THE BEST OF RICARDO LOPEZ: THE ETHICS AND EXPRESSION OF
RECORDED MEMORIES IN DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

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ANALYSIS

Introduction

Though the concept of objectivity is a point of contention among many journalistic scholars (Mindich, 1998; Schudson, 1978, 2001), the idea that the genre of documentary film represents a plain truth has been seen as integral since the genre’s inception; documentary films were created as a nonfiction counterpart to fictional storytelling, and by the definition of “nonfiction” they should be a direct reflection of events in the world, captured as they had occurred. Over several decades of both filmmaking and film criticism, that idea has been challenged (Williams, 1993), to a point that a postmodernist trend in documentary filmmaking has arisen, in which the film’s director makes his own presence and intentions known to the audience, “tapping their personal histories, or at least their memories and perceptions of those histories (Corbett, 2016, p. 53).” Though these discussions often take a focus on the intentions and machinations of the director, less focus has been made upon examining the “memories and perceptions” of a documentary subject. Traditional journalism, such as those in outlets such as newspapers and magazines, generally seeks to corroborate as many angles and points of view of an event as can be found. Working on broader scopes than in newspapers, documentary journalism and filmmaking can tend towards focusing more towards a single point of view; any other points of view become marginalized as a sharper focus is found throughout filming. The
main subject of a documentary becomes the central figure that the narrative follows, while other voices might be given fewer opportunities to be heard.

This single point of reference can be a minefield to critically navigate and inspect, so to speak, given the perception of documentary film as hard truth. If a subject is being dishonest or incomplete in their take upon an event or their role in a story, and this subjective or falsified take is used within the final edit of a film, how would a viewer know about that dishonesty? The obligation of the filmmaker would be to show the subject’s dishonesty, but this is another complication dependent upon several factors, such as whether the filmmaker actively chooses to take their subject’s statements as truth, or if the filmmaker has or lacks access to alternatives against that main point of view being offered. When the latter option is possible, it is generally expressed by way of interviews with other figures in the subject’s life, who might have a different take on events as they occurred, as traditional journalism would utilize. In a postmodern era, though, it can be made through a more intellectually and physically complex means of taking the subject’s own words, thoughts, and memories and deflecting them back against the subject, a sort-of living confrontation wherein they come face to face with their lies or their denial.

By confronting a subject with their own memories of events, their lens of “truth” through which they see the world, or by putting those memories against other points of view, similarly subjective as they were, the primary subject is challenged not only by how they see the world, but how others see the subject and their point of view. This is a concept that I planned to examine through a research project focused upon the creation of a documentary film. Throughout this, my research questions were: *How are depictions of the memories of a documentary subject utilized within their respective films? What choices do filmmakers decide upon when using*
memories in their films, and will it depend on the overarching context within which they want to present their film? Are there ethical arguments to be made if a filmmaker wishes to support a subject’s statements or tear down the factuality of their stories using such memories against them?

To examine these questions, I looked to the theory of framing for help, seeing how filmmakers would arrange memories of a subject in ways that compare and contrast their statements across time, specifically throughout the editing process. Framing, within the context of journalism and documentary, is the idea of taking events as recorded or captured and presenting them within a specific context, in a way to influence an audience to react in a specific manner. As such, the theory would prove applicable for my research as I questioned what kind of choices are made in the editing process and what story or theme a filmmaker would want to tell or express in these arrangements, as well as what position or point of view they intended to promote with these choices. To further illustrate this framing and reframing in documentary, I created a short documentary film utilizing a set of video diaries created by Ricardo Lopez, dubbed the “Bjork Stalker” by news media after a failed attempt to murder the pop singer by sending her an acidic letter bomb.

Finding that these videos were filmed across two major periods of time in nine months (January to April 1996, and July to September 1996), I had thought that Lopez’s remarks and comments would contrast sharply, and I planned to juxtapose the two periods of time against each other and examining his later memories against his earlier actions. I had also planned to detail the creative process and explaining my choices in editing and how they would illustrate the changes in Lopez’s memories over time. My title for the film at the time, “The Best of Me”, would have been a reflection of both of these concepts, as this would have been both a
compilation of twenty hours of footage condensed to twenty minutes or less, as well as how the changes in Lopez’s life would have essentially created the “best” version of Lopez as a person.

As for my own role, I would come to detail what choices and changes would be necessary over time to navigate through the unreliability of Lopez’s single point of view, especially as it changed over time. This potential for change was why I had chosen a comparative approach to Lopez’s video diaries and their contents.

**The Diaries as Memories**

Before continuing, it would be helpful to define what is a “memory” in the context of this research. For the purposes of this project, I opted to define a memory as a direct retelling or recording of a past event from a person whose point of view is the subject of focus. This is an important distinction to make as it allows for materials such as home movies to act as memories, but also prevents archival footage or third-party sources to act as proxy memories due to their disconnection. Further, though some third-party sources may be considered memories should they be from a personal point of view, archival sources such as television broadcasts would not be “memories” out of their attempt to achieve objectivity, and thus they would lack that specificity and subjectivity.

Referring to being “on the scene” and immersed, Meng (2016, p. 266-7) speaks of three means through which a filmmaker may express memories of the past: Reconstruction, or reenacting past events as they occurred or were remembered to have occurred; recording, or committing first-hand accounts to a more permanent record; and repackaging, or the post-production editing of the former two methods to potentially create a greater overall picture or a more linear narrative. In the context of his diaries, Lopez engages in the second method as his
primary means of collecting and preserving his memories by committing them to video recordings. I myself engaged in the third method, rearranging the content of the video diaries to both condense twenty hours down to under twenty minutes and to more clearly present some major themes found across the diaries.

There are three categories under which the many segments of diary footage fall: documentary, filming events as they occur in Lopez’s apartment such as the construction of his letter bomb; confession, where Lopez talks at the camera for an extended length of time in what he describes as self-therapy; and recollection, where Lopez speaks about events that have occurred outside of his home and he feels to be worth putting on record. In my final film, “The best of me.MP4”, I separated and rearranged the video and audio of the diaries, with a stronger focus on documentary footage for visual appeal and confession audio for hard information.

The Context of Presentation

This choice to split the footage was done primarily for narrative purposes; I had not intended to break ethical guidelines coming into the project, but I quickly found that while presenting the diaries in their original state supported an objective relay of information, it was aesthetically little more than a clip show. It also prevented me from integrating my own voice in the film outside of the editing cuts and arrangements made, not to mention any alternative point of view of these events other than Lopez’s own. This was mitigated by both the integration of commentary through YouTube comments plucked from various uploads of the video diaries and the cutting and rearrangement of the diaries. I had some reservations about this presentation, but it proved itself as a far better means of storytelling in this context.

It could be well argued that the context of any story being told helps to define how it should be told, and whether the end results justify the means of storytelling. The decision to
break from ethical norms for the sake of a good story is still not necessarily a choice that should always be made, and I’ve found that doing so depends upon the context of the story as well as what themes from the story you wish to express. A film with a tighter narrative would be more fitting to use footage uncut, reflecting upon real events as they occur, while films with non-linear narratives like my own would benefit from editing the footage to present deeper themes and concepts. Naturally, this does not mean a filmmaker should knowingly edit captured footage to present an alternate truth, as that is a direct violation of many ethical codes. What it would allow instead is the ability to bypass the obstacles of trying to find a story where there is either no narrative flow, where a story is found but is not strong enough to keep an audience’s interest, or where a story is complete but its concepts and themes are deeper than the narrative.

**The Ethics of Editing**

We have examined both how memories are utilized by documentary filmmakers and in what ways such utilization and repackaging of information can be justified. This still leaves the question of if this process is ethically justifiable at all. After all, any distortion of real-world events, no matter what purpose said distortion is meant to fulfill, is still unrepresentative of the truth. I myself am guilty of this in “The best of me.MP4”, as not only do the audio and video I use come from different portions of the overall diaries, positioned to imply a fluid sense of continuity and seamlessness. I did make a conscious effort to maintain a sense of truth, choosing to edit audio around gaps in statements or to bring together a greater theme across multiple statements, but I did not actively manipulate audio to create new statements. The same effort was not as prevalent in the video footage I edited, but I felt that this was softened by the appearance of timestamps inherent in the source material, showing the shifts in time.
This added a transparency that shows to the audience that what they are viewing is indeed broken up from their original source. I would hope that this carries over to the interpretation of the audio, but other than the non-diegetic layering of dialogue over video footage, I can’t be too sure if this would come through. In any case, I can’t feel that I am able to definitely answer the question of if it is acceptable in any degree to bypass or ignore ethical standards in the filmmaking process. In the context of presenting a subject’s memories, I can agree that this an acceptable practice, given the impossibility of presenting those memories as they happened not to mention presenting them in real-time, but it does not mean that a filmmaker can or should edit down memories at their leisure. If anything, I have found that the two most important guidelines in this practice are transparency in the editing and repackaging of material and contextualization of that material. Keeping elements in context will help a filmmaker hone in on specific themes and ideas, perhaps guiding them towards a greater truth rather than a montage of events. Transparency, on the other hand, serves to keep filmmakers not only accountable if their choices are found to be misleading but helps to prevent misinterpretation and prevent such effects and audience reactions. Again, I can’t argue that documentary films should shirk objective facts for subjective truths, but it is not impossible to find a compromise between the two.