

DOCUMENTARY AND THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH

by

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## ABSTRACT

Developed as a genre in the 1920s, documentary film has long been considered a bastion for truth and knowledge. With this assumed integrity, however, came an enduring discourse on the deeper complexities of truth and the authorial power of the documentarian. As poststructuralist theory states it is impossible to recognize a universal truth. While it has long been understood that objectivity in documentary is impossible, I argue that documentary can be used instead to understand people. Comparing *Grey Gardens*, *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, and *Behind the Curve*, I analyze the historical context of each film, as well as the subjective techniques utilized to avow the documentarian's construct framing each documentary experience. I apply similar techniques to my documentary, "Bigfoot and the Citizen Scientist" and further argue that truth is subjective and often murky, and therefore, our documentaries should reflect that.

## INTRODUCTION

Documentary shows a history that is both noble and filled with unrequited idealism: the pursuit of truth. A quest that goes beyond the borders and scope of documentary yet frames the genre so wholly within our own evolution of thought on what it means to be truthful. The proclivity of documentaries to purport a truthful account of reality is a tradition dating back to the beginning of the genre and continues through to today. While Flaherty worked within the expository mode of documentary, documentarians have evolved with the genre and now explore the various truth-seeking methodologies of documentary filmmaking that have sprung up from its inception (Nichols "Documentary Film", 607). In addition to challenging documentary tropes and techniques, filmmakers and critics maintain an ambiguous relationship with camera technology and the ramifications of the filmic image. Yet, the desire to reveal the truth denied or obscured in documentary remains an evergreen pursuit and has taken on various forms as the genre evolves.

One such hunt for truth in story is the evolving display of subjectivity in documentary films. Documentary critic Michael Renov argues that the increased usage of subjectivity and multiple perspectives in documentary is rooted in social movements that pushed against the monolithic voice of nationalist and mainstream propagandas (Renov 176). Utilizing Nichols's dissection of documentary styles, one could ascribe this avowing of the filmmaker's construct to the participatory, performative and reflexive modes (Nichols 582).

However, truth is hardly voiced in any one form of language, and the same should hold for documentary modes. In this way, acknowledging the subjective frame of documentary filmmaking, using an assemblage of techniques, creates only another hopeful attempt at an honest account of a story filmed. For instance, when a documentarian reveals herself in the production, she binds herself to a singular moment of filmmaking, and declares that moment is framed within her subjective understanding. As Henri Cartier-Bresson stated, a “decisive moment - a split second that reveals the larger truth of a situation” (Estrin). In this way, a documentary is presented more as a sliver of a moment, centered around a shared experience between documentarian and subject, rather than a factual account put out on display for a passive audience.

Like our concept of truth, subjectivity continues to take many forms in documentary. In exploring the complexities of articulating a truthful argument in documentary form, I analyze *Grey Gardens* (Maysles 1975), *Behind the Curve* (Clark 2018), and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (Broomfield 2003) and compare them to my thesis film, *Bigfoot and the Citizen Scientist*. The varying degrees of subjective avowal in each documentary reveals and hides the filmed experience shared between the documentarian and the subject. Further, I propose a critical convergence of documentarian and subject exists in each film. In addition, there is a superimposition of truth-seeking found in each documentary. Indeed, these four case studies are more not only ode to the pursuit of truth, as seen in the documentary form itself, but also seen within their stories: the “Edies” restructure their pasts to defend their present existence in *Grey Gardens*; flat earthers rewrite foundational science in *Behind the Curve*; the

factuality of a documentary is on trial in *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*; and in *Bigfoot and the Citizen Scientist*, a housewife and mother discovers herself in the pursuit of a mythical creature. Each story is a reflection of a perception, unprovable outside of that experience. As Poststructuralists would argue, all discourse is constructed from a “set of historically specific, contestable norms” and its authenticity should therefore be challenged (Miller 2). Likewise, documentary lacks ability to fully articulate objective truth. This is the crux of documentary: it is a construct of reality, in itself an amalgam of perceptions, historical context, and subjective understandings. In essence, documentaries, like all discourses, are their own reality, incapable of providing a factual account of events or circumstances as they are constructed from the documentarian’s perception of an experience rendered intangible through time yet locked in history.

## THE WORRISOME POWER OF THE DOCUMENTARIAN

The power of the documentarian to wield filmic images for rhetorical ends is both exalted and condemned. The ethical quandary that comes with this power has likewise elicited a flurry of debates that appear to be eternal. From the cinema revolution of the Soviet Union, we see Dziga Vertov, a radical filmmaker, challenge filmmakers and viewers to both recognize and reject the capitalist and bourgeois interests polluting the purity of the camera lens:

WE are cleansing kinoscreens of foreign matter-of music, literature, and theater; we seek our own rhythm, one lifted from nowhere else, and we find it in the movements of things. WE invite you...to flee out into the open, into four dimensions (three +time), in search of our own material, our meter and rhythm. The “psychological” prevents man from being as precise as a stopwatch; it interferes with his desire for kinship with the machine. In an art of movement we have no reason to devote our particular attention to contemporary man. The machine makes us ashamed of man’s inability to control himself, but what are we to do if electricity’s unerring ways are more exciting to us than the disorderly haste of active men and the corrupting inertia of passive ones? (Vertov 6-7)

His argument that the “synthesis” between man and the camera should occur during the film’s reception rather than during its production highlights the problematic faith filmmakers reserve for the camera. Above, Vertov ticks off tropes of dominant film of his era, (music, psychological dramas rather than real-life dramas) to distinguish dominant ideological expression from the film form itself. Most importantly, Vertov offers a solution to this filmic corruption by simply avoiding the stories and storytelling techniques of the bourgeois. Here, we witness a filmmaker unwilling or unable to uphold



that critical awareness of the malleability of the camera's eye when considering the authenticity of his own work.

During the same era as Vertov, we see John Grierson in Britain, similarly cautioning against the impurity of subjective statements in documentary. Grierson understood the plasticity of film and famously stated, "Documentary, or the creative treatment of actuality, is a new art with no such background in the story and the stage as the studio product so glibly possesses" (Kerrigan 112). Often considered the father of early documentary, Grierson was a patron of state propaganda, and discouraged the avant-garde fragmentation in documentary of which Vertov was so fond. Though employing different perspectives in their films (Vertov favored the perspective of the working class, Grierson preferred that of the state), both filmmakers attested documentary should use alternatives such as montage theory over fictional narrative story structure. As Bill Nichols points out,

The emergence of a documentary film practice in the 1920s and 1930s drew together various elements of photographic realism, narrative, modernism, and rhetoric at a historical moment when the technology of cinema and the techniques of persuasion could serve the needs of the modern nation-state. In Grierson's hands this involved an act of separation between the self-indulgent avant-garde of modernist expression and a down-to-earth documentary movement of realist persuasion. This separation proved, in fact, partial, if not mythic, however much film histories have perpetuated it. (Nichols "Documentary Film", 608)

Grierson attempted to repress this form of "self-indulgent" expression as it did not serve the state but rather undermined the state and its claim to reflect the sentiment and well-being of the people. To Grierson, reveling in the documentarian's power over the

photographic image undermined the genre's potential to serve the people. It can be argued that Grierson understood it was his version of the truth that was the message; and that, the message was one to be controlled- for the sake of the state, and therefore supposedly for the good of the people.

Half a century later, the documentary genre experienced an awakening in tandem with the cultural and civil revolutions that started in the 1960s and 1970s. The epistemic voice of the state could no longer feign sovereignty over diverse nations such as the United States. As Renov states, "The cultural climate of this period [1970s-1990s], at least in the West, has been characterized by the displacement of the politics of social movements (e.g., antiwar, civil rights, the student movement) by the politics of identity...[that is] the clarion call to unified and collective action came to be drowned out by the murmur of human differences" (Renov "Documentary Disavowals", 177). This new call to acknowledge the facade of objectivity and omniscience purported in mainstream documentary reflected a wider awakening of that era, an awakening that allowed for truth in subjectivity. Stated another way, filmmakers sought truth in personal experience.

Extracting the truth from documentary is a historical conundrum and is perhaps a microcosm of the more general distrust we have in one another. We continue to reflect on and challenge dominant voices dispersing general knowledge, both to the betterment and detriment of society. In the realm of documentary, documentarians and critics continue to explore the ramifications of the subjective voice imbuing the filmic image. Strangely, though, often found within this discourse is the enduring belief in the purity of the

camera. Nichols expresses the rudimentary emotional reasoning behind our belief, or our desire to believe, in the authenticity of documentary:

The documentary tradition relies heavily on being able to convey an impression of authenticity. It is a powerful impression, made possible by some basic qualities of moving images in any medium. It begins with the appearance of movement: no matter how poor the image and how different from the thing photographed... When that movement is the movement of social actors (people) not performing for the camera and not playing a role in fiction film, it appears to attest to the authenticity of the film. Coupled with more specific documentary conventions—such as voice-over commentary, location shooting, the use of nonactors engaged in their daily lives as people, and the exploration of social issues like global warming or social justice [most notably associated with the expository mode]—the sense of an authentic representation of the world we share can be powerful indeed. (Nichols “Introduction to Documentary”, 11)

Believing in one’s own ability to not only recognize but also disseminate authentic information has an undeniable appeal. While Vertov deciphered the bourgeois constructs manipulating filmic depictions of reality, Grierson attempted to shield viewers from these constructs to guide them down a more steadfast nationalist path. In both of these sentiments, however, is a commitment to the real. Nichols explains this confidence is engendered in us through the reflective quality of the moving image. To Nichols, viewers are conditioned to believe the truth of the filmic image if presented in an “authentic” documentary fashion. In fact, Nichols attests this manipulation of authenticity requires very little effort, as even the simple “movement” of an image invokes a sense of reality. In other words, it is the very structure of an audiovisual story, regardless of what thematic or rhetorical function it serves, that manipulates the audience. Therefore, one

could argue that Vertov, while forward-thinking for his time, maintained the dogmatic belief in the message of the medium... as long as it was his (the people's) message. Conversely, Nichols clinically dissects the myriad techniques a documentarian can employ on her visually susceptible audience, conclusively demonstrating the elementary construct of the medium's rhetorical power as well as the false promise of the mechanical distance of the film camera.

Awareness of the malleability of the filmic image has existed since the inception of film itself. The main arguments, however, are that the documentary process itself is responsible for manipulating the image of reality, fragmenting it, removing images from context, and then imprinting them with ideological arguments and persuasions. I would argue that it is not solely through the creative manipulation of the filmic image that reality is lost. Even with the use of the "controlled" machine that is the film camera, the capturing of a true reality was never possible as we are not capable of removing ourselves from any situation. The camera is merely an extension of the filmmaker. With camera in hand, the filmmaker creates a subjective space with her films and then present that space to an audience that was not there.

## SUBJECTIVITY SHIFTS IN DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

Sovereignty was often entrusted solely to the divine and powerful. As society evolved, the concept of authority took on a more democratic posture. This journey toward accepting our own agency in dispersing truth reverberates through the documentary genre. Foregoing concepts of homogeneity in society, our view on subjectivity transformed and the result was a splintering of authorship. In *Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, William Raymond defines a traditional understanding of subjectivity:

Subjective as based on impressions rather than facts, and hence as influenced by personal feelings and relatively unreliable...In judgments and reports we are positively required to be *objective*: looking only at the facts, setting aside personal preference or interest. In this context a sense of something shameful, or at least weak, attaches to subjective, although everyone will admit that there are subjective factors, which have usually to be put in their place. (Raymond 24)

Historically, deference was paid to facts and objective reporting. While this respect for fact-based reporting should not subside in favor of opinion and speculation, factual accounts, as a single-minded pursuit, can lend themselves to absolutist notions of truth. This form of purism is appropriate for traditional forms of journalism and hopefully will remain a mainstay in news and investigative pieces. In regard to documentary, though, applying such a fundamentalist disavowal of subjectivity as something “shameful” or “weak” results in a more reductive approach to a medium inherently liminal and abstract.

It is worth considering further the substantive evolution of thought on subjectivity in conjunction with historical shifts in cultural and political perspectives. According to Renov, “By 1990...subjectivity is no longer construed as ‘something shameful’; it is the filter through which the real enters discourse, as well as a kind of experiential compass guiding the work toward its goal as embodied knowledge” (Renov “New Subjectivities”, 176). As we can see in the case studies below, the time period of each film lends a historical context to the level of subjectivity invoked.

The tumult of the post-Watergate era of the 1970s saw loss of faith in the state, demographic shifts in cities and suburbs, advances for equal rights for women, and the financial decay of a stagnating economy. It can be argued that truth in one’s own experiences took on significant meaning in this era. The Maysles brothers’ *Grey Gardens* articulates the fragmenting of a society once taken for granted. The Maysles chiefly utilize the observational mode of documentary, with moments of reflexivity, to reveal the figurative and literal rot of high society in the Hamptons. The reflexive mode, as Nichol’s describes it, “calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking. This mode increases our awareness of the constructedness of the film’s representation of reality” (Nichols *Introduction to Documentary*, 22). The more poignant moments in *Grey Gardens* assume reflexive techniques when the Maysles show themselves on camera interacting with the Beales. Yet, the brothers predominately operate under the unobtrusive auspice of observational documentary, a style that seems to insist an authorial - and arguably elevated - detachment.

The 1970s saw a flurry of direct cinema documentaries, in part due to improved camera technology that allowed for increased mobility (Nichols *Introduction to Documentary*, 31). As time progressed, observational documentary became yet another mode for documentarians to explore and critique. As Renov states, the observational mode allowed for the notion of scientific inquest, or the idea that documentarians could remove themselves from the documentary experience and therefore reveal a less obscured truth (Renov “New Subjectivities”, 176). This new hope dissipated as the decade wore on and discourse on documentary construct left little room for belief in objectivity in the genre.

The vacillation of faith in the filmic image provides a literal discourse in the 2003 documentary, *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*. This documentary chronicles Nick Broomfield’s experience being called upon by the United States court system to attest to the factuality of his 1993 documentary, *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer*. Broomfield and the audience revisit the first documentary as he is questioned about editing techniques, visits with the social actors of the first documentary, and poignantly reconnects with Aileen, a woman suffering severe mental deterioration accelerated by life on death row. The trial in which Broomfield is called to testify, occurs almost 10 years after the release of his first documentary. In the early 1990s, as Broomfield filmed the unfolding of Wuornos’ first trial, the historical backdrop included Anita Hill calling upon Congress to reject her sexual offender Clarence Thomas, tough on crime rhetoric resulting in mass incarceration and the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, as well as a lack of civil rights for the gay community. In that

time period, *Selling of a Serial Killer* attempted an unabashed look at the merciless society and legal system that both raised and ultimately killed “the first female serial killer” and lesbian, Aileen Wuornos. In the ensuing documentary, *Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, several scenes of reflexivity provide communal moments of reflection as we witness what has, and has not, changed in our society and legal system.

Lastly, *Behind the Curve*, the most recently produced documentary in this selection of case studies, does not ascribe to any particular mode of documentary. Rather, it seems to have an unfettered use of documentary techniques. Released on Netflix in 2018, *Behind the Curve* greeted a nation once again in political and social ferment as distrust in the state bloomed and fringe anti-intellectualism conspiracies found their way into mainstream discourse. Documentarian Daniel J. Clark attempts to shed light on one such conspiracy, that of the flat earth movement. Clark, a documentarian concerned with the growing divide between the scientific community and anti-enlightenment groups such as flat earthers (Gilman), creates a visual story that in many ways exemplifies the separation between the two groups. In the same vein as the Maysles in *Grey Gardens*, Clark adopts an elevated presence by filming flat earthers primarily in an observational mode. Clark maintains a distance with his main subject, prominent flat earther Mark Sargent, as he follows Mark through the machinations of this online crusade to prove the earth is flat. This method results in viewers distancing themselves from the flat earthers as they reveal to us their strange universe. Conversely, when Clark films scientists, he uses the participatory convention of an interview, implying that the scientific community is the one with whom to engage. In an unfortunate move, the empathy and connection the



scientists called for in the documentary failed to articulate itself in the framing of the documentary experience.

Our relationship with documentary reflects our more tenuous interconnection between ourselves and the other. As seen in *Grey Gardens* and *Behind the Curve* historical moments of disharmony and social angst promote alienation. While both documentaries show shared moments between the documentarian and his subjects, a clear divide is maintained in each film. Some argue this is to create a greater sense of objectivity and scientific study. With the understanding that subjectivity is relentless and forever present, however, a greater argument can be made that this separation reflects a societal break between disparate parties. Broomfield, on the other hand, openly engages with his subjects and shares his experiences and contrivances of the documentary production with his audience. Each of these films is rich in historical context and sheds light on the fluidity of the subjective construct in documentary. More importantly, however, is how each film reveals to us the complex nature of communicating greater understanding.

## ACCEPTING OURSELVES: SHARED MOMENTS IN DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

A notable moment occurs roughly 30 minutes into *Grey Gardens*. Little Edie, sprawled on the deck, howls all she forsook in her life in order to care for her mother. In this moment, Big Edie slumps in her rocker and challenges her daughter's current perspective on past choices, countering with, "Everything is good that you didn't do. At the time you didn't want it. That's the choice! Everyone thinks and feels differently as the years go by." Little Edie begrudgingly agrees as Big Edie directly addresses the Maysles with "What time is it, chickens?" We hear one of the Maysles reply, "It's one thirty." Big Edie, as she attempts to stand, requests, "I want a hand," a Maysles steps into frame, arm extended, "You have it." As he helps her stand, she asks, "Are you taking pictures?" He succinctly replies, "Always." In this scene the Maysles allow the viewers to be witnesses to the impartiality conceit of observational documentary. It cannot be dismissed that the reflexive scene they chose to show was one in which Little Edie laments an atrophied life, while her mother, the embodiment of an era gone, cannot stand without the aid of those who study her.

*Grey Gardens* does not fit precisely into any of Nichol's modes; rather, it reflects a time of flux in society when ideas of social classes, even the purity of leadership, were in question. One can surmise this moment between the Beales and the Maysles as one of symbiosis. It may not have been a true account of the full documentary experience between these two groups, especially when considering the flattering representation of the Maysles shown in an act of kindness, but it did reveal a group of people, however disparate, in a moment of human connection.

Similarly, as Broomfield attests in an interview for *The Guardian*, “‘You’re embedding, and you’re making very intense relationships, which is kind of wonderful,’ says Broomfield now. ‘It’s an incredible privilege and education, and it’s also very exact, the science, or whatever, of getting on with people so that they want to reveal themselves to you, so they feel they trust you’” (Williams). Here Broomfield maintains he keeps a distance between himself and his subject, yet later reveals that witnessing the execution of Wuornos was devastating and resulted in months of nightmares (Williams). It is curious though that both the Maysles and Broomfield maintain a belief their documentary technique has a scientific nature. As Renov points out, many of the prominent direct cinema documentarians were trained in the sciences, including the Maysles, who were both psychologists. With this in mind, practitioners of this tended to be “under the influence of the natural sciences in their early pronouncements of an ethic of nonintervention, even artistic selflessness” (“New Subjectivities”, 174). Despite this apparent appreciation for scientific methodology, both *Grey Gardens* and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* provide striking moments of connection between the documentarian and the subject. This desire to contend there is scientific discipline in their work shows a continued predilection for documentarians to be viewed as objective.

It can be argued that the more we seek out objectivity, the more we suffer. Objectivity requires a removal of self. Raymond describes the general understanding of subjectivity as something shameful and akin to fiction, as though considering ourselves in relation to reality is not only indulgent and without consequence, but a step away from the true. Yet, when we consider thought outside of documentary criticism, we find

broader reflections on our relation to the real. Watsuji Tetsurō, a 20th century Japanese philosopher who combined ethics with philosophy into the focus of his studies, states the inextricable connection between human and environment in his seminal work, *A Climate:*

*A Philosophical Study:*

My purpose in this study is to clarify the function of climate as a factor within the structure of human existence. So my problem is not that of the ordering of man's life by his natural environment. Natural environment is usually understood as an objective extension of 'human climate' regarded as a concrete basis. But when we come to consider the relationship between this and human life, the latter is already objectified, with the result that we find ourselves examining the relation between object and object, and there is no link with subjective human existence. It is the latter that is my concern here, for it is essential to my position that the phenomena of climate are treated as expressions of subjective human existence and not of natural environment. (Tetsuro v)

We have a common assumption that we see the world (or "climate") around us in an objective/concrete way. However, Tetsurō suggests that we understand reality through a relationship between ourselves and the environment, and not by way of an objective study. Similarly in documentary, early assumptions stated the genre provided an objective truth (if only filmmakers would let it), implying an objective, scientific study of a subject was possible. Now, we have a generally disheartened understanding that subjectivity and bias remain within the framing of all documentaries. Perhaps, though, if we look at a documentary film as its own world - its own climate as Tetsurō would say - even further removed from the natural world by its solely being designed by humans, we can find a truth provided to us as viewers. If we view documentary as a subjective

rendition of a shared moment, we can find personal truths in an experience that we as viewers will only know through the documentarian's eyes.

In *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, we are given a profound moment of reflexivity. Roughly 15 minutes into the film, Broomfield takes the stand in a modest courtroom in Florida. Under oath, Broomfield is asked to explain the editing process in regard to the "seven joint ride" scene from Broomfield's first documentary on Wuornos. Broomfield rubs his jaw as the questioning unfolds. Prosecutor: "Isn't it true that in doing your work you routinely edit things?" Broomfield: "Yes. You always edit after." Prosecutor: "Editing involves cutting, pasting and putting things together?" Broomfield: "Yes." Prosecutor: "And that's what you do all the time?" Broomfield: "Well, yes but I don't know about the pasting." Prosecutor: "Pasting in terms of inserting and connecting and making things fit together." Broomfield: "Correct."

The prosecutor then plays a scene from Broomfield's documentary in which we hear Broomfield's voice-over reveal he is filming Wuornos's lawyer on a "seven joint drive" to the prison to give Wuornos legal advice. This scene was apparently convincing enough for a judge to agree to a second hearing. However, with the film now admitted as evidence, the construct of the scene was questioned. The prosecutor freezes the video on a frame where we can clearly see that Aileen's lawyer's shirt has changed from the beginning of the car ride. When questioned about this discontinuity, Broomfield struggles to explain it, saying "Maybe he changed his shirt." The prosecutor immediately challenges, "Well isn't it possible you just cut and paste and took footage from one episode and cut and pasted into footage from another episode to make it look like

something that hadn't in fact actually happened?" Broomfield: "Uh I remember distinctly the seven joint ride. I don't remember him changing his shirt." The scene ends with Broomfield offering the uncut footage of the car ride, but the prosecutor, having made his point, dismisses the offer.

This scene examines the factuality of the documentary process. How many documentaries, if submitted as evidence in a court of law in their edited, sound mixed and color graded form, could be argued as factually accurate? Arguably very few. Yet, Broomfield does not appear to be disingenuous when he defends his memory of the seven joint car ride. Perhaps instead, he did not have the visual evidence to show that moment, so he cut together two moments to prove the existence of a moment he knew to be true. If Broomfield did in fact do this, he exemplified Tetsurō's belief that humans are incapable of interacting with, and even simply perceiving, their environment in an objective way. Rather, we interpret reality through our subjective experience, forming it to our understanding.

Documentary is an experience shared between the documentarian(s) and her/their subject(s), and later, the documentary and its audience. In my documentary, *Bigfoot and the Citizen Scientist*, I adopt an approach that mixes observational and participatory with sparse moments of reflexivity to profile Bigfoot field researcher, Shelly Covington Montana. The objective for this documentary was to elicit empathy and understanding for a woman involved in a community often maligned by larger society. With said motive in mind, there was little pretense that I would commit to an objective stance on Shelly. Rather, I understood that she was a conservative Texan with a high school education,

who despite her devotion to the scientific method in her field research, believes in Bigfoot, but does not believe in climate change. In order to have her strength and intellectual curiosity not be disregarded because of her cultural background, I opted to not show her within the context of her larger world. I understood that she was a person with whom liberal intellectuals could more easily engage if her political views were hidden away.

In order to depict Shelly in a non-polarizing, engaging fashion, I constructed a film based on my personal experiences with her, rather than including a broader - or more factually accurate - view of her world. For instance, after I had finished filming with her in the forests of Washington, I met her in her home in Texas and filmed her speak at a Bigfoot conference in a small town in northern Texas. My experience of the culture at the conference was disturbing: neo-conservative, conspiratorial, anti-science, xenophobic, and racist. This moment challenged my experience and perception of Shelly, but ultimately, I left that out of the documentary, and focused on my earlier experience of her in the woods. In this way I created a “subjective rendition” of a person, unattached to a broader reality; to me, it felt like a truer expression of the Shelly I had grown to know.

Within the opening scenes of *Bigfoot and the Citizen Scientist*, I endeavored to reveal the reciprocal relationship that developed between Shelly and me. For example, Shelly is first shown atop her ATV in the bed of her pickup truck. Over the course of a minute, she is trying to start the ATV and back it off the truck. This was a somewhat staged shot. While it was necessary to remove the ATV from her truck, we both agreed it would “look cool” to film so she waited until I framed my shot and was ready for her to

back out. Much to her chagrin, her ATV did not start immediately, and she calls out, “Sorry, Ariel!” to apologize to me for the delay. On a filmmaking note, I loved the situation as I felt it both made her struggle immediately tangible and endearing and also informed the viewer of our relationship as she apologizes to me in the shot. Roughly a minute later, the viewer gets their first close up of Shelly. At this moment Shelly sits up front with her friend and fellow Bigfooter, Rebekah. I sit in the back filming. As she prepares for the drive, she sings along to a Bigfoot themed rap song, then asks, “Do you guys need to charge anything?” I reply, “I’m good” while Rebekah says “Yes” and plugs in her phone. This provides another moment for Shelly’s kindness and reciprocity to be shown. It also builds the relationship between Shelly and me. Ultimately, I utilized certain moments like these in my film to create a feeling of relatability and shared experience, while also acknowledging my presence in crafting the story.

In addition to moments of reflexivity, I also employed participatory techniques to provide the audience with a more direct connection with Shelley. Nichols defines the participatory mode as emphasizing “the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms of even more direct involvement, such as conversations or provocations” (Nichols “Introduction to Documentary”, 22). Throughout my documentary, Shelly directly addresses the camera, often prompted by questions from me. A moment in the film that exemplifies this occurs when she is displaying her DNA collection kit. The scene starts with Shelly describing DNA left behind by a bear on a “whammy tree” which leads to her announcement, “So we’re going to collect it and practice our wildlife DNA collection and hair analysis.” Off-



camera I ask, “With your DNA kit?” She nods, “With my DNA kit, yeah.” She then provides a step-by-step tutorial for collecting DNA. It speaks to Shelly’s character that the field DNA kit is her creation. In fact, it is a notable achievement she is well-known for within the Bigfoot community. While neither Shelly nor I delved into the community reaction to her creation, I wanted to provide not only a moment for Shelly to explain her kit, but I also wanted to ensure the audience knew this was a skill she not only developed herself, but also shared with other Bigfooters. A crucial technique for portraying Shelly was allowing Shelly to speak for herself, rather than solely observing her and her way of life from a safe distance. In this way, I hoped to encourage the viewers to engage with Shelly more fully.

Conversely, *Behind the Curve*, a documentary that also dealt with a fringe community, opted to structure the film as if to cement the divide between the flat earthers and mainstream and scientific societies. The agenda of the documentary is established early. The film opens with Mark Sargent explaining the widely accepted knowledge that earth is a planet rotating around the sun and is part of a solar system. While he speaks, we see graphics that match his statement. The film then cuts back to Mark who says, “In reality, you are in a giant planetarium slash terrarium slash sound stage slash Hollywood lot that is so big that you and everyone you know, everyone you’ve ever known, have never figured it out.” We immediately see NASA footage with an astronaut saying, “The curvature of the earth is immediately visible.” A catchy montage of news and late-night anchors reacting in disbelief to the flat earth movement immediately ensues. Clark, throughout the documentary, shows moments of the flat earthers making radical claims

about the earth, then immediately shifts to either pop culture moments of comedians making fun of them or scientists explaining the bleak existence of people who would turn to this anti-science movement. Ironically, it is the scientists who make the most empathetic statements regarding flat earthers and call upon society and the scientific community in particular, to not abandon these people. As a psychiatrist points out, “All of us have that tendency to want to connect to people around things that make us unique. One thing we know is that human beings feel very threatened when we feel that identity being taken away.” Clark immediately cuts to Mark who, in regard to the flat earther community, explains “For the first time they are not different and no longer alone.” To the detriment of the documentary, Clark does not appear to take into consideration the advice of the scientific community, but rather seems to take exaggerated lengths to separate himself from this community. In this way, he foregoes any truthful sentiment that could be gained by engaging more directly with his flat earther subjects. With this, it proves unsurprising that Mark Sargent, and the flat earther movement in general, grew exponentially after the release of *Behind the Curve* (Gilman).

Documented moments that engage in the shared experience of filming a documentary provide a space to ponder the relationship between the documentarian and the subject, to even wonder what it might have been like to be in that moment with them. While any answers we come up with can only be conjecture, those questions nevertheless remind us that we are not watching a singularly objective experience. Rather, we are consuming a framed abstraction of a moment that likely has several variations of existence, which in turn, is how we all often view reality and obtain knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

“Let’s encourage each other to get as close to the truth as we can.”

- Duncan Trussel, *The Midnight Gospel*

The critique on the viability of documentary as an agent of truth is merely a tangent of our larger desire to know what is real. With the film camera came a technology that promised a new mode of expression that we eventually scrutinized with suspicion and discontent. While photographic technology has advanced, our often absolutist beliefs in this machine continue to engage with our own ideological concepts of reality, dogmatism and representation. The very fact that we can’t seem to have a collective view of the camera shows our complex relationship with it, and with reality in general.

Similarly, we cannot seem to trust our own eyes, or even the words of others, especially when words and views only reveal the plasticity of knowledge and the subjectivity of space and time. This struggle between our personal experience in relation to a broader reality is seen in each of these documentaries. In *Grey Gardens* the Beales are fixated on moments of the past, unproved in the film. As their once-grand mansion decays for all to see, the Beales relentlessly recite famed personages with whom they once socialized and display to the camera portraits of their younger, more glamorous selves. It is a reality we can only see through their eyes. Similarly Nick Broomfield attempts to prove the veracity of his statement in *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer*, but when his film’s factual accuracy is questioned, Broomfield is unable to prove an experience he knew to be true. The flat earthers in *Behind the Curve* most poignantly

show how easy it can be to get lost in the age of enlightenment in which nature has no deeper meaning, organisms perform like a machine and “science” rules over man as much as it does over an ant. In this version of reality, flat earthers appear to reject that understanding of the universe in favor of a grander interpretation of human existence. While Shelly, in *Bigfoot and the Citizen Scientist*, picks up the tools of science - the tools of truth - to prove her experience in the world is valid and true.

We will never be a pure observer, removed from the environment that is around us. Regardless of our inability to do so, seeking out a singular truth is a small goal, limiting in its results. As a species we are entangled with a variety of subjective realities, we are entangled with each other, and with our own dogmatic and esoteric beliefs. We are both separate and unified, a paradox documentarians have struggled with since the creation of the camera. When people can have such diverse experiences in shared moments, let alone life in general, it can only be honest to say documentary is constrained by the same unreliable narration we tell ourselves as we walk through each day. Yet, we have unique moments of beauty and epiphany, and just because we may never be able to fully articulate absolute truth, or remember with total clarity an experience, it does not mean we cannot find an honest moment in those spaces we once shared.

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