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The Unfinished Frame: Ethical Reflection in Autobiographical Documentary

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Abstract

This paper explores the ethical complexities of contemporary documentary filmmaking through the lens of autobiographical practice. Drawing on nearly three decades of experience as a filmmaker and scholar, I examine how the act of self-inclusion—both as subject and storyteller—can foster a more transparent, responsible, and reflexive mode of documentary production. The autobiographical approach challenges traditional hierarchies between filmmaker and subject, inviting a reconsideration of authorship, power, and representation.

By foregrounding the filmmaker's own positionality and emotional investment, this mode facilitates a horizontal relationship with participants and audiences alike, offering a potential pathway to ethical clarity in a genre often marked by ambiguity and imbalance.

Drawing on case studies—particularly my own documentary practice—as well as personal reflection and theoretical frameworks like psychoanalysis and performative documentary theory, I argue for autobiography not as narcissistic indulgence, but as an ethical tool that destabilizes truth claims and foregrounds subjectivity as a site of inquiry. Special attention is given to ethical dilemmas involving vulnerable or deceased subjects, and how self-reflexive strategies can mediate issues of consent, gaze, and symbolic power. Ultimately, this paper calls for a renewed discourse on ethics in documentary filmmaking—one that embraces introspection and subjectivity, rethinking the documentary filmmaker's responsibility in the 21st century.

Keywords: Documentary film, ethics, autobiography.

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DOSSIER

El encuadre inconcluso: una reflexión ética en el documental autobiográfico

Resumen

Este artículo explora las complejidades éticas del cine documental contemporáneo a través del prisma de la práctica autobiográfica. Basándome en casi tres décadas de experiencia como cineasta y académico, examino cómo el acto de incluirse a uno mismo en la película—tanto como sujeto como narrador—puede fomentar un modo de producción documental más transparente, responsable y reflexiva.

El enfoque autobiográfico desafía las jerarquías tradicionales entre cineasta y sujeto, invitando a reconsiderar la autoría, el poder y la representación. Al poner en primer plano la propia posicionalidad y el compromiso emocional del cineasta, este enfoque facilita una relación horizontal tanto con los participantes como con las audiencias, ofreciendo una posible vía hacia la claridad ética en un género frecuentemente marcado por la ambigüedad y el desequilibrio.

A través de estudios de caso (trabajo de cine documental propio), reflexiones personales y un diálogo con marcos teóricos—incluyendo el psicoanálisis y la teoría del documental performativo—sostengo que la autobiografía no debe entenderse como una indulgencia narcisista, sino como una herramienta ética que desestabiliza las pretensiones de verdad y promueve la subjetividad como un campo legítimo de indagación. Se presta especial atención a los dilemas éticos que surgen al trabajar con sujetos vulnerables o fallecidos, y a cómo las estrategias autorreflexivas pueden mediar cuestiones de consentimiento, mirada y poder simbólico. En última instancia, este artículo aboga por un discurso renovado sobre la ética en el cine documental—uno que abrace la introspección, reivindique la subjetividad y repiense la responsabilidad del cineasta documentalista en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: Cine documental, ética, documental preformativo, autobiografía.

I thank Prof. Cynthia Tompkins (Arizona State University), whose generous guidance during my Fulbright stay in Phoenix was invaluable in writing this article (https://orcid.org/0009-0000-2334-7320)

Introduction

This research paper explores the potential ethical considerations involved in documentary filmmaking, highlighting areas that may require further clarity and understanding, particularly concerning the portrayal of truth through the usage of

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real people's lives. It examines the challenges filmmakers like me, face in maintaining ethical standards while navigating the complexities of non-fiction storytelling and representation. By exploring various perspectives in case studies[1] and literature review the paper seeks to understand whether it is possible to uphold ethical principles within the planned structure of documentary production, or if there are certain approaches to produce it in a cleaner more ethical manner.

One such approach is the autobiographical mode. Though often associated with personal storytelling, autobiography in documentary can be understood more broadly as the integration of the filmmaker's subjectivity—voice, body, memory—into the making of the film. This mode invites transparency rather than detachment, offering the audience access not only to the subject but also to the filmmaker's position. Autobiography, then, becomes not only a narrative strategy, but an ethical one: a way of confronting the inherent power of the documentarian to construct an alternate reality for the viewer. As Butchart and Har-Gil argue, reflection is not a supplementary act that occurs after filming, but an integral part of ethical decision-making in documentary practice. Particularly in autobiographical modes, where the filmmaker is both author and subject, reflection becomes a continuous ethical labor—of negotiating gaze, authorship, and vulnerability from within the frame. As Michael Renov has argued, the convergence of past and present temporalities, articulated through a first-person reimagining of spaces charged with narrative intensity, produces a synthesis of expressive and descriptive registers. This interplay, as Bruss suggests, is constitutive of the autobiographical gesture, wherein the subject engages symbolically with sites of memory to articulate a self in flux. (*The Subject of Documentary*, Renov, 116).

For nearly three decades the realm of documentary filmmaking has been both my passion and profession, I'm a filmmaker and film scholar professor; throughout this journey, I have traversed diverse landscapes capturing individuals, institutions, situations, relationships, groups, conflicts, traditions, and families first on film and then on video with the digital revolution. However, amidst the exhilaration of movie making lies a labyrinth of ethical quandaries, that regularly are not written down to follow like in other disciplines, each one presenting its own unique set of challenges. As I embark on this academic exploration, I am compelled to delve deeper into the ethical fabric of documentary production, seeking clarity where ambiguity reigns.

[1] I will be using films by other directors, as well as my own, to share and provide examples of the ways I have been trying to improve in the areas discussed in this article

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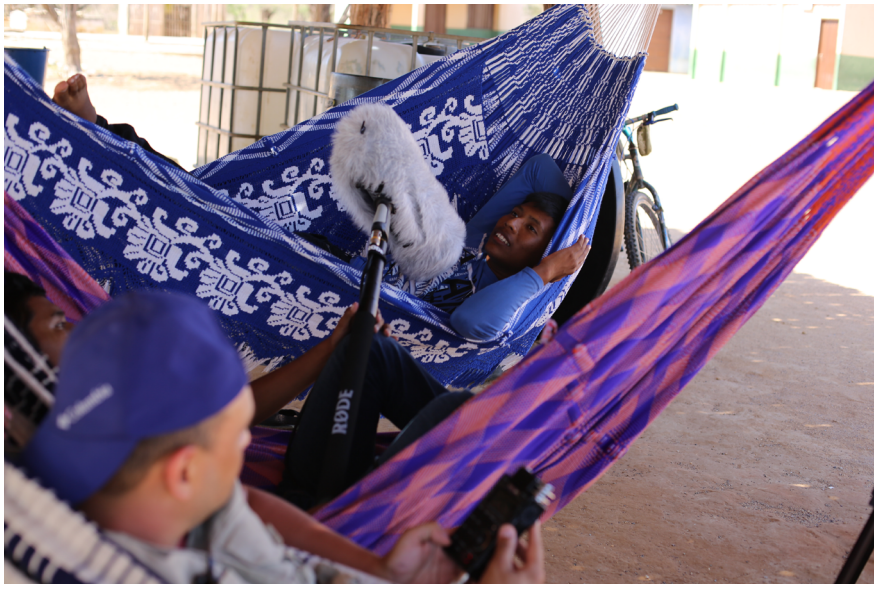

Detrás de cámara de *Majayülü (Lady)* (González García, 2014)

Ethical guidelines seem necessary in documentary filmmaking being an art that involves other people directly, responsible ways of interaction and representation. Most film schools don't even mention even this notion[2]. In the realm of filmmaking, particularly in the context of documentaries where real-life subjects are often portrayed, there exists a significant power dynamic between the filmmaker, the subjects, and the audience. The filmmaker wields considerable control over how these subjects are depicted and how the narrative unfolds for the viewer, ultimately shaping the audience's perception and understanding of the subject matter. This influence can potentially lead to the exploitation or misrepresentation of subjects, as well as the manipulation of audience perception[3]. First, participants must have the opportunity to provide informed consent, ensuring they understand the filmmaker's intentions and the project details. This focuses on the ethical principle of disclosure. Second, audiences have the right to be informed about issues that affect them, presenting an ethical challenge to document public concerns fairly and avoid misleading the audience[4]. The ethical code in documentary filmmaking that doesn't exist, should focus on protecting at the same time, film subjects and audience members. Releases and contracts don't focus on this[5]. But Carmona goes further, asking at the core of

[2] Nichols, *Speaking truth with films*, 155.

[3] As a filmmaker, I have experienced the stressful feeling of not doing things right regarding the way we approach the subject since the beginning of my experience. As I mentioned, this is largely due to the way we were taught documentary filmmaking in film school—a romanticization of the filmmaker who must protect the aesthetic of the film over the subject, in the pursuit of truth.

[4] Butchart, *Camera as Sign*, 675-690.

[5] *Speaking truth with films*, Nichols, 157.

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the documentary construction by an author making a film: "However, perhaps the key question we should ask is whether filmmakers do have the right to manipulate reality so that it fits their personal needs and views of the world. Are filmmakers, for being artists, outside the ethical constraints of transforming people and events into aesthetic objects or work of art?"[6]. Inviting someone to join a documentary film, whether paid or not, raises complex ethical issues around power dynamics, consent, and personal representation. Sooner or later participants may question their involvement considering "the society of spectacle" and potential exploitation, despite aspirations for fame. Unlike reality shows, author Pitrowska tells us that documentaries demand a confessional openness that can evoke anxiety and discomfort[7]."When asking for consent, are filmmakers clearly informing their participants of the possible hazards they might suffer as a result of their collaboration in their films? Calvin Pryluck claims that films such as *The Things I Cannot Change* (1967) and *September 5 at Saint-Henri* (1962) had serious damaging effects on the personal lives of their participants who felt humiliated and ended up being mocked by their own neighbors (Pryluck, 2005)"[8]. Should documentary filmmakers inform their subjects about the potential implications of their participation in the film? How might disclosing these possibilities influence a subject's decision to participate, and does it risk influencing their actions or words during filming? Documentary filmmaking, at its core, aims to capture truth and provide viewers with a firsthand window into another human's experience. However, this pursuit of truth does not exist without the moral complexities that comes together with the medium of filmmaking. While documentaries strive for objectivity, the very nature of filmmaking introduces subjective elements. Despite efforts to present reality, documentaries are constructed using cinematographic techniques, thus blurring the line between truth and illusion, which can be seen as the construction of another reality. This has led to ongoing debates about the true objectivity of documentary films for many decades. "Rouch denied that a filmmaker can achieve objectivity or that the camera can be unobtrusive. Since it is finally the filmmaker rather than the subject who is making the film, Rouch felt that filmmakers must have a strong attitude toward the subjects, must plan what to draw from them" (Mc Clane 232)[9]. And it was the same Jean Rouch, father of the cinema verité, who considered the subject's opinion in the making of the film to affect the shape of it. The importance of Jean Rouch's work has been invaluable for many generations, first finding film as an anthropological tool and later as an art form that is deeply connected to the subject's life, with a consciousness about entering people's lives: "It is important to remember that Rouch was first and foremost an ethnographer. Anthropology, before and after he started making films, was his

6 Carmona, *Ethical Tension Artistic Expression*, 20..

7 Piotrowska, *Psychoanalysis Ethics Documentary Film*, 98.

8 Carmona, *Ethical Tension Artistic Expression*, 23.

9 Mc Clane, *New History Documentary Film*, 232.

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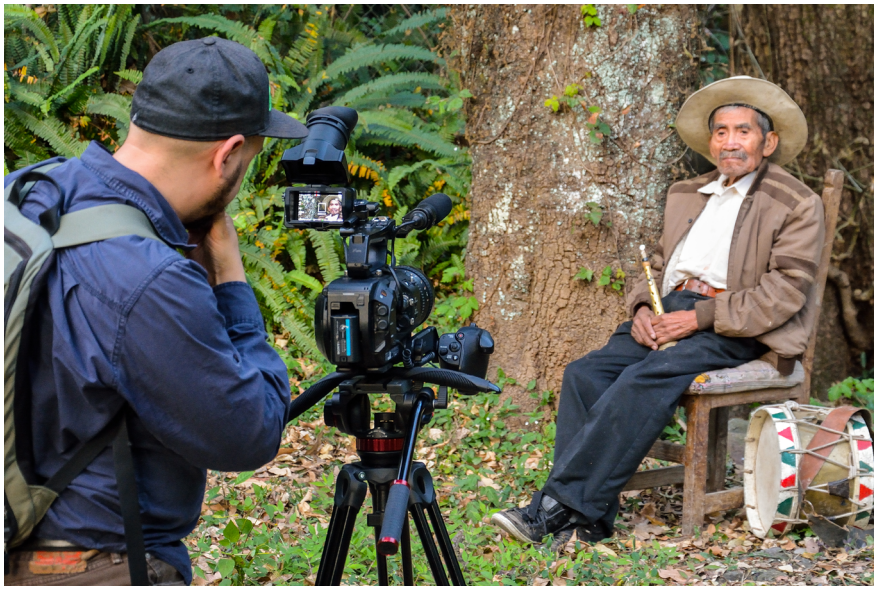
first interest"[10]. While it is crucial to consider ethics philosophically in documentary filmmaking, where the act of filming and representation occurs, it serves as an internal principle guiding the filmmaker's decisions throughout the artistic process. This ethical stance shifts the focus from merely preserving others' rights or acknowledging their difference, toward a deeper interruption—one that compels a reorientation of perception itself, making the filmmaker see otherwise, beyond their original vision[11].



Detrás de cámara de *El Cantar de los Rituales* (González García y Ramírez Durón, 2016)

From issues of consent and representation to questions of manipulation and bias, the ethical landscape of documentary production is rife with tension and uncertainty. Through this research endeavor, I aim to unpack the ethical concerns that have recurrently surfaced throughout my career, compelling me to confront my own limitations and biases but also my active insights. It is an introspective journey, one that invites a critical analysis of the moral underpinnings that govern our craft. Drawing upon scholarly literature, documentary films, real-world experiences, and personal reflections, this paper endeavors to shed light on the multifaceted nature of documentary ethics. By examining key ethical principles and dilemmas inherent in the production process, I hope to stimulate discourse and provoke thought within the documentary community. In doing so, I aspire to contribute to a more robust understanding of ethical practices in documentary filmmaking, fostering greater transparency, accountability, and integrity within the industry. As we navigate the intricate terrain of nonfiction storytelling, let us not only strive for artistic excellence

[10] Ibid.

[11] Baek, *Turning Other: Face Humans*, 63.

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but also uphold the ethical imperatives that underpin ourcraft. As for the framework of the methodology, I mainly will be relying on a literature review, and case studies that consider my own experience as a documentarian, which is an important asset in this respect.

The origins of the problem lie in its own nature

First and foremost, what is documentary? The term "documentary" itself was not born from theoretical consensus, but rather emerged in response to a cinematic practice already in motion—filmmakers simply turning the camera toward the world in front of them. When John Grierson coined the word in a 1926 review of Robert Flaherty's *Moana*, he acknowledged its awkwardness, later admitting that "documentary" was a clumsy label. Yet the term endured, capturing a growing impulse to creatively engage with reality beyond the bounds of fiction[12]. Grierson used the term to describe Flaherty's work "the creative treatment of actuality", which suggests that while documentaries strive to represent reality, they do so through a subjective lens that involves artistic interpretation and storytelling techniques. A genre that includes creations as disparate as Flaherty's lyrical *Nanook of the North* (1922) and the Maysles Brothers' harsh *Gimme Shelter* (1970) must be more thoroughly defined. Even almost 50 years ago, scholars recognized the need for broader subgenres in documentary filmmaking, or more terms. However, despite the expansion of the term "nonfiction" to include various expressions, of what is not fiction movies, not all of them are documentary; little has evolved in terms of classification. There have been not enough defining new terms introduced, and this lack of conceptual progress not only limits the language we use but weakens our ability to ethically account for evolving documentary forms. The need for more nuanced terminology becomes urgent. Edna Rodríguez-Mangual's proposal of "fictual faction" offers a valuable intervention. Instead of treating fiction and fact as opposites, her term acknowledges the layered mise en scene nature of much contemporary documentaries. When filmmakers stage aspects of their own subjectivity to reveal deeper internal truths, they operate in this fictual space—where testimony, emotion, and reconstruction coexist.

In my own Cuban documentary, *Oro Negro*, I encountered this terrain firsthand. Some of the most emotionally charged scenes were not filmed on the island, but later, back in Mexico—where I re-entered the story from a position of exile. I appear on screen remembering backwards, handling printed polaroid photographs of the girl at the center of the film. Her identity remains undisclosed for her protection; her testimony about police corruption and forced prostitution carries real danger. In the voiceover, I make clear the situation: "I cannot go back to Cuba to continue this film." The film is, in that sense, unfinished—not because of aesthetic doubt, but because

[12] Utterback, *Voices of the Documentarist*, 31.

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to finish it would mean harm. That tension becomes the film's ethical ground: it is shaped not by resolution, but by restraint. This isn't a failure, but a form of ethical authorship. *Oro Negro* resists the illusion of mastery. It lives in absence, displacement, and partial testimony. It reflects what Catherine Russell call *experimental autoethnography*—where the filmmaker's subjectivity is not a claim to authority, but a site of exposure, a method for illuminating the very limits of representation. The autobiographical mode here is not about centering the self to explain the other, but about tracing the contours of distance, of what cannot safely be said. The story is told not to complete a narrative, but to hold space for a shared, fragile proximity.

Ultimately, the evolution of documentary filmmaking is closely intertwined with technological advancements. While the essence of documentary—a person with a camera capturing reality—remains unchanged from a hundred years ago, new technologies such as AI, VR, AR, immersive documentary, and 360-degree filming are reshaping the landscape. These technological advancements are expanding storytelling possibilities, enabling more immersive and interactive experiences for both filmmakers and audiences. Just as the introduction of lightweight cameras and portable sound equipment in the 1960s enabled the rise of cinéma vérité and direct cinema—allowing filmmakers to follow subjects intimately, in real time—today's tools are reshaping the grammar of documentary yet again. But unlike the vérité moment, which emphasized immediacy and presence, these newer tools often blur the boundaries between presence and fabrication. While they offer exciting aesthetic and narrative possibilities, they also raise urgent ethical questions: Who is controlling the image? What is being altered or reimagined? And how can we remain accountable to real people and lived experiences when mediation becomes so fluid? The same way vérité filmmakers once redefined authorship and proximity through technological access, today's documentarians must develop new ethical reflexes—especially when working in autobiographical modes—where the authenticity of testimony and the integrity of the subject are at stake. More than anything else, they also introduce new ethical concerns that this paper does not address.

The photographic nature of the medium must do with how people perceive it immediately like the truth. In this respect, Nichols expounds upon the remarkable power of documentary filmmaking, attributing its potency to its reliance on the photographic image. Within the realm of documentary practice, the visual medium serves as a cornerstone, enabling filmmakers to capture and convey reality with a level of immediacy and authenticity unparalleled in other forms of storytelling, of course supported with sound of what we are seeing and naturalistic movement[13]. Film's essence is inherently photographic, a concept underscored by numerous authors and critics. This understanding was fundamental to the Nouvelle Vague movement, which revolutionized cinema in the 1960s; André Bazin, considered the spiritual father of

[13] Nichols, I*ntroduction to documentary*,42..

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the movement, championed this perspective referring to cinema all together: "André Bazin's statement that the photograph has an irrational power to 'bear away our faith' undoubtedly indicates some qualms about the ethics of the artform"[14]. Referring to cinema in general. In 1997, I produced my debut documentary short film screened at the Tampere international short film festival in Finland, *Cronetera* (Gonzalez Garcia, 1997), in which the significance of the photographic element was evident. Deliberately opting for black and white cinematography, shot on 16mm film without synchronized sound but accompanied by a progressive music track[15], the film aimed at abstraction and aesthetic appeal where I decided never to move the camera, no pans or tilts allowed after the Ozu's principles[16]. Despite not having delved deeply into the social issues faced by the road repair workers depicted, the film achieved success due to this aesthetic decision in the eyes of a specialized global film audience. What resonated was its underlying philosophical inquiry—juxtaposing an Aristotelian sense of cyclical time with a Newtonian, linear perception—expressed through the repetitive, almost meditative labor of the road repair crew. This temporal tension, rendered through careful observation rather than overt commentary, gave the film a conceptual depth that transcended its surface simplicity.

Subsequently, in my first documentary feature for television, T*eatro Penitenciario, Libertad desde la Sombra* (Gonzalez Garcia, 2012), I pursued a different visual approach, aiming for a gritty, video-like aesthetic to closely reflect the world of Mexican prison theater without aesthetics filters. While this approach resonated strongly with live audiences, directly impacting them, it garnered less attention from film festivals and cinephiles, thus offering me less artistic exposure.

[14] Trahir and Baltimore, "Article Introduction: Film Ethics", 3

[15] Schöder, "The Day After X,", track number 3.

[16] It is well known that Japanese master filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu, used always the 50mm lens, low angle framing and no camera movement. Studying film, I was looking for models to shape my upcoming style.

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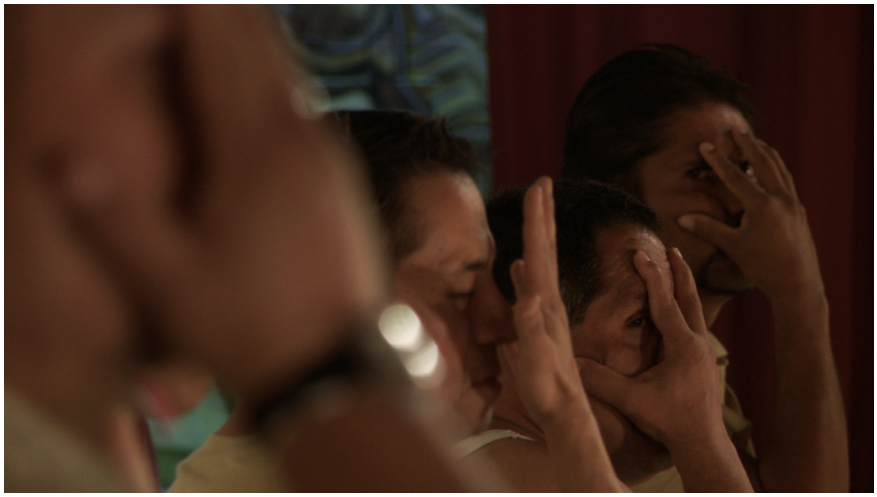

Fotograma de *Teatro penitenciario, Libertad desde la Sombra* (González García, 2012)

I was approaching the life and daily work of Jorge Correa, widely regarded as the father of Mexican penitentiary theater, following him through various prisons. In this context, the filmmaking demanded a radically different strategy. Unlike the formal distance and philosophical reflection achieved in my earlier film about time and labor, this project required intimacy—an embedded perspective that could convey not just the environment, but Correa's internal process and the transformative nature of his interactions with inmates. To achieve this, I embraced a video aesthetic that was raw and unfiltered, rejecting the polished, cinematic lens that might aestheticize or distort prison life and Correa's method. The process itself became part of the film: by being close, both physically and emotionally, I could inhabit and transmit the ethical and performative complexity of that space. This approach, though less celebrated in cinephile circles, felt ethically aligned with the subject matter—it resisted turning the incarcerated into stylized symbols and instead preserved their lived texture and humanity. Still, without my obvious point of view or presence in the film, I hadn't yet discovered the ethical and narrative treasures I now explore in this article—insights that only came into focus through subsequent, more self-reflexive experiences. However, in retrospect, the film lacked a clearly articulated point of view of my own. It reflected Correa's world with care and immediacy, but not through my eyes. In that sense, it marked a step back—ethically immersive, yet devoid of the subjective framing that could have deepened its narrative complexity. But comparing these two approaches in my filmmaking journey has led me to the core concerns outlined in this paper: the awareness of a filmmaker's power to construct an alternate reality for the audience—a conscious act of construction over reality and its components. Because an audience is not truly seeking unmediated reality in a film, even when they claim to, they are ultimately in search of an aesthetic experience. What they respond to—what moves them—is not raw documentation but how that reality is shaped, framed, and

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felt. This tension between constructed experience and perceived authenticity brings us to a pivotal moment in documentary history as I was saying. In the 1960s, two distinct but often conflated approaches to non-fiction filmmaking emerged: direct cinema and cinéma vérité. These schools of thought, though frequently misunderstood as similar due to their handheld aesthetics and commitment to real-life subjects, represent divergent philosophies of documentary representation. Direct cinema, championed by Robert Drew and later the Maysles brothers, Frederick Wiseman, and D. A. Pennebaker, sought to minimize the filmmaker's presence—to act as a "fly on the wall"—capturing events as they unfolded naturally, without commentary, intervention, or stylization. This approach emphasized the "fly on the wall" concept, avoiding voice-over narration or an expository voice. The camera was handheld, moving along with the subjects at a certain distance to maintain a sense of immediacy and intimacy, the filmmaker tried to be invisible. "Direct cinema reaffirmed two theoretical aspects of the nonfiction film: that the genre contained within itself limitless possibilities for cinematic expression, and that all good nonfiction films take their shape from their subject matter. It now seems inevitable that such a departure from the norm would appear in the turbulent 1960's."[17]. In contrast, Cinema vérité embraced the presence of the filmmaker, acknowledging that the camera is never neutral and that its presence inevitably shapes what is captured. Practitioners like Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin leaned into this interaction, sometimes even provoking events to reveal deeper truths. If direct cinema aspired to observation, vérité engaged in dialogue. And it is in that engagement—where filmmaker and subject collide, co-create, and reveal—that I've found a more ethically transparent and formally resonant space paving the road for an autobiographical documentary work. In contrast to direct cinema, cinema vérité featured a more obvious presence of the filmmaker in the film, and the subjects actively participated in the filmmaking process in a deliberate use of mise-en-scène to enhance the audience's aesthetic experience and consciousness of watching a film. Cinema vérité, with its conscious acknowledgment of its filmic nature to the audience, is, in my opinion, ethically closer to resolving the issues we are discussing and solving the aesthetical one as well, about being a film also for film scholars and festivals, "the art world". By considering the person in front of the camera as an integral part of the film, rather than merely a character in a dramatic story, cinema vérité allows for a more authentic representation of the subject's reality, even if it's more of a poetic nature. "Rouch's preferred term is ethno-fiction. This is the name he gives those of his films that fictionalize based on the fact, crossing the boundaries of ethnographic documentary into the fictional realm, but never moving away entirely from the real"[18]. Its even known that the main character approached Rouch first to make a film about migrant workers, because of seeing other films and the way the characters were portrayed by him. These two approaches to documentary

[17] Monaco, *The Sixties: 1960-1969*, 199.

[18] Cooper, *Selfless Cinema? Ethics French Documentary*, 37.

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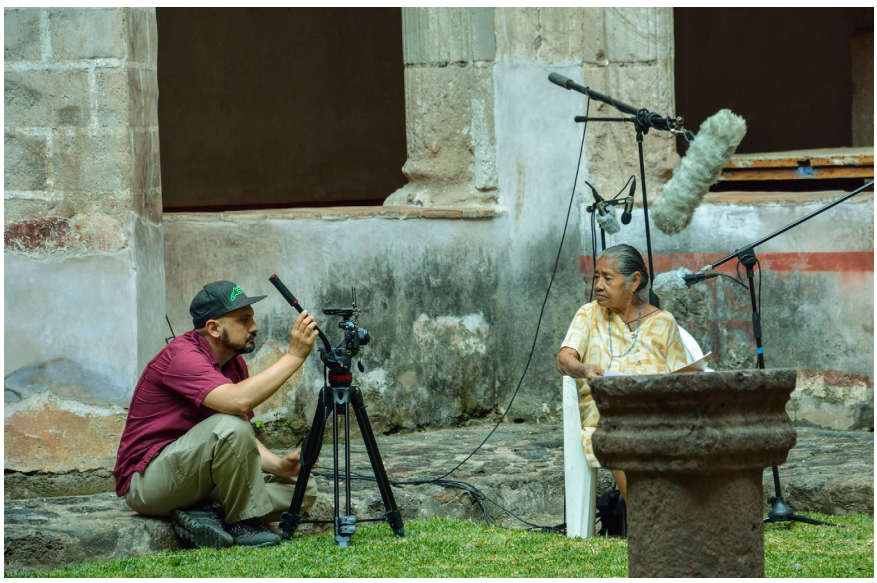
filmmaking have reappeared multiple times since then, and at certain points, the distinction between the use of both techniques has become blurred. When I set out to write and direct *Teatro Penitenciario* (Gonzalez Garcia, 2012)[19], I knew that one way to approach the truth of Jorge Correa's story, the father of Mexican penitentiary theater, was through a combination of direct cinema's bare, "fly on the wall" approach and cinema vérité, using meticulous mise-en-scène stylization. I was intrigued by the methodology itself, incorporating direct cinema elements to capture reality unfolding in sessions and classes within the prison. Additionally, I employed cinema vérité to stage a 'fictionalized' rendering of Correa's final play, performed just outside the prison walls—a thread that runs throughout the film and builds toward its emotional climax. However, during the filmmaking process, I encountered unexpected complexities. For instance, I discovered that not all the participants in the play were former convicts, and the hybrid approach proved invaluable to solve somehow this ethical dilemma. As direct cinema sequences allowed me to authentically capture the reality inside the prison and the dynamics that unfolded there, particularly effective for these interior scenes, where the workshops between Correa and the inmates were happening, without constraints. While the cinema verité sequences were instrumental in representing the characters' world, even his dreams and aspirations, much like in Rouch's *Moi un Noir* (1958) with those spectacular oneiric scenes inside the character's head, his aspirations and dreams[20].



Detrás de cámara de *El Cantar de los Rituales* (González García y Ramírez Durón, 2016)

[19] This documentary was produced independently in part and co-produced by a national public TV channel, canal 22, after winning a contest for documentary projects for TV..

[20] After a day in the beach, the main character goes out at night, and in a certain part he starts to share to us his dream, fighting in a box match, the sequence is constructed and shot in a boxing ring. Minute 29:00.

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Psychoanalysis and documentary

To delve into the psychological dimensions of documentary filmmaking, it is crucial to examine the triangulated relationship among subject, filmmaker, and audience. As we've been discussing, in cinéma vérité, the subject is not merely observed but becomes an active participant in the filmmaking process, generating a dynamic and reflexive interplay between lived experience and cinematic representation. Simultaneously, the audience receives and interprets this exchange through their own perceptual and ideological frameworks, making meaning not from a stable truth, but from a mediated encounter. This leads us to a pivotal concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis: the mirror stage. Lacan's theory posits that subjectivity is formed through a process of misrecognition—an identification with an external image that appears coherent and whole but belies an internal fragmentation. In the context of film, this metaphor becomes useful for understanding the relationship between spectator and screen, as well as the subject's experience before the camera. The screen functions as a reflective surface in which desire, fantasy, and identity are projected and negotiated. Psychoanalytic theory, once limited to clinical settings, has proven indispensable for cultural analysis. As Cartwright notes, Kaplan and others extended Lacanian concepts—particularly the mirror stage—to interpret how subjectivity and desire circulate across literature, art, and cinema. In vérité filmmaking, this dynamic is intensified. The camera is not hidden; its presence disrupts the illusion of observational neutrality. The subject becomes aware of being watched, and this acknowledgement invites the audience into a deeper recognition of the film's constructed nature. Ethical engagement, then, begins with this rupture.

Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis expand on this by contrasting ego psychology's ideal of a coherent self with Lacan's insistence on the fragmented, unstable nature of identity. In documentary, particularly autobiographical and vérité forms, this fragmentation is not a flaw but a generative force. The subject filmed and the filmmaker filming are caught in a loop of gazes—each shaping and being shaped by the act of representation[21]. This interplay opens new dimensions for ethical inquiry: Who is looking? Who is being seen? And under what terms?

This concern deepens when the filmed subject is vulnerable, dying, or deceased. Here, the filmmaker's role expands beyond documentarian to surrogate, interpreter, or even gatekeeper. The camera, far from a neutral tool, becomes what Althusser would call an Ideological State Apparatus—a mechanism that participates in shaping consciousness through its very framing. Whether consciously or not, filmmakers operate within these structures, and their work either reproduces or resists dominant ideologies. Agnieszka Piotrowska, drawing on both Althusserian and Lacanian frameworks, suggests that ethical filmmaking demands recognition of this ideological

[21] Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies Voice*, 12.

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embeddedness. Only by confronting their own position within these systems can filmmakers begin to dismantle the subject-object hierarchy[22].

In this reframed relationship, the filmed subject becomes a co-author of meaning rather than its passive source. This shift is especially significant in autobiographical documentaries, where the filmmaker's own presence destabilizes the idea of neutrality and invites mutual recognition. Lacan's later writings on the death drive, as interpreted by scholars like Downing and Saxton, add further complexity. Ethical subjectivity, from this perspective, involves confronting the symbolic and imaginary limits that give shape to identity. Ethics is not about mastery or clarity; it is about staying with the trouble—facing what Lacan calls the "nullity" of our narcissistic constructs. In the context of documentary, especially when filming the dead or dying, this means resisting the urge to resolve or possess[23]. Ethical filmmaking inhabits ambiguity, fragmentation, and shared vulnerability.

The autobiographical mode, then, does more than humanize the filmmaker. It becomes a methodological framework for acknowledging the constructed nature of representation itself. By inserting their own subjectivity into the narrative fabric, the filmmaker reveals not only the contingency of meaning but also the gaze that produces it. This is particularly vital when engaging with absence—when the subject is no longer able to speak. In such cases, the filmmaker does not claim to speak for the other, but with their absence. This gesture reframes death not as spectacle, but as a horizon shared by both subject and viewer—an ethical space of reflection, not appropriation.

Death and the body

Few scenarios test the ethical potential of the autobiographical mode as powerfully as filming someone who is dying or already deceased. Such moments expose the tension between presence and absence and challenge the filmmaker's claim to representation. The act of filming someone who is dying or already deceased is not only a representational dilemma but an ontological rupture. As Butchart and Har-Gil note, reflection becomes essential in moments when the unknowability of the Other collides with the imperative to document. Ethical filmmaking, in this space, demands not resolution but presence, ambiguity, and restraint.

While traditional observational approaches risk objectifying or aestheticizing vulnerability, the autobiographical mode allows for a more reflexive engagement. By foregrounding the filmmaker's emotional and ethical struggle, the film becomes not a detached record of death, but a shared space of mourning, memory, and witnessing. This mode allows for a horizontal relationship between filmmaker and subject, particularly when the subject consents to or initiates the process of documentation, as in

[22] Piotrowsk, *Psychoanalysis Ethics in Documentary Film*, 6.

[23] Downing and Saxton, *Film Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*, 135.

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the case of Naomi Kawase's *Letter from a Yellow Cherry Blossom* (2002). In such works, the autobiographical perspective resists voyeurism by implicating the filmmaker in the process of dying—not merely as an observer, but as a participant in a collective act of meaning-making. Rather than pretending to capture a definitive "truth" of death, the autobiographical documentary acknowledges the impossibility of such representation, offering instead a vulnerable, humanized account of loss, presence, and ethical responsibility.

In documentary cinema, the body becomes a vital site of meaning—both as image and as presence—deeply connected to psychoanalytic thought, especially in Lacan's work. He positions the body as central to identity formation and expression. On screen, the subject's body conveys emotion, memory, and lived experience, shaped by unconscious desires and social forces. Lacan's concept of the 'mirror stage' emphasizes how identity emerges through the body's reflection, a process embedded within the symbolic order. Yet after death, this dynamic shift: the body no longer evolves or reflects identity in motion. Instead, it becomes a site of rupture—a manifestation of what Lacan calls the 'Real': that which resists symbolization and confronts us with the unrepresentable. The dead body, then, does not signify life lived, but marks a gap in meaning—a limit that documentary must approach with sensitivity, aware of what cannot be fully known, shown, or resolved.

As we have seen, integrating psychoanalytic concepts into documentary filmmaking can be valuable in pursuing ethical responsibility and promoting well-being. A powerful illustration of the limits of indexical representation in nonfiction cinema is found in the public's obsession with the Zapruder footage of John F. Kennedy's assassination. The film's repeated viewing—slowed down, paused, dissected frame by frame—reveals not the truth of death itself, but rather the insufficiency of the image to capture such a moment definitively. Experimental filmmaker Bruce Conner's *Report* (1967) underscores this idea through his use of repetition and fragmentation, pointing to the futility of fully grasping the reality of death through visual means. Sobchack's analysis highlights how the representation of the dead in nonfiction becomes a paradoxical act: the corpse, while materially present, remains semiotically inert. It exists at the threshold between subject and object—between meaning and absence. In this liminal space, the body of the deceased can either become a vessel for profound symbolic reflection or be reduced to mere spectacle. For documentary filmmakers, engaging ethically with the representation of death involves acknowledging this tension and resisting the impulse to impose false clarity or closure where only ambiguity may exist[24]. Sobchack calls into attention to a basic usage of the dead in nonfiction cinema, where the corpse serves as both material and physical grounds for reflecting on existence and non-existence. It represents the intersection between the lived-body subject and the inert, unyielding body-object. The corpse, as a body-object, is physically

[24] Sobchack, I*nscribing Ethical Space*, 232.

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passive and semiotically neutral. It can be subjected to intense scrutiny or imbued with rich symbolism. ""Documentary film operates in literal compliance with the writ of *habeas corpus*. "You should have the body"-without it the legal process comes to a standstill. "You should have the body" – without it the documentary tradition lacks its primary referent, the real social actor(s) of whose historical engagement it speaks.""[25]. In this article, Nichols writes about ethical approach in the documentary film *Roses in December* (Ana Carrigan and Bernard Stone, 1982), where the directors tried to restore meaning to a life that has been tragically lost, Jean Donovan the American nun murdered by a government death squad in El Salvador. Taking much into account the stereotyping, dramatizing, or mythologizing of a human life (Nichols 9), but she cannot speak; the only time we see her body is when the cadaver is pulled from a hole in the ground and in archival photographic footage. Nichols mentions that this methodology resembles *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) a pivotal narrative fiction film, more than a traditional documentary, as Kane's story is constructed through the collective perspectives of those around him, in reconstructing the person. In an objective approach by the filmmakers, but what happens if we take a subjective approach with the dead or the dying? In contrast, Naomi Kawase's *Letter from a Yellow Cherry Blossom* (2002) approaches the subject matter from a distinctly subjective perspective, with her point of view foregrounded throughout the film. Kawase was asked by her former professor, the photographer and critic Kazuo Nishii to be recorded while dying. We must take into account first of all, that it's not the documentarian forcing herself in other one's process, but the subject who becomes part of the filmmaker through their shared mission, filming the death. Kawase shoots it as an autobiography mode, handheld camera in her own hand, close to him, and with her voice taking us from one scene to the next close to the camera. The film is very ethical conscious towards his subject and her audience, making the participant a collaborator telling his story, more than a victim, in an operation where she's just an artistic medium. In her study of documentary filmmaker-participant dynamics, Sanders advocates for a paradigm shift[26]. She emphasizes the need to recognize participants as co-creators rather than vulnerable victims in ethical considerations[27]. And to talk about other more extreme example is the film *One Cut, One Life* (Pincus and Small, 2014) in which the filmmaker—assisted by a colleague—records his own illness and eventual death. Yet the focus extends beyond the act of documenting dying or the potential self-exploitation involved. The ethical tensions arise from the relationships that unfold under the pressure of mortality. As noted in the *New York* Times review: "Throughout the movie, the conflict between the feminist principles of the two women and their unruly emotions complicates the relationship. And the issue of Mr. Pincus's male prerogative in an equal collaboration with a woman remains unresolved" (Holden).

[25] Nichols, *History, Myth, Narrative Documentary*, 9.

[26] Sanders, *Participatory spaces. Negotiating cooperation*, 7.

[27] Thomas, "Stories Freedom: Reflexive Account", 54.

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While the review foregrounds gender, what stands out more broadly is how intimate dynamics—power, vulnerability, emotional dependency—become entangled when the filmmaker is both subject and author, present and unraveling. Pincus's autobiographical approach lays bare the difficulty of observing oneself mid-collapse: confronting how control, authority, or even emotional habits—developed as a filmmaker and partner—are destabilized by the irreversible condition of dying.

The autobiography

As many scholars have noted, the use of specific creative strategies in documentary filmmaking can strengthen both its ethical foundation and its emotional authenticity. One such strategy—central to this discussion—is the inclusion of autobiographical elements. When filmmakers draw from their own lives or foreground the subjectivity of those portrayed, the result is often a film imbued with personal reflection and emotional depth. This perspective fosters reflexivity, prompting both filmmakers and viewers to confront their assumptions and acknowledge the complexities of representation. Autobiography, in this sense, becomes a tool not just for storytelling but for ethical orientation, encouraging a more conscious awareness of one's position in relation to the subject. Michael Renov notes, autobiography disrupts documentary's claims to objective truth, foregrounding subjectivity and interpretation. Rather than presenting unmediated reality, it reveals truths of the interior as he calls them. By making the act of filmmaking visible, autobiography acknowledges its constructed nature, challenging the fact-based assumptions of traditional documentary. In this way, the autobiographical mode deepens the connection between filmmaker and subject, going beyond the limits of vérité. The filmmaker no longer remains a distant observer but becomes an active participant, sharing the same space and perspective as the subject.

Until the year 2023, I had refrained from appearing in the films, looking for an objectivity. However, however I decided to step in front of the camera as part of the filmmaking process recently, aiming to establish a deeper connection and level of understanding with my subjects, and sincerity with the audience. In one instance, while documenting the life of a young woman that used to be a prostitute in La Habana, Cuba, in the documentary short film *Oro Negro* (Gonzalez Garcia, 2024), I chose to disclose similarities between her life and mine, exploring the complexities of our shared experiences.

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Fotograma de *Oro negro* (González García, 2024)

This autobiographical approach allowed me to maintain coherence in the storytelling process, mitigating concerns of exploitation and fostering a more equitable relationship with the subject. Rather than seeking to manipulate or sensationalize, I aimed to engage the audience in a thoughtful exploration of complex themes and personal journeys that was happening inside me[28].

Fotograma de *Oro negro* (González García, 2024)

[28] It was during a workshop with Lech Kowalski in Cuba, that I was able to reflect on his filmmaking style. I had to translate the emotions he evoked in me through his voice and even his physical presence in his films. While I had seen this sense of closeness before, it was not new to me, but I now viewed it through a different lens. I believe this approach is risky, yet it conveys a humility that places the filmmaker in a vulnerable position. This becomes even more powerful when I recognized that Kowalski's story is also part of his constructed narrative, not just that of the subject who serves as the protagonist of his films. So I tried to do that, be as sincere as possible, only through telling my own story before asking for my character's one.

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In 2024, I arrived in Havana to direct a documentary film as part of a workshop. The original project aimed to explore institutional narratives—particularly Cuba's educational system—as a way to understand broader ideological mechanisms at work in post-socialist society. However, what I encountered was not an open ground for inquiry, but a series of obstructions, permissions were delayed or denied outright, access to key institutions was restricted, etc... The weight of official silence bore down on the production, in the name of ideological control the system closed the door on my film before it could speak. Rather than abandon the project, I found myself undergoing a form of creative and personal reinvention. Without access to the institutions I had planned to document, I turned my camera inward. *Oro Negro* emerged from this moment of collapse, when the planned structure gave way to lived experience. Wandering the streets of Havana, I encountered a young woman—a sex worker—who approached me not as a "subject" but as a person navigating the same pressures, though from a different positionality. As we began to speak, she shared her experiences of police corruption, state hypocrisy, and survival in a system that, much like the one resisting my film, demanded performance while withholding truth. She offered me something the institutional Cuba would not: access, collaboration, and mutual recognition. In following her story, I wasn't merely documenting someone else's life—I was also confronting the collapse of the film I had intended to make, and with it, the version of my filmmaking career I had once imagined.Our lives mirrored each other in unexpected ways: she, negotiating power and vulnerability on Havana's streets; I, confronting the invisible walls of cultural and political censorship, with camera and sound in my hands. We were, in different registers, both negotiating the impossibility of transparency within a system designed to obscure.

In this context, the autobiographical mode was not an aesthetic choice—it was a political and ethical necessity. The only honest way forward was to inscribe myself into the story: not to dominate it, but to lay bare the process of its making. *Oro Negro* became a shared document, a cinematic negotiation between two people caught in the same ideological web. Through her presence and my shifting gaze, the film maps a Havana that official narratives refuse to acknowledge—a place where survival, resistance, and solidarity coexist in fragile tension. By embracing autobiography as an ethical strategy, *Oro Negro* also challenges the myth of the objective documentarian. It reveals filmmaking as a site of entanglement, where power, desire, and failure intersect. In doing so, it reframes authorship not as authority, but as vulnerability—an opening toward more horizontal and reflexive modes of cinematic engagement.

We can say that I used the video-diary mode as well, that allowed me to build a horizontal, participating dynamic with the subject. Both the filmmaker and the protagonist (I - her) share personal reflections on overlapping life experiences, speaking into the frame—not as reporter and reported, but as two voices engaging in mutual narrative. This approach resonates with the ethical promise of diary-based storytelling: it foregrounds agency, consent, and authenticity, while acknowledging subjectivity as an essential part of ethical filmmaking. By aligning myself with the

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subject and her stories, I endeavored to create a documentary that resonated on a profound emotional level while maintaining integrity and ethical responsibility though the autobiography.

In essence, by grappling with the question of self-exploitation and manipulation, I discovered a methodology that allowed me to navigate the ethical complexities of documentary filmmaking with sincerity and integrity. By placing myself on the same level as the subjects, I aimed to foster empathy, understanding, and authenticity in the final portrayal, thereby forging a deeper connection with the audience. This understanding—that ethical storytelling in autobiographical documentary depends on acknowledging mediation rather than claiming authority—aligns with Edna Rodríguez-Mangual's idea of "fictual faction." Writing about Cuban documentary comparing it to others talking about Cuba, she notes that "facts and fictions work in dialectical tension," and that filmmakers often expose, rather than conceal, the constructed nature of representation. I draw on this to clarify that *Oro Negro* is not a claim to insider truth, but an attempt to make visible the gaps, distances, and risks involved in telling someone else's story from exile. Like Rodríguez-Mangual's notion of "fictual faction," the film embraces ambiguity as an ethical position.

Fotograma de *Oro negro* (González García, 2024)

At this stage, Catherine Russell's concept of experimental auto-ethnography becomes particularly useful. She describes a shift in autobiographical film practice—a "new autobiography"—where self-representation is understood not as the revelation of a fixed, essential identity, but as a "staging of subjectivity"[29]. In this mode, the filmmaker's personal history is inseparable from broader social and historical structures. Identity, rather than being transcendental or coherent, is portrayed as

[29] Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, 276.

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performative and fragmented, shaped by overlapping cultural discourses—ethnic, national, sexual, racial, and class-based. Through this lens, the subject is no longer outside of history but emerges as a destabilized site under constant negotiation. This politicization of the personal allows autobiographical documentaries to operate not as private confessions, but as socially embedded interventions.

On the other hand, it is evident that some documentarians have veered away from authenticity using this approach, instead delving into the realm of meta-cinema and self-promotion. In doing so, they prioritize spectacle over truth, blurring the lines between reality and fiction. This trend can be seen as a departure from the genuine pursuit of truth and ethical storytelling, as filmmakers prioritize their own personas and egos over the integrity of their work. By succumbing to the allure of self-aggrandizement and sensationalism, these documentarians risk sacrificing the credibility and ethical responsibility inherent in the documentary genre. In essence, their films become more about cultivating a public image or entertaining the audience than accurately representing the complexities of reality, in performative documentaries that make the filmmaker a rockstar. This shift towards spectacle over substance underscores the importance of maintaining a critical eye and ethical compass in documentary filmmaking, lest the genre devolve into a mere spectacle of ego and fiction .“However, it can be argued that the work of performative filmmakers such as Nick Broomfield, Mads Brügger, Sasha Baron Cohen, Morgan Spurlock, Michael Moore and the Yes Men undermines the ethical turn and its mistrust in the individuality of filmmakers, which is driven by historically validated fears of political exploitation. These filmmakers produce ‘satirical documentaries’ that are ‘politically motivated documentary exposés that are created in a comedic, tongue-in-cheek tone’[30] (Kara, Selmin and Møhring Reestorff, Camilla 2015).

Despite these challenges, the autobiographical mode offers a powerful tool for navigating the ethical dilemmas of documentary filmmaking. By centering the filmmaker’s own voice and perspective, it invites a more honest and open exploration of the self and the world around them. It allows the filmmaker to be both subject and storyteller, giving them the opportunity to confront their own biases, emotions, and vulnerabilities in a way that can resonate deeply with the audience. When approached with sincerity, transparency, and self-awareness, the autobiographical documentary can offer a more horizontal, authentic, and ethical relationship between the filmmaker, the subject, and the audience. Ultimately, the autobiographical mode in documentary filmmaking provides an opportunity to rethink the ethical dynamics of the genre. It challenges traditional hierarchies between filmmaker and subject, offering a more collaborative, intimate, and reflective process. But this approach also demands a high level of responsibility from the filmmaker. The autobiographical documentary, by its very nature, confronts the filmmaker with their own biases, vulnerabilities, and

[30] Kara and Møhring Reestorff, “Introduction: Unruly Documentary Artivism”, 2..

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ethical dilemmas. It requires a deep engagement with the complexities of personal representation and a commitment to sincerity in both the filmmaking process and the final film itself. In this way, the autobiographical documentary can serve as both a personal journey and a broader exploration of the ways in which we construct and communicate meaning through film.

Ultimately, this article has argued that the autobiographical mode in documentary is not simply a space for self-expression, but a site of sustained ethical labor. When the filmmaker is both subject and author, the act of making a film becomes inseparable from the responsibility of reflecting on how others—and oneself—are represented. This is not merely a stylistic choice, but an ethical stance. As scholars remind us, ethical documentary practice involves a continuous interrogation of one's decisions at every stage of production. In this light, autobiographical filmmaking offers a unique opportunity: it turns the filmmaking process into a living form of reflection, one that embraces vulnerability, rejects mastery, and insists on accountability. Rather than seeking resolution or moral clarity, the autobiographical documentary stays with ethical tension—demonstrating that to reflect is not to retreat, but to engage more fully with the responsibility of telling real lives on screen.

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