „At First Sight”. In *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. by Renata Salecl & Slavoj Zizek, 129-153. Durham and London: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS.
- Steel, Eric. 2015. „Taboo Subjects”. In *Adventures in the Lives of Others*, ed. by James Quinn, 45-53. London & New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.

Electronic sources

- Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, Benjamin W. Patton, and Charles Drebing. 2018, October 16. „When You Make a Movie, and You See Your Story There, You Can Hold It”: Qualitative Exploration of Collaborative Filmmaking as a Therapeutic Tool for Veterans". *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01954>.

Filmography

- Lumière, Louis. 1895. *The Waterer Watered* [*L'arroseur arrosé*]. France. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2_ioXKuxoQ.
- Lumière, Louis. 1895. *The Sea* [*La Mer*]. France. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAP2_Wq7CZk.
- Lumière, Louis. 1895. *Leaving the Factory* [*La sortie de l'usine Lumière à Lyon*]. France. Retrieved May 17, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEQeIRLxaM4>.
- Varda, Agnes. 1988. *Jane B. for Agnes V.* France. Ciné-Tamaris.