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

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Chapter One: Introduction

In early 1996, Ricardo Lopez of Hollywood, Florida made a decision in a bid to leave a permanent mark upon the world. Working across nine months, he meticulously constructed a letter bomb that, upon being triggered, would spray sulfuric acid upon whomever was unfortunate enough to be within distance. He targeted the pop singer Bjork, an object of his infatuation and obsession, out of racially-motivated anger at her decision to date the black musician Goldie. Upon the completion, arming and mailing of the bomb, he shot himself; his body was found some days later by a landlady, and the police were called to investigate.

Upon their arrival, they found Lopez had been documenting his work with a video camera, collecting just less than twenty hours of video diaries that not only comprised his work on the device, but hours of his personal thoughts and remarks about himself and his ideas, his opinions on the world around him and his slow but steady descent into depression and an isolation from others—including his own family. The camera was rolling throughout many events in this period of time, including Lopez’s final minutes as he turned his gun upon himself. This final tape was the first piece of evidence examined by the police, who immediately turned it over to the FBI, who then contacted Scotland Yard to intercept the package before it could be delivered to Bjork. After this, the video diaries were kept under FBI possession until 2013, when they were leaked and made readily available online. It was around this time that I came across the tapes and became interested in what they contained.

This is not the event that got me interested in filmmaking, of course. I had always had a general interest in film as a medium, but it wasn’t until taking Film Studies courses
in my undergraduate years that my interest was further ignited upon learning more about the artistic theory and choices made by filmmakers. I found myself further entranced by the editing stages of filmmaking and the subtleties and nuances of the process. The timing of cuts and shots, the placement of scenes and stringing sequences together and the use or removal of sound are all in service of expressing a thought or idea that can’t be explained in words alone. I’ve also been interested in experimental means of telling a story or expressing an idea, and I’ve found that editing film and videos allows for a direct means of accomplishing this task.

I chose to continue my education as a graduate student of Documentary Journalism out of both a desire to tell the stories of others—whether directly from their mouths or adapted to a narrative format—and a desire to work in film in any capacity. As it would happen, I came to learn how documentary has shifted from traditional forms of distant observation and post-production narration to styles that directly integrate the filmmaker in the lives of those being followed. It is a platform where this experimentation is not only possible, but at times celebrated. Further, documentary allows a filmmaker to focus on subjects both mainstream and niches, from celebrity culture and world events to localized biographies and historical incidents, all while allowing that room for experimentation and personalization.

With this desire to experiment and a plethora of material with which to work, I knew what I would focus upon for my project. I would create a short film utilizing the hours of video footage—condensing it down to something far more manageable—and find a story to follow Lopez’s final recorded hours, showing what he chose to record, what he was experiencing and what deeper themes or issues might be discovered in the
videos. I also wanted to give consideration to some ethical issues that would certainly arise in such a project like this, given not only Lopez’s mental situation and his suicide, but how I would handle that footage and what choices I would make in presenting these recorded memories from Lopez, as well as confronting how his memory would change over the course of several months. Throughout the workload of my project, I came to look at these issues as well as the issues in my own plans for the film, leading me to not only think about how much of a voice I was giving to Lopez, but also how little of a voice I was allowing myself. With my committee’s guidance I began to consider an alternative point of view to incorporate in the story.

When the videos were uploaded to the video platform YouTube, thousands of people would watch the videos, with hundreds commenting on elements from the diaries. With those comments ranging from insightful to cynical, and with decades of separation from the events in question, this became a point of view worth applying to the video diaries. In a way, this approach became reflective of the ethical issues I was hoping to examine: in the same way that commenters would focus on certain topics brought up or implied in the diaries, I would be choosing certain portions of the diaries to utilize and represent in the film.

This new focus became my short film *The best of me.MP4*, a title reminiscent of some simple drag-and-drop YouTube uploads, as well as an accentuation of the amateurish nature of Lopez’s video diaries. It accomplishes what I initially set out to do (make a documentary about Ricardo Lopez) while also becoming something more than simply compiling Lopez’s videos and giving him a pedestal that most others might feel to be undeserving of him. The film is also a work that I can say is ethically satisfying, as I
feel that I’ve managed to avoid the pitfalls that can and have befallen similar projects.

Simply put, this film is a work of my own, though I certainly couldn’t have done it alone.
Chapter Two: Weekly Reports

Week One (January 15-21)

I hope that the Winter Break has found you well, and I also hope that you’ve settled back into your work for the upcoming semester. I’ve adjusted well enough myself, though I hardly face the stresses that you must go through on a daily basis.

Over the past several weeks, I’ve been working on transcribing the video footage for my Master’s project, the twenty-odd hours of video footage recorded by Ricardo Lopez over the course of nine months. This has been accomplished by going through each video one by one, slowing the speed to catch Lopez’s monologues as they happen; the video footage itself is available in twenty separate video files, split by length. Transcription has been a rough process due primarily to two factors: the video files themselves have a generally low audio quality that makes for rough interpretation of Lopez’s speech, and Lopez himself has a tendency to mumble and repeat himself. Because of this, my transcriptions have not been as direct or accurate as a professional transcriber might desire. This isn’t to say that there are falsehoods in the transcriptions; I marked various areas where the dialogue was too fuzzy to interpret correctly as well as where other oddities such as videotape glitches occurred.

That being said, the material itself is both abhorrent and compelling. With the camera as his audience, Lopez gets lost in his own thoughts and his work. He tends to ramble at times about whatever subject or story crosses his mind, including his family, time travel, other races, the apocalypse or Armageddon, and “Taxi Driver”. He makes a claim that he speaks to his camera both as a means of preserving his thoughts as well as being a replacement for speaking to himself in a mirror. However, it becomes more
apparent over time that he treats the camera as a “person”, a thing that listens and
observes, and his speeches are less so basic diary entries and more a sort of performance,
whether vocalized or otherwise. This also allows for Lopez to be free to express his
emotions, which he admits to bottling up around his co-workers and family.

There is a gap in time of about four months during the recording of these video
diaries; Lopez explains that he lost his drive in March 1996 to continue his plans due to a
number of factors but picked it back up in July after losing his job as a pest exterminator.
This creates a tonal dichotomy between the two batches of videos and between the
Ricardo Lopez of January through March and the Lopez of July through September.
When Lopez began his diaries and his plans to kill Bjork, it appears to have come out of a
place of pure hatred and anger at Bjork’s interest in the black English musician Tricky as
well as a personal desire to be noticed by her. His video diaries were begun almost as a
means of expressing this desire, as he had expressed a fantasy that Bjork would want to
learn about her attacker after the fact and would herself seek out information and the
video diaries.

I am not yet done viewing and transcribing the last several hours of Lopez’s video
diaries, but the tonal shift is still present as Lopez explains how his motivations have
changed. Though Lopez maintains a racist motivation, now directed towards the black
musician Goldie who had become engaged to Bjork, his overall goal was not to see Bjork
be “punished” or harmed, but rather to kill himself and take her down as he died. Where
he had initially planned to get away with his action, now he didn’t care about living as he
felt there was little way for him to climb out of the hole he had fallen into.
This dichotomy plays into the idea of hopping backwards and forwards in time between the “past” Lopez and the “present” Lopez (I’m not entirely certain how to refer to the two time periods). There is also a difference in the idea of theory and practice between the two periods, as the “past” Lopez is more willing to talk at length about his beliefs and thoughts than the “present” Lopez does. Beyond this idea of following a primary timeline of “present” Lopez with flashbacks to the “past” Lopez to explicate upon remarks the “present” Lopez may make, I have also given consideration to the idea of pitting the “present” Lopez against his “past” self, in conversation if possible. There is a point in Lopez’s diaries where he admits to having begun taking medication but stopping after a time; depending upon any other remarks on this that Lopez makes in future videos, I might consider illustrating Lopez lapsing from his meds through a crossing of “past” and “present” Lopezes in which one might quip at the ideas or thoughts of the other. Regardless, I feel this would be helpful towards my overall theme of memory and how it is affected over time.

Alongside this report I have included my current crop of completed transcripts. I will continue working on transcribing the last several hours of video into the next week; I will also work upon an outline from which I will draw the final film. If you have any questions or comments, whether about the transcripts, my observations, or this very report, please let me know.

**Week Two (January 22-28)**

Another week has come and gone, and with it I would like to give another update on my progress. As I said before, this week I transcribed the final several hours of video
diaries and began working on an outline for my film. The transcriptions and outline have been delivered alongside this report.

My plan for the final film is currently taking upon a style similar to a visual essay. Each section includes general notes on the creative direction each portion should take, specific scenes I ought to incorporate, and a notepad for subtitles or intertitles to overlay upon the footage. I’m having some trouble in drafting the outline completely, though this is more a personal flaw and my own issue. When I mull over ideas in my head, I tend to focus more upon how the story begins and how it ends, and far less so upon the middle and how to get from Point A to Point B. I know that I want the film to begin with Lopez at both of his “beginnings” in July and in January, introducing himself and his plans, and I want it to end with the final tape as Lopez prepares to commit suicide. I’ve yet to get a confident lock on what to use in the middle portion of the film.

Mulling through the transcripts alone leaves me at a near-loss; however, I do know some ideas for what I can include in the middle. I would like to focus upon some of the more major themes and ideas that come through multiple times in Lopez’s videos. For example, the most obvious would be his obsession with and idolization of Bjork and his desire to be noticed and validated by her; I would like to document how exactly this changes between the months. I would also like to Lopez’s fear of hurting his mother with his suicide and the guilt he felt, another idea that would come to change between the first and second halves of Lopez’s 1996. As for my own theme of how Lopez’s own memories are affected over time, I would like to express this in a more experimental fashion, in which elements from the first half of 1996 (“Past Lopez”) are broken down over time and
become entirely different statements that respond directly to the actions and monologues of Lopez in the second half of 1996 (“Present Lopez”).

This last aspect, however, gives me some concern due to the unethical implications that would arise by essentially putting words into somebody else’s mouth. I would like to use this approach as a means of examining the memory of a man and the conflicting points of view between his past and present self, as well as an illustration of Lopez literally speaking to himself (he once describes replacing the mirror he would normally use with his new camera). However, the problem is that it would create an outright assumption and falsification of events, sacrificing journalistic truth in favor of an artistic flair.

Additionally, though I would like the film to be at or around thirty minutes long, I shouldn’t force myself to limit both my search for footage to use and the actual edited work to this stretch of time. Though I will try to comprise a longer rough cut, if I try to put in as much information as possible, the film could become bogged with too many ideas that don’t work together well. Conversely, if I incorporate too little footage, the film is likely to become confusing as a narrative if not an exploitative work, which I’ve been trying to avoid. It would be fun to try and cut the film down as short as possible, but I should obviously aim for more rather than less.

This upcoming week I will lock down my outline as best as possible and begin work on actually editing the film together, beginning with one or two scenes as a means of hashing out how the footage should come together. I will continue to offer my thoughts upon the scenes I work upon and the reasons and rationalizations of my choices. I continue to look forward to future input from you.
Week Three (January 29-February 4)

This week I planned to finish my outline and begin rough work upon the film. I have included a very rough version of the first scene in the film, an opening scene in which we are presented Ricardo Lopez and the two periods of time that the film covers. However, I was not able to create a locked-in version of the outline for two reasons. The first is that I was hoping to speak with Stacey this week to talk and brainstorm about the middle of the film, which I admitted that I had issues with fleshing out as strongly as the beginning and ends. However, he ended up sick and had to take time off, pushing our meeting to a later date.

Secondly, I realized during my editing process that having a definitive vision of the movie before it was complete would hardly be a surefire accomplishment. As I found, I found myself making changes to what I had originally been sure I’d include, not to mention the addition of other elements into the edited scene. As such, I believe it would make sense to include my outline as it changes over time with my weekly reports as I deliver them.

This week, alongside this report and my newer outline, I’ve included a very rough cut of the opening scene of my film. For now, my focus is upon arranging footage in a logical manner that allows for a greater conceptual flow of statements from Lopez, going back and forth through time between the two periods to contrast the changes in his statements and state of mind. Thus, the segment has a very basic structure: Introduce Lopez in the “present”, and flash back to his past upon contradiction, flashing back forward to introduce a new contradiction or idea when the opportunity arises. I’ve also opted to sequence Lopez’s present period over the course of time, primarily to help
contrast between the calmer delivery of Past Lopez’s thoughts and the more frantic statements by Present Lopez. Aesthetically, I have put in some short transitions to help illustrate how I’d like to present jump-cuts between scenes and between time periods. I feel like there is a more realistic way of doing this, but for now I’m not worried about it.

Regarding the ethical issues I brought up last week, I’ve come to a conclusion about defying ethical standards after having watched the film *Sonita*, in which the filmmaker and her crew become directly in the life of their subject, as well as having been reminded of the film *Fraud*, a film similar in concept to my own which takes hours of home movie footage and rearranging it in a manner to create a new context and narrative different from the real events depicted in the footage. These two examples have shown the possibilities and consequences of having a more direct interaction with the subjects at hand, and thus I’ve come to shrug off these issues and focus, if only for now, upon the other concepts in the film.

This may be an anticlimactic conclusion to my quandary, but it does bring another question: Can the final film I plan to make, with its intentional alterations of hard truth in the pursuit of a specific aesthetic be considered journalism? Or does it become a sort-of remix art film based on and utilizing real-world/found-footage material? With this in mind, should I still try to attempt a harder basis in fact throughout the film, or should I feel free to do as I please with the footage? I’m doubtful I’ll be able to answer these questions right away, but I know I’ll have to work through them later.

I look forward to any further questions or concerns you might have, and I am always willing to speak at length with you at any time.

**Week Four (February 5-11)**
On Monday, I met with Stacey to discuss the elements of compiling and editing the footage for my film that troubled me the most, as I had mentioned previously. Among the other notes he gave to me regarding this, he suggested that to help me figure out how to get from the Point A of my beginning to the Point B of my ending, I should find a harder narrative to follow throughout the film. Ironically enough, for all my own personal opinions regarding story structure and composition, I didn’t think to put a heavy focus on this as I’ve begun piecing together the film. In any case, this is what I’ve been working on the past week, and as it currently stands I have two potential narrative threads to follow: Ricardo Lopez’s creation of the actual device he planned to send Bjork, and the actions/interactions between Lopez and his family members.

The former footage is generally more straightforward creative action; Lopez opted less for doing work first and explaining his goals later and would turn the camera on, sit down and get to work. The latter footage is much more insightful, as Lopez discusses over both time periods his opinions and relationships within his family, including those of his brother, George, and his mother. As I intend to come through in the opening scene, one of the more blatant ideological conflicts between the past and present Lopez is that of his initial desire to sit on his mail bomb and only send it to Bjork after his mother dies, and his later decision to send it as soon as possible. There is also a clearer series of events over time during the later period, in which George starts to involve other family members in trying to get Lopez help, recognizing a problem that Lopez himself would seem to always deny was the case.

As my primary work this week was to identify and compile footage together, rather than create a rough cut of one or more scenes for later incorporation, I don’t have
anything other than my refreshed outline, which I’ve cleaned up some and added the various scenes I’ve found. This upcoming week I plan to compile at least one more narrative thread, that being Lopez’s thoughts of Bjork. On that note, I’ve started to consider that the subject of Bjork may end up becoming less of a central segment in the final story, given how little Lopez seems to directly say about her compared to other topics. This might change, as all things will change, of course, but at the moment I can almost see a bait-and-switch approach to the subject matter: A viewer would go in expecting a sensational piece about the “Bjork Stalker” but come out having observed the effects and results of isolation, depression, and an unwillingness to genuinely seek help from others. Something along those lines, at the very least.

I apologize for the light material I’m sending along, but I will have something much more substantial within the next week to share. As always, please send me any questions, concerns, or other notes if you have any input of your own.

**Week Five (February 12-18)**

This week I continued working upon creating a more narrativized version of the film’s story, which I will be attaching alongside this report and outline. I also spoke with Robert on Monday to talk about the project and the creative direction, specifically in regards to a frame of reference for the film. His primary concern (or so I’ve paraphrased and recalled) was that with the direction that I’ve currently been taking the film, it comes off less as true introspection into Lopez’s psyche and more a series of scenes and selections from the video diaries. He suggested that I try to find a frame or lens through which I can examine the tapes in a contemporary manner, beyond showing them as they are and showing Lopez as he was.
I didn’t give too much thought into these comments afterwards, since I didn’t feel that I needed to look at these videos in reflection of modern issues but working upon piecing together the narrative framework to follow I found this to be true in the end. Throughout the rough editing I’ve had issues finding a hard story thread to follow. I assumed that I would be able to alternate back and forth between Lopez making his device and other thoughts or events he might talk about (specifically the several attempts by his extended family to get him help), coupled with popping back and forth between the past and present to draw further context. But the snag I eventually found is that to present all of this within a 20- to 25-minute span of time would require removing a good portion of detail and context, much of which I feel is important to the overall narrative that I wish to see in the final film. This is why the longer narrative cut I’m sending feels light and disjointed; as I edited the movie together, I felt that such a presentation would feel disjointed and incomplete, even without my planned flashbacks.

Furthermore, as Robert suggested, the current narrative choices I’ve made limit my own perspective on Lopez’s diaries. Going into this project, I never quite intended on sharing my own point of view, trying to distance myself from the material and any overt personal input, focusing as much upon the diaries as I could. However, I feel now that if I can’t avoid removing a great amount of context from the diaries’ presentation, then I’ll have little choice but to fill in those gaps in another way. I had planned to use intertitles as a means of doing this, but I realized recently that my current draft would use them only at the beginning and ending, with no real incorporation throughout the film. Similar to utilizing a character’s narration at the beginning and ending of a fiction film, I feel this to be akin to a poor inability to build the world that this movie would present.
I think I may need to take a completely different approach to this material, one that both can tell a story or deliver as much information as possible within its running length, allows me to express both my own point of view and that of others, and (with the idea I’ll be sharing) a satirical jab at the idea of sharing, glorifying, and commodifying death in a modern age.

I’ve attached a document with an alternate outline that I feel could allow me to express what I hope to share from the video diaries as well as do so in my own personal voice. It presents a sort of alternate universe commercial from the 1990s, similar to Time-Life audio CD commercials but here advertising a series of tapes compiling filmed or videoed deaths from across time, with a special offer and extended preview of a bonus tape compiling Lopez’s video diaries. Meanwhile, a narrator or presenter/s gleefully describes Lopez’s life and death with casual candor, selling a listener one story while the videos present a different story. Through this, I would want to present a contrast between the minds of those who would like to exploit such footage and the lives of those who are depicted within that footage.

As always, I’m open to comments and meeting with any of you during the upcoming week to discuss this new idea or my current idea further, though I understand that we are in the ramping-up to True/False and thus it might be difficult to find time to speak. In any case, let me know of your thoughts on this whenever you have the chance.

Week Six (February 19-25)

This Monday, I met again with Stacey to discuss the direction of my project, and in specific the proposed outline I offered previously. Though he did approve of a framing device that would allow a personal sense of authorship and voice, he felt that the tone of
the outline as I had presented it was darker than necessary. Though I had envisioned it as being a dark comedy, we came to find that the way I planned to frame the video diaries through an infomercial would have come on too strong with its morbid tone and could have turned off audiences from watching. Stacey and I were in agreement on the ideas presented in the outline and the new point of view through which to look at the material, but ultimately the framing needed adjustment if not a whole new skin.

As such, this week has primarily been spent attempting to flesh out some alternative ideas to my alternate outline, with a renewed focus on not only finding a way to present the video diaries in a way that allows me to share my own voice as a filmmaker and present an alternate point of view to the diaries than Lopez alone, but to do so without turning off an audience outright. Stacey also asked me to find some frameworks that would take into consideration the way that the video diaries have proliferated online, and especially the reactions of those who have viewed and commented upon the YouTube uploads of that footage. I’ve attached three ideas that utilize this element of the videos’ online existence, as well as one idea that extends more from my initial idea but isn’t entirely related to the online element.

I would like to know your opinions on these short proposals and what other points of interest I might want to consider tackling either within these ideas or through other frameworks. I apologize wholeheartedly for the scanty amount of material I am sending this week, though on the other hand it might be a better thing given how close True/False is happening, and I’m sure your heads are more focused on that. Nevertheless, I am (as always) open to meeting with you throughout the week to discuss any other concerns you might be having, and I look forward to your responses and input.
Week Seven (February 26-March 4)

As True/False 2018 draws to a close, I only realize now that it might not have been a good idea to make this year the one in which I try to participate as much as possible, given the amount of focus I need to put into my film’s planning and creation. Nevertheless, I do have some documents to share.

Given that this film incorporates comments pulled directly from YouTube uploads of Lopez’s video diaries, I have both screenshots of these comment sections, almost all in their entirety, and a document collecting the comments that I feel to be the most interesting. The focus of these comments, as I suppose could be said of many YouTube comment sections, ranges from basic gut reactions and jokes to more emotional and psychological examinations. Several commenters express empathy for Lopez and lament his inability to seek help for his problems, while others hold nothing but contempt and are not ashamed to express how glad they are that Lopez is dead. Several commenters made replies to each other, resulting in comment threads which can and at some points have derailed from the original topic and either into a whole new topic or into insults and derision.

In all, it’s an interesting cross-section of the kind of people who would want to view such footage, even if they skip through 99% of the actual video and go straight to the suicide. Indeed, there are several comments asking how to find that segment, which was never uploaded to YouTube for obvious reasons. But for my purposes, I don’t want the comments to focus entirely upon the availability of the video. I’d like the Comments Section to be its own entity almost entirely separated from the video itself, potentially
 ignorant of Lopez at some points. This wasn’t something I hadn’t initially considered until attending a panel during True/False.

Based On A True Story is a series of panels discussing the documentary genre, its present paradigm, and future innovations. One such panel this past weekend was hosted by three filmmakers: Theo Anthony (Rat Film), Sierra Pettengill (The Reagan Show), and Maxim Pozdorovkin (Our New President). The three offered insights into the processes behind their work and how they come to find or use whatever information they collect. Anthony tends to do a deep dive through the Internet based upon whatever he finds interesting, keeping track of his flow of ideas and browser history along the way; Pettengill focuses more upon cataloging hard information and elements to use later; and Pozdorovkin uses and reuses found footage to create new ideas from old information.

The three filmmakers utilize information structures that I’ve already incorporated to some degree within my own project, but one idea by Pozdorovkin stuck with me. He explained that through the juxtaposition and editing of footage to express new ideas, he would “remove authoritative control” from the original footage and its own creator; for example, he might take a propaganda short film and edit the video and/or audio in such a way that it could spout a completely different ideology. This is a concept that never really occurred to me during my initial plans for the documentary but fits in almost too perfectly with my new idea. It almost goes without saying that the ways in which the comments of the uploaded videos contrasts to the actual content are numerous, and it will be something I will want to experiment with during the drafting process.

I am also sending along a loose outline for the idea, consisting both of how I perceive the film to be structured and some other ideas I might want to implement along
the way. As always, let me know if you have any questions or concerns, and I will respond as soon as I can.

**Week Eight (March 5-11)**

This week, I began some proper progress on the movie, both in the arrangement of the material on paper and (at Stacey’s suggestion) in motion as a rough mockup. This course of action has helped me to better realize how my film will be seen by an audience, how it will need to be paced and structured, and what will be necessary to maintain a good flow. I still have some work cut out for me but working like this helps give me confidence in the approach, and it actually feels somewhat more fun to do than I previously experienced.

I am sending along two items alongside this report, one being a rough transcript and scratchpad of the film structure and dialogue and the other item being a rough cut of the film’s opening. The transcript is loose; I aim to focus less on structure for now and more upon compiling elements based upon the themes I intend to cover. The only difficulty I see myself facing for now is how to best arrange whatever I find into a coherent monologue, though with the actual amount of speech in the videos, this may not be as hard as I think. Regardless, coherence and flow are what I’ll want to strive for when arranging lines, both to avoid audience confusion and to make sure topics aren’t dropped and left unresolved.

The rough 2:45m cut is reflective of how I perceive the movie to open and proceed, barring whatever adjustments I’ll make over time of course. My current idea is to have a cold open with Lopez to entrench the viewer into his world and thoughts, then jolt them back out when cutting to the YouTube comments; I don’t know if it’ll be
effective in practice, but right now I think I have that working in the clip I am sending. Under Lopez’s narration, I am trying to find as much “silent” video as possible, which has so far shown up as either pans over Lopez’s living environment or simple shots of Lopez working on his project. I do incorporate some original audio in the rough cut, so in the end this may not be as silent as I intend.

A problem I foresee now is the matter of how to both show the YouTube comments on-screen and how to vocalize them. For the former I think I might simply cut to comments as they are called up, assuming I can’t think of anything more creative beyond that. The latter I can solve in some ways: I can use actual voice actors to recite the comments, adding to their humanity; I can use a text-to-speech program to emphasize the flatness of the text comments; or use trumpeting noises for comedic effect. I’d much rather go with the first of the three, but I’ll obviously need to find people to help me out there. For now, I’d like to complete the movie on paper now so I’ll know what to record (and how it should be recorded) later.

This upcoming week will be more of the same: Completing the transcript and arranging what I have into a timeline. I’ll also likely be experimenting with the music I’m using to accentuate Lopez’s video; the temp music is a slightly edited loop of “offline” by chris†††, but over the past few days I was considering using songs from “Ghosts I - IV” by Nine Inch Nails, which were released under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike license. For reference, the other music and sounds I’ve used are either sourced directly from the video diaries or were released under a Creative Commons Zero (public domain) license through FreeSound.org.
As always, I’m open to meeting with you throughout the upcoming week to discuss the current direction of the project and any other concerns you may have.

**Week Nine (March 12-18)**

This week was less productive in the way I had hoped to be, as I chose to focus more upon compiling diary segments and YouTube comments within the transcript than upon working it into a draft of the film. Of course, this isn’t to say that nothing was done: I do believe now that I have a solid grasp upon how the film will maintain its structure and narrative. I feel that there might need to be two micro-narratives being told at once, one in Lopez’s monologues and one in the YouTube reactions.

First, Lopez’s video would follow him not as he prepares his device but rather as he monologues and laments his own problems and fears. This would not be approached with sympathy; I’d intend for moments in which both Lopez himself expresses a superiority complex and the YouTube commenters note his lack of a desire to seek professional or familial assistance. The narrative of the commenters, meanwhile, would be somewhat disjointed (as any website’s comment section would be) but more or less treat their perspective as one of interest and fascination, building up to a desire to see Lopez kill himself but being disappointed when there is no actual death on screen. This in turn would try to paint the viewing audience, or at least its most vocal members, as opportunistic gore hounds, claiming to be able to sympathize with Lopez but more interested in seeing him shoot himself instead. The overarching framing of the film of a person physically watching the video would be ignored for the most part, primarily serving as an “anchor point” to ground the film in some sort of reality. I’m not sure if I
should paint that person as a gore hound as well or if I should keep them more in the background, but I can come back to this as I continue to hone down the framing.

I haven’t come to a definite conclusion regarding how the comments will be displayed in the film. This will also be a choice I’ll continue to work upon as I edit the film, but I think that my best course of action may be to present the comments dynamically, angling the screenshots or animating pans or reveals of the comment text as a way of giving them a sense of being “alive”. I could do the same for comments that would speak over Lopez as well, popping them into the frame of the video one by one and letting them take over the scene. As for the initial transition into the YouTube comments section from the video, it is something that I will be sure to illustrate better in a later draft of the film, which I would hope to be more complete and more reflective of the transcript I’ve made and the vision I have for how to proceed.

Since I do have the transcript as close to “complete” as it could be at this point, my next course of action will certainly be to work upon constructing and laying out both Lopez’s audio from the diaries and some temporary audio tracks for the YouTube commenters, to be replaced later on; I will also include those initial “anchoring” transitions between the two. As always, let me know if you have any concerns or questions, especially as we get closer to the end of the project. I appreciate your input, whatever it entails.

**Week Ten (March 19-25)**

Though I feel it to be a bit overdue, I’ve hit a goal in the editing process for the film. Alongside this report, I am sharing what I refer to as “the Lopez video”. Simply put, it is a sampling of the whole of the video diaries and what the wave of YouTube
commenters will be discussing throughout the rest of the short. It is the focal point for those commenters, though an audience’s focus would be upon both. Because of this, there are clear gaps in the video around which I plan to edit those commenter reactions; the final few minutes of the video I am sending will also be edited further to synchronize with those comments.

Regarding the editing process, I did need to take some creative liberties to get across the points I felt needed to be seen. Obviously, the major departure here is from my initial desire to keep the diaries relatively unedited and uninterrupted. I enjoy placing limitations on myself to help try and bolster my creative drive, but given the subject matter doing this would have essentially been akin to letting those video diaries play out in real time, a concern that Robert has shared. So, I opted to take an approach less true to life but with more room for me to dig into the overarching themes and ideas of Lopez’s decline.

As for those themes, I’ve continued to stay away from the topic of Lopez’s obsession with Bjork and try to stay more in tune with the other elements surrounding him, specifically his thoughts of his family, his depression and subsequent denial of depression, and his feelings about death and the inevitability of his own demise. These are also the major topics I’ve looked towards for YouTube comments, a number of which you can already find in my transcript.

A fourth topic I was considering focusing upon for the film was Lopez’s thoughts on other races and his own racism, but I hit a snag when assembling footage. As you will find in the video itself, the portion dedicated to Lopez’s racist thoughts is taken from a video diary rife with audio-visual glitches inherent in the source material. Because of
this, I’m not sure if I will be able to use that footage to a great extent, at least not without being a distraction to an audience. However, I do believe that I can mask this through YouTube comments; bringing their discussions on Lopez’s racism to the forefront, as well as conversations that veer off topic, serving a second purpose of showing how those simpler, sensationalistic ideas can lead to discussions that end up avoiding or ignoring other problems. In this case, it would be Lopez’s depression and resistance to outside help. Whether or not this creates viewer sympathy for Lopez remains to be seen, though I believe I’ve made it apparent that Lopez does not desire to be helped.

This upcoming week, I plan to edit together the YT comments around the rest of the video, and I should be able to provide a complete rough cut by March 30. This cut won’t necessarily be “complete” as it will lack voiceovers for the comments, but it will be reflective of the final short’s pacing and structure. As always, if you have anything you wish to ask, please let me know; I will be available in Columbia during Spring Break this week.

**Week Eleven (March 26-April 1)**

As promised, I have sent a rough cut of my short film. Again, it’s not entirely reflective of how I perceive the film to play out when finished, but I did try to keep it close to what I want, going as far as making some timing accommodations for what I want to put in later. Of course, I’m open to feedback (I have already received some from Robert) and will incorporate what I can as I continue to make edits.

That being said, I would like to explain what I was not able to add into the rough cut, whether due to a lack of material or of information. Most explicitly, I have not been able to add in voice-overs for the YouTube comments as I had intended to use this rough
cut process to determine if there were any comments I pulled out that would be further cut, of which there were a handful. I did try to time their appearance on screen for as long as I imagined a person speaking those comments, and I further tried to pace other elements of the film around that timing. Additionally, I did not have the opportunity to record some of the “anchoring” audio that I would use to ground the film further. Given the feedback I’ve received already, these plans may change, but until I have something definite to say I’ll continue to work towards this design.

The final few minutes of the film, where Lopez is dancing to Donna Lewis on the radio, is going to be far less empty than presented. I intend to use it as a backdrop for closing credits, hence the great amount of pure video. However, the issue here is simply that I don’t have many credits to work with, at least other than producer/director/writer credits and like. In the same way that the comments being shown are spaced and lengthened according to how long I suspect a person would read these comments aloud, the ending itself is paced out for as long as I’d imagine the credits being, though I’m sure that the final length will be far shorter. Also, the YouTube comments that appear during this portion are also intended to be overlaid over the credits.

As for additional theory in the editing of the film, I’m afraid that I don’t have much more input to add at this point. While I am still open to change, I’ve elaborated upon nearly every creative choice I’ve encountered or needed to think upon at this point. That being said, I’m sure that as your feedback comes in I will want to adjust or add to what I’ve already figured. As we move closer to the end of the semester, your input will become more and more valuable, and I will do everything I can to speak with you should you request it. As always, let me know what you feel.
Week Twelve (April 2-8)

First and foremost, I would like to thank each of you for your feedback of the rough cut I sent out. I’ve had some time to process through your comments and suggestions, and with all of your help I have some new ideas to utilize for the film, both aesthetically and conceptually, that I would like to pass along.

When speaking with Stacey, he remarked upon the music being utilized for the cut, specifically the music in the opening of the film. While I had chosen it and the other two tracks due to their being part of a concept album regarding depression, this theme had not come through with that opening track. Stacey suggested finding an alternate track which could better illustrate the imbalanced or implicitly schizophrenic nature of Lopez’s diaries and actions. I agreed and will be looking for alternate tracks to use, both from the album and from De Wolfe Music, of which Stacey informed me that we have access through Mizzou.

Robert’s concerns focused upon the visuals of the film and the presentation of the comments. While the comments are a great bulk of the film’s content and narrative, their presentation is uncinematic and can lead to a loss of interest; he suggested that I focus on the content and text of the comments rather than present them as they can be found online. I agreed, realizing that I was trading the context for a cinematic presentation. Robert suggested placing the text on a black background for simplicity and legibility; I think I may be able to keep this presentation within the context of the video diary by making the text appear as VHS subtitles. The only concern I have this new plan would be if I should continue with vocalizing the YouTube comments as I have had in
mind, as this could cause viewer confusion. For now, I’ll table that thought as I try out this new presentation.

Meeting with Andrea turned the conversation from the aesthetic to the themes and concepts of the film. She turned me onto the topic of stage theater and viewer participation and response, which in the context of the film becomes Lopez’s “stage” of his video diaries and the subsequent comments and conversations of the YouTube audience. This is in line with what I’ve been trying to express through the film, but her comments helped me to consider how to tighten up the comments and create a sort-of conversational flow between Lopez and commenters, if comprehensible at the least. Inversely, she talked about her thoughts on Lopez and his presentation both in the film and in his own diaries, bringing to light the notion that he is making himself into a “shell”, hollowed of any substance other than his physical form or, in Lopez’s words, a “walking bag of blood”. As a result of this, Lopez’s diaries present a “disappearing act” wherein he carves out so much of himself over time that he all but vanishes from the world entirely upon his suicide. Andrea remarked upon how this is represented in the emptiness inherent within the diaries, specifically the (unintentionally) empty dancing of the film’s final few minutes. She suggested keeping some of that emptiness in the film; Robert also suggested keeping the video diaries raw as well.

The feedback that all three of you have provided has given me not only insight on how my film should be presented, but what exactly I am presenting and how I can better express that. This upcoming week I will go back into the editing bay and create a second cut that will incorporate these concepts and suggestions, taking to heart your advice and hopefully coming out all the better.
Week Thirteen (April 9-15)

As you have likely seen by now, I’ve completed my second rough cut of my film, reflective of the suggestions you’ve all made. The most distinct of the changes is the presentation of the YouTube comments; much of everything else is relatively unchanged as I wasn’t quite able to find ways to improve upon what I’m telling in the film. I did trim out a fair amount of Lopez’s monologues, not to mention the credits now include filler that helps cut that raw amount of footage down a lot.

The first noticeable change is the opening music. Stacey remarked that the original music wasn’t as foreboding or reflective of Lopez’s mental state as it should try and achieve, so I’ve used a track found in the De Wolfe Music library that I feel serves that purpose. It works for me as it is slower and less rhythmic than other tracks in the library, but I’m not entirely in love with how it implicitly adds a “true-crime drama” feel to the scene. I’ll continue looking for other music tracks that could work, as well as other tracks that might replace the other two songs in the film.

As stated before, the biggest change comes with Robert’s suggestion of making the comments more cinematic and legible within the video, taking them out of their context as YouTube comments and working with the text itself. I wouldn’t have been as content with leaving the text as white-on-black text, so I chose instead to integrate it “directly” into the videos as VHS-style subtitles. I have some reservations about if this will work better to keep a viewer’s attention, but it certainly is less obtuse than the cropped comments. Further, at the very least the only other distraction would be upon Lopez, so I suppose that would be the trade-off.
Despite my hopes to incorporate Andrea’s notes more deeply into my film, I wasn’t able to determine any strong means of doing this, at least not without a heavy reworking of the film’s current structure and possibly re-editing everything all over again. However, I did find a means of representing her idea of Lopez performing a “disappearing act” in the film’s sequence of his mental health, changing out some shots that featured Lopez on camera with others that lacked his direct presence. It also dawned upon me in retrospect how I can represent Lopez as a “shell” of himself in the subsequent scene of his preparation for his suicide by hopefully finding shots where he chooses to remain still or with a neutral tone about him. I’m not sure if I can further represent the sense of emptiness in his home, though, at least without extending the film running length.

Finally, I came to a conclusion regarding the title. I am choosing to call the film *The best of me.MP4*, stylized as such for a few reasons. In my film, the YouTube page seen at times is edited to make the video of Lopez’s diaries appear to have been uploaded under that very title, complete with the .MP4 extension, as a representation of the amateur nature of the video’s existence, further reflected in Lopez’s lack of professional videography. It also further separates it from other projects that are titled “The Best of Me”, my original title for the film but one that I quickly found to have been used elsewhere, Lopez-related or otherwise. Finally, it makes more explicit the digitalized nature of Lopez’s diaries, specifically that their content has been preserved and can be shared online as video files rather than physical tapes.
I hope to hear your comments on this second cut soon, and hopefully we’ll be able to find a good time to meet for my defense. As always, let me know if you have any other questions or comments.

**Week Fourteen (April 16-22)**

This will be the final committee report I will be sending out, as I’ve all but completed the actual film, which was the primary focus of these reports. At this point, the only work that remains is the written materials that will make up my submission to the Graduate Studies department. Again, I have nothing but apologies for not having had these materials prepared, but after our discussion I do have confidence that I will be able to share these materials with you soon. In fact, I am sending along initial Abstract and Keywords drafts, and I hope that you will be able to provide some feedback, even if only to change one or two sentences in the abstract.

I am also sending along a new rough cut of the film, reflective of Robert’s remarks upon the music and the scrolling YouTube comments. I’ve swapped out the remaining music tracks with other songs from the De Wolfe library, which will ease licensing issues but (in my opinion) still gives the film a true-crime feeling that I was initially hoping to avoid. Given the content of the film, I’m not sure if this can be avoided regardless of the music, so it may be something I’ll simply need to live with. As for the scroll of comments, Robert felt that showing the actual YouTube page would be enough to tell the audience that the incoming text boxes would be sourced from those comments. I’m not entirely too sure about it, as I personally would rather have a more overt connection between the initial comments and the later presentation, at the very least to avoid any potential for misinterpretation. I’ve also made some other adjustments
including the placement of Lopez’s VO about his last minutes, some audio effects during the comment war at the end of the racism portion, a brief flash at the beginning to serve as a sort of title card, and an extended comment conversation overlaid upon Lopez’s suicide footage, cut off mid-sentence by the suicide itself. My only other desired inclusion not in this cut is an offset effect throughout the credits, but this is negligible in light of everything else I need to accomplish.

As always, please let me know what you think of this close-to-final cut of the film, as well as if you have any other feedback about the film. As we close in on deadlines, I’d like to have as much input from you as you can provide, and as soon as possible if possible. That said, I have nothing but the sincerest thanks for the help you’ve provided over the past three or so months, and I do feel that without your input I would not have ever had a presentable film at all, much less a movie as close to completion as this.
Chapter Three: Evaluation

When I began this project, I assumed my work would be straightforward and quick to accomplish. My initial idea was simple: As I worked on a short documentary film, I would discuss at length the creative choices I would be making in order to realize a story that would reverberate with a theme of memory within the genre. I wanted to talk about how a filmmaker would choose what elements of a person’s recorded thoughts to utilize for a film and how he would approach and integrate that material, as well as how a filmmaker could further confront a person’s conflicting statements by presenting past and present footage of those thoughts together. These were themes and ideas I had planned to represent through a use of Ricardo Lopez’s video diaries, which comprised close to twenty hours of such thoughts and ideas, seemingly ripe for such conflicts and content. The film itself would be entirely comprised of these diaries, with little overt input from myself.

However, it soon came to light that the diaries alone would not suffice. Though there was a clear “past” and “present” in the diaries, there were not very many of these conflicting thoughts or memories to be had. Creatively, I was limiting myself by only working with the raw audio and video and not allowing myself to alter what was recorded—primarily due to ethical concerns—but also as a means of challenging myself to see what I could do with everything as it was recorded. Conceptually, I was further limiting myself to what Lopez was saying, thus placing him as an authority figure within the film and not allowing for my point of view. This became reflective of my own creative process: I was being open to feedback, but I was very much set on proceeding with the movie as I had initially envisioned it. It wouldn’t be until actually attempting to
edit footage together that cracks in this plan would show themselves. There was little narrative to be found in the way that I was stringing footage together, and though a non-linear perspective is not inherently a wrong choice, it would not have worked with the film as I had planned it.

After speaking with my committee members, they convinced me to look to other means which would shift the film from the context of that raw footage and into a newer context of a YouTube video filled with comments reacting to the diaries. By including these comments, the “authority” broke from Lopez and was handed off to the commenters and myself as the person choosing which comments to include. Furthermore, this recontextualization of the footage also gave me confidence to break from my self-imposed guidelines and edit the footage as I wanted, allowing for a stronger sense of narrative throughout the film. In a way, this was again a reflection of my own creative process. I don’t generally feel confident in sharing my ideas with others, but without that additional input I might never have known if or how I would have fixed the problem before it becomes too big to ignore.

As a result of this, my primary themes of examining memory were put aside to a degree. I had intended to examine how a filmmaker interacts with the recorded memories of an individual, but this was somewhat blocked by how I had chosen to directly manipulate and change the actual video footage. However, there is still an examination of a different sort of memory: by positioning Lopez’s diary footage with YouTube comments of that footage, we are able to see what it is within the footage that is considered memorable enough to be noticed and commented upon, as well as what thoughts that others chose to record as comments. In this, it almost becomes an expansion
of my initial examination, as I had to not only consider what separate elements of video and audio to connect together, but also the comments I would want to choose for this to create a narrative.

I feel that in this way, my primary goal of creating a film with a theme of memory has been achieved. Though the scope of the project changed rather drastically from its inception, it still maintains a core thread of how memory is examined, though now it becomes how a person is memorialized rather than what that person’s memories are or how they should be chosen to remember. Regarding the research portion of this project, I do regret not having been more detailed in my reports. Looking back, I would have liked to have explained my choices line-by-line in a sort of annotated commentary. It may be a lot more than what would otherwise have been asked of me, but I would feel more confident in saying that I had indeed explained myself.
Chapter Four: Physical Evidence

Included with this project report are several files containing almost all of my output created over the course of the project:

- “Outlines.zip” contains many of the ideas I drafted ahead of editing the film together, as well as a document with some alternate ideas for the film.
- “Roughs.zip” contains two early cuts presented to my committee:
  - “01 Introduction (4 February 2018).mp4” is a short cut I sent in Week Three and an example of my film as I had originally planned it to be.
  - “02 - YouTube Comments (30 March 2018).mp4” was sent during Week Eleven and is an early cut of my film after moving to my later outline.
- “Transcripts.zip” contains the transcriptions of the twenty separate digital files comprising the video diaries as well as a loose transcription and rough outline of the final cut.
- “YouTube.zip” contains screen captures of online uploads of the video diaries and comment sections as well as a document comprising the comments I found to be interesting.

The final cut of *The best of me.MP4* can be found on Vimeo:

https://vimeo.com/267053131 (Password: SomethingFunny)
Chapter Five: 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: \textit{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.
Chapter Six: References


Appendix
“THE BEST OF ME”: A DOCUMENTARY FILM ABOUT
RICARDO LOPEZ, THE “BJORK STALKER”

A Project Proposal
presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree
Master of Arts

by
MICHAEL ENGLISH
Stacey Woelfel, Project Chair
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Introduction

When I came across the hours of footage that comprised the video diaries of Ricardo Lopez, the “Bjork Stalker”, my interest was piqued right away. I quickly learned the history of the footage: shot over nine months, the twenty hours of video detailed Lopez’s plans to deliver a letter bomb to pop singer Bjork, the object of his fascination and twisted love. Over the months, the videos captured his social and mental breakdowns as he isolated himself from the world around him. Upon the mail bomb’s completion, Lopez mailed it off, returned home, and shot himself, convinced that he had succeeded in his plan. Of course, that was not to be the case, as the package was intercepted upon the discovery of Lopez and his tapes. The tapes themselves were confiscated and kept under wraps until they were leaked publicly in 2013.

As I followed Lopez’s story, and as my time in the Documentary Journalism program went on, I began to look at how others saw Lopez and sociopathic figures like him. Their lives are often boiled down in reports and news stories as being little more than crazed loners and stalkers, removing their most sensational actions from the greater context of their lives and what led them to commit such acts. While I agree that those figures and Lopez are indeed awful people whose actions are unforgivable, I support the notion that there is more to their stories than what the primary narrative put out there would have us believe. To wave away their actions as little more than madness is, from a journalistic point of view, very limiting and possibly misleading.

The project I would like to pursue for my master’s degree is a short documentary film, collecting selections from the twenty hours of footage from Ricardo Lopez’s video diaries into a narrative that would follow him as he descends, framing his final months
within as much context as possible in order to create a “full” story, without heavy sensationalism or apologism.

**Qualifications**

I feel that I have the qualifications to pursue a project such as this based upon my experience as a filmmaker and editor, as well as a personal ability to handle the workload.

I acquired a B.A. in Film Studies through the University of Missouri with an unofficial emphasis in Film Production. During my education, I came to appreciate the art of film editing and assembly, though I was unfortunately never given much chance to experiment outside of coursework. My education in the master’s program for Documentary Journalism has also given me a great amount of insight in the ethics of journalism, which will be necessary as I navigate the questionability of actions and potential breaches of privacy that Lopez might have made within his video diaries, as well issues of copyright and fair use, which will come into play due to the appearance of copyrighted songs within the video diaries.

On a personal level, I’ve always had an interest in true-crime stories, psychologically imbalanced figures in history and other topic of criminal psychology. I’ve built up enough fortitude over time to press through disturbing images and videos such as the diaries. Though a majority of the footage is visually clean (besides nudity and Lopez’s death) a majority of Lopez’s vocal thoughts and comments are very disturbing, making it no surprise people would want to stay far away from the diaries. I understand why others choose not to focus their creative energy upon these tapes, yet I do feel that I
have that capacity to watch the tapes despite their content, as well as to look beyond a sensationalist angle and find a character beyond “celebrity stalker”.

**Schedule**

My planned schedule will encompass five months of time, from January to May 2018. In **January**, I will begin transcribing the twenty hours of video diaries and taking notes for sequences. In **February and March**, I will begin assembling the footage based upon my notes and any additional input from committee members, providing rough cuts of scenes for feedback. I will intend for these initial cuts to be more substantial than simple clips and edits, hopefully comprising of complete segments to illustrate a full thought. **April** will consist of two goals: The first will be to continue focusing upon assembly of footage and providing a more complete cut of the film, and the second will be to lock down the final edit. Later in the month, I will defend the final project and prepare the dissemination of the film.

During these five months, I also plan to work as a graduate assistant as well as complete one remaining three-hour required course. Because of this, I will be located within the Columbia, MO area throughout my project, which will allow for me to meet personally with my committee should the need to do so arise.

**Dissemination of Work**

I would plan to disseminate my final project for public consumption through two primary methods: Film festival distribution and online distribution. The former will consist of the submission of the final film to national film festivals, assuming it meets eligibility requirements and my personal budget. Specifically, I would likely submit my
film through WithoutABox for the sake of ease, as it allows for submission to multiple festivals with a single form.

Online distribution would be done independently; I would release the film after some time through various means, such as YouTube and Vimeo. Whether or not I would be able to release the film for a fee or at no charge would depend on copyright clearances; I feel that the nature of the footage supports an argument in favor of fair use.

**Evidence**

Evidence of my work being completed will be delivered to my committee on a weekly basis through the following methods, based upon my schedule: In January, transcripts will be delivered as well as any notes I may write down for future scenes and sequences. In February and March, rough cuts of various scenes will be sent to show how I intend for sequences will flow together, before final assembly. In early April, those “dailies” will become longer rough cuts of the final film, altered based upon committee feedback and/or other ideas I may have. In late April, the final edited film will be delivered to my committee for defense.

**Methodology and Literature Review**

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 auteuristic 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’s 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 is easier to discuss than it is to direct in a film. Through this, my research questions are: 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 will look to the use of memories through the theory of framing, specifically looking to how filmmakers arrange what a subject might discuss against later events during filming, as well as how a filmmaker might arrange such moments in the film’s editing phases. 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. This will be my ideal framework to study this question as it is primarily through the
framing of scenes and clips that a filmmaker arranges their film, literally through the editing process and figuratively through the creation of contexts both within specific segments of a film and throughout the entirety of the story. Framing is an inherent element of nonfiction storytelling and documentary filmmaking, and memories take the theoretical framework of framing one step further by applying it to a person and their point of view.

To further illustrate my questions, as well as to help contribute my own answers, I will be creating a documentary that will, in essence, be comprised of direct memories. The footage will be comprised of a set of video diaries created by Ricardo Lopez, the “Bjork Stalker” who attempted to murder the pop singer by sending her an acidic letter bomb. These videos are comprised of two major periods of time: January to April 1996, and July to September 1996. Lopez’s demeanor, remarks, and general daily actions contrast sharply between the two, and I would like to juxtapose the period of time against each other as a means of examining his memories against his actions, as well as to create a profile of Lopez, what he did, and what he might have forgotten he had done over the months. I will also detail as much of the creative process as I can, explaining or showcasing why I might choose to position certain clips together in the final product and how they illustrate Lopez’s memories and/or his slipping grasp upon them. Anecdotally, he remarks that the camera he uses to record his diaries is a “living part of [his brain],” and that they are “the same now”.

The title of the film, “The Best of Me”, refers to a placard that Lopez set up in view of his camera during the final minutes of his life, presumably hoping that upon taking his life it would be splattered with his blood or brains. It will also be utilized as a
means of expressing one of Lopez’s initial goals also discussed in his video diaries: at a point, he had an interest in compiling his diaries together, edited down into a single video for authorities to discover. I would be reappropriating the statement for similar reasons, as this film will in essence become a “best-of” compilation video, though not in the exploitative sense of compiling the most shocking aspects of the diaries for the sake of showing Lopez off to an audience as a carnival sideshow attraction. I will instead be focusing upon the dichotomy that Lopez presents of himself, fluxing between an individual bent upon destroying another person and of a grown man who seems lost in a world that outpaced his own desires.

This dichotomy also bleeds into how Lopez frames himself throughout the video footage. As the camera operator, primary subject and narrator of his diaries, Lopez is obviously hyper-aware of both the camera’s presence and his own presence within his videos, but he is also aware of how he presents himself within the videos. This comes to little surprise, given that he at one point planned to compile this footage together to create a documentary of his own. As such, he seems to present a multitude of factors that “explain” his motivations for what he does, but even upon consideration of all these reasons there are still questions left unanswered if not new questions that are raised.

Despite his seeming willingness to share a great number of details about his plans and his device, Lopez is essentially an unreliable narrator, an aspect that could lead to both the development of his overall character and personality, as broken as it already is, as well as the development of the primary ideas of framing both in how Lopez frames himself and his thoughts as well as how I would be framing Lopez in the film.
The framing of Lopez will be need to be accomplished with a great amount of attention for a number of reasons. While the final product will hopefully represent the brokenness within Lopez’s mind during his final months, I do not desire to create a project that exploits his mental illness. Though the film will document his actions I do not want his thoughts and comments to be seen in a glorified light, presented in the film for the sake of presenting them to an audience. My primary desire is to look beyond these aspects and create a film that satisfies myself both as an artist, telling a story that challenges concepts of mental illness and obsession; and as a researcher, determining how to proceed with difficult topics and difficult implications. This is why I plan to augment my film’s development with as much written commentary as possible, so as to explain the choices and connections I make, opinions I hold about the footage being utilized, and the overall flow of the final edit. By cataloguing my own experiences in the creation of a film constructed entirely upon personal memories from a disturbed mind, examining what clarity can be found within, I will be able to add a new perspective to their use within documentary filmmaking as well as a first-person account of the choices a person might need to make when framing any life, much less one so controversial.

Before continuing, it would be helpful to define what is a “memory” in the context of this research. For the purposes of this review, I have personally opted to define a memory as a direct retelling or recording of a past event from a person whose point of view is a 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 the memories of a person due to their disconnect. 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.

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.

Staged reenactments have become commonplace in documentaries, generally in the true-crime subgenre; examples include Errol Morris’ *The Thin Blue Line*, Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*, and Andrew Jarecki’s miniseries *The Jinx*. Reenactments serve to reconstruct the past when it needs to be examined but cannot be captured as it happened (Galindo, 2009), for obvious temporal reasons. This has been utilized more for entertainment purposes rather than analytical or investigative, much to the chagrin of some critics. Richard Brody (2015) sees reenactments as “insults to the audience—they assume that audiences can’t imagine anything like what the filmmaker is getting at,” and a reflection of ”the filmmaker’s own sense of impotence to create, by the assemblage of nonfiction material, an idea of what he has in mind.”

Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* supports an experimental use of reenactments, in which he allows his film’s subjects, perpetrators of the 1965 Indonesian genocide and now modern-day hero figures, to direct reenactments of their wartime acts in whatever image they desire, resulting in the true memories of the past becoming
meshed with contemporary takes on filmic storytelling. The self-glorification of these reenactments is twisted when one of the major warlords finds himself disgusted by his own past actions when he takes up the role of a victim in a reenactment, feeling fear and mortality and realizing this to be the case for all of his victims.

When it is not possible to reenact these stories and memories, whether out of respect or for artistic or financial limitations, the traditional method of interview and collecting stories will almost always suffice as a means of expressing the past through memories. While in many cases this amounts to little more than a sit-down with a subject, what matters here is not a visual means of storytelling but a contextual one. When a subject is allowed to speak at length about whatever it is that they have witnessed, there becomes a direct connection between that witness and the audience, or a “virtual performance” as Jones puts it (2012):

Indeed, when the witnesses narrate their past, they do so largely unselfconsciously and with genuine affect; they do not appear to be aware of performing. Yet their emotional response to the telling of their story has a powerful effect on the viewer that is comparable to actual performance in fictional film. The virtual performance or everyday presentation of emotion creates an impression of subjectivity which, in turn, has the potential to generate empathy. (p. 198)

There is another directness, not between audience and witness. The modernity of photographic and video technology has allowed for not only the direct capture of memorable events, but a direct access to those memories at any point; Meng analogizes human capacity for memory as a computer hard drive, where memories are fragmented
but accessible (2016, p. 266). Ai Xiaoming’s *Our Children*, a film about the tragic aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, utilizes this direct access to keep memories of victims alive however possible (Svensson, 2017, 208), and by extension those memories become known to and are absorbed by the viewing audience.

Reenactment of events and recollection of memories may be utilized separately in documentary filmmaking, but the third means of expression is not only inherent to the filmmaking medium but has the ability to alter how these events are perceived by audiences. The final step in filmmaking is the editing process, compressing and cutting hours of footage into a final film that is taken and consumed by audiences and critics. Here, the issue of cutting footage is what becomes a point of conflict as to cut the raw footage of an interview or an event (reenacted or otherwise) means to remove information from a greater context in which that footage would normally reside or display. Silbey suggests that gaps in film footage where cuts were made create a new understanding and interpretation of events (p. 161), stating that viewers “draw connections between the presented shots, the juxtaposition of otherwise disconnected scenes adding significance to the overall story.” Where gaps in footage are created, it not only means that something is lost from the preceding and proceeding footage, but a new implication is made; this is montage editing meant to create a “new reality” of sorts. The 2002 documentary *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* explained how commercial media, supportive of a coup d’etat against Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, circulated footage of pro-Chávez supporters firing guns juxtaposed against footage of wounded protesters, an act that put the protesters in a sympathetic light. The reality was that the Chávez supporters were fighting in self-defense, and the footage was edited from two
different events, spread around in order to discredit Chávez and garner support for the coup (Schiller, 2009).

This figurative abuse of the power in editing a film has a further effect when screened for audiences. In 1916, Hugo Münsterberg wrote that films invite viewers to focus their attention upon key messages or ideas and essentially make up their minds for them, conveying thoughts too complex to deliver otherwise (Winter, 2004, p. 372). Further, he suggested that because of this ability for film to function this way, it allowed audiences to synchronize their own internal thoughts with those of the characters on screen (p. 396). Similarly, one single event can be interpreted differently based upon the way it is framed: Silbey (2005) writes about the studies of social psychologist Daniel Lassiter in which videotaped confessions were filmed from several angles simultaneously, then screened to audiences who were asked whether the suspect was coerced into a statement by the detective (p. 162). Lassiter found that those who were screened a tape focused on the suspect saw little external coercion into making a confession, while those screened a tape of the exact same session but focused on the detective saw a great deal of coercion.

Empathy is a natural reaction for a viewer of a film, given the time-honored screenwriting tradition of creating sympathetic characters. In the case of documentaries, the audience empathy for the subject can and in some cases has resulted in real-world change; one of the most notable cases is the release of The Thin Blue Line and the subsequent release of Randall Adams, the film’s subject who was accused of murdering a police officer, after a confession from David Harris was recorded by Morris (Bruzzi,
2016, p. 266). When a film’s director feels sympathy for their subject, however, this can have an effect on how they frame the story, for better or for worse.

In her discussion of true-crime documentaries, Bruzzi accuses the directors of the 2015 miniseries *Making a Murderer*, Moira Demos and Laura Ricciardi, of being biased towards the innocence of their subjects, Steven Avery and Brendan Dassey. Bruzzi suggests that despite their lack of an authoritative presence within the series, there is evidence of their bias within the series’ framing of characters, including portrayals of Avery’s parents and the county prosecutor, and an extended presentation of evidence that the prosecution and defense colluded (2016, p. 275-7). While the series did indeed bring national attention to the case and further momentum for those working to free Avery and Dassey, it raises the question of whether or not the same result could have occurred if Demos and Ricciardi were careful to avoid biases in the presentation of evidence.

*The Thin Blue Line* serves as an example answer to this question. Like *Making a Murderer*, Morris presents the case of Randall Adams with a clear position of support for his innocence, which becomes prevalent well before David Harris’ confession is shown. However, where Demos and Ricciardi would frame the characters in *Making a Murderer* with a heavy hand, Morris stepped back and allowed his subjects to speak for themselves. Using reenactments of their testimonies, he discovers the discrepancies and contradictions in their stories that helps to portray Adams as a victim of judicial incompetency; the film presents every character in a similar fashion, without resorting to framing certain characters in a distinctly positive or negative manner, save for the final scene in which Harris confesses. Morris allows his audience to come to a distinct conclusion, but without overtly pushing them in that direction; Brody (2015) criticizes
this hands-off decision as resulting in a “deadening and trivializing” staging of events, “not because of their subjectivity but because of their impersonality,” though I find to be a positive factor given the aforementioned potential for biases.

Brody also spoke of the reenactment as insulting towards an audience and the filmmaker, preventing the mental recreation of images by replacing multiple interpretations of thoughts and memories through personal imagination with a single point of view in the reenactment. I am inclined to agree with this suggestion; I further suggest that Münsterberg’s notion of the synchronization between film and thought is heightened through reenactment by bringing such ideas to life, to the screen, and to audiences, all of which stems from the singular point of view of the reenactment that further becomes a harder truth. Thus, it is not only the framing of memories as related by subjects that becomes a contextual point of care in the editing stages, but also how reenactments may be framed.

Memories in documentary follow a complex process in their lives. The memories of a subject rest in a person’s mind for life, settling into whatever recesses it finds until called forth again. The memory becomes immortalized, whether in a reenactment that brings the original event back to life, a recorded reminiscing from the subject to an interviewer, or some experimental combination of both. Naturally, investigation into these stories to find truth may reveal a greater context that puts new ideas of these memories into light, or possibly dismantle the stories entirely. There is also the added complication of the post-production step of filmmaking, which can remove a memory from its original context and completely change the implications in editing should the film’s director and editor not be careful. It is after all of this pseudo-game of Telephone
that the memory of a person reaches an audience, where it becomes a truth empowered by the cultural influence of the film medium.
References


