The filmmaker, the subject and the audience: A dialectical exploration of documentary performance

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The Filmmaker, the subject and the audience:
A dialectical exploration of documentary performance.

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Bachelor of Communications (Film and Video)

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Abstract

Documentary filmmakers “engage directly in the study of the phenomena of life that surrounds us. We hold the ability to show and elucidate life as it is, considerably higher than the occasionally diverting droll games that people call theatre, cinema etc.” (Vertov, 1984, p. 47). The ability to ‘show and elucidate life as it is’ is a controversial claim that the majority of academic documentary discussion is concerned with. I intend to add to this discussion through an exploration of performance and its pertinence to the ability of documentary to represent reality truthfully.

The reception of documentary is significantly influenced by this claim and expectation of a truthful representation of the world. As O’Shaughnessy has noted, “documentary’s special pleasures lie in its reality content, the spectacle and voyeurism involved in watching something that we know really happened” (1997, p.86). While the audience is satisfied that the film is, as it reports to be, a truthful representation of the world, this voyeuristic pleasure is catered for. However when the audience’s scepticism is aroused documentary begins to fall apart.

One of the biggest criticisms of documentary and its ability to represent the world as it is, is the claim that the act of observation changes what it observes. So anything that documentary studies through its observation of the world, it creates in the process. I will argue that this artificial affect is incidental in comparison to the importance of documentary maintaining the audience’s perception of its truthfulness, regardless of how untrue this may be.
Declaration:

I certify that this thesis does, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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Introduction.

Bill Nichols has defined the purpose of the documentary project as the stimulation and satisfaction of “epistephilia (a desire to know) in its audience” (2001, p.40). As such documentary is reliant on its truth claim, a claim for the authenticity of its representation of the world, in providing its potency in reception. For observational documentary this claim comes in the form of observed minutiae, small details gleaned from the pro-filmed reality that testify to the spontaneous and intimate nature of its creation. The legitimacy of this has been vigorously debated due to the inevitable disparity between the pre-existing reality and the reality that documentary films, called the pro-filmed reality. This disparity is predominantly a matter of concern for how truthful a subject’s behaviour can be considered. The camera is generally thought to make the subject self-conscious resulting in a significant modification of their behaviour, destabilising documentary’s representation. However there are some that maintain that this disparity in performance can actually result in a stronger truth claim, such as Robert Ezra Park and Jean Rouch who “maintained that the presence of the camera can make people act in ways truer to their nature than might otherwise be the case” (Barnouw, 1993, p.253).

The deviation of the pro-filmed reality from the pre-existing reality can be dealt with in two distinct ways, by either minimising it, or harnessing it. This is where the observational documentary genre splits in two; direct cinema minimises any deviation from the pre-existing reality, and cinema verite exacerbates it. These methods serve to allay any audience scepticism of the subject’s behaviour because of the filmmaker’s influence, and although they use different means, both forms aim to “produce a cinema that simultaneously brings the filmmaker and the audience closer to the subject” (Barsam cited in Beattie, 2004, p.84). My film project is an experiment into this dichotomy, an attempt at creating an insightful character study through observational means. I initiated this experiment with expectations of creating a direct cinema film, but as I encountered all sorts of issues I switched to a predominantly cinema verite film that drew from direct cinema, as the only feasible way of achieving the character study I wanted.

As a theoretical underpinning to my filmic experiment I have chosen to focus on issues of performance as a way of helping me to better understand the nuances of the truth claim of observational cinema. This theoretical orientation is helpful firstly because of its importance in regards to the problem of influence, and secondly because of my intentions to make a character study. The behaviour of a documentary subject can always be considered
performative, in that it always has an audience, and as such it must act as a demonstration of the qualities that the performer wants to be associated with. To derive insight from this, documentary must engage directly with the performance, either in filming or editing.
Documentary has a long and difficult history of trying to define its difference from fiction. From the pioneering work of the Lumiere brothers who "aspired to catch life 'sur le vif' - on the go" (Barnouw, 1993, p.347), documentary has revelled in the reality of found material. Or as Vertov has provokingly stated, "we engage directly in the study of the phenomena of life that surrounds us. We hold the ability to show and elucidate life as it is, considerably higher than the occasionally diverting droll games that people call theatre, cinema etc." (Vertov, 1984 , p. 47). This 'study of the phenomena of life' is compelled by the epistiphiliac drive of the audience, and as such, the credibility of documentary's representation is crucial. So much so, that Erik Barnouw has stated that, "its plausibility, its authority, is the special quality of the documentary" (1993, p. 349). While "fiction may be content to suspend disbelief (to accept its world as plausible), ... non-fiction often wants to instil belief (to accept its world as actual)" (Nichols, 2001, p.2). The means by which documentary instils the audience with belief in its representation of the world is called its truth claim.

Observational documentary is based around capturing the detailed nuances of spontaneity in each small moment of life. This minutiae is observational documentary's truth claim, it is these moments that engender audience belief in the film's representation of the world. The sacrifices that must be made and the determination with which observational filmmakers pursue these spontaneous moments is indicative of their rare power and quality, they offer an intimate immediacy that draws the audience into the world of the subject, offering an opportunity for identification and/or voyeurism. This method of filmmaking originated when equipment was developed that allowed a crew to be mobile enough to follow around a subject without having to control any of their activities. This freedom to relinquish control over the pro-filmed reality was, and still is, quite revolutionary compared to the majority of film product. The determination to actually do so, despite all of the difficulties, is motivated by the desire to capture life as it is. The technical imperfections that are common with the filming of observational cinema is a powerful testament to its authenticity, the less than ideal camera vantage points, lighting, camera shake, focusing issues and off-mic sound all demonstrate the reality and uniqueness of each moment of observational cinema. These traits are so effective in engendering belief in the actuality of the representation that they have since become part of fictional film convention. A handheld camera is now a technical cliché used to evoke realism in everything from films such as Breaking the Waves, The Boys and Saving Private Ryan to television shows such as NYPD Blue, and The Office.
While the connotations of realism are particularly strong with this method of filmmaking this is in no way guarantees audience belief in the reality of the footage. “One of the problems hanging over observer documentarists was the extent to which the presence of the camera influenced events before it” (Barnouw, 1993, p.253). This influence obviously harms the ability of observational documentary to claim to “show and elucidate life as it is” (Vertov, 1984, p. 47). Since every one of those moments of minutiae is tainted by the film crew and the camera’s presence their value as a truthful account of the world is brought into question. What insight into the world is possible if the only window into it inherently changes it? In order to maintain the ability to engender audience belief in their representation of the world it is necessary for documentary to address this problem. In their respective efforts to maintain a credible representation of the world the two modes of observational cinema take different paths, direct cinema attempts to minimise interference whilst cinema verite tries to exacerbate and harness it.

As a response to the problem of influence direct cinema does two things. Firstly, the filmmaker deliberately minimises any influence they have over the pro-filmed reality during the shooting process, and secondly, they remove any signs of their presence and influence in the editing of the final film. As a way of claiming authenticity, direct cinema abstains from narration, interviews, and music, while employing long takes to demonstrate a lack of manipulation in editing. These techniques serve to minimise both filmmaker manipulation and also the audience’s perception of filmmaker influence. This strategy of avoidance and denial allows direct cinema to emulate the fictional model of an invisible fourth wall, providing the audience with an intimate, seemingly unmediated window to the world. The credibility of the film and the voyeuristic response that it engenders is undermined by the idea that the action deviates from what would have occurred if the camera were not there to capture it.

Cinema verite takes this deviation as a central tenet of its methodology, it is through the influence of the camera and the crew that verite makes its truth claim. As Barnouw has noted, “cinema verite is committed to a paradox: that artificial circumstances can bring hidden truth to the surface” (1993, p.255). These artificial circumstances can be as simply mundane as an interview, or as convoluted as an elaborate hoax, but whatever it is, the filmmakers aim to create circumstances where they can gain insight from observing a subject. Jean Rouch, the pioneer of the verite movement, “evolved procedures that seemed to serve as psychoanalytic stimulants, enabling people to talk about things they had
previously been unable to discuss” (Barnouw, 1993, p.254), these techniques reached their pinnacle in his verite tour-de-force, *Chronique d'un ete*. Nick Broomfield, a verite auteur concerned with public figures, is not as interested with what people have to say as he is with the barriers they construct around themselves. Broomfield aims to show these barriers through his own vain attempts at making contact with the identities as he did in *The Leader, the driver and His Wife, Tracking Down Maggie*, and *Kurt and Courtney*. Another characteristic trait of verite is the inclusion of the filmmaker provocation in the film, as Winston has noted, “they tried in some way to guarantee the truth of their observation because we, the audience, could observe them apparently in the act of observing” (1995, p.164). This reflexivity acts as a gesture of complete disclosure on the part of the filmmaker, aiming to convince the audience of the transparency of its production process. Although this position frequently receives criticism of narcissism on the part of the filmmakers it has won out over direct cinema in terms of academic preference in the worth of its truth claim.

The problem of influence is generally concerned with the subject’s performance. By introducing a camera into the subject’s life, the filmmakers are also introducing an audience. This is thought to destroy the authenticity of behaviour because the subject now acts for the benefit of the audience; they are performing an exhibitionist routine and not their authentic behaviour. As Stella Bruzzi notes, “performance has always been at the heart of documentary filmmaking and yet it has been treated with suspicion because it carries connotations of falsification and fictionalisation, traits that inherently destabilise the non-fiction pursuit” (2000, p.125). While these concerns are not without their merit, the idea that performance is necessarily a deviation from normal behaviour is not accurate. As Erving Goffman has noted, performance is at the heart of all social interaction, not just documentary. It is “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman, 1959, p.26). As all activity carries an influence, I take this definition of performance as being inclusive of all behaviour with audience. As documentaries are produced with a crew present and have expectations of a further audience, all behaviour in documentary could be seen as performance.

To better understand the intricacies of a subject’s performance and how it is possible for documentary to make a truth claim about it, I will outline some key principles of Erving Goffman’s theory of behaviour. Firstly, it is important to realise that individuals act within the parameters of roles, which structures their behaviour and prevents them from acting randomly, which means that despite any influence the filmmaker has on behaviour, the subject must still act within the parameters of the role they are performing. As Heading
stated when discussing Goffman's theory, “it is because individuals are role players that their behaviour is neither idiosyncratic nor random” (Jackson, 1972, p.43). The parameters of the roles performed, determines the limits of performance before any idiosyncratic behaviour destroys the credibility of the role. As Jackson notes, “the normative constraints of society are tangibly represented in a system of roles for performance in which the individual is socialised, which subsequently define his rights, privileges and social relationships” (1972, p.1). The normative constraints of any role are derived from the cultural context they find themselves in, with ideological considerations determining the values associated with the role and how these values are expected to be embodied and performed. For example, the role of the mother is associated with the nurturing of children, which is expected to be performed through various activities such as preparing meals, clothing, schooling etc. It is necessary for a ‘successful’ mother to perform these activities and if they deviate too far from the expected role performance then they risk losing their entitlement to the status of the role.

As an individual must perform several roles, often with contradictory values, they must develop a way of convincing the audience of each of their role performances that they are genuinely entitled to the status of the role they perform for them. As William James has noted, “we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups” (Goffman, 1959, p.57). It is through the performance of multiple roles that this necessity manifests itself, the aforementioned mother may also be a prostitute, and she would be wise to keep the two roles separate by what Goffman has termed ‘audience segregation.’ Through “audience segregation the individual ensures that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting” (Goffman, 1959, p.57). Therefore, the audience that the woman plays the mother role to (her children) is not going to be the same audience she plays the role of the prostitute to (her customers). This segregation is necessary because each role has its own criteria upon which it is judged, and since each individual must perform several roles there is bound to be contradictory elements in their various role performances. Audience segregation allows the individual to perform each of their roles to their full potential without fear of contradiction, maintaining the credibility and their entitlement of each of their role performances. The influence of the camera may be mostly felt in relationship to the subject’s audience segregation. As a documentary is generally made with a further audience in mind, it has the potential of transgressing any and all of the boundaries that the subject may have constructed between
the audiences of their various roles. The fear of possible disruption to the credibility of their role performances after the screening of the film may affect how a performer behaves in the documentary. For example, the extreme amount of denial that David Friedman performs in *Capturing the Friedmans* about his father's paedophilia, could be motivated in part by attempting to maintain the credibility of his role as a children's entertainer.

It is through performance that an individual creates and maintains their identity, or as Judith Butler explains:

> acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and discursive means (2004, p.110).

Nietzsche has summarised the same sentiment more succinctly, "there is no 'being' behind doing...the 'doer' is merely a fiction imposed on the doing" (Butler, 2004, p.91). While this theory leaves somewhat of a void where our concept of self once dwelled, it does help indicate the importance of the contingency of performance on our identity. It is only through performance that an individual comes to form an identity, and as such it then must be recognised that all identity is necessarily exhibitionistic. The individual demonstrates particular behaviours, activities and values that alert the audience to their identity by, "enlivening their performances with appropriate expressions, excluding from their performances expressions that might discredit the impression being fostered and take care lest the audience impute unintended meanings" (Goffman, 1959, p.73). Because of the contingency of identity on audience reception, it could be argued that in terms of securing the status of a role it is more important to appear to be fulfilling the criteria of the role, than to actually do so. And as such a carefully constructed performance is as a much of a necessity for sincere performers as it is for insincere ones.

Goffman's performance theory can make behaviour appear to be insincere and calculated, which would seemingly not fare well for documentary's ability to record and present an authentic view of the world. However, as Brissett and Edgley have claimed, "the most revealing insights to be gleaned about human beings lie simply in a close look at what is
right on the surface" (Schechner, 2002, p.175). Ezra Park has stated similar sentiments in that, "the mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves-the role we are striving to live up to-this mask is our truer self" (Goffman, 1959, p.30). The notion that our ideal is our true self is contentious and runs counter to the theory that documentary’s influence on performance is a regression from insight. As this influence would theoretically make the subject more concerned with the image they are projecting, they would prioritise this ideal, which in Ezra Park’s opinion would be their true self. Even if you don’t accept this, the ideal impression that the performer attempts to convey can be a helpful indicator of their interiority by demonstrating their conception of the ideal and thus their value system. The surface is the site of identity and as such it is where the efforts of performance and observation are aimed. So although observational documentary has focused its “attention to surface, and only to surface,” as Winston has complained (1995, p.216), this does not necessarily mean the films lack insight.

Just as a fiction director is looking for a particular type of performance, so is the documentary filmmaker. They are after performances that give an indication of the interiority of the subject. So even if the camera brings out a more performative side of the subject, this just increases their expressivity and the opportunity for the audience to make inferences about the subject’s personality, or in the words of Nietzsche to create a concept of a ‘doer’ based upon observing their ‘doings’ (Butler, 2004, p.91). A fraudulent documentary performance would place the performer in a precarious position, “for at any moment in their performance an event may occur to catch them out and badly contradict what they have openly avowed, bringing them immediate humiliation and sometimes permanent loss of reputation” (Goffman, 1959, p.66). For a documentary subject to successfully perform an insincere performance they must convince their immediate audience, the filmmakers and the documentary’s audience of the sincerity of their performance. Although the film audience is the one a fraudulent performer would be most concerned with, it is the filmmakers which are the most important to convince. The filmmaker’s are committed to maintaining their documentary’s impression of authenticity, and if they are sceptical of the sincerity of a subject’s performance they will not rest the film’s credibility upon it. So in order for the film to maintain its truth claim it is necessary to cast doubt on the subject’s performance. In Errol Morris’s film The Thin Blue Line the filmmaker doubted the performance of one of his subject’s enough to completely change the topic of his film, solicit a murder confession and ultimately get an innocent man off death row. There was no way that Morris was going to allow the authenticity of his film be compromised by this fraudulent performance.
The situation in which a subject performs is crucial for determining what inferences can be made in reading the performance. Both forms of observational filmmaking have different methods of declaring the context of the subjects' performance. Direct cinema puts emphasis on the context of time by using long uninterrupted takes, allowing the audience to experience the rhythm of the pro-filmed reality as it happened. This is in contrast to cinema verite, which puts more significance on the relationship of the subject and the filmmaker, making sure to include the filmmaker in the film. Although both of these methods make efforts to guarantee the truthfulness of their depiction they also act as red herrings to distract the audience, allowing the filmmakers to make contextual changes to the performance elsewhere. These other contextual changes can radically alter how a performance is interpreted. The ability of editing to change the meaning of performance was first noted by Leo Kuleshov, where he:

created a montage experiment which became known abroad as the 'Kuleshov Effect.' I alternated the same shot of Mozhukhin with various other shots (a plate of soup, a girl, a child’s coffin), and these shots acquired a different meaning. The discovery stunned me-so convinced was I of the enormous power of montage (1974, p.200).

This experiment demonstrated how the context given to footage in editing can generate meaning, changing the possible readings of a subject's performance. This power of editing is documentary's primary method of creating meaning, narrative and thematic connections in their footage. In the Maysles' The Salesman the structuring of the material creates the meaning of the performance in almost as dramatic function as the Kuleshov experiment. The film is edited to construct a narrative of the growing disillusion and failure of Paul, a door-to-door bible salesman. The film begins with his performance brimming with optimistic playfulness and then degenerates with some unsuccessful sales, which are given greater gravity in their juxtaposition with the ease that the other salesman close deals, culminating in him unsuccessfully applying heavy handed sales tactics. The film ends with a shot of Paul looking blankly out of a window, which is taken to be a sign of desperation through the context it is given from the rest of the footage, a classic case of the Kuleshov effect. The performance's meaning is constructed in the editing by placing the footage into an order that has nothing to do with the chronology in which it was shot, creating a new chain of cause and effect.
As editing is essentially a fictionalising tool it seemingly runs counter to the aim of the documentary project to “show and elucidate life as it is” (Vertov, 1984, p.47). However, as seen in The Salesman the creation of the breakdown of Paul is necessary for the film to articulate its thematic content and overall statement. As Vertov has argued, “it is not enough to show bits of truth on the screen, separate frames of truth. These frames must be thematically organised so that the whole is also a truth” (Barnouw, 1993, p.58). I interpret ‘the whole as a truth’ as the organization of the footage of the film into a coherent statement that reflects the subjective point of view of the filmmaker. Although, it should be noted, that the needs for the filmmaker to arrange the material into a statement, is subservient to the needs of the documentary to maintain its authentic representational status. So why would documentary filmmakers bother going to the trouble of engaging with the real world if they are just going to manipulate their footage into a fictional statement? O'Shaughnessy proposes that “documentary’s special pleasures lies in its reality content, the spectacle and voyeurism involved in watching something that we know really happened” (O'Shaughnessy, 1997, Pg86). This special pleasure would seem to be enhanced if it was not subjected to filmmaker manipulation, but as Winston argues that is a completely unrealistic position:

As far as the audience is concerned, documentary promises insight and, given that a vision of unmediated image making is naïve and utopian, insight is what should be expected and demanded—not truth telling defined as a species of impossibly mechanistic, strict observationalism (Winston, 2000, p.155).

In providing insight, filmmakers construct their films to make subjective statements about the real world, and as such there are real consequences that should be considered. Berlinger and Sinofsky’s Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills induced scepticism of the guilt of the Memphis Three, three teenagers convicted of murdering three children in a Satanic ritual. In doing so the filmmaker’s raised suspicions about the possible involvement of Mark Byers, one of the murdered children’s stepfather. If their suspicions were investigated and confirmed by authorities and the film helped bring the stepfather to justice and got the Memphis Three acquitted, in a similar way as what happened in Morris’ The Thin Blue Line, then the ethical credentials of the film would be impeccable. But the Memphis Three are still in prison after several appeals, so even though the filmmakers had good reasons to be sceptical of the court process and suspicious of Mark Byers, they must consider what impact their film has had on his life. The film was released ten years ago
helping to make the case still controversial, there are still benefit concerts held to raise money for Memphis Three’s appeal process, and Mark Byers must still have to contend with the suspicion that this film has raised of him.

Documentary can be seen as a performance of authenticity. It aims to engender audience belief in the veracity of its representation of the world through various devices, in a similar way to how an individual aims to convince their audience of their mastery of the values associated with the role they are performing. This performance’s credibility is harmed by the notion that the act of observation changes what it observes. Documentary must respond to this claim to maintain its credibility, direct cinema does this by a strategy of avoidance and denial, and conversely cinema verite embraces the influence of observation and turns it into an asset. If either method doubts the sincerity of a performer then they must anticipate the audience’s reading of the performance and be seen to undermine it themselves, or face rupturing the documentary’s own performance of authenticity.
Part two-Production.

I have known Sasha, the subject of my documentary, for a few years and have always been amazed at her ability to create problems for herself. She has managed to make any problem she faces worse through solutions that are focused purely on short-term goals with almost no regard for future consequences. It is this quality that attracted me to her as a documentary subject. I theorised that a direct cinema character study of this behaviour would be entertaining and would have the potential to comment on self-destructive behaviour in general. This would allow me to use a classical narrative structure (equilibrium, disturbance, overcoming obstacles, resolution) where Sasha would play the role of both the protagonist and the antagonist. This would have been in the vain of films like, *Breaking the Waves*, *Lilya-4-Ever*, and *Ladri di Biciclette* [*The Bicycle Thief*] where the actions of the protagonist make a significant contribution to their downfall.

Although I was unaware of it at the time, this plan was ill conceived, and never had a real chance of working out. The concept was extremely broad in that it was based on following Sasha through her life, it was not just focusing on a single role performance as Connolly and Anderson did on Anne Boyd's role as the faculty head of the music department in *Facing the Music*. As direct cinema relies on the presence of the filmmaker to capture things when they happen, the lack of focus on a particular role meant I needed to follow her with a camera all of the time. This was beyond my capabilities in that I only had a limited amount of money to buy tapes, I didn't have constant access to a camera, and the method of 'going native' where I would stay with the subjects was more difficult than I expected.

In an attempt at allaying any reservations Sasha had about the film I tried to demystify the filming process and my intentions. I told her that I wanted to make the film resemble fiction, that she was the star and the story would come from whatever is happening in her life at the time. I told her that for this to work I need to follow her around with a camera while she ignores me and carries on as if I wasn't there. We discussed ground rules to ensure that she was still able to get moments of privacy and was thus comfortable with this intrusion into her life. The only part of her behaviour she wanted me to not include in the film was her marijuana use. This was fine with me because I didn't think it was important and I didn't want the audience to attribute her behaviour to drug use. So the initial discussions and arrangements with her achieved a good amount of agreement giving me cause to be optimistic.
However, things went wrong immediately, when I started to film it became apparent that Sasha was more concerned with how she was portrayed than I had expected. When I arrived at her house for the first day of filming I found it had been completely cleaned, gone was the squalor and chaos and in its wake was a sterile minimalism bereft of any character. I accepted this gesture as a once-off mistake, but I should have taken it as an omen of what was to come, as what followed could be best described as a frustrating game of cat and mouse. Sasha was the mouse, attempting to enact a performance of a far different identity than what I had been privy to prior to filming. And I was the cat, attempting to capture the identity of hers that I knew before filming began. This game must be inherent in all documentaries but I think our respective aims were almost polar opposites making the original conception of the film a long shot.

The nail in the coffin came not with her performance, but with mine. I was unable to comfortably maintain the strict non-interventionist stance direct cinema requires, I felt troubled by the ethical issues and practical considerations of this approach. As a direct cinema filmmaker I was expected to observe and film the subject struggle with problems, which I found felt somewhat inappropriate in itself. However, when I could help her overcome the problem she was facing, I was torn between my role as a friend and that of a filmmaker. If the problems she faced were more significant I could not see how as a filmmaker I could justify or maintain a non-interventionist stance. Aside from the ethical uncertainty of this position, there were practical implications as well. If I denied Sasha assistance she would then seemingly take revenge on me by finding a way of making my job harder, from not answering her phone to just watching television when I am there to film.

At the end of a month of filming I had some sequences that I thought was promising but I hadn’t effectively captured the cause and effect that drives narrative and that is essential for the type of character study I wanted to make. As the direct cinema method was clearly not working I had to change tack in order to finish the film. The main purpose of my project was always to achieve some sort of insightful character study of Sasha, so I needed to find another way of capturing her character and presenting it for the audience. Due to my research and my involvement in the aforementioned game of cat and mouse I decided the way of achieving a truthful insightful portrait of Sasha was to focus on the mechanics of her performance.

If, as I with the benefit of hindsight wished I did, had filmed my struggles to make the film I could have made a Broomfieldian character study of Sasha. But, I didn’t. Instead I choose
to stay behind the camera and be more of an implied presence than a physical part of the story. I wanted to disrupt the credibility of Sasha’s performance, but I didn’t want to be seen to be the one who was doing it. Instead of focusing on the performance that Sasha was giving as a direct cinema subject, I decided to induce a different performance, a confessional one. This marked the film’s transition from direct cinema to cinema verite, I was no longer a passive observer, I became the manipulator and catalyst of the events in the film. This involved not only inducing a particular performance from Sasha but also the circumstances in which this could be contested and deconstructed.

Sasha liked to present the story of why she doesn’t have custody of her child Olivia as one in which she is the victim. I think she liked this role because it allowed her to avoid taking responsibility for her actions. To convincingly play the role of the victim she had to cast Angela (her foster mum) in the role of the villain. She portrayed her as a Joan Crawfordesque character (ala Mommie Dearest) in that she was infertile, desperately wanted children, managed to adopt some through unconventional means, and then proceeded to abuse them. Sasha’s story was about the custody battle over Olivia, about how Angela maliciously framed her for stealing money and then charged her with theft so that she was able to take her to court, legally procuring Olivia’s custody.

Sasha was only able to maintain the credibility of this story when it was told to people who were unaware of the actual details, and were thus not in a position to contradict her. My position was somewhat precarious in this regard, I didn’t personally know anything of the details of the story but I knew Angela, so I was able to and had the motive (making the film) to find out. Because I intended to discredit Sasha’s performance I tried to encourage her to tell the story with as many embellishments as she wanted, making it easier for me to induce the audience’s scepticism in editing. I encouraged Sasha’s fictionalisation of her story by attempting to allay any possible fears she may have had of contradiction. While this effort may seem useless considering the recording function of a camera, I think my performance of gullability allowed her to think I believed her and wouldn’t follow things up.

After I had recorded this story I made a compilation of clips from it and set up a screening for Angela and her partner, John. I appropriated this screening process from the Maysles’ Gimme Shelter, which in turn appropriated it from Rouch’s Chronique d’un ete, who in the film’s penultimate scene screened the finished film to the subjects in order to question the authenticity of their performances. The screening process in my film was not just about
questioning the authenticity of performance, I had intended to discredit it through violating Sasha’s audience segregation. With the screening I was able to create a situation where Angela and John would be able to see a performance that they are not usually privy to. This allowed them to compare the difference between the role Sasha performed in the film to the role she performs for them. I wanted to use their evaluation of her performance as an indicator of truth, allowing the film to then attain a seemingly greater level of insight and penetration of Sasha’s character. In an attempt at reinforcing this disruption of Sasha’s performance I then screened Angela and John watching the screening to Sasha. I was hoping in observing Sasha’s reaction I would be able to then gauge the truthfulness of the comments Angela and John made about her original performance. Also because I assumed Sasha lied when she told me her story, I anticipated that her reaction to the screening would testify to this, either she would admit that she had been caught out in a lie or she would be forced to elaborate upon the lie which would dig herself a deeper hole.

I feel ashamed admitting this but I think it is worth mentioning as it is illuminating of what can happen in a situation where the filmmaker and the subject’s goals do not coincide. As I was unable to reprimand Sasha for the needless troubles I had in dealing with her in producing the film, I wanted to punish her through the screening process. The intended effect of the screening was to catch Sasha out in a lie, to confront her with the consequences of it, and then to catalyse enough of a change in her behaviour to climax and conclude my film. I expected her to be angry because I betrayed her audience segregation but much to my surprise, she seemed almost relieved, like she wanted Angela to hear this. I found this confusing I thought she had performed the story in the manner she did for egotistical reasons, that this was a discourse that she had constructed in order to deny responsibility for her losing custody of her daughter. However, I have since came to the conclusion that her story, while factually inaccurate, was emotionally true, in that she has invented the details of the events to reflect how she felt about it. This is not my theory but Frederick Bartlett’s, “the first thing a subject tends to recall is his attitude towards it. The recall is then a construction made largely on the basis of this attitude, and its general effect is that of a justification of the attitude” (Baddeley, 1982, p.38). The second reason for why I think Sasha was relieved is the very thing that I assumed was going to make her angry, my transgression of her audience segregation. I think that she had used this story as a way of letting Angela know how she felt about the events of her past without having to do so in person. This information was something that had become understandably ostracised from their normal role relationships and it was the production of the documentary gave her the opportunity to break with these role barriers. Sasha’s confessional performance was what
Michelle Citron was referring to when she wondered, “what type of hyperbolic moments occur ... precisely because of the camera’s presence and a desire, by at least one of the participants, to act out for the camera what can’t be acknowledged behind closed doors?” (1999, p.276). It was precisely because of the influence of the camera that Sasha gave the performance that she did, and although the camera did influence her in embellishing the facts of her story, it was still an insightful performance. Her preference for the role of the victim and her demonisation of Angela clearly show how she feels that Angela has smothered her into passivity. So the relief that Sasha conveyed when she saw that Angela had witnessed her performance was an acknowledgement of her use of the documentary to communicate things that fall outside of her relationship role. The relief could also be attributed to Foucault’s theory that confession was a ritual “in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promotes him salvation” (Renov, p.192). Sasha’s confession in this regard was enacted when I screened the footage to Angela, and it was only when I screened the result of that to Sasha that she realised the confession had been performed and was thus eligible for the intrinsic modifications that Foucault describes.

I have used a cinema verite formula of deriving insight from influence of the intrusion of the camera as the overarching idea to structure the film, I wanted to emphasise the deconstruction of Sasha’s performance at the hands of the screening process. I wanted to initially present her story as credible, which would hopefully gain her audience sympathy and identification. I then wanted to discredit her story by showing Angela’s reaction to the first screening, and establishing the true version of events, as a counter-discourse to Sasha’s story. The plan was to then climax the film with Sasha’s reaction to the second screening, which I could hopefully draw some conclusions from, articulating the thematic content. I hoped the audience identification that was established with Sasha at the start could help the audience internalise the concluding sentiments of memory and its distortion. However I don’t think all of this was achieved, I wasn’t able to contradict everything Sasha said and the need for exposition overwhelmed the other intentions I had for the material. I started out trying to make a documentary Ladri di Biciclette [The Bicycle Thief], sticking to pure direct cinema, creating a narrative out of the events that I observe, but I ended up trying to make Grey Gardens with the use of the verite technique of the screening. I am using Grey Gardens as a model of comparison here because both that and my film are character studies of a mother and daughter, and both films use the way the subject’s argue as an insight into
their relationships, and personalities. Only *Grey Gardens* is a masterpiece and mine is far from it.
Conclusion.

I set out to make a character study, a film that could explore the intricacies of a subject’s personality, as I find the idiosyncratic quirks of a character infinitely more compelling than a narrative based film. I also wanted to investigate the possibilities and pitfalls of observational cinema. I was initially determined to use direct cinema techniques so I could create a documentary that emulated as closely as possible fiction films like *Ladri di Biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thief*). But as I quickly discovered, direct cinema was a lot harder than I expected. Foremost in the problems with this method was the ethical position of non-intervention, I found this a particularly hard role to play and it has been something which has made me reconsider my position to the whole direct cinema enterprise. I think I would only consider attempting another direct cinema film if the topic did not demand an uncomfortable position in its stance of non-intervention. The other thing which I found particularly frustrating with direct cinema is the degree to which you are reliant on the subject, there is no agency with the role of the direct cinema filmmaker, so it requires a great amount of patience of being at the mercy of your subject. Although as empowering as verite is for the filmmaker, there is still the ethical problem of intervention. While non-intervention is troublesome for direct cinema, verite has to accept responsibility for the events that it catalyses. I found this quite nerve racking, as I didn’t want to adversely affect the relationship that Sasha has with Olivia but as with non-intervention I was torn between acting reasonably and doing what is right for the film. Happily there were no adverse consequences from this process, and conversely it seems that the filming has allowed the two subjects to develop a better understanding of each other’s perspective.

The ethical considerations concerned with the effect of the wider screening of the documentary upon the subject’s normal life is something that I have not had to really consider for this project. From the outset this film was intended primarily as an academic work and if I was happy with the finished product then it may be entered into some festivals, but it never was intended to be seen by a large audience. If it was to have a large audience I may have reservations about exposing such intimate details of the subject’s lives and being so critical of Sasha.

From the frustration that I felt trying to work with Sasha I have learnt of the importance of the filmmaker and the subject being able to coalesce their goals with the film. While this collusion may harm the harsh reality of some ideas that can be expressed when the filmmaker alone has the control of the film, it would make the whole production process
more enjoyable. However, my film could be seen as an attack on the sort of fallacies involved with autobiographical works. It may be necessary for the filmmaker to retain some sense of distance from the subject so that they are able to articulate ideas without being too concerned with projecting an ideal image. So it may be a necessary evil that the filmmaker and the subject don’t see eye to eye, but whatever the right balance is I don’t think I found it with this film.

The ability for documentary to make meaningful comments about reality and its relationship to the performance of the subject is difficult to assess. The aim of a truthful representation is always going to just be a theoretical concept in which to measure the honesty of documentary against. However, as Goffman’s theory of performance is applicable to documentary in that film is a performance in itself, the impression of authenticity is more important than the actual possession of it. Therefore, it is what the audience is willing to believe that determines the truth claim, more than the actual worth of the claim in the film itself. It is only because the audience is aware of the influence of a camera on behaviour that it is a problem. So the filmmaker must do what they can to convince the audience that despite the influence they inevitably have on their subjects, they are able to penetrate the performance of the subject no matter how false it is to reach insight.
Reference List.


