

NEGOTIATING CINEMATIC TRUTHS:  
ETHNOGRAPHIC AND ESSAY FILMS AS PARALLEL FORMS

By

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## Abstract

This thesis research project consists of a short, personal documentary, a statement explaining the techniques and theories behind the making of the documentary, and a historical essay tracing the ethnographic film and the essay film as well as an exploration of the composite form of these: personal documentary. The short film, entitled *New Cadet*, is the product of six months of documenting the life of a new West Point cadet through the eyes of her sister. The historical essay first looks at the history of ethnographic film and the essay film, detailing their evolution as well as the criticisms that have followed the traditions throughout their history. It then examines the films *Navajo Talking Picture*, *Leche*, and *Mala Leche* as possible examples of the convergence of ethnographic film and the essay film, all with the purpose of discovering exactly what cinematic truth means to filmmaker and audience.

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*New Cadet (2013)*

<https://vimeo.com/82990548>

## **Artist Statement**

In my time at the University of Arizona, I have studied Anthropology and Film and Television. I knew that using the documentary genre for my thesis project would allow me to combine both fields of study. Documentary is an expression of true events that would allow me to make a study of real people in cultural situations. When I decided that I wanted to make a documentary, I envisioned an auto-ethnography that detailed the role race played within my family and in my own life. As I began to film my family, however, I came upon a story that seemed more relevant at the time. The changes in my sister's life and how they affected our own was clearly all any of my family could talk about, and so it became the subject of my film. Race was always important to our family story, but in the context of this event, we became a white American family. I did not focus on this aspect but I began to realize that although I could extensively document and study my family's history, capturing an event at the time that it was happening could reveal just as much about our dynamic. My sister, Caroline, had just graduated high school and was about to start her time as a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point in New York. Caroline had grown up in the same circumstances and environment that I had, yet was choosing a very different path for herself. The United States military is a unique culture and way of life that was not an obvious choice for a young woman without any direct relatives in the military. I wanted to explore this transition as well as the way it can affect a family and particularly, myself. As I began the production process, I knew only that I wanted the story to be deeply personal.

My method of capturing the story was to shoot as much as I could. Documentary is unpredictable and cannot always be planned, because things often happen that you

cannot anticipate. By turning on the camera as frequently as I could, I felt that I had more to work with and less chance of missing something important. Representing an event is extremely difficult in that one cannot simulate exactly what it would have been like to be at the event. I knew that eventually I would need to edit these moments to form a story, but I wanted to get as close to the truth of the event as possible. Initially, I wanted to film interviews with specific subjects that filled the needs of what I wanted to convey, but soon realized that I had to adjust my expectations. I found that my interviews never went exactly as I had planned and I was often disappointed. Interviewing was a long process and taught me a good deal about people and the unpredictability of documentary. I went through with two interviews before I decided that it was not what I wanted. I have had previous experience with interviewing for my anthropology classes, but it was completely different when I added a camera. In my experience, interviewing for anthropology consisted of asking questions, writing down answers as I heard them, and then interpreting them for a written ethnographic piece. This style is very different from on-camera interviews in that I sometimes missed their body language, and I may not have recorded things exactly as I heard them. I was looking forward to filming interviews because in a way it removes a layer of possible misinterpretation. Instead of reading about what the interviewee said, a viewer can watch them say it and draw their own conclusions. The camera, however, added another dimension to the characters of my interviewees in a way that I was not prepared for and felt inauthentic to what I wanted: cameras change the way people act because they know they are being captured and instantly become aware of their behavior and how they might be seen. This psychological effect is often referred to in cinematic analyses as the gaze (Mulvey).

In order to offset this, I initially utilized the method that many filmmakers of the direct cinema movement utilized in their films. The goal of these filmmakers was to find an objective truth to their documentary subjects by filming them without interference. This included long takes and unaltered footage. But because of my relation to the subjects of my film and my mode of personal documentary, however, it ended up being more reminiscent of the cinema vérité movement. Cinema Verité, although often compared to direct cinema, strives to instead include an awareness of the camera. When I first started to turn the camera on with my family, they acted very strangely and my mom even took to looking right into the camera whenever it came near her. I started to film more often, however, and soon they became used to the presence of the camera. I would still argue that although they felt more comfortable in front of the camera, they never forgot that it was there and therefore their behavior was slightly more performative than usual.

I made many mistakes in my first attempt at filming. It was the first time I had shot anything that would be used for documentary and did not really know what to expect. Many mistakes can only be caught in post-production, when it is too late. For example, I shot a lot of footage of my sister, but did not ask her many questions about how she felt or pushed any of her feelings to the surface. I assumed that what we were all feeling would naturally come across to anyone watching without explicitly saying so. I found, however, that the story was very hard to put together without that commentary. The lack of story with the pure footage was what motivated me to record my voiceover for the piece. The inclusion of voiceover, along with shorter takes and sound mixing set my short documentary apart from both the direct cinema and cinema vérité movement

and makes it a personal documentary. This means that the film is clearly from my point of view and comments on the filmmaking process as well.

I shot my project over the course of about 6 months, starting in June of 2013 and ending in November of the same year. I used my DSLR camera, which is a Nikon D3100. I completed two different versions of *New Cadet*, both of which I edited on Final Cut Pro with the addition of sound programs like Pro Tools. I started post-production on the first version in July after the events of my sister's send off in New York. I was doing an art program in which I was able to get feedback from documentary filmmakers Ondi Timoner and Kirby Dick. Kirby was especially helpful because his most recent documentary, *The Invisible War*, was about women in the military. He helped me look at my footage with serious intentions and encouraged me to dig deeper. He had experience interviewing families of women in the military and after watching the women speak about sexual assault, I was inspired to tap into my fears for my sister.

It was during post-production on the first version of my film that I was made aware of the importance of sound. When I shot my sister's send off in June, out of convenience and an attempt to be conspicuous, I used only my DSLR for image and sound. This proved to be problematic in post-production because some of the things said on camera would have been great, but the sound was not useable. My disappointment spawned from not letting my sister tell her own story. Although I was able to use voiceover and let the audience know what was happening, it was through my eyes and did not represent my sister's view well enough. In the end I utilized this to shape it in the tradition of personal documentary, which in my opinion, made it more intimate and emotional.

Editing the first version of *New Cadet* was an important lesson in shaping events so that they reveal my truth. Experiencing the event the first time was very different from how I saw it through the media files. They were only select parts of my experience that I could use to represent it. The challenge in constructing my short film was making a story comprehensible to viewers but also true to my own feelings about the events. The result was a basically chronological telling of my sister's journey with my voiceover. I broke the chronology briefly in the beginning of the film in which I open with shots of crumbling, abandoned barracks I visited in the time I was editing the film. In this opening scene, I contrasted the eerie barracks with the proudest moment of the Reception Day ceremony—the reciting of the Oath. I did this in order to show my interpretation of the event. I also filmed myself among the barracks reading the letters she had sent me. This was not a spontaneous moment, but I used it to reflect on my life in the absence of my sister. I decided to use voiceover because the story was not clear enough by itself. My voiceover speaks about my sister to an audience that presumably does not know anything about her. The tone is still intimate, however, as if I was recording a portion of my diary. I ended the first version of *New Cadet* on a hopeful note, commenting that I could not control her situation and that I just had to believe in her strength to make it through.

The strong point of my final short documentary, *New Cadet*, was that I captured a longer time period than the first one. In this documentary, I filmed my reunion with my sister over the Thanksgiving break. By Thanksgiving break, Caroline had finished her basic training and was immersed in the routine of school and softball training at West Point. The larger time frame gave me more to comment on in my film as well as allowed to me fix some of my previous mistakes. For example, I tried to let my sister say more

about how she felt. I also took out the score and opted for more natural sounds, except for the song my dad plays on his guitar. This time, instead of focusing only on my feelings about her leaving, I let our relationship show through our interactions with me behind the camera. The voiceover for my final documentary was in the form of a letter to my sister. I got this idea after watching Rebecca Baron's personal documentary, *Okay Bye-Bye*. In the film, Baron narrates her film talking to people that she imagines she knows. Baron's use of the letter would be entirely different from my own since I had a real relationship with my sister, but the letter and Baron's reading of it in *Okay Bye-Bye* imbued the topic with a warmth that I wanted to emulate. I wanted the tone to be even more intimate than my first version, and I found that I could only say how I really felt when I wrote as if writing her a letter. What I prepared for my voiceover before coming into a sound studio was not exactly what I ended up reading; there were times when I tried to speak just as if Caroline was in front of me. The actual act of recording the sound made the words more meaningful and eventually contributed to the healing process that the film provided for me in the end. As I read the words out loud that I had never said, without an audience to judge me, it was cathartic and eventually therapeutic.

This edition of *New Cadet* was supported through a documentary production class I was taking at the University of Arizona. I was able to get feedback from my professor as well as mentors at different schools. Their feedback was extremely valuable in that they encouraged me to focus on family dynamics. They also helped me narrow down which scenes were the most poignant and necessary for the telling of the story. The second version of *New Cadet* was chronological besides the opening scene in which I preview the climax of the film, where I get to see my sister for the first time in five

months. I felt that opening with this scene would set the tone for the rest of the short film. I used text for the introduction of new time and place settings, in order to smooth the understanding of the logistics of the film. I tried to make my voice as unobtrusive as possible so that the viewer might feel as if they knew me already.

I feel as if my short documentary was a successful interpretation of the relationship between my sister and myself. Although her transition into a military academy was a huge change for her and our family, it allowed me to understand through my capturing of the event how we each truly felt about it. My sister and mother watched the film, and told me that they cried when they watched it. Although they thought it a true representation of how we all felt, it might only be for me to decide since I put so much emphasis on my feelings in the film. Part of making a film is being hands on with the reshaping of history. Through the making of my short documentary, I was able to retell a story through my experiences for other people to see. It was from my point of view that the film was shot, creating a distinct vision. When editing the film, it sometimes felt strange choosing to leave parts out because it felt like a betrayal of the subjects (who in this case are my family), but this was part of creating coherence and establishing my power over the way the event would be retold. I was continually forced to reevaluate how I felt about the subject and what I wanted to convey. My choice for a letter format for the voiceover was so important in that it is the marker of essay film. I believe the production of the film and the writing of the voiceover created more meaning than the events held when they first unfolded. The process of writing and piecing together this film helped me to understand my feelings and allowed me to move into a different way of thinking of Caroline's choice. Every time that I watch my film, I am left to start wondering and

processing the information from my sister's departure, creating a never-ending question that the film poses. How has this affected and how will this keep affecting our lives? This, I would argue, is the purpose of personal documentary and essay film. I feel that in these regards, *New Cadet* was successful.

## Historical Essay

### Introduction

This essay explores the ethnographic and essay film forms both in relation to each other and in terms of their impact on the documentary genre. As a filmic form, documentary claims to represent a social truth, the truth of the people and society being filmed. But the act of filming is an act of power; the filmmaker and his/her subjects can only produce truth through that act of power. The act of filming is also an act of representation; to make a documentary is to inscribe power relations into a social representation and to claim that representation as truthful. The representational strategies of documentary, therefore, must first of all be evaluated for *their* truth: to what extent do they acknowledge the act of filmmaking and the subject position of the director, and to what extent do they obscure it? Ethnographic and essay films foreground this question due to their historical evolution and function. In this essay, I will distinguish those functions as education and revelation, respectively.

If the goal of documentary is to film “truth,” to get as close to reality as possible, I propose the essay film as the most successful model. Although many would point to cinema vérité as the purest form of documentary, I will argue that the essay film is inherently closer to the truth of the situation of filmmaking. Ethnographic film attempts to convey reality by focusing on facts in order to educate its audience about a different people. This reality may be inhibited or distorted, however, as it struggles with the self/other relationship between filmmaker and subject. Although the essay film is similar

in its goals, essay filmmakers utilize different strategies in the quest for filmic “truth.” The essay film’s methodology centers on a simultaneous effort toward transparency and an acknowledgement of its elusiveness. In this essay, I will elucidate the history of ethnographic film and the essay film as types of documentary with parallel chronologies and problematics. I will draw on Scott MacDonald’s notion of the “personal documentary” to analyze recent films that have used techniques from both traditions in order to construct what the filmmaker believes to be the best, most truthful representation of that subject. It is first important to outline the definitions of the ethnographic and essay film forms and common critiques of these traditions.

Ethnography is the process and product of studying a culture. It is the term anthropologists use to refer to their fieldwork among a people and their written or, in the case of ethnographic film, visual, analysis of those people. Historically, ethnographic film is considered to be problematic because it is traditionally conducted by Western researchers on non-Western “exotic” people. This is anthropology’s inescapable truth and problem: the study of “people” always proceeds from a Western perspective in its teachings and understandings and is therefore both always *about* the West and tends to construct (only, or centrally) Westerners as people in the first place. The goal of ethnographic film is to educate and exhibit a culture in order for outsiders of that culture to understand it. Although researchers can conduct extensive observational research, there will always be a question of representation as long as the researcher is an outsider. This is especially problematic for ethnographic film, in which the camera claims to be objective and therefore disguises the subjectivity of the study.

By contrast, where ethnographic film hides behind the pretense of absolute truth, the essay film critiques and does not assume an objective perspective – or even that such a thing is possible. The essay film is above all reflective; it self-reflexively incorporates the personal, the public, and the cinematic experience. In doing so, the essay represents the process of thinking. In this, it opposes ethnographic film, which represents the previously composed thoughts of the director about the subjects. The essay film questions and comments on the world in which it exists and asks its audience to do the same. A method rooted in history, the essay film often addresses public issues through a personal lens, allowing the viewer to relate to the filmmaker and take part in its analysis. It thereby opposes the ethnographic film, whose origins preordain and reinscribe a limited relationship and allow the filmmaker to inform the viewer as to the unadulterated truth about the subject.

### **A Concise History of Ethnographic Film**

In 1882, Félix Louis Regnault invented chronophotography, a pre-cinematic technology that recorded movements invisible to the naked eye (Tobing Rony 23). Regnault's most famous experiment involved the photographing of a horse at full gallop. Using his staggered cameras, Regnault was able to observe that all four of a horse's hooves may be off the ground at the same time, something that was unable to be proved with human observation alone. Regnault's other experiments, and the object of his most vested interest, was the study the human body. Regnault understood the camera as a tool for exposing "exotic" cultures and peoples as less evolved than the West. Regnault's career set the terms for how cinema would relate to ethnography, the study of people.

On the one hand, cinema's recording powers render it capable of an amazing objectivity, an ability to capture events, their context, and their traces in space and time. On the other, this objectivity is inherently illusory and flawed, because it is tied to racist and sexist structures of power that pre-determine what the wielders of cinema know to be the objective truth. The history of film ethnography is marked by the playing out of this conflict. In what follows, I will trace that conflict from ethnography's origins as a film form, to the application of "objectivity" to fictional recreations, to calls for a new objectivity, and finally to forms and tactics that do away with objectivity all together and attempt to find another path to the truth of human cultures. That is, my history of the ethnographic film is the history of the movement from a quest for truth, to a questioning of the grounds of that truth, to a move toward the always provisional – and therefore potentially more useful – truths of the essayistic form.

Ethnography is the language of anthropologists:

Cultural anthropologists study humans through a descriptive lens called the ethnographic method, based on participant observation in tandem with face-to-face interviews, normally conducted in the native tongue. Ethnographers compare what they see and hear themselves with the observations and findings of studies conducted in other societies. (BU Anthropology)

Anthropologists use ethnography in order to record and make sense of a different culture. Before filmic technology reached anthropologists, writing was the primary mode of ethnography. A researcher strives to complete fieldwork, which means submerging him or herself directly into the culture he/she wants to study, and observing it for a long period of time. Depending on the researcher, he/she can also participate in rituals and activities in order to gain experience and better insight. After observing and recording, the anthropologist writes about and interprets his/her experiences from an unbiased,

because *external*, point of view. Sometimes, however, researchers may decide to participate in lives of the people they are studying, in which case they comment on their personal experiences. The benefit of remaining objective in ethnographic work is that it ensures trust from the reader and can be more meaningful for a wider audience. As an educational tool closely associated with scientific inquiry at its origins, film has played a key role in finding those wider audiences and gaining their trust.

Ethnographic film has a long history and has had a very significant impact on the maturation of anthropology. Although writing has remained the principal medium of ethnography, the invention of film has made a significant impact on ethnographic practices. With the entrance of film came a more effective way to communicate the visual and audio experience of a culture. It also presented different issues in how researchers conducted their ethnography. The introduction of more portable cameras was crucial to the development of ethnographic film like the Arriflex 35 in 1937 and later the Éclair 35-mm Cameflex in 1947. The entrance of synchronized sound in the 1920s and cameras that could travel easily made filming in distant locations with foreign cultures much more feasible (Corrigan 73). Through these technological advances, ethnographic film is able to reach and educate people who cannot go to places themselves. The emergence of film in researching cultures broke down barriers that even the most descriptive written ethnographies could not breach. Written ethnography leaves the reader with the task of imagining the subject instead of just seeing the subject and their way of life. In this sense, ethnographic film can be thought of as the purest form of education and representation. Yet ethnography's storied purity, its ontological disinterest, is based on its claim to present an unadulterated vision of a people, a claim that is inaccurate.

One issue is the compartmentalizing of a culture. Film is a comparatively short depiction of a people and in the editing process can often leave out critical characteristics. Filmmakers can and often must reduce a culture to its most interesting behaviors in order to fit a compelling subject into such a small timeframe. The filmmakers are in full control of the editing process and decide what can be seen and what goes unseen. Although images may be factual, instead of receiving a fully immersive experience of the culture, the audience receives only parts of a culture. The issue lies in the suggestion that it is possible to completely represent the complexity of a culture in the span of a film. As anthropology has progressed, efforts have been made to avoid compartmentalization by focusing on smaller aspects of cultural life without claiming to be representative of the entire culture (BU Anthropology).

The filmmaker can also affect the interpretation of the images with voiceover commentary. Most ethnographic films, especially in the earlier stages of development, used “Voice of God” narration (McLane 164). This method served to make the commentary the ultimate authority on the subject and was presented as fact. Voice of God commentary allows the audience to place their trust in the filmmaker so that they may learn about the subject without questioning the film’s accuracy. An ethnographic film audience is asked to use their own observational powers once they are given the “facts” of word and image from which to base their observations. The history of ethnographic film is marked by an effort toward full transparency and objectivity for audiences, which eventually meant developing different modes of narration.

Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) not only displays many of the above traits as the first documentary,<sup>1</sup> it is also at the center of many debates surrounding the legitimacy of film ethnography's claims to truth. *Nanook* takes place in Quebec, Canada where the Inuit people dwelled. The film follows Nanook and his family as their customs help them survive the harsh environmental conditions. There are scenes of Nanook and his family doing things like building an igloo, hunting a walrus, and visiting the "Trade Post of the White Man." Flaherty cast the Inuit family and planned what they would be doing for the film, many times re-staging scenes. Under the current standards of documentary, we would describe the film as fictionalized, since Flaherty was directing the cast and scenes were not caught candidly. In the time that it was made, however, such distinctions between documentary and fiction film were not fully realized. Since the film depicted an "exotic" culture to Westerners viewing the film, it was truthful in that it allowed a glimpse into a place and people Westerners could not reach. People had not before been able to witness such a different way of living, allowing for Flaherty's film to have sole authority over the subject. The novelty of the Inuit people was more important to audiences than accurate Inuit representation. Accuracy was not thought to be an issue until later, when authenticity of the subject matter became a widely accepted requirement for the documentary genre.

*Nanook* is also criticized for failing to depict the Inuit culture in its then modern state, choosing rather to focus on the former practices and antiquated customs of the

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<sup>1</sup> While many short ethnographic works predate Flaherty's, and primitive cinema is full of *actualités* that present ethnographic footage of daily life, *Nanook* is overwhelmingly understood as the first film to fully develop and link the air of rhetorical inquiry, narrative structure, and formal language common to modern documentary. Moreover, fellow documentary pioneer and ethnographer John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in a review of one of Flaherty's later films.

people. For example, the scene in which Nanook harpoons a walrus would not have happened had Flaherty not asked for it. At the time of the filming, the Inuit people had already moved on from harpoons, using instead the more effective rifle. Flaherty would defend his work under the ideas of salvage ethnography, in that he saw it necessary to capture the magnificence of the harpooning of the walrus in order to show off the Inuit people and culture (McLane 27). The term salvage ethnography began being used in the 1960s and describes a time in early anthropology and ethnography that focused on subjects for purposes of academic study and preservation, especially of languages of native peoples. It studies a people on the basis of capturing a culture before it dies out in the face of colonialism. Salvage ethnography is discussed in opposition to modern anthropology and ethnography and is criticized for its staged film scenes and altered art (Tobing Rony 91). *Nanook of the North* became one of the best-known examples of salvage ethnography. The evolution of the idea of salvage ethnography – which used to simply be the assumption and justification of ethnographic inquiry *per se* – typifies the ways in which struggles over representation, truth, and filmmaking ethics in terms of power relationships characterize not only post-war discussions of ethnography in particular, but also post-colonial intellectual production in general.

As a decade of colonial independence and cinematic experimentation, the 1950's sparked new traditions in ethnographic film. Two key influential filmmakers from this time period are Lorna and John Marshall. The Marshalls are best known for their film *The Hunters* (1957). *The Hunters* is a study of the !Kung people living in the Kalahari desert, who would become the subject of a long series of films done by the Marshalls. Although *The Hunters* has been critiqued on similar grounds as *Nanook of the North* – it

features scripted events and anachronisms – but approaches the genre with a greater awareness of the camera and its subjectivity. Although *The Hunters* misleads the audience as to the chronology of events, much as Flaherty did, the directors differ from him in that: “Marshall is at pains to make clear that he is not simply providing information about a far-flung cultural group but is artistically constructing a tale” (MacDonald 24). This signals a new approach in efforts to achieve expressive film while still being truthful to the audience. Thus, *The Hunters* and the Marshalls’s later films – including *A Group of Women* (1961), *A Joking Relationship* (1962), and *Baobab Play* (1974) – represent an important transition between classic and contemporary ethnographic practice both in terms of their more personal approaches and eschewing of voiceover in favor of diegetic audio (MacDonald 31).

The Marshalls’s tactics are only some of the many that modern ethnographers use to combat the problem of false objectivity, yet these and related issues remain prevalent. Although researchers make an effort to remain unbiased throughout their ethnography, there is often a power imbalance between researcher and subject. The researcher looking in at the subject will always create a power dynamic that not only affects the participants, but can also affect the way a researcher views and interprets a people, and therefore misconstrues what is true to the subjects. Truth according to subjects is difficult to achieve in that it demands to be seen through the lens of the people studied. It is important to consider that different cultures within the human race grow up with unique ideological perspectives, and although an anthropologist may attempt to use that in their analysis, there is always a chance for misunderstanding. Thus, some believe a fully truthful representation of another people may be impossible. Understanding ethnography

as forever unable to reach beyond the level of representation of a culture is especially true when the relationship between researcher and subject, as it often is, is that of Westerner and non-Westerner. Anthropology, especially in the film language of ethnography, creates a self/other dichotomy in which the person studying is relatable, while the people studied are immediately identified as other. Inherent to ethnography is the goal to remain an objective observer; this is the basis from which anthropologists may capture their subjects and teach others about them. The influences of power, however, will always inhibit this objectivity. The essay film, which draws on and radically reconfigures some of the Marshall's tactics, attempts to acknowledge the impossibility of an objective camera and looks to subjectivity as the answer to a more truthful cinematic experience.

### **A Concise History of the Essay Film**

The essay film is the nexus of a complex series of forms. Within the documentary canon, its own nature is therefore somewhat ambiguous and difficult to define. The essay film combines the literary medium with the cinematic, a key distinction from more traditional documentary. Although the essay film has ties to both the avant-garde and narrative documentary forms, it has paved its own path as a more audience interactive, philosophical genre. This ambiguity is key to their ontology. Essay films inhabit an in-between: they do not belong solely to the filmmaker or the audience as a personal expression or public statement, just as they are not bound only to narrative or the avant-garde. This separation from a rhetoric of reliability and objectivity allows for the essay film to remain subjective and therefore take a stance quite different from that of the ethnographic film. Not necessarily concerned with conveying an exact representation, the

essay film does not claim to know everything, but instead works through issues with personal honesty and reflexivity; it shows how we come to know.

In his book *The Essay Film*, Timothy Corrigan maps the history of this elusive form. Although he notes that the essay film gained a name and importance in the late 1950s, he suggests that films made in the early 1900s hold historical importance for its development (Corrigan 11). Corrigan points to D.W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) as a precursor to essay film in its social commentary and involvement with public expression. Although too early to contain sound, the film uses montage to make a political statement and anticipates later Soviet cinema. A Soviet filmmaker of the 1920s, Sergei Eisenstein ideas on the possibilities of essayistic cinema is also an important early precursor (Corrigan 64). Although not necessarily using the literary essay form just yet, these preliminary filmmakers paved the way for essayistic cinema. Particularly, Dziga Vertov is identified as one of the initial filmmakers to embrace an essayistic mode, especially with his experiments in reflexivity.

One of the most significant precursors of the essay film is Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Vertov's film is a city symphony, a portrait of a composite Russian city that focuses on place and forgoes narrative in favor of an attempt to capture a feeling. The film is known for its scenes of big city life. People engage in everyday activities, yet Vertov injects energy into the scenes so that they become visually musical. He does this with jump cuts, slow and fast motion, and extreme close-ups, techniques that he introduced to the cinematic world in his film. Instead of creating a narrative around any one individual living in the city, he turns the citizens into parts of a machine, working to sustain city life and becoming part of the overall character of the city. The way Vertov

asserts an interpretation of his subjects and transforms them into commentary is a key essayistic characteristic. Most notably, Vertov introduced his idea of “kino-pravda” or “film-truth,” which is referenced in his film in the shots of a human eye within a camera lens. Kino-pravda claims that cinematic experience can provide a more truthful look at reality through its focus on larger truths (Corrigan 60). *Man with a Movie Camera* was also unique in that Vertov made the audience aware of its experimental nature and prefaced the film with a challenge to the audience to think of the film differently (Corrigan 59). By actually showing the “man with a movie camera,” Vertov presents a reflexive point of view, calling attention to the act of making a film. He continuously makes the audience aware of the medium and, as such, encourages them to interact with the material. This reflexivity and interactivity is a common thread throughout the essay film and arguably defines it. *Man with a Movie Camera* also contains political themes that play on the existing social environment of Russia. Essay film is often a representation of public opinion and social dynamics (Corrigan 14). Filmmakers do not exist in a vacuum; they are influenced by their surroundings and the limitations of public understanding. They must work within these limitations in order to challenge them. Although every film has different goals and meanings, essay films are bound by this political language in an attempt to learn and teach.

The arrival of synchronized sound in the late 1920s is crucial to the development of the essay film. Innovations in film sound allowed for the added element of language, the defining characteristic of the essay film, particularly in terms of the voiceover. Corrigan comments that this also introduces the interplay between voice and image, which complicates documentary film in that they affect one another (64). As essay film

often acknowledges this interaction, ethnographic film ignores it. Much of the history of the essay film can be traced back to France, particularly the cine clubs in Paris. Corrigan argues that the 1920s cine clubs in Paris fomented the beginning of a new audience in which film was more important as a platform for debate and social issues, rather than for entertainment (65). Although these gatherings provided the basis for the essay film audience, postwar cine clubs are distinctly different in that they did not seek to revolutionize filmmaking, only produce a more informed audience. Ideas about the power of the viewer are what would launch the essay film movement.

These active, informed viewers and the cine clubs they inhabited were indebted to and anticipated by the World War Two films made by British director Humphrey Jennings. *Listen to Britain* (1942) and *A Diary for Timothy* (1945) in particular comment on the political environment in essayistic ways. In *Listen to Britain*, Jennings presents scenes of people going about daily activities with the undercurrent of war within the routine. *Listen to Britain* is essayistic because it plays out like a collage, bits and pieces of the human experience are put together to try and represent a “communal expressivity” (Corrigan 67). The viewer is asked to listen to the sounds and reflect on them in relation to the image and the social situation that is being documented. As Corrigan states, “sound as expression here does not so much support or illuminate the pressures of the war experience but rather remains tautly in tension with them” (67). It is this tension that establishes dialogue within the film and a more questioning audience of it. Similarly, *A Diary for Timothy* incorporates language through a voiceover that acts as a letter to a child being born into wartime and speculating on a possible postwar future, blurring the line between public and personal.

Corrigan identifies three moments between 1940 and 1945 that truly begin to bring the essay film into legitimacy. First, the French “filmology” movement of the 1940s realizes that cinema may be the most powerful platform for social discourse. Second, André Malraux’s lecture “Esquisse d’une psychologie du cinéma” argued for “the possibility of expression in the cinema” (14). Third, Hans Richter’s “The Film Essay” explains a type of film that makes thoughts into images. These events would set the stage for the postwar essay film and define the structure and purpose of the modern essay film. One of the most widely recognized and earliest essay films arising from this context is Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* (1955), which concentrates on the Holocaust. In his film, Resnais acknowledges the impossibility of representing the reality of the Holocaust, and instead reflects on the trauma of the event and uses the essay format in Jean Cayrol’s voice over narration. Resnais uses present day images of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen alongside the traumatic photos from the past in order to create a tension and provoke questions in the viewer’s mind. For example, one image shows the use of human skin as paper with childish figures drawn onto the surface. The tension between the normal appearing papers and the horror of the meaning behind the words is forced into the audience’s viewing experience. The film uses the “We” in order to pull the audience into the film and the experience, demanding the audience to play an active role in creating meaning behind the trauma. The audience is implicated in the trauma as a spectator and potential perpetrator, thus marking the beginning of postwar new wave cinema as a change in the audience experience. Moving into the 1950s, the short film would become the inspiration for essayistic techniques. Short film would become known as a format in which to express and set change into motion because of its experimental

nature. Filmmakers like Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, Agnès Varda, and Alexandre Astruc would pursue short films as an exploration of film. Perhaps a good example of the essay film's extension into both feature-length films and more contemporary times is the work of Agnès Varda.

Varda was a part of the French essayistic movement in the 1950s and her films *L'Opéra-mouffe* (1958) and *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962) are representative of that. Corrigan lists her more recent projects, *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), *The Gleaners and I* (2000), *Two Years Later* (2002), and *The Beaches of Agnès* (2008) as continuations of Varda's exploration of the essay film. *The Gleaners and I* is a series of short films that documents the act of gleaning in a tangible way in the world of people who glean to survive and implicitly examines gleaning as an essayistic activity. Varda inserts herself into the film, interweaving her own identity as a gleaner into the lives of the others. The film is reflexive, similar to *Man with a Movie Camera* in that the audience is aware of the camera and even comments on the film process. In one part, she comments "You pick ideas, you pick images, you pick emotions from other people, and then you make it into a film." *Two Years Later* follows up *The Gleaners and I* by rethinking the film with the reaction of the audience and subjects of the film, creating an even more interactive experience and transforming the discussion to include a wider scope of issues.

From its beginnings in the European avant-garde of the 1920s, through the propaganda films of WWII, and into the complex, haunted mediascape of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the essay film has challenged traditional documentary form by incorporating the audience as a crucial component. As ethnographic film seeks to inform using an objective perspective in the form of teacher and student, essayistic filmmakers

use subjectivity and reflexivity so that the filmmaker and viewer inhabit *both* the teacher and student role. As the essay film is made, it becomes the process by which the filmmaker can come to understand his/her subject. As the audience watches and engages with the material, they can become a part of this process as well. In the coming sections, I will discuss how ethnography and essay film can be combined to form a new type of documentary and how this functions. An essay film made by a filmmaker seeking to document his or her own life utilizes the essay form as well as the ethnographic film tradition. This type of film can be referred to as personal documentary and adopts characteristics from both of these histories and allows for new criticisms and analyses. The personal essay film, or personal documentary, seeks to investigate a way of life, but eliminates the self/other dichotomy by merging the filmmaker and subject so that they are the same.

### **Personal Documentary**

Arlene Bowman typifies this hybrid form in *Navajo Talking Picture* (1985). The film begins with Bowman, also the narrator, speaking of her grandmother's way of life at her desert home. Bowman initially uses long takes of the ranch that her grandmother lives on, some with her grandmother engaging in everyday chores. Bowman is presenting to the viewer a subject that lives differently than herself and her assumed audience. She describes her grandmother as a strong, independent woman, but does not give specific examples of the woman acting this way, causing the viewer to understand her relationship with her grandmother as rather distant. Although they are not close-knit, Bowman is closer to her grandmother than the audience, and her narration is an attempt to invoke the same appreciation she feels for the grandmother with her choice of adjectives, such as

hard-working and peaceful. Her adjectives communicate her awe, but betray the separation between them. The difference between grandmother and granddaughter becomes even more apparent and in fact becomes the main conflict of the film later on, when Bowman reflects on their relationship. After a brief introduction to her grandmother's life, Bowman transitions from reverent commentary to personal conflict by mentioning that her grandmother became angry at her for trying to film her and began to reject the process. The turning point for the film is the moment in which Bowman decides to put herself in the film; this is when the film stops being purely ethnographic and adopts the tactics of the essay film.

In Tobing Rony's *The Third-Eye*, ethnographic film is defined as being a study done from an outside perspective, particularly of a non-Western culture from a Western perspective (9). Scott MacDonald's *American Ethnographic Film and the Personal Documentary* implies the same thing by using mainly American filmmakers to study ethnographic film and personal documentary. MacDonald also suggests that, conversely, ethnographic film prompts filmmakers to turn the camera on their own lives. This kind of film he labels personal documentary (a term often used as a synonym for a subtype of the essay film). He writes that ethnographic filmmakers led to "the cinematic exploration of the patterns and nuances of the filmmakers' own culture, as exemplified by their personal lives" (4). Just as in the essay film, the subject and filmmaker are the same.

*Navajo Talking Picture* is both an ethnographic film and a personal essay. Bowman identifies herself as being different from her grandmother in respect to her feelings toward technology and cultural differences. By putting herself into the documentary, however, she discovers much about herself. After the scene that takes place

at her grandmother's home, she returns to Los Angeles where the viewers see her walking through the University of California, Los Angeles. She begins reflecting on the filmmaking process and about her decision to insert herself into the film. In the following scene, Bowman and her friend watch the completed footage thus far and discuss her inclusion as taking the film in another direction and her frustrations about her grandmother's ideas about the camera. She compares her grandmother to other people's grandparents, stating that they would not think it strange to be filmed. She does not quite understand why her grandmother is so hesitant, so she hires a friend to translate and ask her grandmother questions. The irony of the translator is that he translates what she says quite differently, essentially making it hopeless for Bowman and her grandmother to truly understand one another. While the words sound similar, her intentions are misconstrued through the translation. For example, as she tries to explain to her grandmother that she is making the film more reflexive, her translator simply says "She's telling you she's going to be in the film too; it's better to be in it together." Since the words are translated for the viewer, they are able to see the inconsistencies and are thrust into a position of frustration. What is initially very frustrating for the audience about the way she speaks to her grandmother is that she does not respect her grandmother's wishes, despite Bowman's evident desire to understand her issues with the camera. Her cultural insensitivity in this situation stages an ethical problem common in ethnographic film, but we see her tension with this throughout and her efforts to resolve this.

In *Navajo Talking Picture*, Bowman is a young person excited to utilize advances made in the film medium to tell her grandmother's story. She soon realizes that her grandmother does not share this excitement. Although she may understand her

grandmother as family and feels comfortable with her, she has a hard time identifying with Navajo culture. Bowman seems more at home with her studies at UCLA and going to class like a fully integrated, urbanized young person in California. The act of filming her grandmother and exposing her home to the camera is treated by Bowman as though it is a gift to her family, something they should be excited and grateful for. She tries to tell her grandmother's story without truly understanding or even trying to understand why her grandmother might not be comfortable being on camera. Seeing people solely as stories to be told "thereby robs them of their voice, individuality, historical agency, and psychological complexity" (Tobing Rony 71). As Bowman delves deeper into the translations and questions, and her grandmother further shies from the camera, Bowman becomes frustrated and no longer presents an idealized version of her grandmother. There is a moment in the film where, in full view of the camera, Arlene offers her grandmother money for helping her and her grandmother gladly takes it after all the struggling against being on camera. The exchange of money transforms her grandmother from her glorified persona that Bowman presented in the first minutes of the film into a complex, modern-day character. The shift from the idealized to the relatable is what helps to classify the documentary as personal as well as ethnographic.

Bowman's additional choice to expose herself and her obvious mistakes with her grandmother is what propels the film into essayistic territory. The cringe-worthy moments with the translator and her grandmother force the viewer into a position of criticism. It forces the audience to think about the power dynamic in the relationship and the ethical issues with Bowman's questions. Her documentary becomes reflexive in that she obviously had to figure out the real translations of her translator and grandmother,

and still chose to show both. Ethnographic film rarely shows the ethical debate between the filmmaker and subject. An ethnographic film presents a carefully researched case and seeks to make the viewer understand. What is not clear is that the researcher himself may not fully understand. In *Navajo Talking Picture*, Bowman decides to insert her voice and character into the film, and thus reveals the self/other dichotomy.

Essay film is a way for a filmmaker to explore the self through the process of filmmaking. Although the essay film looks inward as it seeks to give truthful representation, rather than outward toward the “other,” it is not completely unrelated to ethnographic film. There is a correlation between the two and there can be a natural progression from the ethnographic to the personal. There is no one reason that filmmakers might be attracted to documenting the elements of their own lives and the relationships surrounding them, but many times an ethnographic filmmaker may feel transformed by the cultures they study, like filmmaker Robert Gardner. Robert Gardner is an ethnographic filmmaker that concentrated on preserving cultures he presumed as untouched by Western White Men, yet he avoided the depiction of these cultures as “exotic” (MacDonald 69). Gardner believed in the representation of his subjects as completely detached from his own identity. In an interview, however, he states, “What can I possibly mean by saying that going to the ends of the world has been a way for me to understand myself better? Hidden in the answer are ideas such as it is presumptuous to try and explain other people without bothering to explain oneself” (MacDonald 74). Gardner’s statement suggests that even while trying to be unbiased in ethnography, in order to truly depict another culture, one must have a deep knowledge and understanding of the self. It is no surprise, then, that filmmakers often turn to their own lives to capture

and convey the deepest understanding of a film subject because of their closeness to the subject. Gardner's comment also suggests that it may be impossible to escape the infiltration of personal point of view when filming.

Personal documentary is inherently essayistic. The voice of the personal documentary is obviously the filmmaker him/her-self using the essay form in order to convey one's own inner dialogue and worldview. According to Timothy Corrigan in *The Essay Film*, the most effective essays make use of "personal expression, public experience, and the process of thinking" (14). The film essay is the constant transformation of the self, since the audio and visual components do not simply represent the thought process but rather *are* images of thinking. They are thoughts in development, reflecting the outer world as well as the filmmaker's inner world and the influence the former has on the latter. In the essay film, ideas can be explored and drawn out as well as changed throughout the course of the film and even after it is over. This happens in Bowman's film, for example, as the intentions of her film change and her choices of what to leave in the film add to the ideas of the essay.

Personal essay film also foregrounds the presence of the camera. Whereas ethnographic film may try to ignore or disregard the presence of the camera, the essay film courts and is in fact structured by the viewer's recognition that they are watching a created thing, a personal expression, a *film* rather than an objective fragment of reality. Subjects of personal documentary may look into the camera, the viewer may catch a glimpse of the filmmaker's reflection with the camera, or someone may take the camera and speak directly into it. The introduction and obviousness of the camera presents an important element to the personal essay film. Although I have explained the essay film as

more closely representing social truths as produced by power relations than ethnographic film, even personal essay film does not escape criticism. The acknowledgment of the camera gives the illusion of full reflexivity; it implies the filmmaker is wholly truthful with the audience.

In documentary, unlike fiction film, the viewer is not told, is not conditioned to know, that what they are watching is fiction. Rather, documentary's sober discourse insists that what is on the screen is captured reality. The audience of a personal documentary is doubly subject to this authenticating discourse: the nature of the genre combines with the apparent guilelessness and confessional aspects of the sub-form for an exponential sense of truthfulness, trustworthiness, and intimacy with the director. The power and potential pitfalls of documentary, especially in its ethnographic form, are therefore not escaped by the personal ethnography, but rather re-arranged. The question therefore remains, what does it mean to do justice to the subject? To capture not only some social truth of the reality depicted on screen, not only to show the director in relation to that truth, but to provide the audience with the awareness that the truth is incomplete, that something of the reality cannot be seen – or at least not from a single social position.

### **Conclusion**

The ethics of ethnographic film, then, lie in ambiguity and in context, in the ability to produce a self-reflexive commentary on the filmmaking process while also tracing the shadow of all the other films that cannot be made. In closing, then, I propose the ethnographic essay films of Naomi Uman – *Leche* (1999) and *Mala Leche* (2003) – as emblematic of the potential of the essay film. Their status as such is not due to their

perfection, their total openness or a perfect subjectivity that somehow captures the whole truth of the outside world. Rather, it is the films's deliberate refusal of a full vision, their insistence on the trace of the director's hands, the director's limited viewpoint, the mysterious nature of physical reality, and the way in which political reality limits it, that makes Uman's work so evocative of the potential of this form of filmmaking.

In *Leche* (1999), Naomi Uman explores the life of a rural family in central Mexico. *Leche* is in black and white and contains almost no dialogue. The sounds in the film are diegetic, a mixture of cows mooing and a woman singing, however, they are not synced with the images. We also hear Uman's voice as she narrates parts of the film. This film is unique in its dependence on both the Spanish and English language. Uman uses both languages in her voiceover, and there are title cards of words. The words on the title cards are usually short sentences giving context, and they are written both in Spanish and in English, one on top of the other. The confusion the viewer experiences as the film transitions from one language to the other is intentional. Arguably, this "confusion" applies mostly to a monolingual, Anglo audience. In direct contradistinction to traditional ethnography, which uses English to translate and to judge "exotic" peoples, here a bilingual speaker – especially one with knowledge of the regional Spanish idioms, one much like the subjects of the film – is the one with true authority. Uman uses the second of awareness to keep the audience from ignoring one language or the other. They are both valid and have meaning in her life and her film. Her film strives to be ethnographic, but her presence is clear throughout the documentary, using personal experience without fully commenting on her film as personal.

Uman's scratches on her film stock, working with the black and white images, making the film feel antiquated, which is perhaps a comment on the rural life and lack of modern technology that her subjects experience. Although Uman's dedication at the end of the film suggests feelings of solidarity with her subjects, the film clearly stands on the outside looking in. Arguably, this makes manifest the power divide and distance that is always present in but generally denied by ethnography.

There are long shots of what would seem normal in the subjects' everyday life, but Uman films them as if they are sacred rituals that should be closely examined. The diegetic sounds of the mooing and singing resemble that of found footage, as though the footage had been discovered and put into a museum as a relic of the past. Uman's commentary on Roberto's wish to be filmed with his lasso takes the approach of ethnographic filmmakers of the past, like Flaherty's depiction of the noble savage in *Nanook of the North*. Although she makes it known that she had a conversation with Roberto, she does not assert herself as filmmaker and author of his presence in her film.

*Mala Leche* (2003) is a second film to *Leche*, featuring relatives of the protagonists of the first film. Corresponding with the titles, "leche" meaning "milk" in Spanish and "mala leche" meaning "spoiled milk," the films take different approaches in their portrayals of the families and larger issues. *Mala Leche* contains only title cards; neither dialogue nor voiceover are used. There is also diegetic sound that is synced with the images. Spanish is not used in this film, even though it is prominent in the lives of the people she documents. Although both films explore rural lifestyles, there is an obvious difference. The second film critiques the more modern rural lifestyle, something that the first film rejects. Uman narrates for the Godin family, but also interjects facts about

undocumented immigrants from Mexico and the farm industry in this California town. One title card reads, “In rural Aguascalientes every family has a small herd of dairy cattle, which they milk by hand every day.” Uman relies on fact in a clearly ethnographic attempt to educate the viewer. The next image is a white bubbling flood of what looks like milky water that washes into the grass. The farm life in the next scene is industrialized and very different from the rural tranquility the image of the family cattle in Aguascalientes provided. *Leche* praises a family of farmers and their hard work. Although it pays tribute to this lifestyle, it does not do much for the individual thoughts of the family. In *Mala Leche*, we know the names of the family members, what they do at work, for their community, and even their personal lives. The film also takes on larger issues like the dangers of immigration into the United States and the problems undocumented immigrants experience even after living in the United States for 20 or more years. In both films, however, Uman is our guide. The people do not speak for themselves so we see the families through Uman’s eyes, but she does not mark this as a revelation in her own life, somewhat bypassing the essay film style.

*Leche* and *Mala Leche* show the rough borders that still exist within and between the ethnographic and essay forms. Although I propose the personal essay film as an ideal solution to the critiques of both forms, “truth” in this context is never the last word on the subjects. Personal essay films help uncover many truths – each film is “a” truth – but they categorically deny that there is any such thing as “the” truth about social reality. The essence of the personal essay form is that it is ambivalent; no one film will perfectly fit into an exact personal essay mode. The purpose of the personal essay form will always be

the revelation of the self and measures of success can only be tied to the subjective truth that is the filmmaker's own journey.

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