# THE ROLE OF RECIPROCITY

# IN DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Science and Natural History Filmmaking

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

December 2022

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# ABSTRACT

Filmmakers are often required to navigate conflicts and difficult moral dilemmas with their participants. While some have proposed ethical guidelines to help filmmakers resolve these dilemmas, such normative codes are unable to account for the unique particularities of every situation. I argue Simone de Beauvoir provides a philosophy that is well suited to documentary filmmaking and can help filmmakers analyze the particularities of moral dilemmas too unique to be accounted for by normative guidelines. Beauvoir's philosophy has two primary advantages for documentary filmmakers: 1) it accounts for the sociopolitical context in which the filmmaker and participant exist and, 2) it advocates for an ethic of reciprocity that requires filmmakers to respect the alterity of their participants and foster equitable relationships with them. I apply Beauvoir's philosophy to the ways in which filmmakers build relationships with their participants and use this framework to discuss Michael Apted's *Up!* series, as well as my own film, *Middle America*.

# INTRODUCTION

Documentary filmmakers must reflect on a variety of ethical decision making issue during their productions. Such issues include the responsibility to present the "truth," be objective, and determining the extent of their artistic freedom. A study conducted by Butchart and Har-Gil, however, found that no ethical issue concerned their sample of documentary filmmakers more than that of respect and care for their participants (62). Documentary filmmakers usually do not want to cause harm to the people who agree to appear in their films, but it can be difficult to determine how best to avoid hurting participants while also retaining artistic freedom and accuracy. Furthermore, every documentary production takes place in a unique social, political, economic context that all bring with them their own particular ethical concerns. Some scholars have attempted to develop normative guidelines to help filmmakers navigate these complicated moral issues, but it is not possible for any code of ethics to account for the highly situational nature of these concerns. This is why documentary filmmakers can benefit from the work of ethical philosophers who can provide new ways of thinking about ethical problems. To that end, I analyze the ethical dimensions of the relationship between documentary filmmakers and their participants through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's ethical philosophy. Her notion of "reciprocity," I argue, provides a valuable ethical framework for documentary filmmakers seeking to create equitable relationships with their participants.

# APPROACHES TO DOCUMENTARY ETHICS

According to Calvin Pryluck, ethical concerns regarding documentary film grew dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s. New lightweight filming equipment and the growing popularity of direct cinema gave audiences a window into far more intimate areas of personal life than were commonly seen in documentary film before. This unprecedented access to the private areas of life spurred questions and criticisms about the rights of the participants represented on screen. The Maysles brothers, for example, have been accused of failing to gain consent that truly informed the participants of everything they needed to know to make their decision. During the production of *Salesman*, they would approach a home with a salesman and offer a brief explanation to the resident. "That took me maybe thirty seconds," Albert Maysles said in an interview, "most people at that point would then say they understood, even though perhaps they didn't..."(Pryluck 22). They would then begin recording and ask for a release only after it was over. Such a rushed approach puts the momentum of the situation in the filmmaker's favor. The fact that they only asked for a release once the footage has been recorded also favors the filmmaker because it pressures the participant to agree rather than allow the captured film to go to waste. The presence of film equipment and, occasionally, the sanction of a respected organization, can also place coercive pressure onto potential participants. Frederick Wiseman, for example, recorded patients during their medical appointments for *Hospital*. The very fact of his presence during the appointment gave him the appearance of support from the doctor and hospital itself, likely making it difficult for participants to refuse their consent. Pryluck argues that documentary filmmakers need to be transparent with participants and provide them with as much information as possible in order to truly gain their informed consent (25).

Bill Nichols also proposes guidelines for ethical documentary filmmaking in *Speaking Truths with Film* and argues that filmmakers must be sensitive to the power imbalance

between them and their participants. "The relationship between filmmaker and subject," he writes, "can be similar to that between a benevolent, or perhaps not so benevolent, dictator and his subjects" (Nichols 157). Unless a filmmaker is willing to cede a significant amount of creative control over the production of the film to participants, they hold a great deal of power over how those who appear in their film will be perceived by audiences. For this reason, Nichols argues that a filmmaker's responsibility to their subjects rises inversely with their means to represent themselves in the media (160). If a well known politician, for example, disapproves of how they're presented in a film, they have a variety of methods to present an alternative narrative to a large audience, such as interviews, speeches, and press releases. A filmmaker would therefore have more artistic license to do what they feel best communicates the truth because the film isn't the sole source of information about the participant. In contrast, many people who belong to marginalized groups do not have such access to mass media outlets and therefore have less ability to fight back against harmful representations. Extra care must be taken to ensure that their representation does not cause them harm because participants and their communities may have little recourse once the film is released.

Nichols and Pryluck both acknowledge that no code of documentary ethics can possibly account for the unique particularities of every situation. Every ethical decision is situated in a unique constellation of historical, cultural, and economic circumstances that filmmakers must take into account. For example, the ethical dilemmas I faced when working with a woman from my home town who was struggling to reintegrate into society after a two year prison sentence were vastly different than those I encountered when working on film about shellfish aquaculture in Vietnam. In the former case, I had to consider the damage the film could to do to my participant's self-esteem and relationships and whether or not to include information that could get her into further legal trouble. In the latter case, I was worried about the ability of the workers to consent given the barrier of language and the pressure

placed on them to be filmed by their employer.

Furthermore, Nichols calls attention to the fact that the codes of ethics used in journalism, sociology, anthropology, and other such fields serve at least as much to protect the interests of their respective institutions as they do to protect those who come into contact with them (151). Documentary filmmakers seeking to do right by their subjects would likely find this of little comfort, as the interests of institutions differ and, at times, conflict with those of the individuals affected by them. This is why I argue that normative approaches, such as an institutionalized code of ethics or rigid set of rules are inadequate.

The philosophical work of Emmanuel Levinas has received considerable attention among scholars of documentary film (Nash 224; Cooper 15; Renov 159; Saxton 1). Levinas's work establishes a relational ethics that focuses on encounters between the self and the Other.[1] This relational focus makes it well suited to analyzing documentary filmmaking practices and the ethics of their interactions with participants. Because Levinas's ethical philosophy resists being reduced to a set of guidelines that remain the same in every situation, some have described his work as being non-normative (Nash 225; Nordtug 51). Diane Perpich, however, argues that, even if his philosophy does not outright argue for normative principles, almost every application of his work does. "When Levinas's work is employed to identify and redress social, political, and economic injustices, when it is invoked as calling us to a new respect for alterity, difference, diversity, or simply 'the other,'" she writes, "it is nigh impossible to read these invocations as having nothing to do with normative ethical concerns" (125). Instead, Perpich argues that Levinas's work offers a "normativity without norms" because it describes the normative forces that bind the self to the ethical claims of the Other, but acknowledges that such claims must be evaluated in their particular contexts, thereby precluding the use of any universal principles or guidelines (126). Levinas's work can be seen as offering new

[1] I am capitalizing "Other" when it refers to the constitutive Other in relation to the self as opposed to its more general usage as is often the convention in phenomenological texts.

ways of thinking through ethical problems for documentary filmmakers, which could help filmmakers think through the unique particularities of their situation better than normative guidelines ever could.

Much of Levinas's work questioned why people have so often desired to know the Other. He was particularly skeptical of all forms of visual representation because he believed that they hold an inherent risk of "subsuming the Other in a totalizing visual system, overlooking difference, and in doing so annihilating the other" (Nash 231). One of the central ethical problems for documentary film, then, is the way it often favors universality over particularity. From this point of view, the tendency of documentary films to connect personal narratives to broader social and political issues actually limits its ability to truthfully represent its participants. Michael Apted's *Up! series*, for example has been used as a pedagogical tool in sociology classrooms to help students connect the personal struggles of the film's participants to the social structures that affect their lives (Diehl et al.). Levinas may have questioned if this use of the film truly respects its participants or if it treats them as objects for use within a totalizing system of knowledge that attempts to explain the British class system at the expense of representing the participants' individuality.

Kate Nash has written about certain filmmaking practices that might be considered more ethical according to Levinasian thought. "His work," Nash writes, "calls for filmmaking practices that respect difference, a 'letting be' that eschews the totalizing urge in order for truth to emerge" (231). Filmmakers can practice this "letting be" through their aesthetic choices. For example, a shot that lingers on a face longer than normal, shows a dispute or concern that is never connected to a larger narrative thread, or presents complex and seemingly contradictory information that is never further explained can all help to preserve the complexity of participants. Filmmakers can also prevent participants from being subsumed into their narrative constructions by ceding a degree of control of the film over to them. In Levisnisian ethics, attentive listening to the other is key to having an ethical

encounter. Filmmakers can practice this kind of attentive listening by taking the concerns and beliefs of their participants seriously, rather than eliding them in favor of their artistic vision.

Skepticism towards empathy is a major theme in Levinas's work because it very often involves an act of projection in which individuals imagine themselves in the mind and body of the Other (Amiel-Houser and Mendelson-Maoz 201). It assumes that the thoughts and feelings of everyone, regardless of their culture or background, can be universally understood. "Under the presumption of empathy," writes Amiel-Houser and Mendelson-Maoz, "people tend to dismiss aspects of difference and believe that they can truly know the subjective mindset of another person, sometimes even better than that person" (204). Central to Levinas's notion of Otherness, or alterity, is its radical uniqueness. Otherness cannot be conceptualized, comprehended, or reduced to any extent and attempts to do so can be understood as a form of violence. An ethical relationship, for Levinas, is one in which the desire to know the Other is resisted as much as possible and nonetheless acknowledges an inherent obligation towards them (206). This notion has important implications for documentary filmmakers. It suggests that filmmakers might need to reconsider documentary film's ability to "promote empathy" to audiences and whether or not such an outcome is even desirable.

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# THE ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Although primarily known for her seminal work as a feminist thinker, Simone de Beauvoir has been largely overlooked in the field of ethical philosophy. Beginning in the 1970s and early 1980s, however, Beauvoir began to be recognized as an important philosopher in her own right and along with that recognition there has been a proliferation of work elucidating her compelling thoughts on social and political theory, existential philosophy, and—of particular concern to this paper—ethics. To the limited extent that Beauvoir was regarded in the field of ethics at all, it was most often for her sharp critique of Levinas in *The Second Sex* (Anderson 172). She criticizes Levinas in a lengthy footnote for associating femininity with Otherness and masculinity with subjectivity:

> I suppose Mr. Levinas is not forgetting that woman also is consciousness for herself. But it is striking that he deliberately adopts a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of the subject and the object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he assumes that she is mystery for man. So this apparently objective description is in fact an affirmation of masculine privilege (Beauvoir 80).

Given her disapproval of Levinas's choice to associate femininity with Otherness throughout his work, one may be surprised to learn that much of Beauvoir's philosophy aligns well with his. Indeed, like Levinas, Beauvoir is concerned with the relationship between a subjective self and an infinite, absolute Other. Beauvoir also argues for the paramount importance of preserving the alterity of the Other in such relationships in a highly Levinesian fashion. Where Beauvoir departs from Levinas, however, is in the specific nature of alterity and her belief in the potential of reciprocity to create equitable relationships.

Central to Beauvoir's notion of Otherness is her recognition of two distinct forms of alterity: sociopolitical and existential. Existential alterity is essentially the same as Levinas's notion of Otherness. It is the basic fact that the gulf between human consciousnesses is infinite, opaque, and entirely impossible to traverse. This notion, however, does nothing to

acknowledge the sociopolitical conditions in which the self and Other exist.

Beauvoir recognizes a second form of alterity that is contingent upon a given sociological context and therefore able to be overcome through collective action, in contrast to existential alterity, which is a permanent fact of human existence. Although Beauvoir does not give this secondary form of Otherness a name, Ellie Anderson uses the term "sociopolitical alterity" to describe it (171). Sociopolitical alterity regards the Other as being defined by one or more generalizable characteristics and denies the subjectivity of those who possess such characteristics on that basis. In *Orientalism*, for example, Edward Said describes how the colonialist notion of "the Orient" bared absolutely no resemblance to his own experience growing up in the Middle East. He argues that Orientalism, as it was socially constructed in the West, instead represents an inverted view of Western culture's own self image. Where the West wanted to see strength, nobility, and virtue in itself, it saw weakness, duplicity, and depravity in the Orient. The lived reality and even the very personhood of those in Middle East mattered very little. Through a system of hegemonic power relations, the West defined the Orient as "Other" and the subjective experiences of all those defined by that label were disregarded (Burney 23-24). This form of Othering, which is enforced through a variety of social processes, can be thought of as a form of sociopolitical alterity.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explains the importance of recognizing sociopolitical alterity by describing how women in many ancient societies were believed to have a special connection to the divine and, in certain contexts, were afforded more respect from men than they are given in the modern world. Beauvoir argues, however, that it would be a mistake to assert that the position women held in such times was superior to that of today: "whether Earth, Mother, or Goddess, she was never a peer for man; her power asserted itself beyond human rule: she was thus outside of this rule. Society has always been male; political power has always been in men's hands." In other words,

Beauvoir asserts that even in ancient societies where some women held important religious positions, those women usually did not hold political power and were thus less able to effect change compared to men. Respect for alterity, even its worship, should not be confused for the lack of its subjugation. True equality requires both the respect of the Other's existential alterity and a rejection of any sociopolitical hegemonies that deny a group of people's ability to create change in the world by casting them as Other.

Although it is tempting to only think of sociopolitical othering on a macroscopic scale, it is also a pervasive factor in interpersonal relationships. When encountering the Other, the choice to deny their subjectivity and treat them as an object is an ever-present option. The presence of this option creates a constant tension in relationships between the self and the Other. Even when alterity is respected and oppressive sociopolitical conditions are taken into account and resisted, a subject always has a choice to withdraw such measures (Anderson 178). Thus, equitable relationships, for Beauvoir, are highly contingent upon the continuous affirmation of the personhood of the Other by the self.

This sense of contingency is further developed by Beauvoir's notion of "reciprocity." She writes that, "when two human categories find themselves face-to-face, each one wants to impose its sovereignty on the other; if both hold to this claim equally, a reciprocal relationship is created, either hostile or friendly, but always tense" (Beauvoir 71). In other words, reciprocity is less an equal exchange of value and more a delicate equilibrium in which both parties mutually recognize the desires and beliefs the Other has regarding them. For Beauvoir, consensual intimate encounters were the paradigmatic form of this kind of relationship because, during such experiences, the self can derive even greater pleasure from the knowledge that the Other desires them as much as they desire the Other.

Reciprocity can also be thought of as a mutual recognition of both the self's and Other's

transcendent freedom. For Beauvoir, freedom is not a state of being but rather a basic fact of human existence. Every person is born with the freedom to think and to act of their own volition. This freedom is not granted by anyone else, but is instead an intrinsic feature of human life. Any action to suppress this freedom can therefore be thought of as an act of dishonesty or bad faith. For Beauvoir, combating sociopolitical alterity begins with the affirmation of this freedom, but it is only meaningful if it is affirmed reciprocally. Without reciprocity, the one who recognizes and affirms the freedom of the Other is likely to be exploited by the one who refuses to acknowledge the Other's transcendent freedom.

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# BEAUVOIR'S RECIPROCITY AND DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

Given the lack of any institutionalized code of ethics available to documentary filmmakers, many must contend with improvising solutions on their own while they navigate the complex moral dilemmas that arise during production. Even when attempts are made to formally codify ethical practices for documentary filmmakers, authors are quick to note that such guidelines cannot account for the unique particularities of every situation (Nichols 151; Pryluck 29). This is why documentary filmmakers can benefit from the work of philosophers who provide frameworks for thinking through ethical problems rather than strict normative guidelines. Some scholars have already begun this work by advocating for a Levinisian approach to documentary ethics (Nash 224; Cooper 15; Renov 159; Saxton 1). As I have argued, however, Levinas's work does not adequately take into account the sociopolitical position of the Other nor does it allow for an ethic of reciprocity, which Beauvoir saw as an essential component of equitable relationships. Rather than outright contradicting Levinas, I see Simone de Beauvoir as extending his philosophy to account for these issues. Documentary filmmakers can benefit from her ethical philosophy as they navigate complex and highly situational moral questions regarding their relationships with participants from diverse sociopolitical contexts.

How, then, should filmmakers approach such relationships from the perspective of Beauvoir's ethical philosophy? For Beauvoir, sociopolitical and existential alterity are intrinsically linked concepts. She described the denial of the Other's freedom as a form of dishonesty or bad faith. Sociopolitical Othering is the result of this denial. This is because freedom, for Beauvoir, is the ability of a subject to transcend a situation through their actions in the world and the denial of this freedom is a denial of their ability to think and act of their own volition; merely regarding them as an object without agency. For this reason, sociopolitical Othering always results in existential Othering. Conversely, the affirmation of

existential alterity diminishes sociopolitical Othering. If filmmakers allow their preconceived notions about participants to define and limit their understanding of them, then they deny their alterity and contribute to their oppression.

I encountered a poignant example of the importance of reciprocity during an interaction with a potential documentary participant while working on a film about shellfish aquaculture in Vietnam. I was recording footage at a processing facility when a foreman indicated that he wanted to show me something. I followed him to find a woman sitting alone on the ground shucking oysters. She looked up and recoiled upon seeing me and my camera. She said something that I could not understand, but it seemed clear to me that she did not want to be filmed. The foreman snapped back at her and she resignedly returned her attention back to her work. I did nothing. He looked at me and pointed to her, impatiently waiting for me to begin recording. What is an ethical course of action in this situation? Levinas commands me not to assume; not to violate the alterity of the Other by projecting myself into her position. Beauvoir counsels me to seek reciprocity, to look for, as much as possible given barriers of culture and language, an openness to my presence that indicates her desire to be filmed is at least as strong as my desire to film her, which I could not see in any measure. For me, this is why Levinas offers a flawed notion of documentary ethics. Anderson echoes this in her criticism of Levinas:

> Levinas's ethics takes respect for the other to the point of reversal, where acknowledging that the other is unrepresentable within my domain of the same becomes a relegation of the other to a blank canvas of silence on which the subject of the 'same' can place any qualities, ideas, or images whatsoever without needing to ask the other what she considers herself to be (Anderson 186).

I chose to not film her in that instance, but there were other, more ambiguous situations during that production in which I recorded people that did not seem entirely comfortable with it. Perhaps if I had been conscious of Beauvoir's notion of reciprocity, I would have chosen instead to look for the mutual forward movement of self and Other towards each

other. In my understanding, I take this to mean that I should have done as much as possible to ensure that those caught in front my lens were not merely acquiescing to my camera's gaze, but had an affirmative desire to be recorded.

A filmmaker very often begins an encounter with a would-be participant when they reach out to them to request their consent to engage with the production. From a phenomenological perspective, the filmmaker begins with a forward movement towards the participants and, ideally, a participant will respond to this movement by granting their consent freely and out of a sincerely held desire to be included in the production, indicating a reciprocal movement towards the filmmaker. A participant may, however, grant consent due to subtly coercive forces. Such a force could, for example, be applied by an employer who has a stake in the documentary's production and thus pressures the employee into granting their consent when they would have preferred to withhold it. Even if consent is furnished freely and sincerely, participants may come to feel less comfortable with production as they learn new details about the filmmaker's vision. This is why seeking informed consent, although important, is not adequate to ensure an ethical relationship between documentary filmmakers and participants. An ethic of reciprocity better accounts for the coercive forces that may be acting on participants throughout their engagement with the production.

Just as in erotic encounters, where both participants need to desire the Other reciprocally in order for the experience to be mutually affirming, a filmmaker's desire to film a participant must be reflected by a participant's mutual desire to be filmed by the filmmaker. Simone de Beauvoir offers a philosophy of relational ethics that can help documentary filmmakers have equitable and mutually affirming relationships with their participants. Although largely compatible with the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, she diverges from his work by recognizing two mutually exclusive forms of alterity, which allows her philosophy to better account for the sociopolitical context in which the Other exists. By denying sociopolitical alterity (i.e. by not being prejudiced against the Other) and affirming existential alterity (i.e.

by respecting differences), filmmakers can begin to reciprocate the trust their participants place in them.

While such a relationship may open the filmmaker up to new risks and constrain their artistic choices, it is important to recognize that participants also place themselves at risk in order to help filmmakers realize their artistic visions. Practicing an ethic of reciprocity, I argue, requires filmmakers to share in these risks by only engaging with individuals who have an affirmative desire to be recorded, which in most cases can only be assessed if the filmmaker has built a reciprocally rewarding relationship with their participants. To do otherwise, that is, to record people who have granted consent due to any amount of coercive force, is to deny their inherent freedom and treat not as an equal, but as an object.

# CASE STUDY: THE *UP!* SERIES

The *Up!* series is one of most ambitious and long running longitudinal documentary endeavors ever produced. The series brought together 14 seven-year-old children from various socioeconomic backgrounds in 1964 and revisited them every seven years to see how their lives had changed. Though some declined to participate at various points, remarkably, 11 of the 14 original participants were present in the final entry of the series, *63 Up!* This is a testament to director Michael Apted's skill at fostering positive and trusting relationships with most of his participants. Several of the individuals who appear in the series have spoken very highly of Apted. Tony Walker, for example, when interviewed for *The Daily Mail*, said that, "the trust we had in him was beyond comparison to anything in the world...I trusted him with my life, and I have done so for the last 55 years"(Ridler). In an interview with the *Radio Times*, Sue, Tony, and Bruce all indicated that would likely not continue their participation if Apted were to stop directing the series (Dowell). Much of this can be explained by the nature of making a longitudinal documentary, which forces filmmakers to rely on their participants to return for future installments. Though failing at times, especially in the first three films, Apted's dependence on his participants forced him to adopt an ethic of reciprocity for the *Up!* series in order to keep them coming back for each installment.

The *Up!* series was initially not intended to be a series at all. After the unexpected success of *Seven Up!*, directed by Paul Almond, the head of Granada Television reached out to Michael Apted, a researcher for the first film, and asked him to make a follow-up (Burawoy et al. 323). Apted continued to focus on social class in *14 Up!* and *21 Up!*, but was forced to shift his approach as his participants aged into adulthood and became increasingly uncomfortable with the highly deterministic narrative he was trying to force them into. In *21 Up!*, for example, Apted asks the only three working class women in the film, whom are all interviewed together, if they feel they've had the same opportunities in life as Suzy, a woman born into a

privileged family. Their answers indicate that they refuse to be defined by their social class. "I've had the opportunities in life that I've wanted," says Jackie. "I'd say I've had more," adds Lynn (Apted, 21 Up! 19:15). Tony similarly refused to be defined by his class, saying, "I'm as good or even better than most of them people...especially on this program" (59:20).

Although Apted may have had good intentions in trying to demonstrate the human consequences of the rigid British class system, by treating each participant strictly as a product of the class into which they were born, Apted is reinforcing their sociopolitical alterity, which denies their existential alterity and inherent freedom. This is the opposite of reciprocity, which may explain why participants felt uncomfortable with Apted's questions. Perhaps the most egregious example of sociopolitical Othering occurs in *21 Up!* when Apted has Tony drive him through a high crime area of the East End of London and asks him several leading questions, such as, "Are there many villains in the east end?," "Do you have much to do with villains?," and "Does it worry you, the possibility of becoming one of them?" (58:29). He is implicitly suggesting that Tony, who is shown to have a love of fighting in *Seven Up!* and earns his living placing bets for horse racing spectators, is destined to become involved with illegal activities in the future. By the time the next film was released, however, Tony had married, become a father, and owned a home. To Apted's credit, he recognized he was wrong to, as he puts, "play God with Tony." In article for *Ethnography*, he stated, "I was wrong and embarrassed...I think it's fair game that if I'm caught out and taken to the woodshed, I should share my pain with the viewer" ("Michael Apted responds" 362).

*21 Up!* marks a turning point for the series. In the films that follow, Apted is less concerned about class, aside from the general point that some people have more options than other (Duneier 342). His questions tend more to focus more on the personalities, achievements, and personal problems of his participants. This shift indicates Apted's recognition that he couldn't continue attempting to present his participants as, in his words, "gift wrapped into some convenient little 'social class' box of my making" (Apted, "Michael Apted

responds" 361). He had to recognize and respect the individual alterity of his participants. As a result, he was more often able to foster reciprocal relationships during the rest of the series.

The extent of Apted's evolution toward reciprocity can been seen in his interview with Jackie in *49 Up!* She harshly criticizes him for the way she was represented over the many years of the series:

> You will edit this program as you see fit. I've got no control over that. You definitely come across as, this is your idea of what you want to do, and how you see us, and that's how you portray us...The last one was very much based on the sympathy and the illness that I've got, and what I may or may not be able to do. It should've been about what I can do, what I am doing, what I will do...I think I'm actually more intelligent than you thought I would be, I have reached a level in my life that I'm happy with and I enjoy being me (49 Up! 24:45).

Much to Jackie's surprise, Apted chose include her comments in the film with minimal editing. Apted writes that, after she attended a screening with him and the other participants, "she grabbed hold of me and gave me a big, delicious, wet kiss, and whispered, 'Thank you, I never thought you'd use it'" ("Michael Apted responds" 362). Beauvoir writes that reciprocity involves reciprocal claims of sovereignty between "two human categories" that find themselves face-to-face. These reciprocal claims, whether hostile or friendly, are "always tense" (71). According to this definition, reciprocity represents a delicate equilibrium. Jackie's criticism of Apted demonstrates this tension. Throughout the *Up!* series, Apted has made implicit claims about Jackie's life. By including her comments about him, he affirmed and recognized the reciprocal claims she is making on him, though such an act is not easy. Apted risked his reputation and pride by presenting a harsh criticism of himself as a director to an international audience, but so too has Jackie had to risk—and indeed experience—embarrassment and shame every time she agreed to continue her participation in the *Up!* series. While Jackie's criticism highlights Apted's ethical failures, through the lens of Beauvoir's ethical philosophy, it becomes clear how his decision to include her comments was an ethical act of reciprocity towards her.

## CASE STUDY: *MIDDLE AMERICA*

The relationships between Michael Apted and his participants in the *Up!* series spanned decades, which allowed Apted to develop strong relationships of trust of with the people who appeared in the series. My film, *Middle America*, in contrast, was shot over a much shorter period of time. I met most of the participants in the film only once and the nature of my relationships with them were far less personal. In this way, the production of my film was likely more similar to the majority of documentaries, which are most often not longitudinal in nature and usually produced over a much shorter period of time. Though these relationships were mostly fleeting, I believe it is still possible to analyze them through the lens of Beauvoir's ethical philosophy.

*Middle America* tells the story of three small towns that each claim to be the geographic center of North America. The film explores each town's reasons for their claim, their relationship to each other, and the culture of rural North Dakota's rapidly shrinking communities. The majority of the film's story is told by five participants whom I interviewed at length. Darylanna Durkee and Stephanie Steinke are residents of Rugby, ND, the town that holds the oldest and most widely recognized claim to the center. Bill Bender was, at the time, the mayor of Robinson, ND and claimed the bar he owned and operated was the true geographic center using dubious methods. Lastly, I interviewed Dave Berger and Rick Schmidt, both residents of Center, ND; a serendipitously named town that was determined to be the center using a new method developed by Peter Rogerson, a professor of geography at the University of Buffalo. My experience working with each participant was largely pleasant and none of them have given me any reason to believe they regretted their participation. I nonetheless was better able to practice an ethic of reciprocity with some participants rather than others and my failures and successes to do so had a significant impact on the film.

I had a positive relationship with both the residents of Rugby and I believe this is largely because we were able to establish a reciprocal exchange of value which fostered a trusting and mutually beneficial relationship. Anderson argues that reciprocity need not involve a mutual exchange of value, but does not preclude the possibility for such an exchange to promote an equitable relationship between the self and Other (182). Because filmmakers often have access to expensive equipment and the skills required to use such equipment, they are often in a position to offer valuable services in exchange for an individual's participation. Both the individuals I interviewed in Rugby were involved with a local museum and they asked me to use some of my footage to create a short promotional video for them. They also indicated that they hoped the film would be able to promote the museum to some degree. Given that I had no reason to believe this would contradict the narrative of the film or betray the audience's trust—it was truly a very nice museum—I was happy to agree to their requests. Some may bristle at the notion of such exchanges. The code of ethics published by The Society of Professional Journalists, for example, states that journalists should, "be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; do not pay for access to news" (SPJ). It is possible that, by offering small favors in exchange for participation, I was "paying for access to news," and in doing so I risked the credibility of the film. In contrast to journalists, however, I do not represent the interests of an institution that employs me. It is left to me and me alone to determine whether or not I accept such risks. Given that the two participants I interviewed were taking a significant risk by trusting me to present them and their museum in a positive manner, I believe it is only fair that I take on reciprocal risks of my own and it is my opinion that doing so helped them feel safe and comfortable in their participation.

In contrast, Bill Bender, the mayor of Robinson, did not have any interest in an exchange of value, but we had a mutual respect for each other that provided the basis for a

reciprocal relationship. Bender had a reputation for putting up a wall of humor and sarcasm when interacting with the media. When announcing the creation of the "International Center for Determining Centers," for example, he sent out a press release saying that the inauguration of his organization would be celebrated with a "two day festival and a human sacrifice." He initially kept to his sardonic persona during my interview with him, until he told me that he was motivated to perform such stunts in order to keep the few remaining businesses in his town open. Although I had prepared my questions for him to be about the veracity, of his claim to the center, I recognized the importance of what he was telling me and spent the rest of the interview improvising questions about the struggles of keeping his small town alive. That was when Bender began to drop his persona and give me genuine answers to my questions. For Beauvoir, regardless of whether an act of reciprocity involves an exchange of value, it requires a mutual recognition and respect for the freedom of the Other. Bender had already affirmed his respect for my freedom by agreeing to be recorded for my film without trying to exert control over it. I reciprocated by pivoting my interview to better respond to his values and concerns. This, I believe, allowed him to be more honest and vulnerable with me than he had been with other media outlets.

I was less successful at practicing an ethic of reciprocity with the residents of Center, ND. Of the three towns, I felt their claim had the most legitimacy, but was also the least recognized. I wanted them to argue for the scientific validity of their monument, but both participants were reluctant to do so. For them, the story of their center was that of a successful community collaboration. Being "correct" was less important than the way the town's residents worked together to build it. I was so invested in promoting Center as the "true" center that I stubbornly tried to steer the interview back to the scientific methodology that determined their center and how they felt about being the "true" center. In actuality, the scientific merit of their claim probably held very little importance for either of them.

By trying to force the direction of the interview towards my totalizing vision, I treated the participants as objects, rather than subjective selves in their own right. Although this would have been an ethical failure regardless of the result, my line of questioning had a significant impact on the film. The quality of both interviews suffered from the participants' discomfort and they had little interest in continuing their participation beyond their interviews.

# CONCLUSION

The production of both the *Up!* series and *Middle America* demonstrate the contingent and highly fluid nature of reciprocity. Reciprocity is rarely, if ever, established at the outset of a production and maintained throughout. Despite its fragility, Simone de Beauvoir's notion of reciprocity can help documentary filmmakers who seek to create equitable relationships with their participants. Reciprocity requires the continuous affirmation of personhood by both the self and Other. Filmmakers deny this personhood when they engage with participants who do not have a sincere affirmative desire to be filmed, regardless of whether or not they have signed a release. Conversely, they can practice an ethic of responsibility by attentively listening to participants and responding to their values and concerns in the way they conduct their productions. Doing so may limit filmmakers' artistic freedom and require that they take on more risk than they normally would, but it is important to consider that participants also take on significant risks and are rarely given any creative control over the films they appear in. An ethic of reciprocity, in my view, demands that filmmakers share in the risks and limitations faced by participants.

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