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FilmEU_RIT Ref: 101035820, H2020-IBA-SwafS-Support-2-2020

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FICTION, DOCUMENTARIES AND VOIDS

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Abstract

During the last three years I have been working on my artistic research project, which includes the making of a new documentary film. As the process of filming has advanced so have the notions I had about what a documentary film is and its relationship with the emotional and structural processes that are part of the film.

The following article examines how the inclusion of fictional elements into documentaries allows creators to craft a more layered film experience by challenging the *de facto* reality of documentary films.

This article focuses on two of my previous short documentary films and my current artistic research project as examples of where fiction is used inside the documentary form.

The use of fictional elements in documentaries has been present since the early days of filmmaking, but it is through my practical experience as a filmmaker that I can access a privileged perspective about the intersection between practice and theory.

I focus the article on my own experiences and how they have shaped my creative process and opened the door to explore my own sense of belonging and rootedness via a documentary film (*Threads of My Ancestors*, 2025) and, in doing so, I explore the notion of *Void*, understood as emptiness, something that is missing, and the impact of that void in my own creative process.

Borrowing from Henri Bergson's understanding of time as a continuous present in a constant flow of reinterpretation, where the past is a present that has happened and the future is a present to come (Bergson, 1911; Al-Saji, 2004) and Lawrence Kiermayer's understanding of metaphors as vehicles for meaning (Kirmayer, 1993) I examine my own films and their relationship to what Werner Herzog calls the '*ecstatic truth*' present in cinema. (Herzog, 2014)

November 2023, Villa de Leyva, Colombia

The sun sets behind the mountains, which means that we are running out of light, out of time. Running out of day light – or time – is a common practice in filmmaking.

I am still wearing a costume, looking like a migrant from the 1930s or a ska music enthusiast. Time will tell. We are losing light, always. I look at my mother. We were supposed to shoot somewhere else. Her microphone is being fixed and the temperature is dropping. I am pretending to be her father. Impersonating him so we can film faux-archive footage of his first arrival to Colombia. We are creating the archives, the memories that neither of us have, because we have never met him. We are imagining his story, using it as a tool to explore our own. The microphone is ready, the camera rolls and we start talking.

The setting is ridiculous: A beautiful sunset behind the mountains and us, in the middle of the desert on top of a 1960s' convertible car, discussing our identities.

I ask her to talk about her migrant father, to pretend it happened, that he was an Estonian man migrating to Colombia during World War II. She laughs. We pause for a second. The camera moves, we keep losing light. I ask her: 'Can you tell me why we are here?' She talks about my family and our constant moving around. I laugh and ask her to stop. I wanted to know why we were in costumes on a classic convertible in the middle of the desert. She looks at me and says: 'I don't know, for some reason you feel the need to make this whole thing just to talk to me...'

I wish I knew.

(Llesmes, Carlos, 2023, Production Diary)



Fig. 1 Threads of My Ancestors, Filming in Colombia, 2023

The diary excerpt captures a part of how I have – unknowingly – approached my previous films, a moment of giving yourself away to chance and serendipity. It has happened by instinct and impulse, something that ‘felt right at the time’.

In both documentary and fiction, I have looked for the unknown and relied on it. There is a fragile balance between meticulously planning everything for the shoot and giving up the idea of control and letting the world unfold in front of you, especially when making a documentary film.

The process of making a film is – to me – a balancing act between planning and accepting that plans don't come through as expected, and the repetition of this process turns into a know-how, a practice. The understanding of methods, potential solutions and possible troubles on set grows and develops through practice, becoming almost instinctual.

It is by conceptualising that instinct, by analysing the process that is happening when making choices in a set, that the practitioners can contribute to the knowledge pool connected to filmmaking, as there is a radical difference between seeing a completed film and being in the process of making one. There are thousands of decisions that will not appear in the final product and be forgotten, so the opportunity to think and write during the process can illuminate some of those choices and turn that almost ephemeral action into shareable knowledge.

Documentary films are conventionally considered vehicles of truth, accurate representations of reality (Roscoe & Haight, 2001; Nichols, 2001), as if everything that happens in front

of the camera is *exactly what* and *how* it happened. The truth and nothing but the truth. Which is, of course, not true.

The long-held view that the camera can be objective, that the lens is a mechanical eye that does not discriminate what it sees, that the camera is a neutral agent that observes without interference (Roscoe & Haight, 2001, pp. 11–12) was initially part of my thinking regarding documentary films. I believed, as André Bazin writes, that cinema could be ‘*a total and complete representation of reality... the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief*’ (Bazin, 1967, pp. 17–22), as if filmmaking could get rid of the human interference and capture things *as they are*.

I believed that documentaries were an objective version reality, ignoring that filmmakers privilege certain aspects of reality to tell the story they want since the early days of cinema, dramatising reality and adding extra colour and flavour to what develops in front of the camera.

Robert Flaherty (in-)famously staged sequences of both *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty, 1922) and *Man of Aran* (Flaherty, 1932) and relied on anachronisms to better capture the ‘essence’ of the filmed, disappearing traditions and cultures.

It is possible to argue that even the early films of the Lumière brothers are staged recreations of simple moments, like workers exiting the factories, or the arrival of a train, that attempt to leave an intention of naturalness, but there is an intervention by the filmmakers regarding what the camera is capturing to privilege what the authors want the audience to see and what position within reality the latter can occupy.

In my first documentary film *About Stuff* (Lemes, 2015) I thought I was being an objective narrator of the story. The film is centred around a phone call between me and my older brother. The call is intercut with footage of my parents, my sister and myself, where we describe the character of my brother and the fallout between him and the family. As the film progresses, and the phone call develops it is explained that my brother was killed some time ago and that the phone call is an act of wishful thinking; something that cannot happen in reality, but it can happen in the film. I understood that even if that narrative choice was not an objective retelling of the events, it did allow for me to have that last talk with my brother, and because of that, I could open the door to make a film about grief and sorrow, instead of only retelling a family tragedy.

It is important to note that the film was not written like this. The shape of *About Stuff* emerged in the editing room. The narrative solution of the phone call appeared as a way to tell the story without having to adhere to the linearity of the events and their emotional impact. It allowed me to connect the event of the past with my emotions in the present of making the film, in sum, telling a more emotionally layered story. Breaking the linearity of the story by having the text of the call as a structure to build upon allowed for the testimonies of my family to be recontextualised and retold by their interaction with the present.

This creation of new meaning and relationships between images is a constant flow of the present, one that is always experienced in nonlinear terms; in other words, the present of the interviews is mixed and reinterpreted through the present

of the events that took place in the film and also by the relationship created by the editing process. If we think of time as a collection of instants connected to each other by duration (much like a film strip) the notion of a linear movement from past to future disappears as the only thing that is happening is the present instant. This present is always in dialogue with the ones before and after, as connected instants.

The present, under different aspects and in different degrees of intensity, takes over the whole of time; the past is merely a present that has passed and the future is a present which is anticipated and prefigured in the now (Al-Saji, 2004, pp. 205)

This is what I call a Bergsonian understanding of time, a collection of present moments that are connected with each other and being actualised and re-interpreted by recollection and narrative. In *About Stuff* this exists in the re-actualisation of the interviews and the recollection of the events; even if they happened in the past they are seen through the lens of the present and being experienced in the present.

The effect of this mixture of times, the meeting of several presents, allowed for the story to go past the tragedy depicted and deal with the notions of solitude and loneliness created by death. It became an emotional outcome, where grief could be explored, through metaphorical language (Kirmayer, 1993). It was the use of a fictional device, of imagination, that allowed me to forgo the conventional thinking of documentary films as accurate representations of reality and explore my grief. In that fictional phone call, I was able to express my feelings of being lost and wounded, to accept that I was

running away from the pain that his death caused and, more than anything, that I missed him.

In practice I was finding a way to tell the story, yet, at the same time, I was using metaphors – understood as thinking one thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnsen, 1980) – to process and reinterpret an experience. In the case of cinema this is shown by the juxtaposition of images, one after the other, where the meaning is not expressed directly but is inferred and interpreted by those watching.

Lawrence Kirmayer presents metaphors as the intermediate realm between the body and society, always in contact with myths – the large societal constructions – and archetypes – the bodily experiences – like a raft with ebbs and flows in between but which provides a link for those worlds (Kirmayer, 1993). *Metaphors* are the place where narrative and experience meet through imagination, actions and constructions that affect the individual notion of the self. The work of the metaphor, is to bridge the lived experienced and the societal structures in which it happened; it is to organise reality in such a way that it becomes manageable (Kirmayer, 1993). This reorganisation of reality also allows for metaphors to become healing mechanisms, as they present the individual with the opportunity to reshape their own stories. In my case it gave me the chance to reinterpret a past event and have an impossible conversation.

My belief in an objective reality was forgone the moment I was making my first documentary film, and even if I had not yet begun to think about what this meant in my practice, I

continued using fictional elements and other narrative tools to illuminate the themes of my films.

One of the most fascinating qualities of documentary films, to me, is precisely that they are assumed to be real (Roscoe & Haight, 2001). This assumption opens the door to formal experimentation that sometimes is not possible in fiction films, because fiction films must establish and justify the rules of the world where the story takes place, while documentaries are set ‘in reality’, which allows for formal explorations to highlight the topics at the core of each film.

In *About Stuff* (Lesmes, 2015) the formal exploration was imagining the phone call with my brother, using it as a narrative thread to organise the recalling of the events and opening myself up to feel grief and be able to ‘talk’ to my sibling. Even if the phone call never happened, the feelings of sadness, confusion and anger depicted in the film by myself, and my family are all real.

Films like *Stories We Tell* (Polley, 2012) and *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets* (Ross & Ross, 2020) use similar narrative devices to highlight their emotional core and I will refer to them as I am using similar tools in my latest film *Threads of My Ancestors* (Lesmes, 2025).

Sarah Polley hired actors and a film crew to stage what looks like family recordings of her parents in their youth to support the stories being told by her relatives. The material is woven throughout the film and little by little the audience gets glimpses of Polley creating this material, bringing to the

forefront the constructed nature of storytelling, which is one of the main topics of her film.

As the film progresses the archive material acts, on the one hand, as a vehicle for grounding the material into 'reality' and, on the other, serves to turn these images into *sensory artifacts* (Seremetakis, 1994). These *sensory artifacts* are objects that are imbued with the past; they are containers of memories. In *Stories We Tell* these *sensory artifacts* are the staged material that Polley has filmed, but they rely on the conventions of documentary filmmaking (archive footage, interviews, etc.) and thus serve the purpose of representing the past and allowing for an emotional connection with the story that the filmmaker is exploring.

What Polley does with these images is to use them as glue between all the different stories that her family members tell about her parents, signalling to the audience that what she is trying to recreate is composed by various sources. Just like the film itself, the stories of her family are also a construction made from the many voices and memories that her relatives have about the events. Polley is not presenting a solid indisputable reality (Piotrowska, 2018), but constructing a past using a cacophony of voices, a collage of memories from all her relatives to try to illuminate what happened.

Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets (Ross & Ross, 2020) portrays the final night of a dive bar in Las Vegas and focuses on the regular customers, while they celebrate and mourn the very last night of their beloved bar. The film engages in exploring a myriad of emotions and captivating personal anecdotes about the place and its regular visitors. From themes of

solitude, success, love and politics to loaded conversations about solitude, failure and the hope of a better future, the regulars engage with the losses of the past with those who have become their '*chosen family*' after many nights of drinking together. The bar is the last refuge that the customers have as a place of solace and support, so its final night calls for a big and emotional farewell.

The only issue with all these emotional fireworks is that the bar is not real, it has never existed, and all the characters are paid participants. The directors gathered the so-called experienced barflies from many dive-bars in New Orleans and placed them together in a bar that looked like what they had imagined, decorated it as a typical Las Vegas venue and filmed for 18 continuous hours, prompting different topics of conversations among the 'customers' (Indiewire & O'Falt, 2020). Despite the fictional setup, the film manages to capture the experience of being in and the feeling of a bar, the camaraderie and closeness with all its ups and downs.

The filmmakers were curious about the people seeking the dark of a bar in a place as affluent and bright as Las Vegas. Their attempt was to capture real moments from people who were not inhabiting a character, but who were that character (Indiewire & O'Falt, 2020).

The film is an exploration of human emotions and how they develop between strangers that relate through each other by drinking and sharing the space of a bar. Their stories and solitudes indeed exist and find a voice in *Bloody Nose, Empty Pockets*. There is most certainly something honest and truthful about what happens between the characters

and the fact that the bar is fictional does not eliminate that truthfulness.

In my short film *Pig Typhoon* (Lesmes, 2017) Andrés and Silfredo, the main characters, tell the story of a typhoon that hit Cuba and how the storm blew away all the pigs on the island, except for one pig, who refuses to eat because it knows that if it gains weight, it will be turned into food. The pig, the typhoon, Andrés and Silfredo are real, but the idea of the storm taking away all the other animals and the pig refusing to eat is something I invented.

This invention allowed for the filming process to be a game between me and my characters, a process in which our

imaginings could run wild, and what happened was that both Andrés and Silfredo began telling stories that were not safe to share under the Cuban regime, but, as the film was built on an absurd premise, all of its content could be considered equally absurd and disregarded as such.

The Act of Killing (Oppenheimer, Cynn, & Anonymous, 2012) is one of the most well-known documentaries that uses a theatrical setting to explore the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–1966 and its effects on the executioners. The film follows those who enacted the killing and asks them to recreate and re-enact those situations using all the filmmaking tools at their disposal. The film follows the journey of the executioners when confronted with their actions and how history



Fig. 2 Film frame of *Pig Typhoon*, 2017

has been told and portrayed in Indonesia. The film culminates with Anwar Congo, one of the perpetrators, having a panic attack and feeling remorse for his actions.

In both *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer, Cynn, & Anonymous, 2012) and *Pig Typhoon* (Lemes, 2017) it was fiction and not reality that allowed for this freedom of speech. In both films it was through imagination and fiction that the characters' own experiences became lighter and easy to share, as they were now framed under a different contextual premise. Similar to my own experience making *About Stuff*, part of the emotional weight of the past was lifted when reinterpreting it in the present.

By narrating the events, the characters were able to distance themselves from what happened and change their meaning and impacts. Memories are not something static but can be reinvented and reinterpreted to change their meanings using metaphors and storytelling (Kirmayer, 1993).

'It is not just any meaning that heals, nor simply any meaning that fits, but those meanings that offer the sufferer and his companions a way to continue' (Kirmayer, 1993)

In both *About Stuff* and *Pig Typhoon* I combined fiction with reality to bring forth new connections and drive the narrative away from the specificity of the events, exploring thematic layers not present at first glance. This process of bringing fictional elements into the documentary, allowed me to explore the underlying themes of grief, fear, despair and even the laughter provoked by the image of flying

Cuban pigs, creating a more nuanced and layered experience which is what Werner Herzog described as '*(there are) deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylisation*' (Herzog, 2014, pp. 471-472)

THE VOID AND THE ANCESTORS

In *Threads of My Ancestors* (2025) the documentary film I am currently making – the one referenced in the beginning of the article, where the sun is setting while I pretend to be my unknown grandfather – I am, once again, combining fictional elements with reality so I can tell a story.

In this case the story revolves around my mother and her relocation to Estonia. In the film we are imagining that her father was an Estonian who migrated to Colombia during World War II and that is what brought us to the country; that is the reason for us to be in such a remote place from Colombia.

As we dive into the search for our imagined roots, we are also dealing with our family history, the challenges of migration and the sense of belonging to a place or a community. The film is exploring these topics through playfulness and imagination, which is what the inclusion of fictional elements explicitly brings to the process.

A key part of the development of the fictional elements of the film is what I call the '*negative spectrum*' of memory; these are the memories that only exist because we are aware that we have forgotten them. Like the missing piece of a puzzle, there

is a *void* in the image that contains the lack of information, but, simultaneously, serves as a testimony of what is missing (Tzu, 1997, p. 8; Musashi, 2012).

This *void*, the emptiness, is a crucial part of my film and my research. I believe that acknowledging the edges of what is unknown still illuminates what used to be there. In the specific case of the film this is the figure of my grandfather. His absence is present as a question, as an emptiness that we can try to shape, a *void* that we can use to imagine a different story and through that story re-tell, re-contextualise and examine our real past.

'Every separation is a link', as stated by Simone Weil (1947), evokes this concept. In this case the border of the void, the emptiness left by my grandfather, becomes a link to our present and an opportunity to imagine the future and understand our past (Al-Saji, 2004; Hustvedt, 2016).

Using fiction allows me to re-imagine those stories that are not talked about in the family, the moments of pain that both me and my mother have experienced and sometimes buried, and also to create another relationship with the audience, as the fictional devices are explicit through the making of the film. My intention is to highlight that the film is a construction that wants to understand the present by exploring the past and to invite the viewer to join in this imaginative journey.

Thus, the filmmaker becomes a force of invitation and play, and the characters participate actively as creative forces, while the audience is invited to be active and engaged while deciphering the many layers of the narration. The inclusion of

an explicit fictional layer into a documentary narration allows for the notion of the documentary being objective and real to be ignored and invites the audiences to be active viewers of the construction unfolding in front of their eyes.

May 2024, Tallinn, Estonia

The waves meet the sand quietly. I always imagine them crashing loudly, an unstoppable force. But there is little to no crashing in this latitude. My mother is being prepared for the shoot, again microphones. I look back at her, this time I am wearing contemporary clothing, but the plan is to go and yell at the sea. Yell as if we had crossed it by boat, as if our residence permits were being denied, as if we were carrying the weight of being Colombian, as if our parents had left us, as if we were having to adjust to a life out of control, as if we were destined to be adrift, as if the pain was wrapped around our hearts, as if we didn't know what we were doing, as if we didn't have permission to exist here, as if our ancestry had been erased, as if imagination was not enough, as if we could yell it all away, as if we just needed to catch our breath and then continue...

The idea for this scene is based on trying to find an expression for the bottled emotions that come from navigating a bureaucratic process. Having my mother do something is far more interesting for the audience than having her talking about a procedure. It is also a visual tool for storytelling. She is in front of the sea letting a scream out; the sea is vast. It extends to the horizon, like possibilities.

I look at the shot on my computer and try to imagine how it weaves with the rest of the film. It is staged, but the scream

coming from my mother's lungs is real. She lets out real anger and pain while screaming. In that moment it is as if she was standing at the edge of the void, at the edge of the emptiness left by the unspoken and the scars of the past. Screaming into that void, reliving it, re-actualising it and transforming it through action brings it back to the present and acknowledges its existence; whether the situation is real or not is not a measure of its impact in the narration.

The moment at the seaside lives back; the past is existing in the present – the two of them coexist (Al-Saji, 2004) in the editing room, where they will be weaved into a film, into a narrative that contains both fiction and documentary as interlinked elements that compose the totality of the story.

The fact that the setting is a fictional one or that we are imagining that unknown ancestor does not make my mother's scream less real or powerful. The action of screaming is not necessarily realistic; it is not something she would do, but the film allows her to play, to imagine and, maybe, by imagining she can transform her reality.

This reflects the understanding that the potential of a documentary is not anchored on the 'accurate' representation of events, but that the possibilities of storytelling, the 'ecstatic truth' (Herzog, 1999) lie in the construction of the tale, in embracing that it is a fabricated version of reality, where experimentation with form and metaphors become tools for the participants and the audience to have a new experience of the world.

By acknowledging the voids of our past, by playing with them, by inviting and embracing imagination into our stories, we allow ourselves to see them under a different light and weave new meaning that allows us to move forward. It does not matter that is it not 'true'; it does not get more real than that.

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Films to watch:

Ciclón de Puerco (Pig Typhoon):

<https://vimeo.com/217456123?share=copy>

Acerca de Cosas (About Stuff):

<https://vimeo.com/140675128/4502328a1a?share=copy>

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