LET ME TELL YOU, THIS IS A TRUE STORY

Ambiguous narratives in collaborative documentary

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Master of Film & Photographic Studies
Thesis
Thesis advisor: Peter Verstraten
Date: 22 August 2018

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2003, Dutch broadcaster VPRO withdrew the commissioned documentary *Ford Transit* (Hany Abu-Assad, 2002) just a few days before it was to be screened at the Netherlands Film Festival. The film, about a taxi service that transports people and goods between Jerusalem and Ramallah, was in the middle of a successful and award-winning festival run when an Israeli journalist revealed that the main character was in fact not a real taxi driver, but an acquaintance of the filmmaker. A number of crucial scenes in the film – in particular, scenes depicting altercations between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers – turned out to have been portrayed by actors.

The VPRO considered this a violation of the agreed-upon definition of a documentary: no use of re-enactments or reconstructions allowed.[1] Other professionals followed a similar line of reasoning when questioned about the controversy. 'What you see really happened. And the people in the film are really the people that they claim to be', was documentary filmmaker Niek Koppen's succinct definition of what documentary should be.[2]

Abu-Assad, however, remained unapologetic about the introduction of fictional elements in his film. Although he stated his regret at not having disclosed his working method, he maintained that his film is a documentary because it depicts reality truthfully. 'As soon as the filmmaker arrives with his camera, the situation changes', Abu-Assad says.[3] Every documentary rearranges the elements of reality in order to tell a specific story, and the use of reconstruction is not fundamentally different from the use of montage and music, according to Abu-Assad.

In documentary filmmaking, the issue of what constitutes the 'truth' of a story has always been a crucial question. Which stories get told, how, and by whom? Who is addressed, who listens, and how is a story given significance? These questions are specifically interesting in the light of films that cannot be classified as either documentary or fiction, but that make use of elements from both fields. The proliferation in the last decades of mockumentaries, partly scripted reality television, and dramatised scenes in documentaries is proof of that our

[1] *Trouw*, 2003, https://www.trouw.nl/home/vpro-trekt-documentaire-terug-van-filmfestival~aa7e3c93/.
[2] Ockhuysen, 2003, https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/-net-echt~b3a38406/.
[3] *Trouw*, 2003, https://www.trouw.nl/home/vpro-trekt-documentaire-terug-van-filmfestival~aa7e3c93/.

understanding of what documentary can be or can do has dramatically changed over the last several decades.

These examples often still rely on the assumption that in documentary, reality is best represented by mimicry: the events portrayed must look as 'real' as possible. At first glance, Abu-Assad's defence is in line with this assumption, as are the reactions of many of his peers. Manipulation is allowed as long as it produces scenes that are 'authentic' and 'truthful'.[4] But Abu-Assad remarks that his play with fiction and reality is more than just a practical tool: it is also a conceptual device to demonstrate the complexity of visual language and to question assumptions about the origin of narratives.[5]

The last decades have produced documentaries that use fictional elements for different reasons than to approximate reality: to give room to a personal interpretation of events, to facilitate the subjects' self-representation, or as a tool for critical reflection. In these hybrid films, the story is often constructed by freely combining formal and conceptual techniques associated with both documentary representation and fictional storytelling, and the filmmaker's personal background, interests, objectives, and attitudes may openly and visibly influence that construction.

In the case of *Ford Transit*, the filmmaker's background is particularly significant. As a Palestinian-Israeli filmmaker, Abu-Assad might not have been granted access to film at the Israeli-Palestinian border at all. In order to depict the reality of the lives of his subjects, with whom he shares the same background, he had no choice but to resort to fictionalisation.

The introduction of fictional elements can open up space for both the director and the subjects of the film to influence their representation. The starting point of the film is the subjects' situation, but the making of the film can be taken as a form of storytelling in which reality – what is happening at a specific moment in time and place – interacts with the recounting of the subjects' experiences of their reality. Recounting can be factual, but it can also involve

[4] A remark by Kees Ryninks, at the time Head of Documentary of the Netherlands Film Fund, shows how problematic these definitions are. In an article in *De Volkskrant*, he states that manipulation is permitted as long as 'emotional reality' is not compromised. He does not define 'emotional reality', but he seems to admit that montage is an acceptable form of manipulation in documentary film, whereas (unacknowledged) reconstruction is not.

[5] *Trouw*, 2003, https://www.trouw.nl/home/vpro-trekt-documentaire-terug-van-filmfestival~aa7e3c93/.

imagination, interpretation, staging, reconstruction, and reflection, and the filmmaker can include the subjects of the film in this process as co-creators.

Perhaps the divide between reality and fiction was never so clearly delineated to begin with. As Stella Bruzzi argues in her book *New Documentary*, looking at documentary film through the lens of the performative turn, all forms of documentary are in some way or another defined by the inherently performative interaction between the filmmaker and the subjects. Every event that takes place before the camera is defined by this interaction: 'The truth emerges through the encounter between filmmaker, subjects and spectators'.[6] As Bruzzi says, the audience is well aware of the artificiality that inevitably accompanies the intrusion of the filmmaker.

This thesis investigates hybrid documentary-fiction films that were constructed through a close collaboration between the filmmakers and the subjects, and in which the subjects' personal experiences and ideas about self-representation influenced both the content and the form of the film. The objective of the filmmakers is to raise questions about how to understand somebody else's experiences; what it means to insert oneself as a filmmaker into the lives of others; how to make sense of complex inner experiences that are difficult to represent visually; and, most importantly, how to make the spectator aware of these issues. They do so by using formal methods that are usually associated with fiction filmmaking and by foregrounding the film's construction.

I propose that in the films I will be discussing, the spectator is urged to take an active part in the construction of meaning. Since the filmmakers do not offer a conclusive perspective on the story or an interpretation of the images, the spectator is made to invest his or her own experiences, which are equally valuable as those of the filmmakers and the subjects of the films.[7]

As a guideline for my investigation, I will use Jacques Rancière's essay on emancipated spectatorship. In 'The Emancipated Spectator', Rancière breaks down the opposition between viewing and acting in order to escape its innate inequality. According to Rancière, the

[6] Bruzzi, 2006, 11.
[7] From here on, I will alternately use 'his', 'her', 'he', and 'she' when referring to the spectator. The omission of 'their' as an indication of gender neutrality is solely due to the possible confusion between the singular and plural.

opposition comes from the idea that the viewers' position is either passive, taking pleasure in the spectacle, or active, being 'draw[n]out of their passive attitude and transform[ed] into active participants in a shared world'.[8] For Rancière, the emancipation of the spectator starts with the recognition that 'looking is also an action [...] and that "interpreting the world" is already a means of transforming, of reconfiguring it'.[9]

Emancipated spectatorship should be considered the viewer's active and critical engagement with the text, whether that is a play, a film, a book or something else. Rancière opposes the idea that the author of the text – or the director of a film – has a greater knowledge and therefore a greater authority than the spectator. What Rancière proposes instead is an 'intellectual adventure', a process of translation, association, and dissociation, in which both parties take part as equals.[10] The outcome of this process is unpredictable, because it is led by personal experience – the only tool one has to measure new information against.

Taking Rancière's emancipated spectatorship as a guideline, I will investigate which formal methods associated with fiction filmmaking can employed to activate the spectator, how, and to what effect. My case studies are hybrid documentary-fiction films that are produced through a collaborative process between subjects and filmmakers. I have divided my thesis into three chapters that each treats a specific formal method: identification through ambiguous focalisation; the uncertain relation between voice, text, and image; and database logic as an alternative to narrative logic.

The starting point in the first chapter is the idea that the filmmaker can somehow become part of the subjects' world to the extent that he is 'with' them, subservient to their story but still an (acknowledged) presence. I will use Peter Verstraten's book *Film Narratology* as a tool to analyse how focalisation is effectuated in *'Til Madness Do Us Part* (Wang Bing, 2013), *All These Sleepless Nights* (Michal Marczak, 2014), and *I Touched Her Legs* (Eva Marie Rødbro, 2010), and I will argue that Pier Paolo Pasolini's concept of free indirect subjectivity from his essay on the cinema of poetry can serve to analyse how these films involve the viewer in a 'being-with' the subjects.

[8] Rancière, 2011, 11-12.
[9] Rancière, 2007, 277.
[10] Rancière, 2011, 17.

In the second chapter, I will investigate three short films in which the relationship between the voice, the spoken word, and the image is uncertain. The texts in *Moore Street* (Desperate Optimists, 2004), *The Beast* (Samantha Nell and Michael Wahrmann, 2016), and *Ain't Got No Fear* (Mikhail Karikis, 2016) consist of voice-over, scripted monologue, and dialogue and song lyrics that are produced in collaboration with the subjects of the films. By using direct address and breaking the fourth wall, these films question the source and authorship of the texts as well as the audience's position and whom these words address. Stella Bruzzi's ideas on performative documentary and Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror* will serve as the main framework for the analysis.

In the third chapter, I will take Lev Manovich's concepts of database logic and cultural interface as my starting point to investigate three short films that defy narrative logic by collating images from different temporal and spatial sources. *Green Screen Gringo* (Douwe Dijkstra, 2016), *For The Record* (Aïlien Reyns and Fleur Khani, 2014), and *Dear Lorde* (Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby, 2015) employ methods of cut-and-paste and, in part, make use of footage that is produced independently by their subjects. I will illustrate how these films are influenced by network culture, the consequences this has for the self-representation of the subjects, and how the spectator is urged to find the connections that are distributed through a network rather than a causal narrative.

My aim is not to be conclusive, but to trace a broad outline of the possibilities that hybrid filmmaking offers to activate the spectator through ambiguous storytelling. I have chosen recent films – most have been produced within the last decade – in order to give a contemporary rather than historical perspective. This perspective is reflected in the order of chapters and case studies, which lead from the more conventional formal method of focalisation via the introduction of staging the narrative to the way that stories can arise in contemporary network culture. This is not a linear progression in time or in how effective these films are in their appeal to the viewer, but rather an indication of where the collaborative process between filmmaker and subjects might take future filmmakers.

I tried to approach the films with the same curiosity, playfulness, and investment that the filmmakers themselves display, in the hope that this will also be conveyed to the reader.

CHAPTER ONE: THE LIMITS OF CONTROL

It is a tantalising idea that a documentary filmmaker can 'disappear' into an environment by making her presence part of the situation to such an extent that she is no longer a foreign object but a fixture, a fly on the wall. The idea hinges on the assumption that she is consequently able to capture what happens in front of the camera without interfering. It also suggests that, by extension, the viewer gains privileged access to the events as they unfold through the mediation of the filmmaker.

Bill Nichols positions the fly-on-the-wall method within the observational mode of documentary filmmaking.[11] This method developed in the 1960s with the introduction of small 16mm cameras and recording equipment that could easily be handled by one person, allowing for free movement within a situation and taking away the need for artificial devices such as staging and setting up interviews.[12] The word 'observational' suggests neutrality and sobriety, and in Nichols' definition, 'sobriety' means that the subjective perspective of the filmmaker is kept at bay.

Nichols' highly influential compartmentalisation of documentary modes has been criticised by Stella Bruzzi as being reductive; unaccommodating to recent, more complex hybrid forms of filmmaking; and resulting in a conservative canon of documentary films.[13] Bruzzi approaches non-fiction filmmaking primarily as a performative practice.[14] Factual representation is impossible, says Bruzzi, because 'documentary is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation, and bias on the other'.[15] With this statement, Bruzzi places subjectivity at the core of the documentary effort.

In fiction filmmaking, the relation between subjectivity and realism is equally ambiguous, since the presence of the former somewhat paradoxically enhances the viewer's experience of the latter. The more convincingly the characters' subjective experiences are expressed, the

[11] Nichols, 2010, 31.
[12] Nichols, 2010, 172.
[13] Bruzzi, 2006, 2-3.
[14] Bruzzi bases her theory in part on the performative turn in the humanities and on Judith Butler's influential book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, first published in 1990. Butler poses the idea that identity only comes into being as it is performed. This idea is informed by J. L. Austin's linguistic proposition of what constitutes performative speech: an enunciation that calls into being what it utters, for example, 'I now pronounce you man and wife'.
[15] Bruzzi, 2006, 6.

more the viewer is made to identify with them, the more 'real' their circumstances might seem to him, and the more he is 'drawn into' the film.

This sense of realism is conveyed through the use of focalisation. Focalisation offers the viewer a subjective interpretation of events by representing the point of view of one of the characters in the film. The focalising character offers the viewer an interpretation of the events: the happy expression on a character's face while looking at another character leads the viewer to a positive impression of the latter character.[16]

Zero focalisation is impossible, since every shot involves choices: camera position, depth of field, movement, the duration of the shot. There is always at the very least external focalisation, the expression of an external narrator who determines how the story and characters are presented.[17] According to Peter Verstraten, all forms of subjective focalisation are secondary to and embedded in this external focalisation. From this perspective, even a documentary's most neutral shot is focalised by an external narrator: the filmmaker. But focalisation can also be ambiguous, uncertain, and shifting between the point of view of the filmmaker and that of different characters.

In this chapter, I will analyse three documentary films in which the filmmakers claim that they were 'led' by their subjects. Hence, their own presence as filmmakers was subservient to the subjects' agency to represent themselves. This suggests that the relationship between external and internal focalisation might be more complicated, and that the filmmakers' subjective vision might be expressed in different ways than merely as the external narrator.

I will demonstrate how the friction between external and internal focalisation leads to ambiguous focalisation and eventually to what Pier Paolo Pasolini calls 'the cinema of poetry': a state of 'being-with' the subjects and the situation.

[16] Verstraten, 2009, 43.
[17] Verstraten, 2009, 40.

'Til Madness Do Us Part

'Where they go, I follow'. This statement could summarise Wang Bing's approach to the subjects in his documentary films.[18] The camera's sticking close to the characters, trailing one person for some time and then suddenly swerving to the next when caught by another movement, another story, is no doubt the most prominent formal aspect of Wang's documentaries. In his films, there is no use of exposition, no interviews, no analysis of events through voice-over or otherwise, no critical comparison or contextualisation by the filmmaker apart from the most basic information on his subjects.

The residents of a mental institution in rural China in *'Til Madness Do Us Part* (*Feng ai*, 2013) are introduced only by their names and how long they have been institutionalised, in simple lettering over the image. It is only at the end of the film that, through a short and sober text, we learn about the location of the hospital and the fact that violent and non-violent inmates are housed together. Disorderly conduct or other unwanted behaviour can be as much a reason for institutionalisation as murder. Initially, all that the viewer knows about the men in the film has to be deduced from what the camera shows.

There is something alluring in this statement – 'Where they go, I will follow' – that is so close to a lover's declaration. It suggests that the power in this relationship between filmmaker and subject resides with the latter, that the subject chooses the path and that the filmmaker will trail with a lover's loyalty. Yet it also suggests obsession, relentless stalking, voyeurism. This dualism is exemplified by the way that *'Til Madness Do Us Part* was received by the international press. For example, in a review for *Slant Magazine*, critic James Lattimer states that Wang's lack of judgement and his 'willingness to watch and listen to absolutely anything' invokes intimacy and tenderness, going so far as to call the film 'gentle'.[19] Film critic Andrew Chan, however, reaches an opposite conclusion when he states that what *'Til Madness Do Us Part* makes us feel 'most viscerally is the pitilessness and ruthlessness of his gaze'.[20]

[18] Guarneri, Wang, 2017, https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-wang-bing/.
[19] Lattimer, 2016, https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/til-madness-do-us-part.
[20] Chan, 2016, 42.

Two things are worth noting here. First, Lattimer and Chan base their views on a similar analysis of *'Til Madness Do Us Part* by focussing on its long duration and its prolonged attention, in equal measure, to banal details, dramatic events, and quotidian activities. However, they reach opposite conclusions about the subjective nature of the filmmaker's gaze: tender versus ruthless. Second, Lattimer and Chan equate what the camera records with the director's gaze and extend this gaze to the perception of the viewer: they suppose that the filmmaker's subjective view is adopted by the viewer.

Two important aspects connected to Wang's camerawork are missing in their analysis: the way that the 'trailing camera' hinges on the interaction between filmmaker and characters, and the way that montage both effectuates and undermines the supposedly shared subjective view of filmmaker and viewer.

What does this 'trailing camera' mean for the agency of the subjects? Are they really leading the director's gaze, as Wang claims, or are they merely subjected to it? In this specific situation – an overcrowded, dirty mental hospital, where treatment is limited to medication and which offers no occupation or distraction other than a small TV in the shared room – this question is particularly pertinent. It is hard to imagine a situation where people have less freedom, less agency to decide what happens to them. With five beds to a room and no locks on the doors, it seems impossible to find privacy or evade the presence of the filmmaker. The inmates at times acknowledge his presence with a direct look or a few words, but most often seem to ignore him in the same way that they ignore the presence of fellow inmates: as something that cannot be changed and therefore must be accepted.

In this space defined by limitations and restrictions, there is a constant friction between the supposedly discreet and virtually unnoticed presence of the filmmaker, and the different subjective perspectives of the filmmaker and the characters that the film offers.

There are many instances throughout the film that break down one of the keystones of narrative cinema: the shot/reverse shot principle. According to this principle, the first shot shows a character's expression and the second shot what the character is looking at. The external focaliser depends upon an internal focaliser to guide the viewer through the interpretation of the images. In Wang's film however, the point of view offered by the camera is often difficult to trace back to a specific internal focaliser.

The camerawork in *'Til Madness Do Us Part* is very different from some of Wang's other films, such as *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* (2007) and *Father and Sons* (2014), as critic Travis Jeppesen rightly notices.[21] In these films, Wang employs a static camera on a tripod to record long, uninterrupted takes. In contrast, *'Til Madness Do Us Part* alternates shots from a fixed perspective with sudden bursts of mobility.

One scene, around 10 minutes into the film, particularly stands out. The camera begins following a young man called Ma Jian who wanders from room to room at night, talking to unwilling fellow inmates and disjointedly reflecting on life inside the institution, intermittently addressing the camera. 'Come on, follow me', he says, looking over his shoulder. When Ma Jian arrives at the communal room, he takes off his coat and multiple jumpers and declares that he is going for a run. The camera hovers in the doorway for a few moments before setting off after him along the corridor. 'Someone is chasing me, he's gonna kill me', Ma Jian says, and then, 'Damn, you are as sweaty as me. That's enough, I am tired and sweaty'.

This scene is striking because it is one of the rare instances in which a character directly addresses the camera in a prolonged, albeit one-sided conversation, but even more so because the camera's initial hesitation and wobbly chase down the corridor makes visible the physical presence of the filmmaker. The scene emphasises how each shot is informed by the interaction between filmmaker and subject, and as such, results from the filmmaker's choice of how to deal with an unexpected situation. Similar to the methods of direct cinema, these movements emphasise the filmmaker's physical presence and make the viewer aware of the shooting apparatus.[22] Jeppesen sees in this camera movement 'a wandering agency', but it is the filmmaker's agency that he is referring to, not that of the subject. The direct address and the unsteady movements of the camera are an indication of the physical presence of the filmmaker, but they also indicate his emotional involvement. His willingness to engage with Ma Jian, to allow him to break the fourth wall and force the filmmaker to run with him, is a sign of empathy.

[21] Jeppesen, 2016, 41-44.
[22] Pernin, 2010, 22. In her article, Pernin defines a number of characteristics of the New Documentary Movement in China that developed in the 1990s: a focus on ordinary people, a full length format, and a distinct lack of didactic purpose, characteristics that are also associated with direct cinema. In combination with a hand-held syle of filmmaking informed by the rise and accessiblity of digital video equipment, this has led to a kind of 'auteur cinema' in recent Chinese documentary film.

This particular scene also emphasises the problem of the power relation between filmmaker and subject, which in *'Til Madness Do Us Part* is made concrete in the dichotomy of voyeurism versus agency and intrusion versus privacy. Rancière addresses this moral question in *'Til Madness Do Us Part* in an interview with film theorist Stoffel Debuysere: 'The point is to know how you deal with the characters in front of you, how you deal with their bodies', he says.[23] Compulsive movement might seem to be a symptom of mental illness, but Wang's tracking camera transforms it into an action. What Jeppesen calls 'a wandering agency' Rancière sees less as an indication of the subjective consciousness of the filmmaker, and more as a method of opening up the confined spaces of the asylum.

Although it is the filmmaker who transforms 'the closed space into an open space of some kind of action', Rancière locates the *capacity* for that action in the bodies of the characters themselves. Rancière states something similar when he talks about Pedro Costa's film *In Vanda's Room*, when he says that the political dimension of the film lies in 'the confrontation between the impotence and the power of a body, the confrontation between a life and its possibilities'.[24] Even in the most uncertain and powerless existences, there is a power in speech and action which is grounded in the sensory riches of daily existence. Rancière observes about *In Vanda's Room* that:

> It affirms an art in which the form is not split off from the construction of a social relation or the realisation of a capacity that belongs to everyone. The politics of the filmmaker involves using the sensory riches – the power of speech or vision – that can be extracted from the life and settings of these precarious existences and returning them to their owners, making them available, like a song they can enjoy, like a love letter whose words and sentences they can borrow for their own lives.[25]

For Rancière, the work of Costa and Wang depends on the patience with which they approach their subjects, and the attention they pay to the beauty that is found even in the direst circumstances. This attention can manifest itself in the long takes and extreme duration that Costa and Wang are known for, but also in a mobile camera that willingly follows the

[23] Debuysere, 2017, http://www.sabzian.be/article/on-the-borders-of-fiction.
[24] Rancière, 2011, 80. Pedro Costa's films are documentary-fiction hybrids in which the characters are restaging the their lives in front of the camera. His work shares with Wang's an emphasis on the daily lives of people relegated to the margins of society, extended takes and long duration, and a lack of exposition or explanation of context.
[25] Rancière, 2011, 81.

characters, or the bond between filmmaker and subject that is expressed through direct address.

If Wang opens up confined spaces with his moving camera, as Rancière claims, then in the scene described above, he does so in a fairly straightforward way. Although the power relation between filmmaker and character is ambiguous in its pulling and pushing, in the way they alternately keep their distance and draw closer to each other, it is clear that the images are focalised by the filmmaker. Even though the scene does not consist of one continuous take, the editing is consistent with the filmmaker's point of view, which carries across the cuts.

In many other scenes, however, the camera and the editing are much more at odds with each other. In these scenes, the editing produces sudden, arbitrary jumps from one position to another in a way that is inconsistent with the shot/reverse shot principle. Scenes in which Wang trails behind a character for minutes on end are alternated with scenes that are limited to one space and that consist of a number of takes brought together in discontinuous editing.[26]

In one of these scenes, the camera follows a man called Ma Yonglian into the tiny, bare room that he shares with four other men. Ma, who is a Muslim, begins his prayers while standing on his bed. The camera stays just within the doorway for some time, framing the room at eye level, before cutting away to show the doorway from exactly the opposite position inside the room. Again, the image cuts to a view from the door, and again from a position back inside the room, this time framing the doorway from a lower angle. By now the other men have started to wake up, prompting one of them to try to get into an occupied bed for some warmth and cuddles. With each consecutive shot, the camera takes up another position in the room. Because the room is so small, the filmmaker cannot help but stand or crouch near the edge of one of the beds. At the end of the scene the camera ends up virtually on top of two men sharing a bed, moving up and down with their breathing, like some disembodied ghost.

The effect is that the images produced by the camera could just as well be the point of view of one of the men lying or sitting in their beds. Since the editing does not follow the shot/reverse

[26] Bordwell and Thompson, 2004, 502. Discontinuity editing in film narratology is defined as 'Any alternative system of joining shots together using techniques unacceptable within continuity editing principles'. In this case, it is specifically the matching screen direction and position that Wang violates.

shot principle of continuous editing, it is impossible to attribute these shots to a specific internal focaliser (that is, to a specific character). [27] The filmmaker has made himself part of the situation, but it is impossible for the viewer to determine where the external focalisation coincides with the internal focalisation of one of the characters.

Wang offers no coherent representation of life in the asylum. The viewer does not know how much time has passed between each shot or whose point of view the camera represents. The viewer is placed in the middle of the situation with no guide as how to interpret the images. In this way, Wang incites the viewer to define her own position.

All These Sleepless Nights

Two boys, one girl. A lot of drinks, more cigarettes. Music and parties that start at dusk in living rooms and end at outside raves at dawn. Best friends Krzysztof and Michal and Eva, who completes the triangle, wander the streets, talk, sleep, and dance. They belong to the generation born after communism ended in Poland, and they enjoy their coming of age in the brief period in history when life in Warsaw was cheap and full of promises.[28] Time is on their side. Their lives are captured by director Michal Marczak in a way that reflects their experiences: ecstatic, energetic, sentimental, disjointed, focused, aimless, sensuous. The result is *All These Sleepless Nights*, the documentary-fiction hybrid with which Marczak burst upon the documentary film world in 2015.

Marczak spent months doing research for his film, partying, drinking, and talking to youths until he met and befriended Krzysztof and Michal. Over the course of a year and a half, he chronicled the story of their lives. The fact that Marczak is only a few years older than the two young men no doubt helped shape this collaboration between filmmaker and subjects. Marczak, who is also responsible for the cinematography of his film, gets as close to his characters as possible. His camera moves with and dances around his characters, who

[27] Verstraten, 2009, 9. 'Focalisation' is a term used in film narratology to indicate the subjective colouring of a certain shot. A shot coloured by the experiences of a character in the film is not necessary a point-of-view shot; conversely, an internal focaliser is not necessarily a character in the film.

[28] In an interview with Geoffrey MacNab for *The Independent*, Marczak reflects on the circumstances in which the first generation after communism grew up in Poland. Around 2014 and 2015, when the film was shot, the economic climate in Poland was good, there was freedom of speech, housing was cheap, and young people had a lot of free time. Consequently, Warsaw developed lively arts, music, and theatre scenes with a distinct style of their own.

consider his presence as natural as if he were an old friend. There is an extraordinary intimacy in the way the filmmaker manages to become part of the lives of his characters, especially considering the fact that he uses a highly cinematographic language. His images are lush, beautifully photographed, with a shallow depth of field and fluid, stabilised shots. Marczak means to convey the emotional and sensuous experience of reality, and he uses techniques borrowed from fiction film to draw the viewer into this experience.[29] He says:

> What really got me into doing documentary was the idea of making films that really bring you into the story, that make you feel like you're there with the characters, that make you feel like you're a partner and not just a viewer. You have to actively be in it, and everything that you've lived through is also part of the story. It's like an immersive experience.

Half an hour into the film, the camera shows a field at the edge of town. The camera moves, smoothly but still synched to the rhythm of the music coming from the outdoor party nearby. It drifts between solitary figures dancing before setting off after a figure running towards the party, where the camera meets up with Krzysztof and Michal. While the camera circles around and among the partygoers, it is unclear exactly whose point of view is represented. The discontinuous editing juxtaposes multiple shots without conforming to eyeline match or screen direction.[30]

This makes it difficult for the viewer to determine the status of certain shots. What at first might seem to be the vision presented by the visual narrator – which is the external focaliser through whose perspective the story is told – could also be a point-of-view shot that belongs to an internal focaliser. 'I wanted the camera to be a character', Marczak says, and indeed many shots could be interpreted either as belonging to this camera-as-a-character, to the filmmaker himself as he is part of in the goings-on, or to Krzysztof or Michal.[31]

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[29] Hynes, 2017, https://www.sundance.org/blogs/artist-spotlight/young-turks-talking-to-michal-marczak-about-all-these-sleepless-nights. Marczak is not always that clear on in which genre his film belongs to. In an interview with online film platform Indiewire, he calls the distinction 'completely boring' and states that he leaves the labelling to others.

[30] Bordwell and Thompson, 2004, 501.

[31] Hynes, 2017, https://www.sundance.org/blogs/artist-spotlight/young-turks-talking-to-michal-marczak-about-all-these-sleepless-nights.

Marczak, like Wang, uses ambiguous focalisation and discontinuous editing to activate the viewer into determining her own position and interpretation of the images, but with a diametrically opposed style. In Marczak's case, narrative discontinuity is not effectuated with arbitrary cuts between shots, but via a fluidly moving camera that switches between different focalisers within the same shot. Likewise, the auditive track is often disconnected from the visual track and continues over the cuts, which further complicates the question of a dominant perspective.

Marczak's interest in blending documentary and fiction in order to convey an experience of 'being-with' his characters resonated with critics and audiences alike. Although interviews with Marczak tended to focus on his methodology and the use of fictional elements, technical equipment, rehearsal, and improvisation, critics did not see Marczak's method as something that diminished the authenticity of the film.[32] As Bruzzi argues, the distinction between documentary, fiction, and experimental film genres has become much more flexible in the last decades.[33] Bruzzi mentions the potential in recognising that the viewer is aware of the fact that documentary can never be a straightforward representation of reality and calls this recognition 'hugely liberating'.

Marczak admits that perhaps half of what happens in the film would not have happened without the filmmaking process, but that all the events were real nonetheless, lived through by everybody involved, and that nobody was acting.[34] This phrasing – living through or in a certain moment together – bespeaks Marczak's desire to let go of factual representation in favour of expressing this communal experience.

To do so, Marczak needed a specific set-up that allowed for a high degree of mobility and could still produce the high-quality images he was after. Marczak used a custom-made rig with a follow focus, fast lenses, and a battery in a backpack, which permitted him to shoot for hours in dark environments without any additional crew. This enabled him to take part in the events rather than only record them.

[32] The film made a succesful run at documentary film festivals and won the Directing Award for World Cinema Documentary at Sundance, but has also been announced and screened as a drama. On IMDb, the film is credited both as a drama and as a documentary. When the film was available on Netflix, it was advertised as a drama.
[33] Bruzzi, 2006, 8.
[34] Hynes, 2017, https://www.sundance.org/blogs/artist-spotlight/young-turks-talking-to-michal-marczak-about-all-these-sleepless-nights.

What he aimed for was what Pier Paolo Pasolini calls 'free indirect subjectivity': to 'be with' his characters and to assimilate to their psychology to such an extent of 'being-with' that his own perspective is infected by it.[35] According to Pasolini, with free indirect subjectivity the image is capable of offering a perception that is objective and subjective at the same time.[36] Pasolini derives his term from literature's free indirect discourse: when the author identifies with and adopts the psychology of his character to 're-live (his) discourse', he also adapts to his character's language.[37] Since cinema does not have access to the same tools as language, this 'contamination' between the vision of the author and that of the character has to be achieved by stylistic means, specifically the way that different viewpoints are brought together by montage.

In the scene I described above, Krzysztof's voice is heard in a voice-over, which suggests that he is the focaliser of the images. But as the camera swerves through the crowd and suddenly catches Krzysztof's body in the frame, there is a small, surprised wobble. This suggests that it might not be Krzysztof who is focalising after all. Verstraten argues that in scenes like this, perception can shift from character to character.[38] However, the camera movement suggests ambiguous rather than shifting focalisation. Perhaps the visual narrator – the filmmaker himself – is focalising this shot *while adapting to Krzysztof's psychology*. When Krzystof appears in the frame, the contamination of the filmmaker's vision is temporarily suspended.

It is worth noting that it is only Krzystof's voice that is used in the voice-over in the film, which suggests that it is Krzysztof who is the internal focaliser of the subjective shots in this scene and scenes like it. But if these shots are the result of free indirect discourse, in which the vision of the filmmaker blends with that of the character, the voice-over might also be the result of the filmmaker's interpretation of Krzystof's psychology. Kaja Silverman argues in her book *The Acoustic Mirror* that the fictional model of voice-over reveals a character's private thoughts 'like a searchlight'.[39] In this case it is unclear exactly whose private thoughts

[35] Pasolini, 1976, 7.
[36] Pasolini, 1976, 6. Although I previously pointed out the problematic nature of the terms 'subjective' and 'objective', I use the terms here in accordance with Pasolini's thought.
[37] Gilles Deleuze expands on the relationship between language and cinema in his chapter on the perception-image in *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*. Deleuze refers to the semiotic and linguistic terms in which Pasolini approaches free indirect subjectivity and explains that the richer a language is, and the more it allows for dialects, the wider the possibilities are for the use of free indirect discourse.
[38] Verstraten, 2009, 117-118.
[39] Silverman, 1988, 53.

are revealed. Krzystof's words can also be seen as a factual explanation of his motivation in a documentary that otherwise uses no exposition.

To remain mobile and low-profile, Marczak did not make audio recordings on set but recorded the dialogues afterwards with ADR.[40] Similarly, the exact same music that played on set was recreated on the auditive track in the studio.[41] The result is a high-quality stereo soundtrack in which music, dialogue, and voice-over are modulated to reflect the shifting attention of separate focalisers. It is not always clear who the focaliser on the auditive track is, and not all sounds can be traced back to a source in the diegetic world. The way that the visual and auditive tracks are aligned at times and at other times separated reflects the uncertain division between documentary and fiction in *All These Sleepless Nights*. This is most apparent in the voice-over, which uses Krzysztof's voice, but not necessarily his own words.

David Heinemann beautifully summarises Pasolini's ideas when he writes: 'Free indirect speech reinforces this ambiguity [regarding the narrative point of view] to the formal opposition it gives rise to – between picture and sound, image and voice – contributing to a polyphonic, multivalent cinema'.[42] The multivalence in *All These Sleepless Nights* not only lies in its ambiguous focalisation, but also in its ambiguous status between documentary and fiction.

The viewer is presented with a multitude of subjective experiences, as well as options to 'read' the film as more documentary or more fictional. These choices are presented throughout the film, and consequently the viewer has to keep calibrating her interpretation of the events to the options presented to her and to her own experiences. This comes close to what Rancière defines as emancipated spectatorship. Rancière breaks down the hierarchy between doing and seeing, between cause and effect, between filmmaker and viewer, and replaces it with a process of measuring previous experiences against new ones in which both director and viewer take part.[43] In *All These Sleepless Nights*, this process includes the subjects of the film. After all, the filmmaking process was already a measuring of experiences

[40] Additional Dialogue Replacement
[41] Hynes, 2017, https://www.sundance.org/blogs/artist-spotlight/young-turks-talking-to-michal-marczak-about-all-these-sleepless-nights.
[42] Heinemann, 2012, 2.
[43] Rancière, 2011, 13-14.

between filmmaker and subjects, and it is through free indirect subjectivity that these shared experiences are communicated to the viewer.

All These Sleepless Nights questions the separation between filmmaker, subject, and viewer and between documentary and fiction by merging everyone's personal experience and interpretation of events into the same structure.

I Touched Her Legs

In my treatment of *'Til Madness Do Us Part* and *All These Sleepless Nights*, I have focussed a great deal on the filmmakers' involvement with their characters and the way their empathic 'being-with' is conveyed to the viewer. I have linked this to the shooting apparatus and the kind of images a certain apparatus is capable of producing.

It would seem, based on these examples, that a certain kind of apparatus is linked to a certain kind of 'being-with': that in order to be fully led by the unforeseen movements of the inmates of the asylum, Wang could only use a simple, small, consumer-grade DV camera, and that in order to fully convey the experiences shared by young people exploring themselves and the city, Marczak had to rely on the kind of smooth, tactile, high-quality images that are usually associated with fiction filmmaking. Although it might be difficult to imagine Wang using Marczak's cinematography in the confined spaces of the asylum, I want to demonstrate that the kind of experience that Marczak offers the viewer can also be achieved through the employment of a consumer-grade DV camera.

Danish director Eva Marie Rødbro has a distinct talent for portraying the subcultures of specific groups of youths, whether in the suburbs of Copenhagen or in the American South. In *I Touched Her Legs*, a 10-minute short film from 2010, there is no exposition, no contextualisation, and no introduction of characters at all. The film consists of a montage of digital images, with no better image quality than what the average mobile phone at that time could produce.

There is no storyline, only fragments of situations joined together by a soundtrack consisting of diegetic sounds that are often carried over to the next shot, or that are disconnected from

their visual reference point completely. The way that the characters behave – often as if Rødbro were not there, sometimes acknowledging the camera with a sidelong glance – suggests that she is as much part of the situation as is imaginable. The images look like the kind of home footage that is produced routinely and without much thought. In fact, it might very well be the case that a number of shots were not made by Rødbro, but by her subjects themselves, or their friends or neighbours.

Rødbro's discontinuous editing brings together images that are impossible to allocate to a specific internal focaliser, or even to the director or visual narrator. The shifts in perspective occur too often, and the consecutive shots are too short for a coherent use of focalisation., As in Marczak's film, the camera is no longer bound to an objective or subjective view and produces a free indirect subjectivity, which Deleuze by way of Pasolini defines as an unmoored, anonymous viewpoint that the camera offers in a 'being-with' the characters. What happens is 'a case of going beyond the subjective and the objective towards a pure Form which sets itself up as an autonomous vision of the content', as Deleuze describes this operation in which the camera becomes an 'independent aesthetic consciousness'.[44]

It is perhaps the specific aesthetics that Rødbro employs that makes this camera-consciousness possible – an aesthetics that, in its unpretentiousness, seems to belong to the characters as much as to the filmmaker, or rather to nobody in particular. Quoting Pasolini, Deleuze says: 'It is a very special kind of cinema which has acquired a taste for "making the camera felt"'. According to Pasolini, the camera is felt when the images do not adhere to a consistent 'linguistic' structure. The camera is not put in the service of meaning, but instead is allowed to 'do violence to (the facts) with mad semantic deformations'.[45] *I Touched Her Legs* makes the camera felt in this way, although Rødbro's deformations are ambiguous and gentle rather than violent.

[44] Deleuze, 1986, 74.
[45] Pasolini, 1976, 10.

CHAPTER 2: VOICES HEARD

In this chapter, I will investigate three short documentary/fiction hybrids in which the narratives are partly based on lived and voiced experiences and partly fictional. In the first chapter, the viewer's spectatorship was activated through the use of ambiguous focalisation and free indirect discourse, which complicated straightforward identification. The filmmakers demonstrated their empathic involvement by sharing in their subjects' sensory experiences and conveyed this sense of 'being-with' to the viewer. But empathy and involvement can also lead to a more explicitly shared authorship that is expressed in the construction of new, partly fictional narratives.

In *Moore Street*, *The Beast*, and *Ain't Got No Fear*, the collaborative process focussed on first collecting and examining personal stories, and then transforming them into new, partly scripted narratives. The films make use of different forms of non-conversational texts such as voice-over, scripted dialogue, theatre monologue, and song lyrics. The relationship between image, voice, and text is far from straightforward, and all three films make use of a form of direct address – in which the words are spoken to an anonymous 'you' – often accompanied by the characters gazing straight into the camera.

Moore Street

Between 2003 and 2010, Desperate Optimists (hereafter DO; Christine Molloy and Joe Lawlor) produced a series of seven short films under the umbrella title *Civic Life*. Each of these films was made in close collaboration with local community groups and takes place in a specific area – a park, a building, a street – that has significant meaning for that community. The location is often a place in a state of transit or regeneration, as well as a source of pride for the community.[46]

[46] Lawlor, 2017. For example, *Leisure Centre* was commissioned in the context of the regeneration of Ballymun in Dublin, a notoriously run-down estate in the smog of the airport. Ballymun was built in the 1960s as temporary housing, with virtually no facilities, and suffered from violence, poverty, and drug-related crime. During conversations with the population, DO asked what the regeneration meant to them, and where they should put the camera. The leisure centre had just been built and was chosen because it was new, not run-down – because it looked good and was therefore the opposite of Ballymun.

This sense of pride and ownership explains in part the willingness of local people, community groups, and funding organisations to become involved with the filmmaking process, but it is certainly DO's working method that must be credited for the commitment of the community. Molloy and Lawlor spend months on making contact and spending time with the community and their leaders, building trust and collecting the stories and experiences on which their films are based.[47] It is through these leaders, who have the trust of and authority in the community, that the filmmakers could contact people and convince them to take part in the filmmaking process. As Molloy states, their work is not about creating communities, but articulating them.[48]

The time is at night, and the location is Moore Street, one of the oldest market streets in Dublin. In the decade before filming, this street found itself in the middle of a transformation and regeneration process due to an economic boost and the influx of immigrants, mainly from Nigeria, who had set up shop there.[49] The camera follows a young black woman who walks the abandoned street at a pace somewhere between purposeful and strolling. On the soundtrack, we hear her whispering to a loved one left behind, spoken both in English and Swahili. Her voice starts before the images, listing words in English over a black screen and repeating them in Swahili: *Rain. Here. Streets. Cold. Whiteness. Blackness. Walking. Things*.

With these first words, she sets a bleak and somewhat threatening atmosphere, in which she presents herself as somebody potentially in danger – a woman, walking a deserted street at night – and specifically a black woman in a predominantly white society. As film critic Sukhdev Sandhu points out, the overarching title *Civic Life* should not be taken as a mere nostalgic celebration of the communal responsibility associated with quotidian life rooted in a distinctive local area.[50] *Whiteness, blackness* – with this juxtaposition, the woman points out that she is a stranger, that as a representative of a class of people that is often held responsible

[47] Lawlor, 2017.
[48] Mayer, 2016, http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/desperate-optimists-power-public.
[49] Lawlor, 2017. DO was commissioned to make a new work to represent Ireland at the São Paulo Biennale 2004. At the time, Ireland was going through a period of particular economic development. As a consequence, immigrants started to come to Ireland, which up to that time had been a country of emigration. This imposed an agenda upon the commission: to deal with notions of immigration, location, and identity – the overarching themes of DO's work – in the context of Ireland during that particular time. Moore Street had become a hub for African immigrants, mainly from Nigeria. As often happens, the immigrant population concentrated on and around market streets where small and flexible businesses could be set up: clothing, food, telecom shops, etc.
[50] Sandhu, 2006, 22-23.

for the disintegration of communal ties and values, she might be perceived as a danger herself.

The ominous atmosphere is reflected in the camerawork, in which DO's trademark one-take is translated into a constant movement of circling, distancing, and doubling back.[51] The camera alternately frames the woman from behind, from the side, and the front, moving further away and coming closer again, never losing sight of her. There is a notable difference between this one-take and the audacious single shot of the first film in the *Civic Life* series, *Who Killed Brown Owl*. There, the crane-mounted camera makes a slow rotation around a park on a summer day, swooping up and down to reveal the details of what turns out to be a murder mystery, adding a dark humour to the idea of the idyllic, suburban, polite, and indeed civic English society.

In *Moore Street*, the single take is made with a Steadicam that remains at eye level. Its drifting, prowling movements could perhaps be compared to the camerawork in *'Til Madness Do Us Part*, as a push-and-pull play with agency and power between filmmaker and subject. But although the questions of who has agency, who is allowed to speak, and for whom are central to DO's practice, it is not the camerawork per se that visualises this dynamic. It is the significance of the voice in relation to the image, and the performative aspect that lies at the heart of both, by which questions of authority and community in *Moore Street* are addressed.

A one-take film with a dynamically moving camera is per definition a highly stylised form of cinema. Given the way the woman walks the street, stops, looks into a doorway, and crosses the street, without acknowledging the camera that circles around her, it is clear that the action is precisely staged and that every movement is thought out. The use of real time is connected to the viewpoint of a live audience in the theatre, where mistakes cannot be masked by editing and where everything happens in 'one take', and thus also connected to performance, in which the moment and what is happening in that moment are central.[52]

[51] Lawlor, 2017. The choice of the single take is informed by practical as well as conceptual motivations. At the time that *Civic Life* was made, 35mm was the standard for both shooting and screening. One roll of film would yield 10 minutes of shooting time, and when that roll of film was used for one continuous shot, without edits, the development and print of the film would just fit the budget.
[52] Slater, 2006, 6.

The voice-over is equally stylised. There are no hesitations in the woman's voice; her sentences are fully formed and poetic, as if she is reading a letter. It is here that DO's background in community theatre shows: they made experimental theatre pieces using forms of verbatim theatre in the 1980s and 1990s, before turning their attention to filmmaking.[53] As in verbatim theatre, the words spoken in *Moore Street* are based on actual testimonies; in this case, multiple stories from the local community of immigrants are collated into one monologue.[54]

The overt stylisation and aestheticisation of voice and image is a distancing device, meant to call the viewer's attention to the film's reflexive qualities. Bruzzi describes this kind of documentary practice, which abandons any pretext of transparency or observation, as 'a multi-layered, performative exchange between subjects, filmmakers/apparatus, and spectators'.[55] At the same time, the woman's voice draws the listener nearer. Her tone is intimate, soft, almost whispering. Although she is addressing an unnamed loved one, her use of direct address – 'you' – invites the listener to stand in for that unknown person.

The gender and tone of the voice-over in *Moore Street* are crucial. The woman's voice is a subversion of the traditional understanding of the voice-over in documentary as rational, authoritative, and capable of explaining the events with detachment. The authority to selectively dole out information and steer the interpretation of the image is conventionally invested in the voice of a white, middle-class male.[56] The whispering, intimate voice in *Moore Street*, however, comes from a black female body. It is not generalised and authoritative, but specific, personal, and idiosyncratic.

The more explicitly gendered the voice is, and the more fluid and ambiguous the relationship between voice-over and image – that is, the further removed from the traditional voice-over narration of expository documentary – the greater its ability '[to expose] the untenability of documentary's belief in its capacity for imparting "generalised truths" faithfully and unproblematically', Bruzzi says.[57]

[53] Quick, 1997, 27.
[54] Lawlor, 2017. The cast likewise have a background in theatre: they are members of the Dublin-based African theatre company Arambe Productions, whose theatre pieces centre around belonging and immigration.
[55] Bruzzi, 2006, 9.
[56] Bruzzi, 2006, 57.
[57] Bruzzi, 2006, 66.

Although Bruzzi is particularly interested in the gendered voice as an example of the subversion of the traditional voice-over, her argument applies to class, race, and language as well. In other words, the more stylised the use of voice in relation to the image, and the more the narration is grounded outside of the default power position, the more the viewer is made aware of the question: who claims the power to speak, and for whom?

Because of the intimate nature of the story, the woman's voice in *Moore Street* resembles the fictional model of the voice-over, the 'searchlight' upon the character's private thoughts.[58] The difference is that these are not somebody's private thoughts, but an address to a loved one, which is by proxy also an address to the viewer of the film. Central to her address is the element of exchange in the process of immigration and belonging. She walks because she has no other means of transport: 'Soon, I will have walked every street. I have come to the conclusion it is the only way to understand a city's character, its nature'. By walking out of necessity, she also gains something: intimate knowledge of her surroundings, the kind of knowledge that a native community has by default and that she lost when she left her country. An exchange has been made.

She expresses her ambivalent attitude towards her place in this new society as an exchange, too: 'Did I say I don't want to belong? Ok, I admit: […] I do want to belong. But on my terms. I don't want to surrender everything. I'll give this city the bits of me it needs, and I will protect the rest. It's a kind of transaction, an arrangement we've come to'. There is a price to pay for belonging, and she chooses to keep some things for herself. Even in the intimacy of her narrative, there are parts that are shielded from the viewer. Only her own community can understand the words she speaks in Swahili. She makes a reference to a photograph of her loved one, but the viewer does not get to see that image. Her face is constantly in the frame, but her expression is impassive, yielding nothing.

For most of the film, the relationship between voice and image seems to be straightforward: one assumes that it is the woman walking whose voice is heard. Near the end of the film, the woman scrutinises her face in a mirrored storefront. The camera catches both her face and her reflection before she turns, suggesting that no matter how much we see of her, she still remains enigmatic. Then, for the first time, the camera leaves her to move towards the black

[58] Silverman, 1988, 53.

man who has emerged from a doorway. Others join him, standing in the street, looking straight into the camera. She has joined a group, the woman explains, to share thoughts and writings. This raises the possibility that perhaps the voice does not belong to this woman, but to another; perhaps it is the story of a man, voiced by a woman. This possibility challenges the notion that the viewer had access to the woman's private thoughts by assuming the position of the unknown 'you' she addresses in her voice-over.

Now that the connection between body and voice is uncertain, the displaced voice could also be considered as belonging to an extradiegetic commentator, which is invested with authority precisely *because* it comes from some unknown place off-screen and is not traceable to an actual body.[59] Traditionally, it is a male voice that holds this authority to explain. In *Moore Street*, the voice is female. To activate the female voice like this opposes the passive role in which women in cinema are traditionally cast, says Silverman.[60] But since the words she speaks might belong to somebody else, a somebody who might also be male, the question of who is speaking on behalf of whom is further complicated. The spectator has no guide to navigate the fluid demarcations between voice, text, and author.[61]

The Beast

Moore Street can be seen as a reflexive attempt to question authorship and authority by using a displaced voice and a narrative of ambiguous origins. What at first seemed like a coherent connection between image and sound and between narrator and text turned out to be a fluid shifting of narrators and perspectives within the same text.

The film points out that certain voices are traditionally invested with more authority than others. Although the woman in the film might have adopted or performed someone else's words, the text clearly originates from the same situation as the images: the immigrant community of Moore Street. In the short film *The Beast*, the question of who is speaking for whom is complicated by the use of a text that is a collage created from unrelated sources.

[59] Bonitzer, 1986, 322; Doane, 1980, 43.
[60] Silverman, 1988, 17.
[61] Bruzzi shows how Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* breaks down expectations around the female voice-over in a way that is similar to *Moore Street*. In *Sans Soleil*, the female voice-over relates the experiences that a fictional, male persona communicated through a series of letters. Bruzzi, 2006, 66.

The Beast is a collaboration between two filmmakers, Samantha Nell and Michael Wahrmann, professional actors, and members of a local community.[62] The film is shot in PheZulu Village, a mock-Zulu settlement which is part of PheZulu Safari Park, located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. It promises its visitors an insight into Zulu culture. The highlight of the experience is the Zulu dancing show, during which the dancers show off their skills with 'grace, agility, and humour', according to the website of the park.[63] The village is essentially a theme park in which the staff performs for tourists, arrayed in traditional Zulu garb.

Most roles in the film are played by the real staff of the village. They are essentially playing themselves, doing what they normally do: arrive, change, chat, start work, pose for photographs, dance. But even as themselves, they are already performing a role, that of 'traditional Zulu people', for the tourists.[64] Likewise, the tourists in the film are real tourists performing tourist acts like taking photographs and asking for selfies with the 'Zulu villagers'. Only the two main characters are played by professional actors – but in the film, their characters are professional actors too, who only perform in the village because of the lack of interesting stage roles for black actors.[65]

The film is like a *mise en abyme*, with roles being doubled within and without the spoken text. For example, the main character is addressed by the name Shaka, the famous Zulu king, but it is unclear if this is his real name or a nickname derived from his role as the 'Zulu king' of the village. The name is of course also a reference to the romanticised TV miniseries from the 1980s which narrates the way King Shaka united various tribes to form the Zulu Nation in the early 19th century.[66]

The film's play with theatrical conventions and expectations is foregrounded by the way *The Beast* is shot. The film consists of a series of vignettes, in medium shots with the camera in a fixed position, with the action in the centre of the frame. This formal arrangement reflects a

[62] *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs*, 2018, https://www.quinzaine-realisateurs.com/en/factory_film/the-beast/. *The Beast* was made in the context of the South African Factory organised by the Cannes Film Festival/Quinzaine des Réalisateurs in 2016. Young international directors were paired to make a 15-min. film within a few weeks.
[63] *PheZulu Safari Park*, 2017, https://www.phezulusafaripark.co.za/zuluculture.htm.
[64] Nell, Wahrmann, 2016.
[65] Nell, Wahrmann, 2016. The main actors are Khulani Maseko, an actor and poet from Durban, and performing poet and actress Luleka Mhlanzi.
[66] *Shaka Zulu*. Writ. William C. Faure, Joshua Sinclair. Dir. William C. Faure. Harmony Gold, South African Broadcasting Corporation, Tele München Fernseh Produktiongesellschaft, 1986.

theatre stage, reinforces the artificiality of the situation, and locates the spectator of the film at the receiving end of the performance.

At the same time, the spectator's position is often aligned with that of the visitors to the park, who themselves are actors in the film, performing their role as visitors. When Shaka and Thando, the main female character, sit around a fire at night, the viewer might believe herself to be a witness to a private conversation delivered to her by the camera – until a photo camera flashes and the viewer is made aware that she is no different from the visitors to the park. She no longer feels the privilege of watching anonymously and unnoticed; she has been caught. This is not a conversation, but a performance, put on for an audience, and the viewer is made to play her part in that performance as a member of the audience.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière explicitly states that emancipated spectatorship is a performative process: 'teaching or playing, speaking, writing, making art or looking at it' are all performances.[67] To make sense of the world means measuring new information against previous personal experiences, thoughts, and ideas, and in this process, everyone is equal. Rancière breaks down the opposition between viewing and acting in order to escape its innate inequality. According to Rancière, this opposition is defined by 'an *a priori* distribution of the positions and capacities and incapacities attached to these positions. They are embodied allegories of inequality'.[68]

To truly learn something new, Rancière says, we need to resist preconceptions about the differences between people, the roles imposed on them and their allocated place in society. The directors of *The Beast* make the viewer aware of those preconceptions by pointing out how dubious and ambiguous his role as spectator is.

Shaka and Thando discuss in Zulu his ambition to perform Shakespeare, but not cast in the traditional black role of Othello – he wants to play Hamlet. 'Why don't you perform something by Zakes Mda?' she asks.[69] 'As long as I don't play a black man', he answers. 'You are a black man', she answers. To perform Shakespeare is the highest attainable feat, but the 'black' roles are merely typecasting, and a black man cannot play a 'white' role.

[67] Rancière, 2011, 17.
[68] Rancière, 2011, 12.
[69] Zakes Mda is a contemporary South African playwright.

Zulu's wish to play non-black parts reflects his desire to be taken seriously as an actor. At the same time, as an actor in a fake Zulu village, he performs part of his own cultural identity for tourists – in exchange for money rather than prestige. As in the aforementioned TV series, traditional singing and dancing are put on display for entertainment in the park and in the film, too. Apart from being criticised for portraying Zulu culture as savage and uncivilised, the series also received backlash for the fact that it was written and directed by white men, and as such depicted a colonialist perspective on African culture. South Africa was still governed under Apartheid at the time the series aired in 1986. This historical context of inequality makes the viewer aware of the fact that her position is not neutral; it implicates her in the fact that there is no equal relationship between black people and white people in the entertainment industry.

In her article about *Paris is Burning*, a documentary that foregrounds the construction of identity through performance, Caryl Flinn points out that when the filmmaker leaves her presence unacknowledged, the audience might 'not recognise that they are watching a work shaped and formed by a perspective and standpoint specific to (the filmmaker)'.[70] In the case of *The Beast*, however, the reflexive use of both theatre and cinema conventions foregrounds the fact that the film is shaped by the filmmakers in order to emphasise that performance is always *for* somebody. There is always an audience, and the question of who is watching and how is central.[71]

It is not coincidental that in *The Beast*, Shakespeare is named as the epitome of serious theatre. In the last scene of the film, when the whole troupe performs a traditional dance for the tourists, Shaka suddenly breaks character and starts performing the monologue of Shylock, the Jewish antagonist in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* – first in Zulu, addressing the troupe, then in English, addressing the audience behind the camera, and finally, looking straight into the camera, addressing his rival in the play, the visitors of the park, the filmmakers, and the viewer at the same time: 'The evil you teach me will be difficult to execute; but in the end, I will better my instructor'. It is a telling choice of text, not only because of the reference to a possible reversal of positions between the powerful and powerless, but also because Shaka's position is reflected in that of Shylock: Shylock's eventual defeat and conversion to Christianity mirror the subjection to colonialism of both the

[70] Flinn, 2013, 445.
[71] Flinn, 2013, 443.

historical and the contemporary Shaka. As Thando points out, 'Shakespeare was a colonialist dog'. But by speaking in direct address and breaking the fourth wall, Shaka also turns the tables on the spectator. If we thought that in the previous scenes we were listening to 'real' dialogues, or at least dialogues based on real experiences, it is now made clear to us that everything was just a willing performance. And although Shylock's monologue fits Shaka's personae, these are not his words, either.

The scene resembles the final scene of *Moore Street*. In both scenes, the subjects suddenly acknowledge the camera by looking straight into the lens, and in hindsight the viewer is made to question the authenticity of their words. *Moore Street* suggests that anyone in the community that the film portrays could be the source of the words, but the film keeps the viewer's empathic rapport with the subjects intact. In contrast, *The Beast* implies that none of the words were the subjects' own, and as a result the viewer is made uncomfortably aware of his predispositions.

My next case study, the short film *Ain't Got No Fear* by visual artist Mikhail Karikis, focusses less on the meaning of the words spoken, and more on their musical, rhythmic, and acoustic qualities. The subjects of *Ain't Got No Fear* are children, not adults, and as a result the outcome of their collaboration with the filmmaker is a more playful, more physical, and less intellectual performance.

Ain't Got No Fear

Of the filmmakers discussed in this chapter, Mikhail Karikis, is the one who embarks on the most intensive and prolonged collaboration with his subjects. As in the case of Desperate Optimists, his work is often commissioned and artistically approaches a certain area and community that have faced radical changes due to economic, industrial, and social shifts.[72]

[72] An important difference however is that Karikis does not work with a specific film format or even artistic discipline in mind. Although each collaborative project starts with workshops, the outcome is let completely open. At the end, there might be a film – or not. This willingness to let the process determine the outcome explains the formal diversity of Karikis' work, which includes video, performance, installation, sound, photographic work and games. Karikis, 23 May 2017.

Sound and voice are central in Karikis' practice. Both are treated like phenomena that are grounded in and connected to their physical source, whether this source is a location or a body. These sources of sound – body and site – are historically specific and connected. Karikis uses the sounds that are produced by the sites where the members of the community work, as well as the vocal sounds that are produced by that community, directly or indirectly, in relation to their labour.

In *Sounds from Beneath*, for example, the sounds coming from a mine are combined with the voices of a miners' choir in a new musical composition; in *Children of Unquiet*, the sounds produced by the geothermic power plant merge with the sounds that the local children make, using the buildings as an acoustic instrument. Karikis' films oscillate between stylised recordings of the performances and actions that were developed during workshops, and non-linear montages of more documentary images and sounds. For Karikis, film functions as the locus where sound, place, and people can be connected.[73]

Ain't Got No Fear starts with sound. A boy of around 14 is calling his horse, his voice echoing off the buildings of the nearby power plant. The second voice is that of the industry itself: growling, rumbling, and clanking sounds, omnipresent and slightly animal-like. The boy roams the field together with a friend, both in hoodies, with industrial buildings and junkyards always looming in the background.

These first images, which could be both documentary and fiction, point towards the kind of social-realist drama of directors such as Ken Loach, Lynne Ramsay, and Clio Barnard.[74] But the expectation of witnessing hardship and struggle is negated when the industrial sounds turn into a rhythm and the short film into a kind of music video. The next shot shows the boys in a group standing in the street, all looking straight into the lens, with the largest one rapping: 'Once I was seven years old / moved house, the other was sold / went to a village on the Isle of Grain / there's very little crime, and hardly any pain'. They joke and push each other around, their expressions at once serious and guileless, reflecting their position between childhood and adulthood.

[73] Karikis, 2017, http://www.mikhailkarikis.com/category/all-projects/children-of-unquiet/.
[74] These images especially call to mind Ramsay's *Ratchatcher* and Barnard's 2013 sophomore effort *The Selfish Giant,* which both focus on boys in a socially and economically neglected area. Coincidentally, both Barnard and Loach use collaborative processes in their filmmaking and to some extent work with improvisation, verbatim techniques and non-actors.

The camera moves around with them, staying at their eye level, adopting a point of view that could be one of the boys'.[75] Scenes showing the boys rapping alternate with shots of them at play in the fields and woods, sometimes wearing colourful, abstract masks. There is an imaginative, dreamlike quality to these images. The sun is low, everything has a golden hue, and the absence of adults gives an impression of freedom rather than neglect.

The concept for the film was the boys' idea: they wanted to make a documentary about a teenager's life, made from a teenager's perspective. In their rap, the boys recall events of their childhood and imagine themselves in old age. Their background is reflected in the scope of their imaginations: school, play, later a job, perhaps the army, settling down – stories that are deeply rooted in the geographical and social circumstances from which they arise. They come from working-class families that are often sustained by the military-industrial complex or the oil-fuelled power plant. The community is isolated. The area has poor infrastructure and is largely neglected in terms of social and economic investment. The power plant might become obsolete in the foreseeable future, in which case the lack of employment will force people to leave.

That is the dominant narrative that is often presented when post-industrial areas like these are being discussed, inside and outside of the UK. Karikis points out that the decision-making process around deindustrialisation and the narratives around obligatory migration often exclude the affected communities, let alone the children belonging to these communities.[76] 'The voices of young people are actually not very audible, and there is a silenced kind of political voice of young people, but that does not mean that they do not have an opinion', Karikis says.[77]

The film is an effort to make audible this silenced voice. Karikis treats the voice as embodied and singular, defined by gender, class, race, and sex, connected to a concrete, historical site. It is about who is doing the talking, Karikis states, more than about what is being said. [78]

[75] One of the participating boys, Eddie Pattenden, is credited as cameraperson in the end credits of *Ain't Got No Fear*. All the participating boys are credited in some way as co-creators in the film.
[76] Karikis, 2017, http://www.mikhailkarikis.com/category/all-projects/children-of-unquiet/.
[77] Karikis, 2017.
[78] Karikis, 2017.

Of course, the same could be said of the voices in *Moore Street* and in *The Beast* – the voices in these films are also gendered, race- and class-specific, and connected to a specific site. The difference lies in Karikis' last statement. In *Moore Street* and in *The Beast*, it is very important *what* is being said. These films make use of texts that reflect, or reflect on, dominant narratives and roles that are historically invested with power, and they do so in a highly stylised manner that draws on the authority associated with classical theatre and filmmaking.

In contrast, *Ain't Got No Fear* centres *who* is doing the talking. The film offers a perspective that is usually unheard or forgotten, and this perspective is expressed through the acoustic and musical qualities of the voice. The narrative in the rap is based on the memories, experiences, and expectations of the teenage boys – experiences that are considered less valuable, if they are considered at all. What the boys possess is a kind of subjugated knowledge, which Foucault describes as 'knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity'[79] – in short, the kind of knowledge that a child has.

It is precisely because the film draws on the boys' own particular knowledge, which is so specific and strongly connected to their own local environment, that the dominant discourse about the circumstances that affect their community can be challenged.[80] 'Are we gonna stay / or are we gonna move', the boys rap, but that is only part of the story. Their rap demonstrates a decidedly positive outlook towards the future. This is particularly noteworthy since their rap is based on the musical style grime, which often features gritty lyrics about urban life.[81]

The lack of entertainment in the region has produced a lively rave culture in the local woodlands, which explains the boys' affinity with this style of music and their choice of a music video as the most suited form of self-expression. This choice – of music and song – is explicitly foregrounded as a way of expressing and shaping a community. In *Ain't Got No Fear*, the rap is a truly performative act in the sense that it shapes and constitutes the boys'

[79] Foucault, 2004, 7.
[80] Foucault, 2004, 8.
[81] Grime originated in the early 2000s in London, growing out of UK electronic music styles such as garage, jungle, and hiphop. Rap is an important element of the style.

identity. The rap imagines a possible, desired present and future, and by performing that imagining, makes it part of reality.

This interaction between performance and reality and between the boys, the filmmaker, and ultimately the viewer is reflected in the formal aspects of the film. Some of the camerawork and sound recordings were done by the boys, and this shows in the fact that some images are slightly out of focus or otherwise not particularly skilful. The film is playful and gives room to its different constituent voices.

In the next chapter, the hierarchical distance between filmmaker and subject is further diminished by the substitution of database logic for narrative logic and the use of footage that was not directly produced by the filmmakers themselves.

CHAPTER 3: NOW ONLY THE EYE CAN CATCH

According to science fiction author Bruce Sterling, the effect of the immediate availability and shareability of knowledge in our contemporary network culture is the collapsing of temporal and spatial distance.[82] We now perceive history to be a fluid narrative rather than a linear, causal chain of events. When we have a problem that needs to be solved, we no longer need to go to the library to search through encyclopaedias, and our search is no longer a time-consuming trajectory from A to B to C. We access Wikipedia and similar online databases, type in keywords, and the information pops up immediately. We post our question on blogs and send out queries to online communities, and others will accumulate the information for us. When the result appears, it is no longer traceable to one coherent story or to one authorial voice.

The computer provides the interface through which information flows. According to media theorist Lev Manovich, the computer interface has become 'a filter for all culture, a form through which all kinds of cultural and artistic production (is) mediated'.[83] It has become such an integral part of our communication that it influences and determines how we think: it has become a cultural interface.[84]

In this chapter, I will analyse three short films that use database logic as an alternative to a linear, causal narrative. The filmmakers collected material from different sources that are spatially and temporary separated and collated them together without making hierarchical distinctions based on the source of the material. They invite their subjects to take part in the production of images, and they cut and paste them together into ambiguous new narratives.

Green Screen Gringo

In 2015, Dutch filmmaker Douwe Dijkstra travelled to São Paulo, Brazil to participate in the two-month LABMIS residency program at the Museo do Imagem e do Som. As well as a vibrant metropolis and a centre of national and South American arts and culture, São Paulo

[82] Sterling, 2010, https://transmediale.de/keynote-bruce-sterling-us-atemporality.
[83] Manovich, 2002, 64.
[84] Manovich, 2002, 70.

was at that time also the stage of social unrest, triggered by the rise of public transportation fares in 2013 and continuing into a broader protest against corruption and inequality in the following years.

São Paulo is a complex and contradictory city where people from all over Brazil converge in search of work, education, and liberty – the city has a famously large and visible LGBTQ community – and as such it reflects the diverse social and cultural origins of its population. It is a city that knows progressive architecture and city planning as well as armed guards at gated apartment buildings, gang and police violence as well as strong civil rights movements, and a beautiful coastline just a few hours' drive from the city's high-rises.

How can a foreigner, and a European, white foreigner at that, portray this multifaceted city and its inhabitants in such a short period of time? 'The situation here is a bit complicated', the voice of a young man explains in a voicemail message on the audio track, midway through the film. 'The strangest thing is that everything seems normal'. Dijkstra acknowledged that it was impossible to try to understand the city. His solution was to fully embrace his status as a *gringo* and his outsider's perspective on São Paulo. Armed with a foldable green screen, he took to the streets to invite people to take part in his short film *Green Screen Gringo*.[85] Taking part, in this case, meant either simply posing in front of the green screen or performing a simple daily task or activity. The film has no interviews, no exposition, and no linear narrative.

The opening sequence of *Green Screen Gringo* clearly shows the setting and the method of the film: first the city, seen from the top of a high-rise and stretching into the distance, and then the filmmaker himself, holding up the green screen next to a small rooftop pool for a few seconds before a shot of a waterfall is superimposed onto the screen. On the soundtrack, fragments of songs and news broadcastings about the political situation play.

Green Screen Gringo offers a kaleidoscopic view of São Paulo and, to a lesser extent, the small village of Ubatuba located on the coast between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. It

[85] Green screen is a cinematic technique that allows multiple images to be composited into one. The most common example is when actors are filmed against a green backdrop, and the green is replaced with a seperately filmed background in postproduction. Now, suddenly, the city glides past their car windows, or the plains of the West open up behind them. The technique is also known as chromakey or bluekey, blue and green being the most suitable colours because these are relatively absent from skin and hair tones and clothing. The effect was achieved in analog film with the use of filters.

consists mainly of long shots of street scenes, the beach, shops, and a museum. All the subjects are shown at least twice, once with the green screen visible as an object behind them in the image, and once composited into another scene. Subjects and situations recur in contrasting combinations, which infuse the images with new and contradictory meanings. A man on a treadmill later runs down the street, along a wall that has 'Fora Dilma!' ('Dilma Out!) painted on it; surfers, still wet from the sea, join a group of students at a museum; a young man sells his bootleg CDs both in the centre of São Paulo and at the beach of Ubatuba; a man sitting behind his desk in an office also sits on the street with his belongings gathered around him.

Dijkstra contrasts notions of identity, visibility, and social status by collapsing time and space into one image. Although – or rather precisely because – the construction of the film is never hidden, it becomes increasingly unclear as the film progresses what part of the image is 'real' and what is 'fake'. Of course, everything is equally 'real' because everything happened, so perhaps it is more accurate to say that it becomes unclear what 'belongs' in the image, and what does not.

In *Green Screen Gringo*, the green screen is just large enough to encompass one person, cut her out of her surroundings, and place her into another. But Dijkstra also uses the screen to offer a portable window on another time and space when he carries the screen filled with the image of protesters across an empty street. The green screen simultaneously makes and breaks the illusion of a coherent reality.

This specific kind of composite shot, in which images from different sources are collaged into one while the viewer remains aware of the incongruity of the combination, is a cinematic technique with a long tradition in narrative film. As a trick shot, it is usually employed to depict the thoughts, memories, or hallucinations of the protagonist.[86] In *Green Screen Gringo* however, the composite shot is used as an alternative to cross-cutting or parallel editing, tools used to connect events that are separated in time and space.[87]

[86] For example, the mirror reflecting back a monstruous, distorted version of the face of the person in front of it is a well-worn horror trope.
[87] Cross-cutting connects events that take place within the same temporal continuum by cutting back and forth between different locations; parallel editing suggests similarities or contrasts between different storylines. Verstraten, 2009, 80-81.

The green screen functions as a visual, spatial way of saying 'meanwhile'. Analogous with the GUI of a computer, the green screen offers the same cut-and-paste interface by which a software program combines elements of different spatial and temporal origin without hierarchic distinction.[88] One scene in the film clearly reflects on this, in which a young man sitting on his bed with a laptop seems to make different backdrops, dancers, and goats suddenly appear around him with the click of a mouse.

The green screen signals the construction of the film, but it also signals the filmmaker's participation in the situation. Throughout the film, Dijkstra is the one who carries the green screen into the frame and holds it behind his subjects. At the same time, he remains almost completely hidden behind the screen, apart from his hands and his legs sticking out from under it. We do not see his face or hear his voice, nor are we offered any other explicit clues regarding his personality.

The filmmaker could have chosen a different framing mechanism to make himself completely invisible, or more visible. In fact, there is one brief moment when Dijkstra crawls away from a busy street scene in which his face is shown. Dijkstra admits that he would rather not have shown his face, but that the shot was just too valuable for the film.[89] Dijkstra equates his presence with that of the green screen: functional, but not intrusive.

The subjects pose in front of this screen, sometimes self-assured and sometimes shy, aware of the fact that they are being filmed. When a young man recites a poem in front of the screen, he confidently takes the stage, but as soon as he is finished he smiles shyly, leaning back to touch the screen behind him with his fingertips. Two girls boldly embrace and kiss, then break apart awkwardly when the scene is done. A drag queen puts on her face, a young couple dances, a protestor speaks through a megaphone, and a man explains to a loved one on the phone that he is just calling because the filmmaker wanted him to have a conversation on screen.

All these highly performative images, in juxtaposition with people going about their business on the streets, emphasise how much of people's identity is a performance. The screen facilitates that performance because it is a wall to pose in front of, a stage to perform on, a

[88] Manovich, 2002, 65.
[89] Dijkstra, 2008, https://vimeo.com/203290582.

window to look at, a legitimisation of the intrusion of filming on the street, a conversation starter, a source of humour, an ice breaker.

Formally, the green screen binds images from different sources together in the same time-space continuum, the same way the interface of a computer can simultaneously access and show information from different online databases. *Green Screen Gringo* does not follow a causal narrative. The film adheres to the database logic of accumulation: one image is added to the previous one, which is added to the one before that. The effect of this cumulative approach to the narrative is egalitarian: each scene and every person in front of the camera is just as valuable as the next.

The film is the result of the filmmaker's effort to engage with his subjects and to treat everyone without hierarchical distinctions. When the boy from the beach suddenly pops up in the museum, the connection between the two scenes is not causal, but rather a kind of hyperlink that leads from one web page to another. The scenes are related to each other like nodes in a network that the viewer has to navigate.

For all his hiding behind the screen, Dijkstra is still the one who decides which situations are filmed. In my next case study, *For The Record*, the filmmakers also accumulate images from daily life, but with minimal intervention. They put out a query and waited for what was sent to them.

For The Record

If someone asked you to make and upload a video about what 'home' means to you, what would you film? Which part of your life, your house, your family, your possessions would you show?

Filmmaker and historian Aïlien Reyns went to Beijing and asked people this seemingly simple question: what does 家 mean to you?[90] The question is not simple at all, of course, not

[90] Animal Tank, 2014, https://www.animaltank.com/for-the-record/.

least because apart from ‘home’, the Chinese character 家 has many other related yet distinct meanings: house, family, the domestic, belonging.

Reyns’ request resulted in a number of videos in which people used a mobile phone or simple digital camera to record their intimate surroundings. The images are obviously amateurish, wobbly, often out of focus or overexposed. Every scene shows another room: living rooms, bathrooms, kitchens, dormitories. The camera pans across these rooms, zooms in on the most mundane objects – from jars of face cream to plastic dolls still in their box – and offers a view, through opened windows, on more apartments, other homes. There are not many people in these images, and if there are, they hardly react to the fact that they are being filmed. It seems to be objects that represent 家.

The film’s title, *For the Record*, hints at this notion of what has significance, what is worthy of being recorded. It also evokes Reyns’ background as an historian, whose work it is to keep a record, and the question who is in charge of producing that record.

The subjects of *For the Record* participated in the creation of the film in a fundamentally different way than the subjects in the films I discussed previously, in which the subjects could influence their representation – to various degrees – but did not independently produce content for the film. In *For the Record*, the subjects were able to film what they wanted to show without the intervention or even the presence of Reyns herself. However, the personal significance of the resulting images remains a mystery.

Reyns made an associative rather than linear montage from the images, with no visible distinction between their different sources, and replaced the diegetic sound of the footage almost completely with a voice-over. At times, some diegetic sounds are audible, but never the voice of the person filming or the voice of another person in the diegetic space. The narrative of the voice-over was written and performed by theatre maker and artist Fleur Khani in reaction to the images, adding a reflection on the meaning of ‘home’ from a western perspective.

The viewer knows that she is looking at independently produced images of self-representation, but is at the same time, she is confronted with a lack of information regarding

the personal significance of these images and with a disparate voice-over narrative. The viewer is drawn in by the seemingly direct and unmediated nature of the images and simultaneously made to question their meaning and authorship.[91]

Blip, *blip blip*. First there is only sound over a blank screen. When the image appears, the *blips* turn out to be the sound of manually swiping through photographs on a mobile phone that is placed on a table, with a large cup of Starbucks coffee behind it. Home is apparently represented by these family photographs, and the display of the mobile phone replaces the photo album that is laid out on the table. A thumb swipes across the screen, or perhaps caresses a face.

A striking number of screens are present in *For the Record*: television screens, camera displays, mobile phones, laptops. Most people who are visible in the footage hardly pay attention to the fact that they are being recorded; they are absorbed in their screens. This is what network culture looks like: screens everywhere, and every screen is an interface, a way of communicating with others that are removed in space and time, a way of accessing and sharing images and information.

These images reflect that *For the Record* itself is a product of network culture: crowdsourced from multiple sources, using internet forums and platforms, with various threads converging and the distinct authorial voice lost.[92] 'We used to call upon the people who were not there. And bring them into our rooms. We got closer to them than we were to each other, even though they were not there. There was something about the meaning of a door being open or closed. How you would place a screen in a room and what the person looking through that screen would see', the woman in the voice-over says. This is exactly what Reyns has done: as a proxy for the people who responded to her call, she placed screens in these rooms, and allows the viewer to look through them.

[91] Nash, 2014, 387. Kate Nash argues in her article on interactivity in web documentary, 'Participation in media draws attention to the ability of participants to contribute to the documentary text and so captures the relationship between participation and representation. […] Critical reflection on participation in documentary would focus on the nature of participant contributions, the "framing" of the invitation to participate and the relationships surrounding production'.
[92] Sterling, 2010, https://transmediale.de/keynote-bruce-sterling-us-atemporality.

In *For the Record*, the screen is the screen of network culture: an interface through which cultural data flows.[93] Because every contemporary screen also contains a camera and can record and upload as well as access and play information, information can flow in two directions. 'We all became anthropologists somehow. Observing each other. Ourselves'. the voice-over says, suggesting that these interfaces are instruments for communication as well as surveillance.

The screens in *For the Record* are not windows to another world in the same sense that the cinema screen is a window. In the cinema, 'The image [is] an autonomous luminous screen of attraction, whose apparitional appeal is an effect of both its uncertain spatial locations and its detachment from a broader visual field', says Jonathan Crary.[94] In the cinematic dispositif, the viewer is displaced from his surroundings. He is drawn out of his seat in the auditorium and into the film.

Conversely, the screens in *For the Record* are firmly located objects amongst other objects. They are physical, functional, and personal household items that facilitate daily tasks and structure communication. These are what Noam Elcott calls 'domestic media devices', the term 'domestic' indicating not only their natural habitat – the home – but also their purpose as a personal assistant.[95]

These screens exist in the same physical space as the people who watch them. *For the Record* shows a domestic dispositif where 'Cinema is an optical toy, a piece of furniture, a book, a sculpture – in a word, an object', as Elcott puts it. This is clearly the case for the subjects in Reyns' film. Instead of editing their digital photographs on a timeline, they show the camera that took and stores the images. Instead of screen-capturing the video editing software with which they are making a video, or even that video itself, they film the laptop on which they are working. The woman filming her bathroom also films herself in the mirror, the camera in front of her face, placing not only herself but also the recording device in the recording.

In the voice-over, Reyns and Khani explicitly connect the object-ness of the screens to experiences that are shared through these screens:

[93] Manovich, 2002, 64.
[94] Crary, 2002, 19.
[95] Elcott, 2016, 53.

> I'm talking about a time when the entire world was made of plastic. The objects and the people. The people in the rooms. The rooms surrounding the objects and the people. Our imagination. Our fears. We had this way of archiving the past, by capturing it in images and preserving it on the internet, sharing them, and all images became familiar.

In *For The Record*, this familiarity of images and devices and the emotions they invoke is shared with the spectator. Network culture can work as a flattening device that dismantles the hierarchy between images and experiences. The spectator too is made out of the same artificial material, in a room surrounded by objects, sending and receiving the same messages.

Dear Lorde

Fourteen-year-old Maxine Rose is on a quest to become a worthwhile person. She writes letters to her heroes – pop singer Lorde, Desmond Tutu, Jane Goodall – to ask for advice and to inform them about her dreams, opinions, and expectations. Maxine lives in one-story adobe house in a remote part of the California desert together with her 'mental-illness mom'. In many ways, Maxine exists on the margins of society, surrounded by other misfits, but she is also a typical artistically inclined teenager who struggles with her beautiful and smug best friend, cuddles with her mom, collects bones in the desert, makes drawings, and aspires to being not only worthwhile, but great.

Artist duo Emily Vey Duke and Cooper Battersby were already interested in these kinds of girls' stories before they met Maxine Rose when visiting friends in New Mexico.[96] Over the course of the Christmas holiday, they worked together with Maxine Rose to produce the footage of her. The artists then wrote a voice-over based on their conversations with Maxine, with some alterations regarding where Maxine lives and her English background.

[96] Dykeman, 2015, https://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/43357-working-it-out-with-gillian-dykeman-duke-battersby.

For Duke and Battersby, letter writing was a means to include pop references in the narrative that are woven together with the collage of images and sounds in *Dear Lorde*. Apart from the scenes with Maxine Rose, there is time-lapse footage of her house at night; macro images of sea animals and insects; YouTube vlogs by Beyoncé, wannabe stars, goths, and American teenagers; Louis C.K. performing; images of zoo animals and distant landscapes; chat windows that pop up on screen; and lettering over the image. On the auditive track we hear Maxine reading her letters and singing and playing the piano, but there is also extradiegetic sound in the form of songs, music, and laughter.

At times, these images and sounds are clearly linked to Maxine's words. When she writes to Jane Goodall and tells her the story of a monkey that had to be cut off from human contact, the footage of monkeys in a zoo might refer to what Maxine saw herself in real life or, more likely given her circumstances, on the internet. When she informs Desmond Tutu about her diversity class, there are images of children in an unspecified African country and of YouTube star Alex Boyé covering Lorde. In other instances, like when Beyoncé dancing is cross-cut with an image of a dragonfly on a log in Maxine's yard, the connection between the image and the voice-over narrative is less direct and more associative, but these scenes can still be considered to reflect Maxine's perspective.

As it is for every contemporary teenager, Maxine's window to the world is her computer. All these secondary images and sounds that are not directly related to Maxine or her environment might originate from the online databases that Maxine accesses, clicking from one YouTube video to the next. Manovich says that 'The computer interface acts as a code that carries cultural messages in a variety of media. When you use the internet, everything you access – texts, music, video, navigable spaces – passes through the interface of the browser and then, in turn, the interface of the OS'.[97] Seen this way, Maxine is a kind of interface herself: she is the organising principle behind the different elements in the film.

Because the images are connected through the database logic of purpose and coincidence as well as through personal interests and associations, there is no clear hierarchy between them – but neither are they randomly chosen. According to Manovich, a cultural code is rarely neutral; the mechanism influences the message. 'A code may also provide its own model of

[97] Manovich, 2002, 64.

the world, its own logical system'.[98] By adopting Maxine's perspective, the film shows how different information – different data – can connect. Narrative is just one of the possible ways to make those connections.[99]

It is true that *Dear Lorde* reflects the database logic of network culture by amassing images according to Maxine's own logic. What complicates this reading is the way that the filmmakers draw different perspectives and voices into the film, including their own. As in *Moore Street*, the effect of the Maxine's voice-over, addressing an absent 'you', allows the audience to share in her private thoughts. Consider how different the effect on the viewer would be if Maxine had made video messages to her heroes, looking and talking straight into the lens, instead of writing them letters. That kind of confessional video is usually both a private and a public message, with a double spectatorship in mind: addressed simultaneously to one specific person and to a larger online community.

But Maxine expresses herself through writing letters, making music, and drawing – all very direct and personal artistic expressions that are not directed to a wide audience, but only to Maxine's inner circle. However, many of these expressions depicted in the film are actually not Maxine's own. Those are not her hands making the drawings, and it is not her voice that we hear. The viewer might assume that the voice-over consists of Maxine's words, but the delivery is clearly too sophisticated to be her own, and does not match hers when she is seen speaking herself. In fact, the voice-over recording of Maxine reading her letters to her heroes is performed by actress Rebecca Manley. This indicates that the voice-over is the filmmakers' interpretation of Maxine's perspective, rather than her own exact wording.

The introduction of this voice that is not necessarily Maxine's does not diminish the sense of intimacy that the film evokes. As Duke and Battersby stated in a podcast interview with ArtSlant, their objective with the film was to cultivate a sense of empathy towards Maxine and towards their audience.[100]

[98] Manovich, 2002, 64.
[99] Manovich, 1999, http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ34/Manovich_Database_FrameSet.html.
[100] Dykeman, 2015, https://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/43357-working-it-out-with-gillian-dykeman-duke-battersby.

What the different images and sounds gleaned from different sources in *Dear Lorde* have in common is that they all reflect the desire to be heard. There are a number of scenes that are extracted from vlogs in which people show their online followers what is important to them. Beyoncé dancing in front of the Christmas tree in her house, a young goth in full regalia going over the specifics of an embellished leather jacket, even the obnoxious young men horsing around, all of them are hoping for the validation of their followers. The filmmakers treat them with no distinction; they are all equally important.

Duke explicitly calls these vlogs confessional – just as Maxine's letters are confessions, and many of her lyrics, too – and a source of empathy. She stresses that producing empathy is a form of labour. *Dear Lorde* brings together these empathy-producing forms of labour with the self-expressions of Maxine, the vloggers, the artists whose songs are used, and of the filmmakers themselves. There are a number of instances in the film in which a woman's voice is heard singing. It is not Maxine but Emily Vey Duke, who often includes her own musical performances in her work. Duke's voice is not perfect and the recording sounds homemade. In a way, she stands in for Maxine, who admits singing out of tune but 'sh*t doesn't have to be perfect to be awesome', as the pink letters over the image declare.

The lettering that appears over the images throughout the film might be the words of the filmmakers or those of Maxine, or perhaps generally reflect the desire to be valued: 'I need to get out of this backwater craphole', 'I want people to use me to navigate the night skies'.

As the film progresses, the database logic that binds the images together becomes more compelling, forcing the spectator to pick her way through association and dissociation. Throughout the film, there are scenes with images of insects and small marine animals, filmed in extreme close-up with a shallow depth of field. These images are formally and content-wise unconnected to Maxine's narrative or to a general quest for validation. While the other images are made with little regard to cinematic quality, this is an entirely different kind of cinema, lush and tactile. What these images show is the presence of something that the naked eye cannot see and which can only be made visible with the camera. They suggest the connection of small parts to the whole, the way insects' behaviour is connected to a more complicated ecology. The insertion of these images raises the spectator's awareness of herself as a part of a complicated and not always manifest whole.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have taken Rancière's concept of emancipated spectatorship as a framework to analyse how the films under scrutiny activate the spectator into assuming a critical attitude towards the question of who is speaking, about whom, and who is addressed. As I have shown, the spectator of these films has to choose her own position, which is never neutral but is determined by her own perspective and experiences. As Rancière says, finding meaning means 'linking what one knows with what one does not know'.[101]

I have outlined three methods of filmmaking via which the films were produced by an ascending degree of collaboration with the subjects: from promoting a 'being-with' the subjects through the use of ambiguous focalisation; via establishing doubt about the origin of and relation between text, image, and voice; to the merging of footage made by the filmmaker and by the subjects according to database logic. The introduction of fictional elements in the films I have discussed reflects the collaborative process and the intention of the filmmakers to let their subjects speak for and about themselves.

This trajectory led to the introduction of footage that was produced independently by the subjects themselves, as in *For The Record*, and by people who did not take part in the film's production process, as in *Dear Lorde*. The next step would logically be an investigation of films that extend the sourcing of their material to include footage produced by the participants while they are allowed to contribute not only to the content, but also to the structure, distribution, and discourse around the film – in short, films in which the subjects participate *in* and *through* media.[102] Some examples include interactive web documentaries and crowdsourced fiction.

Dear Lorde, with its use of vlogs and confessional videos, already hints at the kind of self-representation that network culture encourages. One can image how this could lead to the dissolution of the distinction between subject, filmmaker, and spectator, with every person involved 'being at once a performer deploying her skills and a spectator observing what these skills might produce in a new context amongst other spectators'.[103]

[101] Rancière, 2011, 22.
[102] Nash, 2014, 387.
[103] Rancière, 2011, 22.

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Appendix I: Filmography

Chapter 1

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Chapter 2

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Chapter 3

Dijkstra, Douwe, *Green Screen Gringo*, Netherlands, 16min, 2016.
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