



W&M ScholarWorks

Undergraduate Honors Theses

Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects

5-2019

Meridian

Benjamin Fox

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses>



Part of the [Film Production Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fox, Benjamin, "Meridian" (2019). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 1391.

<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/1391>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

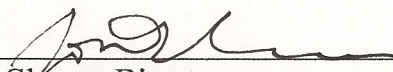
Meridian

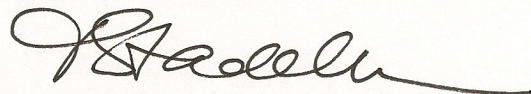
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and Film & Media Studies from
The College of William and Mary

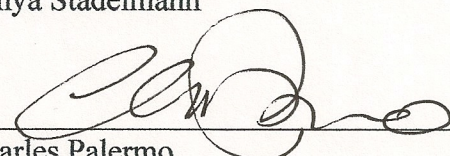
by

Benjamin Nathan Fox

Accepted for HIGH HONORS


Jonathan Glasser, Director


Tanya Stadelmann


Charles Palermo

Williamsburg, VA
May 2, 2019

Reflections on the making of *Meridian*, a documentary about the Meridian Coffeehouse

The film is available at: <https://youtu.be/ibKYapZr1D8>

Introduction / Intention

For this year-long project, I set out to produce a film that would capture the energy and community of the Meridian Coffeehouse on the campus of the College of William & Mary. For three years, I have played an active role in the management of the space, from booking, managing, and recording live music events to hosting various shifts to watch films and create music. Being a double major in Anthropology and Film & Media Studies, and having been further inspired by a Visual Anthropology course that I took at the University of St Andrews in Spring 2018, I decided to attempt a visual ethnographic approach to document the Meridian. I focused on my own relationship to the space and the people within it as a participant observer, pondering the ethics of the camera as a documentary tool and considering various stylistic and ideological approaches to representing a space and the people in it through a visual medium. The primary product of this Honors Thesis is the film, which is available on YouTube under the title *Meridian - A Film by Ben Fox*. This paper serves as a reflection on the process of filming and editing the documentary, and includes some context about the space and my own experiences to aid in the viewing of the film.

Personal Experience

I have been active at the Meridian since the first semester of my sophomore year, and have gradually taken on more responsibilities in the space. My positions at the Meridian this year were events manager and historian, both roles that I shared with other members of the Meridian

staff. The events manager position entailed working closely with the booking team and the general manager to make sure events went smoothly, focusing on organizing and setting up the space for shows as well as managing hospitality for artists and announcing Meridian policies and values. These duties revolved almost entirely around musical performances that take place on the weekends, including touring bands from various places around the East Coast and local artists. As co-historian, my duties were to take pictures and videos at shows to be posted on social media, which worked out very well with this project.

Much of my experience producing this film and this reflection were aided by an ethnographic research project undertaken in the Fall of 2017 for Professor Jonathan Glasser's Anthropology seminar titled "Muslims, Jews, & the State." That project focused on the nature of the Meridian as a self-proclaimed safe(r) space and compared its history and values to those of DIY communities and democratic punk collectives.

This film ethnography project would not have been possible without the support of the Meridian 2018-2019 staff and everyone who came before. Special thanks go to Megan Frayser, Kayla Temple, Stacia Phalen, Maggie Armstrong, Benjamin Chase, Sam Wiles, Collin Ginsburg, Cherrie Yu, Gabi Thiam, Ethan Vojtko, Colin Morgan, Tanya Stadelmann, Charles Palermo, and Jonathan Glasser.

A Brief History of Meridian

"A History of the Coffeehouse" is an essay posted to a bulletin board that permanently resides in the Meridian. Written by two of the Meridian's past members, it outlines the formation of the space as a part of a William & Mary campaign to support student activities outside of the

alcohol/substance-based Greek Life and bar scene. It originated as a coffeehouse called Zarathustra's after students John and Catherine Carraway fixed the floor, repainted, and gathered funds from the Parent's Fund and support from the College's Alcohol Task Force to purchase coffee and sound equipment. For the years that John and Catherine attended William & Mary, Zarathustra's was a popular student gathering spot, and on many weekends there would be performances by local campus musical acts that drew massive crowds and provided a substance-free alternative space to hang out from 7:00 PM to midnight on weekdays and 7:00 PM to 2:00 AM on weekends. Coffee was cheap, \$1.50 per cup with unlimited refills, and pastries were also sold. John and Catherine managed the space and its finances and shows until they graduated, and in 1995 Zarathustra's was renamed Meridian "after several coincidences convinced" the founders that "it was meant to be." Zarathustra's sentiments of inclusivity, safety, love and respect for art, intellectual pursuit, and the purveyance of coffee persisted in the next official use of the space.

In 1995, the Meridian became a space that was directly operated by students, with a large group of like minded individuals coming together to repurpose and decorate the space. Continuing in the Zarathustra's tradition, it was not just a coffeehouse: much more emphasis was placed on its status as an alcohol-free place where people could hang out, listen to music, create art, watch films. The student staff members are responsible for maintaining the space by ensuring that it remains clean, locked and secured when no one is there, and by keeping the school informed of any structural issues that the building might experience.

The Space Now

The Meridian is a space for talking, for relaxing, for dancing, for doing homework on a random Tuesday or ending the week and beginning the weekend with a show. We have coffee, but very few people drink it. In my experience the only people who really drink coffee at shows (which usually take place between between 6:00 and 9:00 PM on a Friday or Saturday evening) are either band members who want to energize before their set or Meridian staff who need to stay awake to maintain the integrity of the space. The coffeemaker, according to Jack Carraway (one of the mythicized founders of Zarathustra's), has been around since the beginning, and it has no buttons. You plug it into the wall, it heats up, and you pour water into it that pours over the grounds.

Every night of the week there is something going on at the Meridian, managed by staff members. There are two shifts per night, the first 7:00 to 9:30 and the second 9:30 to 12:00, each with a different theme and group of people (both staff and not) that populate them. The nature of these shifts is fluid, and changes each semester depending on the interests and varying personnel on staff. Sundays at 7:00 PM are Meridian staff general meetings, and anyone is welcome to attend these meetings to learn about what will be happening in the space during the upcoming week.

One of the values of the Meridian is to promote the William & Mary student body to play and produce music, and we seek to provide a space for that to happen easily. We open up our space for band practices throughout the week, and hold open mic and themed cover nights throughout the semester. Since the artists we host are usually not signed or very well known, we

always try to have at least one local artist on the bill for any show to draw a student crowd and try to get new people to come to the Meridian.

In order to promote our values of providing a space for expression through music, our Friday and Saturday night shifts are reserved for shows. We mostly try to have three to four band bills, with at least one local act on each show to draw their friends and other students. During my time helping with the management of the space, events managers and Meridian exec have standardized the price of shows to a three to five dollar donation (with no one turned away for lack of funds), and we have seen some of the best turnout in the Meridian's recent history. This has allowed us to be able to pay touring bands well, donate to charitable organizations, and also save a cut of the money for new equipment and to maintain some of the amenities we offer, such as coffee, tea, and snacks.

According to lore and personal experience, there has always been a bit of a stigma that the Meridian scene is relatively inaccessible or hard to break into. It has been perceived as being reserved for the hardcore indie punk kids, those who like mosh pits and smoke cigarettes and only wear black or denim jackets, a space where someone might go to see an obscure show. In short, it is thought of as a punk space, a space so alternative as to be inaccessible.

Whether this reputation holds true today (and in many ways it does), over the course of my time coming to shows and meetings at the Meridian I have personally found that it has become a more accessible, welcoming, and comfortable place to be. In my own experience, this definitely has to do with my commitment to engaging with the space and the people in it—in other words, it may have become more accessible for me because I became part of the community. But through concerted efforts on the part of staff we have attempted to provide more

ways that the William & Mary community can safely and happily have fun in the space. It provides good music, positive vibes, and interpersonal connection to anyone who wants to have a good time with others, while also serving as a space that actively tries to be consciously safer and more inclusive than other social spaces on campus. The main barrier to entry is that a person would still need to desire spending their Friday or Saturday night listening to a relatively obscure musical act or local campus performers.

Intention of the Film

I worked closely with Professor Jonathan Glasser in the Anthropology Department throughout the past year, discussing various ideas for the structure and content of this film. We pondered the possibilities and values of sensory ethnography, mockumentary, a pure music documentary, and generally experimental film. I also spoke with Tanya Stadelmann in the Film & Media Studies Department and Charles Palermo in the Art History Department about the process of creating a documentary film and received helpful guidance regarding organization, interview, and camera technique.

Some of the main questions we asked of my intentions for the film are as follows: should I use the Meridian to make a film that alienates the audience from “the truth” in order to comment on cinematic documentation as a whole? Should I include talking head interviews and *tell* viewers the “reality” of the Meridian space? Should I use archival footage, only footage taken for the purpose of this film, or a mix of both? Is this a film about the Meridian as a space or about the people in the Meridian? How does music fit in? How does art fit in? What is a safe space and is the Meridian one? Why is the Meridian not a more racially diverse space? Should I

represent everyone who is on Meridian staff equally or focus on turning a few of my friends into recognizable characters that viewers can latch on to? Is it more important to create a film that is compelling or factual? Should I make my presence at the Meridian one that is always accompanied by a camera to the point where people cease to notice they are being filmed, direct the actions of those in the space to get the perfect shot, or should the self-aware poses of the film's subjects be clear?

I didn't want to make a film that set out to define the Meridian or illustrate its history. My experience of the space and the experience of the viewer that can be presented by my footage is entirely a product of the present moment, a combination of interlinked subjectivities which form a cohesive but constantly shifting whole. Since the Meridian has been around in some form since the early 90s, I couldn't possibly hope to accurately or faithfully represent what the space meant to the people who came before me, even if I were to use archival footage and interviews.

I also didn't want the focus of the film to be a series of people as talking heads *telling* viewers what the Meridian is currently or even what it means to them. Directly informing people about facts, opinions, and ideas is a tool that is very necessary when describing something in writing, but film allows for more of an opportunity to show rather than tell.

I wanted to create an ethnographic film that would provide viewers with the impression of what it is like to be in the Meridian, what people in the space do as staff members, audience members, or members of bands that come to play. I wanted to represent the energy and life present in the space, the nearly constant flow of people listening to music, doing homework, watching films, doing tarot card readings, sometimes making coffee, joking with each other. I wanted to display what it is like to be in the audience at a Meridian show.

Planning

One of my initial ideas for how to accomplish an ethnographic film about the Meridian was to attempt for an entirely collaborative process. The film about the Meridian would be made by the Meridian and for the Meridian. I had hopes that our weekly meetings would include going over footage from the past week, talking about it, figuring out what was interesting and what we as a group wanted to say about the space that we inhabited and managed. I would hold shifts at the Meridian where we would expand upon this and think about ways we could improve our process, constantly discussing and improving on our group film. This gradually revealed itself to be an unrealistic dream.

The reason why the Meridian seems to work is because staff members can decide where their talents are best applied and work together with other people to accomplish the group's goals. The goal of making a documentary about the space was my own, and while it was supported by the group and I received much encouragement and excitement throughout the year, it was never able to become a truly collaborative project because others in the space did not have the desire to create a documentary themselves. This is very understandable as we all have different interests and time commitments, and I'm happy with how the film turned out.

In fact, capturing a personal, first-person, subjective experience of the Meridian as a venue, art space, and safe house ended up becoming the most important aspect of this film. The intention behind the film became to provide viewers with the ability to see and experience many different facets of the Meridian and decide for themselves what the space is about. For people who know and love the Meridian, this documentary will be a way for them to recall their own experiences of these specific events or use it as a jumping off point to unearth memories and

experiences that I could not have possibly hoped to capture with a camera. For those who don't know anything about the Meridian, the primary hope is that after seeing the film they will want to know more about the space and decide to come to a show or a shift, deriving their own subjectivities from it.

In this way, *Meridian* became a participatory documentary project in which I as a filmmaker and member of the Meridian presented self-reflexively my own experiences and visions of the space as I engaged with it. I wanted to be clear about the fact that my opinions, experiences, and place behind the camera and in the editor's seat determine what viewers see in the film. One of the ways that I represented this in the final product was by including and highlighting a moment where Stacia points to the camera and says my name while describing the guidelines of the space to the audience before a show. I also kept in moments when my own breathing is incredibly audible, shaky or relatively unsteady camera shots to remind the viewer that the camera is in a person's hands, and even my voice from offscreen interacting with the different people in the film.

Filming Process

I spent much of my weekly meetings with Professor Glasser discussing the various possibilities for how I would go about editing and presenting the film, and each week I filmed the shows taking place at the Meridian. Shows are the experiences at the Meridian that I felt the most personal connection to, and they are also the moments when more of the student body at large seem to descend upon the space. The energy and emotion present at Meridian shows is incredibly powerful and exciting, and being a musician myself I always enjoy experiencing and

filming live music. Throughout the two semesters I also brought my camera along to some meetings and various shifts, attempting to capture quieter moments that would provide context for the Meridian as a community space in addition to a music venue.

At the end of the first semester I made my first rough cut, which at the time featured primarily an interview with Stacia Phalen along with footage from Meridian's Homecoming festivities and other shows. Creating that rough cut provided a relatively solid foundation on which to expand the film, and provided me with insight as to what other aspects of the Meridian I needed to film.

In terms of filming staff members and guests of the space, people initially seemed most uncomfortable when they were alone on camera not doing anything in particular. Sometimes people saw the camera and decided to bump up their performance, to accentuate their pose, to engage with the camera and represent themselves in an energetic way, or maybe just smile at the camera as if they were being photographed. Those who were on Meridian staff at shows initially seemed to feel less comfortable being monitored going about their business, setting up for a show or putting things back together at the end of the night.

In order to address this, I tried to make the camera a ubiquitous part of my presence at the Meridian. When I was there at shows, I had the camera and I was filming. For the most part I would point it at the performers, and occasionally pan over the crowd. Sometimes I would point it directly at the crowd and capture their dancing, or pick up more subtle elements such as their feet stomping on the ground to the music. As the filmmaking process became more involved, I requested to film certain people interacting with the space specifically. Most of these were organic processes, where someone was already at the Meridian during their shift or just hanging

out, and I showed up with my camera. These moments weren't necessarily interviews as much as documentations of hanging out in the space, and they are meant to show people some moments of personal experience in the midst of the rather impersonal footage of musical performances and abstract shots of decor.

The most exciting part of the filming process was the moment when I shot the closing sequence of the film. I was at the Battle of the Boybands Cover Night and Megan Frayser, the other primary videographer for the project, told me to come outside. We walked out of the Meridian and across the street, and there was a beautiful sunset framing the building. We stood there and I filmed some of the building, and people gradually noticed us standing out there and decided to join. First it was Stacia, then Kayla, then seemingly in one movement everyone who was at the event was standing across the street admiring the beautiful view. I knew that this had to be the ending of the film.

Editing Process

Thinking about the film as an ethnographic project, I compare the process of gathering footage to taking field-notes. I spent a large portion of my time this year at the Meridian with a camera, filming the space and the people within it. After I had accumulated footage throughout the year, I made six rough edits and presented select versions to my advisors Jonathan Glasser, Tanya Stadelmann, and Charles Palermo at various points throughout the second semester. This process was incredibly helpful for recognizing what was working in my film and what needed to be addressed, whether that included making minor fixes to the sound design or going back to the space and filming more to capture a particular type of event.

The first rough edit I made focused almost entirely on a single interview, with footage from Homecoming and some establishing shots of the house cut into the film. As I continued to edit, I became more focused on crafting a narrative around the feelings of energy and community in the space. Through selecting certain bits of footage which spoke to my feelings and impressions about the space, I was able to generate a structure over the next few edits. By the end of the project, I had a structure that I was proud of: Establish the coffeehouse in space and time through the use of establishing shots; present myself as the person behind the camera to the audience in a self-reflexive nod to the subjectivity of documentary filmmaking; present the members of the space as they discuss the Meridian's values; display the energy of the space through excitingly edited concert footage (this part is strewn throughout); show meetings, art, and people hanging out in the space; address the issue of the coffee; give some breathing room with a softer section (the tarot card reading); a moment of brevity; and a moment of community at the end with the sunset.

The film really came out in the editing. I had a total of almost six hours of footage from the year to edit down into about twenty minutes, so it was a difficult process deciding which moments to feature, but through the multiple edits and deciding the structure I was able to produce a film that I was happy with and ready to present to the Meridian community.

Screening

The film was first screened on Saturday, April 27th around 3:30 PM at Meridian during our end-of-the-year music festival Sky is Falling. I was able to present the documentary I had spent the year making to the people who were most invested in the space, while they were

enjoying a fun and warm spring day of music and art. This screening, while taking place at a public event, was also a sort of test run for the wider Meridian community to ensure that they were happy with my representation of the space and to receive feedback.

I received praise for the film's pacing, style, and use of music from the space, as well as its commitment to representing what the space is like as an audience member and a staff member. The only requested edit was to remove a segment where a staff member's phone number was visible for a moment. Some graduating members of staff cried at the film and thanked me for representing the space that they have grown to love during their time here, and this experience was incredibly rewarding to validate and conclude my efforts this year prior to my defense of the film as my senior Honors Thesis.

What did I learn?

Creating this documentary has been an experience through which I have explored my own presence within the Meridian, as well as the nature of the camera in a public space and the way people interact with it. Meridian is a space for community building, which thrives because of the energy and time that staff, audience members, and performers put into creating a positive and fun environment for the Williamsburg community. The version of Meridian that is represented in this film is entirely dependent upon the specific people who manage and frequent the space this year. But at the same time, the energy and power of the space as a force on campus as presented is one which I at least personally believe will persist, and that the future generations of Meridian-goers will benefit from being able to view this film and compare their experiences with and conceptions of the space with those presented in the film.

In terms of filmmaking generally, I learned that committing oneself to documenting a space requires spending a lot of personal time there, and that the most valuable moments will present themselves when they might be least expected. I also found that people generally tend to not want to be on video. Being filmed seems to make them feel like they have to pose or present themselves to the camera. Some people, even those accustomed to performance, seem to have trouble presenting themselves for a video versus a still photograph. Posing for a photo captures a single moment and the composure need only last as long as it takes for the photographer to get the right shot. But my role as a filmmaker, a person with a movie camera, was to point the camera in their direction and capture whatever they were doing.

At one point (and this is featured in the film), Stacia compared being constantly filmed while in the Meridian to living in a surveillance state, and wondered what George Orwell would think about our DIY democratic music and art space being monitored by my watchful lens. While people at the Meridian definitely enjoy the fact that there is now a documentary film about our space that they can use to remember this year, the process of making it was definitely complicated as it involved pointing a camera in people's faces when they were not expecting or prepared for it. This led to some interesting self-reflexive moments in which aspects of documentary filmmaking in practice are revealed, but it also made me realize the potential effectiveness of constructing a more organized filming and interview structure for future documentary work. More overall organization of the filming process with more direct requests to certain individuals to be in the film might make things easier, while creating most comfortable environment for people to be themselves (or the version of themselves they wish to present to the world) on camera.

In my future endeavors as a documentary filmmaker, I will not always have the benefit of being this familiar and personally close to the subject I am tasked with representing. I will probably not have the same rapport with the people I am documenting, the ability to enter and exit their space whenever I please, two semesters to work on the project, or unfettered access to use whatever media equipment I need to accomplish my goals, and I will have to work within these constraints. Making this film has presented me with the opportunity to think deeply about music and filmmaking, and provided a valuable experience to reflect on the Meridian's place in the William & Mary community.

Selected Bibliography and Film List

Barrett, Dawson. "DIY Democracy: The Direct Action Politics of U.S. Punk Collectives."

American Studies, vol. 52, no. 2, 2013, pp. 23–42.

Getino, Octavio and Fernando Solanas, directors. *The Hour of the Furnaces (1968) Part 1:*

Neocolonialism and Violence. YouTube, 17 Jan. 2012.

McBride, Christina. "The Meridian Coffeehouse Is A DIY Haven On a Small College Campus."

RVA Mag, 19 Nov. 2018.

McClade, Grace. "The Meridian." *Williamsburg Documentary Project*, 18 Feb. 2010.

Minh-Ha, Trinh T., director. *Reassemblage: from the Firelight to the Screen*. A Film by Trinh T.

Minh-Ha, 1983. *Women Make Movies*.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Ind., 2017.

Stradling, Richard. "Anything Goes With The Coffee At Zara's." *Daily Press*, 4 Apr. 1994,

The National Archives UK, producer. *London Can Take It*. YouTube, 9 May 2008,