GOING BEYOND THE VOICE OF GOD: UNCONVENTIONAL VOICEOVER NARRATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF POINT OF VIEW IN DOCUMENTARY FILMS

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family. They have supported me through thick and thin. I couldn't have asked for a better one.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 1

2. HISTORY OF THE DISEMBODIED VOICE.....3

3.THE CASE STUIES 7

Case Study 1: Nature is Speaking (2014) – Conservation International 7
Case Study 2: I Am Not Your Negro (2016) – Raoul Peck.....10
Case Study 3: Sans Soleil (1983) – Chris Marker 12
Case Study 4: Vineas Salutis: Vineyards of Salvation (2023) – Ashley Lobao 14

4. CONCLUSION.....17

REFERENCES CITED.....18

ABSTRACT

Documentary film narration styles have evolved over the years adjusting to the changes in the medium's trends. An unconventional narration style, one that is more personal and intimate, has evolved and become the newest narration trend. This paper evaluates four films: Conservation International's *Nature is Speaking* (2014), Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), and finally, Ashley Lobao's *Vineas Salutis: Vineyards of Salvation* (2023) to explore how an unconventional narration can establish a films point of view and deliver a deeper meaning to the viewer.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

The most obvious form of human communication is the spoken word, it also can be one of our more effective modes of communication, when used correctly. Stories were once only told in this way. Modern storytelling stems from oral traditions, such as songs, chants, and poetry. The tradition is still done today, when friends and family gather and share stories of their lives (Mendoza "Evolution of Storytelling"). One can claim that the news, stories about our current events which are relayed in radios, morning shows, podcasts; all effectively use the tradition of oral storytelling. In the summer of 2022, I was faced with the start of my thesis film. This was my last moment to fully explore the art of documentary filmmaking within the safety net of an MFA film program. I had conveniently stumbled upon an inspirational story that I wanted to tell but was still faced with the question of how. After, researching various film theories, and reflecting upon the films I had studied and watched over the years. I then discovered inspiration in the human voice. Two films and one series of short films sparked my interest.

Narration stemming from the human voice, is rooted in how we used to tell stories, but it also plays a key role in modern storytelling. When talking about the voice of a film there are two things it can refer to. The first is the literal voice, the spoken human element of a film, then there is the authorial presence. When talking about voice in documentary film, Bill Nichols states: "The voice of documentary makes claims, proposes perspectives, and evokes feelings. Documentaries seek to persuade or convince us by the strength of their point of view and the power of their voice." ("Introduction to Documentary" 50). The purpose of a documentary whether that is to persuade, convince, inform, or entertain others is rooted in the language of a film, commonly in the primary

voice. This is what I look for in films when I want to understand its purpose. In films with narration, voice is the main means of communication between filmmaker and viewer. The film speaks directly to the viewer. The primary voice of a documentary film can determine the point of view in which the story is told. Some may tie it to an authorship in which the voice of a film coincides with the perspective of the film. The point of view of a film is important to acknowledge as this is where subjectivity can be imbedded into the film. Documentaries are known to be more objective than the fictional alternative, I discern however that there are still elements of subjectivity in documentary film, and this is where voice can come into play.

For clarity, the term "voice" will refer to the spoken word whilst "point of view" or "perspective" will relate to the authorship component of a film. A voice of a film—the primary if there are several voices—normally aligns with the protagonist of a fictional film. In a documentary the primary voice can refer to the narration or key interview or character. Narration in a documentary has evolved with documentary history, taking on the various roles necessary to tell the story in, what is momentarily deemed the right way. Art, and consequently films reflect the current culture they are created in. It makes sense that as culture has evolved so has our art. This evolution is reflected in films in many ways, one of which is in the narration. Over the course of documentary narration history, grew a version of the narrator that takes on the form of a commentator, purely describing what is on screen, one that has lower personal stakes in the story and visual. This type of narrator dictates what elements of the story is told. It allows for the audience to adopt a passive role and settle in for the ride and by letting the narrator take control. This is what will be considered the conventional narration. On the other end of the narration spectrum are styles that are more personal and, emotionally invested, narrations that allow for a

deeper connection between the film and the viewer. This is what will be considered unconventional narration.

This essay critically evaluates how an unconventional narration style of a film allows for a deeper understanding of the perspective or point of view that documentary film is told in, therefore enhancing the success of the message of said film. This paper explores three documentary films with unconventional narration voiceovers: *Nature is Speaking* (2014), *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), *Sans Soleil* (1983), to fully understand how the narration establishes a film's point of view and increases success in conveying a message and story. Finally, I explore my film, *Vineas Salutis: Vineyards of Salvation* (2023) and discuss what from these case studies inspired and guided me when I was creating my film. In this paper I examine the choices I made regarding narration and discuss why I consider these made my film more successful.

CHAPTER TWO:

A HISTORY OF THE DISEMBODIED VOICE

A disembodied voice in a documentary is commonly referred to as the voice of God or voiceover narration. This is especially true when the voice heard isn't associated with a person or persons seen in the film (Wolfe, 149). Voiceovers, aren't an element solely used in documentary or nonfiction work, as is seen in the fiction films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *All About Eve* (1950) and *The Princess Bride* (1987). The main purpose for the voice of God or narrator differs depending on the type of film, they all however aid in telling the story. In a fictional film this might mean providing context or insight into the following or previous scenes. In a documentary the voice of God commonly offers information that provides an explanation for the visual, at least this is the case with the expository mode (Nichols, "Introduction to Documentary" 121). The modes of documentary film have evolved over time. Film theorist Bill Nichols had identified six different modes: expository, poetic, observational, reflexive, performative, and participatory. I will be referring to a few of these modes in this paper as each mode illustrates the human voice differently. The first is the expository mode, in which the voice of God maintains an omnipotent, omniscient, objective perspective. A tool that matches the intention of an expository film, to reveal or tell a story that contains a rhetoric (Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary" 17). A great example of this is in blue-chip films such as, BBC's Planet Earth (2010) in which the narrator, David Attenborough, explains the actions and behaviors of the natural world. This form of narration is what most are familiar with in a documentary film. The Griersonian ideology gave rise to the expository mode's voice of God. This voice of God narration is what one could consider conventional, at least if it maintains a detached third-party approach. Often considered the fathers

of documentary film John Grierson's and Robert Flaherty's work set a standard for conventional voiceover narration before sync sound was ever invented. Establishing a standard for conventional documentary film ("Robert Flaherty | American Explorer and Filmmaker").

As mentioned, documentary began its reign before the concept of sync sound cinema. As these films had no sound, the voice of the film was conveyed through title cards and text. Although lacking the same effects as a human voice, the title and text cards were effective in providing information to the viewer. A great example of the use of title cards are in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). The visual of the film provides the evidence to match the text and facts of the film. It wasn't until sync sound, that voice could be truly presented within a film. Voice, especially the disembodied, whilst allowing an added aural effect, played a similar role to title cards in the relationship between information and image. The film provided the evidentiary visual support for the voice of God or narration. This aids the rhetorical purpose of expository films by supporting the claims of the narrator.

Following the rise of cinema verité and observational films, narration was substituted for on screen voices, usually in the form of recorded conversations (Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary" 17). This was intentional as the notion of verité drove an urge for 'reality' or truth, and so voice in documentaries became, as Nichols calls it, "transparent" (17). Charles Wolfe claims that there is an 'element of ridicule" when it comes to the voice of God narration, he asks who has the right to claim such authority (151). Verité cinema eliminated the need for this critique by eliminating the voice of God all together. Growing from the verité and observational practices came the participatory modes, in which voice comes from formal interviews or interactions between the subject and the filmmaker (Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary" 18). Now narration

can be derived from interviews however, once the speaker has been identified that voice loses its power as a narrator. Pierre Schaeffer, a composer, defines an acousmatic sound as a "sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen". In film, this term can be considered most familiarly to the term non-diegetic sound (Chion, 18). Michel Chion takes this notion a step further and defines a disembodied voice as an acousmêtre (21). There are various versions of the acousmêtre: a commentator, a theatrical, a radio, each playing similar roles in each medium. When the voice remains unattached to an individual, if it remains non-diegetic it holds magical powers. If the narration or voice of God remains magical and powerful, anything is possible (Chion 23). Once the viewer can attach the voice to a face, by seeing the voice being spoken by a seen-on screen individual, that disembodied voice of God, loses all power; it undergoes, what Chion describes as, de-acousmatization (23).

In the expository mode, the voice of God is rarely de-acousmatized. Commonly one doesn't see any element of this narrator. This distance further enhances the omniscient power of the narrator, giving them unspoken permission to be an authority on the subject (Chion, 27). Such effect is evident in Planet Earth (2010) in which we take the information given to us by the narrator at face value. The effect of de-acousmatizing a voiceover is seen frequently in participatory documentaries where an unknown speaker becomes identified as the interviewee or as the filmmaker. When a film cuts from an interview to b-roll, the viewer from this point forward associates the voice they are hearing with the face it belongs to, humanizing the voice. This humanization dissolves the omniscient power that an acousmêtre holds. A similar loss of magic occurs than when Dorothy meets the man behind the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). When this happens, the authority on the subject is required to come from elsewhere. The interviewee

must climb the hurdle of establishing authority that an acousmêtre narrator may not. The moment in which the acousmêtre is visualized usually has great meaning to a film. It is a moment where tension, that the viewer may not be aware of is released (Chion, 27). In a participatory documentary, when we place a voice to a face we are being introduced to a real human, cementing the reality of the story being told. Kirsten Johnson's *Dick Johnson is Dead* (2020) is a great example. We are introduced to Dick Johnson, an elderly father and grandfather who is struggling with facing the end of his life. Our narrator through her words hints to who she is, however when we do place a face to the voice, we finally see her as the daughter and mother she is described to be. She becomes human. As we are de-acousmatized in the early stages of the film; whilst she and her father are shopping for coffins, we are allowed to emotionally connect and evolve with her as she moves through the story. If we were to be exposed to her voice in a later stage this may not happen, and the overall impact of the story would be less.

From the participatory mode evolved the self-reflexive films (Nichols, The voice of Documentary 18). These films hold true to the idea that documentaries are re-representations of reality (18). Rascaroli discusses how that in these more self-reflexive films such as essay films, the narration becomes more subjective approaching the unconventional rather than the conventional objective perspective (25). Both however utilize the direct address, an inherent trait of the voice of God and some essay films may fall under an expository mode more than a reflexive one. Either way the film is talking directly to the viewer (Rascaroli 38). Orlene Denice McMahon when talking about essay filmmaker Chris Marker's narration states that he brings awareness to the subjectivity of the camera and thus the filmmaker (87). Stella Bruzzi critiques Nichol's definition of the expository mode that it traps films such as the essay film in the past, forcing them

to be deemed as outdated (47). I deem, however that an unconventional approach of implementing the personal using the direct address can go beyond the Voice of God tool established by the expository mode and build a more effective mode of storytelling. This form of narration allows for a deeper emotional connection between the film and the viewer without having to de-acousmatize the narrator, giving them human and godly omniscient powers.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: *Nature is Speaking* (2014) – Conservation International

In 2014 Conservation International, a non-profit organization released five short films as part of a campaign titled *Nature is Speaking* to "give nature a voice" (Conservation International). Their "goal: To reframe why conservation is important and reinforce a simple message—Nature doesn't need people. People need nature." (Conservation International). The five initial short minute and thirty second videos are each narrated by a celebrity, ranging from Harrison Ford to Julia Roberts. Each celebrity embodies and performs as an element of the earth, for example *Harrison Ford is The Ocean*, and *Julia Roberts is Mother Earth*. The initial video series has since grown, now totaling to thirteen videos in over five languages, each film has between 50,000 to 12 million views. As each film follows a similar narration and creative style, I will be only examining the short film narrated by Harrison Ford titled *Harrison Ford is The Ocean*. This two-minute-long film contains footage of the ocean, void of any humans. Accompanying these images is Ford's narration. The narration style of this series is considered unconventional as the first-person narration is derived and told through an abiotic element; one that holds a personal stake in the visual and imbeds itself in the film. Despite the fictional elements of the narration the film still holds an aura of documentary, one that is similarly found in the poetic mode. A mode in which the film is pieced together with montage editing to derive emotion and meaning, emphasizing the color, and imagery. With the addition of the voiceover narration however, one could argue that this film is also expository. I know both to be true. I also know that the narration goes beyond the

conventional narration than one commonly found in the expository mode and uses the unconventional narration style to provide insight into the film's perspective.

The film begins with Ford stating, "I am the Ocean." the point of view of this film is established using this voice. Right off the bat we are given an identity of the acousmatic narrator. The voice we are hearing is claiming to be the ocean; therefore, short film being told through the point of view of the Ocean. The narrator continues to talk in the first person, establishing its characteristics to finally discussing its relationship with humans. The film ends on a vengeful tone. Concluding with the message that The Ocean will survive, however its relationship with and ultimately humans won't, if nothing is done to conserve our relationship. This is a common thread all the Nature is Speaking films follow.

The visuals in *Harrison Ford is The Ocean*, all consist of oceanic scenes, from above and below the surface. Water rippling, raindrops falling, waves crashing, and schools of fish swimming are just some of the clips seen in this film. The mood and tone of the imagery coincides with the mood and tone of the narration. This corresponds to that of a poetic film. There are moments where the relationship between voice and imagery follows an expository approach, where the images provide support for the narration; to support a rhetoric (Nichols, "Introduction to Documentary" 51). A moment where this occurs for example is when Ford says "Every stream, every cloud, every rain drops. It all comes back to me." At this moment we see rain falling into the ocean. This simple frame re-enforces the claim about the water cycle. This proves that this film is expository, as films of this mode maintain a rhetorical and factual purpose.

The imagery, however, does over time develop a juxtaposition, from the point of view set by the narration, one that could lead to confusion but ultimately helps the overall goal of the short

film. The audience is being spoken to in one perspective but watches from another. Now, who is to claim to know what the visual perspective is from an abiotic piece of nature? This visual perspective would allow us to 'walk' in the shoes of the ocean.

This action of seeing what the character in the film sees is called the suture effect. The suture effect is a common practice in fiction films and on occasion, documentaries where the audience sees from the perspective of a character in a film to eliminate the gaze of a camera and imbed the viewer into the story ("On Kaja"). Its intent is to put the viewer in the shoes or perspective of the character in the film, increasing the viewer emotional impact so to make them feel how the characters feel. The future effect can be very useful when establishing point of view. As this effect isn't used in these shorts you could conclude that the visual opposes the narration to an extent. The use of this tool could help drive the films perspective and point of views. The imagery, however, matches the purpose of the campaign more than it does the perspective of the narration. Since there is no suture effect, the imagery gets the viewer to appreciate the external perspective of nature more. This drives the viewer to care for nature, an overall goal of a conservation company. It urges the viewer to appreciate the beauty and feat of nature, whilst the narration drives the notion that the Ocean has a lack of dependence on humans confirming the necessity of the narration.

The narration in all these short films is performed. A script was written, and an actor performed the words spoken. One of the six documentary modes is performative (Nichols, "Introduction to Documentary" 51). This mode is known to portray a personal perspective, information presented is done so through the point of view of the filmmaker. *Nature is Speaking*, however is not performed by or through the point of view of the filmmaker, it's told from the

perspective of the subject portrayed by an actor in this case: Harrison Ford. These films capture a performance, this don't make them performative. As established earlier by the narration, these films can be classified as poetic expository.

Harrison Ford is a well-known and established celebrity, whose voice is recognizable. So even if the viewer had not seen the title prior to watching the film, they could easily guess that Harrison Ford is the narrator. The first statement of the film "I am the Ocean." establishes an identity for our acousmatic narrator that clashes with the one the viewer already has of the owner of the voice. Therefore, the viewer is forced to play along, suspend their disbelief, and pretend for these two minutes that the Ocean is speaking, and not the man known and loved from our favorite space movie franchise. This moment of disbelief gives the audience a moment to settle into the emotions of the film. It initiates a more personal connection between viewer and narration. Here we see a sort of de-acousmatization of this voice. The ethereal magic given to an acousmatic presence is removed as we know the face of the voice outside of the context of this film. This de-acousmatization is something however that the campaign overall benefits from.

As Conservation International is a non-profit, they are subsequently continuously looking for people to support their cause, whether that be through monetary means or otherwise. So, this campaign's secondary goal is the spread the word of the non-profit and drive up the global presence of the company. The celebrities who are a part of the *Nature is Speaking* series are doing exactly that; they bring in viewers who are fans of the actor to watch and perhaps partake in the campaign. In addition, the de-acousmatization that viewers go through in these films is not one that we are unfamiliar with, we do so whenever we watch a film with any well-known actor. The film's point of view has been established to be the oceans, however considering Harrison Ford's semi de-

acousmatization, one could argue that the point of view is revealed to be that of Conservation International's. With the reveal of the second film's goal, comes the revelation of the films true point of view. The narration does this through its celebrity connections as well as a more personal first-person writing approach.

The success of the campaign is evident in the creation of more than just the initial films as well as the translation of all these short films into various world languages. A whole the series has roughly 17.7 million views on YouTube. To this effect the Conservation International's *Nature is Speaking* short films are successful in using their unconventional narration style, of a performed celebrity narration to not only get across their primary goal "To reframe why conservation is important and reinforce a simple message—Nature doesn't need people. People need nature." but to also achieve a secondary goal of extending outreach.

Case Study 2: *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) – Raoul Peck

I Am Not Your Negro (2016) is a film based on James Baldwin's unfinished manuscript. The 2016 film is directed by Raoul Peck, a Haitian filmmaker who is known for historical and political films (Raoul Peck - Velvet Film). The film examines the history of racism and the civil rights movement in the United States of America. Like the Conservation International short films, Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) utilizes a performed, celebrity voice. The narrator is Samuel L Jackson, a celebrity known for his roles in the Marvel universe, and iconic films such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Peck could have had the choice to piecewise a narration as is done in *Tupac: Resurrection* (2003) where archival videos and recordings of the rapper are pieced together to tell his story. Peck chose to have the film narrated by an actor and not use the archival voice of Baldwin. This doesn't deter him from using other archival elements embedded between the

performed narration. As established in Conservation International's *Nature is Speaking*, a first-person narration that hold elements of fictionality, rooted in reality, can make for an unconventional narration. What makes Jackson's narration even more unconventional is how it was written. The narration in Peck's film is a personal mimicry of Baldwin. It takes a deeply invested approach to express Baldwin's thoughts and analysis. This departs from the detached, more observational style seen in conventional narration. Peck pieced the narration together from notes, letters, and other writings from Baldwin as the original manuscript—which was intended to be the book Remember This House—was left incomplete. He only left thirty pages of notes (Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro*). Peck describes how he wrote the script thus completing the manuscript in the book of the same name as the film:

> "In spite of these few exceptions, we remained to the end devoted to James Baldwin's thought, style and choices…I hope not to have betrayed a man who has accompanied me from very early on, every day of my life, as a brother, father, mentor, accomplice, consoler, comrade-in-arms—an eternal witness of my own wanderings." (Peck*, I Am Not Your Negro*).

Peck spent time and care when drafting and completing the writings of Baldwin, so much so that the film credits Baldwin as the writer. The narration is written in first person, most likely reflecting the tense in which the manuscript would have been written in, this first person's point of view is Baldwin's. The reflection of a first-person narrative and the effect to which Peck chose to maintain Baldwin's "thoughts, style and choices" in the writing solidifies the intended point of view and message of this film.

I Am Not Your Negro (2016) focuses on understanding the racial issues in America from the Civil Rights movement to present day. In an article in the Wall Street Journal, Peck says he directed Jackson to embody Baldwin, "I don't want you to mimic Baldwin, I don't want you to

read him, I want you to be him." (Wall Street Journal). The performed narration has a different effect on the point of view than it does with the Conservation International films. Unlike those shorts, Jackson's voice is not immediately recognizable. Unless the viewer had read about the film prior to watching there is little recognition that Jackson is in the film until the closing credits. This makes his performance more effective. He truly becomes Baldwin. This further confirms Baldwin's perspective. The mimicry of Baldwin allows the viewer to develop a deeper connection to the films point of view. This elevates the film and permits for a more successful film which effectively translates the message by engaging with the viewer on a personal level. In fact, it has been proven that humans when listening to personal stories engage with the story on a deeper level mentally than they would if someone were to just tell them information (Renken "How Stories."). The direct address of 'Baldwin' to the viewer begins building a bridge between viewer and filmmaker. This bridge relies on the personal engagement of the narrator. This narration an intentional move by Peck, he is not searching for additional recognition by using Jackson's name, he is attempting to finish the work started by Baldwin as if he indeed wrote it himself.

The visual elements of the film contain archival images and footage from past and modern movements. Some of the archival footage includes Baldwin speaking in interviews. Jackson's performance is so convincing that, at first it is believed that the acousmêtre has been revealed. Inherent to the nature of the writing the film mimics, *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) takes on the form of an essay film. Nichols discusses how self-reflexive documentaries, such as the essay film allow for re-representation of reality, one that is established by the filmmaker's point of view. *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) is already established to tell the story from Baldwin's point of view. As is evident in Peck's book about the film *I Am Not Your Negro*, and his skill to emulate Baldwins

writing, this film also holds the perspective of Peck. An essay film's narration is usually derived from a personal perspective to drive a conversation between filmmaker and viewer (Rascaroli, 32). The direct address of the acousmêtre, done in the first person, guides the viewer to engage with the film on a personal level (Rascaroli, 35). Peck's ability to include both his and Baldwin's perspectives through a performed celebrity narration allows for a deeper connection or conversation to occur between the films message and the viewer. Peck's intention is to complete and portray the opinions and ideas of Baldwin. What better way than to have him tell the story himself.

There are moments in the film where the perspective and point of view falters just for a moment and that is when an FBI report on Baldwin is read aloud by the narrator. The report, written in the third person jars the viewer from the established first-person point of view we are used to. The information portrayed however is important to the message of the film, allowing the viewer to understand that although Baldwin didn't see himself as an activist like Martin Luther King Jr or Malcom X, the government did, further embedding the narration into the context of the film.

The false de-acousmatization of Jackson's voice to Baldwin's face represents the success of the narration in establishing the film's point of view as Baldwin's. Peck's perspective, which aligns with Baldwin's is revealed through insight into the writing process. *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) conveys the voice of a dead writer performed and shaped by modern artists to establish a long gone perspective that the world can still learn more from. Through Baldwin's revival, his unfinished story can be told. People are social, we enjoy connecting to each other. Peck uses this to his advantage, by developing this human connection with the viewers he has established a bridge

in which he can more easily get his message across. Human connections are built through intimate interactions. An unconventional narration allows for a more intimate interaction between viewer and film, and consequently through the film, viewer, and filmmaker. In Peck's film we see his unconventional narration develop an intimate relationship with the viewer, this is emphasized in how the narration was written.

Case Study 3: *Sans Soleil* (1983) - Chris Marker

Iconic amongst self-reflexive essay filmmakers, Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) explores: nostalgia, travel, and human culture. The film takes us around the world from Iceland, to Japan, to Cape Verde, all the while making personal commentary on what is seen. As explored with *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), an essay film adopts a more personal direct address narration to establish a conversation (Rascaroli, 32). Marker's film does exactly this. The narration establishes its unconventionality through having an acousmêtre enunciator to embed the voice heard and message told with the images.

Marker's narration uses a letter format. The primary narrator is a woman who is reading or paraphrasing from letters sent to her by, who we assume is the filmmaker. The opening line of the film "the first image he told me about was of three children on a road in Iceland in 1965" establishes this point of view. The use of the verb 'told', indicates the conveying of information from one to another. She continues to use verbs that hint at where she is getting her information from. The opinions and perspectives are that of the letter writer. As we watch the film we are allowed to reflect upon—as is the nature of an essay film—the commentary of the letter writer. This leads the viewer to assume he is the filmmaker.

In her article “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments” Laura Rascaroli defines and discusses the role of an enunciator in an essay film:

> “The essay’s enunciator may remain a voice-over or also physically appear in the text, and usually does not conceal that he/she is the film’s director. The narrator of the essay film voices personal opinions that can be related directly to the extra-textual author.” (Rascaroli, 35)

She goes on to state that the enunciator is what distinguishes an essay film (35). When discussing the essay narrative Philip Lopate claims that an author needs to separate one from themselves to create a character (18). Rascaroli claims this is what an enunciator does (35). Sans Soleil (1983) is a good example of this. The woman narrating this film by reading the letters is his enunciator. This doesn’t make her the filmmaker but, a character through which the filmmaker talks through. Through her we are told about the feelings and thoughts of the letter writer, who we assume to be the filmmaker. There are moments however where the line between our female enunciator and letter writer are blurred. There is a moment in the film where we see and hear about a Cat Temple in Japan. During this scene there are breaks in her speech that make us forget she is quoting a letter. She begins quoting “He wrote me that in the suburbs of Tokyo there is a temple consecrated to cats” this is then followed by roughly thirty seconds of visuals of the temple and diegetic sound. The narrator then continues “I wish I could convey to you the simplicity…” the two levels of you—the first being the viewer and the second being her—followed by a break in the narration is what blurs the boundary between enunciator and filmmaker. Although confusing the point of view, this has no direct impact on the message told, as is the magic of an enunciator who embodies the perspective of a filmmaker.

Not only is the woman the enunciator, but she is also the acousmêtre, one that is never revealed. Her role as enunciator, if anything, enhances her power as the acousmêtre. As we saw with the confusion of point of views, her omniscient powers, the aura of her authority, becomes secured. All we know of the letter writer; who we assume to be the filmmaker; are his words and images of the film. She, the narrator, is our only source to these letters to this individual, therefore assuming authority of him to her. Giving her acousmatic presence even more power than a conventional voice of God, whose authority might be doubted. A similar effect can be seen in *The Princess Bride* (1987) in which the grandfather is reading the story to the child. The grandfather is our verbal source of to the story. He is the key information holder. Within the framed narrative of the fantasy story, he is the acousmêtre and has the same amount of authority and power as our woman narrator if it were not for the opening and closing scenes of the film in which he is de-acousmatized.

The role of the narrator is very similar to that of a conventional one, like we would see in *Planet Earth* (2010). The narrator, in a direct address talk about the visual on the screen. In this way, one could claim that *Sans Soleil* (1983) is an expository film. However, the main difference in narration between the two films, is the personal moments that Marker chooses to include. These moments lead the viewer to believe that the narrator hold higher stakes in the film, that they have a deeper emotional connection to the footage. This intimate behavior gives the viewer permission to also be more intimate with the film. The level of closeness achieved enhances the story being told, making more of an impact on the viewer. This example supports Bruzzi's argument that the definition of the expository mode, limits the expectations of the film. Marker's use of an acousmêtre enunciator as his narrator allows for the necessary distance of an essay filmmaker to

portray their rhetoric and opinions effectively whilst establishing their hidden point of view. This narration style although distanced from the filmmaker through an enunciator, still inhabits an unconventional personal narrative through the enunciator's letter reading, which are characteristically personal. This narration allows for the viewer to build a more intimate relationship with the film, therefore allowing for a more effective mode of storytelling.

Case Study 4: *Vineas Salutis: Vineyards of Salvation* (2023) – Ashley Lobao

In 2019, Eric Asimov, New York Times Wine Critic, wrote an article about how wine production was being impacted by climate change (Asimov). Despite this being a known issue for at least a decade, I had only recently found myself invested in the issue in 2022 when I read this article. Now, it's a given that I would be unaware of the issue until I had read this article, however I doubt I would've cared as much if it hadn't been for my recent infatuation with wine. After a few months of additional research and preliminary interviews, an idea for a film began to form. *Vineas Salutis: Vineyards of Salvation* (2023) is a documentary that explores how California winemakers are taking a step towards sustainable wine making all the while mitigating the impacts of climate change. This short film is narrated by an ethereal woman who represents a changing Mother Earth, an embodiment of climate change.

Like Marker's female enunciator, this Goddess character is an enunciator for me, the filmmaker. Initially the narrator was going to be more like the characters in Conservation International's *Nature is Speaking* Series (2014). However, after initial edits a more realistic approach was chosen, one that is more grounded like Peck's narration in *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016). It was deemed that this approach was needed due to the real-life elements of the interviews. This doesn't mean that there aren't elements inspired by the style in *Nature is Speaking* (2014).

The relationship between image and narrator is very similar. Like in Conservation International's films there is a lack of suture effect. When the narrator is speaking, we see elements of the narrator, the same applies for *Vineas Salutis: Vineyards of Salvation* (2023). When we hear her, we see parts of her, her voice however is never de-acousmatized as she is never seen speaking. Due to her appearance however, we assume she is the voice we are hearing. The female figure is dressed in a costume, one that allows the viewer to draw obvious connection to the changing earth. Her face is never actually revealed until the final moments of the film. In addition, there is no pseudo de-acousmatization either. As I don't hold a celebrity status or have a well-known voice, the narration is unrecognizable to those who don't know me. This adds to the magical powers of my narrator. For those who do not know me, my anonymity enhances the power of the acousmatic enunciator, similar to that of Marker's narrator. For those that do know me and my voice they are forced into a sort of de-acousmatization that occurs in the *Nature is Speaking* (2014) films.

The narration style determines the film's point of view through the direct address of the enunciator character, like how it is established in Marker's film. Her verbiage, her asking things of the viewer; aids in setting up the films point of view as well initializing a viewer film relationship. The main difference, between this film and Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) is how hidden the true authorial presence is. In *Sans Soleil* (1983) there are the letters that we assume to be the thoughts and opinions of the filmmaker. However, in this film the viewer is unaware that the Goddess character is the enunciator for the filmmaker. The line between film point of view and authorship of the film is blurred. The only hint is held in the doubt that there is an actual goddess and that these thoughts, and opinions must be derived from the filmmaker. The authorial figure of the film is still present in the doubt of the fictional character. This is similar to the relationship that

viewer to the Conservation International short films have. The suspension of disbelief that the viewer is actually listening to the ocean speak is the same that a viewer adopts when watching my film.

In-between the goddess scenes are traditional documentary interviews with those involved in the wine industry. These moments highlight the humanity of the issue, introducing the viewer to the people behind the story. As discussed in *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), the relationship between narration and interviews can influence the point of view of a film as well as the effectivity of the message on the viewer. Peck was able to transition between archival interview and narration seamlessly. This enhanced Jackson's performance securing Baldwin's point of view. In *Vineas Salutis: Vineyards of Salvation* (2023) however, the transition between narration and interview doesn't secure the point of view of the film but instead act towards the goal and message of the film. This film emphasizes the idea that change is inevitable. As the narrator speaks, she introduces the concept of the relationship between humans and nature. The back and forth between her and the interviews is meant to mimic that relationship highlighting the need for a conversation between nature and humans.

The enunciator goddess plays an emotive role as well as a structural one. She drives the structure of the film choosing what comes next. This is done in a way that is almost essayistic. She emotes and comments on what has and what is to come in the story of wine and climate using the interviews as evidence and support. Her role and character were derived to aid in getting the message of the film across. This story could have been told without her presence however, I believe that as the filmmaker my voice and options matter. They make this film unique. My opinions as the filmmaker add to the story, they highlight things from my perspective. Elements of the personal

are not something to steer away from, they enhance the message of the film by creating a situation that is easier to connect to. A subjective approach to narration, although unconventional endorses the subjectivity to a documentary film that inherently already exists. Marker highlights the subjectivity of filmmaking with his narration, a notion often forgotten especially with elements of fictionality or fantasy. In this case I hope that the narrator's fantastical elements allow for enough suspension of disbelief to ease the consumption of information, but her human elements allow for my perspectives to shine through.

CHAPTER FOUR:

CONCLUSION

I live in a world consumed by media. 'Fake news' and other hyperbole, clickbait attempts have constructed a world in which we can never fully know which storytellers to trust. This hesitancy has made sharing information difficult. But I have discovered that when it comes to personal stories, people sharing events that have happened to them or things that they have learned or clearly care about, the hesitancy disappears (Renken). I find myself believing in their story just because they show a deeper personal connection to it, their intimacy with the story makes me feel as if I can also hold an intimacy with it. Oral storytelling practices used to be personal. The stories we would share would be things that happened to us or people we know. The personal connections of those stories drove us to care and listen to them. Everyone has a unique perspective, no matter how similar your lives may be. Storytelling can be enhanced by that. Voice in film plays a key role in how we convey the message of the film, what perspectives we choose to show and how we show them matter. Narration has evolved with documentary filmmaking and storytelling; and a more personal and intimate approach to narration has resulted in an unconventional voice of God narration. This style of narration has allowed for a deeper connection between viewer and filmmaker, all whilst embracing the subjectivity that comes with documentary filmmaking. The four case studies in this paper exhibit how various artistic choices can allow for an unconventional voiceover narration to hold the more intimate and personal details of a story. These choices have led to stronger and more impactful stories. Conservation International's films used fantastical elements to bring to life and give voice to the natural world. Peck's narration travels in time and revives a voice lost to society. Marker embeds his subjectivity in the romanticized practice of letter

writing. Finally, my film considers the choices made by these filmmakers in an attempt to mimic a conversation with Mother Earth. The first three films have proven to be successful in their efforts. Conservation International has grown their project's scope, Peck's film was nominated for an Academy Award and, Marker's film still resonates with audiences today almost forty years later. It is clear from all these films that an omniscient invested narrator can maintain an authority over a film whilst also keeping in touch with intimate sentiments that make a story personal.

As is the way with all art, styles mimic and reflect the times. It will be interesting to see how the more subjective approach of narration evolves as the art does as well. Will we abandon subjectivity? Will narration disappear entirely, if so, how will information get communicated in films with no omniscient spoken word? Will we primarily be using interviews to tell stories? These are all valid questions and thoughts that will be answered as time and documentary film evolves.

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