Creativity and Autoethnography: Representing the Self in Documentary Practice

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the debate over documentary films that utilise evocative autoethnographic techniques, ultimately affirming that resulting outputs can realistically communicate experiences of the self. The problematic nature of portraying 'reality' through media is well established. Indeed, we are seeing the line between reality and fiction grow blurrier with every creative documentary that is released. Evocative autoethnography seeks to utilise creative processes in order to connect personal experiences with those of a larger culture. Documentary films often reflect upon specific personal moments and represent them using creative techniques, such as animation and reenactment, to essentially communicate expressions of self and cultural phenomenon. Some critics maintain that autoethnography should not be clouded by the researcher's subjective experience; that, too often, navelgazing ensues. This paper presents a number of examples from the field, ultimately proposing that the use of evocative autoethnography can utilise creative techniques, such as animation, recreation, and even satire to connect research to significant and shared cultural experiences. In examining the debate over the viability of Evocative Autoethnography and drawing on documentary texts, this project highlights the benefits of harnessing of creativity in the representation of cultural truth.

INTRODUCTION

Representing the self in a documentary film can be an intricate process that poses many questions relating to performance, reality, and authorship, ultimately calling into question the authority of the filmmaker. In the past few years my work has increasingly been concerned with this problem of truth in creative practice and I am now largely interested in questioning whether or not a documentary filmmaker can utilise evocative autoethnographic methods to communicate a cultural experience.

Reality has always been a fraught concept in the world of documentary filmmaking, especially when the filmmaker presents their own experiences within their work. Part of the problem is the creative decision-making process that imposes a large degree of subjectivity on a work. Evocative autoethnographic methods acknowledge this subjectivity, but strive to keep the work within the bounds of a wider cultural experience. Such methods, however, have been called into question by some who argue there is still too much subjectivity in the results.

In this paper, I will discuss my own processes in confronting these issues, as well as the work of notable films, such as *Drawn From Memory* (dir. Fierlinger, 1995), *Stories We Tell* (dir. Polley, 2012), *The Kid Stays in the Picture* (dir. Burstein & Morgen, 2002), and *Waltz with Bashir* (dir. Folman, 2008). I will also point to theorists, such as Leon Anderson (2006), Norman Denzin (2006), and Carolyn Ellis & Arthur Bochner (2000), as part of my discussion of evocative autoethnographic approaches to communicating cultural experience.

My practice-led PhD project examined the auratic experience of filmmaking technologies, focusing on traditional and contemporary media and utilising an autoethnographic approach to document an experiment that saw me go offline for 80 days in 2011. Selecting eight technological signposts in time, starting at 2004 (with the prevalence of DV Video) and ending at 1822 (with the advent of the diorama, prior to the first stages of photography), I documented the utilisation of technology from each period and explored the consequences of 'going offline' in the modern world. I then took that documentation and presented it as a feature-length documentary film entitled *Detour Off the Superhighway* (dir. Kelly, 2013). Hammersly and Atkinson write that ethnography;

> '...involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research' (Hammersly & Atkinson in Pink 2001, p.18).

This method, applied to the recording of myself, allowed me to visually record the process of my creative practice and therefore, perhaps, retain an element of transparency within *Detour Off the Superhighway*, ultimately enhancing the experience of the film. Of autoethnography, Ellis writes that it is;

> ' ... research, writing and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self- consciousness, and introspection.' (Ellis 2004, p.xix).

When I was writing my doctoral project's exegesis, I stopped short of declaring the film a work of autoethnography, however I now maintain that it is an evocative autoethnographic film. My creative works I have produced since completing my doctoral project, including the short experimental film *#Selfie #NoFilter* (dir. Kelly, 2014) have also been created through the application of evocative autoethnography.

As such, this article will demonstrate my approach to evocative autoethnographic filmmaking, including the establishment of a context around the creative processes and outputs, so as to achieve representations of wider cultural experience.

REALITY IN DOCUMENTARY

> 'All documentary filmmakers, in one way or another, by the very selection of what lens they use, what time of day they shoot, what people

are in the shot, what remains in the film, and what remains out of the film, it's all a creative process, and it is not, as some purists used to maintain, just "recording reality". There is no "reality"' (Wexler in Cunningham 2005, p.89).

There is much to consider in the way of representation and reality when a filmmaker is the subject of their own film. Cunningham writes about the 'importance of the personal relationship between documentary directors and their subjects' (Cunningham 2005, p.8). Due to the autobiographical nature of my documentary, *Detour Off the Superhighway*, this personal relationship seemed of less concern than the 'doubly self-fashioning' creation of an on-screen persona (Clifford in Chanan 2007, p.249). My initial impulse, having come from a background in fictional narrative filmmaking, was to attempt to act out my reaction to various situations in which I found myself. Pink and Mackley have used the ethnographic method of asking their subjects to re-enact certain routines (Pink & Mackley 2012, section 5.11). In this case, it was sometimes through the employment of such an autoethnographic process that I learned what my reaction would be before re-enacting the events for the camera. Such was the experience of working with limited resources and personnel. Despite my commitment to such processes, I was also aware of the growing understanding of capturing a subjective version of reality within documentary films (Jarl 1998, p.149). Paul Ward writes;

> 'In all of these attempts to adequately capture the meaning of documentary, there is the same dilemma: how to deal with and understand something that quite clearly is attempting to represent reality (or some part of reality), but as it does so, uses specific aesthetic devices. A commonsense suggestion is that the aesthetics somehow distort or change the reality being represented' (Ward 2013, p.7).

There are a number of notable examples I have turned to lately, in order to help me better understand this question of reality in documentary. *Waltz with Bashir* is probably the most notable example of the use of animation in documentary filmmaking. Kate McCurdy writes that 'the surreal and unreal images conjured up by the recollection of these events meant that for Folman, it was "only natural to transform the quest into animation, full of imagination and fantasy"' (McCurdy 2008, n.p.).

I feel that this example points to one solution for the problem of how one might represent an undocumented memory on film. For example, in *Detour Off the Superhighway* I wanted to represent a surreal memory from childhood, in which I misunderstood the function of VHS tapes, erroneously believing that one could change the contents of a tape simply by changing its label. Of course, this is a classic example of a child misunderstanding the way technology works and I, of course, had no archival photographs or video to demonstrate this, but it was an experience that I wanted to visually share in the film, without simply explaining it verbally. To do so, I paired a composition of still images from my childhood with the audible description of my memories from the time.

Drawn From Memory is another notable animated documentary that uses a similar

technique. In one segment at the beginning of the film, Fierlinger points to a false memory he has from his childhood of looking out his bedroom window in Japan to find an erupting volcano. This memory is represented through the use of animation in the film.

In the animation of my childhood experience of VHS tapes, I also utilised the parallax effect; a technique famously and extensively used in *The Kid Stays in the Picture*. Regarding this effect, Blos-Jáni explains that;

> 'The private snapshots are divided onto layers, on foreground and background, using focus-effects, zoom and miming camera movement; the two dimensional pictures become three-dimensional, cues of depth are introduced and some repetitive motion is stimulated... The pictures are detached from their original contexts and meanings and function as attractive illustrations of the story…' (Blos-Jáni 2009, p.163).

As the author of the piece, I spent an extended period of time animating the sequence, all the while reflecting on my own experience of what the images represented. I was partaking in their presence. If this story of misunderstanding the function of VHS tapes was merely told through the use of a piece to camera or voice over, I do not believe that it would hold the same value within the film for the viewer. It is through the application of contemporary animation techniques to archival images that sees that naïve childhood experience represented in the film.

More recently, I have been taken with Sarah Polley's film *Stories We Tell*, which chronicles her journey to uncover the truth behind her family's background. Among the techniques Polley uses to tell this story are appropriation of found footage and re-enactment. Due to the fact that both of Polley's parents were performers, she had a wealth of archival footage to draw on. Of course, when such footage was repurposed for the film, the meaning behind it changed drastically. An old musical performance by Polley's mother, Diane, is appropriated within the context of the film to offer us a glimpse of the real Diane. Indeed, this is the only time we hear her voice in the film.

> 'When I watch the black-and-white footage of my mother auditioning, staring out into the audience, I feel maternal about her," Sarah says. … Diane sings a spoof of "Ain't Misbehavin"' called "I'm Misbehaving". But actually, she is on her best behaviour. She is nervous (biting her lower lip) and vulnerable (apologising for fluffing the song's last line). Sarah sees her as "exposed" – here and elsewhere' (Kellaway 2013).

It is one segment of the narration, recorded by Polley's father Michael, which best sums up the use of archival footage in this film. He says;

> 'When you're in the middle of a story, it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring; a blindness. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story, when you're telling it to yourself or to someone else' (Michael Polley in *Stories We Tell* 2012).

Polley also uses re-enactment within the film, employing actors to seamlessly slip into the film, represent moments that had not been previously captured, and highlight the experience of uncovering one's family history and of telling stories about it.

I purport that these examples demonstrate that subjectivity and evocative methods can be used in documentary film practice, whilst still communicating the realities inherent in a cultural experience.

In the past, documentaries shunned subjectivity, instead opting to strive for objective truth or actuality (Jarl 1998). This trend has changed, however, with documentary filmmakers acknowledging the unfeasibility of achieving objective truth in their work, preferring instead to claim their films as a subjective version of reality (Jarl 1998, p.149). Pure objectivity is increasingly thought to be a flawed notion in documentary practice (Winston 1995, p.11), yet the very nature of documentary requires that some form of reality be represented. I propose that evocative autoethnographic outputs can utilise creative techniques, such as animation, extensive filtering, recreation, and even satire to connect research to significant, shared, and real cultural experiences.

EVOCATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

> 'Autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes. Identity is no longer a transcendental or essential self that is revealed, but a "staging of subjectivity" – a representation of the self as performance' (Russell 1999, p.276).

The autoethnographic routines applied in documenting the 80-day experiment served as a research method towards the production of *Detour Off the Superhighway*. Without the autoethnographic research I conducted during the experiment, I would likely not have been able to present such honest portrayals of my process when using the traditional image-making devices. Yet without presenting my work as a documentary film and utilising evocative methods in its production, I would possibly have been limited in how I might present the findings creatively.

There has been much debate regarding the role of autoethnography and whether there is a place for the creative presentation of such research – what some refer to as 'evocative or emotional autoethnography'. Ellis and Bochner suppose that evocative autoethnography is 'akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature' (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p.744). In response, Anderson argues;

> 'I applaud the energy, creativity, and enthusiasm of these scholars for articulating a theoretical paradigm for the form of autoethnography that they promote and for producing and encouraging texts (and performances) that exemplify ethnography within this paradigm. But I am concerned that the impressive success of advocacy for what Ellis (1997, 2004) refers to as "evocative or emotional autoethnography" may have the unintended consequence of eclipsing other visions of what autoethnography can be and of obscuring the ways in which it may fit productively in other traditions of social inquiry' (Anderson 2006, p.374).

He champions a methodology he terms 'analytic autoethnography', which avoids overtly seeking 'narrative fidelity only to the researcher's subjective experience' (Anderson 2006, p.386). Conversely, Denzin writes that;

> 'Anderson seems to fear that we are in danger of forgetting our past... Good ethnographers have always believed in documenting and analyzing those phenomena for fellow scholars. They have gone for the best data, never losing sight of their research focus, even when studying insider meanings, including their own! These researchers were self-reflexive but not self-obsessed... They understood the value of self-understanding, but they knew that most of the time their research interests and their personal lives did not intersect' (Denzin 2006, p.421).

This debate is an important one relating to my practice, for while I utilised autoethnographic research methods when undertaking the 80-day experiment, I also presented my findings in the creative form of a documentary. I would argue that it is the blurring of these lines that enabled me to produce the documentary I did – a glimpse at our culture's fraught relationship with ever-developing media and communication technology.

Another critical line of argument in this realm of enquiry is that such practices might make for a lonely experience for the researcher. Indeed, the film that I made was produced with little budget, which meant that I went without a crew for the most part. It was a very personal film and, for production, was one that mostly relied on the friendships I had formed with those around me. Friends frequently stepped in to assist me in the documentation process, under my guidance, and, although this is an unusual way to produce a film, it made for a fun experience with my close friends. Another point to emphasize is that this was part of a doctoral project. The evocative autoethnographic practice formed part of a wider research methodology, which was enriched by a range of qualitative and creative practice-led methods. The film and the larger project did not seek 'narrative fidelity only to the researcher's subjective experience', as Anderson writes of this evocative autoethnographic method. It was a highly contextualised doctoral research project that benefited from contextual analysis and deep critical thought.

EMBRACING SUBJECTIVITY FOR A GLIMPSE AT A WIDER CULTURE

Beyond *Detour Off the Superhighway*, my short experimental film *#Selfie #NoFilter* utilises mobile video, Instagram, screenshots, and After Effects to prompt a series of questions concerning the nature of contemporary mobile self-portraits, or 'selfies'. The film is very heavily edited and every shot is a screenshot from a mobile device.

In doing so, the film engages with concepts surrounding the areas of modernity, social media, mobile photography aesthetics, ego, celebrity, co-presence, and self. The film depicts the pre-production, production, post-production, and exhibition stages of creating a selfie on Instagram, ultimately providing a representation of the mechanical process of modern photography.

Shooting one still image and one video on an iPhone 4s, the remainder of the film is comprised of screenshots taken from the mobile device, during the action of processing an image through Instagram. Within the film, various filters are experimented with, then ultimately discarded, as are a number of other visual editing features inherent in the image-sharing platform. At its core, the film uses an autoethnographic framework to question the purpose of both selfies and the widespread and haphazard use of ever-developing editing functions within platforms such as Instagram.

The 'user' finally utilises the hashtags '#selfie' and '#nofilter', to reflect the social nature of the platform and users' proclivity for optimizing its search capabilities, often employing ironic falsities, in order to gain a wider audience. This tendency for Instagram users to attach incongruous hashtags to their posts is something I had observed for quite some time and, upon reflection, the decision to represent this tongue-in-cheek practice within *#Selfie #NoFilter* is one of which I am very proud, because it demonstrates that, although an evocative autoethnographic filmmaker might include a flat-out lie in their creative work, this lie points to a wider cultural practice within the Instagram community.

CONCLUSION

Evocative autoethnography is an area that is not widely written about, let alone put into creative practice by self-proclaimed evocative autoethnographers. The debate between Ellis & Bochner, Anderson, and Denzin seems to be the most notable outcome of this field of research. I find the practice to be very informative and helpful when approaching a careful blend of theory and practice through practice-led research, as espoused by Haseman (2007), Bennett & Wollacott (2002), and Stewart (2001), as it allows me to combine my ethnographic documentation with other qualitative research and creative practice methods, thereby satisfying my creative research endeavors.

While I would concur that the notion of reality in documentary practice is problematic, I would point to the practice of evocative autoethnography as one that allows the practitioner to remain grounded by the aim of utilising observation, documentation, qualitative research, and creative practice to present outcomes that are deeply representative of wider cultural experiences. Such methods have allowed me to come to informed, self-reflexive conclusions in both my writing and in my creative works. Furthermore, it is significant that such methods also allow creative practitioners to represent experiences that otherwise could not be depicted.

In my examination of my own creative practice, the work of theorists in the field of ethnography, and other creative practitioners in the field of autobiographical documentary filmmaking, I conclude that creative and evocative autoethnographic techniques allow researchers, filmmakers, and authors to represent cultural phenomena extremely effectively.

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