

Mediating subjectivity through materiality in documentary practice

Catalin Brylla

Introduction

This chapter discusses my documentary film practice, which explores the filmic mediation of subjectivity through the materiality of the pro-filmic event and the materiality of the film text. One of the major challenges for documentary filmmakers lies in the identification and mediation of subjective experiences and their expository degree of traits unique to the person being filmed. But, how can a spatio-temporally highly localized, first-person phenomenon like ‘subjectivity’ be turned into a ‘collective’ subjectivity that is experienced by an audience?

Searle (1992, p. 97) asserts that subjectivity per se cannot be observed in the physical world, but it can be mapped through the interaction between our body, our behavior and the immediate environment. Searle also argues that “where conscious subjectivity is concerned, there is no distinction between the observation and the thing observed, between the perception and the object perceived” (1992, p. 97). Therefore, the synergy between perception and the material world represents the major premise of my proposed methodology, which attempts to explore two sets of symbiotic relationships in the pursuit of mediating subjectivity: the relationship between film characters and their physical environment, and the relationship between spectator and film text. I will first distinguish between these two relationships by proposing a two-level approach to my film practice where both levels can be understood through

the study of materiality as an agency for not just perceiving, but *experiencing* the world, which constitutes a major paradigm in phenomenological thought (see Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The first level relates to the filmmaker's encounter with the subject, for which I will propose anthropological methods that facilitate the identification and filming of subjective experiences manifested through objects and spaces. These methods will be based on phenomenological traditions adapted to ethnographic inquiry. The second level relates to the audience's experience by means of the film form, for which I will suggest methods based on cognitive film theory.

Phenomenology and cognitive theory may appear incongruent, the former describing *subjective, first-person* point-of-views, and the latter formulating *objective, third-person* methodologies (Marbach, 2007, p. 385). However, I aim to demonstrate that the addition of cognitive models to a phenomenological approach is beneficial to documentary practice in order to facilitate the mediation, in particular the *reception* of subjectivity. David Bordwell stresses the value of cognitive models for addressing a variety of levels of audience reception: "Cognitive theory wants to understand such human mental activities as recognition, comprehension, inference-making, interpretation, judgment, memory, and imagination" (1989, p. 12). Also, similar to phenomenological tradition, cognitive theory postulates that film viewing is an 'intentional act', where perception and cognition are directed at 'something' in the outside world. This 'something' constitutes film form – the *materiality* of the film text.

My case study will aim to validate this cognitive-phenomenological approach by referring to a scene from my current documentary project that explores the cinematic portrayal of blindness and subjectivity. My research constitutes in what Haseman (2006, p. 4) calls 'performative research'. Drawing on J. L. Austin's 'performativity' in speech act theory, he

posits that as an alternative to *quantitative* (numeric) and *qualitative* (verbal) data, *performative* data represents non-numeric and non-verbal forms that make up the research practice itself, such as moving images (2006, p. 6). This type of research is strictly practice-led, in that practitioners commence practicing and see what emerges, thus omitting ‘the constraints of narrow problem setting and rigid methodological requirements at the outset of a project’ (2006, p. 4). Thus, the methodology presented here has largely emerged from the interaction between me and my documentary subjects, observing their behavior, reactions and attitudes within their domestic spaces, and focusing on their interaction with material elements (objects and places). As a result, my methodology is grounded and encourages a flexible bricolage approach where cross-disciplinary methods are adopted, tweaked and merged in order to suit emerging empirical data.

Materiality and a two-level approach to film practice

The concept of ‘materiality’ offers a good starting point for identifying, capturing and conveying physical manifestations of subjectivity. I adopt the term “materiality” as used in material culture studies, which according to Hicks (2010, p. 25), has emerged during the twentieth century as a major discipline within archeology and socio-cultural anthropology. According to archeologist Christopher Tilley, “Materiality refers to the fleshy, corporeal and physical, as opposed to spiritual, ideal and value-laden aspects of human existence” (2006, p. 3). Thus, materiality can include any *thing* as diverse as tools, decorative objects, buildings, food, plants etc. For Woodward it is only through material engagements that individuals have the opportunity to articulate aspects of identity (2007, p. 135). Objects have the potential to “carry personal, cultural and emotional meanings, related to subjective identity – they can facilitate interpersonal interaction, and help a person to act upon him or herself.” Accordingly, in a

filmmaking context subjective experience takes on material form that is empirically palpable to the filmmaker and consequently mediatable through film. However, materiality can also be understood as the virtual physicality of film form, which is essentially the audio-visual juxtaposition of filmic elements that are empirically palpable to the spectator. Thus, as there are two sets of materialities, there are two sets of subjectivities, as Chateau confirms: The referred to or pro-filmic subjectivity, as observed by the filmmaker during the encounter with the subject, and the depicted subjectivity, as experienced by the audience through formal choices in the film text (2011, p. 12).

This distinction reveals two phenomenological instances of experiencing Searle's externalized subjectivity: Firstly, the pro-filmic embodiment of the character's subjectivity through objects and spaces, and secondly, the resulting filmmaker's embodied experience manifested in film form and ultimately experienced by the spectator. But, in real life these levels overlap, rendering the distinction purely conceptual. For instance, as soon as the camera starts recording the encounter, formal decisions are made about framing, shot size, camera movement and editing. Nevertheless, with regards to mediating subjectivity, I argue that these two levels require different, though interdependent methods. Hence, the *distinction* should not be seen as a *separation* in the structuralist-semiotic tradition.

The materiality of the encounter

Given the inductive nature of practice-led research, instead of proposing a fixed set of methods, I present two prerequisites in form of two anthropological theories of materiality, the 'biographical object' and 'objectification'. These concepts are malleable enough to frame a variety of methods in accordance to specific case studies encountered in the field. In addition,

they share a phenomenological paradigm in that they focus on first-person subjective experiences in relation to objects and space.

The ‘biographical object’ is an object that mediates a localized, particular and individual identity through human interaction (Morin in Hoskins, 1998, p. 8). She discerns three levels of mediation: (1) at the temporal level the object becomes old and worn, (2) at the spatial level it anchors the owner to a particular space and time, and (3) at the owner’s level the object is formative of the user’s identity and narrative process of self-definition. This dialectical relationship between subject and object is also established through the theory of objectification (Miller, 2010; Tilley, 2006). Tilley explains the ambiguous relationship between subject and object as being “same and different, constituted and constituting” (2006, p. 61). They form part of each other, while not collapsing into or being subsumed into the other. Hence, objects can be regarded as embodiments of subjects, and the interaction with objects constitutes the embodiment of subjective experience. Low calls this phenomenon of experience-oriented space “embodied space”. “Embodied space is the location where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form” (Low, 2003, p. 10). These anthropological concepts prove particularly useful for organizing the *mise-en-scene* of the encounter. For example, subjects may be asked to interact with biographical objects or be interviewed within personal spaces in order to elicit embodied experiences on their part. Simultaneously, formal decisions (cinematographic and editorial) have to be made in order to capture and mediate these experiences, for which I propose methods based on cognitive film theory.

The materiality of film form

For Chateau “film ... is clearly an objective object in the sense of being absolutely external to any mind; above all, it is observable like any other physical thing” (2011, p. 165). He also emphasizes that film form is the quasi corporeal manifestation of subjectivity through specific signs, which he calls the “objectivation of subjectivity,” and the process of mediation entails the audience’s interplay with that form (a.a. 12). Chateau therefore assumes an audio-visual codification of pro-filmic subjectivity into film form, which requires an objective set of codes, or common language that determines a wider audience’s understanding and experience of the subjectivity portrayed. Thus, ‘objectivization’ is an intrinsic part of Chateau’s ‘objectivation’. The objectivization of subjective experience is explored in empirical studies based on phenomenological approaches.

According to Gallagher and Zahavi, Husserl’s phenomenology is initially a philosophical venture, not an empirical discipline (2008, p. 29). Thus, Husserl’s transcendental methods of analyzing first-person subjectivity are incompatible with objectivizing methodologies from natural sciences (a.a. 28-29). However, Gallagher and Zahavi describe a new approach, “naturalized phenomenology”, that acknowledges subjective phenomena as being part of nature and as a result, open to empirical analysis (a.a. 30). For the task of naturalization Marbach proposes that the empirical results of phenomenological observations need to be embedded in formalized descriptions that bear intersubjectively shareable meanings, which requires a formalized language that expresses not the content of experience, but its formal structure (in Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008, p. 30). Therefore, naturalizing phenomenology has two major advantages: firstly, the evaluation of highly subjectivized phenomenological data results in an objectivized form of notation that is accessible to other researchers, and secondly,

phenomenological research designs can be reproduced in different contexts with different subjects.

Although these observations may seem only tangentially relevant to documentary filmmaking, they nonetheless highlight the very essence of the filmic mediation of subjectivity. Filmic mediation is an agent for conveying information and meaning through a particular code (Hayward, 1996, p. 213). In Marbach's words, this code is a formalized language that carries intersubjectively shareable meanings, which conveys the expression of formal structures of subjectivity from an individual screen subject to a collective of subjects within the audience. In other words, subjectivity can only be mediated to an undetermined group of spectators if first-person phenomena recorded during the real-life encounter are translated (naturalized) into a codified film form that elicits an equivalent subjective response in a group of viewers. This 'objectivization' of subjectivity is inextricably connected to Chateau's 'objectivation', and their synergistic relationship enables an anticipated interplay between pro-filmic materiality, the materiality of film form and the audience's experience thereof. Cognitive film models prove valuable for not just the analysis of film form, but the very conceptualization of it during the filmmaking process.

Cognitive film theory is rooted in cognitive psychology and offers arguably the most adequate approach to the process of naturalizing and objectivizing phenomenological data. For Currie film cognitivism is a methodological framework, rather than a prescriptive set of methods (2004, p. 106). Hence, film cognitivists are suspicious of "system-building, opting instead for an eclectic mix of theories and models determined by the purpose in hand". Cognitivists attempt to avoid 'perceived totalizations, miscalculations, and obscurities' as exemplified in other film theories (Rushton and Bettinson, 2010, p. 160). Thus, cognitive theorizing is often speculative

and diffident, formulating scientifically plausible, but at the same time flexible and corrigible arguments. In this capacity, cognitive film theory seems an appropriate choice for the grounded bricolage approach my practice requires.

Henry Breitrose is a strong proponent for the use of cognitive film theory in documentary practice, arguing that a pragmatic film theory should provide the documentary filmmaker with some confidence in the process, as well as helping him/her craft a work that “succeeds in engaging the audience” (2012, p. 5). Speaking as a pedagogue, Breitrose means by ‘confidence’ an intuitive determination with regards to aesthetic choices tailored to the situation or purpose at hand, rather than a pre-conceived or normative approach. Teaching documentary practice myself, I can confirm that students, as well as experienced practitioners, are constantly faced with the need for spontaneous decisions about the choice of locations, actuality and filming styles. Cognitive film theory proves very efficient in these situations, as it directly relates a variety of possible audience experiences to choices in *mise-en-scene*, cinematography and editing.

The material methodology in practice

Focusing on a real-life example, the proposed methodology was conceived and refined as a result of my encounters with two blind subjects during my documentary project on blindness and subjectivity. The subjects rely on materiality in relation to their bodies (e.g. through touch, smell and echolocation) to not only get by in everyday life but to establish a sense of identity and compensating for the lack of seeing their body and their spatial surroundings. My initial observation of their tendency to speak through or about objects, directed me towards material culture studies. However, this alone proved insufficient when it came to considering filmic mediation and how an audience could experience (not just witness) embodied subjectivity, for

which my choice fell on cognitive film theory. This would allow me to reverse the process of film analysis (as originally intended by cognitive film theorists) to a process of film synthesis that informs the actual production process (as suggested by Breitrose). With reference to the conception of a particular scene from the film, I will first describe the methods used in relation to the pro-filmic encounter, and then the methods used in relation to film form.

Terry and his Brush – Pro-filmic Encounter



Figure 1: Terry and his brush

I asked Terry, a blind painter, to choose an object that is very dear to him and talk about it in front of the camera (Figure 1)¹. I did not direct him about what to say or what to do with the object. Terry chose an old paint brush that he kept referring to as an ‘old mate’. One of the most interesting aspects of this scene is how the encounter between the filmmaker, subject and object

contributes to the eduction of Terry's subjective experience and the revelation of the brush's material mediation capacities through Morin's three levels (spatial, temporal, identificational). This performative interaction is triggered by Terry being situated in two ontological modes, for which materiality is constitutive (Richardson, 1982, p. 421). Drawing on Heidegger's being-in-the-world, Richardson explains that in one mode we experience the world around us as a given fact, being absorbed in responding to others and subconsciously focusing on the task at hand. In the other mode we are detached from the tasks at hand and self-conscious in our responses to others – we experience the world as a construct. Objects and spaces determine which mode we adopt, resulting in a concrete material situatedness. Richardson points out that our “ability to shift modes of being poses critical questions about the relationship between our existence and the world in which we exist”.

In the brush scene Terry oscillates between these two modes because the scene is essentially a hybrid between an interview (Terry talking to and for the camera) and actuality (Terry performing or recreating actual events). Thus, these two contrasting modes of situatedness result in Terry experiencing the brush at times self-consciously, and at times immersively. Initially, Terry is self-conscious of the situation and the object as he presents it to the camera, touching it reflectively and making occasional pauses in order to organize his thoughts. He highlights different attributes and functions of the brush, some of which appear to shift into his reflective consciousness for the first time. For instance, when he demonstrates how he puts his brush behind his ear during painting, he reflects over his action by warning himself that he should not poke his eye (Figure 2). This reveals Morin's spatial level of the biographical object, as the brush is spatially anchored to a particular part of Terry's body, and his actions have to be limited and carefully orchestrated in order not to anchor it to an undesired part. Also, Terry chose

to be interviewed in his bedroom where he usually paints, so, the brush is not only anchored to a particular place, but also to a particular situation - it is only when Terry uses the brush that the bedroom becomes his studio.



Figure 2: Commenting on not poking his eye

He also verbally points out that the brush is worn out, whilst inadvertently plucking the loose head off the handle and scratching through the thick layers of paint that have engulfed the brush's handle over the years. These actions reveal Morin's temporal level of the biographical object becoming old and worn, showing its patina of age. Furthermore, whilst reflecting over the brush's age, Terry becomes at times absorbed in his actions (e.g. the scratching), seemingly talking to himself. Yet when these actions become reflexive, he talks again to the camera. The same fluctuation happens when he re-enacts different painting maneuvers (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Re-enacting painting manoeuvres

Terry and his Brush – Film Form

In terms of spectatorship, my objective during filming and editing this scene was to make the audience closely experience Terry's character and subjectivity through body movement, space and objects. Therefore, I used film cognitivist Murray Smith's character sympathy model. Smith (1994) establishes three levels of character sympathy: recognition, alignment and allegiance. Recognition is dependent on the visual representation of the human face and body (a.a. 36). Alignment describes the spectator's access to the character's space and subjectivity (a.a. 41). Allegiance refers to the moral and ideological evaluation of the screen character. As allegiance has to be discussed on a narrative level, it will not be elaborated here.

Regarding recognition and spatial alignment, I filmed Terry mostly in medium shots, as they allowed the inclusion of his face, his upper body and the brush in the same frame, reinforcing the notion of embodied space through close visual proximity. I deliberately avoided separating Terry and the brush through too many insert shots, which would have resulted in a

montage of close-ups that deconstruct the space. This is often done in documentaries about blindness in a somewhat naïve pursuit to engage the audience in a tactile experience, whilst unintentionally obscuring body language and the coherence of space. The medium shot has an additional advantage of showing hands and arms gestures. Especially in conjunction with handling objects, these gestures are intimately connected with verbal communication and externalize emotions, as well as unarticulated thoughts (Beatty, 2003, p. 1).

However, considering the dialectic concept of objectification, the brush had to be treated in a “subjective” manner, too. In terms of the recognition of and alignment with objects, Carroll and Seeley (2013, pp. 59-60) define Schyn’s diagnostic recognition features as “sets of sensory features sufficient to enable an organism to perceptually recognize the identity, shape, location, and affordances of objects and events in the environment”. Diagnosticity is task specific and the perspective we approach and view the object from depends on the task or goal for which the object is used.

The diagnosticity in Terry’s scene manifests through a plethora of different angles and sizes of the brush, highlighting different affordances and situating the brush in different modes of ‘being’ – utilitarian, possessive, emotive, autobiographical. There are a few close-ups that show Terry’s fingers interacting with the brush, such as when he starts scratching into the paint layers and when the head comes off (Figures 4 and 5). These close-ups were necessary to reveal specific parts of the brush that linked to Terry’s action. I deliberately tried to avoid close-ups of the brush without Terry performing a task that would motivate diagnostic proximity.

Interestingly, unlike the other blind character where I had to move the camera in order to capture different angles and sizes of the object handled, Terry’s expressive upper body gesticulations meant that the camera could be mostly static, and still capture multiple perspectives of the brush.



Figure 4: Scratching into paint layers.



Figure 5: Brush head coming off.

In terms of subjective alignment the brush scene takes place in a particular space, the bedroom, where Terry would naturally interact with the brush, and towards which Terry has certain feelings. The bedroom is small and congested, which Terry had previously complained about on several occasions. I have tried to mediate Terry's subjective experience of his bedroom by not having any extreme wide shots that reveal the entire room, but only shots where Terry's body (or parts of it) fills the frame. In addition, the camera remains in the same position

throughout the scene so that all shots reveal only one perspective of the event. As a result, the audience's sense of space is very limited. No total orientation is possible and the space is experienced as tight and claustrophobic. This sensation is heightened by the continuity style that simulates real-time, immersing the spectator into a diegetic chronotope. There are no cutaways to other spaces, no non-diegetic sounds or music, and no voice-over. For the entire scene the experience of space and time is restricted to this small part of the bedroom.

In summary, one can see the inextricable connection, yet conceptual separation, between methods used during the encounter and methods used to conceive film form. This two-level approach does not only offer a useful and reliable tool for practitioners, but also an academically rigorous methodology for predicting a possible mediation process, thus formulating a plausible audience response. Thus, the methodological conclusions from my case study can be extrapolated in film production, as well as film analysis contexts. But, especially in terms of audience reception, it is paramount to stress that the mediation process I describe for Terry's scene is only a *possible* outcome. As the filmmaker, this is naturally my preferred outcome. This does not mean that I disregard alternative audience experiences and polysemic readings of Terry describing his brush. Unfortunately, the scope of this chapter does neither allow for other possible spectatorship scenarios, nor for an expanded discourse arguing that the process of naturalization in a film mediation context is not necessarily normative or positivist, assuming a single, idealized viewing response. This is a common objection to cognitive film theory which has been thoroughly contested by cognitivists, such as Peterson (1996) and Nannicelli and Taberham (2014). Nannicelli and Taberham locate the major (film) cognitivist paradigm as one of rational inquiry: What unites cognitivists is striving for a rigorous approach or *theorizing*,

rather than the theory itself (2014, p. 7). From this perspective, it can be argued that my proposed methodology is itself ‘only’ a case study.

Consequently, my aim has been to present *one* theoretical approach to documentary filmmaking and practice-based research. I have formulated an interdisciplinary and pragmatic methodology for enabling the filmic mediation of subjectivity, which has emerged from my documentary practice, and I do not claim that objects and spaces are the only vehicles for conveying subjective experience per se. As my practice is semi-ethnographic, I have identified materiality (in the anthropological tradition) as a possibility to map subjectivity through embodied space when subjects perform or reflect on quotidian activities and objects. Hence, focusing on materiality is not only relevant to blind people, but also to other research contexts that deal with observing and filming people’s everyday lives. However, I have not touched on other documentary film elements, such as the interview or voice-over, which entail alternative forms for mediating subjectivity (e.g. *disembodied* subjectivity). Other stylistic forms, such as animation and archive, open up even further layers of subjectivity with regards to authorship and the materiality of the film image itself, in which case concepts of reflexivity, authorship and the film-as-artifact require exploration.

This chapter has mainly focused on subjectivity through spatial experience from a cognitive-phenomenological perspective. Emotions, which are widely analyzed in cognitive film theory, have not been considered. Neither has the hermeneutic level of audience reception where narrative comprehension and interpretation can become vehicles for subjectivity when linked to themes and motifs, which is further complicated through polysemic audience readings. In order to account for these different types of audience reception I hope the discourse presented here encourages longer film studies to make more use of the cross-disciplinarity of contemporary

cognitive film theory, referring to fields, such as semiotics, iconography, aesthetics, neuropsychology and cultural studies. I further hope that it will stimulate documentary practitioners to embrace theoretical models, especially if they prove pragmatic for specific case studies. This should be accompanied by the understanding that film's primary purpose is that of mediation, and mediation can only be achieved if it is understood as an interaction between the author, the subject, the film text and the spectator. Grasping the linking processes between these entities should be the main concern of film practitioners, scholars and educators.

References

- Beatty, G. (2003). *Visible thought – The new psychology of body language*. London: Routledge.
- Bordwell, D. (1989). A case for cognitivism. *Iris*, 9, 11-41.
- Breitrose, H. (2012). There is nothing more practical than a good film theory. Proceedings of *Digital media and composition conference*, Columbus, USA. Retrieved from <http://dmp.osu.edu/dmac/supmaterials/Breitrose.pdf>
- Carroll, N. and Seeley, W.P. (2013). Cognitivism, psychology, and neuroscience: Movies as attentional engines. In A.P. Shiamura (Ed.), *Psychocinematics: Exploring cognition at the movies* (pp. _53__-_75__). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chateau, D. (Ed.) (2011). *Subjectivity*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Currie, G. (2004). Cognitivism. In T. Miller and R. Stam (Eds.), *A companion to film theory*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Gallagher, S. and Zahavi, D. (2008). *The phenomenological mind: An introduction to philosophy of mind and cognitive science*. Oxon: Routledge.

- Haseman, B. (2006). A manifesto for performative research. *Media International Australia*, 118(1), 98-106.
- Hayward, S. (1996). *Key concepts in cinema studies*. London: Routledge.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hicks, D. (2010). The material-cultural turn. In D. Hicks and M.C. Beaudry (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of material culture studies* (pp. 25___-__98___). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hoskins, J. (1998). *Biographical objects: How things tell the stories of people's lives*. London: Routledge.
- Low, S. M. (2003). Embodied space(s): Anthropological theories of body, space, and culture. *Space and Culture*, 6(1), 9-18.
- Marbach, E. (2008). Towards integrating Husserlian phenomenology with cognitive neuroscience of consciousness. *Synthesis Philosophica*, 22(2), 385-400.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge.
- Miller, D. (2010). *Stuff*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Nannicelli, T. and Taberham, P. (2014). Introduction: Contemporary cognitive media theory. In T. Nannicelli and P. Taberham (Eds.) *Cognitive media theory* (pp. 1___-__23___). Oxon: Routledge.
- Peterson, J. (1996). Is a cognitive approach to the avant-garde cinema perverse? In D. Bordwell and N. Carroll (Eds.) *Post-theory: Reconstructing film studies* (pp. __108___-__129___). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Richardson, M. (1982). Being-in-the-market versus being-in-the-plaza: Material culture and the construction of social reality in Spanish America. *American Ethnologist*, 9(2), 421-436.

Rushton, R. and Bettinson, G. (2010). *What is film theory? An introduction to contemporary debates*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Searle, J.R. (1992). *The rediscovery of the mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Smith, M. (1994). Altered states: Character and emotional response in the cinema. *Cinema Journal*, 33(4), 34-56.

Tilley, C. (Ed.) (2006). *Handbook of material culture*. London: Sage.

Woodward, I. (2007) *Understanding material culture*. London: Sage.

¹ The video clip can be accessed at <https://vimeo.com/77627500>