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Pursuit of Faith: “Navigating Ethics and Self-Referential Documentary”

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ABSTRACT

This Master’s Project sets out to explore the history of my Irish Catholic, French Canadian family; using archive materials from my grandmother (super 8mm home films, scanned photographs) and more recent interviews between my grandparents (in person and via Zoom) and functions relationally, a pas de deux between a self (me) and a familial other (my grandparents) rather than an outright self-examination.

Given the profound importance of healthy family dynamics in the life of the filmmaker (me), the paper includes the explorations of ethics, and four common principles; “consent, do no harm, protect the vulnerable, and honor viewers' trust” as guiding benchmarks in my own process. My goal through this project is to explore my family experience in all its complexity and place it into present day context and constraints of coronavirus, while examining other films (and literature about films) to inform the choices I make; ethically, structurally and stylistically for this autobiographical documentary. In keeping with this ambition, the essay formulates an ethics, a way, to think about the nature of autobiographical film in its possible relation to memory, the elusive ‘truth’ and understanding family religion and culture. Primarily analytical, the paper presents the ethics of my autobiographical documentary film by looking at a variety of self representations in film and literature and domestic ethnographic research.

Like all autobiographical works, in writing, painting or film, my master’s project is a journey towards self understanding, and admittedly, self construction. The analytical paper focuses on my documentary, the ethical issues that arise while conducting domestic ethnography (the careful description and explication of culture) and the editing choices I drew from first person documentaries to connect those who came before us to those who come after us. Sarah Polley’s ‘Stories We Tell’ largely serves to inform me on storytelling and defining ‘truth’ whereas Alan Berliner’s ‘Nobody’s Business’ serves as a framework on editing choices. Berliner has a lot to inform about the underbelly of Kodachrome versions of family life; he reveals the importance to capture the surface rather than the depth of family life, beyond the filmed holidays, birthdays and anniversaries to fully grasp that only after this smooth facade and promenade of well-behaved children orchestrated for the occasion is where the ‘truest’ family dynamic lies.

The paper both brings to the surface ethical issues in the life of a documentarian, and examines these ethical issues in the context of others autobiographical documentaries. Written to reflect the power of memory, intergenerational history and the healing power of stories, the film spotlights self-relations and self-growth, embodies the interconnections among self, other and the world, and awakens one’s own humanity in the process of sharing, telling and the process of filmmaking.
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To anyone reading, I hope this story inspires you to be brave to ask your family questions too.
“I believe that thinking about the consequences of your work— the issue of ethics— is essential. Since we're specifically involved in the transmission of cultural ideas— ideas about value, then we have to examine the meaning of what we're proposing...

The issue is not about telling people what they should be doing, but rather trying to make people conscious of what they're doing. There's a difference.

And what you hope will happen is that a consciousness develops which relates what you do to the society around you. It's a very old-fashioned idea: what you do has an effect on the world you live in.

And if you're concerned about the state of the world, there is no escape from the fact that you're participating in it.”

— Milton Glaser
I. Introduction

“According to Sartre, every aesthetic implies a metaphysic; in documentary, every aesthetic also implies an ethics.”

- Paul Arthur, *The Art of Real: Standards & Practices*

The central goal of my documentary film, ‘the pursuit of faith,’ is to understand the story of faith from the perspective of my grandparents. Specifically, my goal is to capture the genesis of my grandfather’s Catholic faith tradition and threads of my family’s religious beliefs from one generation to the next, despite our physical distancing and my beliefs as a Buddhist. Does the notion of faith transcend different religions, history and the current pandemic for one family? I ask my grandparents, devout Catholics, to share their spiritual experiences as young adults on ‘Retreat on the Credo’ and their formative experiences with the ‘divine,’ while I, a young woman who identifies as Buddhist, and as their granddaughter, consider my own faith and connection to family during a phase of uncertainty and social distancing under the pandemic. What do I learn from my grandparents, who serve as spiritual leaders, despite our different religions, as we face COVID-19?

In the accompanying paper, I consider the ethical implications of using home videos as narrative and illustrative conduits to history and memory. What are the ethical implications of recording, creating and sharing my family documentary? I place this project within the larger question, “How can a self-referential documentary film be ethical?” Using my personal moral compass, I engage in a sustained critical analysis of my film, while bringing in documentary
voices (i.e. Jonathan Caouette, Tarnation, Sarah Polley, Stories We Tell, Alan Berliner, Nobody's Business, Andrew Jarecki, Capturing the Friedmans) and the scholarly voices of Patricia Aufderheide (American University), Susan Sontag (author of On Photography), Michael Renov (professor of Critical Studies at USC), Olivia Laing (author of Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency) and Paul Arthur (former film historian) to surface the ethical issues in self-referential documentary film beyond my own lens. Given the profound importance of trust and family dynamics in my life outside of the film, I apply four common principles from American University’s Center for Media Social Impact’s journal article, ‘Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work.’ Consent, do no harm, protect the vulnerable, and honor viewers' trust— serving as guiding benchmarks.

II. Context

I always wonder what makes you who you are. Are you the way you are because of society and present events or are you behaving as a result of the conditions your ancestors had and the experiences they went through?

Given the state of disorder during Spring 2020, the global pandemic, the loss of my final NCAA Track & Field season and a 600 mile distance between myself and my loved ones, I felt an urgent need to understand where my family came from to grasp where I am going. The onset of COVID-19 sparked my interest in recording my grandparents' stories, then my grandfather’s eightieth birthday came up in April 2020 and provided a justified opportunity to record his stories. My Grammie planned an extravagant surprise eightieth birthday for my Papa, unbeknownst to him, and had to cancel the entire party due to coronavirus. I faced limitations of
celebrating his monumental birthday over Zoom under quarantine, while finishing courses for my Master’s degree in Durham, North Carolina. That is when I began to ask more questions seriously about his 80 years of living and the ethics that governed this process.

According to a professor of history at Yale and author, David W. Blight, “History is not a scoresheet; it is a land both foreign and familiar. It lives in us even as it can seem so far away” (Blight). I don’t attempt to pinpoint or connect my historical moments to theirs, in the following documentary, ‘the pursuit of faith.’ Rather, I consider family history as what was recorded in the making to fuse the foreign and familiar. My father’s family films are organized, assembled and edited by me, one of my grandparent’s sixteen grandchildren, who takes the role as a director. Some questions I ask during the production of this film were:

- Why am I setting out to digitize their home videos and record their stories in 2020, rather than any other year?
- Why do I document the conversation to understand my religious inheritance?
- Am I asking them questions about their spiritual journey, while on my own, to connect with them in our little lifetime?
- Am I recording my grandparents’ stories because I do not want to face their mortality?
- Why spend all this time looking backwards while making sense of the present, in a fervent attempt to find shared, common humanity through the process of making sense of my family’s Catholic religion?

Our geographic distance apart and my own longing for connection through a screen, while under state-mandated self-isolation, intensified the need to understand where I come from and what my family’s past was.
So, I said to my loved ones, “Tell me your story.”

III. Intentions

I am aware, in making this film, the potential traps of thinking of it as some kind of definite memorialization of my family, and of using it narcissistically to sanctify my own experience of my family. Susan Sontag, the American writer known for her ideas on culture, said, “memorializing the achievements of individuals considered as members of families (as well as other groups) is the earliest popular use of photography” (Sontag 176). My project is not a photograph, but in the same way that photography memorializes the past, I attempt to narrate events and achievements of my grandparents' lives through multimedia. Sontag also said, “the book has been the most influential way to arrange and guarantee longevity, if not immortality... but photography loses much less of its essential quality when reproduced in a book than a painting does” (Sontag, 174). Therefore, Sontag raises the issue of ‘quality’ when materials, such as my original audio and video, as well my grandparent’s footage, in ‘the pursuit of faith,’ are reproduced. I take Sontag’s perspective to heart and question the depth of my reproduction. I do not intend for my film to serve as a way to immortalize them. My intention is to use materials that are representative of the quality of my grandparents lives.

In “The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary,” Alisa Lebow notes the deception that her title holds, as a collection of essays about first person documentary films. She argues that the title “preys on the all too-readily accepted impression of first person films as self-absorbed, myopic films that only a mother could love, despite the fact that the films discussed in this book, almost without exception, defy such expectations” (Lebow, 1). Clearly, narcissism is a threat when creating a first person film, but my intention is to combat
an ego-driven film through production choices and editing that serves a larger audience than myself and my own kin. It’s important to consider this film as defense against my own anxiety or a narcissistic venture on the self.

Narcissism

I seek to combat first-person film narcissism through the recognition of my own limitations and intentions. I do not expect that my self exhibition will be healing to my family, nor do I seek personal catharsis through the creation of this film. For example, *Tarnation*, filmed by Jonathan Caouette is a low budget documentary that pursues self examination and inquiry into his family that is seen as a “necessarily narcissistic venture” by Marsha Orgeron and Devin Orgeron from the University of Texas (Orgeron, 861). Although Caouette’s decision to display his family and his own life in this public fashion might lead the audience to understand this narcissism as a kind of therapeutic response to instability and disorder, especially of the mental variety, it does not justify the film as necessary narcissism. He seeks relief through the production of his film and pursues the project to avoid the dissolution of a family, evident to the audience. On one hand, I replicate Caouette’s pattern in my own documentary by recording events of my family’s past that have been silenced and recognize my recording impulse pulling towards fictional and factual. On the other hand, I do not engage in my documentary recording as an attempt for resolution or catharsis like Caouette. My film may perhaps be a response to a generation of family where religious faith fell silent, but my intentions come from a pursuit towards abundance. Unlike Caouette, I do not depend or sublimate my film as a means to heal or connect my family back together; they do not depend on whether I completed or displayed the
film and held the process of recording their stories as the primary importance of self examination and inquiry. I recognize the limits of a film's power to achieve any ends. While its means mainly served as a conduit for self examination and inquiry into myself, I intend to draw out universal struggles of connection and alienation to a wider audience through a documentary production.

Connection over investigation

My intention for this film is not to discern a factual truth in the spiritual events that occur within my grandparents lives or even compare and contrast them to my own spiritual beliefs. I seek memories to find what’s alive and present in revelations through our conversations and attempt to create a space of sharing and family connection across generational divides through the excuse of a film. In Michael Renov’s article, Family Secrets: Alan Berliner's "Nobody's Business" and the (American) Jewish Autobiographical Film, he reflects that “memory, inner truths, and family secrets are the order of the day for nonfiction films” (Renov). Renov’s view supports my intention to return to the family genesis to “discover the sources of their fears and yearnings,” and creates limitations within my recording. I do not record the experience of too many current events, nor do I invite the voices of family members beyond my grandparents. These recordings are a collaborative practice and are not pursued to analyse or interrogate. I view the microphone as an open ear to reality and as a way to shake any preconceptions about my individual beliefs that hold me back from empathy for my grandparents’ religion, and thereby associated communities of religion. I choose to use a microphone, rather than film, to express their tone of voice, respect their privacy and avoid manipulating images and performativity. While Renov calls contemporary documentary filmmaking a “a kind of identity sleuthing,” I try
to avoid a detective persona and sleuthing for ‘clues’ on my own vocation, sensibility, or pathology and intend to keep the present moment and interpersonal connection between my grandparents and me as a priority in our dialogue.

*Fair Use*

Lastly, I do not intend to use my film for commercial purposes and this film serves a nonprofit educational purpose. Fair Use, a legal doctrine that promotes freedom of expression by permitting the unlicensed use of copyright-protected works in certain circumstances allows for certain types of uses—such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research. Creative work, such as my documentary, would be less likely to use Fair Use than factual work to maintain the nature of copyrighted work.

**IV. Limitations**

“We set lots of limits. The limitations that we set were, and still remain, Glenn’s dignity and what his family would want and what his children would want.”

- Gordon Quinn, *Filmmaker of “Hoop Dreams”*

My pre-documentary footage is limited in that it represents an inadequate expression of my grandparents' lives today. In *Familial Pursuits, Editorial Acts, Documentaries after the Age of Home Video*, authors Marsha and Devin Oregeron recognize a significant number of documentaries that rely on primary footage taken by subjects in documentaries over the course of their pre-documentary lives. For example, *Tarnation*, as well as *Capturing the Friedmans*
(Andrew Jarecki, 2003) and *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005), employ footage that was taken by and of the documentary subject(s) before the production of the film. The film's directors assume the role of editor and interpreter of a prerecorded, personal moving archive. As these films demonstrate, home videos hold implications for intimacy, memory and narrative of the past, as personal memory morphed into something tangible, authorized and visual to substantiate the stories they share into the present day.

Documentary filmmakers, including myself, need to have a sense of ethics when it comes to their work. In my film, I recognize personal bias as the subjects’ granddaughter and omit the voices of other family members. I choose this direct way of editing to limit the interpretations of my grandparents’ direct experiences from the perceptions of others, even my loved ones. According to filmmaker Gordon Quinn, documentary filmmakers hold a stronger responsibility than journalists by nature of the time spent with subjects. Given that my subjects are my grandparents, and that I have unusual access to my grandparent’s stories about faith, more than an outsider would, I have significant blindspots in personal bias and a greater responsibility to create moral and clear boundaries towards telling the truth, protecting my subjects and accuracy in what I present in their interviews; to preserve our familial ties.

Another limit to consider is the reduction of the medium of film and the recognition that my grandparents exist beyond the stories they share and the story I share about them. In ‘Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,’ the authors James Agee and Walker Evans admit their subjects “exists, in actual being, as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist” and see film as a ‘character’ (Agee, Evans 103). This supports my claim that my grandfather and grandmother live off the script of this documentary, just as I exist outside this
film and ‘the pursuit of faith’ only faintly imitates life. As Agee and Evans say, there is an “immeasurable weight in actual existence” and I do not attempt to surpass the limit of reality through my film (Agee, Evans 103).

V. Methods

Approach to telling the stories in film

How do you tell a story? To voice over or not? The “I” is undoubtedly an unreliable narrator. Truth remains outside of film or my voice over narration and I do not attempt to conceal that. My method is to combine recorded FaceTimes/Zooms, archival footage (photo, audio and video) and my voice over reflection to create a film in cinéma vérité style. Working with my grandmother, I scan her photographs and home videos and use Dropbox to store footage to develop a full collection of primary sources. With their approval, I record calls to document our conversations and include my subjectivity and questions in these recordings. I work to limit falsity by evading the temptation to dramatize incidents for the sake of entertainment value and choose a raw style of filmmaking for the sake of protecting my family and their original stories. With that in mind, my style of film is: observational and reflective, with primary source recordings and (my) voice over narration.

Means of Memory

I involve the role of family memories in primary source recordings as a method to understand the past so as to move forward in the next generation. In an article in Nature, Carina
Dennis offers insight into why two deaf women sought to convey messages of their parents to the
next generation. She wrote, “Communication and the pursuit of intimacy are central to being
human.” Whereas I do not have the same struggle of deafness, my grandfather is half deaf, and
following Dennis’ logic, I pursue communication despite sound barriers using home videos as a
conduit for intimacy, memory and narrative. Memory plays a role in my film to bridge a gap
from time and connect two generations to the present.

*Suspend disbelief*

I look to Alan Berliner’s films that include home footage for interview strategies to
remain in the present while pursuing questions about my grandparent’s past; their spiritual
journey (requiring insight from the past) and invites me to suspend disbelief of certain views
they held. For example, Berliner often gets into arguments with his father, rather than talking
about the traumas and childhood experiences he intended to bring up, demonstrating to the
audience something that makes the film more real and ‘true.’ Similarly, I avoid making a film
with a predetermined conclusion or including arguments about why I believe in Buddhist
principles rather than Catholic values. I thought I’d know when my project came to completion
with footage at my grandparent’s 60th wedding anniversary in October 2020, rather than with
some change of faith in the ‘characters.’ My story is not about getting them to change their
views, but to connect through our differences. Unfortunately, COVID-19 had other plans, and my
filmmaking involved change and choices. The film ends without an in-person wedding
anniversary celebration and keeps the integrity of nature’s changing events, rather than my own
hope for plot development and allows Papa and Gram to escape my attempt to fit them into a character template.

*Voice over reflection*

I particularly choose voice over style in my introduction and conclusion to create a relationship between myself and the viewer. Using *Grizzly Man* as reference, a narrative driven by Werner Herzog’s quest to understand the life and work of naturalist Timothy Treadwell, I also make my presence known with voice-over narration. Upon settling into interviews with my grandparents, I let the conversation lead and choose an ‘observational, fly on the wall style.’ In the wake of practitioners of the direct cinema of the 1960s like the Maysles brothers and Frederick Wiseman, I reject voiceover narration here during the interviews to remain emotionally uninvolved with my loved ones and, editorially, detached from subjects, while I include background music to soften the white noise.

VI. Ethics

"*What principle might justify our choice to dedicate an entire issue to the subject of documentary ethics?*"

-  *D Geva*

In the words of Paul Arthur, ethics are as integral to the natural landscape as documentary footage itself, that’s “invoked constantly and from a variety of angles” (Arthur). However, whereas the language for consistent and coherent ethics in fiction-film production is erratic and muffled, at best. I found patterns of fiction-film in documentaries and sought to discern
embellishments that help capture a story’s truth from that which makes an unethical drama out of footage. Just as owning a video camera doesn’t make someone a skilled filmmaker, owning the super 8 film from one’s family’s past doesn’t make one an ethical documentarian. Therefore, in recent documentaries, such as Capturing the Friedmans, Grizzly Man or Roger & Me, the issue of ethics was central to the interviews and production of a story, but included fiction’s familiar embellishments of dramatic climaxes, mood music, continuity editing, and optical effects (Arthur). In “The Stories We Tell,” Polley’s story is the aftermath and the way her family reacts to a newly revealed part of history. Likewise, I have to consider how the recorded material potentially reshapes my family dynamics, my grandmother and grandfather’s faith, my own sense of spirituality and how to retain their dignity through revelations they share. Documentary film is a lens that opens us up to one another, allows people to see ourselves more clearly, but I had to set limits in order to maintain ethical integrity and purpose through this work. As someone subject to such scrutiny, it is crucial that I explore the implications of this autobiographical film’s story development on my family and the impact the film intended to have on the audience; to avoid a self referential project rooted in narcissism, exhibitionism or falsity.

In the article, Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work, documentary filmmakers identify themselves as “creative artists for whom ethical behavior is at the core of their projects” (Aufderheide). But given the year 2020 as a time of financial strain, unemployment for many, to lower costs, increase productivity and rely on conflict resolution on a case-by-case basis, the ethics of documentary filmmaking is not easily articulated using the ‘I.’ Without clear ethical standards, young filmmakers, like myself, have more freedom, but greater opportunity for distortion, misrepresentation, coercion, or betrayal.
outside our lens of awareness, even if the act of filmmaking appears to serve a higher goal such
as ‘getting the story told.’ Sure, you can be a documentarian without being ethical, hence the
controversial documentaries like *The Hunting Ground*, where filmmakers do not give Florida
State University enough time to respond to allegations of on-campus sexual assault before
shaping their own narrative, to Alex Gibney’s *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief*,
but when the subject you record consists of your own family, I have reason to believe it is ever
more important to raise ethical questions and highlight issues in documentary filmmaking for the
sake of what happens off set. As a result, it’s imperative that I look to a guiding framework to
justify my choices for my family’s story and hold myself accountable to standards throughout the
process of filmmaking, editing and accessibility for viewing.

Value of art and culture

Why should we bother at all with ethics? What kind of motivation ought to justify my
action, intention, and desired outcome for a film about my family? Perhaps it was my travels in
Cape Town, South Africa to fully understand the meaning of ‘ubuntu,’ meaning we are bound to
live interdependently with one another. I commit to understanding the nature of documentary
‘togetherness,’ to serve as a beacon for connection as well as functioning as a piece of art, that
has an inherent value in and of itself. As much as I am the maker of this film, the ‘pursuit of
faith’ also pursues the audience, who turns to art for meaning and seeks connection in times of
around the central question, what is the use of art, and for the people who think and talk about it,
during times of crisis? (Laing). For example, Laing questions what art did in the AIDS crisis in
her essay in the book, The Lonely City, and concluded it agitated, organized, consoled and
eventually, memorialized the people affected by it (Laing). She focuses on what the art does for
people, introducing the idea of hospitality, through a series of essays, rather than judging art as
good or bad; and that’s frankly what I set out, rather ambitiously to do, through my film during
the coronavirus epidemic. As a result, I turn to the enduring tradition and art of documentary
filmmaking as well as to the turbulent history of documentary ideas; to face the recurring
evidence of interdependence between the ethical sensitivity to documentary film and the material
dimension of documentary’s value to culture for creative socially necessary creativity in times of
relative despair. In more simple terms, how am I here, and not there? There and not here? How
can my film serve as a conduit for this gap, for my grandparents, for the viewer and for myself?

While I believe documentary serves an artistic value, especially in times of suffering, the
issue of ethics must be raised. Robert Sinnerbrink, a philosopher of film, argues in his article,
The Act of Witnessing: Cinematic Ethics in The Look of Silence, that cinema is an ethical space
and creates distinctive ethical language. While Sinnerbrink believes cinema adds a unique
contribution to the history of ethical thought, Paul Arthur looks at documentary ethics as “this
uncanny hesitation, or double take” to serve “as blunt warning to contemporary documentarians,
especially a growing cadre of first-person storytellers” (Sinnerbrink). Sinnerbrink finds ethics
within the movie whereas according to Arthur, flaunting ethical conundrums is not the same as
confronting them, since the way they are framed textually may conceal as much as it
exposes” (Arthur). Therefore, I find navigating the complicated dynamics of moral responsibility
toward its human subjects, especially given my family members, as the nature of my work,
beyond the complete film, ‘the pursuit of faith.’
That being said, what makes an autobiographical documentary film ethical? I came across four common principles from the Center for Social Media at American University’s School of Communications: “consent, do no harm, protect the vulnerable, and honor viewers' trust” to serve as guidelines for my project.

1. Consent

How do I adequately gain consent from my grandparents? I have to make sure my grandparents are willing to revisit their memories transparently. As their grandchild, I only have celebratory things to say. This documentary required insight about their upbringing and conflicts. I gained their approval verbally, but they had to be willing to talk on a consistent basis, over technology or 6 ft apart. Camera-mediated relationships between the observer and observed, what may be referred to by some as the “documentary transaction,” constitute a primary site of ethical disturbance. My grandparents might not get how comprehensively I want to understand their spiritual journey, but as long as they are willing to carve out time to talk on a regular schedule, I have the opportunity to access their memories under quarantine.

I believe my film's social actors (my grandparents) were able to make sensible decisions on how they were represented. I gained consent from my grandparents by asking them if they were OK with being recorded and explained that implications (widely out of my control) could happen upon sharing the film with a wider audience. Given the sometimes queasy intimacy involved in documentary recording, I offered a clear, convincing justification for displaying scenes of highly personal, perhaps humiliating activities to forge a connection with the audience. Unfortunately, my grandparents were not OK with film recording and we negotiated
reality with audio recordings. I found this compromise fair and indicative that I adequately gained consent for footage and interviews from my grandparents. I did not know many details about their history of worship before hand, but through open ended questions, with their consent and the right to be forgotten, I slowly integrated intimate questions on spirituality into our conversation. (The right to be forgotten allows people to delete information, videos or photographs of themselves from internet records so they cannot be found by search engines and protects the integrity of my ethical framework).

2. **Do no harm**

   I considered the limitations of their consent and what my grandparents would accept in a film that’s focused on their spiritual life (without present-day video). I considered myself a steward of my grandparents’ stories as I wielded power behind the camera. I approached my grandparents from a place to connect rather than extract recordings because I only know what I know, and there is a lot I don’t know.

   While pursuing this topic of ethics for the subject, I was reminded of the 19th century philosophers, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Their concept of "do no harm" serves as a universal prescription for moral action. Thanks to my studies in Political Science, I had an easier time understanding how utilitarianism related to the ethics of my documentary project.

   Utilitarianism is a modern form of the Hedonistic ethical theory which teaches that the point of human actions are for happiness, and that the guiding principle that distinguishes action as right versus wrong through pleasure and pain. Bentham is known for the aphorism, “the greatest good for the greatest number.” Mill wrote, “Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote
happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” when it comes to what is right and wrong.” How much good, for the greatest number of people, will the recollection of my grandparent’s stories create for others? I sought this film to increase happiness beyond my own need for it and strove to create a film that moves a wider audience.

More specifically, this film may not create the greatest good for my grandparents. I realized before, during and after, that the recognition of our conflicting beliefs could cause a chasm between us. The exploration that I portrayed in the film created a good in its process, but the final product held potential harm to outweigh the good, under the pleasure principle. In other words, the camera is a tool. In the *Art of the Real: Standards & Practices*, the film *51 Birch Street* is brought to attention as an example of documentary which wields the camera as a “tool of psychological insight” (Arthur). The filmmaker, Doug Block, attempts to use his footage to reverse the audience’s perceptions of his parent’s parenting, cleverly before a reconciliation with his dad. He begins using his camcorder “to better connect with his parents, particularly his father, to whom he's never been particularly close,” and to document a little family history for himself and his sisters (Ebert). This brings up alarms for my own film with similar intentions, and paid heed to the criticism from Block’s film. His film is unethical because of the visible representations of harm that he depicts on screen. In one scene, his mother moves from the bedroom to the bathroom to avoid being recorded in an unflatteringly low angle. She calls out to the filmmaker, her son, “You destroy trust!” from behind the bathroom door. This serves as an example to me of what not to do. I could not guarantee what would happen once we began recording, but assured my grandparents that this film would not be something I would pursue bringing to any larger audience other than for the screening for my degree, if it eroded our trust.
They do not mind that this film would be and was shared with others. I assured them that I’ll do my best to prevent harm to them or our family, harm that’s not directly related to being in the film; the root of this project relies on trust.

To reverberate what Mill said, “The moral rules which forbid mankind to hurt one another (in which we must never forget to include wrongful interference with each other’s freedom) are more vital to human well-being than any maxims, however important …” (Mill). As both a documentary filmmaker and a family member, I had a responsibility to be as accurate as I can in what I present to the audience, protect my family (“do no harm” while I present my grandparents’ spiritual path, and acknowledge any biases I have while presenting this work to the audience. Documenting family and trying to understand spirituality can be invasive, exploitative, and incomplete. I had to consider how far reaching my audience went, and what my themes were. For example, in the film “Stories We Tell,” Sarah Polley asks her family members many of the same thematic questions and discloses to everyone they are being recorded and for what purpose, but she often hits a nerve and emotions from her family members appear without expectation. Ultimately, I decided to keep this film as a research-based project, as opposed to an artistic endeavor, without showing my grandparents themselves, to avoid potential harm it may cause and respect their integrity. The act of writing a script and editing the film about the lives of my grandparents does not ultimately become ‘right in proportion’ as it holds too much promise to produce the reverse of happiness, given the reverence my grandparents hold for Catholicism.

3. Protect vulnerable
Third, my next tenant was to “protect the vulnerable.” Within the nature of a
documentary, subjects are vulnerable based on what they share and how this is used. I built upon
my moral epistemology to practice an ‘ethics of knowing.’ Therefore, what lies at the heart of
historical memory is an ethical duty to the construction of knowledge and structures of feeling, in
relation to personal and collective traumas. I do not know what traumatic events I would uncover
to myself and my family's surprise, nor what I had to introduce or omit within certain historical
events my grandparents reflected on. For example, Luis Buñuel's short ‘mockumentary,’ “Land
Without Bread,” enacted complicated dynamics of moral responsibility towards its subjects
through filmmaking itself. As the audience watches a close-up of a young girl’s open mouth, they
are told she died from infected tonsils shortly after the filming. Their initial response is
unsurprisingly, outrage at the filmmaker. What was Buñuel's ethical, moral duty to protect the
vulnerable little girl? What was his knowledge of her condition? And as a storyteller myself, was
Buñuel truthful in his description of what happened, or does a ‘faux-ethnocentric narration’
reconcile the issue of protecting the vulnerable? I do not want to falsely narrate my way out of an
unethical project. While I affirm the narration of my film to be ‘true,’ based on my off-the-
camera relationship with my kin, there is a growing group of first-person storytellers who
participate in a bourgeois genre of actualité, the actual footage of real events, places, and things
before a documentarian goes into the editing room and edits vulnerable moments with their
subjects. To restate Arthur from earlier in the paper, “flaunting ethical conundrums is not the
same as confronting them” since they are framed by the filmmaker and may omit as much as
they expose.
An example of vulnerability exposed is within the New Yorker’s op-doc, a “A Couple’s Final Words to Each Other Accidentally Recorded.” In this film, the son exposes his elderly parents, and specifically his father's health. In my opinion, this film indicates an unequal balance of power between the filmmaker and his subject because he failed to protect the vulnerable.

While the New Yorker film was a touching story, I valued the ethos of ‘protecting the vulnerable’ at the forefront of my film and this governed my editing process. First, I protected them by ensuring the inquiry into their religious beliefs is from a place of my own ignorance, despite my alienating education, and as a way to understand my family better versus an opportunity to ‘get the story.’ Secondly, I honored the media-mediated relationships between myself and my grandparents, what Paul Arthur refers to elsewhere as the “documentary transaction,” by switching from a film camera to a Shure microphone to remain on audio, based on their wishes.

4. Honor viewers’ trust

Who is the audience?

The last ethical tenet I included related to the audience. I had an obligation to deliver accurate and honestly told stories to them. The primary audience was millennials, or Gen Z people, or more specifically, those who do not fall in the category of elders (Boomers) while connecting with the struggle to accept grief. My intended audience was people who straddle those two younger generations and are looking for a way to connect with their family across time, space and age; particularly, people who are interested in family connection through the pandemic. The secondary audience would be my family but I made strides to reach a larger demographic than my own kin. While I made efforts to protect my subjects in the film, I had the
task to also honor the primary and secondary audience. How do I honor their trust and avoid a navel-gazing film? In the conclusion of “Honest Truths…,” the authors make reference to the pressure that filmmakers face to “inflate drama or character conflict and to create drama where no natural drama exists (Aufderheide 5). They may be encouraged to alter the story to pump up the excitement, the conflict, or the danger to serve the audience. For example, one filmmaker admitted their photographs of an animal were not exciting enough, so the executive producer replaced animals from another country and undermined the trust of their viewers. During my editing process, I ran my film by four close friends to get feedback on whether or not I conveyed my intention about connection and grief to a wider audience. Upon taking close notes on their reactions, and learning that they wanted to see more of these universal themes, I tried my best to put my ego aside to edit my film accordingly, cut out some details and avoided a temptation to create a more ‘exciting’ film. My rule while filming was to honor viewers' trust and maintain integrity by avoiding drama, or false images.

VII. Editing

I think it's going to be very interesting . . . to see what happens with this digital generation of parents who have recorded their kids' every footstep. . . . People can just go back to the data bank and see exactly how little Jimmy spooned his peas into his mouth at age four. There'll be a record of it.

- Ross McElwee in ‘Home Movies and Personal Documentaries’

Clear Consent
I thought about the ‘standing on the shoulder of giants’ metaphor before beginning my editing process. By standing on the shoulders of ‘giants,’ I may be able to see further than I normally could. In other words, my family existed before I do and where they came from happened before my subjectivity in the editing room existed. Paul Arthur humorously recognizes “one surefire sign of a sketchy doc is how many crucial questions about the physical circumstances or verbal agreements governing the recording process” are left hanging by the end of the film (Arthur). I kept his comment in mind during my editing process. I made the circumstances and agreements related to my grandparent’s audio recordings, archive footage and the interviews itself clear in the film; they were not the product of my tech-wizardry or manipulation. Using clear communication and circumstances, my grandparents were aware and this is displayed for my audience. Therefore, in the edit room, I choose to keep recorded phone calls of my grandmother and me navigating the process of sending photographs and video over email. I also kept the conversations where my grandfather says it’s okay to record and even included moments where my grandfather asks to “stop here for today.”

On Truth
How was I to make sense of the truth behind the stories I heard from my grandparents? What was the ‘truth’ between the words they shared, the meaning I made from it and the interpretation from the audience that I have little control over? Following the logic from “Honest Truths,” “In the edit room . . . you decide what your film is going to be, you have to put your traditional issues of friendship aside. You have to serve ‘the truth’ (Aufderheide).” In my case, I had to put my relationships aside with my grandparents to look at a ‘higher truth’ or ‘sociological
truth’ that was inadvertently adopted from the inquiry of this documentary. In order to make this film accessible to more than my own family, I looked to the truth of communication, needing to connect and turn to art in times of distress; a theme that grounds itself in universalism. I kept these ‘truths’ in my edits and allowed this to inform the choices I make, ethically, structurally and stylistically, for this autobiographical documentary. That being said, I choose to edit the film into a three act structure: Act I: The world as I know it, crumbles, Act II: Put your mask on, first and Act III: The arrival of answers, more questions, to cater towards a more universal audience and specifically, gen Z and millennials who look to cross a divide between their views and their grandparents, or an older generation.

Connection as Theme

Going back to Sontag, who says “Ideology is what constitutes an event and there’s no evidence of event until event has been named and categorized,” I found it important to edit my grandparents interviews to draw out the universal theme of connection (175). While I was looking to capture this, an event without photography, I remained steadfast in creating evidence of our experience of connection for an audience. Granted, editing is a relatively vulgar act, but a necessary process as a storyteller who aims to share a theme with others. To support my claim, Rick Burns once said “theme is the most basic lifeblood of a film” (Burns). Likewise, I opened my film with voice-over narration to engage the audience with an immediate story, a young woman’s quest to connect with her family, grounded in plot and character with her grandparents, but choose to include evidence of the event on top of the narration of the event being told.
In the editing room, I worked with an observational narration during my interviews with my grandparents, and a voice-over, scripted narration to draw a premise and conclusion for the film. My editing style was influenced by Werner Herzog’s style in ‘Grizzly Man,’ where he made his presence known with voice over narration. The film is driven by Herzog’s quest to understand the life and work of naturalist Timothy Treadwell and naturally illuminates aspects of human condition through his own reflections. One example of Herzog’s style is his use of self-conscious scenes that I thought to include in my own film. Herzog includes a scene when Timothy Treadwell’s former girlfriend is given the watch, to capture genuine interactions on film. Herzog said, “If you’re trying to film two people in a natural moment, they generally need to be doing something that focuses their attention on something other than each other, or more importantly, the camera.”

Another influence I looked to during my editing process was Andrew Jarecki, the filmmaker in Capturing the Friedmans. Jarecki juxtaposed present tense interviews with disparate chunks of found footage, generations of home movies and TV news clips. His style was particularly impressionable during the first act of my film, where I integrated news clips and emails related to coronavirus and split them with chunks of my own found footage of my grandparents. According to Paul Arthur, “Jarecki introduces his dramatis personae” and while I am nowhere close to the expertise of Jarecki, he certainly inspired my decisions.

VIII. Conclusion

What is the purpose of this film and what was learned? The authors James Agee and Walker Evans bring light to my answer by telling readers, “If I am clumsy, that may indicate the
difficulty of my subject and seriousness with which I am trying to take what hold I can of it” (Agee, Evans 99). This reminds me to live within my own clumsy limits, while appreciating the process of making a documentary and final product.

*Hold a container for stories*

Editing for a universal audience and ultimately not showing the film to grandparents was a hard decision. Jonathan Rosenbaum, the film critic, acknowledges, "we're all tainted by the graphic exposure of family wounds" and the contrast between my beliefs as a Buddhist and their Catholic views held consequences that I was not willing to open beyond the conversations we already had (Chicago Reader). Ultimately, I do not find it ethical to show this film to my grandparents. I had to consider how this film would transform values, beliefs, behavior and stories to create a new future with my family for better or for worse. Upon screening the film to my immediate family, I rested in the decision that I would not show the film to my grandparents. Does that make my film unethical, if I am unable to show the subjects themselves?

I argue no; when I engaged with the four ethics from the Center for Social Media at American University’s School of Communication which I hoped to follow, the integrity of my project remains. My grandparents had given verbal consent, which I included in the film, I do ‘no harm’ by abstaining from showing the film to them and being honest with my intentions to record and share my own beliefs with them in our dialogue, rather than through the film. I protected the vulnerable by keeping this film as a private creation and not a public spectacle. Lastly, I honored the ‘viewer’ by bringing up universal themes that any human who needs to connect will understand. What legacy do I want to leave behind for future generations? I hope to
show this to future generations that faith, to my understanding, is not Buddhist, nor Catholic. Faith is what glued our family together during COVID. There was no logical explanation.

*Documentaries reflect the human condition*

Films don't succeed because they are important or inspiring or because they motivate action and activism: they succeed when they grab an audience through story. While making a documentary was hard, and becomes even harder when the subject is your family, I’d argue that, in terms of story, my film succeeds. I develop strong characters, build compelling tension between a granddaughter who believes in a different religion and offer a credible resolution where she comes to understand faith as beyond either religion. According to Sheila Curran Bernard, the author of Documentary Storytelling, “Facts do not define documentary films” and argues that it is what the filmmaker does with factual elements, “weaving them into an overall narrative that strives to be compelling as it is truthful often greater than the sum of its’ parts.” Based on my intentions, to understand the meaning of faith from the perspective of my grandparents, my film was a worthwhile endeavor. However, if one was to look at a successful film through the lens of the audience, it may have fallen short. “While I do not agree with all of their beliefs, the pursuit of understanding my grandparents’ faith made me feel more connected than any faith doctrine.” I stand by the conclusion of my voiceover. Certainly the process of documentation brought me closer to my family through the intimacy of our conversations, whereas the finished product film does not deepen our connection. When you talk about somebody else you are really talking about yourself. I have no other experience other than my own and am grateful for the opportunity to listen to my loved ones’ stories, and see myself in
them. I don’t know where they came from because I don’t know where I came from and it was such a gift to hear the past from my grandparents. My film succeeded as a story to an audience by delivering a portrayal with integrity that holds everyone’s version of their spiritual experiences in a verbalized and visual manner. The film demanded active engagement, challenged my audience to think about what they know, what they want to learn about faith and confounded expectations of clear resolutions and pushed boundaries in documentary filmmaking.
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