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Toward a Cognitive Definition of First-Person Documentary

*Veerle Ros, Jennifer M. J. O'Connell, Miklós Kiss,
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SUBJECTIVE AND PERSONAL TENDENCIES IN DOCUMENTARY FILMS

Contemporary documentary practice is witnessing a predominant trend, in which films abandon the longstanding ideal of objectivity in favor of more diverse and subjective perspectives on reality. From bold new uses of reenactment and performance, as seen in *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (Renzo Martens 2008) and *A Strange Love Affair with Ego* (Ester Gould 2015), through creative and playful editing of home-video and archival footage, as in *Tarnation* (Jonathan Caouette 2003), *I for India* (Sandhya Suri 2005) and *Heart of a Dog* (Laurie Anderson 2015), to the recent wave of animated documentaries, such as *Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi 2007), *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman 2008) and *Crulic: The Path to Beyond* (Anca Damian 2011), many contemporary documentaries seem to opt out of the idea of ‘capturing reality’ with a camera in favor of extensive formal experimentation and the creative, liberal and imaginative expression of subjec-

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tive memories and experiences. Central to this development are a reevaluation of the documentary subject and a blurring of boundaries between subject and filmmaker. This convergence of positions has led to the emergence of the ‘first-person’ documentary, a growing and diverse set of films in which the roles of filmmaker and subject coincide (Lebow 2012). While examples of subjective and autobiographical documentaries can be found among the oeuvres of experimental filmmakers as far back as the 1940s (e.g. Maya Deren’s 1943 *Meshes of the Afternoon*), it was only with the enthusiastic reception of a more recent wave of first-person films like *Wide Awake* (Alan Berliner 2006), *Arirang* (Kim Ki-duk 2011) and *Cameraperson* (Kirsten Johnson 2016), that a widespread, fundamental shift towards the increasing use and scholarly appreciation of subjective and personal perspectives in documentary could be noticed (Bruzzi 2006; Renov 2004; Rascaroli 2009; Lebow 2012). This development, in turn, has contributed to a shift in our understanding of documentary film’s central truth claim.

The idea that photographic and filmic images contain “traces” of historical or actual reality (Bazin 1960; Barthes 1981) has long been thought of as central to documentary’s defining quality as a “document” of historical reality (Currie 1999; Nichols 1991)—a mode of thinking that corresponded closely to the aims of the Direct Cinema movement, which pledged to observe the world with seemingly as little intervention as possible. This paradigm of a quasi-unmediated view of the world proved untenable in the face of arguments concerning the inherently constructed nature of representations, which have been given additional momentum by the current digitization and virtualization of visual media (Rombes 2009). Recent documentaries abandon this referential claim altogether by utilizing formal techniques, such as reenactment, animation, digital-image manipulation and associative montage, asserting their authenticity through different means instead. In response, documentary theory has shifted its focus towards the reappraisal of elements previously thought of as marginal to documentary practice, such as performativity (Bruzzi 2006), subjectivity (Renov 2004; Rascaroli 2009) and self-representation (Lane 2002; Lebow 2012). While this has led to an understanding of documentary as something more dynamic, diverse, subjective and performative than previously assumed, a side-effect is that the boundaries between documentary and fiction film appear to have become ever more nebulous. In spite of this development, the cognitive distinction between fiction and nonfiction remains of crucial importance to human communication

(Bondebjerg 2014b, p. 39). Thus, it has become necessary to ask how, under this new practical and theoretical paradigm, viewers continue to make that distinction in first-person documentary.

Our aim here is to investigate how a method of cognitive poetics—“an interdisciplinary approach to the study of literature [and film] using the tools offered by cognitive science” (Tsur 2008, p. 1)—could contribute to a more refined understanding of documentary in general, and first-person films in particular, by taking into account the dynamic interplay between a film’s formal properties, its social context and the mental processes of a hypothetical viewer. After providing a brief survey of existing theoretical approaches to subjective tendencies in documentary and their current limitations, we present the process by which viewers distinguish documentary from fiction film as an act of cognitive framing: the selection of a set of preexisting expectations on the basis of the recognizable aspects of a situation (Minsky 1975, p. 1). We then demonstrate how the selection of the documentary frame is dependent on an interplay of cues that can be found in the textual (formal and stylistic) and contextual (intertextual and paratextual) elements of a film with the real-world knowledge of the viewer. From this perspective, first-person documentary could be understood as a sub-frame of the documentary frame, which allows for greater degrees of subjectivity and experimentation and comes with its own unique set of viewer expectations and emotional affects. Through the example of a scene from *Camera-person* (Kirsten Johnson 2016), we show how the foregrounding of a filmmaker’s personal, affective involvement with the content of a scene can act as a cue for the selection of this sub-frame. Existing at the intersections of personal memory and historical fact, these documentaries confront their viewers with a variety (and often a contradictory combination) of framing cues, challenging elementary processes of meaning-making and inviting viewers to share empathically in personal, subjective perspectives.

DEFINING FIRST-PERSON DOCUMENTARY

The emergence of the diverse and heterogeneous group of films we refer to as “first-person documentaries” has been addressed from several theoretical angles, but providing a clear definition for it has so far proven difficult. What complicates matters is that it encompasses an incredibly diverse set of practices and techniques, and traverses several documentary sub-genres, making it particularly problematic to delineate on the basis of

formal or contextual properties alone (O'Connell 2015, p. 21). Perhaps as a consequence of this diversity, several different labels circulate, each focusing on a related but at times distinct set of practices, such as performative documentary (Nichols 2010; Bruzzi 2006), autobiographical documentary (Renov 2004; Lane 2002), personal cinema (Rascaroli 2009), essay film (Corrigan 2011) and first-person documentary (Lebow 2012).

Bill Nichols (2010) defines this set of films as “performative documentary” to set it apart from five previously defined modes of documentary: namely, the poetic, expository, observational, participatory and reflexive modes. The performative mode, he writes, underlines “the complexity of our knowledge of the world by emphasizing its subjective and affective dimensions” through “the free combination of the actual and the imagined” (p. 202). While this description seems to fit the current wave of first-person documentaries, a problem arises when we take into account Stella Bruzzi’s (2006) differing, more elaborate interpretation of performativity. Bruzzi bases her understanding of documentary performance on Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) and J.L. Austin’s *Philosophical Papers* (1970). By focusing on documentary’s function as “utterances that simultaneously both describe and perform an action” and taking identity into account as a matter of communication, she complicates Nichols’ fixed, categorical employment of the term (p. 48). Moreover, Bruzzi argues for the central role played by performance in all forms of documentary. Indeed, as sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) argues, almost every instance of human interaction has elements of conscious and unconscious role play that are similar to the staging of a play, and it is hard to see why acting in front of a camera (even if the character role one plays is oneself) should be any different. Bruzzi (2006, p. 13) proposes to analyze documentary as “a perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation,” claiming that both viewers and filmmakers are perfectly aware of the impossibility of a purely “objective” representation of reality (p. 7). Her suggestion, therefore, is to treat every documentary as an act of performance—but therein lies the problem with the term for our investigation. If performativity is an unavoidable part of documentary practice, it ceases to function as a defining quality of the particular (first-person) group of documentaries we are attempting to delineate.

Michael Renov (2004, pp. 44–45) applies the terms “autobiographical documentary” and “new autobiography” in his description of the current trend of recent subjective documentaries, suggesting that these terms may encompass various related autobiographical modes, from “essayistic” films

to “the confessional mode” and “domestic ethnography.” As John Corner (2006, p. 128) states, “Renov’s explorations into the documentation of the self extends our sense of documentary’s metaphoric range and its continuing depictive potential.” However, central to all these modes of filmmaking is “the activity of self-inscription” (Renov 2004, p. 106), rather than the side of documentary reception we wish to investigate.

Moving away from the focus on subjective documentary as a means of authorial expression, Laura Rascaroli (2009) distinguishes two dominant trends within the larger field of subjective documentary films—“personal cinema” and “the essay film.” She defines the essay film as a form of self-expression that is usually subjective but need not necessarily be autobiographical. By contrast, “personal cinema” is always autobiographical, distinguishing the two forms on the basis of the kind of commitment they ask of their viewer (pp. 14–16). Although many “personal films” take the shape of a series of deeply personal reflections, this intimate mental world is opened up for the viewer, resulting in a shared autobiographical text (p. 118). Similarly, Timothy Corrigan (2011) categorizes different essay film modes: Interview, Travel, Diary, Editorial and Refractive Cinema. Reality, however, is more complex—essay films are often quite slippery and overlapping, mixing multiple modes. Acknowledging this, Corrigan (2011, p. 8) states he believes “this overlapping is partly to do with the ‘unmethodical method’ that, according to Adorno, is the fundamental form of the essay and helps explain one of the central paradoxes and challenges of the essay: It is a genre of experience.” As is the case with Rascaroli’s endeavors, Corrigan’s work is a valuable step towards positioning essayistic film in film history by acknowledging its dialogical interpersonal dimensions instead of viewing it mainly as a means of “personal” expression—a welcome change of perspective. However, neither author provides a more specific take on how such viewing dynamics may come about.

Documentary theory has clearly moved beyond the assumption that in order to convey an authentic representation of real events, a film must strive for objectivity. Central to these approaches appears to be a match of two (formerly held to be incompatible) concepts: subjectivity and documentary. It is from the intriguing interplay of these two forces that a form of cinema emerges that is especially challenging to earlier theories of documentary, and it is this broader category of subjective documentaries that our definition should seek to address. We are interested in films that provide a personal, subjective perspective on real situations or events, a per-

spective that results in stylistic divergence from the traditional formal conventions of documentary film. This broad and varied group of films is best encompassed in Alisa Lebow's definition of first-person films:

First person films can be... autobiographical in full, or only implicitly and in part. They may take the form of a self-portrait, or, indeed, the portrait of another. They are, very often, not a cinema of 'me', but about someone close, dear, beloved or intriguing, who nonetheless informs the filmmaker's sense of him or herself. They may not be about a person, self or other, at all, but about a neighborhood, a community, a phenomenon or event. The designation 'first person film' is foremost about a mode of address: these films 'speak' from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position. (Lebow 2012, p. 1)

This definition is broad enough to include all documentaries that provide personal, subjective perspectives on real events. Furthermore, Lebow's definition implies a specific emotional affect that many scholars suggest is a defining property of this type of documentary: that of a temporary empathic 'merging' of the perspectives of viewer and filmmaker. What is lacking, however, is a specification of how exactly this sense of immersion in a subjective, personal perspective arises. Therefore, the question remains: what combination of textual, contextual, paratextual and/or real-world properties leads viewers towards the perception and appreciation of a documentary as a first-person documentary?

DOCUMENTARY AS A COGNITIVE FRAME

Over the past twenty years, cognitive approaches to film studies have grown to such an extent that they now occupy a prominent position. Although, until recently, most of the attention has been directed towards fiction film, some scholars have argued convincingly for the potential of a cognitive approach to documentary (Eitzen 1995; Currie 1995; Plantinga 1997; Smith 2003; Tsang 2011; Bondebjerg 1994, 2014a, b, among others). This chapter taps into that potential by investigating how first-person documentary could be defined as a cognitive frame that comes with its own set of evaluative criteria and emotional affects.

One of the earliest proponents of the idea that documentary cannot be defined solely on the basis of its formal properties was Dirk Eitzen (1995). Arguing against the notion that documentary can be defined as a stable

category, Eitzen claims that “documentary must be seen ... not as a kind of text but as a kind of ‘reading’” (p. 82).¹ He suggests that viewers are guided in their interpretation of films by elements of a film’s formal properties or context. Such “situational cues” can either take the form of explicit verbal labels (such as explanatory title sequences, program notes in a TV guide, and so on) or the more ephemeral form of references to familiar historical events or the cinematic conventions of a certain type of documentary (p. 95). Eitzen sketches here the basics for a cognitive, reception-based approach to documentary, in which the focus is shifted from defining documentary as a stable—objective and text-immanent—category to a more dynamic question of how viewers actually distinguish documentaries from fiction films.

The notion of “frames” invoked by Eitzen is central to understanding the reception of documentary from a cognitive perspective. Frames, in general, can be understood as sets of expectations that we may project onto a situation (in the case of documentary, the encounter with a “medial performance”) in order to make sense of it (Minsky 1975, p. 1). Frame theory stresses that “framing” is a cognitive and interpretive activity in which we are constantly engaged; “frames” form the meta-conceptual structures that guide our interpretation and enable signification (Wolf 2006, pp. 4–5). Cognitive frames, then, can be defined as inherited and culturally acquired mental organizing principles that regulate interpretation by guiding expectations and focusing attention on the potentially significant elements of a situation, which are determined on the basis of the outcome of similar past experiences (Goffman 1974). In cinema, the selection and appropriation of a frame depends on elements of a given audiovisual simulation and its context, which signal its expected pertinence, thus triggering a response: viewers utilize their preexisting real-world and medium-specific knowledge to structure incoming information, to regulate their own expectations and, ultimately, to evaluate an experience. This suggests we could define documentary as a cognitive frame, a specific set of expectations that can be applied to film on the basis of its adherence to culturally established formal conventions (which may change as our visual culture develops) and the ways in which it is framed socially and contextually (which may also change as documentary constantly acquires new social functions). This definition enables us to place the

¹ For a similar claim, presented from a phenomenological perspective, see Vivian Sobchack’s (1999) article, “Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience.”

attribution of documentary value on the side of reception without succumbing to the notion that the choice to view a film as a documentary is purely subjective or arbitrary.

In a similar line of thinking, Ib Bondebjerg (1994, p. 74) draws on Marvin Minsky's (1975) concept of the "frame" (noting its clear similarity with Goffman's use of the term) to suggest that documentary can be understood as a prototypical structure that comes with its own set of default assumptions, which help us to "reason, generalize and to predict, foresee or deduct what may happen or has happened" in a given situation. Drawing on Wolfgang Iser's (cited by Bondebjerg 1994, p. 83) idea that a fictional discourse depends on a set of conventions that are "shared by the author and the audience and understood as such," Bondebjerg suggests that our framing of nonfictional film and television, likewise, depends on a similar "communicative contract" between filmmaker and viewer (p. 84). He outlines four pragmatic dimensions upon which this contract rests: the institutional dimension (the sociological, cultural structure of the viewing experience); the intertextual dimension (the textual, cultural and psychological aspects of a genre, oeuvre or otherwise related group of films); the experiential dimension (based on knowledge, attitudes and concepts acquired through our interaction with the world); and the situational dimension (the concrete time and place of the viewing experience) (p. 84). Thus, Bondebjerg treats the documentary frame as something that does not arise exclusively from a viewer's personal experiences but is equally a product of institutional forces, social conventions and commonly shared beliefs and values.

If documentary is indeed best understood as a cognitive frame, we should next inquire on which factors of a film's presentation and context do viewers base their selection of a frame. On the one hand, Eitzen (1995, p. 95) suggests that situational cues guide viewers towards the documentary frame, but his list of examples of cues remains rather sketchy. On the other hand, the four dimensions outlined by Bondebjerg more accurately expose the complex interplay of factors that influence our reading of a film, but render it difficult to isolate the specific, individual elements of a film's text or context that guide viewers toward the documentary frame. We suggest a middle-way and more pragmatic approach that distinguishes between three primary "levels" at which framing cues may be found to operate: (1) the formal/textual level, (2) the contextual/paratextual level, and (3) the real-world referential level. Rather than treating these three levels separately from the cognitive dimensions of documentary, we view

them as the three primary sources of “input” for the universal cognitive process of framing. While watching a film, a viewer’s cognition draws on the cues (potentially) available on all three of these levels in order to determine the (apparently) appropriate framing for a film:

1. *Formal and textual framing cues* are found in elements of a film’s formal—stylistic and narrative—presentation. The example that Eitzen (1995, p. 91) uses of a “jiggly” camera is an illustration of a formal/textual cue, an aesthetic convention that is associated with a certain type of documentary filmmaking. It is important to note, however, that formal conventions are not necessarily adhered to by all documentaries, and that they can also change over time or be exploited by fictional films in the service of their ambitions for realistic representation (the diegetic use of hand-held cameras in Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick’s 1999 film, *The Blair Witch Project*, is an example of this).
2. *Contextual and paratextual framing cues* can be found in the programming of film festivals, trailers, TV guides, DVD covers, VOD info blurbs, reviews, posters and promotional websites. The context of a film’s release often plays a critical part in how it is received; films are marketed to a target audience and specific elements of their narrative might be highlighted as important. Many first-person documentaries are excellent examples of the potential for contextual framing to override the viewer’s evaluation of a film on the basis of its formal properties.
3. Finally, *real-world referential framing cues* originate from what we already (might) know of the real-world situation that is represented in a documentary before engaging with it on any level. According to Torben Grodal (2009, pp. 255–256), “our knowledge modifies our experience of realism. ... There is thus a potential conflict between the kind of realism established by perception and that established by knowledge.” Thus, while many documentaries employ techniques that would seem to counter the establishment of perceptual realism (that is to say, an uninhibited, embodied immersion in the cinematic world), knowing the fact that they represent objects and events known to actually exist in the real world may, nevertheless, act as a powerful cue to establish a sense of *factual realism*.

This brief outline is, of course, far from exhaustive, but it could potentially serve as the basis of a structured analysis of the framing process.

Eventually, one of the aims of a cognitive approach to documentary should be to specify the most significant cues that lead viewers towards the framing of a film as a documentary and to reveal their interplay by showing how they may modify, strengthen or contradict each other. This project lies beyond the current scope of this chapter. Instead of further specifying and theorizing these levels, let us now consider how, within this model, first-person documentary could be defined as a sub-frame of the documentary frame, corresponding to a specific configuration of formal/textual, contextual/paratextual and real-world referential cues.

FRAMING FIRST-PERSON DOCUMENTARY

First-person documentaries present an interesting case for this model as they challenge the formal conventions of traditional documentary, providing their viewers with various cues that do not automatically fit the documentary frame. As noted earlier, many first-person documentaries abandon the indexical claim of observational documentary in favor of new, experimental forms of representation. This raises the question of how, in spite of such formal innovations, viewers still come to frame these films as documentaries. As further noted, first-person documentary has a specific affective dimension that sets it apart from the traditional documentary norm and enables an empathic merging of the perspective of the viewer with that of the filmmaker. Two experiential properties appear to be essential to our selection of the first-person sub-frame: on the one hand, an awareness of watching a representation of historical or actual reality, and on the other, an awareness that this representation is “filtered” through the subjective perspective of the filmmaker. To show how such an awareness could be established, we will briefly sketch how, on each of the three levels outlined above, framing cues could lead viewers to experience a film as *both* a non-fictional representation *and* a subjectively filtered narrative.

On level (1), the *formal/textual level*, first-person documentaries divert from the familiar conventions of observational documentary by employing a wide variety of anti-mimetic techniques of representation, ranging from animation (for example, *Persepolis*, *Waltz with Bashir*; *Crulic: The Path to Beyond*) to digital-image manipulation, collage and associative montage (for example, *Tarnation*; *Heart of a Dog*), performative reenactments (for example, *A Strange Love Affair with Ego*) or even the use of sculptural art (for example, Rithy Panh’s 2013 *The Missing Picture*). According to Grodal (2009, p. 250), our sense of perceptual realism

depends on a combination of “perceptual specificity” and “familiarity,” both which may be hampered by the stylistic techniques utilized in first-person documentary.

Techniques like animation and reenactment reduce the sense of realism; that is to say, they restrict the representation’s optical fidelity and block the viewer’s access to the perceptual specifics of the historical or actual events represented. Furthermore, such techniques break away from the “familiar” documentary genre conventions—although viewers may, of course, become familiar with them in time, to the point where they solidify into new conventions. Grodal suggests that “our intuitive sense of objectivity or subjectivity depends on the issue of control rather than on whether something is evaluated as real or not in an absolute sense” and that this feeling of “control” depends on the extent to which a filmic representation supports our motor actions (p. 230). Simply put, the more straightforwardly “mimetic” a filmic representation is, the more it allows for an embodied immersion in the filmic world and the more objective it will seem on a perceptual level. First-person documentaries tend to utilize elements of overt stylization that disrupt the viewer’s sense of perceptual realism and act as clear cues to frame them as subjective narratives. Furthermore, formal/textual cues may come in the form of overt acknowledgments of the subjective perspective, such as a voiceover speaking in the first person or the overt presence of the filmmaker as an on-screen character (such as Renzo Martens in *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* or Kim Ki-duk in *Arirang*).

As demonstrated below, however, cues at both the contextual/paratextual level and the real-world referential level provide the viewer with clear indications that, although the perspective provided by the film may be subjective, the events represented are nonfictional. Thus, while these documentaries may forfeit their claim to perceptual specificity and its associated sense of indexicality, the events and phenomena they represent are still specific and real—that is to say, as far as viewers can determine, given the extratextual cues that are available to them. Much of this estimation depends on the subject matter’s “familiarity” (to use Grodal’s term again); lacking concrete evidence, humans are hard-wired to give greater credence to stories that correspond with what they already know.

At level (2), the *contextual and paratextual level*, first-person documentaries seem to be surrounded with framing cues that emphasize their status both as nonfictional narratives and as artworks that reflect a personal vision. Contextually, most first-person documentaries are categorized and

indexed very clearly as documentaries, whether through their programming (for example, their inclusion in film festivals such as the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam) or labeling as “documentary” (for example, on movie review websites and databases such as the Internet Movie Database). At the same time, however, reviews tend to indicate the intimate subject matter of the film and emphasize the role of its creator as an individual with personal preoccupations who, due to a close relationship with the subject, is uniquely qualified to share their subjective perspective on it. Examples of this phenomenon abound, from the advertising of the recent documentary *Heart of a Dog* as a film by “acclaimed musician and performance artist Laurie Anderson” (Movieclips Film Festivals & Indie Films 2015), through the descriptions of *A Strange Love Affair with Ego* as filmmaker Ester Gould’s “personal quest” to understand her sister Rowan (IDFA 2016), to Roger Ebert’s (2003) review of *Tarnation* as an example of “intensely personal and subjective autobiographical filmmaking.” The marketing and critical reception of these films clearly seeks to frame them as performative artworks that reflect the unique, subjective perspectives of their visionary creators.

Finally, on level (3), the *real-world level*, viewers tend to have limited access to specific, factual knowledge of the situations that first-person documentaries represent. As many first-person documentaries deal with personal histories, family histories and other subjective histories that do not (yet) form a part of established, common historical knowledge, viewers often have little choice but to accept the documentary as their only window onto the reality of the represented situation. Nevertheless, those elements of a first-person documentary that do correspond to the specific or general real-world knowledge available to the viewer act as powerful cues to frame the film as a documentary. For example, the inclusion of several historical BBC television broadcasts, including an interview with the former British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, lends Sandya Suri’s autobiographical family memoir, *I for India*, a strong connection with known historical reality.² When we apply Grodal’s criteria of cinematic realism to this film, the inclusion of such highly specific, recognizable fragments of evidently nonfictional material reinforces the sense of realism of the entire

² It is worth keeping in mind how much of our knowledge of history is mediated and may be subject to various degrees of manipulation, so that “historical reality” in this context must be taken to mean a commonly agreed-upon understanding of historical events rather than a literal record of them.

documentary, while the less specifically recognizable elements of the documentary correspond to familiar tropes of family dynamics, diaspora and racism. This mix of perceptual specificity, recognizability and general familiarity is what lends the film its strong sense of factual authenticity, in spite of the subjective perspective it represents.

In summary, we hypothesize that the selection of the first-person documentary frame depends on a combination of: (1) textual/formal cues that elicit a sense of overt subjectivity; (2) contextual cues that emphasize a film's status as personal cinema; and (3) contextual cues and correspondences with real-world knowledge that affirms its status as nonfiction. The application of the "first-person documentary frame" may thus be described as the result of a complex framing process, a hermeneutic negotiation between cues that elicit a strong sense of subjectivity and cues that lead the viewer to frame this experience as still belonging to the realm of documentary film. Based on existing definitional attempts of first-person documentaries, we furthermore hypothesize that the first-person documentary frame comes with its own set of expectations and emotional affects. It is likely that viewers evaluate first-person documentaries on the basis of their *emotional authenticity* rather than their *factual reliability*.

THE AFFECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF THE FIRST-PERSON FRAME IN KIRSTEN JOHNSON'S *CAMERAPERSON*

Film viewing is an embodied activity, and the emotions experienced when watching films closely resemble those experienced in real-life situations (Grodal 2009; Plantinga and Smith 1999; Plantinga 2009; Bondebjerg 2014a). Framing, as a cognitive activity, profoundly affects the experiential "stakes" of a situation. For example, we evaluate a scene depicting violence or torture very differently when we know it to be actuality, not fiction. Considering that the neural architecture that governs our emotions developed at a time when fictional representations did not yet exist and "all incoming data were essentially true" (Grodal 2009, p. 185), these differences in evaluation can only be explained as the result of the application of an "as-if" frame (Bondebjerg 1994, p. 73) at a higher-order cognitive level. This fictional frame can provide a measure of relief when we are confronted with extreme scenes. Although they may still affect us deeply, we can comfort ourselves with the knowledge that they are "just pretense." Likewise, when our awareness of a documentary's subjectivity

causes us to apply the first-person sub-frame to it, this also comes with its own unique set of affective implications.

Emotions such as care and empathy, which originally developed in relation to the care of newborn infants (Lambert 2012), are conspicuously triggered by many films (Grodal and Kramer 2010, pp. 20–22). Our ability to feel empathy for others has extended from parental love to include friends, relatives and group members over the course of our evolutionary history (Churchland 2011). Evidence from empirical studies suggests that empathy and bonding do not stem from selfless altruism but continue to depend on a sense of kinship or “oneness,” the sense that another person is “of the same stuff” as ourselves (Maner et al. 2002).

The classical observational mode of documentary presentation does not lend itself well to the establishment of an empathic relationship between documentary subject, filmmaker and viewer. While such documentaries may play upon the emotions of their viewers in powerful ways, they aim to present perspectives that, at least, seem impartial and objective. Hence, a great deal of effort is devoted to purposefully obscuring the fact that the perspective given on a situation is unavoidably shaped (at least in part) by the personal fascinations, concerns and prejudices of the filmmaker.

In first-person documentary, the borders between these three agents are more diffuse: not only do the roles and interests of filmmaker and subject frequently coincide, but viewers are also invited to share in this perspective, to make it their own. By emphasizing subjective experiences and feelings, first-person documentaries shift the focus of their viewers from the factual details of the situation that is represented (which, being specific and clearly different to our own, is something we can more easily distance ourselves from) towards its emotional dimensions, which are universally human. This effect does not come about spontaneously; rather, it should be understood as the result of a complex (and to some extent calculated) interplay of framing cues provided at the contextual/paratextual, formal/textual and real-world referential levels.

In the case of *Cameraperson* (2016), the contextual framing cues are provided by the film’s website, where we find the following brief synopsis: “Exposing her role behind the camera, [director] Kirsten Johnson reaches into the vast trove of footage she has shot over decades around the world. What emerges is a visually bold memoir and a revelatory interrogation of the power of the camera.” These lines explicitly foreground the idea that the film presents its author’s critical reflection on her own creative process.

The term “memoir,” moreover, suggests that an extensive degree of access to the personal memories of the author will be provided, and this will help us construct her as a character we can come to understand and empathize with. Furthermore, we are provided with compelling reasons to want to immerse ourselves in her perspective: the material in the film is described as a “trove of footage,” presented in a “bold” and “revelatory” manner. As such, the framing cues provided here in just a few words are already sufficient to make us aware that this film presents its creator’s subjective perspective rather than an objective or impartial one, and that we are meant to empathize with this perspective.

On the formal/textual level, *Camera person* consists of a combination of documentary footage, shot in diverse locations around the world over the course of Johnson’s career as cinematographer, and more personal ‘home movie’ material, centered around her children and her mother who suffers from Alzheimer’s. While some of the repurposed material originates from documentaries shot in a rather straightforward observational style, it takes on a more subjective character in this particular juxtaposition. Specific choices in editing explicitly foreground the filmmaker’s presence as both observer and participant in the scenes that are shown. For example, we are frequently made aware of the filmmaker’s presence behind the camera through vocal interjections and adjustments to the camera settings. Loosely centering its structure on the themes of birth, life and death, the dialectical montage of the film establishes interesting links between the personal “home video” material and the preexisting material shot for other documentaries, revealing the personal in the universal, and vice versa.

The film includes a number of scenes with intense emotional content, such as a conversation with survivors of war and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina and an interview with a boy who was handicapped, and lost a friend, in a land-mine accident. Such negative emotions are balanced with pleasant scenes, like one of children playing in a garden. Viewers are given little indication of the intended connections between the scenes other than their loose organization around the film’s central themes. As a result, the focus of their attention shifts from the construction of the film’s central argument or narrative to the specific way of looking and the universal emotions it represents.

At the real-world referential level, the fact that the film is largely made of documentary footage, and includes no animated or otherwise stylized sequences, provides its viewers with a high degree of perceptual specificity,

heightening its sense of realism. Through its explicit references to known historical events, such as the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (or, conversely, the absence of any scenes depicting fantastical, surreal or otherwise non-natural content), further asserts its status as a piece of nonfiction. This framing additionally enhances the film's emotional impact, making it impossible to distance oneself from the events that are represented by viewing them as "just pretense."

The combined effect of these contextual, formal and real-world referential cues is clearly witnessed in one of the film's most emotionally charged moments. In this scene, we witness how a midwife struggles to get a newborn infant to take its first breath. Most of the factual details of this situation are omitted. We are given the name of the hospital and the city but not told why the filmmaker is documenting this birth, who the mother is, or any other circumstances. The absence of a soundtrack and the panicked questions of the filmmaker enhance the tension of the scene and act as powerful emotional cues to activate feelings of fear, panic and distress in the viewer (Smith 1999). Naturally, the newborn infant presents a suitable target for our instinctive tendency to care for the lives of our offspring. Although the child is not ours, we may fear for its life as if it were. Simultaneously, we are cued to feel with the filmmaker, who, rather than keeping an objective distance, reveals her own emotional stake in the scene through her interjections. Although she does not appear within the frame, her nervous questions from behind the camera reveal the ambiguity of her presence as both observer and potential actor. We ask ourselves—as she does—at what point should she stop filming and try to help. Johnson eventually does intervene, going around the hospital in search of an oxygen supply, with little success. After what seems an eternity, the midwife succeeds in getting the child to take its first breath, but whether it will survive the effects of its prolonged asphyxiation without an oxygen mask remains an open question.

While it could be argued that the emotional content of this scene is so powerful that it would trigger a strong emotional response regardless of its presentation, it is easy to see how the first-person sub-frame adds an additional degree of closeness to our empathic involvement. By putting its viewers explicitly in the shoes of the filmmaker, with whom the contextual framing has already prepared us to empathize, the film lets us experience these events from her subjective perspective. This immersion is further enhanced by our shared feeling of the lack of any power to meaningfully intervene, resulting in a shared feeling of helplessness. The way in which

this scene cues us not only to *feel for* its subject but to also *feel with* the filmmaker seems to momentarily erode the boundaries that normally exist between these three agents. Had the same scene been accompanied by a voiceover or intertitles providing additional contextual information, these would have cued viewers to engage higher-order cognitive processes and reduced its emotional immediacy. In its current presentation, the scene illustrates the potential of first-person documentaries to immerse viewers in the subjective perspective of their authors and to trigger strong feelings of empathy for people who are not part of our immediate family circle or tribe, foregrounding the universally shared emotional dimensions of situations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

First-person documentaries push the boundaries of creative liberty within the documentary frame, employing a wide range of techniques (reenactment, digital-image manipulation, collage, montage, animation) and materials (archival footage, photographs, stock footage, citations from other films, reenacted scenes, controversial material) to tell stories about real events from highly subjective—personal—perspectives. We can witness a corresponding shift in focus in recent documentary studies, as scholars relinquish the idea of defining documentary as a stable category, or as the immanent quality of a set of films, and define it instead as a mode of reception or cognitive frame (Eitzen 1995; Bondebjerg 2014a). However, much work remains to be done in detailing the exact criteria that govern the selection of this frame of reception, as well as the specific expectations and emotional affects it raises, and that is precisely the contribution that a cognitive approach to documentary could supply.

When documentary is defined not as a text-immanent quality, but rather as a set of expectations and forms of knowledge that functions as a suitable frame for the viewer to potentially assign to a film, and when it can evolve dynamically in relation to changing conventions, it becomes clear how techniques such as re-enactment, animation and montage have been part of the documentary tradition from its very outset, despite the fact that such techniques would appear, on the surface, to divert from documentary's referential ties to historical reality. Indeed, the first-person sub-frame reveals the malleability of the documentary frame by utilizing formal techniques that seem to contradict classical notions of documentary as being factual and argumentative. When we embrace the idea that

documentary may encompass a diverse set of sub-frames, each of which comes with its own unique set of evaluative criteria and emotional affects, we can understand the foregrounding of subjective experiences that we see in recent first-person films as another stage in documentary's ongoing project of authentically representing the world we inhabit. Seeking to immerse their viewers in the personal perspectives of their authors, these films foreground emotional content over factual information and make bold use of unconventional techniques of presentation. In doing so, the first-person documentary frame further challenges conventional ideas of what a documentary should or should not be, and demonstrates the merits of a cognitive approach to the field.

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