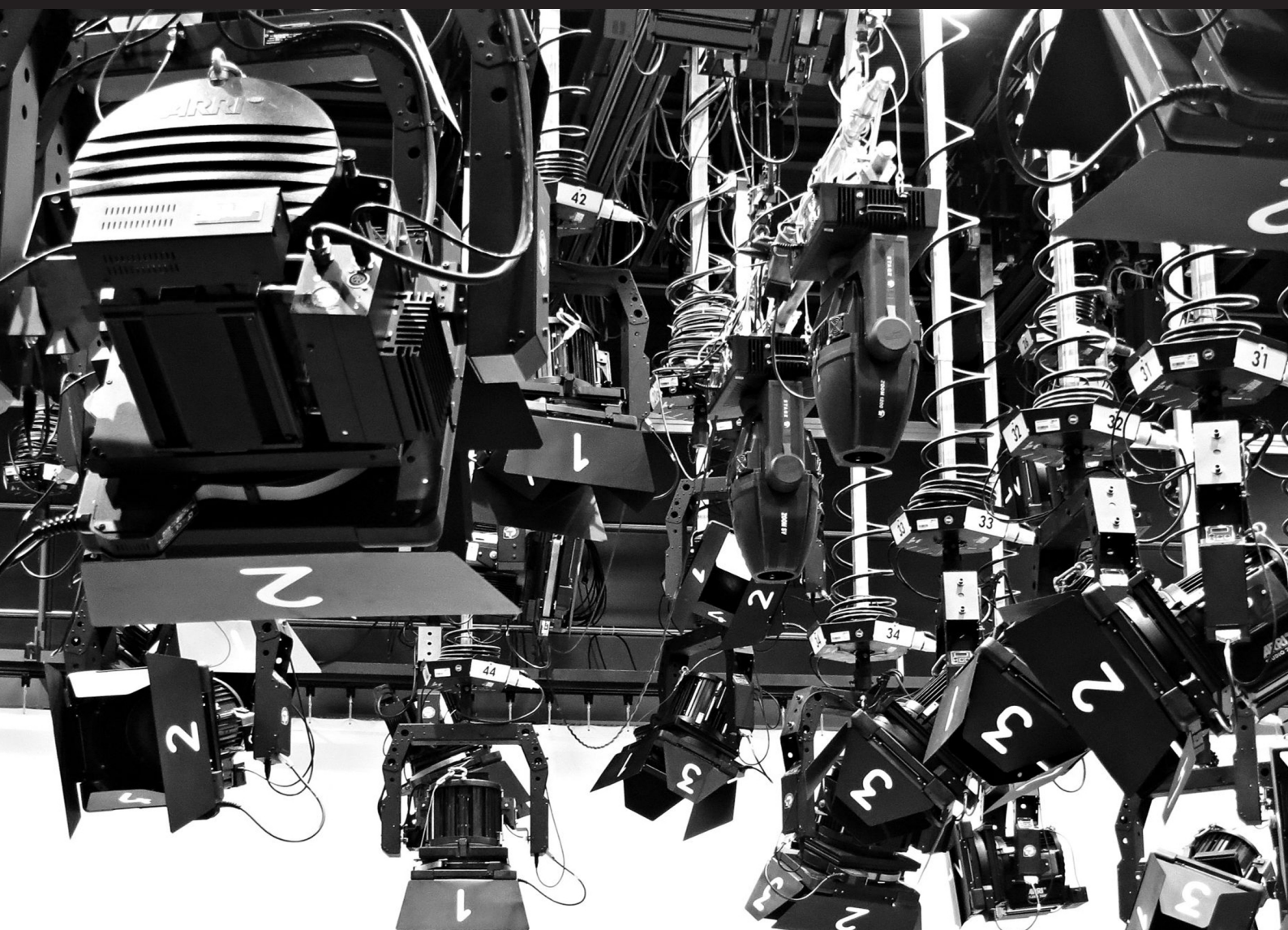


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Edited by James Rowlinson

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Dr. James Rowllins is Editor of the IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication and Film, as well as a Lecturer at the Singapore University of Technology and Design, partnered with MIT, where he is Course Lead for Film Studies. He holds a doctorate from the University of Southern California. His research interests include cinematic realism, politics and aesthetics, the legacy of the French New Wave and digital technology's impact on contemporary filmmaking practice. He has directed several short films that have been screened at international film festivals and on university campuses.

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Satyanshu & Devanshu Singh are Indian filmmakers, screenwriters, poets and teachers. A medicine graduate, Satyanshu joined brother Devanshu, who was working in the film industry as an Assistant Director while also studying Mass Media. Together they have collaborated on a number of high-profile films, such as Vikramaditya Motwane's *Udaan* (2010) – an Official Selection at the Cannes Film Festival in the *Un Certain Regard* category, and Rajesh Mapuskar's Hindi sports comedy, *Ferrari Ki Sawaari* (2012). They made their directorial debut with the short film, "Tamaash" (2013), which won first place in the IAFOR FilmAsia Open Film Competition 2012 under forty minutes fiction category, as well as multiple awards in prestigious international film competitions.

Introduction

Dr. James Rowllins, Editor-in-Chief

Welcome to the second issue of the IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication and Film!

JMCF is committed to promoting scholarship that explores the relationship between society, film and media – including new and digital media, as well as to giving a voice to scholars whose work explores hitherto unexamined aspects of contemporary media and visual culture.

JMCF is primarily associated with *MediAsia*, IAFOR's Annual Asian Conference on Media and Mass Communication, and *FilmAsia*, IAFOR's Annual Asian Conference on Film and Documentary. Since our first issue, IAFOR has launched *EuroFilm*, its European Conference on Film, *EuroMedia*, The European Conference on Media & Mass Communication and *NACMFCS*, the North American Conference on Media, Film and Cultural Studies. While the journal retains a focus on Asia, it will therefore be expanding its horizons to include papers with a truly international scope.

This issue features six papers and two interviews with IAFOR 2013 Open Film Competition winners Mario Garefo, and Satyanshu and Devanshu Singh. Not only did these filmmakers win first place in their respective categories from among very tough competition, but they have been recognised by a slew of prestigious international festivals. In their interviews, the filmmakers talk passionately and with conviction on issues ranging from film financing, the digital versus film and 2D versus 3D debates, as well as their major challenges, influences and ambitions. I feel sure that we are likely to hear more from these exceptionally promising filmmakers in the near future.

Documentary aesthetics and more broadly, questions of cinematic truth and reality, provide the overarching themes of this issue. We live in an era where journalism continues to pass off partial and biased reporting as objective. Any number of recent events illustrate this, but perhaps none so flagrantly as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. While the Russian state-controlled media, predictably, celebrated the annexation of the Crimean peninsula as an historical, moral and military victory, Western media, equally predictably, immediately condemned Russia's unacceptable, illegal "land grab" and the actions of its dangerously Machiavellian President. The positions mirror perfectly the Cold War partisanship of thirty years ago, suggesting that despite living in the post-Soviet, post-analog age, little has changed in the mainstream media landscape. With journalistic news so compromised, therefore, discerning viewers are increasingly turning to documentary to gain a more informed, objective and "actual" understanding of the world around them. This gives a huge boost to documentary, securing its influence in the digital age.

Dr. Vincent Piturro, in his article, "Documentary Film Rhetoric: *Saving Face* and the Public Sphere," concurs that documentary film has largely taken the place of investigative journalism. Significantly, he also suggests that documentary has a responsibility towards social action. His analyses, grounded in a consideration of Jürgen Habermas' and Gerard Hauser's theories of the public sphere, relate to the documentary *Saving Face* about Dr. Jawad, a London-based plastic surgeon who has

come to the aid of Pakistani women, the victims of acid attacks. Dr. Piturro's enthusiasm for documentary's potential as a means for bringing about social change raises polemical questions about the interaction between scholarship and activism.

The representation of woman on the Indian subcontinent – a “hot topic” in mainstream journalism – is treated with subtlety and intelligence in Preeti Kumar's article, “Reconfiguring India: Narrating the Nation through Great Men Biopics.” She shows how what has come to connote “Indian” increasingly coincides with a virulently “hyper-masculine” nationalistic discourse, at the expense of Mother India mythology and feminine readings of the nation. In her analyses, she tackles head-on the inherently problematic genre of the “great men biopic” – tales of founding fathers and celebrated men whose heroic deeds, sacrifice, and lofty moral virtues have come to define the “myth of nationhood.”

If the depiction of women, and more generally of the subaltern on the Indian subcontinent, emerge as the subtheme of this issue, the next article concerns the experiences of Indian migrants in the former colonial power. Dr. Robert Cross' article, “Sandhya Suri's *I for India*: Documenting Transnational Subjectivity,” discusses a film compiled of forty years of tapes and Super 8 movies exchanged between doctor Yash Pal Suri, who immigrated to Britain in 1966, and his family in India. Dr. Suri's daughter, Sandhya, created the documentary after discovering her father's tapes, in which he poured out his feelings of alienation and despair. Referencing theory on diasporic identity formation, Dr. Cross shows how *I for India* employs a variety of sophisticated discourses to comment with self-reflexivity on identity formation.

Shifting gears, Celia Lam in her article, “Emotional Realism and Actuality: the Function of Prosumer Aesthetics in Film,” considers the latest development in cinema's long-standing ambition to capture life “as it is.” Dr. Lam shows how high-end HD prosumer (hybrid professional-consumer) camcorders are being used to convey the “ad hoc immediacy of actuality.” When combined with conventional editing techniques engendering emotional realism, the effect is disconcertingly “true.” This aesthetic is found in the science-fiction film *Chronicle* (2012) about three high school students who film themselves as they acquire telekinetic abilities. The film can be seen as something of an updated version of the famed *Blair Witch Project* (1999).

In the final treatment of documentary, Barry Natusch and Beryl Hawkins revisit Bill Nichols' seminal work *Introduction to Documentary*, in which the theorist introduces his “modes” (poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative); each one corresponding to specific eras of film history. In view of the heterogeneous mix of classical, postmodern and experimental aesthetics present within most contemporary documentaries, the researchers ask if Nichols' modes are not most effectively applied holistically and at a micro level. To this end, they embark on an extensive empirical study of two highly-acclaimed documentaries, *Helvetica* (Hustwit 2007) and *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* (Klayman 2012).

Dr. William Schulte's article “Newsroom Resistance: An Ethnographic Study of the Modern News Worker, Policies, And Organizational Dissatisfaction,” provides a reminder that the digital age is not without consequences for recalcitrants. In this portrait of the newspaper industry in the digital age, Dr. Schulte's ethnographic study

shows that traditional tasks like quality writing and photography are less and less valued by newspaper bosses, and that news workers slow to adapt to digital tasks risk being laid off. The study demonstrates that while organizations generally have the upper hand, news workers are nonetheless finding ingenious ways to mount a resistance to the tide of digitalisation.

In an improvement on the first issue, and in recognition of, to quote Nicholas Mirzoeff, the overwhelmingly “modern tendency to picture or visualize existence,” a significant number of movie stills and graphics have been incorporated into this edition. Future issues may even have video or interactive, multimedia content.

Finally, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all those who have contributed to this issue, including the authors, the JMCF Editorial Advisory Board and the publications team at IAFOR. I would particularly like to thank Dr. Anna Krivoruchko, Dr. Nilanjan Ragunath, Dr. Alastair Gornall, Dr. Edgar Clayton Simpson, Priya Atwal and Rohit K. Dasgupta for their conscientious and excellent peer reviews.



Interview with Mario Garefo

James Rowlinson

Mario Garefo's film *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* was awarded first place in the IAFOR FilmAsia Open Film Competition 2013 in the under twenty minutes fiction category, as well as the competition's Grand Prize. The following interview was recorded in May 2014.

Keywords: Film funding crisis, Greece, digital vs film, art and illusion, Italian cinema, Antonioni, Visconti, Fellini, French New Wave, Buñuel.

Tell me about yourself and your path to becoming a filmmaker.

I was born and raised in Athens. My parents belonged to a certain generation which tended to impose on its children a classical education in foreign languages, sciences and arts, with the aim of securing a different perspective and better prospects for them than they had benefitted from. In essence, with this kind of education, societies supplied children with the necessary tools for entry into cut-throat financial rivalry – societies today are even more cynical: they provide their children with the necessary skills to become, for example, simply great economists with no superfluous, unnecessary knowledge. However, this education – despite its indisputable value – unwittingly led me to take a different direction as I reacted against it, becoming more of an existentialist rather than a conformist. I was originally a good student at school, then a mediocre student and, in the last two years, a bad student. Luckily, my avid consumption of books and knowledge of literature provoked a friendly reaction from the teachers who, most of the time, let me “get away with it.” I also excelled in music, which I have practiced professionally since lyceum.

My passion for the cinema came when I understood how exciting it would be to reconstruct the way I saw the world through cinema. Reality is the palette which contains everything; it can be boring, but it is the way you approach it which makes it different and interesting. Prior to then, music was my chosen means of exploration. Although I loved it very much, I sensed that it was elusive and in the future I would be obliged to give it up. The images and words of cinema, on the other hand, seemed to me uniquely tangible, like the tools of a mechanic. I saw that I could make images that corresponded to the way I always liked to “see” and hear music. I would say that my encounter with cinema was with something pre-existent in me. I therefore studied directing and the theory of cinema in Rome, satisfying my passion for cinema, and Italian cinema in particular.

Talk about the genesis of *The Man Who Fed His Shadow*. How did you conceive of the idea? What were the constraints – technical, budget, time, etc.?

The script is a loose adaptation of the homonymous short story *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* by the Argentinean writer Leónidas Barletta. While reading the story, I happened to be listening to a song by Charles Aznavour, “Comme ils disent,” which is featured in the movie. On face value, these two works seem to be unrelated to each other – but they are not. Both works are about a mysterious instinct that obliges two persons to show loyalty to something others would call a foolish obsession. Although each hero comes from a different background, the deep faith they have in their art makes them similar; they are both believers in a system of values to which we pay no attention nowadays. This is exactly what caught my attention: that beyond ideology, religion, education and culture, there is an emotional value system which “weighs” things in a different way and exonerates people and their actions.

Regarding other matters, in Greece, before the financial crisis, the state funded eight film proposals annually – yet in the last four years it has funded literally none. The financial crisis, though, is not the cause but simply a wonderful excuse for the politicians to tell us “there is no money.” The truth, however, is that they have always been indifferent to supporting art and particularly cinema. Furthermore, the selection process is obscure – they have created a program which subsidizes approximately five

short films which they chose secretly, depriving applicants of the right to formally apply for the competition or to submit their proposals officially, as is usually the case in democratic procedures. Their aim is to offer funding to people as personal favours. This is indeed absurd for a country with such a big artistic tradition. It is no coincidence that accomplished artists have left Greece and gone abroad for a better future.

The Man Who Fed His Shadow was written five years before it was shot. I entered it into these financing programs on three separate years, but it was always disqualified at the final stage. I therefore decided to shoot it with whatever money I managed to raise from different jobs and with the assistance of two independent producers who helped me mainly in the renting of equipment, venues etc. It took me a long time to create the result I wanted. I worked for a year on the pre-production and for another year on the post-production – at a given point I was worried that the film would never get completed. This was very painful process which I don't recommend to anyone, including myself. It was when the film was finally finished that I understood that the effort put into the production had paid off. This led to an ironic twist of fate. After the film's premiere in Greece, I was accused of being an aesthete because of the supposed high production costs – whereas in fact the film's budget was one third that of the films from the national programs produced with subsidies.

The cinematography in your film is exquisite and of a superior quality. Tell us about the technical aspects of the shoot (digital or 35 mm?) and edit that made this possible. Did you take charge of the cinematography? How did you design the set?

I worked meticulously on the design of the shots, thought very carefully about the lenses I would use, and made sure that the sets and filming locations looked as natural as possible. I wanted to create an eerie atmosphere where “ghosts” from the past seem to haunt the walls and furniture. I was lucky to work with Thodoris Michopoulos, whom I consider a great director of photography with the potential for a brilliant future. Without his contribution the photographic aesthetic of the film would have been impossible. Assis Dimitrolopoulou also made a great contribution to the costume designs, art direction and production design. Giannis Chalkiadakis, maybe the best editor at this moment in Greece, was responsible for the editing. Our collaboration was perfect: I brought him satisfactory material, we agreed on the view and the style we wanted the film to have, and everything went smoothly.

Before I reveal the medium that the film was shot in, I would like to discuss the usual controversy surrounding digital and film. Digital or film? Should we build our homes out of stone or concrete? Should we use organic tomatoes in our salad or not? Should your hair be natural or dyed? Is the breast of the girl across the street natural or silicone? A lot of questions which seem obsolete to modern man. I can imagine how silly Visconti would seem to someone today, when one day, in a fit of anger, he broke all the utensils in the set because he felt betrayed when he realized that one of the glasses in a scene of *The Leopard* was simply glass and not porcelain like all the rest! Would this glass change anything in the final aesthetics? Probably not. But ask yourself: would we have such a legacy from him, or find such beauty in his films, if his temperament was not characterized by this obsessive mania, to the point where he thought his vision was compromised by a single glass?

Please, do not think that I am a fan of obsessive-compulsive behaviour. I am simply an admirer of beauty. Through digital means, one can get very beautiful results which can rival, at times, that of film. In a movie theatre very few people will discern the difference – yet there is one. Although viewers may not recognize it, I believe that film acts in the subconscious of the viewer. The Parthenon is made of Pentelic marble (as opposed to regular marble) and even this small difference contributed to its being a little more beautiful. This is of little interest to the spectators. I am talking to those craftsmen who are interested in adding a little zeal to their craft. In conclusion, I would like to mention that, to my sorrow, I was obliged to shoot the film with digital for financial reasons. And I say “to my sorrow” not for the result – I am more than happy for the result. I say “to my sorrow” because I live in an age of discounts. Discounts of every kind – even in the way we make love. Because the question of “film or digital” implies: “film or digital, because no financial ability.” If there was no financial reason, why would we struggle to shoot films in digital, which sometimes comes close to film? We would shoot directly in film.

Let’s talk about your influences. Am I right in seeing *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* as a tribute to the grand masters of Italian cinema, in particular Fellini and Antonioni?

My influences are mainly from Italian cinema and the French *nouvelle vague*. Fellini is, of course, very close to my heart. But also Visconti, Pasolini and Antonioni. I am also influenced by the cinema of Dino Risi, Mario Monicelli, Ettore Scola, Pasquale Festa Campanile and the *Commedia all’Italiana*. I consider all of them very important and still underrated compared to what they deserve. I also adore Bernardo Bertolucci. In fact, in *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* I make a reference to *The Conformist*. When the leading actor has an argument with Roland outside the dinner table, a song by the Trio Lescano (a female trio from the prewar era when Mussolini was in power) is playing. Bertolucci uses the same song to close his movie with Jean-Louis Trintignant sitting outside the Coliseum. A poster of *The Conformist* is hanging on the wall when the magician enters the cabaret. I admire many directors from French cinema, but mainly Truffaut and Godard as well as the poetic realism of Jean Vigo, whose work I consider to be the equivalent of Arthur Rimbaud’s poetry. I pay homage to them by carrying them in my heart and by choosing to be aesthetically influenced by them. A practical homage placed within a film can be risky and turn into poor mimicry, so I avoid it.

...and a tribute to Rossellini’s social realism by virtue of the film’s ending?

In the last scene, it is true that I had the neorealist era in mind, but mostly Visconti, and specifically the film *The Earth Trembles*. I imagined the last scene somewhat differently, but due to production costs I did not manage to do it exactly as I had intended. I wanted the leading actor to be in a minimalistic landscape, such as a remote house next to the sea, surrounded by at least fifty children of various nationalities and for the film to close with Aznavour’s song.

To what extent is the protagonist, the magician, a metaphor for the filmmaker? Is cinema a shadowy art – an illusion that breeds “fear, suspicion and doubt” and that is practised by fraudsters masquerading as men of science? Or is it something more celebratory, more magical?

I would answer that if the obscure and profound urges which an artist tries to bring to the surface cannot be considered as something festive and majestic by men of science, then he is doomed to be a fraudster, a terrorist, worthy of suspicion and evil – and we are still living in the Middle Ages. I have come to realize that writing is nothing other than puzzle-setting for an unknown participant – a puzzle about how one feels as a human being within a general picture. It seems that self-pity must be a strong incentive for the writer in order to go ahead with such a project. In reality, the whole process requires psychoanalysis. At the premiere of a film, rather than the audience asking the director why he made the film, the director should ask the audience, “Is there anyone in the theatre who can tell me why I did what I did?” I would say that the film is a child and you are its father. You see it live and mingle in an unsuspecting crowd; in some ways it looks like you, but you cannot do anything to change or reverse its fate.

Why is the shadow a woman?

In order to express the contradictory and unsatisfied nature of the magician’s existence.

Let’s talk about the burlesque cabaret scene, which is very sensual. Was this inspired by any films in particular? It rather reminded me of David Lynch ...

I had two things in my mind: the songs in the movies of popular Italian cinema, but mainly, the majestic scene of Luis Buñuel in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, where Fernando Rey, stunned to see his beloved one in a cabaret, dancing arrogantly for wandering tourists, is confused about whether he should feel hedonic desire or repulsion. In this scene I wanted to depict, through the singer, the protagonist’s lack of satisfaction and the aspirations that a man can place in another in order to give his own existence some meaning. It is possible that this kind of relationship commits people erotically. Lynch intensifies this, but he is more concerned by objects than people and despite coming from the performing arts, he tends to objectify his human characters.

Please discuss the significance of the street scene with the transvestites, along with, I believe, your cameo appearance. Is the artist a voyeur or a transvestite, who lives in a sordid milieu far from the bourgeois?

The street scene is the ultimate moment of general allegory of the film, in which the young man, played by the director himself, witnesses the tragedy of the leading hero. Throughout the film the magician plays various roles which prompt the audience to ask for clarifications. Is he a conjurer? Is he a father? Is he an imposter? Is he a transvestite? Is he honest? Is the shadow his ex-spouse or his daughter? Is he in league with his daughter?

I wanted to tell the protagonist's story through these multiple roles, but to stay at the level of only moderate allegory – moderate because I believe that allegoric films flirt with didacticism and that it would be unfair on my part to promote didacticism in a film with clear intensions and a sincere dialogue. Instead, I wanted to promote more of an existential discussion, which can be defined as follows: what dealings can this kind of artist have with an audience that is raised and bred on cheap fare? What place is there for an artist who wants to talk with sincerity in a world where science has imposed a compulsory optimism? At the party, will he not be considered a man of bad intentions whose aim is to spoil the “good mood”? Are not the guests – bourgeois nouveaux riches who have climbed to the top through indecent means – the real fraudsters, pedalling cheap optimism to cover up their mediocrity? Is not the modern age nihilistic? I intended the young man, who walks through these sordid streets and haunts and who is aware of all of this, to represent hope and resistance in this primeval battle between nihilism and culture.

Any thoughts on this dialogue from Godard's *Pierrot le fou*, where Belmondo, reading about Velázquez, says that “after fifty years, [he] could not paint anything definite... could not capture anything in the world except the mysterious exchanges that drive forms and colours to penetrate each other”? Is this close to the “essence” of cinema: an impressionistic medium?

Impressionism is a sincere approach and a possible solution. I say this in light of the fact that modern cinema has adopted a realism based on a misunderstanding about what realism is. Nowadays, as Wim Wenders correctly comments, the tendency to tell a story, any story, is on the wane. This is because we are slaves to a wrong view about realism. Nothing is permitted if it does not allude to current events – and when a film ignores them, it is considered out of time and place. Artists have been replaced by kinds of historical analysts. Just observe how many movies with great ideas are released but that lack any kind of “magic” because their heroes are restricted to behaving realistically, that is to say, conventionally (in terms of dress, reactions, decisions etc.). It takes courage to build heroes of the kind of Godard, Fritz Lang or Fitzgerald in literature. I hope we will find again such courageous artists.

What other awards has *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* won? Will this recognition help with future endeavours? What are your future plans and projects?

The film has won a total of twelve awards and has, to date, been included in thirty-nine official selections in festivals around the world. I hope the recognition from the IAFOR Open Film Competition will help my next film *The Spaceship* materialise. It is based on a script that I wrote four years ago. Unfortunately, I am having the same funding difficulties that I encountered with *The Man Who Fed His Shadow*. It has been preselected twice in the Greek funding programs I mentioned before and both times it has been disqualified at the final stage. Despite the recognition of the merits of the script and the success of *The Man Who Fed His Shadow* in international festivals, the funding regime in Greece remains obstinate.

Finally, how do you feel about the state of contemporary cinema, in particular the European art film? Which directors do you most admire?

Modern cinema, compared to the other arts, is at a disadvantage: it is enslaved by a censorship promoted by the big festivals. If one observes the awards given in renowned festivals, one understands that films are not judged aesthetically, but on their themes and politics (films made for humanitarian causes, for instance, etc.); it is obvious. I do not claim that it is bad to use the cinema for such causes – but there are specific festivals for such films. When this is done by original film festivals, they promote a generic style and this is bad. Paper can be used for writing novels as well as for printing fliers for political protests. This is exactly what I appreciated in IAFOR: an objectivity concerning the movie themes and a selection based on clear cinematographic and artistic criteria.

Of the modern film directors I like the most, there is François Ozon and Nicolas Winding Refn, as well as Lars von Trier, Michael Winterbottom and naturally Pedro Almodóvar.



Interview with Satyanshu & Devanshu Singh

James Rowllins

Satyanshu and Devanshu Singh's film *Tamaash* was awarded first place in the IAFOR FilmAsia Open Film Competition 2013 in the under forty minutes fiction category. The following interview was recorded in May 2014.

Keywords: Coming of age films, Indian cinema, Kashmir, Iranian cinema, Kiarostami, 2D vs 3D

Tell me about yourselves and your paths to becoming filmmakers. Who were your greatest influences?

We come from a middle-class family from a small town called Munger in Bihar, from a society where becoming a filmmaker would normally seem like a fantasy, not even a distant aspiration. However, our grandfathers encouraged us in different ways that today we feel contributed to our journey. Our maternal grandpa was a fine poet, musician, and used to put up plays that he wrote and directed. Our paternal grandpa encouraged us to learn music and to read, and every evening he used to tell us stories from Indian mythology. Plus, our Mum is a big film-buff and it was she who introduced us to the world of movies. Of course, it was limited to the mainstream Hindi films, but she has very good taste, and hence we learnt to appreciate films the way she did. We remember watching award ceremonies with her on TV, where we, little kids, used to predict the winners and thoroughly enjoy the show. Once that love affair with the movies started, films and filmmakers started influencing us in ways that were beyond anyone's imagination.

At first, Satyanshu pursued a conventional path and graduated to become a doctor while Devanshu graduated in Mass Media after moving to Mumbai, the city of cine-dreams. However, after finishing his studies, Satyanshu decided to let go of his job as an army doctor, because by then Devanshu had started working as an assistant director. Since July 2008, we have been based together in Mumbai, which we now consider our home, and have been living out our dream.

Let's talk about the genesis of *Tamaash*. How did you conceive of the idea? Why did you set the film in Kashmir? Is the story autobiographical or personal on some level?

When we decided to graduate from making amateur videos to making our first short film as directors, one of our friends, Omar, who is from Kashmir, suggested that we should film there. He promised to take care of the line production. Of course, it was an exciting idea. The very same night, Devanshu wrote a story about Anzar, a little boy who is not very good at his studies and who faces the unreasonable wrath of his peers. However, nothing happened with this for a couple of months as we got busy with other projects. Then one day, Satyanshu went to a screening of short films made by his students (at a Mass Media Graduation course), and that inspired both of us to go ahead with our film. The very next morning, Satyanshu came up with a magical twist to the story that turned it into a fable. By that evening the script was done, and more or less remained the same. Of course, the bond between the two brothers in the film, Anzar and Mufeed, is very much similar to the bond between us. We have always stood up for each other and have backed each other up even if it meant going against everyone else. A strong sense of companionship and mutual understanding is visible between the little kids in the film. We feel like we were pretty much the same, only, maybe, we looked more alike, almost like twins, unlike the two characters in the film. But the autobiographical connection ends there. That said, the theme, the importance of goodness and preserving innocence and fighting evil within, remains something both of us strongly believe in, and perhaps that was the guiding principle for us while making the film.

Were you inspired by any classic childhood or coming-of-age movies?

We were hugely inspired by the stories of Ruskin Bond. And of course, the influence of *Where is the Friend's Home* by Abbas Kiarostami is very visible in the film. We had also worked on Vikramaditya Motwane's *Udaan* (2010), which is also a coming-of-age film that also has a beautiful relationship between two brothers. So that did inspire us very significantly. But the specific influence ends here. A lot of people, after watching the film, say it reminded them of Majidi and other Iranian filmmakers, although it is possible that it is mainly the cultural set-up (Kashmir has a lot of similarities with Iran) that reminds them of those films. Cinematically, our Iranian connection begins and ends with Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's Home*, at least at the conscious level.

The shots of Kashmir are extremely beautiful, but the indoors sequences are even more vivid. Tell us about the technical aspects of the shoot and edit that made this possible. What technical obstacles did you encounter shooting in such a remote location?

Thanks for using such kind words about the film. To be honest, we feel we could not do justice to the beauty that was around us. Since the film was made with a lot of limitations (money, human resources and time) we could not capture Kashmir the way we wanted to. However, we are more or less happy with the way the indoor sequences appear in the film. The credit for that goes to our DP, Sahir Raza, who did a phenomenal job. All indoor sequences, except a few shots here and there, were shot at night, using artificial lights. At first, Sahir was horrified at how old and obsolete these lights were. But in Srinagar, that was the best we could do. And hiring lights from Delhi or Mumbai was beyond our budget. So it was Sahir's imaginative lighting that saved us. We also had no camera equipment except for a monopod. All the shots in the film, including the long tracking shots, running with the kids etc., were shot using that one monopod. Also, we were shooting on a very tight schedule and there were times when location scouting, setting up, and all other decisions relating to art design and props were done on the day of the shoot. We would shoot at one location while searching for the next. After finishing at the first, we quickly moved to the next, and then Devanshu would do the art design within a couple of hours as Sahir set up the lights. If it were not for the enormous and unconditional support of the locals (and we thank Omar for that), we could not have achieved such a beautiful visual design. Later, while editing the film, we knew that we had a "good looking" picture in our hands. But as we all know, during the edit you are so concerned with getting the right notes out of performances and crafting an impactful story that we hardly cared about the visual aesthetic of the film. Only when people started responding favourably to the rough cut, did we again start noticing the visual design of the film and the colours of the landscape.

Was this your first experience of directing children? What challenges, if any, did this present? Did you encourage the children to improvise?

The biggest challenge, of course, was that the actors were speaking in Kashmiri, a language we didn't understand. But ultimately this worked in our favor. Like most audiences for this film, we had to rely on the facial expressions of the actors, the mood they created with speech without necessarily understanding the words they

were saying. So, it was a boon in disguise not to know the language. Devanshu reached Kashmir prior to the shoot and did the casting of the kids, mainly with the help of Mr. Ashraf Nagoo, the actor who plays the father in the film. He trains young kids and he brought Zahid to us, who became our Anzar. Devanshu is very good with kids and he bonded with them really well, doing workshops and training them. Satyanshu met the actors for the first time on the set, because we had decided that Devanshu's decision would be final.

During the shoot, Satyanshu played the "bad cop", the hard taskmaster, while Devanshu took care of the kids. Bonding with them was so special that soon the little actors became our biggest source of entertainment, especially the little one playing Mufeed, who became everyone's pet. These kids stayed with us in the same hotel and by the end of the shoot they were more saddened than us by the fact that it had ended. They had tears in their eyes as they bid good-bye to us. That moment, when they could not even say "bye" because of their choked voices, will remain one of the most beautiful memories of our lives. It is because of special and unforgettable joys like this that working with kids, despite all the challenges, remains wonderful. However, we regret the fact that due to a lack of manpower and resources we could not really take care of the kids, and the other actors, in the way that we wanted to. We really hope, in our subsequent films, that we will be able to make things more comfortable for our actors.

To what extent is the story a true portrayal of the lives and problems of Kashmiri children? Or is it more of a universal fairy-tale about childhood antics and fears? Is there any particular symbolism associated with the Tamaash and the "devil man" that non-native audience may not get?

The film is very much a universal fable. As there is no specific Kashmiri connection, we do not think non-native audience miss out on anything. We, also, consciously stayed away from any political connotations. In fact, while shooting we made sure that not a single barbed wire is seen in the frame. However, we have also been criticised by some for that – for being consciously apolitical. On the other hand, some people have interpreted it in political ways and have surprised us with their reading of the film. We know that this is one pleasure afforded by the movies – to have audiences of different kinds react to the film in their own ways, and we do not mind that at all. It is amusing and inspiring. However, we feel that staying apolitical in this film was important for two purposes. First, the thematic thrust of the film is the insistence of goodness. Any distraction would have harmed this simple and universal emotion. Second, almost all films set in Kashmir are political. We asked this question – why can't a Kashmiri film be just a beautiful story? And hence we decided to try to do just this. We unapologetically accept that this film could have been set anywhere.

Your film is polished and professional in terms of narrative and visual aesthetics. Was this the desired effect, or a "necessary evil" given the demands of contemporary movie-goers? (I.e. in a world with no commercial constraints, would you be more inclined towards avant-garde or experimental aesthetics?)

Avant-garde and experimental cinema is very important and we deeply respect the courage and conviction of filmmakers operating in this space. However, both of us feel inspired to tell meaningful and entertaining stories, and believe that the form

should be based on the demands of the content, to make it most effective. Perhaps, we will always make films in the same way – by selecting a story that inspires us, that we feel will connect with every person in this world, and then find the aesthetic that best suits that story. Perhaps this is the reason why the film won awards like Audience Award at the River to River Film Festival and Children’s Jury Award at the International Children’s Film Festival India. Also, we prefer showing this film to a large audience, because we see them react to it collectively and strongly. Nothing is more fulfilling than seeing hundreds of people forgetting everything and laughing and enjoying the film you have made. Ironically, in India we face a completely different question. Since we made a short children’s film in Kashmiri, they ask us if we are going to make a mainstream film one day. But we completely understand their perspective, as we understand yours. In summary, we would say that we aspire to entertain and move people without selling our soul. All other classifications – avant-garde or mainstream, art or commercial, children or adult – are only incidental.



Satyanshu and Devanshu Singh on set in Kashmir.

Did you screen the rushes and/or the final film to the actors? Did they respond favourably?

All our actors are such humble and sweet people that they keep saying kind words to us. It seems all of them are happy to be part of this film. They have not seen many Kashmiri films that look like this. The kids are surprised – they never thought the film would shape up like this. But they do not care about the awards. Everytime we talk to them, they are only concerned about inviting us over to Kashmir. “When are you coming back?” they ask. “Now even the snow is melting away!”

Congratulations on the many awards that you have won for *Tamaash*. Is this recognition important for future endeavours? What are your future plans and projects?

When we made the film, it was mainly to learn filmmaking and convince ourselves and others that we can direct. Back then, we hardly thought that it would bring us so many awards. The IAFOR award at Osaka was the first we won. It was followed by the Children's Jury Award at Hyderabad. That award was special for two reasons: one, it was awarded by a jury comprising of children and two, there were sixteen films from all across the world in competition, including some big names like "The Amber Amulet" (winner at Berlin) and the Oscar nominated "Buzkashi Boys." A few weeks later we won the Audience Award at the River to River Florence Film Festival, followed by special screenings in Rome and Milan. Then, in February, Mumbai International Film Festival screened our film in seven different cities in India. We were competing with eighteen other films in the National Short Fiction category and we won three out of four awards (Best Cinematography, Best Sound, and Best Film). We were more than happy with these awards and thought *Tamaash* has earned enough appreciation, but perhaps the best was yet to come. In mid-April, the Government of India announced the National Film Awards, which are the highest honor for filmmakers in India. Our film achieved a Special Jury Mention in the Non-Feature Film category. We received the award from the President of India on the 3rd of May. We really hope that winning this award for our very first film will open doors to more opportunities for us and enable us to keep making the films we want to, because honestly, being able to do what one wants to is the greatest and the biggest reward one can hope for.



Satyanshu receiving the Special Jury Mention Award from President Pranab Mukherjee

How do you feel about the current state of cinema, in particular the art film, in India and beyond?

The current state of cinema in India and beyond is a very vast topic. We really hope that the lines separating art film and commercial cinema will blur – this will help everyone. As of now, we would say that, despite piracy, the decreasing attention span among viewers, competition from TV, the Internet, and new forms of entertainment, we believe and hope that cinema, in the form we have known and loved it, will survive, with its head held high.

Finally, I see you have an interest in 3D filmmaking. Is this a positive development for filmmakers?

We are definitely among those few directors in India who understand the fundamentals of 3D filmmaking, thanks to a program we were part of in 2011. However, we feel that 3D is only another tool to help tell your story. The 2D vs 3D debate is very similar to the colour vs black and white, or 16:9 aspect ratio vs Scope arguments. Even today, some exceptional black and white films are being made

around the world. We feel that 3D cinema will stay and get bigger. But it will only go beyond the status of a technological gimmick when its use begins to serve films' content. *Life of Pi* and *Hugo*, in our opinion, benefitted from the 3D revolution in deeper and long-lasting ways than the typical blockbuster. Films such as Wim Wenders' *Pina* have given 3D more credibility as an artistic tool and we look forward to more 3D films by masters and avant-garde filmmakers. We hope that one day we too will be able to afford to make a 3D feature film, whose content will show that 3D can go beyond technology and become an intrinsic part of a work of art.

Documentary Film Rhetoric: *Saving Face* and the Public Sphere

Vincent Piturro

Abstract

This paper will discuss the 2012 Academy Award-winning short documentary *Saving Face* and the social action campaign surrounding the film. In the absence of true investigative journalism, documentary film has become a new discourse community that circumvents institutions and uses the Convergence Culture as a mechanism for education and social action. Documentaries such as *Saving Face* highlight Gerard Hauser's definition of rhetoric – "the use of symbols to induce social action" – and Hauser's re-formation of the public sphere as described by Jürgen Habermas. Hauser views the public sphere as one formulated by ideas – or discourse – rather than the identity of the population engaging in the discussion. In other words, the film, and many other documentaries, form new public spheres that break down social, economic, class, and geographic boundaries. These films encourage global discourse and lead to global action. As Christina Tangora Schlacter notes, the critical component of the public sphere "is the concept of a deliberative democracy: one in which there is critical analysis of democratic decisions and where social issues are based on the collective interest of the public..." (36). Where investigative journalism and democratic processes have failed, documentary film has filled in the gaps.

Documentary film has the power to both inform and induce social action in a globalized society, using the very tools of globalization to formulate public spheres among disconnected publics. This paper will examine the current trend of documentary film as both investigative journalism and social action through a specific example.

Keywords: Social action, activism, documentary, acid attacks, Pakistani women, public sphere, Habermas.

The filmic image can burn an impression into our minds. The most famous example from history may be *Night and Fog*, Alain Resnais' stunning documentary about the Holocaust. The film changed the way the world viewed the Holocaust and the War in general; after seeing the now infamous images, nobody could deny what happened. Only the image could have accomplished such a feat.

Current documentaries, and in particular, short documentaries, have the same ability to burn impressions and enlighten us. In addition, as such films become more prevalent, easier to make, more accessible to see, and provide more opportunities for interaction through web and other multimedia outlets, the films can be stunningly impactful as they form new public spheres. As this essay shows, the lack of real investigative journalism in our current society has opened up avenues for investigation and action through the medium of film. Documentaries can inform, organize, and activate diverse international groups and individuals toward a common purpose. Real social action through film is not only possible, it is already happening.

The 2011 short documentary film *Saving Face* moves along the same track as *Night and Fog*, albeit with a slightly smaller but no less important scope. The film tells the story of UK doctor and Pakistani-native Mohammad Jawad and two of his patients in Pakistan. Dr. Jawad is a London plastic surgeon who works on wealthy English clients, but he also moonlights as a surgeon for acid-throwing victims in his native Pakistan. Once every few months, Dr. Jawad travels to Pakistan where he consults and operates on certain women chosen for surgery. The film follows the stories of two of those patients, Zakia and Rukhsana, as they prepare for and receive surgery. The audience sees and feels the heartbreaking stories and shares in their pain and triumph as Dr. Jawad attempts to give them back a semblance of their former selves. The film was co-directed by Denver-based Daniel Junge and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, a Pakistani filmmaker. It won the Academy Award in 2012 for Best Documentary Short. The images are shocking, startling, moving, and ultimately, redeeming. The film and the social action campaign also inhabit a space first theorized by Jurgen Habermas: that of the public sphere. The public sphere, for Habermas, was a place where a certain discourse community could come together and discuss issues that could lead to action on a larger societal level.

This paper argues that *Saving Face* and other social-action documentaries not only determine a particular discourse community in a public sphere, it actually *creates* the community. Rather than a group of individuals who share similar homogeneous values previous to the formulation of the community (which was an element of Habermas), the film creates the discourse community by speaking to the values of a wide range of previously-created discourse communities. In other words, the shared values of this community reside *in the film itself*. While many documentaries speak to one discourse community, and oftentimes that community is already very active, this film speaks to multiple communities and includes some that may not be active. The film addresses multiple, global discourse communities and molds them into one public sphere, including the filmmakers from different ends of the world and opposite genders; the disenfranchised, as portrayed by the women in the film; the culture of capitalism, as portrayed by the doctor in the film and the production of the film itself; the political, manifested by the legislative victory in the film; and the socially conscious viewers who see the film and act because of it. The formulation of this sphere is particularly fascinating in that the same economic engine that can produce

much of the inequity in the world (capitalism) also provides relief in Dr. Jawad's successful practice. In addition, the film was independently produced by that same capitalist engine and it brings together a diverse group of interests through this particular public sphere. The hyper-capitalist engine that has roared through the last century into this one is also the same engine that may be able to provide a modicum of relief.

Saving Face

Junge relates that he first heard Dr. Jawad in a BBC interview speaking about the beautiful, aspiring model Katie Piper, herself a victim of an acid attack on the streets of London. Dr. Jawad performed successful surgery on Piper in 2008, and the model's story made international headlines. Junge became interested and subsequently contacted Dr. Jawad about Piper's ordeal, but upon learning about Jawad's work in Pakistan, Junge decided that his story lay with this aspect of the doctor's work rather than the work in London. While Piper's story made international headlines, the stories of hundreds of Pakistani women (and countless others around the world) who are victimized every year go untold. Junge's film gives voice to those women.

Junge is a social action filmmaker based in Denver, Colorado. His first feature-length film, *Chiefs*, won the Grand Jury Prize at the Tribeca Film Festival and was broadcast nationally on PBS. His subsequent feature, *Iron Ladies of Liberia*, premiered at the Toronto Film Festival and aired on over 50 broadcasts worldwide including PBS and the BBC. *They Killed Sister Dorothy*, his third feature film, won the Audience and Grand Jury Prizes at the South by Southwest Film Festival before broadcasting on HBO and earning a 2010 Emmy nomination for Best Investigative Journalism. And his film *The Last Campaign of Governor Booth Gardner* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Short in 2010.

Even though he has received accolades as an investigative journalist, Junge does not see himself as such. When asked if he considers himself an investigative journalist, Junge replied,

No, but I certainly didn't turn down the Emmy nomination when I was recognized as such! There is certainly crossover between the worlds of journalists and filmmakers and the distinctions are hazy. But in general journalism is a very specific discipline, with training and ground rules which are unique to that profession. More and more (especially with the decline of print journalism), documentary filmmakers are being asked to act as journalists and many have, admirably. But as filmmakers we're compelled to tell stories and connect our viewers emotionally and viscerally rather than just inform. Furthermore, as filmmakers, we're obliged to play by the rules of filmmakers (getting signed releases from subjects, for instance) while journalists are not. So although there is a confluence between the two professions and will continue to be more and more, it's good to recognize them as distinct. (Piturro, interview)

The line between investigative journalism and film has thinned, however. Such recent feature-length documentaries as *The Cove* or *Dirty Wars* blurs the line between film

and investigative journalism, blending the art of film and the field of journalism to illuminate controversial topics and act as agents of social change. Junge and his filmmaking partner feed into that dynamic.

Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy is an Emmy and Oscar-award-winning documentary filmmaker who also moves between journalism and filmmaking. She has worked in over ten countries to produce internationally acclaimed films including *Pakistan's Taliban Generation* (2009), the recipient of the Alfred I. DuPont Award and the Association for International Broadcasting Award. Her other films include *Afghanistan Unveiled* (2007) and a series of documentaries for Channel 4 for which she was awarded Broadcast Journalist of the Year by One World Media, UK. She is the first non-American to receive the Livingston Award for International Reporting and is a TED Senior fellow. Both of these filmmakers are well-established and professional social activists, but most never heard of them before the 2012 Oscars.

While those Academy Awards gave recognition and publicity to the filmmakers and the causes of the women, the activism actually started much earlier. Both filmmakers have always included a strong current of social action and social justice in their films while maintaining the integrity of the art form as they approach difficult topics – the trick is how to make the films affecting, appealing, and *important*. When asked about the handling of controversial subjects and if social action is a goal, Junge responds,

I certainly make films from my political position and I'm intending to coerce audiences and effect change. But I don't wake up every morning and think, "How can I make the world a better place?" I'm not that altruistic. Rather, I want to tell stories and I want to viscerally affect my audiences. The stories I cover – stories of injustice – have the biggest stakes in the world. Wherever people are disenfranchised or facing injustice, there are incredible stories that need to be told. That's what compels me to tell these stories, but I certainly sleep better at night knowing my films might make a difference. (Pituro, interview)

The films make a difference because of the film itself, the promotion of the film, the film festivals in which it is shown, the online campaign surrounding the film, and the activism which follows. It is what Henry Jenkins calls the "convergence culture," where old and new media intersect in ways that make active participants out of the consumers. The result is a more socially active consumer who engages with other consumers to produce a final product – real social action through the formulation of a new public sphere.

The Public Sphere

In other words, *Saving Face*, and many other recent documentaries, form new public spheres out of discourse communities that break down social, economic, class, and geographic boundaries. The film encourages global discourse and leads to global action in an era of instant communication and globalization. In a period when news organizations have diminished in size, stature, and importance, documentary film has become a conduit for informing the public as well as activating the public. The key

concept is the idea of the public sphere, and how that public sphere can lead to social action.

The idea of the public sphere originates with Jürgen Habermas. The public sphere was theorized to be a place where citizens come together to discuss ideas in an (somewhat) informal setting and develop a general course of action based on those ideas; that course of action includes moving the discussion/debate from a small group to a larger societal level, supposedly for the benefit of all. As Habermas described it,

[b]y the “public sphere” we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed.... Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest... The expression “public opinion” refers to the tasks and criticism of control which a public body of citizens informally practices... vis-à-vis a ruling class.

For Habermas, the notion of the public sphere has its roots in “the Greek *polis*, and more importantly, with the liberal theory and democracy of J.S. Mill and others” (Pusey 88). Habermas was also influenced (as was Marx), by the “advances in political freedom achieved in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France and the high points of parliamentary government that he dates from 1832 to 1867” (Pusey 88). Examples include British coffeehouses or the French salons of the era. Even the great American experiment of the contemporaneous era lends itself to formulations of the public sphere, although much of the early American lawmaking was still strictly controlled by a select few and in official settings. And therein lies one of the criticisms of the public sphere – by design and in action, it is exclusive, beginning with upper-class fraternities and resulting in self-serving bourgeois practices that would then be legitimized on a larger scale.

Along those lines, Habermas has been revised to include the notion of “counterpublics” and “subaltern publics” as described by Nancy Fraser: “Subaltern counterpublics are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (67). In addition to Fraser’s work, Michael Warner also examines the idea of a public sphere as a counterpublic to include the gay, transgender, and transsexual community and subsequently completely debunks the notion of “a public” because of its inherently exclusive nature. Gerard Hauser takes Habermas a step further and posits the idea of a “rhetorical public sphere,” one in which the ideas, rather than the identity of the population engaged in the discourse, takes precedence. As Hauser notes, “publics may be repressed, distorted, or responsible, but any evaluation of their actual state requires that we inspect the rhetorical environment as well as the rhetorical act out of which they evolved, for these are the conditions that constitute their individual character” (1999: 80-81). Hauser’s formulation, by its very definition, marks off the actions of the public sphere as rhetorical and thereby grants them a purpose – to act. Hauser’s own definition of rhetoric – obviously informed by Kenneth Burke – is “the use of symbols to induce social action” (2002: 3). These revisions/additions to Habermas

attempt to (re)view the public sphere concept as more inclusive, more dynamic, and more attuned to issues rather than demographics.

In addition to these contextual and structural criticisms, the historicity of Habermas' initial formulation is also questionable in that, as Pusey notes, "we are still faced with the somewhat embarrassingly brute fact that its modern development historically coincides with the ugliest period of nineteenth century industrial capitalism" (90). The massive shifts of power that occurred during this time period really only involved the movement of wealth and power from one elite class to the next elite class. Most were still left out of the equation. In addition, the twentieth and twenty-first century advancements of hypercapitalism have exacerbated the idea of exclusionary publics. As Pusey describes, "...we are faced with the unexpected and puzzling coincidence of mass democracy, affluence, and a degradation of the public sphere" (90); in other words, we have become victims of our own success, wherein "mass education, increasing social mobility, and in short the whole process of "modernization and development" brings with it not rationality and emancipation but rather, to Habermas' eye, a deepening irrationality" (90). The ethos of late capitalism began to lay waste to any Enlightenment notion of true democracy and citizen rule. And finally, the rise of globalism in the late 20th century also proved to dilute the influence of media as an agitating force as global media conglomerates increasingly focused on sensationalism and pop culture; the media became another mechanism for perpetuating hypercapitalistic ends in self-serving fashion. Gone are the days of Edward R. Murrow and semiautonomous, hard-hitting investigative journalism in the mass media.

The public sphere and the media are indelibly tied together, and the success of one depends on the success of the other. The structure of the public sphere for Habermas held a place between civil society and the state, resulting in the creation of public opinion through critical discourse. As Christina Schlacter notes, Habermas called for active participation, not superficial participation, as a critical role in democracy, and the public sphere represented an act of critical communication and discourse rather than superficial discussion. The public sphere and the public interest are tied together: the outputs of these critical debates were not collective opinions, but a shared opinion formed through discussion. The critical component of the public sphere is the concept of a deliberative democracy – one in which there is:

critical analysis of democratic decisions and where social issues are based on the collective interest of the public. But this type of discourse is inherently pluralistic and interactive and the publication of popular or academic journal articles, or the release of a film, hardly represents the full range of information exchanges or collective learning opportunities. Documentaries can, however, fill one gap in the public sphere left by overall cutbacks in investigative and informative journalism, and the part of documentaries in providing relevant information to the public with which they can connect and collaborate on, is critical. (Schlacter 36)

That brings us to documentary film, more specifically for the purposes of this paper, short documentaries, and to *Saving Face*. While Habermas' formulation, and the Hauser's update, of the public sphere have been more recently applied to the digital

age and specifically to the internet (Calhoun), such a discourse includes the same limitations of Habermas' original construction as too exclusive – now referencing those who have access to the Internet. But this paper goes beyond a discussion of solely the Internet and includes *film* as a way to form a public sphere and even further, as a rhetorical device that may lead to social action. *Saving Face* provides a furtive example.

Saving Face, The Public Sphere, and Social Action

The collaboration of many public spheres in the case of the Pakistani women as depicted in *Saving Face*, then, is a positive example of the public's influence on an issue that otherwise may have gone unnoticed or at least buried once noticed. While the issue may at first seem private – only affecting the women in Pakistan – it is much more complicated and not so regionalized as it first may seem. Victims of acid-throwing populate the world, including North America, and the larger issue of women's rights and legislative relief, effects everyone. Add in the enormous financial support the United States and other nations give to countries such as Pakistan, and you have a public that is very much involved in the political side of the issue as well as the very real and heartbreaking human side of the issue. It is very much a public matter, not private. So when Junge spoke with Dr. Jawad and learned of his work inside Pakistan, he knew he found his story.

Junge invited Obaid-Chinoy, whom he calls Pakistan's best filmmaker, to join him in making the film and she readily accepted. Of her involvement, Junge states,

She's an Emmy-winning filmmaker, and having a partner on the ground there, especially a woman who could go and shoot some of the most sensitive stuff without me, was just great – not only for safety concerns but for the comfort of the subjects. I think it gives the film an intimacy in rural Pakistan that I wouldn't have been able to do myself. (Edwards)

For her part, Obaid-Chinoy said she was interested in getting the women's stories out to the international community. While she estimates an average of one hundred incidents of acid-throwing reported every year in Pakistan, she believes the actual numbers are exponentially higher (Edwards). The women are simply too afraid of reporting the incidents – they fear further retribution and retaliation from their attackers and their families. The film therefore not



Figure 1. Dr. Jawad examines Zakia.

only gives voice to some of the victims, it encourages more women to speak out about such acts. Poignantly, it accomplishes all of this with a human touch.

One of the most striking examples comes in the opening images of the film, as we see one of the victims, Zakia, holding pictures of how she looked before she was attacked. The *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, and editing all work together to produce a *logos* and *pathos* that lead us to sympathize with Zakia. She was a beautiful woman, and as she says, she feels bad looking at the pictures because she knows she will never look like that again. The touching image of her current, disfigured face cut against the static photograph of her former self at once tells her heart-wrenching story, but it still provides some hope for a (happier) future in the juxtaposition of static to current (filmic) image. The static image is an artifact of the past, but the current filmic image allows for “editing” and therefore provides hope for her future. The possibility of hope and change through the moving image not only speaks to Zakia’s own presence in the diegesis, but it speaks to the project of social change through film in a meta-cinematic sense. An aesthetic of hope is established from the beginning of the film.

Later, when Dr. Jawad meets his other patient, Rukhsana, she relates the story of how she still lives at home with her husband (her attacker) because she needs to be with her children. Her husband threw acid on her, her sister-in-law threw gasoline on her face, and then her mother-in-law lit a match and set her on fire. And yet, she still has to live with them. The film cuts to Dr. Jawad, visibly upset, and he walks out of his office in disbelief after the interview. All the while, we sit and watch the brutally disfigured face of this once beautiful twenty-five year-old woman. The sympathetic response from Dr. Jawad is once again both real and extra-filmic: Dr. Jawad becomes our stand-in and he expresses the sentiments and emotions that we feel as viewers. That sentiment extends from sadness to anger as the viewer ponders the fate of her attackers. What will happen to her husband and family? Probably nothing, we know.



Figure 2. Daniel Junge and Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy shooting the film.

The film then follows Dr. Jawad as he works with Rukhsana (and Zakia) over the course of the next few years. Junge traveled back and forth to Pakistan for over two years to get the full story. About this same time, the Pakistani Parliament passed a landmark law – to give life sentences to those found guilty of acid throwing. The film shows clips of the

arguments being made in the Parliament and the victorious sponsor of the bill after it is passed. Zakia then begins working with a lawyer, an activist for women’s causes, and they bring Zakia’s husband to court. It would be the first test of the new law in all of Pakistan. After many delays and court maneuvering, they finally get a verdict. The court rules in favor of Zakia, and her husband receives two life sentences. The smile on her face is undeniably the first moment of happiness in her life since the attack. The second is the following scene, as she relates the story to an ecstatic Dr. Jawad,

and he congratulates her with a high-five! As important as these scenes are, the stakes are underscored by the interstitial cuts that serve as transitions from one scene to the next: young girls playing in the streets and in the fields. As the film makes beautifully clear: these children are at stake. Our previous identification with Dr. Jawad now becomes a vehicle for social action as we, the viewer, have a mission at the film's end.

The significant aspect of the diegesis is how Zakia's story speaks to multiple public spheres: it speaks to the political process, it speaks to the activist base, but most importantly at this point, it speaks to the women of Pakistan who now have legal recourse if they are unfortunate enough to find themselves in this horrible predicament. This is a crucial aspect of the film: it has *created* the public sphere around these women who may hold some hope that their attackers will actually be punished, and perhaps even the law will act as a deterrent to the men and future perpetrators of this brutal practice. The viewer now has a personal and political stake in the film.

Both Junge and Obaid-Chinoy had such social and political action in mind when they made the film. When asked what he wanted people to take away from the film, Junge states,

First of all, I think that when people hear of the nature of the subject, they think it's all doom and gloom and horror, and of course it is, it's extremely dark subject matter. But I hope that when people watch the film, they see Pakistanis addressing a Pakistani problem, and moreover, they see a Pakistani filmmaker, my partner Sharmeen, documenting Pakistanis addressing this problem. I want viewers to come away with a sense of hope and empowering the institutions which are fomenting change, rather than just think it's an unchangeable situation. (Edwards)

In short, Junge was looking for change. Returning to Gerard Hauser's definition of rhetoric, Hauser believed it was the use of symbols that induced social action. But Junge's quest did not stop with the release of the film nor the Academy Award. He also initiated a very ambitious outreach program that focuses on education and outreach. Several years later, the campaign is still going strong, and according to its website, its goals are three-fold:

- to screen *Saving Face* around the world for leaders representing international agencies, governments, NGOs, academia, hospitals and other institutions positioned to impact policy, capacity, and advocacy on the issue;
- to equip individuals across sectors with SAVING FACE materials and resources – including the film, viewer's guide, and online platform – in order to educate through special screenings, spotlight those working to combat acid violence, and identify ways audience members can get involved;

- to support special projects inspired by the film and designed and led by our NGO partners and other change agents to end acid violence, such as trainings, public awareness efforts, community events, and fundraisers.

The filmmakers not only had specific public spheres in mind when making the film, but they were also able to create new public spheres that continue to grow, outside the political system, while engaging in real social action and enacting real change.

Documentary film has the power to do both, and a film such as *Saving Face* is able to provide hope and relief to many suffering and disenfranchised women throughout the world. There are other recent examples of similarly successful films: the short documentary *Sun Come Up* (2011), which detailed the plight of Carteret Islanders in the South Pacific, for example. Some of the world's first environmental refugees, the islanders must leave their homeland as the seas rise and threaten to infect their water tables and flood their islands. The campaign surrounding the film has brought much needed attention and funds to the islanders. Another recent short documentary, *Open Heart* (2013), tells the story of African children in need of life-threatening heart surgery and their journey to the one hospital in sub-Saharan Africa that performs such surgeries. The hospital is funded by an Italian NGO and by Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir. When al-Bashir threatened to withhold funding for the hospital, director Kief Davidson told al-Bashir that he was going on a press tour with the film (recently nominated for an Academy Award), and Davidson would announce to the world that the Sudanese leader was not funding a hospital that would save hundreds of children's lives. Al-Bashir immediately funded the hospital, saving countless lives. A follow-up study on such films could investigate how the films translate to direct social action.

Other recent examples include such powerful feature films as *Super Size Me* (2004), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *Food Inc.* (2008), and *The Cove* (2009). The possibilities of other documentaries creating new public spheres with a goal of social action are endless, and the images of these films searing into our collective psyches can serve to initiate change along the lines of "Night and Fog," with the help and understanding of an informed and activated public. As Dr. Jawad says at the close of the film, "I am doing my bit, but there is only so much I can do. Come join the party."¹

¹ *Saving Face* may be purchased from Women Make Movies. All proceeds go directly to help the women.

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Appendix

The complete interview with *Saving Face* director Daniel Junge.

Q: As a documentary filmmaker, do you also consider yourself an investigative journalist?

JUNGE: No, but I certainly didn't turn down the Emmy nomination when I was recognized as such! There is certainly crossover between the worlds of journalists and filmmakers and the distinctions are hazy. But in general journalism is a very specific discipline, with training and ground rules which are unique to that profession. More and more (especially with the decline of print journalism), documentary filmmakers are being asked to act as journalists and many have, admirably. But as filmmakers we're compelled to tell stories and connect our viewers emotionally and viscerally rather than just inform. Furthermore, as filmmakers, we're obliged to play by the rules of filmmakers (getting signed releases from subjects, for instance) while journalists are not. So although there is a confluence between the two professions and will continue to be more and more, it's good to recognize them as distinct.

Q: Your films deal with controversial subjects. Is social action a goal of yours? If so, why?

JUNGE: I certainly make films from my political position and I'm intending to coerce audiences and effect change. But I don't wake up every morning and think, "How can I make the world a better place?" I'm not that altruistic. Rather, I want to tell stories and I want to viscerally affect my audiences. The stories I cover – stories of injustice – have the biggest stakes in the world. Wherever people are disenfranchised or facing injustice, there are incredible stories that need to be told. That's what compels me to tell these stories, but I certainly sleep better at night knowing my films might make a difference.

Q: How do you think you can bring about change through your films?

JUNGE: In some cases, it's very specific – like when my films have been used to help convict a killer or have been cited in voting for a Nobel laureate. Other times it's more general – like how my film *Chiefs* has been shown so many times for young Native Americans around the country. But perhaps the biggest affect is less tangible. Through a successful film that gets wide distribution, you can change the conversation. For instance, acid violence is most certainly more known and discussed by virtue of our film *Saving Face*. Although the results may not be easy to quantify, it's hard to argue that a successful documentary doesn't change the conversation around issues.

Q: What challenges do you face in trying to bring about social change?

JUNGE: There's a Woody Allen line, from *Stardust Memories*, "Do you want to make the world better? Make funnier movies." That's instructive. I can't get consumed with how my films will affect social change. My role is simply to make the films as well as I can and hopefully they have a chance of affecting change. All too often, documentary filmmakers feel entitled to their audiences by virtue of the

importance of their subject rather than the quality of their filmmaking. On the contrary, the onus to make our films as compelling as possible to reach the widest audience in the most powerful way to possibly affect change.

Reconfiguring India: Narrating the Nation through Great Men Biopics

Preeti Kumar

Abstract

Cinema plays a pivotal role in the negotiation and construction of national identity, selectively appropriating history, attempting to forge a sense of commonality in a set of people by evoking a sense of a shared past and by establishing a rupture with “others.” One of the means of constructing a nation is through the biopic. Great men biopics chronicle heroic deeds, sacrifice, and lofty moral virtues and either fabricate, or rediscover, and authenticate the myths of the founding fathers and celebrated men. Biopics disseminate the “myth of nationhood” by use of various narrative strategies – such as a glorification of hyper-masculinity, structuring binary oppositions in terms of character and thematic concerns, “otherness,” visualizing national territory, homogenizing a cultural diversity etc. These films become a part of the nationalistic discourse that reflects perceptions of what it means to be “Indian.” Bollywood in general and the biopic in particular has moved away from the Mother India mythology and its feminine reading of the nation to produce a particular variant of nationalism. This paper attempts to deconstruct how the nation is simulated, and meanings, such as national pride and national idealism, are mediated to the audience in selected Indian biopics – *Sardar*, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*.

Keywords: Cinematic biopic, Bollywood, identity, memory, otherness, gendering, simulation/construction.

Introduction

The narrativization of the past in cinema has been a method of propagating the idea of the nation to a national public, a means by which a people can build a picture of themselves as individuals and communities. The assumption that “nations are enduring primordial entities” (Hjort & MacKenzie 8) is now perceived as fallacious and the modernist proposition holds that nations emanate from nationalism and not vice versa. The conception, consolidation and representation of a nation imbricate a variety of discourses that communicates a distinct image of a national community.

One of the means of narrating the nation is by recreating the myths of its founding fathers. In cinema, great men biopics have been a method of deploying the passions of patriotism by the chronicling of heroic deeds, sacrifices, and lofty moral virtues, and by fabricating, rediscovering, or authenticating the myths of celebrated men. Presentations of particular versions of historical lives privilege specific ideologies and naturalize an imagery of the nation in the popular psyche. The argument this paper makes is that in presenting a quasi-realistic portrayal of the lives of the protagonists, the Indian biopic constructs and mediates a specific and predominantly masculine image of the nation to the audience. This paper attempts to deconstruct how the ideal of “nation” is simulated and meanings, such as national pride and national idealism, are communicated to the audience in four Indian biopics: *Sardar* (Ketan Mehta, 1993), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (Rajkumar Santoshi, 2002), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (Ketan Mehta, 2005), and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (Rakeysh Omprakash Mehta, 2013). It also attempts to show how films can be used as evidence of the nationalistic discourses and culture of the time in which they were produced.

The biopic “narrates, exhibits and celebrates the life of a subject in order to demonstrate, investigate or question his or her importance in the world; to illuminate fine points of a personality; and... to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology” (Bingham 10). The classical Great Man biopic pursues the objective of earliest biographical writing: to combine hagiography with edification. Through a selection of the most encomiastic accounts of the subject, the biopic attempts to produce the full explanation of a life that is congruent with the popular myths or collective social memories of the hero. Through “its controlling storytelling devices... beginning in medias res, embedded flashbacks to “primal scenes,” montage sequences that condense the rise (or fall) of the subject, or trial-like scenes where, under pressure, the historical character verbalizes his or her goal” (Vidal 9), the biopic imaginatively recreates a historical moment and produces the hero as an apparatus of history. According to Vidal, in narrating the hero’s life before he achieves greatness, the biopic conflates myth with a sense of historical inevitability and “history becomes no more than a self-fulfilling prophecy” (6). He adds that “this mode of address [the biopic] obscures its ideological bias” (6). The spectator of the great man biopic is thus positioned as a passive recipient of an “icon-memory.”

In India, cinematic biography has enjoyed growing popularity in recent years with the realist strand producing many biopics, notably on the leaders of the Freedom Struggle (Dwyer 68). Critical writing on Indian cinema, asserts Lalitha Gopalan, frequently dwells on how Indian films are continually concerned with the questions of national identity and history (Gopalan 381). The Independence Struggle, cinematically identified with the lives of its leaders, has become a national frame of reference, a

meta-narrative influencing collective identity, and filmmakers have either affirmed or deconstructed the mythology surrounding national leaders.

The earliest films – biographical pictures of mythical heroes – were inspired by Bal Gangadhar Tilak's call to "*swadeshi*" (from "*swa*" – own, and "*desh*" – country). *Kaliya Mardan*, a 1919 film directed by Dhundiraj Govind Phalke, showed Lord Krishna vanquishing the serpent, Kaliya, to the chorus of "Vande Mataram" (the revolutionary national song of the Indian Freedom Movement). *Bhakta Vidur* (1921) retold the episode from the epic *Mahabharata*, with the protagonist, Vidura, appearing as Gandhi with his characteristic loin cloth and cap. The film also included a song on the *chakra* (the spinning wheel, which Gandhi introduced as a sign of Indian emancipation) and the Indian National Congress. The lives of great men, mythical or historical, have consistently been rallying points of nationalism.

Through the stories of individual achievement, the biopic engages in a form of historical (re)writing where historical events are seen through the subjective prism of the hero's experiences. The unique national and cultural inflections of the biopic ensure that the representation of the character is mediated through the discourse of the nation. That one of the prime motives of the biopic is constructing the nation can be seen from the fact that the basis of the movie is usually more dramatic than historical/factual.

While the plot of the film would endeavour to follow the historical "facts" where possible, the director would not hesitate to substitute a fictional narrative for a historically accurate one when the overarching dramatic concerns of the film demanded (Chopra-Gant 75).

If it is the "collisions of actualities and dramatic fiction which causes a lot of resistance" (Bingham 14) that makes Western biopics a "flawed genre," in Indian biopics "dramatic fiction" overwhelms "actualities" – erasing the problematics of a subject's lives and constructing a larger-than-life hero. Indian biopics have rarely progressed beyond the earliest classical, celebratory melodrama style; many warts-and-all type of biopic like *The Dirty Picture* (based on the life of item-number girl, Silk Smitha) and *Guru* (on the life of renowned industrialist Dhirubhai Ambani) are only poorly disguised cinematic *romans-à-clef*, not biopics proper. In chronicling the lives of the famous, Indian biopics tend to avoid controversial aspects and construct the life as an unfolding of destiny to greatness and achievement. The "idea of a 'calling,' with its spiritual connotations" (Bingham 37) informs the Indian biopic, and the hero becomes the embodiment of goodness and virtue; the film, a vehicle for a didactic message. Indian biopics, consequently, embody rhetoric of ideology – purity or patriotism, and films on national heroes are discursively framed to communicate the image of a nation to a public.

Anderson's definition of the nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both limited and sovereign" (6) is still the accepted notion of the nation. A nation is an imaginary construct – it is not the awakening of a people into political and social consciousness; it is a creation of a geo-political and cultural idea where none exists. "Both Gellner and Anderson stress that nations are ideological constructions seeking to forge a link between a self-defined cultural group and the state, creating *abstract* or *imagined* communities that we loosely refer to as 'the

nation' and which gets passed off as 'natural'" (Hayward 2000: 89, italics in original). A nation emerges as an idea from the traditions of political thought and literary language and also through nationalist discourses that present the idea of a nation as persisting through time. To maintain the illusion of cultural and social continuity, a nation needs narratives – a profusion of memories of a shared past, glorious heritage, and heroic endeavours, which are constructed by narratives that seek to name the land and space that a people inhabit.

There are two aspects that constitute the “spiritual principle” of the nation: one in the past; the other in the present – “the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories... [and]... a present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of a heritage that one has received in an undivided form” (Renan 19). What the biopic does is to create the one and instigate the other. The biopics' politico-ideological interests resonate with what Friedrich Nietzsche called “‘monumental history’: a monologic discourse that seeks to forge continuities between the present and the past through the tools of narration” (Vidal 11). Allied to a significant moment in the life of a nation, biographical stories of national heroes are pivotal in the process of memory, history and construction of a specific discourse of national self-identity.

Of the biopics chosen for analysis, *Sardar* is a 1993 film on Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Indian freedom fighter and independent India's first Home Minister. *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* is a 2002 film on how Bhagat Singh develops his ideals and on his struggle for Indian independence. *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* is a 2005 film based on the life of Mangal Pandey, the Indian soldier who is credited with initiating the Indian rebellion of 1857, also known as “The Sepoy Mutiny,” or “The First War of Independence.” *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* is a 2013 biographical sports drama on the life of Milkha Singh, “The Flying Sikh,” the Indian athlete who was a national champion runner and an Olympian.

Mangal Pandey begins in 1857 with Mangal Pandey, an Indian sepoy of the British East India Company, rescuing his British Commanding Officer, William Gordon, during the Anglo-Afghan war. A friendship which crosses race and rank develops. The pivotal point of the narrative is the mutiny of the soldiers sparked by the introduction of the new Enfield rifle. Loading the musket required the soldiers to bite a cartridge which was rumoured to be coated with beef and pork tallow – anathema to Hindus and Muslims respectively. Revolution breaks out; Gordon and Pandey find themselves in opposite camps; British units are summoned from Rangoon; the Sepoys defeated; and Pandey is captured and executed, despite Gordon's prophetic protestations that it will only lead to his martyrdom and further uprisings. Pandey marries the prostitute, Heera, in jail; Gordon joins the rebellion against the Company Raj and the film closes on a montage of drawings on the Indian Independence Movement and documentary footage of Gandhi's campaign that ends colonial rule in India.

The Legend of Bhagat Singh details the forging of Bhagat Singh's political ideology - his disenchantment with Gandhian non-violence; revolutionary activities; the assassination of the police officer, Saunders, as retaliation for Lala Lajpat Rai's death; the custodial torture he endures; his rationale and the representation of his bombing the Indian Parliament building; his sixty-three day fast for ameliorating the condition

of Indian prisoners; and his final martyrdom along with his associates, Rajguru and Sukhdev. The film also critiques Gandhi for his failure to help these revolutionaries who rivalled him in popularity.

Sardar commences with a frame narrative of violence and corruption in modern day India from which the narrative flashes back to a magnificent past. The story of Vallabhbhai Patel shows the transmogrification of his politics – his initial ridicule for Gandhian philosophy to his transformation after listening to Gandhi, his renunciation of a lucrative legal practice to become Gandhi's lieutenant, his strategic successes in the Bardoli and Kheda struggles, his executive expertise and shrewd statesmanship, his successful integration of princely states into India, particularly the recalcitrant states of Hyderabad, Junagadh and Kashmir, and his role as Home Minister of Independent India. The film ends with him resting in a village ruminating on the unity of India.

Bhaag Milkha Bhaag is based on *The Race of my Life*, the autobiography of Milkha Singh. The film starts at the 1960 summer Olympics in Rome, where Milkha Singh, the Indian athlete, who leads the 400 m race, drops to the fourth place when he hears his coach shout, "*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag!*" ("Run, Milkha, Run!"). He is overpowered by the traumatic recollection of his father's voice and words as he flees the maundering Pakistani hoards during Partition. The film flashes back to narrate the life of the impoverished refugee of Delhi who survives by stealing, until he joins the Indian Army where he is noticed by the sports coach after he wins a race, in which he competed, enticed solely by the prospect of the top ten winners getting milk and two eggs. He is selected for the service races where he is beaten up by senior players the day before selection of the Indian Olympic team. In spite of his injuries he participates in the race, and wins conclusively by breaking the national record. The night before the Melbourne 1956 Olympics he has a one-night stand and, exhausted, he loses the final race. Overcome by guilt, he sets himself to break the world record and trains obsessively to win in various international events. He is requisitioned by Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, to lead the Indian contingent to Pakistan for the goodwill games, which he does reluctantly. In Pakistan, he relives the murder of his family and his father's desperate last words, "*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag.*" At the games, the Pakistani athlete leads initially, but Milkha overtakes his opponents one by one, winning the race and the appellation, "The Flying Sikh." It is noteworthy that the film glosses over the greatest triumphs as a montage, the culminating scenes reserved for his victory over the neighbouring country of Pakistan.

These films, nuanced and well researched, are a change from the romanticised and moralistic versions of biographical narratives customary in Indian cinema and were all critically well-acclaimed, though only *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* was a commercial success. They present historical events and elements accurately, and avoid the exotic settings and exaggerated jingoism and pop patriotism that biopics on the same subjects embodied. They also garnered various national and international film awards: *Sardar* won the National Award for Best Feature film on National Integration, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* won two national awards – for the Best Regional Film (Hindi) and for the Best Actor and three Filmfare Awards; *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* won the prestigious National Award 2014 for Best Popular Film Providing Wholesome Entertainment as well as the National Award for Best Choreography, six awards at the 59th Filmfare Awards 2013; *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* won the 2005 Netpec Special

Jury Award at the Locarno International Film Festival “for the great narrative power and emotion flowing through the strength of a rising nation.” The directors are well acclaimed at their craft – national and international award winners, - and their scriptwriters, Vijay Tendulkar, Farrukh Dhondy and Prasoon Joshi, are noted playwrights, writers, poets celebrated in their own fields. However, even though their films are acknowledged as measured and balanced, they are still involved in a post-colonial enterprise: the construction of a national imaginary.

The three films on the political leaders, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, *Sardar*, and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* deal with different stages of the Indian Freedom Struggle and the paradigmatic frame of reference for *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* is the trauma of Partition. Significantly, these films were produced during a critical time in Indian political and cinematic history. Hindu – Muslim communal riots had threatened to fracture the nation after the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodha in 1992. In 1997, numerous foreign channels – mostly American – were available on cable television which was perceived as an “invasion of foreign values” with the possibility that “Donald Duck will supplant *Ganesh*” – a statement by Joel Farges, the producer and expert on Indian cinema (cited in Thoraval 137). Fears of cultural hybridity, inherent instability and a perceived weakness of the nation in the face of foreign powers that existed through the 90s and the early years of 2000s necessitate a repertoire of patriotic symbols. These films recreate the past as a method of social commentary and resurgence of nationalistic ideals.

Biopics disseminate the “myth of nationhood” by use of various narrative strategies. These films become a part of the nationalistic discourse that reflects perceptions of what it means to be “Indian.” National cinema does not “simply articulate the cultural specificities of a given pre-existing nature” (Hjort & MacKenzie 8), but enables the inhabitants of the geo-political space of India to imagine themselves as a distinctive national community. Various signifiers of a nation – space, songs, semiotics – are presented to evoke a nationalist spirit. On the strength of the films being addressed here, it can be said that the most important narrative strategies are the construction of a masculine trope, the creation of binary oppositions, the use of visual, lexical and symbolic representations in response to what is seen as the current concerns of the nation.

Constructing a Masculine Trope

Traditional Indian society privileged the manliness of the Brahman (the priest/scholar caste) with his cerebral asceticism over the violent and active Kshatriya (the warrior caste). However, with colonial ideals valorising hyper-masculinity and denigrating the English educated natives as devious and feeble, Indian nationalists tried to regain their self-esteem by constructing the ideal of the Kshatriya as the paradigm of “true Indianness” (Kulkarni, 2014: np). Krishnaswamy argues that the idea of Indian effeminateness was “a misreading and distorted recognition of something real in Indian culture” (295). Hindu mysticism posited man as an ideal female devotee contemplating the Divine, and this androgyny was interpreted according to Victorian norms as emasculation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the concept of Oriental effeminacy and consequent mental and moral inferiority became the norm, and Indian men sought to reshape themselves in the image of the superior imperialist who was robust, virile and martial. The credo of belligerent masculinity, therefore, arose as a

counter narrative to the colonial discourse that scorned the native as effete, inferior and passive.

Violent anti-colonial struggle derives from the “appropriation of the colonial rhetoric of emasculation, whereby the native needs to reclaim his power by reclaiming his manhood...” (Nandi 2012: 14), and one means of asserting manhood was by protecting his woman/nation. The hegemonic narrative of India propagated by the nationalists during the Freedom Movement was that of the nation as Divine Mother/Goddess. The national song “*Vande Mataram*” (Hail, Divine Mother) hypostatized India as Durga, the warrior Goddess, who defeats the demonic hordes that the gods were powerless against. Amongst the militant revolutionaries of the Indian Freedom movement, the symbol represented the Holy Land/ Mother, and the Freedom struggle, thus, became an exhortation to male chivalry to liberate the National Goddess whose “virtue and purity must be aggressively defended against alien men who are not sons of the soil” (Alter 114). The gendered ideology of the Freedom Struggle was driven by the sense of subordination and lack of agency of the colonized male who sought to reshape himself in the image of the imperial ideal of muscular manliness.

With the advent of Gandhian non-violence, which invested suffering, self-abasement and self-sacrifice with virtue, the warrior symbolism was elided and the feminine quality of passive resistance glorified. Both Gandhi and Tagore deplored the narrow motive forces of Western nationalism which inspired the “cult of patriotism” (Tagore 450) and called for universalism as a panacea for world ills. Gandhi’s nationalist politics, his veneration of self-control, spinning and *Satyagraha* (“soul force”) went against overt masculinity and undermined the philosophy of aggressive virility of the

revolutionary forces. His ideology – his emphasis on the therapeutic value of *ahimsa*, prayers and fasts – “lead to the construction of what might be called an androgynous politics” (Alter 50). Even during his lifetime, Gandhian ideals were derogated as unmanly by the Extremists including the revered cultural icon and philosopher, Aurobindo Ghose, who distanced himself from the nationalist movement, “Sri Aurobindo is neither an *impotent* moralist nor a *weak* pacifist...” (Ghose 22, emphasis added). According to Nandy (8), Gandhi strategically subverted the colonial cultural hierarchy of sexual identities which tended to place *purushatva* (the essence of masculinity) above both *naritva*



Figure 1. Bharat Mata – Mother India

(the essence of femininity) and *klibatva* (the essence of hermaphroditism). He did this in two ways. First, he “borrowed intact from... traditions of saintliness in India,” by putting androgyny above both *purushatva* and *naritva*. Furthermore:

Gandhi’s second ordering was offered specifically as a methodological justification of the anti-imperialist movement... *Naritva* > *Purushatva* > *Kapurushatva*. That is, the essence of femininity is superior to that of masculinity, which is in turn better than cowardice or... failure of masculinity... the two sets makes available the magical power of the feminine principle... to the man who defied his cowardice by owning to his feminine self (53).

After Independence, Mother India was glorified as the suffering peasant woman who maintains her integrity and honour in the face of terrible hardship as depicted in Mehboob Khan’s 1957 epic melodrama, *Mother India*, “an exemplar allegory of woman as nation” (Desai 3).

With globalization and the threat of economic neo-colonisation, the peril of Maoist insurgency, regional separatism and the rise of Right wing fundamentalism in the 1990s, Indian cinema moved away from the Mother India trope that depicted the nation as the suffering nurturer, to privilege the ideals of hyper-masculinity as laudable and desirable. There are three means by which a masculine nation is mediated to the audience – the employment of myth/archetype, conveyance of didactic messages of heroic self-sacrifice, and glorification of normative male values.

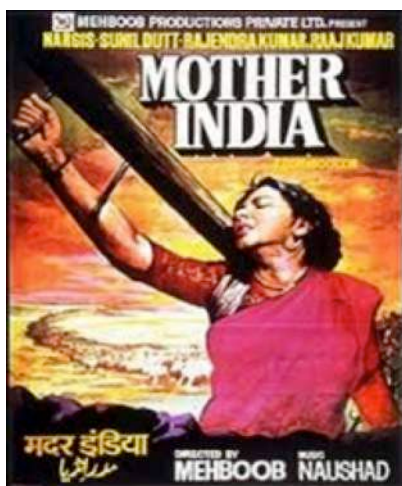


Figure 2. *Mother India* Film Poster

from the Gandhian concept of celibacy that sought to render sex and gender irrelevant in search of truth. In contrast, patriarchal politics postulated “a substantial, incarnate, *seminal* truth... something that only men can embody by virtue of who they are” (Alter 51, italics added). *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* presents the young fiancé of Bhagat Singh who seductively sings, “*Meri bindiya, meri kangana bulaye*” (“My bindi and bracelet beckon you”), to which he replies, “My path is rough; I cannot be one with you” (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). Milkha Singh tells Perizaad, his fellow athlete, that he is in a fight from which he cannot be distracted.

Bhaag Milkha Bhaag also introduces the Karna myth – the underdog who is technically superior being excluded because of jealousy. During Milkha Singh’s training, the background music echoes with mythical imagery: “Open the wheels of your chariot, make it the *Sudarshan chakra*.” In the *Mahabharata*, Karna was killed

while removing the wheels of the chariot; here the movie exhorts the hero to remove it fearlessly and make it the weapon Lord Vishnu employs to decimate his enemies (Milkha's competitors). Post-colonial nationalist texts subvert and invert the hierarchy that existed in colonial discourse between the superior masculinity of the colonizer and the barbarism of the native. The subject citizen has to powerfully reassert himself and prove himself against the dominant power.

Finally, the Ahalya myth is sounded in Mangal Pandey's acceptance of Heera, the prostitute, as his bride. He legitimises, like Rama, the fallen woman, an allusion that can be both symbolic of the rescue of Motherland from the clutches of the foreigner and significant in that Rama had by the 90s become a symbol of nationalist resurgence in the hands of the Right wing parties. Biopics of national heroes represent the man as proving his machismo by doing what is expected of him, such as protecting his women. Joseph Alter summarizes Partha Chatterjee views on gendered nationalism:

...the notion of an inner purity of tradition – imputed by colonized men onto the bodies of colonized women – was the product of an alien discourse of power that classified certain aspects of Hindu culture as inherently private and apolitical, thus producing what he calls “the new patriarchy” of modern liberalism (24).

In appropriating the Mother India symbol of Hindu tradition, nationalist discourse transforms the nation into the violated woman who has to be redeemed. “In Hindu discourse, women have been represented as Mother and Nurturer, yet her protectors have always been men” (Sethi 136). Significantly, the Goddess venerated in the national song “Vande Mataram” is Durga – the “domesticated” power of the Divine Female. While Kali is the powerful and destructive Goddess who tramples her *purusha* (man), Durga is the nurturant, transformed by the controlling power of man. The indigenous fund of myths and symbolic practices provides a link with the past and the nation is invoked by the employment of archetypes that resonates with the “collective unconscious.”



Figure 3. *Mahakali* – Kali stamping her *purusha* (man) (www.kalibhakti.com)



Figure 4. *Durga Mata* – Goddess Durga

Secondly, biopics put up national heroes as *exempla virtutis*, exhibiting public acts of national heroism that are worthy of being emulated. Kohn postulates that modern nationalism took three concepts from Old Testament mythology: “the idea of a chosen people, the emphasis on a common stock of memory of the past and of hopes for the future, and finally, national messianism” (cited in Brennan 59). A crucial epiphanic moment - evocative of the classic biopic trope of “character-shaping trauma” - is presented, when a moral choice is taken. Sardar, when he is moved by Gandhi’s speech and throws his coat into the fire, symbolically committing himself to India; Mangal Pandey, when he turns away from criticism of his country to devotion to its beliefs and challenges William Gordon, “We can win back our *mulk* (“country”), *izzat* (“honour, respect, dignity”) *sab kutch* (“everything”);” Milkha Singh, when he identifies himself with a cause narrated in terms of identity with the nation: “*Main India Banoonga*” (“I will become India”). The moment when the protagonist takes an oath and dedicates himself to the nation is a memory that informs the thematic concerns of the film. When Bhagat Singh picks up the blood-stained earth at Jallianwala Bagh, the nation replaces family as the site of sacrifice and devotion.

Suffering is presented as spectacle accompanied by hyperbolic statements of national-historical import which amounts to nationalist propaganda. In the words of Gautam Chakravarty, “...recovering a story of heroism and martyrdom is to give legitimacy to contemporary armed resistance” (2005: 53). Highlighting the repressive measures of colonial masters and glorifying extremist action was part of the process of nationalist mythography. V.D. Savarkar, the revolutionary freedom fighter, suspected of complicity in Gandhi’s assassination, titles Mangal Pandey “*shaheed*” (“martyr”) in his *The Indian War of Independence* (88).

In the biopics selected, the protagonists all show a scant regard for their own lives in the pursuit of their cause. This is seen in Bhagat Singh’s custodial torture during his fast, Milkha Singh’s wound during his first race and the first shot at Mangal Pandey through the noose readied for him. *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* presents the marginalized subaltern, Milkha Singh, who takes on the authority of the “colonial oppressors,” the reigning sports champion. The violence he endures is the suffering of those who transgress social/political boundaries. He runs barefoot and bleeding, against the remonstrance of his coach, to “become India.” Anderson’s idea of “purity through

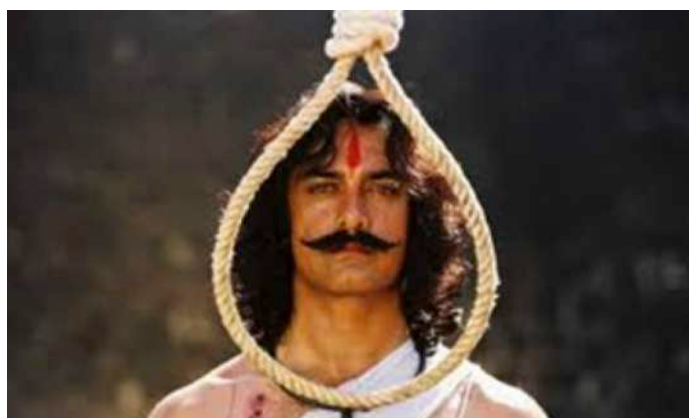


Figure 5. Mangal Pandey. *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*

fatality” – the willingness to die for a cause (145) – is akin to what nationalist writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee inscribed as the ideal of masculinity – capable of inflicting violence, enduring pain, and making the ultimate sacrifice.

The protagonists of the films all exemplify hegemonic masculinity – strong, rugged, competitive, physically and emotionally

tough. They are unafraid of violence and willing to fight to prove dominance. Mangal Pandey, Bhagat Singh and Milkha Singh are physically superb – their body types conform to the specific physiques popularized by Hollywood action heroes of the 80s – muscular, broad shouldered, massive biceps, perfect abs. The aged Sardar Patel, though not sinewy, reiterates the patriarchal ideology of manly ruthlessness. He is ready to fight, “sword will be met with sword,” and warns the Muslim League that if they create problems for the Government, then that Government’s Home Minister does not “wear bangles” (*Sardar*). The reluctance to be violent is seen as contemptible – Chandrashekhar Azad in *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* dismisses the non-violent protest of the Congress as the actions of a *napunsak* (“eunuch”). This ideology is reminiscent of Fanon’s imagery of castration which symbolized the emasculation of the native man, and his call to liberate nations through violent action. The spectacle of violence serves to agitate subjects and make them adopt a particular radical ideology. Blood is baptism into manhood and flows freely in third cinema.¹ “As both perpetrators and targets of violence, men’s bloody bodies frequently signify the cruelty of and damage wrought by civil and state violence. Blood becomes a new symbol of socio-political visibility...” (Desai 4). Bhagat Singh’s declaration, “shedding blood is no great deed, whether yours or anyone else’s,” and Milkha Singh’s rigorous training which culminates in blood flow, is the exemplification of a violent and virile Indian masculinity.

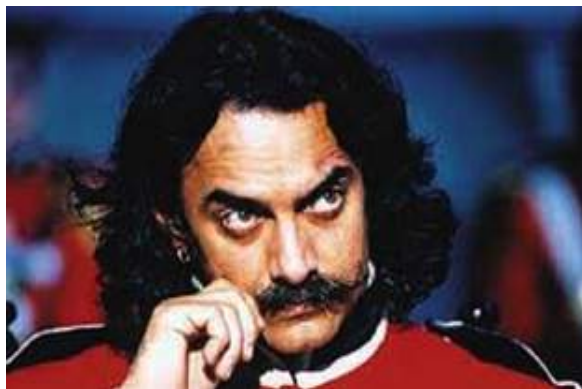


Figure 6. Mangal Pandey during his court martial (*Mangal Pandey*)

Heroes are strong erotic figures indulging in wrestling matches to the cheers of the watching male audience and drinking indigenous drinks (*bhang* or *lassi*). Masculinity is imbricated in the congruence of stamina, sports and spirits, through images connoting athleticism, appetite and brash insouciance. Songs and dances that evoke the nation include the *bangada* – the aggressively male Punjabi martial folk dance. Masculinity is performed in the recurring metaphor of twirling

moustaches – both Mangal Pandey and Bhagat Singh show their pride and defiance when taciturnly twirling their moustaches as they listen to the verdict in court. In India, popular representations of masculinity routinely employ the iconography of curled moustaches.

Hegemonic masculinity is evinced in lexical choices – “man of steel,” “lion in the lair,” “bullet from a gun,” “every vein of yours is an iron wire” etc. The masculine, athletic body is fetishized with close-up, low angle and arc shots that exaggerate the importance of the muscular physique, making it an object of desire. Writing on *Hey Ram*, Lalitha Gopalan notes, “...the muscular militant body in the film services the cause of the ideal male image in Hindu nationalism” (385).

¹ A term, loosely defined as a cinema that is in opposition to neo-colonialism and the capitalist system, originally coined by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema” (1969). The article begins with a reference to Frantz Fanon.

The three political biopics present women characters as taking part in resistance movements, but they are for most part nameless and faceless. In *Mangal Pandey*, the



Figure 7. Milkha Singh, training in the rain (*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*)

women, in spite of their pivotal roles as romantic interests, fade into the backdrop when the actual agitation begins. In spite of the innumerable political leaders introduced in *Sardar*, women are mostly shown serving tea or accompanying the male protagonists. The nation “becomes a masculinised space, the woman or the ‘other’ can enter that space according to the terms set forth by masculinity” (Nandi & Chatterjee 2012: 139). While the ideal man is aggressive, decisive and strong, women are “delicate as glass”

and “will break at a turn” (*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*). Traitors, examples of subservient masculinities, are abused in feminising terms “*nayi dulhan ki tarah sharmata hai*” (“behaving shyly like a bride”) (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). Similarly, the contrast between the recreational activities of the sinewy Punjabis, whose game is wrestling, and the lean Englishmen, who are pictured as playing the gentler game of cricket, has gendered overtones. The wrestler, whose tutelary deity is the celibate Hanuman, is “an aggressive Brahmachari” (Alter 99), whose diet – large quantities of almonds, ghee and milk is popularly associated with the production of semen. When challenging the cricket-playing Englishmen to a duel, the Indians rigorously training in the wrestling pit pick their opponents, “I will take on this one who looks like a girl” (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). Superior and inferior social agents are built into the social structure to consolidate the idea of hegemonic nationhood. The narrative “fixes” the significance of the visuals and semantics to show that the mainstream expression of national identity is overwhelmingly male.



Figure 8. Sardar Patel's sister serving tea to Nehru (*Sardar*)

Binary oppositions

A country that faces the problem of divisions along caste and religious lines requires texts and visual experiences to enable citizens to regard themselves as part of a distinctive nation. Cinema asserts the collective identity by both homogenizing cultural differences and by the process of “othering.” Potential ruptures are subsumed and a cohesive Indian/Hindu male ipseity imposed amongst groups that do not share a common social or political ideology.

To reflect hegemonic perceptions on what it means to be “Indian,” plurality and diversity are erased and culture standardized. Distinct religious communities, identified only by their clothes (fez caps, *tilaks*, turbans, *bindis*) are shown as celebrating Holi together or praying in the *dargah* (*Mangal Pandey*). It is a Muslim

who shouts, “Bhagat Singh *Amar Rahe*” (“Bhagat Singh is immortal”) and another who brings food for the Hindu boys, on whose behalf the latter beat up the English men. The national myth that India as a country did not know communal or regional squabbles or clashes before British rule is naturalized in films. The depiction of different communities, distinguished by the clothes they wear, ostensibly following the same ideals of devotion to the state is the common strategy of biopics. The communities are shown as living within specific boundaries but always typical of the nation. *Sardar* makes a fetish of presenting leaders from different areas and different communities in acting in unison and agreement on most issues. Amnesia is necessary for constructing a nation, and the memory of communal discord that is a threat to the nation’s fragile sense of unity is a taboo subject. This is similar to the radical right wing ideal of a monolithic India – the homogenous ideal of *Akhand Bharat* (“Undivided India”) that attempts to aggressively enforce a cultural uniformity on the pluralism of Indian ethnology.

Films also “construct imaginary bonds” so that “diverse and often antagonistic group of peoples are... invited to recognize themselves as a singular body with a common culture and to oppose themselves to other cultures and communities” (Higson 1995: 7). Nations are maintained by transforming cultural boundaries into political perimeters. By representing a mythical past, shared customs, and political and psychological solidarity, films attempt to assert an “‘authentic’ national identity” (Sethi 186).

Structural oppositions are created – between Indian and British, between Indian and Pakistani, between national integration and separatist tendencies to proclaim its “otherness” from other nationalities and identities. The others in political biopics are easily defined. In three films – *Sardar*, *Mangal Pandey*, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* – the main opponent is the imperialist. The British are one-sidedly portrayed as morally corrupt – the East India Company trades in opium and uses slave girls for sex; the British soldiers are drunk and lascivious as contrasted with the Spartan restraint of the Indians (*Mangal Pandey*). If the colonial discourse presented the English soldier as disciplined and civilized and the native as “sexually threatening to the white woman’s body” (Nandi & Chatterjee 13), nationalist films reverse the paradigm – Heera is molested by the drunken English soldier and the imperial army engage in mindless and barbaric violence. Englishmen are mostly portrayed as cruel and cowardly – attacking unarmed Indians viciously, fighting only when odds are overwhelmingly in their favour and retreating fearfully when challenged (*Mangal Pandey* and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). In *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, the injustice and callousness of the Englishman is displayed in the sign “Dogs and Indians not allowed” and in the words of the British official at the site of the Jallianwala Bagh, “Bloody Indians,” followed by the British flag that waves before his face. The self-indulgence of the English is contrasted with the gallant sacrifice of the Indian. Voice-over narration in *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* annotates the montage of Bhagat Singh’s fasting – “On one side the revolutionaries’ starvation, on the other side, the revelry and feasting of the British and the princes” (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). The concept of celibacy and superior masculinity is closely connected to the criticism of the libertine. Sin, predatory sexuality and savagery are the coefficients of Westernization.

Crowds and colour evoke the nation – the contrast is between the vibrant, lusty world of the Indians to the claustrophobic discipline of the English. *Mangal Pandey* shows the clamour and companionship in the Indian marketplace followed by the empty silence of the British cantonment. The marketplace – with robust men smoking, drinking, playing and celebrating – is a masculine public sphere. Women are visible only in the security of the native male. In *Sardar*, citizens move out (exteriority) to greet the title character, women open windows and come to apply *tilak* on him while they rush indoors in panic as the British official drives past.

Colonial narratives exoticized the East as feminine – irrational, ignorant and primitive. Biopics of national leaders become counter-narratives to the stereotype – the Orient is “high culture,” wise, progressive and masculine. “India is rich” (*Mangal Pandey*); “Neither my country is poor, nor illiterate. When your forefathers couldn’t speak, our children studied the *Ramayana* and the *Gita*,” “Your *Rani* wears the diamond looted from our Taj,” “What are you so arrogant about?...for using paper instead of water for cleaning?” (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*). Native inferiority is reversed through a kind of xenophobic chauvinism akin to the discourse of the militant nationalists.

The opposition extends to women: English women are mostly depicted as lazy and sexually promiscuous and the object of Indian male gaze while the Indian woman is maternal, moral and principled, even when a sex worker. Again, this is part of the rhetoric of “the inner purity of tradition” invoked by the Indian social reformers and nationalists where the native woman can function only as chaste wife or mother. Politically sympathetic English female characters in *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* do not problematize the premise because the differences that arise are cultural, emotional and psychological – not political.

In the biopics set in the post-colonial and globalized era, the “other” includes Pakistanis and supporters of Pakistan. Srivastava states that historians have long considered the history of Muslim rule to be, in part, responsible for the Hindu intelligentsia’s “self-image of effeteness” (Roselli) and the emasculation of India. The Muslim is recast in the post-colonial narrative in the mould of the colonized male – devious, promiscuous and childish.

Jinnah, in *Sardar*, is shrewd, cunning and duplicitous shown first in a three-piece suit, stubbing out a cigarette. According to Barthes, poses and gaze signify values and identities. Visual semiology shows how the film presents Jinnah – he does not look at the viewer, and so there is no response from the audience. When he does, the camera is placed at a higher angle. At meetings, he glances, sideways and down, which is the stereotyped image of a woman’s look – with the negative connotations of defensiveness and duplicity. Gandhi comments on the founder of Pakistan, “Jinnah talks like a child – give me the moon – he will not take anything but the moon” – a lexical choice which connotes immaturity and unreasonableness. Nandy argues how colonialism drew a parallel between primitivism and childhood (15). Like the childish Indian of the imperial imagination, Jinnah is “ignorant... savage, unpredictably violent... and, thus, incorrigible” (Nandy 16). Jinnah’s threats of *jihad* is followed by shots of burnt streets, dead bodies, paper reports of “thousands feared dead in Calcutta” and Patel’s statement, “The House on one side wants to govern; on the other side, the League wants to destroy the nation” (*Sardar*).

Likewise, the contrast is stark between the ascetic lifestyle and mature restraint of the widowed and celibate Sardar on the one hand, and the flamboyance and callow belligerence of the polygamous Rizwi of Hyderabad who declares that 40 *lakh* Hindus will die before Hyderabad becomes part of India, on the other. A threat that the Sardar firmly nullifies, pointing out that the Indian army would not stand by and watch. It is the adult male that represses the childish rebellion “ensuring internal peace and providing tough administration and rule of law” (Nandy 16). The concept of *brahmacharya*, as indicated earlier in this paper, signifies “stature and vitality... energy, ardour, intellect, competence, capacity for work, wisdom, success and godliness...” (Sivananda 1984: 10-11). The coordinates of maturity, morality and intrepidity is reserved for the Indian male.

One of the means of celebrating the nation is by evoking differences as the binary opposites in terms of characters or themes – for “us” the integrity and moral virtue of people, the valour of men and the chastity of women; for “them” deceit, cowardice, lasciviousness and retribution.

Visual, Lexical and Symbolic Representations

The process of historical reconstruction of key events provides a spatiotemporal horizon for the audience to represent a nation’s past to itself. *Sardar*’s frame narrative consists of news reels of the Quit India Movement, clippings from newspapers, television footage of the swearing in of the last Viceroy. The horrors of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre are played out through the memory of young Bhagat Singh. These significant moments are mapped out visually and temporally which creates a picture of a nation moving through “empty homogeneous time” (Anderson).

Space is a necessary correlative of time, and biopics give an illusion of visualizing national territory with images of rivers, mountains and hamlets evoking the idea of a unique geographic entity. Landscape becomes important, and the emerging consciousness of the nation can be seen in the attention paid to spatial details of a



Figure 9. Milkha Singh, training (*Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*)

visually infinite panorama. In *Sardar*, the terrain of India is shown in Patel’s travels: the Arabian Sea which opens the narrative, the flatlands, grasslands etc.; the Simla conference begins with a pan shot of Nehru showing Edwina Mountbatten the mountains. If *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* speaks of a lower level army officer who goes on to become a celebrated athlete, the film’s setting moves from

the outskirts of Delhi’s refugee camps, to small towns, to the vast and harsh terrain of the mountains where he trains. The vastness of India is foregrounded by the practice of naming – Travancore, Cochin, Bhopal, Hyderabad, Chenab as voice-over narration and assertions such as “*Is desh ko ek hi hona hai*” (“This country has to become one”)

and in press-clippings “Tribal Raids in Kashmir,” “Greater Rajasthan is Born” (*Sardar*). The physical representation of India – rivers, mountains, states – is more rugged and extensive than beautiful; national space is depicted in the permanent aspects of topography, not the ephemeral facets of nature. In *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, the Taj Mahal is visible from the rooms where the Lahore conspiracy is hatched. Strikingly, the symbol of an Emperor’s tribute to the woman he loved forms the backdrop, as a group of men volunteer the ultimate renunciation for their Motherland. Depictions of nature and culture cohere to the defined notions of masculinity.

The emerging consciousness of the nation is seen in the verisimilitude of the spatial details: period accessories and idealized depictions of dress. Significantly, character development is marked by a change in ensemble: Mangal Pandey is seen in the uniform of a British sepoy but he is hanged wearing his attire of a Brahmin. The insignia of foreign rule, tyranny and native subordination is discarded in a



Figure 10. *Pagadi sambhal* (“Protect your turban”) bhangra dance (*The Legend of Bhagat Singh*)



Figure 11. Mangal Pandey in uniform (*Mangal Pandey: The Rising*)



Figure 12. Mangal Pandey lead to execution, his bhrmanic sacred thread prominent (*Mangal Pandey: The Rising*).

gesture of cultural nationalism. The contrast between the Indian contingent and Jinnah in *Sardar* is also one of clothes – the one in the sartorial mode of the Oriental, the other following the English with his three-piece suits. Milkha Singh “becomes India” when he wears the uniform of the Indian track team. Similarly, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* and *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* exhort “*Pagadi sambhal*” (“Look after your turban”) and “*Pagadi baandh*” (“Tie your turban”) to signify self-respect as the turban is seen as a symbol of male prestige.

In biopics, traditions are also appropriated and touristic images offered to constitute a national identity. The colourful pageantry and pictorial tableaux of cultural stereotypes is metonymic in affirming a national culture and identity. Minstrels singing and elephants trumpeting with chants of *mangal* which means “auspicious” forms the frame narrative of *Mangal Pandey*. Religion is ubiquitous: demure

women – their heads modestly covered – circumambulating the *tulsi* (“sacred basil”); *sadhus* (“holy men”); conches, temple bells and rituals; along with bazaars, fairs, dances, acrobatics, shots of bullock carts, cock fighting, snake-charmers, fire dancers, wheat fields, Ramlila celebrations, ethnic drinks (*bhaang* and *lassi*) drunk from earthen cups and the constantly reiterated Holi celebrations. Images, visual and metaphoric, have meaning potential and the film uses “established *connotators*” to signify undertones of hardiness and vitality to the audience (Machin & Mayr 2012: 51). The stereotyped images that connote a national specificity are all raw, rustic, earthy.

Individual signs and visual paraphernalia like flags and maps also serve to reaffirm the nation by presenting its geographic and emotional contours. Within five minutes of *Sardar*’s opening we see the map of India on the news montage with the flag superimposed on it and a narrative on cross-border terrorist attacks from Pakistan. The presentation of a nation under attack and the iconic photo – a scene with Mother India in chains superimposed onto the map of India – is evocative of Nielsen’s study on “patriotic masculinities.” The picture is an alteration of an original photograph of Gandhi, Nehru and Patel under a map of India and showing a manacled peasant whose body forms the contours of the nation. Nielsen’s research argued that American “wartime propaganda depended on the ‘images of threatened motherhood, dependent or ravaged womanhood in its appeal to male citizens to enlist, fight, labour... as acts of male chivalry’” (Satpati and Samiparna, 2012: 131). The exploited, enslaved nation is reclaimed by the man. In *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, the climatic race has foreign flags in the backdrop, the last lap shows the Pakistani flag; the enormous Indian flag, a potent cultural symbol, in rich colour and extra deep perspective, is articulated visually as Milkha, who becomes the flag, crosses the finish line in the first place. The set of symbols which carry wider emotional meanings serve as a system of reference for Indians to think of themselves as members of a victorious group.



Figure 14. *Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Vallabhai Patel 1946. In the background, a peasant’s shackled feet are seen.*

Source: Thirty Old and Rare Photos of Pandit Jawaharlal, Nehru Life Archive.

Great men biopics are the prism through which most citizens understand history. The past is recreated through cultures and nations by the re-enactment of historical lives. The memory aesthetics of the biopic that (re)presents a unique life in a specific moment in history promote a sense of shared past and common culture. The

construction of memory and the restructuring of history – elimination of problematic aspects and accentuation of “desirable” behaviours in a biopic – is a result of a value-laden selection and are reflective of the *zeitgeist* of the age in which it is produced. An inherent agenda of the biopic is to delve into national cultural discourses to reintegrate hybrid identities into a national consciousness. Nation-building as a thematic concern is predicated by foregrounding the contrast between a rich past and an inferior present. In a country that is riven by fissiparous tendencies and sub-nationalities, biopics link the past lives to present concerns to emphasise unity and sovereignty. A nation that has been perceived as “soft,” “non-violent” is re-presented as “manly” and assertive. The biopic foregrounds the hero but celebrates and consecrates the nation.

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Sandhya Suri's *I for India*: Documenting Transnational Subjectivity

Robert Cross

Abstract

Documentary filmmaker Sandhya Suri's *I for India* (2005) is a compilation film that presents and interprets her father's experience of migrating from India to the UK in the 1960s and settling fully in Britain. It explores through her father's own amateur filmmaking the process and nature of transnational identity formation. Over a 40-year period her father, Dr. Yash Pal Suri, recorded home movies and audio letters, which he sent to his family in India in order to report about his new life. In 1982, after 16 years residence in the UK, Dr. Suri took his family back to India, only to discover that such a return – or *remigration* – was impossible. Unable to acculturate themselves back into Indian life, Dr. Suri and his family migrated for a second time to their British “home.” After her unexpected discovery of her father's audiotapes, in which he had poured out his feelings of alienation and despair, Sandhya created a documentary from this “found archive.” This paper examines how Sandhya's film documented and dissected the experience of transnational migration and added further interpretative layers to her father's filming project. I follow Stuart Hall (1990) in viewing diasporic or transnational identity as “a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). I discuss how Sandhya used a variety of filmic and audio discourses in *I for India* to document and comment with self-reflexivity upon this ever-shifting process of identity formation.

Keywords: *I for India*, Sandhya Suri, transnational, voice, home movie, documentary, migrant, hybridity, assimilation

A migrant is a person who has crossed a border. S/he seeks a place to make “a new beginning,” to start again, to make a better life. The newly arrived have to learn the new language and culture. They have to cope not only with the pain of separation but often with the resentments of a hostile population.

Madan Sarup, *Home and Identity*

We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. As a result we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools.

Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands”

Introduction

This paper discusses director Sandhya Suri’s 2005 award-winning documentary *I for India* in the light of transnational subjectivity and identity formation through film and audio media.¹ Sandhya made the film following her unexpected discovery of a trove of audiotapes in her parents’ home. The documentary, compiled from a variety of filmic, photographic, musical and audio media, spans four decades in the life of Sandhya’s physician father, Dr. Yash Pal Suri. It covers unevenly the period from his migration to Britain from the Punjab with his wife Susheel and young daughter Neeraj in 1966 up to the film’s completion in 2005. The documentary explores intimately the shifting nature of transnational subjectivity in response to the experiences of migration and repatriation, alienation and acculturation, and sheds light on how the identity of the exile is forged by the competing pressures of belonging and displacement, racism and assimilation, memory and disillusionment. The primary theme throughout is Dr. Suri’s shifting responses to “acculturative stress” (Berry), not only in Britain but also in India.

In this paper I look at how firstly Dr. Suri himself and then subsequently Sandhya documented and represented his life between two cultures and languages, particularly in terms of the key stages of acculturation recognized by cross-cultural psychologists, namely integration, assimilation, marginalization and separation (Ward & Rana-Deuba). I approach Sandhya’s multi-perspective documentary not only as a biographical record of the crucial middle decades of her father’s life but also as a self-reflexive exploration of (auto)biographical filmmaking itself and of how the acts of

¹ In 2005, *I for India* garnered Best Documentary Awards at the Karachi International Film Festival and the Asian Festival of First Films and won the Silver Award at the Film South Asia Festival; in 2006, it won Best Documentary Awards at the Zagreb Film Festival and the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles and was part of the official selection at the Sundance Film Festival and Visions du Réel international documentary film festival.

filming a life and taping a voice do not merely record but actually construct and project subjectivity and identity, particularly in the context of the experience of transnational migration. My interest, in other words, is in how audio-visual media not only reflect but also generate and reify identity.

To begin with, it is necessary to consider Dr. Suri's migration to Britain and how this transformative experience drew him into amateur filmmaking in the first place. Dr. Suri, who had graduated from medical college in 1958, migrated at the age of 33 from India to the UK. As he describes it in retrospective voice-over in the documentary, "[Hindi]² At that time, many young doctors like me were leaving the country in droves for better opportunities overseas. They called it the brain drain of India."³ Like many of these young ambitious doctors, he came to Britain in order to gain valuable professional experience and upgrade his qualifications by working in the National Health Service. Although he seems to have had no intention of staying long-term, he ended up settling permanently in Britain. The initial impetus behind his self-filming and self-recording project was the simple practical matter of staying in touch with his parents and siblings back in the Punjab during this sojourn in the UK. Finding international telecommunications too unreliable and letter-writing, as an overworked junior doctor, too time-consuming, his solution was to buy two Super 8 cameras, two projectors and two reel-to-reel tape recorders. One set of equipment he kept for himself and the other he sent to his relatives in India, enabling the separated families to exchange films and audiotapes. Dr. Suri's resourcefulness here in establishing a kind of "proto-webcam" link confirms Vertovec's observation that "migrants are often at the cutting edge of technology adoption" (2009: 60) in their need to maintain communication with far flung relatives. Indeed, Super 8 film, which of course is a silent medium, was launched by Eastman Kodak in 1965, the year prior to Dr. Suri's arrival in Britain. This shows that his chosen method of communicating with his Indian family employed the very latest technology and that he himself, like many other aspiring filmmakers in the 1960s, was open to innovative methods of filming.⁴ As we shall see below, however, the lack of real-time connection, in contrast to webcam, would actually lead to misunderstandings and the creation of unreasonable expectations, principally in terms of what both families had hoped for with Dr. Suri's return to India.

Structurally and thematically, the film falls into three stages, or acts, which are uneven not only in terms of length but also in period covered and of media used. The first act, which takes up the bulk of the film, covers the Suri family's initial 16-year stay in Britain. This section mostly comprises excerpts from Super 8 home movies and audiotapes exchanged as "cine-letters" and "audio-letters" between Dr. Suri and his family in India. The second act covers the Suri family's unhappy nine-month return to India in 1982 and subsequent remigration to Britain. Dr. Suri's repatriation

² In this text all references to Hindi speech in *I for India* quote the corresponding English subtitles.

³ On the history and implications of the recruitment of Indian doctors to the UK see Robinson and Carey (2000) and Kangasniemi, Winters & Commander (2007).

⁴ Kodak's "Super 8 mm Film History" page states: "In April of 1965, this revolutionary new format was introduced, and... many of today's great cinematographers and directors began their careers decades ago, at the counter of their local photo shop, buying a cartridge of Super 8 film." motion.kodak.com/motion/Products/Production/Spotlight_on_Super_8/Super_8mm_History/index.htm Retrieved 2013/11/10.

obviated the need to continue the exchange of movies and tapes, and so none were made during this time. The footage depicting this period in *I for India* is therefore a reconstruction shot two decades later by Sandhya in 16 mm. The main point of this section was to document – or rather re-enact – how Dr. Suri’s much longed-for return to his home country resulted in failure. Dr. Suri himself is absent in this section; the troubled and disappointing experience of repatriation is recounted in on-camera interviews conducted in English by Sandhya with her mother and two elder sisters. Sandhya’s camera roves around various locations in Meerut such as her father’s deserted clinic and her grandfather’s house, where the Suri family stayed, in order to convey the background to the family’s attempt to resettle. The third act covers the period of the Suri family’s re-establishment of their lives back in Britain. The section begins with Super 8 footage, presumably filmed by Dr. Suri’s brother, of the Suri family’s departure from Meerut in 1983; the bulk of this final act, however, comprises footage, shot by Sandhya in Digi-beta, of interviews with her parents and sisters, interspersed with Super 8 flashbacks, in which they consider aspects of their oscillating transnational life between India and Britain. This section closes with indications of the future direction the family will take from the “now” of the documentary. Real-time footage of eldest daughter Neeraj’s interracial marriage and of middle daughter Vanita’s departure at an airport for a new life in Australia shows that the Suri family’s bicultural and multi-locational life will continue in the pattern set by Dr. Suri in 1966.

Although Dr. Suri’s archive of home movies and audio-letters convey a good deal of basic information about his life, it is Sandhya’s directorial strategies, particularly her selection and juxtaposition of media, that heighten or reinscribe the range of meanings that can be read from her father’s experience. Furthermore, Sandhya’s documentary project, whilst focusing on her father’s experiences, also becomes a process of *self-discovery* as she excavates her family’s past and provenance and seeks for answers surrounding her own cultural identity. In this sense, Erik Barnouw’s observation about documentary filmmakers is certainly applicable to Sandhya and her use of her father’s audiovisual archive:

True documentarists have a passion for what they find in images and sounds –which always seems to them more meaningful than anything they can invent ... *It is in selecting and arranging their findings that they express themselves; these choices are, in effect, their main comments* (348; emphasis added).

In this sense *I for India* can also be seen as an autobiographical quest on the part of Sandhya, an act of what Michael Renov (1999) has aptly termed “domestic ethnography.”

Dr. Suri’s experience of migrating from India to the UK made him a transnational, which is to say an “individual whose sense of identity crosses multiple national borders” (Ramji 2006a: 646). The transnational, Stuart Hall has argued, “must learn to inhabit two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to transcend and negotiate between them” (310). Hasmita Ramji, who has studied the return to India from the UK of first-generation Gujarati Hindus, writes that:

[T]ransnationalism as a concept and area of interest has grown out of

the recognition that migrants do not necessarily substitute old homes for new in a straightforward transfer, but often create active social fields between the two.” (Ramji 2006b: 705)

Following this idea we see that Dr. Suri’s transnational subjectivity, as *I for India* demonstrates, has not emerged from him relinquishing his “Indianness” and embracing a new “Britishness” (essentialist concepts that in any case have no substantiality), but has been created from an existence lived and imagined, struggled for and negotiated, between the two cultures and societies. A key aspect in the evolution of Dr. Suri’s transnational subjectivity, and one that Sandhya excavates in *I for India*, concerns her father’s use of *voice* – both in the sense of verbal enunciation and of agency – in the audio-letters.

Voice and agency differentiate the *transnational* from the *migrant*, two terms that it is important to define here. Indeed, although both share superficial similarities in their exiled and deracinated status, there is a crucial social and economic difference between the migrant and the transnational. In the context of South Asian migration, most people who came from the former colonies to work and live in Britain in the decades following the war were *migrants* in the sense that they lacked skills and education, belonged to the working class, spoke only their mother language, and migrated out of economic necessity. They took low-paying unskilled jobs and saw themselves as belonging to a diasporic community that furnished their needs and structured their lives. The *transnationals* who came to Britain, by contrast, constituted a social elite made up of multilingual, highly educated and skilled professionals such as doctors and engineers who migrated to Britain through choice rather than necessity. They were able to exercise considerable agency in negotiating their places of residence and even their nationalities, and gained the respect of the host society.⁵ In this context, Bryceson and Vuorela make the point in their study “Transnational Families in the Twenty-first Century” that

[t]here are some transnational families who consciously try to avoid people of similar cultural background to themselves when settling in a new place. This is common amongst the elites who feel they have more in common with people of similar income levels... and may deliberately avoid networking with their fellow countrymen for fear of becoming ghettoized expatriates. (21)

Dr. Suri and his family, as we shall see, belong in this transnational category. In the sections that follow, I discuss different issues raised by the documentary – namely, racial hostility, assimilation, voice and agency, repatriation, and Sandhya’s directorial intervention – in order to analyse how the film has not only documented but also constructed the transnational subjectivity of its principal subject.

⁵ See Brah (1996), Cunningham & Sinclair (2000), Bryceson & Vuorela (2002), and Goulbourne et al. (2010).

Racism and Assimilation

Sandhya devotes a considerable amount of film time to conveying, through the inclusion of excerpts from British TV current affairs programmes of the 1960s and 1970s, some idea of the uncertainty and hostility that greeted new arrivals from the Indian subcontinent. These excerpts, all betraying racist tendencies in varying degrees, effectively establish how “official” media – represented here by the BBC – positioned South Asian immigrants *en masse* as, at best, uneducated job-snatchers, and, at worst, unwanted aliens who were perceived as a threat to the culture of Britain. This compilation of clips enables Sandhya to construct a filmic patchwork tapestry of the “hegemonic cultural memory” (Berghahn 86) of the host society that serves as a backdrop to the sometimes assimilatory and sometimes separatist discourse of her father’s audiotapes. Although *I for India* is not an overtly political film, the inclusion of these clips constitutes Sandhya’s attempt to comment on the broader implications of mainstream British society’s wary response to South Asian immigration during those years and on how this may have affected the process of her father’s acculturation.

The first excerpt is taken from *Make Yourself at Home*, a BBC series presented in Hindustani and English that was first broadcast in 1965 with the purpose, evident in the title, of helping newly arrived immigrants to adapt to British life and culture. Yet this benign intention is problematized by the headmasterly tone and manner of the presenter – “toe-curlingly condescending,” in the words of one commentator (Bradshaw) – as he portentously lectures his audience on the correct method of manipulating a light switch (see Figure 1). His patronizing approach exemplifies what Bhatia and Ram refer to in their study of South Asian diasporic experience in Britain as the “omniscient English eye” constructing the colonial other as “primitive and savage” (142). Sandhya’s artful editing, however, inverts this master-subaltern relationship and suggests that the real ignorance lies with the host society. “If I press the switch on the wall,” the presenter announces, “the light will come on.” Amusingly, the opposite happens: the screen immediately turns black and the title of the film appears, thereby proclaiming one of the implied meanings of the words “I for India,” namely that “I,” as a British Asian filmmaker, am using my film to subvert the former colonial power’s othering of my family’s Indian identity and heritage.



Figure 1. “This is a switch”: helping South Asian immigrants to understand challenging technology in *Make Yourself at Home* (BBC, 1969).

The next clip, from *The Dark Million* (BBC, 1966), signals a shift away from paternal “helpfulness” towards suspicion, and reflects the growing hostility towards the new arrivals as immigration steadily increased to a peak in 1968, the year in which Parliament enacted the restrictive Commonwealth Immigrants Act (Hansen) and in which the Conservative MP Enoch Powell delivered his notorious “Rivers of Blood”

speech that warned of the perils of open-door immigration. In less dramatic language than that employed by the Cambridge-educated classicist Powell, the narrator of *The Dark Million* seeks to pin down the “non-Britishness” of these exotic newcomers. He reports drily that:

[t]oday there are about a million coloured people living in Britain. That’s about one in fifty of the population. The immigrants have often established little islands of their own culture. In Smethwick the Sikhs have their own shops with their own special foodstuffs. They have their own cinema where they can go to see Indian films. They speak to each other in their own language. They create an atmosphere of foreignness. Very different from the sort of atmosphere that British people are used to.

The racialising language employed here – “coloured people,” “little islands of their own culture,” “atmosphere of foreignness,” and so on – unmistakably positions South Asian immigrants as non-assimilated and *other*. Sandhya is suggesting here that the Suri family, which started out in 1966 by living not far from Smethwick in the Midlands, would have been positioned in a similar fashion. This seems unlikely, however, since Dr. Suri, as a highly skilled and elite transnational, did not really see himself as belonging to any South Asian diasporic community. Unlike the working-class migrants who formed distinct and separate communities (“little islands of their own culture”), Dr. Suri, as I will show in the next section, took great pains to assimilate and integrate himself and his family into mainstream British society.



Figure 2. South Asian immigration represented as a dark invasion on *Immigration – The End of the Line* (BBC, 1979).

The racist tone of *The Dark Million* becomes more explicit in a 1978 World in Action report, featuring an interview with Margaret Thatcher in which she makes her infamous assertion, echoing Powell and his “Rivers,” that people in Britain – obviously the indigenous majority – are afraid that this country might be rather “swamped by people with a different culture.” She goes on with ominous certainty to state that “[p]eople are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.” The implication here is that hostility

to immigrants is not only understandable and to be expected but also, since she was elected Prime Minister soon after this, almost *officially sanctioned*. The scaremongering continues in another clip from a programme entitled *Immigration – The End of the Line*. (BBC, 1979). Footage of a National Front march is followed by presenter David Jessel announcing that the Government is making immigration control a priority in order to persuade the country that “a clear end is in sight to the line of people, *most of them coloured* [my emphasis], who can claim the right to come

and settle here.” Jessel delivers these words in front of a graphic display that depicts the black migrants as an arrowhead-shaped invasion force threatening Britain (see Figure 2).⁶

These broadcasts approached the issue of immigration in general terms, treating the South Asian immigrant minority as a monolithic entity and making no distinction as to religion, nationality or employment. Sandhya included a clip from another current affairs programme entitled *The Immigrant Doctors* (BBC, 1974) to shed more focused light on the her father’s experience as a participant in the medical brain drain. In this excerpt the presenter explains that:

[A]lready there are 9,000 immigrant doctors working in our health service. That means a third of all our hospital doctors qualified overseas. And in the present crisis, with many British-trained doctors now threatening to leave the health service, their number could increase still more. Some will settle in this country. Most will return home, but often after a longer stay than originally intended.

The implication here seems to be that it was considered acceptable for “immigrant doctors” to come to Britain to assist the NHS as long as they did not outstay their welcome by remaining in the country long-term. The clip continues with a British Medical Association spokesman adding patronizingly, “They [the immigrant doctors] come in the first place to get *a proper training*, but I’m not at all sure that that is what they get. They do provide for the NHS *a ready supply of cheap labour*” [my emphasis]. Once again, as in the case of the *Dark Million* report, the effect of the language used here on a BBC programme is to position the South Asian doctors as an unwelcome, under-qualified but regrettably necessary alien presence. With her inclusion of these jarring excerpts, Sandhya is evidently stressing the point that her father, who as a locum was dispatched to hospitals all over the Midlands, would have been positioned in general as one of the “dark million” and in particular as an under-trained and low-cost stand-in for a “properly” qualified White doctor. Thus we can see that even a highly educated and professional transnational like Dr. Suri was not entirely exempt in a general sense from the racist and othering attitudes of British society.

The unwelcoming racist climate indicated by the TV clips determined a great deal about the direction of Dr. Suri’s evolving transnational subjectivity. It led him towards integration and assimilation and, as a natural consequence, away from involvement and identification with the wider South Asian diaspora. Put simply, he wanted to convince himself and those around him that he had joined mainstream British society. Thus, far from associating with compatriots in a ghettoized South Asian community, like the Sikh migrants of Smethwick, the transnational Dr. Suri made extraordinary efforts to integrate himself into White Britain. In an interview I conducted with Sandhya, she informed me that the South Asians in her parents’ social network were primarily other doctors and their spouses and that the language they

⁶ It is amusing to speculate in passing whether the producers of *End of the Line* took the opening animated sequence of the popular BBC comedy series *Dad’s Army* (broadcast between 1968 and 1975), in which swastika-headed arrows threaten the British Isles with imminent invasion by the Nazis, as their model for this disturbing and simplistic image.

used at their social gatherings was English. These doctors came from diverse regions of the Indian subcontinent, so it was only natural that English should have been used as a *lingua franca* among them; nevertheless, the effect of using English even with fellow Indians would have been to further Anglicize these assimilating transnationals. Dr. Suri's home movie filming project was both the expression of and driving force behind his assimilation process. The home movies proclaimed that Dr. Suri's belief or wish was that he belonged to British society. His recording of his and his family's efforts towards integration reinforced and reified that acculturative process. Dr. Suri's efforts at assimilation included fully adopting Westernized dress; using English, even with his children at home (the young Neeraj speaks with an unmistakable Middlesbrough accent); sending his daughters to local schools; and immersing himself in such typical native leisure activities as visiting the seaside (see Figure 3), cultivating roses, and chatting with neighbours about the weather over the garden fence.

An additional aspect of Dr. Suri's integration was that he interested himself warmly in the new culture around him. He turned the gaze of his Super 8 camera on Britain and created short films in which he enthusiastically showed aspects of British life and explained the odd ways of British people to his family back in India. He documented his new life, showing train journeys, the interior of the family's new home, Neeraj playing in the snow, and so on. He faithfully recorded family events as "a concatenation of ritual highlights" (van Dijck 27), and Sandhya weaves numerous Super 8 clips of family outings, birthday parties, and hospital social functions into the first act of the documentary. Dr. Suri invested some considerable time and effort in making the silent Super 8 movies more interesting by adding musical soundtracks, voice-overs and jokey title cards, all of which strongly suggests that, during the first decade at least, life in Britain was an enjoyable and positive experience for him.



Figure 3. Signs of assimilation: Dr. Suri and Neeraj in Western dress by the seaside.

A graver aspect of the filmmaking project also indicates that Dr. Suri countered the racist tendencies lurking in some corners of British mainstream society by presenting his family life as *normal*, as no different from the model families that were filling the TV screens at that time. José van Dijck writes that:

[C]apturing one's own family in the 1950s and 1960s meant to imitate the idealized family as shown on TV. The possession of the 8 mm [as in the case of Dr. Suri] in itself signalled the newly acquired material wealth that was prominently shown off both in television shown off both in television series and the home movies of these decades. (27)

The process of assimilation was certainly helped by Dr. Suri's position as a physician. Although they are not heard in the documentary, it is relevant to consider the words of Enoch Powell, who haunted the debate about immigration in the late-1960s, and whose inflammatory opinions would have been very familiar to Dr. Suri. In his "Rivers" speech, Powell declared that his primary concern was with those immigrants who planned to *settle* in Britain:

I stress the words "for settlement." This has nothing to do with the entry of Commonwealth citizens, any more than of aliens, into this country, for the purposes of study or of improving their qualifications, like (for instance) the Commonwealth doctors who, to the advantage of their own countries, have enabled our hospital service to be expanded faster than would otherwise have been possible. *They are not, and never have been, immigrants* [my emphasis].⁷

Thus Powell accorded doctors coming from the former colonies special status and respect, which undoubtedly encouraged someone in Dr. Suri's position to feel more welcome in Britain than the proletarian migrants in the wider South Asian diaspora. This distinction, I suggest, encouraged him to distance himself from his "immigrant" compatriots and redouble his own efforts at assimilation into middle-class British life.

Professionally, Dr. Suri's good work in the NHS enabled him to climb up from locum to specialist and achieve a position of high status and respectability. This success resulted in his decision to stay on longer than planned in Britain. In one audio-letter to his father, his discomfort at sharing this unwelcome news is clear in his stiff alternation between Hindi and English, as he declares that:

[*Hindi*] It's been a long time since I've been amongst you all. A very long time since I left my home. You have considered the matter, so have we. [*English*] Now what is the future for us? [*Hindi*] I'm being offered a senior position as consultant physician here. [*English*] Should I accept it or not? You know, I didn't qualify yesterday. I'm not that young. If I do not succeed as a specialist back at home [in India], then probably I'll be much more unhappy, so it was after quite careful consideration that we decided that we'll stay on a bit longer.

At this point in the early 1970s, it is evident that Dr. Suri had progressed quite some distance along the path of integration into British society, and that his transnational identity was becoming increasingly shaped by the culture of the host country. As a consequence, "India" recedes somewhat from the family life. A poignant moment that captures this development is when we hear Vanita, as an infant probably aged around four or five, saying with a broad northern English accent, "Dear Grandmother, I do not remember you but I know that your complexion is fair and that you have rosy cheeks. I hope you are all well in India."

⁷ For the full text of Powell's speech see www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html. Retrieved on 15 Feb 2014.

It is safe to conclude that the great effort that Dr. Suri had invested in assimilating himself had built up expectations on his part that he and his family would be fully and equitably accepted into mainstream British society. Judging from what is shown in *I for India*, his integration proceeded more or less smoothly until around 1980, when his attitude towards Britain and its indigenous population appeared to reach a turning point. This change is revealed in an April 1980 audio-letter in which he ventilates his growing frustration:

[*Hindi*] I'm fed up . . . [*English*] sick and tired . . . of people not addressing me by my family name. [*Hindi*] They can't manage to pronounce "Suri." Some idiot will call me Fury, some Dury. [*English*] Even they don't ask for the spelling. ... [*Hindi*] And if we mispronounce their names, [*English*] then we'll be immediately corrected. [*Hindi*] Tell me, what can I do about this? Sometimes I think, what's the use of bothering with these people.

It is significant here that Dr. Suri separates himself from the White British with his use of "we," "they," and "these people." His frustration is to some degree understandable. As a senior doctor, he had certainly become accustomed to being accorded respect and perhaps even deference. The mispronunciation of his name could have been taken as a sign of disrespect, but this would presumably have depended upon the intent of the speaker. Aside from this, any racism that Dr. Suri suffered during these years seems to have taken a rather mild form, since there is no indication in Sandhya's film that he suffered from any act or threat of physical abuse or violence. The only example of verbal abuse he mentions is occasionally being addressed as a "Paki." Undoubtedly, his position in society as a respected medical practitioner served to protect and insulate him from the kind of racist violence that was and still is a regular part of daily life in the migrant communities of Tower Hamlets, Bradford or Leeds. The key point here is, I believe, that his considerable success both in terms of his professional advancement and of his integration into British middle-class society had created within him *expectations* of complete acceptance. Thus the mispronunciation of his name, trivial enough in itself, was a sobering reminder of his continuing status as an outsider – a slap in the face. Consequently, Dr. Suri entered a phase of separation in the process of his acculturation that would point him back towards India or at least towards the "India" he imagined. The audio-letters that he sent back to his family in Meerut during this period attest to his sense of frustration and alienation.

Audio-letters and Voice

In *The Myth of Return*, his study of Pakistani immigrants in Britain, Muhammad Anwar poses a simple question that goes to the heart of grasping the processes and travails of acculturation: "Even if a migrant is objectively assimilated," he asks, "what about his subjective identity?" (Anwar 9). Objectively, as we have seen, Dr. Suri had gone a long way towards successfully integrating himself into mainstream British life. Subjectively, however, after a decade in the UK, he began to see himself more and more as a *sojourner* rather than a settler. In a 1976 audio-letter, six years before repatriating to India, he tells his father:

[*English*] Respected Father, an important change is taking place in my life. An establishment of what I'd like to call a house, rather than a home, because I haven't still accepted that I can settle anywhere else in the world except my own country. I love my country [*Hindi*] although we have spent a major part of our lives here [in Britain] and by doing so, to a certain extent, made ourselves into misfits for own home.

Clearly, Dr. Suri's great effort at integration – his “*over-integration*,” as Sandhya expressed it in an interview with me⁸ – had taken its toll over the years, making him in his own eyes an in-between “misfit.” Having made strenuous efforts to assimilate himself into mainstream British life, he had distanced himself from his native Indian language and background. This is evident from the fact that he frequently used English in his audio-letters to his family in India. Clearly, he was inhabiting a cultural and linguistic limbo, caught between living unhappily in the “house” of Britain whilst yearning for the “home” of India. He was, to use James Clifford's formulation of the diasporic dilemma, experiencing “the separation and entanglement of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (255).

This transnational dilemma felt by Dr. Suri – and in varying and differing degrees, as we shall see, by his wife and daughters as well – is what fascinated Sandhya and induced her to create the documentary. “The identity crises of first-generation settlers interest me more than those of the second generation,” Sandhya stated in one interview (Sandhu, 2007). “What happens when you lose your language? How does 40 years on foreign soil actually change a man?” She did not find answers to these questions in her father's Super 8 films but rather in the audio-letters, which provide a darker and more despairing counterpoint to the untroubled brightness of the home movies. The bifocality of the silent yet breezy Super 8 home movies and the darker and introspective audiotapes points not merely to a technological but also to a psychological dichotomy. As Sandhya recounts in her director's statement on the official homepage of the film:

Like so many families, lacing up our ancient projector and replaying our favourite Super 8 home movies was something we used to do with routine nostalgia. Only years later, as an adult, when I came across a box of audio reels, did I realize that the films were part of a much bigger story. Over weeks I sat down and listened to over 100 reels of audio letters, which my father had recorded and exchanged with his family back home in India – the most intimate thoughts and observations of our lives in England over a period of forty years.⁹ At the same time as he was recording Super 8 films of birthday parties,

⁸ This interview was conducted on Skype between Japan and the UK on 13 June 2013.

⁹ In answer to my question about how the tapes came to be in her father's home, given that he had sent them to his family in India, Sandhya told me the following: “I knew of the existence of one or two cassettes of my grandfather's audio letters as I had found them earlier at our home. It was my father who mentioned that he had rescued the earlier audio reels from the dust and heat of our home in India [during the return in 1982-83] and that they were probably somewhere in the house. I consequently found them and couldn't believe what I had. Some of the super 8 reels I found in India were quite damaged and a few audiotapes I found too had simply melted in the heat so some stuff was lost but luckily my father had guarded a lot of it.” (Email from Sandhya Suri to author, 14 February 2014)

new houses and our successful lives abroad, the audio tapes were telling a more complex story. The familiar home movies took on a whole new meaning for me. (Suri)

The important point here – perhaps the most significant point about *I for India* overall – is that Sandhya had by chance rediscovered in both a physical and a figurative sense, her father's private voice and was now allowing it to be heard in the documentary.

Voice is inextricably bound together with the language employed by the speaker. Dr. Suri's growing command of English over the sixteen years of his family's initial stay in Britain resulted in his feeling linguistically deracinated as he began to lose his native facility with Hindi. In the audiotapes, as we have observed, he switches between his mother tongue and English, often awkwardly so. In a clip from June 1980, not long before the return to India, he apologises to his father in stumbling, half-whispered speech for having grown more accustomed to English and thereby losing fluency in his own language:

[*English*] This is very confidential. Please don't play it back for anybody else. [*Hindi*] It's for you and Mamaji. Don't think that your son has gone mad because he's been speaking to you in *a foreign tongue*. But this is the language which gets the job done over here. I am really trying to find the Hindi "equivalent" of . . . Oh God, I mean, what is the word for "equivalent" in Hindi? I mean, I will try to find the comparable word in Hindi and not use *the foreigner's language* anymore [my emphasis].

As was noted above about his divisive use of the pronouns "we" and "they," Dr. Suri's reference here to English as the "foreigner's tongue" – the language that had previously been his passport to successful integration – is a clear sign of his resignation, for all his outward professional advancement, at finding himself still, after a decade of making every effort to assimilate, a marginalized outsider in Britain. The dark introspection is artfully emphasized here by Sandhya's juxtaposition of the recording with a bright and happy sequence of Super 8 footage depicting a family outing to a seaside funfair.

It is in the audiotapes that Dr. Suri wrestles with and works through his memories and feelings of nostalgia and desire, and where he finds his voice and expresses what I would like to term a "post-assimilation trauma" that urges him on towards asserting agency in deciding to repatriate to India. In their 2011 study *Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia*, Madianou and Miller make the key observation about the use of audiocassettes – a point equally applicable to Dr. Suri's reel-to-reel tapes – that what

the machine-produced cassette tape lacked compared to the personal crafting of handwriting, it made up for in the significantly more emotional immediacy of voice and its stronger sense of a co-presence between sender and receiver. This emotional quality... comes from the presence of voice. (60)

This is the *orality* of a confessional performance of self. According to oral history theorist Lynn Abrams, “Orality comprises the rhythms and cadences, repetitions and intonations, the use of particular speech forms such as anecdote or reported speech, the use of dialect, as well as the volume, tone and speed” (20). As Sandhya notes in her director’s statement, these elements and qualities were present in her father’s recordings:

Listening to my father's audio letters, to the mike clicking on and off, us as children playing in the background, his breath as he struggles to find the right words, or the barely concealed anger or puzzlement in his voice, you can really picture him sitting in front of his tape recorder, documenting his life. (Suri, undated)

It is in these audio-letters that Dr. Suri, who had become linguistically liminal and hesitant, recovered and used his voice, and it is in listening to these recordings that we become privileged witnesses to the intimate “inside story” of his experience of displacement and loss and his negotiation of a new and constantly evolving identity.

Return and Broken Dreams

After a decade in Britain, Dr. Suri faced increasing pressure – emotional blackmail almost – from his family in the Punjab to repatriate. This pressure, which toyed with his deepening feelings of guilt and nostalgia, was exerted by almost every member of his family in what seems to have been a concerted effort in the Super 8 movies and audio-letters they sent from India to force him to return. His father appears to have been the driving force behind this effort. We hear him telling his son:

[*Hindi*] Yash, my son, I have many expectations of you. And when you open your clinic here, I’ll take care of everything for you. I’ll look after it all. May God let you come and be successful here. There’s so much work for doctors here, I can’t begin to tell you.

His mother expresses similar sentiments: “[*Hindi*] Just as God has blessed many doctors here with fine mansions, so I pray for the day when my Yash returns home to have such a mansion. And when I set foot in that mansion my heart will be filled with joy.” His siblings are more aggressive in approach. His sister, for example, upbraids him for missing her wedding and fans the embers of guilt: “[*Hindi*] You think I am angry with you. Yes, I would have loved for you to be at my wedding because every sister wishes for her brother to be at her wedding.” Emotional pressure was exerted upon Dr. Suri more subtly through his daughters. “Hello Neeraj, Vanita,” their grandfather says in English,

Do you not like to come to India? You come here, stay over here, and you carry on your education here in India. Anyhow, it is a good country now. I think it’d be better if you all come forever to India and don’t stay in England now. What’s your opinion? What’s your papa’s opinion? Does he like to come to India or not?

The heaviest emotional pressure comes from his mother: “Yash, you know that of all my children I love you the most. The rest we’ll talk when we meet.” Unfortunately,

they would not be reunited. A shot depicting a devotional photo of Dr. Suri's mother draped with prayer beads, filmed by Sandhya, makes clear the fact that she had died before he could return. His failure to see his mother again fuelled his yearning to return. Finally in 1982, one month after his mother's death and after an absence of sixteen years, Dr. Suri and his family headed back to India with the intention of establishing his own clinic and settling for good.

The second act, which covers the return to India, begins with a montage sequence shot by Sandhya of modern Indian city life with its noise, crowds and congested traffic. These shots of local colour, accompanied by the driving rhythms of a Bollywood film song, convey not only the excitement of modern India but also the notion that the country has changed a good deal from the one that Dr. Suri left in 1966. In place of the Super 8 home movies and audiotapes that recounted life in Britain during the first act, Sandhya now uses her own footage and interviews with her mother and sisters to recreate the family's experience of trying to readapt to life in India.

The homecoming, it seems, got off to a good start. "The day I arrived," Dr. Suri recalls, "was a very memorable day. You see, certain things you can never forget. It was like Tom Jones's 'Green, green grass of home.' It can't be described. A great feeling."¹⁰ This joyful mood is confirmed by Mrs. Suri's recollection:

Your father's mood was very good. He was quite happy and... he started getting ready for his clinic, buying furniture, buying equipment and whatever he needed. So he was quite happy, he was looking forward. He was full of enthusiasm at that time.

Sandhya's filmed reconstruction of this period includes a sequence in which we see a reenactment of a sign painter creating a billboard that announces Dr. Suri as a "Leading U.K. Specialist" (see Figure 4). Significantly, the transnational doctor had brought "Britain" back with him as an integral part of his identity and as a professional seal of excellence. This strategy failed to attract patients to his clinic, however. Neeraj recalls visiting her father there:

He'd always dreamt of coming back and being the great doctor, and doing charitable works as well as having a flourishing clinic. Quite often when I came it was empty. Having seen Dad in the big hospital in Darlington, you know, where he was a man of standing, just seeing him sitting alone in his little hut, it was quite sad.

Mrs. Suri speaks of the difficulty that her husband had establishing himself in Meerut, "Your father was new in that town, so to establish himself as a physician was difficult. Your father used to get irritable sometimes in [*sic*] the psyche of those people and their mentality. It was difficult." She recalls that one person in the locality

¹⁰ Dr. Suri's tongue-in-cheek reference to this 1966 hit song about the emotional return home of a man released from a long spell of imprisonment, apart from signaling his familiarity with British popular culture, suggests that he experienced his return to India with great relief as the end of a long period of "incarceration" in Britain. Unlike the protagonist of the ballad, however, Dr. Suri did not find everything as he had left it.

was heard to say, “Doctor Suri knows how to practice in England, but here, how does he know how to treat patients here?” Thus in his homeland Dr. Suri ironically found himself positioned negatively as a *British* outsider, paradoxically othered in the land of his birth by his compatriots. Mrs. Suri’s use of the phrases “those people” and “their mentality,” however, suggests strongly that Dr. Suri had “co-produced” the alienation and distance that arose between himself and his patients. In some sense, then, he had brought this upon himself.

The key shift in perspective between the first and second acts of *I for India* derives from the fact that Sandhya’s reconstruction allows the voices of her mother and sisters not only to be heard but also to express frank opinions about this period with the full benefit of hindsight. Mrs. Suri and first daughter Neeraj were unhappy in India from the outset. Many things, ranging from having to live cheek by jowl with two other families under one roof to the lack of a washing machine, greatly frustrated Mrs. Suri. She comments in an interview with Sandhya that “[i]t was a different way of life and I didn’t like it very much.” Neeraj, who was an 18-year-old college student at that time, also hated being there. She recalls that she was bored, since “there was nothing to do, nowhere to go, especially if you were a girl.” College life, she recounts, was “mundane compared to life in England.” Only second daughter Vanita seems to have enjoyed being in India since she “no longer felt like a misfit” as she had in England. In India, she recalls, she felt “really at home.” The Suri family stuck it out for nine months before deciding to return – to *remigrate* – to Britain in October 1982 in order, as Mrs. Suri expressed it, to “get on with our life.”



Figure 4. Sandhya’s reconstruction of the “Leading U.K. Specialist” sign advertising Dr. Suri’s clinic in Meerut.

For Dr. Suri, his yearned-for India had turned out to be a mirage. His unhappy experience of returning to the land of his birth recalls the words of Salman Rushdie in his essay “Imaginary Homelands”:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (10)

This sense of loss and displacement is underscored in the film by Sandhya's inclusion of a song from the classic Hindi film *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (*Paper Flowers*). The English subtitles of the lyrics read, "What a cruel joke time has played on us. You have not remained the same, nor have I." Ironically, popular Hindi cinema has long served to bind NRIs in the diaspora to Indian culture.¹¹ The inclusion of references to Bollywood here, however, serves only to highlight how removed Dr. Suri had become from his homeland. Nevertheless, even after the failed repatriation and his second migration to Britain, India continued to be the foundation upon which he constructed his subjectivity and identity. In an audiotape he made soon after returning to Britain, he proclaims:

Finally, I want to say one more thing: please do not underestimate Y.P. Suri with regard to his patriotism and his loyalty. No matter that he did not succeed in his own country, to resettle. The love for my soil hasn't diminished. I'm a true Indian.

It is most likely that these words were offered as a reassurance to his family in India and as a way of smoothing over what must have been an unpleasant second departure from Meerut. These patriotic sentiments notwithstanding, it would appear that "India" fell away from the family's life following the resettlement in Britain. As far as it is possible to judge from what is shown in *I for India*, Dr. Suri and his wife resumed the process of assimilating into mainstream British society. In sequences shot by Sandhya in 2003 depicting Dr. and Mrs. Suri participating in meetings of respectively the Darlington Camcorder Club and the Darlington Women's Club, both retirees have clearly been fully accepted by other members and seem to be happily assimilated into British life.

There is sad irony in the failure of the home movies and audio-letters to fulfil their role of binding the two families together. Nowadays with the exponential growth of cheap and efficient international telephony, as Vertovec argues, the "real-time communications allowed by cheap telephone calls now serve as a kind of social glue connecting families and other small-scale formations across the globe" (56). Of course, real-time communication by webcam is an even more effective social glue, since it is possible to see one's interlocutor and gauge meaning and nuance from facial expressions and gestures. Two fundamental problems with the home movie exchange between Dr. Suri and his family in India – firstly the time-lapse between creation and reception of the films, and secondly the usually upbeat selection of material included – skewed communication in a way that was ultimately unrealistic and unhelpful. On both sides of this filmic correspondence Dr. Suri and his brother shot footage that showed their lives to the greatest advantage and purveyed the most joy. This naturally fostered ideal images of the other side. In the case of Dr. Suri, who in any case was feeling nostalgic for his "India," the movies coming from Meerut with their images of Punjabi life and familiar scenes would have constructed an ideal image of India in his mind. The time lapse between movies arriving would have meant that the same movie from India, for example, would be viewed repeatedly, thereby reinforcing and reifying this ideal image. The time lapse also made immediate response, as with telephones and webcams, impossible, leaving this ideal picture

¹¹ On this point see Bandyopadhyay (2008) and Alessandrini (2001).

unchallenged. The use of this technology, which in 1966 had seemed so state-of-the-art, actually nurtured false impressions and expectations between the two families and made the failure of the return an inevitability.

Directorial Interventions

Whilst Sandhya's film *I for India* has won awards as a documentary, it is open to question whether it can be described as a straightforward documentary in the commonly accepted sense of an objective filming of reality. Both the structure and narrative of the film have been heavily shaped by Sandhya's directorial interventions, ranging from her selection of material and her imaginative creation of certain sequences to her creative juxtapositions of sharply contrasted media and moods, all of which draw out nuanced meanings and readings and heighten aspects of her father's subjectivity and acculturation. In this context, Daniela Berghahn has shrewdly identified the significance of Sandhya's central role in generating meanings in the film with her apt description of *I for India* as "a complex postmemory film with a palimpsest structure" (100). Berghahn here borrows the term "postmemory" from Marianne Hirsch, who has worked with the children of Holocaust survivors in their attempts to reconstruct their parents' lives. Hirsch writes in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* that "[p]ostmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation" (22).

The act of searching through parents' memories and archives of photographs and home movies to create documentary films, Michael Renov has argued, is actually "a kind of identity sleuthing in which family-bound figures – progenitors and progeny – are mined for clues" (142) to the filmmaker's own migration-fractured identity. In making *I for India*, one can say with some certainty that Sandhya was investigating her own second-generation transnational subjectivity and "writing" her own life as well as that of her mother and sisters on the palimpsest of her father's self-recordings.

Sandhya's interventions as director seek to lay bare the inner life of her father. We have seen how her juxtapositions of the upbeat Super 8 clips with the dark



Figure 5. Conjuring memories: Sandhya makes her father's back garden in Darlington merge into the mustard fields of the Punjab.

introspective audio recordings expressed the troubled state of her father's mind in the years prior to the family's repatriation. Sandhya also used her own creative footage to convey Dr. Suri's nostalgic memories of his homeland. Early in the film we see the elderly doctor standing at his kitchen window and looking out at his garden. With Hindi film music playing the garden dissolves into a yellow vista of mustard fields in the Punjab (see Figure 5), which then serves as a bridge to archival footage of rural Indian life designed to conjure the life Dr. Suri had left behind.

An even more striking example of Sandhya's creative attempt to convey her father's guilt-stricken mind leading up to the return is the extended "dream sequence" in which the line between documentary and fiction certainly becomes blurred. This sequence begins with a shot of the elderly Dr. Suri napping rather fitfully. There follows a night-time montage with unsettling shots of street life in India featuring silhouetted figures and rickshaws moving slowly in and out of smoke or mist and the sounds of sepulchral voices and eerie slowed-down bells and cymbals (see Figure 6). The result is a mildly nightmarish atmosphere in which recordings of the distorted voices of his relatives in India, extracted from the audio-letters, pressure him relentlessly in Hindi to return. His sister informs him, "Mother remembers you all the time and whenever she talks about you, she starts to cry." His brother-in-law tells him, "The longer you stay away from home, the unhappier you'll be. Satisfaction will come only from home. You won't find it outside." His brother employs the more direct leverage of guilt:

Do you remember when you were in India? How much love there was between us? Maybe, having moved to European life, you've forgotten how we used to be here. You left and went abroad and the responsibility you should have dealt with, you being the eldest son, that now is all on my shoulders. And as far as I can I will manage because I have no choice.

Then we hear the father, again, crying and lamenting in Hindi, "Yash, son . . . hello. God bless you and Sheel. My heart is breaking. I'm very distressed. Come home and I'll be better again. What else is there left in my life? My son is far away. I feel like dying. What shall I do? My life is unbearable without you."

A final example of the way in which Sandhya intervenes as director is her repeated insertion of filmmaking motifs. The passage of time, particularly in the first act, is marked by shots of film cans with place and date written on them (see Figure 7). There are also linking shots of her elderly father lacing up his old projector or sorting through a box of tapes. Filmmaking itself becomes a leitmotif. In the sequence mentioned above that shows the meeting of the Darlington Camcorder Club, we see Dr. Suri presenting a home video he had recently made while on holiday in Egypt.

The most self-reflexive filmmaking moment in the documentary, however, comes almost at the end of the film during the sequence in which the recently emigrated Vanita speaks with her parents by webcam. The split image on the computer screen shows Vanita talking from Australia and Sandhya herself filming the conversation (see Figure 8). This is the only time in the whole film that we see Sandhya, and fittingly she is hidden behind a camera recording this momentous event in the family's migratory history. In this moment one gains a sense of the centrality of filmmaking in



Figure 6. Conjuring dreams: Sandhya's conveying her father's troubled dreams about his family in India.

the Suri family and how it has served to help them not only to document but also make sense of their transnational lives.

Conclusion

Over the last thirty years or more, a number of British-Asian fiction films have thematised, not only the troubled experiences of migrants, transnationals and their progeny, but also the pleasures of hybridity (Malik, 2010).¹² Writer Hanif Kureishi and director Stephen Frears are often seen as the initiators of this tendency with their highly successful film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), which as Sarita Malik (1996) has observed, celebrates the pleasures of hybridity. The mixed race protagonist Omar, born of a Pakistani father and an English mother, is the very embodiment of what Salman Rushdie terms this “plural and partial” in-between-ness. This film is notable for its pattern-setting exploitation of the possibilities of what I would like to term the *interstitial humour* arising from migratory and hybrid lives lived between two languages and cultures. The tendency to employ comedy both to defuse the potentially divisive drama of racial interaction (and, by the way, court mainstream audiences) is evident also in such fiction films as *Bhaji on the Beach* (Chadha, 1993), *East is East* (O'Donnell, 1999), *Anita and Me* (Hüseyin, 2002), *Bend It Like Beckham* (Chadha, 2002), and *West is West* (De Emmony, 2010).



Figure 7. Dated Super 8 film cans used to mark the passage of time in *I for India*.

Comedy has also been used in popular television programmes such as *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC, 1996), *The Kumars at No. 42* (BBC, 2001), and *The Indian Doctor* (BBC, 2010) (Gillespie). In other words, we can see that comedy has offered a protective glove with which to touch the prickly issue of race in multicultural Britain. The terrorist outrages of 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London, however, changed this situation and made comedy an inappropriate response (Malik 2010). Fiction films such as *Ae Fond Kiss...* (Loach, 2004), *Yasmin* (Gleenaan, 2004) and *Brick Lane* (Gavron, 2007) and television dramas such as *Bradford Riots* (2006) and *Britz* (2007) have addressed divisive interracial issues, particularly with regard to the suspicion with which the Muslim community has been viewed in some quarters, with depth and gravity. The serious (i.e. non-comic) cinematic treatment of race issues has come of age.

¹² I use the term ‘British Asian film’ here to refer, not to a film that has been written or directed by someone of South Asian descent, but to a film with a British Asian theme. Thus I take both Ken Loach’s *Ae Fond Kiss...* and Gurinder Chadha’s *Bend It Like Beckham* to be British Asian films.

When we turn to documentaries that deal with the real-life migration experiences of British Asians, we discover a great lack. Sandhya's *I for India* is one of the first and best films to attempt to fill this void. In this paper I have discussed how the film documents the development of her father's transnational subjectivity from a number of angles, namely the racism of official media in the 1960s and 1970s as evidenced by



Figure 8. Self-reflexive filmmaking: the webcam captures Sandhya (right) capturing her sister Vanita as she speaks from Australia.

the BBC clips inserted in the film; Dr. Suri's efforts to integrate and assimilate into mainstream British society; the juxtaposition between the Super 8 home movies and the private audio-letters and Sandhya's "discovery" of his voice; the Suri family's repatriation to India and subsequent resettlement in Britain; and Sandhya's interventionist strategies as director. All these factors, I have argued, have contributed to how *I for India* has both represented and constructed Dr. Suri's transnational identity.

In conclusion, I would emphasise two elements in Sandhya's film that make it a unique and valuable document worthy of attention. Firstly, we hear Dr. Suri's *voice* as he reflects on and wrestles with the implications of his transnationality. His confessional outpourings place us in the privileged position of "listening in" as he gives verbal expression to his authentic and deeply held thoughts about his experiences over many years in Britain. Secondly, we witness an actual return to India. In Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* and in the film adapted from it, the husband Chanu, like Dr. Suri, succumbs to "Going Home Syndrome" and returns to Dhaka. The crucial difference between real-life Dr. Suri and the fictional Chanu, however, is that one never learns what happens to the latter after he repatriated. Did he return to a "Bangladesh of the mind" and then come back to Britain or could he successfully reintegrate himself into Bangladeshi life? In *I for India* we are invited to follow the whole process of returning home, before, during and after, and from multiple perspectives. As we have seen, there is even a Super 8 clip recording the moment when Dr. Suri and his wife and daughters take their final leave of the family in India. Sandhya's film uncovers the complexities of repatriation.

These two elements differentiate *I for India* from another documentary that enquires into British Asian identity entitled *I'm British But...* (1990). This film marked Gurinder Chadha's debut as a film director and foreshadowed the themes of her fiction films. In Chadha's documentary various young second-generation British Asians with Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origins talk in conventional on-camera interviews about their hybrid lives and identities. They speak of South Asia abstractly as a cultural presence that they can either embrace or deny. In contrast to *I for India*, there is no filmed return to South Asia. Furthermore, whilst offering interesting insights into hybrid identity, the interviews conducted in *I'm British But...* lack the spontaneous orality of Dr. Suri's confessional tapes: the subjects answer questions

directed at them, whereas Dr. Suri unburdens himself in a more private and spontaneous way to his parents. Sandhya's *I for India* has broken new ground not merely for being one of the first films to fill the British Asian documentary void but also for offering deep insights into the transnational experience in Britain as well as in India, and for opening up the complex processes involved in acculturation and identity formation. As Dr. Suri says at the end of the film, "[*Hindi*] This sketch I have given of my life... I think our youngsters [*English*] they will gain a lot of insight from it, about the early struggles."¹³

¹³ The recent three-part BBC Radio documentary *Three Pounds in My Pocket* (Kavita Puri, March 2014), which allows the experiences of South Asians who came to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s to be heard directly from the individuals themselves, points in a similar direction to *I for India*. *Three Pounds* provides an interesting comparison to *I for India*, however, in that it deals mostly with the hard "ground-level" experiences of working-class migrants rather than elite or middle-class transnationals such as Dr. Suri. See www.historyextra.com/feature/£3-my-pocket-pioneering-migrants-who-came-britain-india-1950s. Retrieved on 20 Apr 2014.

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Emotional Realism and Actuality: The Function of Prosumer Aesthetics in Film

Celia Lam

Abstract

Current trends in film and television production styles have favoured the use of aesthetics associated with prosumer and social media products. These aesthetics, including handheld shaky-cam, variable audio and open acknowledgement of the camera, have been utilised for their ability to imitate reality, to take away a little of the polish of professional film and television production and to inject the raw, ad hoc immediacy of actuality. Yet an emotional connection between a film and its spectator cannot be disregarded, and represents another form of reality in film: that of emotional realism. Indeed conventional cinema relies on aural and visual techniques to generate emotional authenticity for its characters and to align them with spectators as a means to encourage investment in a believable fictional world.

The application of techniques associated with real-world aesthetics in narrative contexts seems instinctively to be at odds with the aims of fictional cinema. Through a close analysis of *Chronicle*, this paper explores the function of prosumer aesthetics in a fictional context and examines how tropes of “reality” can inform emotional realism.

Key words: Prosumer aesthetics, production techniques, fiction film, realism, reality.

In recent years a series of films have been produced using the 21st century aesthetic of prosumer technologies that challenges the convention of classical fictional techniques and blurs the boundary between spectator, character and camera. In particular the aesthetic confronts the construction of emotional realism in narrative film. Within the parameters of a fictional world emotional realism manifests as emotional authenticity, generated through the application of specific cinematic techniques that align spectator and character. Experiences and reactions within the fictional world become imbued with veracity through emotional authenticity and form a foundation of believability on which (albeit diegetic) reality is based. The aesthetics of the prosumer seemingly abandon conventions that support alignment and emotional realism in favour of “real-world” mimicry. Yet these aesthetics have been used with increasing frequency in narrative films. This paper explores the function of prosumer aesthetics in a fictional context and examines how the tropes of reality can inform emotional realism.

Prosumer aesthetics are a blend of the raw, gritty and occasionally grainy imagery associated with consumer grade handheld video cameras, described by Lev Manovich as “DV realism,” and the visual outcome of a recording lens infused with the movement and positioning of its human operator Mark Hansen terms the “haptic aesthetic” (11). As a set of technical and stylistic choices, the aesthetic mimics the everyday user’s appropriation of a multi-lens environment in which the self-referential need to record and publish our lives in social media is enabled via lightweight and easily operated digital cameras and smart phones.

In particular the camera lens (and slaved audio – another feature of the prosumer aesthetic in which audio and vision is simultaneously edited to mimic the effect of on-camera microphones) is positioned, not in relation to the viewer (Metz in Rosen), or to itself as an external object viewing a profilmic event (Mulvey), but primarily in relation to the diegetic character as an acknowledged object of gaze. It also becomes an object of operation within the diegesis as the visceral, mobile and amateur stylistic tropes of prosumer-composed images are adopted to suggest a non-professional presence behind the lens. By extension, an authenticity associated with the amateur and the unmediated (perhaps incidental) capturing of reality as it happens is suggested. In application the techniques become “indexical, providing some truth-value of their referent...” (Landesman 34).

Indeed the challenge of the capturing and projecting lens lies in its function between the experiential “real world” of actuality and the perceptual “screening” of mediated reality. Through the camera’s lens reality begins to lose its claim to actuality as it becomes possible to mould, shape, edit and re-contextualize the images of reality into *some other* meaning, thereby fictionalizing even documentary footage which purports to present unmediated fact. Indeed the documentary film’s claim to actuality and an objective reality has been widely discounted by many scholars, who argue the genre’s stylistic conventions are but techniques to support a highly subjective view of the

filmmaker's *version* of reality.¹ As Michael Renov states, "every documentary representation depends upon its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audiovisual signifier" (7).

The earliest manifestation of such technologically mediated ambivalence is seen in photography, which presented problems by claiming to represent actuality. Yet, as Metz argues, a photograph of a real object is still only a reflection of reality. The "perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its *replica* in a new kind of mirror" (Metz cited in Rosen 250). Thus the medium – in this case the camera lens and apparatus of projection – inhibits claims to reality. The image that is experienced via manufactured processes is, by default, reality rendered as illusion, a symbolic rather than iconic signifier of reality. It is for this reason that Andre Bazin eschews the convention of coverage – in which a scene is visually fragmented into separate shots and reconstituted in the edit – in favour of minimal camera movement, long takes and wide angles. The presence of the camera and the subjective signifiers of variable shot sizes interrupt the presentation of a reality that, while scripted and fictional can reflect a social realism that "tends to make more reality appear on the screen" (MacCabe 181).

Notions of truth, authenticity and reality in cinema take many forms. Thus while Bazin advocated for the presentation of a form of social realism in fictional film, cultural theorist Ien Ang supports the notion of a different inherent "truth" in narrative fiction. Writing about viewer reaction to the 1980s soap *Dallas*, Ang argues for an emotional realism that connotes rather than denotes, one in which the experiences and emotional responses of characters are judged based on their resonance with spectators' own lived experiences; the "'true to life' elements" (47) of the series. This emotional reality is achieved in part through the functions of plotting and characterization but also through the use of conventional filmmaking techniques, the "last shot of an episode is then nearly always a close-up of the face of the character concerned, which emphasizes the psychological conflict she or he is in" (53). The close up highlights the emotional nuances of the actor while at the same time signifying to the audience the relevance of the moment of emotion, and with the aid of music and performance, the emotional resonance the moment has for the narrative of the film.

These techniques create a certain emotional authenticity for the diegesis such that, even if the events of the plot are far removed from everyday reality, the emotional resonance they have for the characters in the plot constructs points of identification and empathy for a viewing audience. By becoming invested in the moments of

¹ The terms "actuality" and "reality" are often used with some degree of fluidity and are defined in reference both to each other and to the factual; that is devoid of the imaginary. The origins of the words provide some distinction in which "actual" (late Latin, *actualis* = pertaining to acts, practical) and "real" (late Latin *realis/res* = relating to things/thing) are constituted as practical states of being (in actuality), and objects (the "real" thing). The associative notion of reality as a factual conceptualization of the world "as it is" is a result of the implications that actuality brings to the term (Erikson 453). The notions have been explored with some flexibility in the field of psychoanalysis where the relative interiority and exteriority of the terms are used interchangeably. Freud claims the "state-ness" of actuality when differentiating between the internal "thought-reality" and "external actuality" of patients who display a "disregard of the reality-test," while Erikson distinguishes between an external "phenomenal reality" (462) which analysts aim to free from "certain distortions" (462) and the internal activity of actuality as a "world of participation, shared with a minimum of defensive maneuvers and a maximum of mutual activation" (463). Yet a common conjecture is the relative malleability of "reality," which Erikson suggests, can be subject to "distortions" (462) and the inherent nature of actuality found in its "external" (Freud) manifestation. Thus there is an implicit suggestion that while actuality is in some way "fixed," reality can be reflected, represented, or altered.

emotion, the spectator can ease into a suspension of disbelief and connect with the narrative on an illusionary level. Spectators are invited to invest in the reality of the fiction not as a mirror of actuality but as a constructed “other world,” in which the plausibility of the plotted events is closely linked to the emotional truth of the character’s responses to the world, the events within the plot, and to other characters within the fiction. In order to do so the spectator is required to suspend disbelief and, in the words of Richard Allen, to “experience projective illusion” (139). Conventional filmmaking techniques encourage this projective illusion through the use of the aforementioned close up, while Mary Ann Doane’s notion of the three spaces of cinema – the diegetic, screen and theatre – suggests the power of sound design to physically align spectator and character (cited in Rosen). Similarly emotional alignment and identification is assisted by the selection of musical score to cue an emotional response. As Neil McDonald states, “music can embody aspects of a character or a prevailing mood of pain and obsession” (73).

In the process of achieving projective illusion, audiences demonstrate a learned ability to read the cues of conventional filmmaking – continuity and montage editing, sound design and music – as signifiers of a fictional reality. Audiences inherently understand that to engage with the narrative they first need to read the images, not as a reflection of actuality but as a fictional reality, one in which the emotional reality of the construct is paramount to disengaging with their lived reality in order to enter the constructed world.

The 1999 film *The Blair Witch Project* used these genre-bound audience expectations to great effect when, in an effort to convince of the reality of their film’s premise, directors Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, appropriated the aesthetic of DV realism.² In essence the film is a mockumentary, albeit one that is deliberately styled as an observational documentary. Yet its approach to storytelling not only challenged the genre’s claims to unmediated reality, but also efficiently blurred fact and fiction to expose audiences’ conditioned reading of the techniques as signifiers for the real. In place of the carefully considered shots, editing, sound design and music normally associated with fictional storytelling, the film was presented as found footage and adopted a mobile, occasionally shaky and unfocused lens, replete with slaved audio and a narrative framework that accounted for the presence of a camera, which invited direct reference from its three main characters. Indeed it was the visceral “reality” of the technique that accounts for the believability of the film’s premise and led audiences to read the film, not as stylized fiction but as truth: as a documented account of events leading up to the disappearance of the movie’s three purportedly real film students while making a documentary on the mythical Blair Witch.

The Blair Witch Project was not the first film to adopt the found footage conceit (Peter Watkins’ 1965 *The War Game* is an early example). However the plausibility of the 1999 outing is firmly rooted in the wider techno-cultural milieu of the time. The late 1990s saw a burgeoning Do-It-Yourself amateur media culture aided by the digitization of media and nascent sub-cultural potential of the Internet. In particular the proliferation of cheap digital cameras and affordable editing software encouraged

² The expectation that the cues of conventional filmmaking techniques, such as continuity and montage editing, sound design and music, relate specifically to the construction of *fictional* diegetic worlds. Conversely, non-conventional filmmaking techniques, such as excessive Handycam, are the tools of documentary filmmakers who construct narratives based on *fact*.

non-professionals, ranging from enthusiasts to aspiring film students, to mimic the professional productions they witnessed in mainstream media. The fact that *The Blair Witch Project*'s three characters were film students meant their access to the "official" 16 mm film camera used was conceivable while the general availability of prosumer equipment lent their use of the secondary Handycam believability. Additionally the viral website created in the lead up to the release of the film fit, hand-in-glove, with the notion of the Internet as a repository for non-mainstream culture that was starting to gain currency at the time. A large number of audience "discovered" the mystery of the Blair Witch through a dedicated website that listed missing person reports for the three main characters, leading many audience members to believe in the authenticity of the "found footage" tag of the film (as was the intent of the filmmakers).

While the promotion for the film was swathed in an ambivalence that presented fact as fiction, it was the accurate appropriation of a non-professional production aesthetic that consolidated its claim to actuality. It both borrowed from and reflected a set of behaviours manifesting in contemporary youth culture, specifically the increased use of affordable production and editing equipment by a DVD generation who made shorts in their spare time. In echoing this real world behaviour, the film tapped into a set of preconceived significations of authenticity that intrinsically linked the aesthetics with an amateur producer attempting to adopt a professional stylization. Thus the inclusion of interviews, cutaways and establishing shots was believable within a narrative framework purporting to follow the filmmaking experiences of its protagonists. At the same time the juxtaposition of the (attempted) professional techniques to the decidedly amateur Handycam footage served to reinforce the authenticity of its claim as a record of unmediated reality.

For *The Blair Witch Project* to successfully present fiction as fact, the film needed to distract the audience from its inherently constructed nature. To achieve that, conventional cinematic techniques and the signification of the fictional they came to represent were necessarily discarded. The aesthetic of the prosumer was adopted in its stead precisely for its ability to signify 'truth' and to convince the audience to invest in the actuality of the narrative.

It is an aesthetic that served the fact/fiction narrative of *The Blair Witch Project* well. Yet more recent films have reflected a trend towards adopting prosumer techniques to serve highly fictionalized narratives in the science fiction (*Cloverfield*, 2008) and horror (*Paranormal Activity*, 2007) genres. As established, the fictionalized construct of narrative films clearly relies upon techniques that delineate reality from imagination and generate emotional authenticity. Prosumer aesthetics are built on indexical signifiers that suggest an actuality far removed from the constructed world of the diegesis, and constantly remind an audience of the reality of their everyday experience. The application of such techniques to the construction of a fictional narrative seems experimental at best, clichéd and gimmicky at worst. At the very least techniques indicative of reality would appear best suited to momentary self-referential gestures towards contemporary technological use rather than as legitimate cinematic tools.

Josh Trank's 2012 film *Chronicle* offers a means to examine the dramatic potential of a technique that lies between the seemingly incongruous "real world" styling of prosumer technology and the fictional construct of narrative. The film adopts the

aesthetic conventions of DV realism that characterizes other “found footage” films in the genre. However unlike *The Blair Witch Project* it was not filmed on a DV camera but shot on 35 mm film. The final vision was treated to give it a DV “feel.” The decision to shoot on film was perhaps motivated by the wish for more latitude in deciding the final look of the film in post-production, or to ensure more technically accurate images as it was filmed by camera operators rather than the actors of the piece (Holben). Regardless of practical considerations, mimicking rather than capturing the prosumer aesthetic in-camera is indicative of a creative process that aspires to an outcome more complex than *The Blair Witch Project*’s claim to authenticity.

The plot of the film is in essence a study of psychological decline. Following the discovery of a mysterious alien rock three teenage boys: introverted Andrew, blasé Matt, and popular Steve – develop superhuman abilities that enable them to control objects by telekinesis and to manipulate electricity, giving them super strength and the power of flight. At first the boys use their powers for fun, but as their powers grow, they are soon confronted by the dangers of their abilities and their own dark natures. Ordinarily this type of plot is served by conventional cinematic techniques that enhance emotional beats within the unfolding narrative. As such the application of realistic prosumer tropes seems initially out of place. However *Chronicle* differs from other films in the DV realism genre by abandoning claims to being found. It does not establish a dramatic conceit in which the film itself is the unmediated account of a (past) cataclysmic event recorded by a witness. Instead the film contravenes the aesthetic as a stylistic choice not for its indexical signification of actuality, but for its potential as a point of identification and observation which serves to (re)enforce the emotional reality of the diegesis.

***Chronicle*: Emotional Reality through a Camera’s Lens**

A complex series of relationships are established between the capturing (and for the audience, viewing) lens and the film’s main characters in which physical alignment extends to emotional allegiance and ultimately the construction of the camera as a character in its own right. In the process a camera-based emotional realism is achieved and enforced.

Alignment with Camera: Point of View (POV)

From the outset the camera is physically aligned with Andrew, showing the audience what Andrew wishes to represent of his own experience. The opening shot establishes Andrew and the main dramatic conceit of the film. Half hidden behind the eyepiece of his Canon XL1 MiniDV camera, Andrew announces that he will film all events to follow, presumably motivated as much by his fascination with cameras and filmmaking as with the wish to gather evidence of his father’s violent and abusive behaviour. Matt and Steve, introduced through Andrew’s lens, openly reference the camera thereby legitimizing its position within the diegesis.



Figure 1. Andrew in opening shot of *Chronicle* (2012)



Figure 2. Steve acknowledges the camera (*Chronicle*)

The viewing lens – that through which the audience sees the film – is associated with Andrew, operated, it is imagined, by the unseen character whose presence is only “felt” behind the lens. However this association is not exclusive. At a party attended by the majority of the school’s student body Andrew is seen in frame, throwing into question the origin of the lens. The mystery is resolved when Andrew addresses Matt behind the lens, freeing the camera from its submission to Andrew and introducing the possibility of an associative mobility for the lens within the diegetic space.

As subsequent characters pick up and operate the camera, the lens becomes briefly associated with their viewing perspective, sharing the same physical space and experiential position as the character who carries and operates it, constituting what Jenna Ng calls the “first person lens based POV.” It is not through a character’s subjective POV that the lens sees but through a subjectively laden objectivity. While the camera records it offers a seemingly objective view of the fictional world, yet when Andrew’s camera is passed to his friends they cease to be objects of the camera’s gaze. When in physical possession of the camera, they draw the lens into their subjectivity and impose their perspective over the camera’s look.



Figure 3. Drawn into Steve’s subjectivity when he controls the camera (*Chronicle*)

At the same time, the shared possessive subjectivity of Andrew’s camera is not the only view offered in the diegesis. The party scene also introduces Casey, seen first through the first person lens based POV of the camera-as-controlled-by-Matt. She also operates a camera – recording for her blog – and a quick cut to her lens establishes the film’s second conceit; any lens is accessible. Inter-cutting between the two lenses offers a direct way of accessing the spatial perspective of the characters, and interjects a conventional shot-reverse-shot editing structure.

Figure 4. Casey's camera (*Chronicle*)Figure 5. Matt seen through Casey's camera (*Chronicle*)

Through the first person lens based POV, the camera becomes momentarily associated with whoever controls it, aligned briefly with the viewing position of the character whose perspective it shares. However between characters is the potential threat of a disassociation from alignment, and thus a void in perspective with which to attribute the camera. Ng accounts for this by suggesting the anthropomorphized POV of the camera as viewing object. In films like *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield*, when a character loses control of the camera, as when Hud is attacked and killed by an alien in *Cloverfield*, its continued recording reinforces its independence as a viewing object outside of a character's control and constructs it as a character in its own right.

In *Chronicle*, Andrew's camera is afforded greater spatial mobility due to a narrative construct that gives Andrew the ability to levitate it. This allows Andrew to be seen in the camera's frame while still controlling it. Thus the first person lens based POV becomes turned in on itself. The perspective offered is that of Andrew's yet it is not his subjective viewing perspective of the diegesis – rather it is the view of the camera-as-viewing object, anthropomorphic but clearly controlled by Andrew. However unlike the restricted view of the operator offered by the limited framing in *The Blair Witch Project* or *Cloverfield*, the viewer is presented with a sweeping, free-floating lens reminiscent of conventional dolly or crane shots. While functionally under the control of the character, the camera becomes free of it in both perspective and physicality. The way in which the films handle this POV addresses some of the criticisms of the aesthetic which argue that the technique, while offering the semblance of mobility within the diegesis, actually restricts the range of views offered to an audience (Ng). When Andrew floats his camera throughout a scene in which he and Steve have a rooftop conversation, conventional framing techniques are invoked, as the lens adopts the slow, serene, push-in effect of a dolly track.

Figure 6. Andrew controls camera by telekinesis and is seen in frame (*Chronicle*)

Alignment with Camera: From Visual to Experiential

As the narrative progresses the camera's view is visually and then experientially aligned with Andrew's subjective experience of his life. In an introductory scene at school, Andrew is targeted by a group of bullies who attack not only him but also his camera. The attack is seen from the perspective of the camera in Andrew's hand; as Andrew is pushed and shoved so is the lens, pulling the camera into his subjectivity. Eventually it physically echoes Andrew's experience as a bully rips it from his hands and throws it to the ground, extending the alignment from the visual to the experiential as it receives the same treatment as the character it "sees" for.



Figures 7-9. Bullies take Andrew's camera (*Chronicle*)

Instilling Emotional Veracity

Later this experiential alignment extends to the emotional. Prolonged screen time suggests an allegiance between character and lens, which becomes increasingly symbiotic as the film progresses. The camera relies on Andrew to enable it to view, and by viewing to exist within the diegesis, while at the same time Andrew counts on the lens to witness for him the stark reality of his life, and by witnessing to help make sense of his domestic situation and his growing super human powers. As he refines his powers he starts to operate the camera by telekinesis, effectively demonstrating the extent to which the lens had become an extension of his physical being.



Fig. 10. Andrew controls camera by telekinesis (*Chronicle*)

The way in which he relates to camera operation is also reflective of his emotional state; floating and carefree when Andrew, Matt and Steve experience the joy of flying; slow and pensive when Andrew experiments with levitation after an (off screen) admonishment from his father; and fast, visceral and aggressive when Andrew avenges himself on his school yard bullies. At the same time the camera's presence registers as a type of emotional support when Andrew receives his first on screen

beating from his father. Having set up the camera, half obscured, on his desk Andrew turns to confront the verbal and physical abuse that had only been intimated thus far.



Figures 11-13. Andrew's camera captures a beating and echoes his perspective (*Chronicle*)

The camera is not under his control however Andrew's gaze at the lens both before and after the beating draws the object of his gaze into his subjectivity, affirming his experience at the same time agreeing with his moral perspective. It is as if the camera is connected to Andrew on a cognitive and emotional level, and even though he does not control it, it is very much "on his side": understanding, sympathetic and reflective. It is a part of him. In the final scene of the film, Matt addresses the camera and Andrew simultaneously, reinforcing the man-machine fusion. The audience is invited not to view the camera in alignment with Matt – even though it is he who operates the camera – but to see it as a conduit to Andrew, or his memory at the very least.



Figure 14. Matt addressed Andrew via camera (*Chronicle*)

Lens as Character

The camera functions first as Andrew's emotional doppelgänger however as the film progresses and Andrew becomes increasingly insular and destructive, it slowly gains autonomy and is constructed as an entity – albeit one representative of Andrew's humanity – in its own right. Unlike the recording eye of Ng's anthropomorphized POV however this camera is imbued with a type of emotional quality of its own. When his mother's medical funds run out, Andrew attacks and robs a group of youths before ransacking and destroying a service station, during which Andrew's camera becomes progressively removed from his subjective position.



Figure 15. Aerial view of robbery (*Chronicle*)



Figure 16. Camera returns to Andrew (*Chronicle*)

Throughout the duration of Andrew's assault on the group, his camera hovers above at a distance, seemingly seeking safety in objectivity. It looks down as if to judge the morality of Andrew's action from afar, only venturing closer when the act is complete and Andrew slumps by the side of the road, dejectedly clutching his spoils. In that instant the camera – or Andrew's remaining moral core which the camera has come to represent – seems to reach out to Andrew, offering comfort but warning against further violence, its abhorrence manifest in the physical distance between its viewing position and its controller in the preceding action. This is reinforced in the following scene in which Andrew's accidental destruction of a service station is shown only through the facility's security camera and not Andrew's own lens. It is as if the camera has abandoned him, signifying a complete disconnection between Andrew's diegetic experience and the camera's viewing position.

After the incident at the service station, Andrew and his camera are hospitalized. Andrew is confronted by his father who informs him of his mother's death, and blames him for her passing. Throughout this interlude the action is covered from two perspectives: a security camera inside the room providing a high angle view of the room and Andrew's camera set up on a tripod at the foot of his bed providing a mid-two shot of Andrew and his father. As his father becomes more irate, Andrew slowly wakes and with that his camera starts a slow push in. At the height of his anger Andrew's father motions to hit him across the head and Andrew reacts by grabbing his arm. At the same time the vision of the scene switches to the security camera and through it audiences witness the destruction of the wall and window in Andrew's room, along with his camera. With that, the last of Andrew's humanity is destroyed as he rises from his bed and proceeds to drop his father from the side of the building.

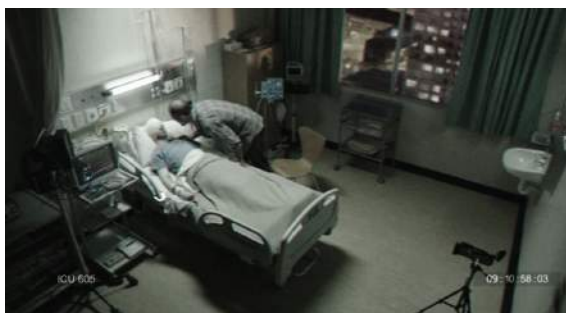


Figure 17. View from security camera (*Chronicle*)



Fig. 18. Mid-shot from Andrew's camera (*Chronicle*)

As if to reinforce the importance of the symbiotic relationship between character and lens, the film now disregards Andrew's subjectivity and offers Casey and Matt as

alternative aligning perspectives with whom to empathize. Some distance away, Matt senses Andrew's distress and travels to the hospital with Casey and her camera – through which the subsequent action is seen. He arrives in time to save Andrew's father, setting up a confrontation with Andrew that quickly deteriorates into an aerial battle. Without the characterization of an anthropomorphized lens, Andrew becomes objectified as a force of pure destruction, an anti-hero whose destruction becomes the task of the new, alternative, hero Matt. For as much as Andrew's control of the camera legitimized its position within the diegesis, the camera's presence also reflected an aspect of Andrew's vulnerability and sympathy as a character.

Lens as Character: Points of Comparison

In a way the characterization of the camera is made possible by the multiplicity of POV offered throughout the film. The destruction of Andrew's camera at the beginning of the third act allows the film to fully exploit the ability to access and see through any camera lens. Casey's camera, helicopter, news and security cameras are utilized in quick succession as the viewer's perspective is flicked from lens to lens in pursuit of Matt and Andrew's aerial confrontation. When they pause at the Chicago Space Needle, an abundance of digital devices are appropriated to give the viewer access to the action. The multitudes of lenses (with the exception of Casey's camera) have no specific character to whom they can align, instead mimicking the voyeuristic gaze of the general audience as, phones and tablets raised, the (diegetically insignificant) bystander in the film witnesses and records the climatic events.



Figure 19. Multiple lenses (*Chronicle*)

While serving the function of showing the viewer the action, the multiple and fleeting lens-based POVs were exploited to delineate the intimate, emotional connection that Andrew, his camera and the audience had established. By presenting the external lenses of the bystanders as cold, emotionless and voyeuristic (interested only in the novelty of the spectacle and less in the human tragedy behind it), Andrew's camera is established as a main character in its own right. In contrast to the measured, serene and at times beautiful images captured by Andrew's camera, these mass POV lenses are fleeting, grainy and harshly pragmatic both in aesthetics and in function: they are dispensed with once serving their purpose of tracking the action. The privileged viewing position of Andrew's camera is thus reinforced as the most legitimate, emotionally truthful camera with which to identify.

Aural Alignment: Heard First

For Doane, the placement of speakers in the cinema theatre, and the subsequent distribution of sound through those speakers creates a “sonorous envelope” (343) that recalls the imprinting of the mother’s voice of the infant before birth. In particular, the human voice, endowed with “‘presence’ guarantees the singularity and stability of a point of audition” (Doane 343). Thus, while Andrew’s voice is not representative of the prenatal mother, it is to his voice that the spectator is aligned. The film opens on black and for the first thirty seconds the most immediate and “present,” both in proximity and vocal quality, sound is Andrew’s voice as he argues with his (aurally distant) father through his bedroom door. From that point forward, Andrew’s physical location behind the lens constructs him as the most “present” character as the film extends the conceit of self-shot footage to the audio. As Andrew is the camera operator, his voice is the closest to the imagined on-camera microphone and thus the clearest and richest in timber.

The film does not strictly conform to the prosumer audio conceit however. For the most part, particularly in the first two acts of the film, the audio is slaved to the image and shifts abruptly when the visuals change. There is no musical score and the proximity of characters and events to the camera determines the audio quality and strength. However the film does not shy away from the use of sound effects, introducing whooshes (when flying), thumps (when punches are thrown), and high-pitched digital distortions mixed with a low hum (when the alien rock is discovered). It adopts the convention of adding non-diegetic sounds to reinforce the fictional reality of the diegesis at the same time conforming to audience’s generic expectations of how flying, fighting and alien objects *should* sound. In this regard the film builds in a backdoor, enabling the audio some degree of conceptual freedom and bending the prosumer aesthetic so that a more aurally coherent landscape can be created.

A more flexible approach to sound design also enables the use of aural techniques to enhance Andrew’s emotional experience, adding a level of alignment with his character. The effect is first used towards the end of the second act when Andrew uses his super strength to retaliate against his father. In the silence after the confrontation Andrew floats his camera towards him and a low protracted whoosh-hum is introduced, reflecting the beginning of his psychological decline. In a later scene after Andrew’s hospitalisation, the sound is again used to indicate Andrew’s control over the camera and his growing emotional trauma. As Andrew wakes from a state of unconsciousness, the camera slowly tracks forward accompanied by the low whoosh-hum subtly mixed under his father’s vocals. Outwardly Andrew shows no signs of change. However the sound effect signals he is awake and as his father’s diatribe reaches its peak a sustained high pitched tone is introduced, reflecting a psychological tension that has reached its limit. When the building finally explodes, the visual and aural release of tension acts as a turning point for Andrew’s submission to his role as the ultimate predator.

Conclusion

The prosumer aesthetic is an indexical sign of actuality. However, in a fictional context, the presumptive connotations of reality are challenged by the technique’s ability to recontextualize the chronicled events. In this instance an unmediated reality

is not denoted. Instead the subjective experience of the fictional character is enriched by the connotative implications of the aesthetic; the events may not be real, but for the character within the dramatic framework, the *experience* of it is and the aesthetics reflect this reality. By restricting the spectator to the same experiential field as the character, the distance between the spectator's objective gaze and the subjective experience of the character is reduced, thus enhancing an emotional alignment and reinforcing the emotional reality of the film. When the camera lens is constructed as a character in its own right it offers a midpoint of alignment in which the emotional resonance of a scene can be connoted through visuals alone. In this way, more so than with conventional techniques, the lens is endowed with emotion independent from music, sound, and the gaze of character or viewer. Constructed as a character, it takes on the "lifelike" (Ang) qualities of an emoting entity within the diegesis.

Chronicle's appropriation of the prosumer aesthetic does not, like *The Blair Witch Project* or some of its contemporaries, seek to convince its audience of the authenticity of its content, nor does it construct a sensation of recorded reality. Rather the application of handheld camera and slaved audio techniques offers a means to bring the audience within close psychological proximity of its characters – observational if not experiential. As such themes of affirmation, self-destruction and redemption find equal expression (literally) through visual manifestation, performance and narrative progression. By abandoning the convention of fictional techniques, *Chronicle* is thus rendered as a more interesting study of psychological decline, and ultimately a more complex film.

There is no doubt that these techniques will continue to be explored and applied in the unconventional telling of conventional narratives that challenge and confront the boundaries between spectral, character and technological gazes, and which aim to blur the line between fictional representation and the indexical symbolism of the apparently real.

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**Mapping Nichols' Modes in Documentary Film:
Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry and *Helvetica***

Barry Natusch and Beryl Hawkins

Abstract

Bill Nichols' "modes" theory of classifying documentary films by describing them in terms of poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative "modes" is well established as an analytical model. Nichols' mode taxonomy is generally used to broadly describe the predominant mode present throughout a film and therefore operates at a macro level. It is proposed, however, that Nichols' concept of modes is also applicable at a micro level. By this is meant that in-depth scene-by-scene analysis is also possible in terms of Nichols' modes in order to better understand the film structure and the director's vision. To demonstrate the proposed approach, Nichols' theory of modes is used to analyse the structure of two recent films *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* (Klayman 2012) and *Helvetica* (Hustwit 2007) by categorizing scenes in terms of modes. It is shown that this empirical approach is useful for filmmakers and film critics and justifies the influential position of Nichols in film theory.

Keywords: *Ai Weiwei*, *Helvetica*, documentary films, Bill Nichols, narrative.

Introduction

American film scholar Bill Nichols has received widespread and enduring attention as an author of nine books and over a hundred film articles, but beyond this, he is best known for his “modes” theory of classifying documentary films at a macro level by examining genres, structures, and aesthetics.

An overview of several models of film analysis theory reveals the difficulty of finding an appropriate model for analysing documentary films. A noted scholar of documentary films, Michael Renov, proposed four tendencies of documentaries – to record, persuade, analyse or express, – but these categories are rather too generalized and simplistic, and by the scholar’s own admission a difficult model to adapt to the nuances of contemporary documentaries (Renov). An earlier approach, highlighting four documentary traditions, is Paul Rotha’s model (incorporating naturalist, realist, news-reel and propagandist traditions), which offers more detailed categorical distinctions than Renov’s.

A more comprehensive mapping of documentary films, however, has been created by Bill Nichols (2010). Among Nichols’ six modes of documentaries there are a few similarities with Rotha’s traditions. The realist tradition, for example, is somewhat akin to Nichols’ poetic mode; the news-reel tradition shares similar traits with Nichols’ observational mode and the propagandist tradition fits into Nichols’ description of the expository mode. Nichols’ departure from Rotha’s model lies in his detailed mapping of each mode in cinematic terms in order to uncover the filmmaker’s distinctive voice as well as the film’s overall framework (Nichols 2010). Nichols admits that each documentary film does not necessarily fall into one mode but can consist of a combination of modes. At the same time, the fluidity of the modes opens up the possibility for a variety of interpretations for documentary films. As Nichols remarks, “most films incorporate more than one mode, even though some modes are more prominent at one time or place than another. These modes serve as a skeletal framework that individual filmmakers flesh out according to their own creative disposition” (Nichols 2010: 143). He goes on to emphasize that “we can accept this fluidity as cause for celebration” (Nichols 2010: 143). Therefore, in contrast to the majority of theories which adopt a single, hermetic approach to dissecting documentary film, Nichols’ theory rather uniquely allows for, and even seeks out, multiple dimensions within any well-directed documentary.

The following summarizes features for each of the six Nichols’ modes of documentary film:

1. The poetic mode exhibits Modernist characteristics typified by the qualities of fragmentation, emotionalism, expressiveness and ambiguity.
2. The expository mode’s purpose is to disseminate information or to persuade. Images and footage are used to strengthen spoken narrative. A common feature is an authoritative voice-over as used in news and TV programs.
3. The observational mode uses film footage to chronicle a scene as it occurs. Seeking to be objective, the unobtrusive camera takes on the role of the audience, watching and observing the action.
4. The participatory mode relies on interviews, considering them to be a credible source of knowledge about the subject.

5. The reflexive mode focuses on the act of filming to apprise the viewer of the filmmaking process. An example is when one camera films a recording session taken by another camera.
6. The performative mode is identified as being subjective. Performed acts with an emotional intensity or uniqueness of vision are recorded to express the director's personal vision or enhance the narrative.

As clear and useful as Nichols' taxonomy is, criticism has been directed at the model, for instance, by identifying the modes as too reductive in the case of Bruzzi (2002) and sometimes inconsistent in the case of Ward (2005). Referring to his taxonomy as "Nichols' family tree", Bruzzi not only finds problems with its "breathtakingly simplistic" nature, but also finds that documentaries are too experimental and "heterogeneous" to be assigned to one mode (Bruzzi 3). Even mixing the various modes in one film, she suggests, also questions their overall usefulness in contemporary documentary film analysis.

Ward also points out that categorizing modes as representative of certain eras results in inconsistencies. For example, expository documentaries were not just restricted to the 1920s, and reflexive documentaries are not just a modern development. Ward also notes that the term "documentary" is now so broad that it is difficult to categorize many of these films. However, Nichols defends his model by noting the following: "The differing documentary modes may seem to provide a history of documentary film, but they do so imperfectly. Not only were most of them present from the outset, a film identified with a given mode need not be so entirely" (Nichols 159). He goes on to say that "the modes do not constitute a genealogy of documentary film so much as a pool of resources available to all" (Nichols 159).

Despite these concerns, Cagle argues that since documentaries are frequently hybrids of Nichols' modes, this actually confirms the usefulness of his taxonomy, particularly because hybridization tends to enrich a film. Cagle supports the notion of hybridization using Nichols' modes in analogizing it to a sun-centred universe evolving into one involving intricate planetary alignments: "Where the taxonomies and models of documentary have moved, in Copernican fashion, from basic generalizations to increased complications and exceptions, a Keplerian alternative should be possible" (Cagle 47). He goes on to support this extended view of Nichols' modes by showing, through a close reading of three films, that documentaries can be effective by combining multiple modes to carry the story.

In this article it will be shown that the Nichols' model can be even more useful as a tool of analysis at the micro level or more specifically through a scene-by-scene dissection. This emphasis on the micro level is perhaps merely a more expanded interpretation of Nichols' own theoretical approach to film analysis. Nichols acknowledges the foundation for understanding the style and grammar of movies lies within the "continuum of images which it frames and punctuates with gaps (cuts, dissolves, fades, etc.) that are constantly shifting, with units that are limitless" (Nichols 1975: 35). Similarly in documentary films, Nichols says that "photographic images do not present concepts, they embody them" (2010: 99). It can be said then that the key to a fuller understanding of the documentary film lies within each image or scene. The concepts that emerge from each image or scene will invariably enable us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the film. As Nichols himself puts

it, the “combination of the two,” the micro level (individual scenes) and the macro level (overall organization), “gives the documentary tradition its power and fascination” (Nichols 2010: 101). The micro-level analysis can also provide more evidentiary proof of the documentary film’s overall concept, “expressive power” and cinematic value.

To test Nichols’ modes taxonomy at this micro level, two generically different documentaries were chosen. *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* is a striking portrayal of the artistry and social activism of contemporary Chinese superstar-provocateur, Ai Weiwei. *Helvetica* is a literary, almost poetic narrative, an aesthetic critique and demographic appraisal of a typeface. From this in-depth analysis, it will become clear that Nichols’ modes, when applied at a micro level in combination with each other, are the most effective means of reading and dissecting contemporary “hybridized” documentaries.

The Documentaries: *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* and *Helvetica*

These two documentary films chosen to test Nichols’ modes taxonomy analysis are both critically acclaimed films. Alison Klayman’s *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* (2012 – henceforth *Ai Weiwei*) was positively reviewed as “an inspiring and important documentary portrait of the Chinese artist and political dissident” (Morgenstern) and a film which is a “lively, informative, funny and inspirational portrait of a courageous, charismatic, highly original man” (French). The second film, Gary Hustwit’s *Helvetica* (2007), is described as being a series of “provocative, lively interviews with graphic designers and theorists” (Seitz) and being “enjoyable to watch them rhapsodise sans serifs and spacing” (Clarke).

The favourable critical response to *Ai Weiwei* could also be attributed to what academic Christian Sorace describes as Ai Weiwei’s iconic status in the international art world, which enables him to “uncover the substratum of politics” in his struggle with the powerful Chinese Communist Party and use it as both a source for his experimental artwork and to illuminate social injustices (417).

The film showcases the mercurial personality of Ai Weiwei, the avant-garde Chinese artist, whose work has received accolades throughout the contemporary art and political spheres. The narrative draws the viewer into the fascinating world of a complex creative spirit who openly defies Chinese authorities, organizes social activist campaigns and creates large-scale art installations including his 2010 “Sunflower Seeds” exhibition at the London Tate Modern. The film’s director, Alison Klayman, also portrays Ai Weiwei as something of a paradox. Ai Weiwei’s life and ideals are in a constant state of flux as evidenced by his active condemnation of the “bird’s nest” stadium, the Olympic facility that he personally helped to design yet later on criticized because residents in the area of the stadium had been displaced. At the same time, grappling with his heritage as the son of the politically controversial poet Ai Qing, also explains his indefatigable activism.

The documentary *Helvetica* highlights the design and widespread adoption of the typeface Helvetica. The director’s vision colours the storytelling through interviews with graphic and type designers associated with the development of the typeface since the 1950s. There seem to have been few challenges to its rise as the dominant

contemporary typeface which can be seen everywhere today. However, dramatic tension in the film, lies in the strongly expressed opposing views of those on the one hand who see Helvetica as a clean elegant type which can be used anywhere, while others see it as a bland and banal default font. The winner is the Helvetica font itself; it is found nowadays in all countries.

Both films exhibit an approach to documentary filmmaking which Chris Cagle has described as “post-classical narrative” (47). By this he means a documentary film which is neither traditionalist documentary nor art documentary but which lies somewhere between. Yet the two films are also generically quite different. *Ai Weiwei* is the account of an artist/social activist’s life, whereas *Helvetica* is a lyrical, historical account of the proliferation of a ubiquitous typeface.

Microanalysis of Nichols’ Modes in the Two Films: Overview of the Findings

All the modes were indeed present in both films as can be seen from Table 1, which summarizes the proportion of modes observed in both films across 116 scenes (79 scenes from *Ai Weiwei* and 37 scenes from *Helvetica*). The expository and participatory modes accounted for nearly two thirds of the total number of scenes in both films (59.0% of *Ai Weiwei* and 59.4% of *Helvetica*).

The other modes demonstrated different patterns of distribution. Even though the poetic mode was observed in both films, the number of scenes illustrating this mode was higher in *Helvetica* (21.7%) than in *Ai Weiwei* (13.5%). Perhaps this was because *Helvetica* dealt with the aesthetics of a typeface, whereas *Ai Weiwei* was heavily focused on the political activism of the artist himself. More observational scenes (15.4%) of *Ai Weiwei* (engaged in political activism) were counted than observational scenes in *Helvetica* (5.4%). The reflexive and performative modes were almost equally present in both films, even though they represented a minor portion of the data (11.3% of *Ai Weiwei* and 13.5% of *Helvetica*).

Table 1: Scenes classified by Nichols’ modes in *Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry* and *Helvetica* (first 24 minutes of each film)

Modes	<i>Ai Weiwei</i>	<i>Helvetica</i>
Poetic	16.5% (13)	21.7% (8)
Expository	24.1% (19)	24.3% (9)
Observational	15.2% (12)	5.4% (2)
Participatory	32.9% (26)	35.1% (13)
Reflexive	6.3% (5)	8.1% (3)
Performative	5.0% (4)	5.4% (2)
	Total Scenes 79	Total Scenes 37

Both films demonstrate a similar profile in that they open with a series of “poetic” scenes, flashes or fragments to create a subjective impression of the topic. A scene here is defined as single or multiple shots edited to present a narrative sequence. As such, scenes can include multiple images or shots linked by subject. Overall, *Ai Weiwei* contained a greater number of scenes than *Helvetica* in the first twenty-four minutes. *Ai Weiwei* changed scenes more quickly than *Helvetica*, which included lengthier interview sequences.

The expository mode with a narration and a more controlled rhetorical argument then appeared, with both films using the voices of the social actors being interviewed to provide voice-overs of scenes before moving into the interviews which characterise the participatory mode. The opening twenty-four minutes of both documentaries were also punctuated with observational camerawork, looking in on the life of *Ai Weiwei*, and showing examples of typographers' work in Helvetica, sometimes with hand-held camera footage. Both films also included some reflexive mode scenes, with external cameras filming the actual filming of *Ai Weiwei*, and test takes being highlighted in the case of *Helvetica*. Only a few examples of the performative mode could be positively identified in either *Ai Weiwei* or in *Helvetica*.

1. Poetic Mode

Nichols acknowledges the modernist characteristics within the poetic mode, typified by the qualities of fragmentation, emotionalism, expressiveness (in form), and ambiguity (2010: 162). More specifically, he goes on to say that the filmmaker manipulates the "spatial juxtapositions" of images and creates "temporal rhythms" in order to convey a subliminal message or feeling. As Nichols puts it rather succinctly, the "film form" is the filmmaker's primary objective in these sequences, not the "social actors" (2010: 162).

Imparting information through narrative storytelling is, of course, the more familiar cinematic technique, so it can be a much more challenging task to clearly identify the poetic mode. Nichols' poetic mode originates from the early cinematic period of poetic experimentation (the 1920's), therefore recognizing these historical roots can lend more clarity to an understanding of the poetic mode. The most radical development which emerged from this early cinematic period, Nichols explains, is that "the filmmaker's way of seeing things took higher priority than demonstrating the camera's ability to record what it saw faithfully and accurately" (2010: 129).

It may also be useful to turn to the characteristics of postmodernism to gain even more insight into the complexities of the poetic mode. Cultural theorist Linda Hutcheon describes postmodernism as "deliberately undermining" traditional notions of "value, order, meaning, control and identity" (13). Therefore creating a unique "film form," even within a limited number of poetic mode sequences, challenges our traditional notions and in that premise perhaps lies the key to identifying the poetic mode. If a particular film sequence illustrates any of the qualities of discontinuous fragmentation, ambiguity or surrealism, then perhaps it may well fall under the category of the poetic mode.

Similarly, Lyotard's description of postmodernist artists also applies to filmmakers engaging in the poetic mode, when he says that postmodernist artists are "not in principle governed by pre-established rules" (110), but rather create their own parameters in their works which can also converge with their personal lives as evidenced in the film, *Ai Weiwei*. Alison Klayman's selection of the title suggests Ai Weiwei's sense of self-aggrandizement contributes to his attitude of self-empowerment, leading to his social activism and his stance of never regretting anything, even to the extent of running up against the rules of censorship and protest in a Chinese context.

The filmic concept of focusing on a material object as opposed to a dynamic person or a compelling sociopolitical issue also clearly places Gary Hustwit's *Helvetica* within the postmodern context of "undermining" identity and values. Ascribing identity to a type font and placing importance on the value of a font in our cultural society perturbs our traditional notions, in essence transforming the unrepresentable into a presentable artistic creation (Lyotard).

Poetic Mode in *Ai Weiwei*

Given that postmodern characteristics are present in both films, it is easy to understand the high percentage of poetic mode examples (16.5% and 22%) that occur, as shown in Table 2. Montage is the predominant focus. Series of fragmentary images (montages) occur as exemplified in the stills of vivid red and green vases, the bicycle installation and the blue arm sculpture (Table 2, ex. 4). Metaphorical images also come to life in this mode with, for example, the same arm sculpture appearing in white (Table 2, ex. 2) and reappearing again in Ai Weiwei's famous "finger defying" photos, which express his opposition to governments and authority. Another image of the white cat serenely settled below a towering blue cylindrical sculpture (Table 2, ex. 3) represents serenity and a simple life in the midst of a frenetic urban landscape. The pace of editing in these fragmentary images varies, as can be seen in the slow rhythm of the work camp still (Table 2, ex. 1) which lasts a notable eight long seconds. Poetic nuances are also revealed in the framing of shots, illustrated by the director's partial framing of Ai Weiwei's face with no eyes, only showing his mouth (Table 2, ex. 6).

Elements of memory become apparent during the scene where Ai Weiwei talks about his personal impressions of his father's persecution during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, when he says, "These are experiences I cannot erase" (Table 2, ex. 6). Klayman deftly edits a montage of archival family and historical stills to visually illustrate the factual side of his family history (Table 2, ex. 5). Abrupt shifts of time and space (temporal and spatial juxtapositions) consistently occur between, for example, Ai Weiwei's Chengdu hotel room and his art exhibition preparation in Munich.

Poetic Mode in *Helvetica*

Instances of the poetic mode in *Helvetica* are listed in Table 3. For the most part these are a series of fragments, still shots, sound bites from interviews, snatches of music, intercut shots, tinting of the image and framing of the shot. All these devices could be seen as the director seeking to "aestheticize," particularly, the beginning of the film, to make it seem as if the font Helvetica has origins in an atelier rather than a printing house.



Series of fragments or montages occur frequently in *Helvetica*. Montages include a series of book covers and street scenes of Helvetica signage in New York and Amsterdam (Table 3, ex. 4 and 5). A slower editing rhythm is utilized when the camera lingers on the 14th St/Broadway-Lafayette subway platform (Table 3, ex. 1) as a means to emphasize the importance of this signage in contemporary Helvetica history. In a manner similar to *Ai Weiwei*, Hustwit uses abrupt shifts of time as evidenced by the intercutting of interviews in offices and montages of street scenes,

such as bicycle parking in Amsterdam. In addition, the moderate tempo music score echoes the mood of the visuals.

Several metaphorical images emerge in the New York street scenes, specifically in the shot of the yellow taxi positioned between the truck and the bus, which is visually tied to the voice-over comment, “It’s hard to get your head around something that big.” In the same vein, a visual of the Monza Grand Prix is shown together with the voice-over, “And it’s Swiss designers in the 1950’s who are really driving that along” (Table 3, ex. 3).

Elements of memory are covered in such interview comments as “The 1950’s was an interesting period in the development of graphic design”; “It was in 1993 that I bought my first computer”; “...and working on a poster took us days”; and “I started late with the computer” (Table 3, ex. 6 and 7).

Table 2: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as poetic mode categories

Poetic Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Editing: slow rhythm	1. Work camp still: length of shot is 8 seconds.	
Metaphorical representation	2. White arm sculpture reappears in Ai Weiwei's famous “finger defying” photos. 3. White cat serenely settled below a towering blue cylindrical sculpture.	










Series of fragments	4. Fragmented art images.	
Use of historical footage	5. Reference to Ai Weiwei's father in <i>The Long March</i> .	
Framing of the shot	6. Partial framing of Ai Weiwei's face with no eyes, only showing his mouth.	

Table 3: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as poetic mode categories

Poetic Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Editing: use of slow motion	1. Shot lingering on 14 th St/Broadway-Lafayette Signage, NY subway.	

Metaphorical representation # 1	2. Visual tied to voice-over comment, "It's hard to get your head around something that big."	
Metaphorical representation # 2	3. Visual tied to voiceover comment, "And it's Swiss designers in the 1950's who are really driving that along."	
Series of fragments: New York	4. New York street.	
Series of fragments: Amsterdam	5. Amsterdam street.	
Historical footage # 1	6. "It was in 1993 that I bought my first computer" (Wim Crouwel).	
Historical footage # 2	7. "...and working on a poster took us days."	

2. Expository Mode

The expository mode presents a more organized narrative than the poetic mode. Where the poetic mode highlights aesthetic elements, the expository mode presents a more organized, narrative approach. Nichols describes the basic elements of the expository mode as “indexical images of reality; poetic, affective associations; story-telling qualities; and rhetorical persuasiveness” (2010: 167). He emphasizes this by saying that the expository mode “addresses the viewer directly with titles or voices that propose a perspective or advance an argument” (Nichols 2010: 167). Features of the expository mode include “voice of God” off-camera narration to lend an authoritative tone to the production by subjugating images to the role of merely backing up what is said. The goal of this is “to build a sense of credibility from qualities such as detachment, neutrality, disinterestedness, or omniscience” (Nichols 2010: 169).

Expository Mode in *Ai Weiwei*

Archival and news footage is an important element in the expository mode (see Table 4, ex. 1 and 2: the Long March, the schoolbags of child victims after the Chengdu earthquake, news footage from the earthquake, television broadcast news stories and the Beijing Olympic displacement footage), lending a sense of realism and authenticity to the film’s structure. Further illustrations of the presentation of objective images are seen in the numerous slides with white text on a black background conveying simple factual messages such as “More than 70,000 people died in the earthquake” (Table 4, ex. 7). In addition to these expository mode scenes, however, there are basically expository scenes where one is left with the impression that, through his inventiveness and charisma, the subject of the film, Ai Weiwei, displaces the director’s agenda and voice. In Table 4, ex. 3 and 4, for example, the film focuses on Ai Weiwei himself talking directly to the camera, explaining his approach to art and activism. “I consider myself more of a chess player,” he claims, a statement that is accompanied by images from his Twitter post (Table 4, ex. 5). Linked to these are staged scenes of Ai Weiwei working on his computer (Table 4, ex. 6), and shots of a cat opening a door to illustrate the metaphor, “Out of 40 cats one knows how to open the door” (Table 6, ex. 7), implying that only the select few will challenge the status quo and become activists. Archival and news footage is also an important element in this mode. In *Ai Weiwei*, news footage of the Chengdu earthquake, television broadcast news stories and footage of the displacement caused by the Beijing Olympics lend a sense of realism and authenticity to the film’s structure.

Expository Mode in *Helvetica*

In *Helvetica* (Table 5), a series of experts on typography introduce the narrative. Considerable use is made of their voices beginning off-camera, introducing an image then intercutting with interview head shots of the narrator talking on camera (Table 5, ex. 1 and 2). The footage thus supports the comments made by font designers as they often introduce opposing views on Helvetica, some maintaining that it is a simple clean design, others claiming that its very simplicity makes it banal. This dichotomy of views of the typeface becomes a subplot in the narrative. The director uses a mix of

still images, indoor and outdoor footage of Helvetica signage in a number of countries and contexts to emphasize its ubiquity (Table 5, ex. 4).

The narrative expository of both films is thus told through a mix of voice-over commentaries supported by still images and footage (Table 5, ex. 3 and 5).

Table 4: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as expository mode categories

Expository Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Montage of fragments: rhetorical/argumentative frame	1. Ai Weiwei's father on the Long March.	
Image supports basic claims	2. School bags after the Chengdu earthquake.	
Direct address of viewer	3. Ai Weiwei talks to the camera directly.	
Explanation	4. "I consider myself more of a chess player."	
Image gives further support to commentary	5. Twitter computer screen shots.	




Controlled arrangement	6. Ai Weiwei typing on his blog, with continuing cat motif.	
Staging of events	7. Cat metaphor.	
Use of titles	8. White text/black background: "More than 70,000 people died in the earthquake."	

Table 5: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as expository mode categories



Expository mode subcategories	Examples <i>Helvetica</i>	Images
Argument proposed	1. Rick Poyner puts forward the view that typefaces can influence the message they carry.	
Argument advanced	2. Erik Spiekermann argues that Helvetica is ubiquitous, like McDonald's.	

Image gives further support to commentary	3. Matthew Carter reports where his interest in typography came from.	
Visual illustration of commentary	4. Pervasiveness of Helvetica signage in New York.	
Images support basic claims	5. Originators of Helvetica.	

3. Observational Mode

The observational mode functions in much the same way as the housebound magazine photographer in the classic Hitchcock movie, *Rear Window*, who spends his days and nights observing his neighbours. Anything that happens in “observational” film sequences is portrayed as objective reality in the documentary. It is essentially akin to how we respond to television news footage. The silent, unobtrusive camera becomes our eyes and ears, and we believe that we are “there” in much the same way that television reality programmes voyeuristically make us believe we are genuinely sharing experiences with participants.

The observational mode occupies a lower ranking in both films (15.2% and 5.5%), compared with the expository and participatory modes, as shown in Table 1. This mode, examples of which are listed in Tables 6 and 7, is also subtle like the poetic mode but easier to detect. The viewer is compelled to extrapolate the underlying message because the filmmaker has become an “observer,” too. The filmmaker has, in effect, retired “to the position of observer,” Nichols explains, by relinquishing control over the action and subjects during filming and editing (2010: 174). The filmmaker is thus sharing his observations with the viewer, which in turn “calls on the viewer to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done” (Nichols 2010: 174).

Observational scenes are more apparent and easier to categorize than the poetic mode because they have the look and feel of what film scholar and documentary filmmaker David MacDougall describes as “rushes” (raw footage from a day’s shooting). He suggests that sometimes filmmakers are attracted to this *cinéma vérité* style because it

“reinjects into their film some of the qualities perceived in the rushes,” which ultimately adds another dimension of excitement to the film for both the filmmaker and the viewer (MacDougall 42).



Observational mode in *Ai Weiwei*

Considerable use was made of hand-held smartphone footage. During Ai Weiwei’s confrontational scenes with local police authorities (both in a hotel room and on the streets), the smartphone footage showed the emerging pattern of shocking events while at the same time lending more credence to the veracity of Ai Weiwei’s accounts (Table 6, Ex 4). In another long scene, Klayman aims to reveal aspects of the artist’s character by showing his adoration and respect for cats (Table 6, ex. 1), to the point of this becoming the basis for some of his own personal philosophy. Another scene illustrates Ai Weiwei’s love of food and the importance he places on spending social time with friends and staff (Table 6, ex. 3). Footage of a security camera in one scene (Table 6, ex. 3) serves as a metaphorical representation of observation.

Observational mode in *Helvetica*

In *Helvetica*, as seen in Table 7, the sense of participation is intensified through unedited footage that serves, presumably, to enhance the sense of documentary spontaneity and is a nod to the aesthetics of *cinéma vérité*. At Broadway-Lafayette station in New York, the unobtrusive camera shows a man walking along the platform, sitting down on the bench and leaning over to kiss his friend (Table 7, ex. 1). The cinematic technique used during an interview with Massimo Vignelli (Table 7, ex. 2) clearly resembles the unsteady nature of a hand-held camera as opposed to a formal camera setup. Body language is a major consideration in some of the interviews with Rick Poynor and Wim Crouwel, where the interviewees are frequently using hand gestures and a variety of body positions.

Table 6: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as observational mode categories

Observational Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Aspects of Ai Weiwei’s character revealed	1. Cat scene.	
Raw footage, like “rushes”	2. Ai Weiwei places importance on food and social time with friends/staff.	





Camera as a tool	3. The security camera serves as a metaphor for observation/surveillance.	
“Rushes”	4. Hand-held camera-phone in police confrontation hotel scene.	

Table 7: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as observational mode categories

Observational Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Unedited footage, like “rushes” # 1	1. Actions of commuters at Broadway-Lafayette Station, New York.	
Unedited footage, like “rushes” # 2	2. Hand-held camera during interview with Massimo Vignelli.	

4. Participatory Mode

Interviews serve as the foundation for the participatory mode as well as a credible source of knowledge about the film’s subject. They are the most important element of investigative news programmes; hence they serve as the persuasive mechanism charged with convincing the audience of the film’s veracity. It is not only the mere presence of interviews, but also the variety of voices and opinions from multiple individuals that enhance our belief in the film’s credibility.

In contrast to the observational mode, the participatory mode is infused with the filmmaker’s perspective, as Nichols explains, and it “gives us a sense of what it is like

for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result” (2010: 181). Subtle clues about the filmmaker-subject relationship also become more apparent in this mode. Nichols goes on to say that “as viewers we have the sense that we are witness to a form of dialogue between the filmmaker and his or her subject... that stresses situated engagement, negotiated interaction, and emotion-laden encounter” (2010: 187). Moreover, the way in which the filmmaker edits the interviews, leads to a clearer understanding of the filmmaker’s subjective relationship with the film’s issues.

The participatory mode is also the most frequently used category in these two films, as shown in Table 1 (32.9% and 36.2%), implying that both filmmakers believe that by exploring multiple viewpoints they will present a more fair and balanced perspective of their issues, an approach that news analysts certainly subscribe to in order to gain public trust.

Participatory Mode in *Ai Weiwei*

In the case of *Ai Weiwei*, Klayman uses interviews (Table 8) as a means “to represent broad social and historical perspectives” (Nichols 2010: 187). It is easy to place the following interviews within this category: that with Chen Danqing, a fellow artist who recounts details about Ai Weiwei’s early career as an artist (Table 8, ex. 3); that with Ai Dan, Ai Weiwei’s brother, who talks about their previous family life (Table 8, ex. 4), and that with magazine publisher Hung Huang (Table 8, ex. 5). Through the interviews with Huang and art curator Ethan Cohen, we also see evidence of Klayman’s distinctive voice, which is one of admiration and praise for Ai Weiwei. The individual voices of the earthquake volunteers represent the voice of the common people and thereby lend another perspective to the tragic 2008 Chengdu earthquake.

“We’re hired assassins” (Table 8, ex. 2) is the metaphorical comment by Li Zhan Yang, Ai Weiwei’s assistant, which is revealing of the artist’s work regime. It could be construed as a somewhat negative comment, but it can also be seen as the filmmaker’s attempt to present a more balanced view of her subject.

Participatory Mode in *Helvetica*

The intercutting between participatory and observatory modal elements is a noteworthy element of this film. Interspersing footage of the actual interview and observational footage of Massimo Vignelli, a font designer who tells the story of Helvetica is an example of this. Hustwit’s voice finds expression in the differing views of interviewees on the aesthetics and merits of Helvetica, but it would seem that his narrative perspective is most closely aligned with Vignelli’s (Table 9, ex. 1). Matthew Carter, type designer, provides an historical overview by talking about his father (Table 9, ex. 2) and the origins of Helvetica. Primary source material is included in this mode, such as Vignelli’s American Airlines logo pictures. Like Klayman, Hustwit includes references to broad social issues and historical perspectives. Interviews with four type designers also provide further details about Helvetica’s apparent ubiquity, as well as the range of attitudes towards the font (Table 9, ex. 3 and 4).

Table 8: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as participatory mode categories










Participatory Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Filmmaker and subject respond to each other. Filmmaker's role: engaging and collaborative	1. Ai Weiwei leaning toward filmmaker.	
Interview: enriches commentary with grain of individual voices	2. Ai Weiwei's assistant, "We're hired assassins."	
Interviews: filmmaker presents broad social issues and historical perspectives	3. Chen Danqing fills in details about Ai Weiwei's early career.	
Interviews: oral history	4. Ai Weiwei's brother, Ai Dan, talks about their previous family life.	
Interviews: filmmaker presents broad social issues and historical perspectives	5. Praise for Ai Weiwei by curators & journalists, e.g. Hung Huang, magazine publisher.	

Table 9: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as participatory mode categories

Participatory Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Primary source material (visual history)	1. Visual representation of Vignelli's American Airlines logo.	
Interviews: oral history	2. Matthew Carter talks about his father and the origins of Helvetica.	
Interviews: filmmaker presents broad social issues and historical perspectives	3. Type designers Hoefler and Tobias talk about Helvetica's ubiquity and the range of attitudes towards the font.	
Interviews: oral history	4. Wim Crouwel talks about the computer's role in typeface design.	

5. Reflexive Mode

The reflexive mode focuses on the act of filming to make the viewer more aware of the filmmaking process, beyond the theme and content of the film itself. Nichols describes this mode as “*how* we represent the historical world as well as... *what* gets represented” with the goal of helping the viewer “to see documentary for what it is: a construct or representation” (2010: 194). The reflexive mode might therefore be manifested in scenes of the social actors in the process of being filmed or being prepared for filming as the following examples show.

Reflexive Mode in *Ai Weiwei*


In Table 10, examples of reflexivity in *Ai Weiwei* are presented. Ai Weiwei is filmed by a secondary camera as he talks to the primary camera (Table 10, ex. 1, 2 and 3). These scenes are fairly straightforward instances of the reflexive mode, depicting the act of Ai Weiwei being filmed and having his photograph taken. The filmmaker is thus employing reflexivity in what Nichols calls a “formal perspective, in that reflexivity draws attention to documentary form itself” (2010: 194). But there are also scenes where Ai Weiwei is filmed taking a picture of himself and using a camera to photograph evidence of police activities.

Reflexive Mode in *Helvetica*

Examples of reflexivity in *Helvetica* (Table 11) reveal the process of the filmmaker making his subjects feel comfortable, allowing them time to compose themselves, to question themselves and to seek confirmation from the director that they are on the right track. In employing this mode, Hustwit seems to address the issue of “What to do with people?” by including artisan Vignelli’s questions, “How should I talk? Should I not talk? You want me to say something? Say something? Say nothing?” In contrast, Hustwit only uses participatory mode footage of Rick Poynor, with no reflexive introduction, as if to distinguish between the characters and roles of the two social actors: studio designer and the professional typeface commentator.

The inclusion of such reflexive scenes in both films reveals some of their approach to the process of filmmaking, and their relationship with their interviewees. Klayman’s reflexive scenes reveal that Ai Weiwei might have had considerable influence in the making of her film because he was so confident in front of the camera. In Hustwit’s film, the reflexive scenes show a slight diffidence on the part of some commentators (“How should I talk?”) suggesting that even though these people are experts in their field and are focused on seriously evaluating Helvetica, they are not so confident in front of a camera (Table 11, ex. 1 and 2). In both films, the reflexive scenes also serve as transitions between scenes.

Table 10: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as reflexive mode categories

Reflexive Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Contextualization	1. Ai Weiwei being prepared for filming.	

Metacommunication	2. Camera films Ai Weiwei speaking to another camera.	 A still from a video showing Ai Weiwei, a man with a beard and a green jacket, speaking directly to a camera. A large professional video camera is visible in the foreground on the left. Subtitles at the bottom read: "I've been asking everyone around me for good ideas." A timestamp "00:03:31" is in the top left corner.
Contextualization	3. The act of photographing Ai Weiwei.	 A still from a video showing two men in a courtyard. One man is standing against a brick wall, and the other is holding a camera up to take a picture of him. A timestamp "00:00:32" is in the top left corner.

Table 11: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as reflexive mode categories

Reflexive Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Reflexive introduction # 1	1. Massimo Vignelli, "How should I talk? Should I not talk? You want me to say something? Say something? Say nothing?"	 A close-up still of Massimo Vignelli speaking. Subtitles at the bottom read: "You want me to say something?" A timestamp "00:03:41" is in the top left corner.
Reflexive introduction # 2	2. Wim Crouwel, "Shall I begin?" (Filmmaker making subject comfortable)	 A still of Wim Crouwel, an older man with white hair, speaking. The background shows a wall with some text.

6. Performative Mode

The performative mode, in which performed acts are recorded with an emotional intensity or uniqueness of vision, conveys a personal and subjective vision or narrative. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish from the participatory mode, as Nichols himself acknowledges. Nichols emphasizes that he does not deploy the term in a linguistic sense.¹ Rather, his discussion of "performative" is closer to the ideas of

¹ Linguists, such as Austin, have defined "performative" language as being "illocutionary," where using language becomes a speech act. For instance, a minister at a wedding ceremony declaring, "I pronounce you man and wife."

sociologist Goffman, who talks about performative elements of acting by real people or social actors who “present themselves in everyday life in ways that differ from a consciously adopted role or fictional performance” (Nichols 2010: 8). However, Nichols goes on to emphasize that where the performative mode differs from the other modes is in the way that social actors’ performances draw “more heavily on the tradition of acting as a way to bring a heightened emotional involvement to a situation or a role... They want us to feel on a visceral level rather than on a conceptual level” (2010: 203).


Performative Mode in *Ai Weiwei*

Examples of performativity in *Ai Weiwei* are presented in Table 12. The dropping of a Han dynasty vase is shown through a sequence of stills (Table 12, ex. 1). The vase is valuable and evokes a subjective response, which might otherwise be seen as an outrageous and wanton act of vandalism. Another unique Ai Weiwei performance occurs when he sits in a large cooking pot with the lid on his head (Table 12, ex. 2). A third example is at a group photo shoot when one girl mimics Ai Weiwei’s signatory finger gesture as he steps in and joins the event (Table 12, ex. 3). These examples of performativity, infused as they are with an emotional message and carrying the narrative, are powerful images underscoring how fortunate the filmmaker was to be able to work with such a performative artist.

Performative Mode in *Helvetica*

As shown in Table 13, examples of performativity in *Helvetica* include a girl walking by the Helvetica film crew shooting her own film, thus suggesting an element of reflexivity (Table 13, ex. 1) as well as being performative. A second example is the demonstration by Matthew Carter showing how he designs a typeface on a computer screen (Table 13, ex. 2).

Table 12: Sample scenes in *Ai Weiwei* identified as performative mode categories

Performative Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Demonstration of an extraordinary or outrageous act	1. Ai Weiwei breaking Han vase.	




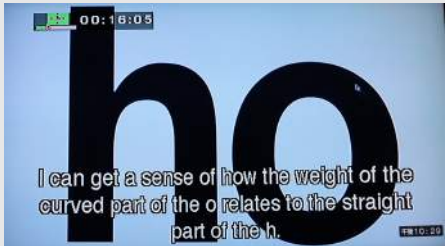
Performance # 1	2. Ai Weiwei in a cooking pot.	
Performance # 2	3. Ai Weiwei and girls make finger gestures spontaneously in group photo shoot.	

Table 13: Sample scenes in *Helvetica* identified as performative mode categories

Performative Mode Subcategories	Illustration	Corresponding Frame
Involvement of passers-by	1. Girl filming the filmmaking against Helvetica background.	
Demonstration: how a task is performed	2. Designing a typeface.	

Conclusion

As documentaries come to occupy a more important role in the visual culture landscape, it is all the more imperative to find effective means of analysis that take into account the mode's latest trends and developments. This research shows how an empirical approach to film analysis can supplement and enhance the more traditional approaches to film theory.

Indeed, we are now able to return to the initial conjecture regarding Nichols' modes: that adapting Nichols' approach from a macro level to a micro level provides an equally effective approach to analysing hybrid documentary films. The question of whether Nichols' taxonomy could be applied on a microanalytical level has been answered through the preceding analysis of 116 scenes from *Ai Weiwei* and *Helvetica*, all of which could be categorized into one of the theorist's six modes. This empirical approach, which is set out by highlighting the relative proportional representations of the respective modes, revealed the dominance of participatory, poetic and expository modes, which account for three-quarters of the scenes in both works. The other three modes – observational, reflexive and performative – constituted approximately one quarter of the scenes examined.

Beyond merely identifying modes present within given scenes, it is essential to consider how these enable us to excavate the "message" of the film and the voice of the director. Reading a film can be said to be analogous to a jigsaw puzzle consisting of many pieces where the pieces are scenes and the shapes are the modes. Understanding how the pieces fit together is like reading a musical score where the composer's vision can be revealed. The microanalysis of Nichols' modes helped us to more clearly comprehend the skeletal framework of the films and the directors' visions. It also suggests that a director requires both a macro level and micro level awareness of modes in order to produce a sophisticated documentary.

Nichols has intimated at the need for both broad and focused analysis of documentary films. He claims that the link between modes at the macro level and micro level "gives the documentary tradition its power and fascination" (Nichols 2010: 101). This mingling of modes, Cagle (46) agrees, is also reflective of the enriched "hybrid" nature of contemporary documentaries. In view of this tendency towards hybridization, and more generally towards a conflation of more heterogeneous, experimental, avant-garde, and "post-classical" forms, it can be argued that Nichols' modes, applied at a micro level, provide an effective tool for analysis.

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Newsroom Resistance: An Ethnographic Study of the Modern News Worker, Policies, and Organizational Dissatisfaction

William Schulte

Abstract

Modern news workers see themselves pressed by digital routines, industry confusion, and their organization's loss of journalistic focus. This ethnographic study looked at the ways they resist counter-journalistic policy. Social construction theory and the hierarchy of influence model informed this study as new and forming occupational pressures push news workers' ideological and professional dispositions away from their employers. This study found friction and frustration for news workers when organizations defied the traditional journalistic tenets. Organizational directives to follow policy were overt and common. As the newsrooms in this study struggled to find effective business models, their attention was often diverted from the needs and performance of news workers. The desire to streamline information and have more content handled in the digital realm kept management from addressing news worker satisfaction and deficiencies in coverage. This study found management did not value traditional tasks like quality writing or photography and revealed that those news workers slow to adapt to digital tasks were laid off. Organizations generally have the upper hand, but news workers have found a few ways to send messages to administration.

Keywords: Future of newsrooms, digital news, newsrooms, news workers, policy, control, resistance, dissatisfaction.

Introduction

Cultural upheaval in the realm of news work is not a newly minted dynamic. History has shown news workers become protective of their traditions and civic roles when technology threatens to change their routines or their function. However, the modern American news machine has shed news workers at an unprecedented rate. Over the last five years traditional civic roles have become subservient to seeking a tenable business model for many news organizations.

A 2008 survey in *American Journalism Review* revealed that news workers were pessimistic about their futures in the face of changing technology and felt disenfranchised by leadership. This has not always been the case. Fellowship was once common in the newsroom (Breed). This is depicted in classic movies like *The Front Page* (1931), *Ace in the Hole* (1951) and *All the President's Men* (1976); even the *Lou Grant* show that ran from 1977-1982 featured a heated but collegial dynamic between supervisors, staff, and peers. This study shows that the acerbic personalities, once depicted in these movies, now in reality find creative ways to resist management.

The *American Journalism Review* study explored loss of fellowship among colleagues and a disconnection with readers. Many news workers highlighted in this work felt this loss was the result of favoring digital newsgathering and distribution (Wilson). According to Linda Foley, then the president of the Newspaper Guild,

pessimism stems from changes in the workplace. In earlier days, she says, reporters came back to the newsroom to write stories after gathering the information they needed, and there they could bounce the story off coworkers. The resulting feeling of connection around the newsroom is missing in an age when reporters can file stories without ever meeting their coworkers. (Wilson 3)

This lack of optimism that concerned news workers in 2008 has certainly proved to be valid in terms of jobs. Between 2008 and 2012, the newspaper industry laid off over 38,000 news workers (Smith). This was done in favour of cheap citizen journalism and younger, video-savvy news workers. Layoffs continue to rise, notably June 2013 saw the layoff of the entire *Chicago Sun Times* photo staff.

This is a challenging period for news workers as competing forces like digital platforms force organizations to re-create themselves. As publishers scramble to bring costs in line with thinning revenues, digital change has broken the traditional business model that has served media organizations during most of the rise of the American press. This study reports the results of a collection of observations among working journalists. It incorporates the ethnographic tradition of participant observations, job shadowing, and informal conversations. This work visits the concepts of newsroom social controls but focuses on how new social controls have given rise to resistance in the workplace.

Literature Review

Many would suspect that the individuals on the front line of news production would be extremely influential in controlling the images brought before the public as a reflection of the world. However, the literature related to the pressures and influences on the American news worker has indicated this has not been the case.

According to Tuchman (1972) each story a news worker produced had the potential to affect the way he/she was viewed by superiors, and their daily actions affected the ability of the organization to make a profit. "Inasmuch as the newspaper is made of many stories, these dangers are multiplied and omnipresent" (Tuchman 1972: 298). Berger and Luckmann explored these pressures and introduced the idea that over time social groups form a mental picture of the roles individuals play as they interact. This belief of what reality is becomes reality; thus reality is socially constructed. They also found that although reality is socially constructed, rather than a reflection of an objective reality, concrete individuals served as the agents of that reality.

Since White's pioneering study, gate keeping has been thought of as the foremost example of news worker power. Various studies suggest that the gate and the gatekeeper role neither remain intact nor are fully replaced but have become a hinge between tradition and change (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski). Warren Breed supported the idea of a news worker disempowered by social control. He said, "Any important change toward a more free and responsible press must stem from various possible pressures on the publisher, who epitomizes the policy-making and coordinating role" (Breed 334).

The hierarchy of influence model proposed by Shoemaker and Reese had utility in understanding the role of the rank-and-file news worker. It saw the news worker's level of influence squeezed by routines, organizational controls, extra-media concerns, and ideology. In this model the levels of influence were explanative of the hierarchical structure of organizations. The individual was at the centre of this model and this level of influence referred to the education and professionalism of individual journalists.

Schlesinger found routines to be more than just a way to meet deadlines and manage a complex world for audiences. He noted the routines of news programs were affected by political, economic, and ideological constraints that made news production akin to propaganda. Schlesinger found that news workers on the front line of production could make only cosmetic changes that appeared profound to other professionals because of their novelty. Many scholars assert that digital transition has obscured what a journalist truly is (Allan).

Bourdieu explored social space in terms of peer networks and social capital as the non-financial social value of an individual. As individuals engage and interact in the various aspects of life, they develop certain dispositions toward their identities and the ways they are expected to behave. Through these dispositions, combined with other complex social behaviour and expectations, they will start to understand their place in the social order and begin to embody this expectation in their habitus.

The imposing hand of corporate hegemony was explored by Doug Underwood. He noted, “Newspaper content is geared to the results of readership surveys, and newsroom organization has been reshaped by newspaper managers whose commitment to the marketing ethic is hardly distinguishable from their vision of what journalism is” (xii). Individual agency is challenged when that which is expected is in discord with outside behaviours.

Actions we did not think about in advance will be dissociated from our selves and experienced as the doings of outside agents. Our rational judgments of our own authorship, in sum, seem to be accompanied by a more ephemeral sense of controlling our worlds—a feeling of vicarious agency that comes and goes depending on whether we have merely contemplated the action. (Wegner et al. 847)

Influence can also be viewed as a lateral consideration rather than in terms of being superior or inferior to more macro views. Berkowitz attempted to refine White’s gatekeeping metaphor and explained that decision-making was a group process, thus content was shaped by group dynamics. Rothenbuhler offered the following definition of ritual to inform communication research: “ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (27). He further explained that this behavior must be logical and have affect beyond the behavior itself.

Gramsci explained how cultural hegemony found itself in all aspects of life. It was societal norms that are perceived as universal truths about the way things were. Hegemony entered all aspects of daily life and influenced work, leisure time, and interpersonal relationships and impacted creative energies, thoughts, beliefs, and desires. It created a status quo, limited alternatives, and contained opportunities. It also shaped public consent so that the granting of legitimacy to dominant classes appeared spontaneous and normal in the structure of society. However, for the system to function decisions needed to meet broad needs. Hallin suggested that the media were in fact disconnected from the bourgeoisie and their control mechanisms because they needed the media to confirm their legitimacy in the capitalist system.

Tuchman (1978) found social construction only loosely related to power; moreover, he found that social construction of the factual world had more to do with the strategic rituals (such as objectivity) that allowed news workers to do their jobs within the news cycle. He found this more telling of how they constructed reality. Hall found the assignment of meaning and reality personal. Journalists used sources to create conceptual maps that organized information and fixed meanings; however, there was no single meaning and this varied depending on the historic, cultural, and personal viewpoints that gave them context.

Giddens argued that institutions did not create discourse; rather they helped those discourses become favorable and legitimized in the eyes of the public by controlling the allocation of resources through the economic forces under their influence. This indicated that discourse at least originated with the individual journalist, but under social constraints.

Boczkowski (2004) and Deuze (2007) suggest that journalists are in danger as that

which has historically been associated with their professional identity is being replaced. Journalism in terms of traditional roles like gate keeping and agenda setting is less important than speed, hypertext, and multimedia (Deuze and Paulussen). Goffman asserted that social construction of reality was an act of participation between media performers and the audience. He used the metaphor of a theater to explain that individuals were like actors performing scenes in front of others, and the stages were mediums that allowed communication to be framed.

Gamson et al. found media was overbalanced by way of ideological constraints. They noted,

If all we have learned is that reality construction takes place in a commercialized space that promotes a generalized “feel good about capitalism,” this does not take us very far. It leaves open a bewildering array of messages that are produced in many voices and many modes and that can be read in many different ways. Whatever we can learn from reality construction by examining the process, it leaves a great deal open and undetermined.” (Gamson et al. 380)

According to Choshen-Hillel, agency and power do not appear to be synonymous. Rather they are influenced by conditioning, and the allocation of resources in an ultimatum game. This triggers strategic thinking and interpersonal considerations such as reciprocity, revenge, and fear.

The previous research reviewed in this article synthesized the theoretical underpinnings of the news workers’ world and it is clear that the power of news workers to assert influence is often challenged. Technology and profit motive have led to layoffs and this has led to questions concerning journalistic autonomy, job performance, story choice, treatment, and resistance. News organizations continue to swear by objectivity, and journalists still aim for fairness and detachment. These values, generally considered positive attributes, are often at odds with the goals of stakeholders.

This review indicates little about personal values, human and social considerations, power within the newsroom, and internal stakeholders on a micro level. Gans suggested American journalists share a set of enduring values that shape the nature of news. Domingo looked at online newsrooms and discovered interactivity in newsroom discussions was common, the tendency was to consider the audience as passive rather than active. This begs the question: what personalities and values are involved in the newsroom and how do they react when challenged?

Methodology

The literature review revealed that social construction of reality has many interpretations, but it also showed that news workers have a number of reasons to resist organizational structures. Influences on news workers are plentiful but the literature review did not reveal consistent ways influence is resisted in a modern newsroom. This study addressed how news workers internalized and acted upon unfavourable policy. Given the limitations of the research cited above, this study explored the following questions:

1. How are news values socially constructed by traditional or emerging pressures, platforms, economics or other external issues?
2. How are policies resisted when traditional civic roles of news workers are marginalized?
3. How do news workers view interactions through the lens of journalism and how do directives and values resolve themselves in a functional newsroom routine?

Because this research was conducted in the “natural world” and the work relationships, attitudes, and job routines were germane to understanding the culture; a qualitative approach was chosen to allow the work to be responsive in an environment often rife with sensory chaos. Data was cultivated from three months of observations, thirty-one formally shadowed informants, forty-five informal informants met at the newspapers, and assorted internal documents such as news budgets and employee handbooks.

Participant Observation

This researcher chose three daily newsrooms to serve as field sites. They differed in size and structure, but were similar in geographic location. This was done to see how news workers interacted with the themes above.

The observation lasted from 20 June to 20 October 2011. The circulation at the newspapers varied from more than 150,000 to less than 13,000. The same large media corporation owned two of the newspapers observed; a large non-public media group owned the third newspaper. All of these newspapers were within 150 miles of each other. Proximity allowed all of the newspapers to be observed in the same time period. The news managers who granted permission for the study requested that the publications not be mentioned by name. This term was agreed upon, as that anonymity was desirable to protect the news workers. All informants in this study are anonymous. A pseudonym is used in field note and when referencing specific news workers. This promoted candour and was in keeping with ethnographic tradition. This researcher spent two days a week observing at each site during a standard eight-hour work shift while participating with and observing news workers doing their jobs.

Analysis of Fieldnotes

While in the field, this researcher filled notebooks with extensive “jottings.” Jottings are the listings of topics or events used in preparation to write formal fieldnotes (Robben & Sluka). These jottings became a narrative as the notes were transcribed into dated and categorized formal fieldnotes. These fieldnotes generated a binder of chronological observations. The next steps were to sort, compare, and contrast the data. Examples from fieldnotes are used herein to exemplify themes that were discovered.

Findings: Resistance

Organizational controls have taken on remarkable complexity in the wake of the digital paradigm between print and digital product. Management has become much

more overt and committed to re-branding newsrooms as digital information centers rather than newspapers. Administrators have many tools at their disposal to bring news workers in line with these goals. At the same time, news workers have not abandoned their vocations as creative, civic-minded journalists. Although they understand the issues their organizations face, they are increasingly disenchanted with being treated as commodities and liabilities, rather than valued professionals. At least that is the impression many journalists have with regard to the way their organizations views their contributions.

Journalistic autonomy is challenged in newsrooms like never before. With management desperate to find an operational model that works, they do not have time for discretion with news workers, and their sanctions are much more overt. This paper explores how organizations are perhaps poorly served by this behavior. News workers resist unfavorable policy and challenge organizational rhetoric, especially when they see these behaviours as contrary to journalistic principles or unjust to themselves or their peers. As news workers are the front line of their organizations, and the last to touch content on its way to the public, they are positioned to resist. Practical concerns for their livelihoods and the organizational controls placed on them by administrators often led to “indirect” resistance in the newsroom. But, the digital world has opened the door for news workers to exercise autonomy and stay informed.

The Practical Nature of Self-directed Work

Reporters are still, at least on paper, extremely self-directed. Although assignment desks will dispense work, this is often the result of the need for story quantity (for instance there not being enough stories to fill a local section of the newspaper on a certain day), breaking news, or a request from management. This can be a large swath of time, but it does allow reporters the latitude to find and develop their own stories. In fact, it is an expectation. Even in the cases where stories are assigned, it falls to reporters to choose the angle, sources, and style the work will take. This dynamic, like so many others, is challenged by the evolving needs of management. With smaller staffs, administrators need to control and understand what information they will have up front so they can control their content.

Breed pointed out that executives are not involved in the legwork of story building, thus staffers were able to use their superior knowledge to subvert policy. This is still true, but to a far lesser degree. Planning coverage before an event gives editors more control of the finished product but removes much of the organic spontaneity that many journalists value. In reality, editors are stuck confronting a great deal of content. Although reporters have been laid off, the means to cultivate material for the paper has grown through citizen journalism, partnerships with other news organizations, and digital sources. Line editors have been laid off as well, forcing those who remain to contend with copy and wrangle other material. Reporters are expected to write between two and three stories a day and most line editors manage between six and ten staff members. Getting all of the stories edited is a challenge and controlling the elements contained within them is nearly impossible. It is also not desirable.

Many line editors share core principles and empathy with the staff they manage. Autonomy itself is a principle for line editors that allows them to both manage staff and see to their own routines. Line editors have a very different role in the culture

from upper management. They are on the front line with news workers and often find organizational directives as puzzling as their staff. They act as a buffer between management and staff, and though they must at times enforce policy, they have close connections to news workers (having risen from their ranks). Line editors do influence and change content, and do follow organizational directives, but they do not take action against news workers in a consistent way. They exercise their autonomy by allowing reporters to exercise theirs. For line editors, compression of tasks in the news cycle justifies letting go of some operational directives. This, along with the tradition of autonomy and the need to maintain collegial relationships with their staff, lends to the self-guidance of the news worker.

Social Connections

The close connections in newsrooms can have domestic considerations as well. Several news workers observed in this study met their spouses on the job. Office romances were common at all of the field sites. As partners are frequently promoted at an uneven rate, often a rank-and-file news worker is married to a middle manager. One middle manager was married to a news worker who was also the vice president of the local union. Despite the fact that most organizations will not allow a spouse to supervise his/her partner, editors do and must interact with each other. Thus, an editor supervising another editor's spouse must consider the social implications of the communication regarding that partner. In other words, a meeting that includes criticism of an editor's spouse would be uncomfortable. Rank-and-file peers are also involved in this dynamic. Small job performance issues that would be noted in passing by one's co-workers will be wholly ignored when that worker's spouse is in earshot. The spouse of an editor is positioned so that negative rhetoric is curbed. Interestingly, this dynamic works for both partners, with the editor defended in the news worker's social circles as well. This connection is social protection and can give news workers added autonomy in their jobs, but does little to defend against layoffs. Such connections can also cause peer resentment.

The Personal Brand

Historically, staffers who were considered stars by executives were able to sidestep policy much more effectively than younger news workers (Breed). Now, even seasoned news workers face the ax as administrators look at cutting stars to save money. In spite of this, news workers do have ways to build their value to an organization. A number of audience engagement techniques exist in the digital world that news workers have started using on their own. Many news workers, without prompting from the organization, maintain Facebook and Twitter accounts. Also without prompting, they will promote stories that appear or will appear in their print or online products. They build complex social media webs of sources and community followers. This is done separately from the organization's efforts in these social media areas. The publications themselves, as well as peers of an individual news worker, will often have followers on Twitter and repost tweets. Digital specialists representing the organization will be friends with reporters and other news workers on Facebook and reply, along with the public, in their comments sections.

Organizations see this as advantageous, as it builds a synergy between mediums. However, no news worker in this study said he or she felt pressure to maintain a

social media presence by employers. Most organizations have digital specialists who formally perform social media functions for the organization. This may sound like a new land of autonomous expression for news workers, but there are certainly limits to what the organization will tolerate in any public forum. The wholesale lambasting of the organization will certainly lead to a pink slip (if noticed). The real freedom of social media for journalists resides in other expressions, some of which have historically been taboo. A news worker can, for instance, endorse his/her religion in a social media forum. Because social media is voluntary and personal, organizations have not introduced formal policy in this area. This is a different dynamic from what Epstein noted, as he told of a ranking newsman who had never had a conversation with any peer about religion because he feared it would compromise his credibility. The modern news worker finds more freedom in the realm of personal expression. An individual can allude to a religious bias online and be associated with his/her organization without recourse. On Twitter one news worker wrote, "What a fantastic service. Thank you Rev. [Name]. If you're looking for a great religious experience, visit the First Methodist Church this Sunday." The message appeared in the same Twitter feed with sources, editors, and story promotions.

News workers may also exercise influence indirectly by pointing subscribers to something the news worker finds interesting in a social media forum. This can be a comment made by a political pundit with a charged opinion, or an article discussing the way another city is handling a problem similar to one their community is facing. Pointing to information is not considered taking a stance. Organizations at this point do not find this unfavorable. As individual news workers build followers, the organization gains online traffic with little risk to their reputation for objectivity. The organization's print product and directly-associated digital products are held to another standard, but the crossing of digital worlds generates conversations regarding everything from politics, religion, sexual orientation, and family life. News workers use social media to promote civic organizations, hobbies they favor, and the work they do interchangeably. This creates a richly human news worker that resonates with readers and peers alike, and in doing so, creates an autonomous brand beyond the organization.

The Soft Organizational Directive

Organizational directives can be resisted by not taking action in the hope that either the policies will blow over, or the organization is not wholly serious about them. Organizational directives are often not strongly enforced, but contain loose ideas that are left for news workers to act upon. Organizations have adopted several ideas in the last few years that are associated with the digital world, but responsibilities and personnel associated with those tasks are often loosely defined. Creating video for an organization's web site may in one newsroom be the responsibility of the reporter associated with the story or, at another, it may fall to a photographer, as a visual journalist, to be the videographer. At still another organization, video may be the responsibility of a digital specialist.

With a jammed news cycle, news workers are often given the latitude to choose which assignments they will give their full attention, whereas other assignments will be pushed down the road or given only perfunctory treatment. In the case of photographers, video production for a website is a relatively new responsibility. Some

enjoy the challenge, others resent it, but video never replaces the need for photographs in the newspaper or website. With this in mind, photographers are able to justify just doing the basics of video production or simply not finding the time to do it at all. Other photographers truly enjoy making video, almost to a detriment. One photographer was observed editing and re-editing a video piece until most of his workday was consumed. At the end of the shift, the piece was not done to his satisfaction, though it was extremely well polished and featured careful editing, “B” roll, and music under the audio. It was so over produced that the segment played like a promotion for the organization featured in the story, rather than a news story. In fact, the audience would need to work to find the news in the video at all.

This time management and work product was acceptable to the organization, perhaps because the industry tends to favor online products, and because administrators see a polished product as having inherent value, without regard to news value. News workers are sometimes able to use this blind spot to build their own agendas and drive their own workdays by presenting preferences favorable to them as being most favorable to the audience, all the while keeping alternatives quietly to themselves. One news worker called this, “driving the bus without being behind the wheel.”

Planning and Time Management as Control

Staffing was cut to absolute minimums, and management and news workers alike carefully monitored their use of time. Organizations were legally required to pay workers for the time they spend doing their jobs. Some newsrooms have added time clocks to keep overtime under control.

This control has been justified by the organization because many companies issue mobile technology for their workers. Even so, reporters will routinely clock out so they have the time to finish a project without going into overtime. Editors say this practice is unacceptable but they have little inclination to monitor it. The data needed for stories is often available online, reducing the amount of legwork required. The removal of travel time has, in many cases, increased the productivity of reporters, decreased the need for staff, and kept staff on hand and in the office. Editors can reach their workers whenever they wish, but many in the rank-and-file believe that editors are more likely to assess their needs differently if a reporter is not close by. Some reporters have found technology to be a blessing and a curse in the control of their day. For instance:

Kelly and the Art of Breaking News

Kelly was a breaking-news reporter. Her day started from home at 4 a.m. and she was efficient. She started her shift while her children were asleep and, from her home, she checked the police blotter and fire runs (all of which were available online). She watched the television news to make sure nothing was missed overnight, she listened to the police scanner for breaking news, and she made breakfast.

Kelly was prolific. She Tweeted headlines as soon as information was confirmed by police, she called for details of an alleged rape case, and

gathered information for a story about a theft. Kelly filed six stories online by 4:45 a.m., updated her Facebook and Twitter accounts, and informed editors of her work.

After she filed the stories, she continued to monitor the broadcast news and her scanner, cleaned the kitchen and made her children's lunches. Her children were up by 7 a.m. Kelly carried her Blackberry for mobility, and texted her editors with updates as she put her daughter's hair in pigtails.

Kelly identified the rape case as the story of the day. She planned to visit the location where the crime occurred to conduct interviews before filing a longer story. She hoped to avoid the office altogether because of the "depressing environment." However, her editor called her in to work on an unrelated story about the day's heat advisory.

At the office she was asked not only to write the weather story, but also to finish a story about a smoking ban, and update a missing-person report from the week before. Kelly filed a total of nine stories in less than six hours.

Technology allowed Kelly to manage her time in a way she found beneficial. Internet, scanner, and smart-phone technology allowed her to be efficient and split her days in ways to manage her personal and professional obligations. Nevertheless, there were some holes in the process that made her uncomfortable. She was not able to elaborate on the stories she broke and she found this to be a dangerous precedent. All of her information came from official reports and no one edited her online copy.

Adhering to Expected Tasks

Many news workers resist their organization by doing exactly what is expected of them. The ability to digitally retrieve information is not a new phenomenon, but often administrators have no idea what is available online. Reporters who prefer a gumshoe journalism experience need only be ambiguous enough in their day's activities to leave the office. They can make rounds that feed their beats with information they find around the community and supplement that information as they wish with online data. This allows them to maintain the personal relationships needed to find good stories. Surprisingly, in light of the increasing complexity of the news world, in some cases minimal work is expected of news workers. This is certainly contingent on the day of the week, the specific tasks, and the organization's culture, but some news workers can do only the very basics of their jobs and still be considered productive. This is yet another blind spot for executives, but the culture itself is perpetuated by middle managers that also may enjoy an occasional easy workday. The roots of this minimalist approach normally goes back to an organizational culture that does not value its employees through monetary compensation, job security, or collegiality. Moreover, news workers remember a time when this was not the case, exacerbating the situation. Consider the following comments from one news worker:

We're management heavy and management is looking upward, working to satisfy the people upward. I don't sense management appreciates a

work ethic. I don't think it even recognizes it. Partly because of all this over work, they don't see what the people around them are doing. I observe people around me that are not acting with integrity, and don't seem to be called on it. There are people making personal calls and saying they worked overtime, or playing video games. I don't think that's appropriate to do during work... Here is another way of not feeling supported; we have a deadline, and we'll go for weeks at a time meeting it, then we'll miss it by two minutes and there's a memo the next day.

No manager has ever watched me do my shift. And if they haven't seen all the things that happen in the last 10 minutes, then I can't take seriously their criticism. So I don't feel particularly respected. I have to build that respect for myself, to be proud when I walk out. And I understand that the people who are making personal phone calls or playing games are reacting to the same feeling of disrespect. And so they feel, if you don't respect me I'm not going to do the job. I can't do it that way and sleep at night.

News workers profiled in this study have learned that the organization will take all the time and energy they have to give, but the same respect will not be returned to them. This may be understandable, but it causes friction with peers who are very close to their work. These frustrations are reflected above.

“Sunshine Blogs”

Many executives depend on a code of silence among themselves and other stakeholders to keep sensitive decision-making plans from news workers while details are worked out. This control is called a “black ceiling,” but while it is opaque, it is not impenetrable (Schulte). News workers are keen observers of their work environments, and although they are rarely given the complete picture of operational decisions, they are given enough to find themes and trends which are unfolding above their heads. One way they are able to construct the reality of their worlds, even without a complete picture, is through the anonymous independent blog. Like “sunshine laws” that allow journalists to make government operations transparent, these “sunshine blogs” are set up for news workers and interested parties to connect and make their companies more transparent. They are the new clearing houses for internal media company information. It is not known exactly who contributes to certain blog-sites (certainly this is by design), which spill information about company plans, but news workers find certain blogs to be remarkably accurate. They have predicted layoffs and executive changes at specific locations, added clarity to organizational directives, and peeled away mystifying acquisitions and policy. Many news workers add information to “sunshine blogs.” This information is compiled to create a more complete picture of events for news workers, but more substantial contributors must exist above the “black ceiling.” Many news workers believe that contributors are those working at corporate offices or are themselves executives sympathetic to the problems news workers face in a changing industry. At the same time, many executives are not fans of these blogs, and some find them positively galling. They say these websites are not credible, and have sanctioned news workers for looking at them on company time.

With the demise of many collective bargaining units, these blogs act as a kind of labor community to address common concerns and grievances.

Forceful Personalities and News Judgment

The idea of “driving the bus without being behind the wheel” reveals another aspect of the cultural dynamic in newsrooms. As previously observed, many news workers who have climbed the company ladder are those who are less ideologically opposed to organizational directives and corporate goals. Some would call them “yes-men.” News workers characterize themselves and the personality attributes required to do their jobs as hard-nosed and abrasive. Often those attracted to the business are forceful and do not find brown-nosing consistent with doing their jobs (Mayer). This is consistent with the stereotype of the tough, no-nonsense reporter who will go to any length to get a story, all the while angering editors and infuriating sources. These attributes are not as common today as they once were, but coarse behaviors and routines still exist in the culture. As norms, behaviors and ethics are somewhat distinct from one newsroom to another, and as individuals are indoctrinated into the profession in different ways, conflicts can arise.

News workers are often able to circumvent policy by citing precedent from past decisions or ignoring precedent, which has not been formally set. For instance, some newsrooms have a policy in place keeping the names of minors who are the victims of violent crime anonymous. However, editors maintain the privilege of making that determination on a case-by-case basis. Perhaps circumstances arise where a victim’s credibility is called into question by authorities. In this case, editors may decide that it would be equitable to name the accuser. Down the road, news workers need not make a case regarding policy in this area. They may move forward as they please because similar circumstances have set an ambiguous precedent. The advantage in this case goes to the news worker who initially chooses how to address the material in question. This is because, from that point on, others must force a conflict or let the story go, the latter being the path of least resistance. Even when said conflict is forced, often a news worker with a forceful personality will get his/her desired result. This is because policy is ambiguous. This dynamic also has a cumulative effect. If a news worker has a reputation for being difficult, approaching him/her about their news judgment or changing his/her work will be avoided. Often, this reputation will keep news workers from being approached in the first place.

Conclusion

The deck is stacked against news workers in nearly every policy and personnel decision, but news workers are a resourceful group. Choshen-Hillel appears to be correct. Agency and power was not observed to be synonymous in this study. News workers were however influenced by conditioning and resources. Although the digital paradigm has closed many of the doors that made the traditional skills of news workers favorable, it has also opened others. The autonomy of the Internet has allowed news workers to peek around the “black ceiling” executives use to plan policy changes that affect staff. “Sunshine blogs” have sprung up around the industry as a tool to understand and control the news worker’s reality, control corporate spin, and connect with others trying to do the same. At the same time, pressures on administrators have forced them to look at big-picture decisions. This allows some

staff the latitude to circumvent policy, exploit ignorance of the time requirements, and choose the tasks they wish to pursue. This is true whether they are digital or traditional tasks. This distraction of administration has also allowed news workers to build a hybrid personal/professional presence in social media.

News workers find little guilt in these activities. Loyalty is challenged as news workers have become keenly aware that their fealty is unlikely to be rewarded, and administrators are often working against them. The news workers' desire to resist is clear in their rhetoric each time the organization asks them to go the extra mile, buy into the organization's new projects, or give to their causes. This behavior is not confined to a few disgruntled news workers, but has burgeoned and become naturalized in many consummate professionals. Directives will be challenged by those with forceful personalities and will be relentlessly tested to see how committed the organization is to them. It is also clear that neither side desires this adversarial relationship.

The damaged business model has changed relationships and moved those in the press away from collegial relationships (Schlesinger). We have explored how executives have exploited the distance between themselves and news workers in a number of ways, but they are not the only ones exploiting this distance.

Media organizations introduce directives to control the social and professional values inherent in newsroom culture, but the more desperate they become to remain financially viable, the more transparent their controls. As news workers experience this, they resist in interesting but mostly ineffective ways. This may sound like a victory for organizational control, but it is not that simple. Journalism does not exist in a static state. It is a linear endeavor that exists in a perpetual cycle of decisions and countless human choices. Journalists are uniquely positioned to make those continual choices in relation to each other and their products. Berger and Luckman explained that social construction is the result of those choices and social constructionist dynamics are pointed and specific, but they are not permanent and fixed for all time. The news workers' ongoing choices are of profound influence regardless of policy because the ability to select is not fixed, but fluid amidst professional and social discourse.

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