

MESSAGING BETWEEN THE LINES: A CASE FOR MULTIPLE,
RESPECTFULLY-HANDLED PERSPECTIVES
IN THE ESSAY FILM

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
The Essay Film and Messaging	1
2. MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES.....	7
Case Study in Multiple Perspectives: <i>Fast, Cheap & Out of Control</i>	7
Case Study in Multiple Perspectives: <i>The Gleaners and I</i>	12
3. SUBJECT TREATMENT	15
Case Study in Subject Treatment: <i>Fast, Cheap & Out of Control</i>	15
Case Study in Subject Treatment: <i>The Gleaners and I</i>	20
4. CONCLUSION.....	24
Effectiveness of Multiple, Respectfully-handled Perspectives.....	24
REFERENCES CITED.....	26

ABSTRACT

In the non-fiction film, and particularly the essay film, directors sometimes use multiple story lines, or perspectives, to approach an argument from several different angles. Out of this synthesis, a separate overarching thesis emerges which, I argue, is an effective method of conveying the filmmaker's voice. However, it is not only the use of these multiple perspectives that contributes to a greater meaning between the lines, it is also the filmmaker's treatment of the subjects that provide those accounts and viewpoints. This paper examines several case studies of essay films to investigate the efficacy of multiple perspectives and the subject treatment thereof in communicating the film's thesis. I find that, provided the subjects are treated with respect and given space to tell their own stories, the use of multiple voices can make a film's statement much more powerful than by using the filmmaker's voice alone.

INTRODUCTION

Essays have long been powerful social and political tools, rallying cries for change or providing commentary on controversial aspects of society. Words inform and inspire, but the addition of images yields an even greater potential to move and impact. Thus, essay films, in their employment of both, can play to whichever strength will be more effective at any given moment, making the overall position, compared to a traditional literary essay, that much more convincing. Perhaps an essay that is “written” with emotion and narrative is a more pure use of the essay as a tool to convey “a personal point of view as a public experience” (Corrigan, 13). Using varied perspectives and treating one’s subjects respectfully further maximizes the potential of essay films as message carriers. In something like mob-mentality or the concept of emergence, people tend to have more faith in a position or argument if multiple people present it; essentially, each subject serves as each other’s validation, or at least a source of balance, by giving a broader context to the viewer.

The Essay Film and Messaging

In a discussion of effective messaging in essay films, it is valuable to outline quickly what an essay film is, or at least what I am referring to with the term. Though the essay film is an emerging genre, or at least a genre that has only recently and retroactively usurped many films that have previously escaped traditional categorizing, there are some clear standards for classification as such. Several film theorists have defined the essay film and examined the genre’s role in public discourse. For the sake of

arguments made in this paper, I will assume these theorists' conventions of categorizing essay films as described below.

As referenced by Nora Alder, Hans Richter's 1940 paper, "The Film Essay: A New Form of Documentary Film," describes perhaps the most important distinction of the essay film: making a conceptual exploration tangible.

[Richter] theorizes, even if only in rudimentary form, a new genre of film that would enable the filmmaker to make 'problems, thoughts, even ideas' perceptible – a type of filmmaking that would 'render visible what is not visible' (Richter, 197). Richter dubbed the result 'essay,' since it 'deals with difficult themes in generally comprehensible form.' Unlike the genre of documentary film, which presents facts and information, the essay film is an in-between genre that, insofar as it is not grounded in *reality* but can be contradictory, irrational, playful and fantastic, is thus well suited to develop complex thought (Alder, 50).

Timothy Corrigan, in turn, uses Aldous Huxley's explanation of the written essay to derive his essay film definition. Huxley states, "essays ... can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference," those poles being: 1. personal and autobiographical, 2. objective and factual, and 3. abstract-universal, with the most effective being those that combine approaches (Corrigan, 14). For example, Corrigan's interpretation of essay films as editorials is that they "offer or demand ways of understanding and, more important, ways of personally and publicly reacting to the news of daily life" (154). Corrigan continues, "editorial essay films unveil and analyze not only the realities and facts that are documented but also the subjective agencies ... of those realities and facts" (155). Philip Lopate, a critic of both the written and filmic essay, further narrows the scope by insisting that essay films must bring the audience on a journey with the filmmaker. "An essay is a continual asking of questions—not

necessarily finding 'solutions,' but enacting the struggle for truth in full view” (Lopate, 19). In Tom Ryan’s 2001 interview with Errol Morris, Morris talks about his work as, essentially, Lopate’s definition of essay film:

The Thin Blue Line is a classic example of that sort of thing, where the final movie bears absolutely no resemblance to what I’ve started out to do. And I haven’t ever looked at that as a bad thing. I think it’s good, because it means there’s an investigative element in everything that I do. There’s a process of discovery or uncovering of material.

He continues,

I like there to be some underlying context, some set of issues or problems that is expressed in the material, that goes beyond the material itself. I like to take stories that other people might disregard or ignore and find surprising, unexpected depths in them.

The last common theme cited in examinations of essay films is the avoidance of strict fact, or reliance on subjective observations. Werner Herzog is notorious for pushing the boundaries of what he calls “the ecstatic truth” in his documentaries as he searches for a greater overarching truth that he sees as more true than fact-based reality. Herzog’s “ecstatic truth” is precisely this between-the-lines thesis statement at which the filmmaker arrives through the process of creating an essay film. I have chosen two case studies upon which to focus my examination, Agnès Varda’s *The Gleaners and I* (2000), and Errol Morris’ *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (1997). Both of these films use an essayistic topical investigation as their primary structure with multiple subjects providing the examples. Although reactions to these non-traditional narrative films ran the gamut, on the whole they were both very well received and thus, good models of how this approach can yield successful films.

Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* is a filmmaker's personal journey to understand the topic of gleaning—or making use of society's waste—and her role in that system, both as a filmmaker and as an aging woman. The film can be read as an investigation of “the excess we produce and our inability or structural refusal to get it to the people who may need it. Whereas pre-capitalist society suffers from scarcity, capitalism creates crises of over production, in which hunger is no longer a product of lack of resources but of surplus. And thus hunger is the effect of structural deprivation” (Neroni, 181). Lomillos goes on to explain, “in Varda's case the social documentary is intertwined with autobiographical forms such as self-portrait, travelogue, diary and notebook” (54), which is, essentially, an accurate summary of Lopate's essay film. He continues, “the film is neither an orthodox documentary nor an integral self-portrait but an amalgamation of both. *The Gleaners and I* is a poetic and personal essay that enlarges subjectivity and authorship in documentary film made in the digital era” (Lomillos, 28). It is Varda's personal exploration of this theme that provides the structure and organization of the film (Lomillos, 32).

With these assumptions about essay films in mind, this paper will discuss how, instead of using one primary story line, multiple perspectives yield a stronger thesis statement. An effective essay film reveals such a statement via juxtaposition—in the spaces between the clear individual narratives. Errol Morris does this extremely well in *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, a film that uses four clearly distinct stories of four men and the quirky manner in which they each seek understanding of the human condition. Morris' voice doesn't actually enter the film (save a couple of brief questions in the

background of his patented, eye-contact-achieving Interrotron interviews), but his thought process seemingly oozes out the cracks in between the four stories as they twist and maneuver their way around each other throughout the film. The b-roll (supplemental imagery shown on top of interview audio) and juxtaposition of footage is Morris' editorial, weaving together the topics of his subjects into one loosely cohesive exploration of humanity's apparent need for control (Jaehne, 46). Similarly, Agnès Varda uses multiple subjects, but their stories drive her own sinuous narrative, such that she maintains a presence in the film as guide. However, she never wholly reveals her overarching commentary from within her on-screen character. Instead, this messaging comes out through the way in which she assembles her subjects' stories. Thus, she essentially has two personas in the film—Varda, as she is on a quest to understand gleanings, and Varda as a filmmaker, reflecting on her own quest as she puts the pieces together, trying to understand the same concept but from a more omniscient and reflective viewing space.

In deepening the exploration of how best to use multiple stories, I also examine the way in which filmmakers treat their interview subjects. If a filmmaker shows little respect for his or her characters, as an audience member, I partially discredit their position, whether consciously or subconsciously. That is not to say that the filmmaker can not wholeheartedly disagree with any his or her subjects, but that there must be some recognition of each subject as a human being, with a unique perspective, that is worthy of decency in his or her treatment. Morris often receives critical scrutiny in this regard, but I maintain that, if anything, he tends toward the other direction of admiring his subjects,

or at least having compassion for their humanity. Varda seems to have great admiration for her subjects in *The Gleaners and I*, but unlike Morris, her interactions with them on camera make this apparent. She has the benefit of being one of the subjects herself, not only documenting others and their views of gleaning, but making it abundantly clear that she considers herself a gleaner as well. I will further discuss the directorial choices of each filmmaker and how this handling results in a respectful portrayal of the subjects. These choices, in turn, yield a more convincing essay on the part of the filmmaker.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Much like this essay, using multiple examples serves to universalize an argument rather than looking at one film as a stand-alone work. To make any sort of fair generalization, one must refer to multiple cases.

William Faulkner famously illustrated with his 1930 novel, *As I Lay Dying*, that multiple perspectives show there are many equally-valid truths. However, the work also showed that there is a greater or alternate truth as well that only the omniscient reader (or viewer), privy to each of the character's truths, as well as the benefit of temporal distance, is capable of synthesizing. Using the films *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (1997) and *The Gleaners and I* as case studies, I will explore how having multiple perspectives effects the thesis of each film-essay.

Case Study in Multiple Perspectives: *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*

Errol Morris' *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* uses four subjects with distinct stories to explore the human desire to understand ourselves through the creation or control of an "other." The film does not have one, or even four linear stories, but rather bounces amongst the four characters and their passions to paint a larger picture of the common theme that each seek to understand. According to film scholar David Resha, the film employs an "associational structure [and] an open voice...that challenges the audience to make meaningful connections between the people and ideas in the film" (225-6). Indeed, as one views the film, there is almost a running commentary between the lines, arising from Morris' editorial juxtapositions, which leads the viewer to draw

parallels and conclusions of his or her own. There is no obvious structure inherent in Morris' chosen subjects—like being from the same town or connected to the same event—as in many of his previous films (Resha, 227-8). The structure is derived, instead, from the edit, and thus gives insight into Morris' exploratory process and conclusions.

To set up the structure of the film from the outset, Morris opens with a compilation of bits from all the stories and related archival footage. This technique ensures that the viewer has some familiarity with each character, and sets up the expectation that the film will return to each subject and further explore their viewpoint. As the movie goes on, the stories differentiate less and less, almost to the point of becoming one narrative told by all four men and illustrated by their stories, collectively. Using the narrative about death and legacy as an example, each man is on a similar search for understanding, so Morris can intercut the voice-overs of one subject with the footage from another's story. The visuals from one segment almost illustrate better some of the other subjects' points because the words are able to take on a universal quality, rather than a literal one. "Although the audience may expect the subsequent images to mirror or illustrate the character's voice-over words, Morris' images often skid away. If their whimsical course does not entirely abandon the words, the relationship at least becomes ambiguous, rippling with irony, play, and contradiction" (Resha, 236). Some of the b-roll initially associated with one subject is increasingly used to illustrate another subject's story, suggesting a relationship or association (Resha, 240). At 11:30, the focus switches from Brooks talking about ambulatory robots not having to be stable, to Mendez discussing environmental stability. At 12:50, Brooks moves into the robots doing what is

in their nature and not having to be told what to do, while the visuals are of circus performers engaging in their respective acts—demonstrating that if they simply do what they are “programmed,” or have been trained to do, the circus will come together. Morris takes advantage of the multiple perspective approach to use one story as a metaphor for the other. The film then morphs into a manifestation of this method; at some point each story becomes a visual metaphor for each of the other stories. Looking at some specific instances, at 35:40, Morris superimposes Rodney Brooks’s statement, “I think there is some deeper-seated thing which crosses the sex boundaries: of understanding life by building something that is life like” with footage of George creating his topiary animals. Resha points out that here “the viewer is prompted to generalize the claim and consider the implications for the other interviewees” (Resha, 241), though I would extend that sentiment to all humans, not just the interviewees. Similarly, moving into the following passage that begins at 35:50, Ray talks about people readily identifying with other social animals, while Morris shows circus images of people and horses interacting, moving in the same manner. We know that Ray’s words reference naked mole rats, but we’re seeing something else entirely. Morris hijacks Ray’s statement and re-appropriates it to refer to humans and animals in general. He uses this method again at 41:20 when Ray describes the “tweets and whistles and grunts” that mole rats make, and instead of showing the mole rats, Morris uses footage of the circus audience cheering and exclaiming. Again Morris uses one story to illustrate the other in order to synthesize an overarching thesis—the human desire for complete control is a futile, though compelling, endeavor.

Errol Morris employs several creative decisions that affect how the film is read. He shoots on different film stocks, alters shooting speeds and color saturation, and uses varying levels of footage degradation including transfers and reshoots of already-low-quality VHS recordings (Resha, 232). He also makes extensive use of archival footage, with Clyde Beatty's *Darkest Africa* (1936) being the most predominant, but also employs old sci-fi movies and cartoons. All of these choices work to distance the viewer from the subjects by referencing the layers of interpretation and representation inherent in the film medium, but also to give the viewer slightly more space to ponder the themes that weave throughout. Morris uses music to tie the stories together as well, creating a consistent mood across the different narratives—in essence underscoring the atmosphere of his meta-message. Resha summarizes, “like all of Morris’ films, *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* actively foregrounds particular topics and themes through elements of style and structure. This process of highlighting ideas and connections does not determine every aspect of the viewer’s understanding of the film, but it does create a framework through which the audience makes certain kinds of associations” (Resha, 235).

By 43:30 in *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, each individual’s literal story has been explored in depth, and Morris delves further into a single, more abstract topic—at this point, frailty and vulnerability, and using the four men’s stories to expedit it. Morris uses his characters here to make the topic of the film a concept rather than the topic being the subjects themselves. As we near the end of the film, Morris shows a clip from *Darkest Africa* of Clyde Beatty getting shot at, and then transitions back to his subjects with a shot of the lion cage and Dave’s stories of close calls with the animals, to Ray talking

about extinction of species and then to George talking about his topiary animals getting destroyed or beheaded. The viewer, by being given these multiple perspectives in relation to one another, tries to find connections and patterns amongst them. Presumably, Morris' intention here is to facilitate the reading of the story from the concept rather than from the subjects themselves. However, if he had tried to make a film about control and passion and legacy using only abstractions, the message would have been either lost or entirely heavy-handed. It takes the synthesis of these several, specific stories to come to a broader conclusion. At 56:45, the theme evolves into the uncontrollability of life and coming to terms with that lack of control. Weather, nature, the environment, time—these are all variables that winnow away control. Dave talks about being stuck in the lion cage during a power failure—being in the dark with the storms riling up the cats, and George talks about the weather destroying his animals in the garden. This is, essentially, a reference to the inevitability of death and what each of us will leave behind, and each man shares how he faces that reality. Rather than the film being about the overlapping life-quests of a lion tamer, a mole rat expert, a robotics engineer, and a gardener, *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* addresses the larger concept of vulnerability and the search for meaning in life, with each of the four men's perspectives as a different lens. Just as Varda-as-filmmaker seeks to understand gleaning by reflecting on her journey and interactions, one can almost see Morris as a fifth character in *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, going through his own search for control and meaning as he assembles the film over the course of several years.

Case Study in Multiple Perspectives: *The Gleaners and I*

Varda uses her multiple subjects to speak to the larger topic of adaptation to ill-functioning distribution systems and waste. The end-result of these dysfunctional systems is a population of people that, either because of need or personal ethics or interest, takes to collecting what would otherwise be thrown away. As Lomillos points out, “all the individuals in the film are considered gleaners in both a literal and a figurative sense: they collect things from the ground [or otherwise abandoned or discarded] whether in the country, on the seashore or in the town; the female filmmaker collects some thrown-out objects and, more importantly, she collects images and sounds” (24). The film is the embodiment of Varda’s own exploration of gleaning, with her large cast of characters portraying the many forms it can take, and her own gleaning of digital material as the connecting framework amongst them all. Like *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, *The Gleaners and I* would lose all impact were it simply Varda’s own musings on an abstract topic; the many stories she plugs into on her journey *show* rather than *tell* the viewer what her point is. For example, when she asks the people gleaning the oysters how many they are legally allowed to take and what the restrictions are. She talks individually to eleven people, and they all have a different answer for how many they can take and how far from the oyster beds they have to be. She doesn’t have to say explicitly that the practice isn’t very standardized—her subjects demonstrate it with their answers (44-45:00).

Varda, at 51:00, uses an incident that occurred at a grocery store to deftly display how multiple perspectives produce multiple truths, and that the ultimate truth is something greater than simply the assembled stories. Prior to Varda having entered the

scene, a group of young people habitually gleaned discarded food from a grocery store dumpster, until the store owner, tired of having to clean up the mess they left behind, poured bleach on the discarded food, rendering it unusable and angering the youth. Varda interviews all of the players involved in this one incident—the young people, the grocery store owner, and the magistrate that issued the final ruling on the case—to hear each of their versions of what happened and their response to the outcome. Had she interviewed only one player, the story would have been merely about the specific incident, but the incorporation of all sides makes that part of the film, instead, a critique of the faulty distribution system. Varda even states, “they all played their part, applying their own logic,” and, “each experiences it differently.”

Not only does Varda use multiple perspectives to make her point, she makes direct reference to people perceiving the world differently depending on their needs. At 33:30 she interviews Hervé (also known as VR99), an artist who collects trash to use in his compositions. He explains that the city even issues a map of where things can be found to make collecting easier. Varda points out to him that the map is more likely issued to show people where they can deposit their items for removal. Hervé smiles at this observation, realizing that she’s correct about the city’s intention, but her inclusion of this moment in the film shows that both interpretations are equally true depending on the map-reader’s intended use.

Using multiple perspectives helps Varda argue that gleaning should be interpreted as a more socially-acceptable practice. She includes homeless people and those that glean out of need, but presents them with direct juxtaposition to a Michelin Guidebook chef

and a famous artist, for example. Thus, with myriad perspectives, the viewer doesn't have to rely solely on Varda's interpretation.

SUBJECT TREATMENT

In non-fiction film, the treatment of the participants, or the filmmaker's attitude toward his or her subjects, invariably has an effect on the exploration of the issues being addressed. This is particularly true of an essay film because the thesis is tied intimately to the filmmaker's handling of the content. Rather than the subjects' stories as the narrative of the film, the filmmaker uses them instead as representations of a concept, used to illustrate a broader idea. To achieve this end, the filmmaker's contextualization of his or her subjects plays a critical role in the viewer's understanding of the thesis. My aim is to examine specifically *how* the filmmakers handle their subjects so as to use each of their narratives as a representation of an idea, while simultaneously honoring their stories for what they are.

Case Study in Subject Treatment: *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*

Morris has received both criticism and praise for his treatment of subjects, with some critics reading condescension and at times mockery toward them, and others reading celebration. These simultaneous and opposing readings speak to the complexity of his approach (Resha, 250-1). I would argue that Morris' tone toward his characters almost tends toward veneration, to the extent that he makes a murderer (*Thin Blue Line*, 1988) or a Holocaust denier (*Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.*, 1999) into understandable, multi-dimensional characters (Livesey, 28-29). Morris' treatment of his subjects comes from having, according to interviews, a genuine interest in people and what they have to say, as well as wanting to understand how each perceives

his or her own world, aware that Morris, in turn, might learn something about how he perceives his own world. With this assumption that everyone has a story to tell and everyone has insight to share, it becomes impossible to take a condescending tone with one's subject. Even Fred Leuchter, in *Mr. Death*, becomes a sympathetic and almost tragic character under Morris' treatment, while somehow also not giving his beliefs any factual legitimacy (Livesey, 30-32). It's as if, instead of having reverence for humanity, Morris has reverence for his subjects as representative members of humanity (Jaehne, 43); he shows the faults of humanity through his characters, but does not belittle them for being incarnations of those faults. "He uses relatively unknown people as his *dramatis personae*, focusing on their knowledge, labor, and dedication as a microcosm of human progress" (Jaehne, 46).

Morris' approach gives his characters enough respect to let them speak for themselves and portray themselves as they wish, rather than protects them from his audience. This, I believe, is what many people interpret as deprecating. Morris even goes as far as saying in his interview with Peter Chattaway, "you know, there's this idea somehow that documentary filmmakers are supposed to be making commercials for humanity. It's like you're hired by some exclusive advertising agency to sell humanity to itself, that you should provide some kind of life-affirming, valetudinarian portrait of the world, and people can say, 'Ah! How wonderful life is! What a finely wrought thing is man!' [...] To me, I guess my response to that idea would be, 'Why!?'"

Fast, Cheap & Out of Control begins with each of the four subjects introducing themselves and giving their own backstory about how they each got involved in their

respective field of expertise and passion. The lower third, or title card, comes after this introduction, and even then, is only the subject's name and very basic title, so that the viewer is left to listen to the speaker and not have preconceptions derived from how Morris decides to title the men—at least not before they're given their own opportunity to present themselves. Morris also gave the men no direction in terms of how to present themselves, letting them choose their own “look.” And so, Ray Mendez ended up wearing a bow tie entirely of his own volition (Phipps). Morris states, “I often think that, if I've done my job correctly, that the story that emerges on the screen captures something of the complexity of reality, something that captures the complexity of the character that I am portraying” (Rapold, 51). Lutkehaus elaborates, “he describes his film as presenting ‘four versions of the myth of Sisyphus,’ [...] Morris clearly admires the dignity of these four men who ‘love what they are doing, despite the hopelessness of what they are doing.’” (77). This speaks directly to Morris' cynicism of humanity, but also to his respect for his subjects. Again, one could see the film itself as the creation of a fifth subject—Morris—on his own Sisyphean quest.

Another way that Morris seems to credit his interview subjects is with the use of his patented Interrotron, by which the subject can look straight into the camera while maintaining eye-contact with Morris. The effect is that the interviewee makes “direct” eye-contact with the audience, suggesting that Morris intends for the viewer to trust the subjects (Jaehne, 45-6). This approach also takes away the comfort and power of simply watching and replaces it with the more demanding role of interacting (Resha, 231). The Interrotron also enables closer shots, making the interviews more intimate, as well as

reducing the *mise en scène*, which forces the viewer to rely only on what the subject is saying for information, rather than on whatever Morris might choose as context. This starkness makes their voices the ultimate authority since they are the only source of information.

Morris' choice of shots also serves to empower his subjects. One example of this occurs at 27:00, when the camera follows along as Rodney Brooks enters the room for his party, putting him in a social context, and suggesting that other people not only approve of him, but in fact, celebrate him. Indeed, Brooks' coworkers are having a party in his honor, for which they had special shirts printed, and they even cheer Rodney's name as he enters. Even though Morris gives us the opportunity to see each of the subjects for ourselves and judge them accordingly, choosing to use an over-the-shoulder shot while Brooks receives positive feedback makes it particularly easy for the viewer to identify with him; we are more apt to trust the impression we get from the filmmaker if it matches the clues provided by the character's context.

Resha makes the argument that in the context of Morris' highly-stylized and controlled film (for example, the highly crafted 120 frame-per-second, night-time, rain-in-the-garden scene), the subjects' decisions are not apparently their own, and thus, the audience must ask, are their statements also under Morris' control? (Resha, 249-250). I argue that Morris is simply using the opportunity to represent his own voice through craft. This use of craft is more his chance to comment on the film's topic than it is to demonstrate his control of the subjects. In the same way a literary essayist would use the craft of writing—tone, voice, structure—to underscore his or her point, Morris uses the

tools available to him as a filmmaker to convey his point of view in this essay film. To see another example of the way in which Morris presents other people's views, one need only look at his social media feeds. Fallon explains,

[he] seems to engage in one-sided debates with his [Twitter] followers, posing questions or polemics and then responding to rebuttals without including or quoting the other side. Reading through the stream, this leaves one feeling off-kilter, aware of the answer but not the question, something his signature interview technique often reproduces in his films (52).

The interesting point to note here, however, is that the roles are seemingly reversed. In his films, Morris' subjects provide answers to his disembodied questions, while in this public forum, Morris shares only his answers to other people's un-posted questions. Because he has ultimate control over his Twitter feed, and this censoring of questions is the manner he chooses to represent himself, perhaps this indicates that in Morris' mind, having one's answers speak for themselves is empowering. Applying this reasoning to *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, it seems reasonable to conclude that Morris intends for all four subjects to appear to steer their own stories, rather than simply responding to his cues.

As regards the treatment of his multiple subjects, there is certainly a constant, between-the-lines messaging that is uniquely Morris', but because he lets his subjects speak in their own voices, they are not lost in his synthesis. To achieve this he chooses empowering camera angles that facilitate greater empathy, and uses the Interrotron to create a sense of interaction rather than watching. The result is his subjects' stories don't lose their individual meanings, they simply contribute to another, perhaps more universal, message.

Case Study in Subject Treatment: *The Gleaners and I*

Agnès Varda's subject treatment in *The Gleaners and I* is echoed by her gracious interactions with her subjects throughout the film. She sees herself as one of them, or perhaps even more accurately, aspires to be one of them. Thus, she does not come across as condescending to anyone in the film, even when she might, at times, disagree with their views. Lomillos points out, "the 'and' of the title does not function only as a mere [...] addition but as the strong link from which the film is meant to be seen: they and I. From the very title, the female filmmaker or *glaneuse* proclaims herself to be part of the story" (23). But even considering herself worthy of inclusion in her group of gleaner-subjects is a process:

At the beginning of the film, she prioritizes the others (real gleaners and those represented in paintings) over herself. Then, by means of a metaphorical process, she *allows* herself to be constituted as a *glaneuse* with aesthetic vocation (performing in front of Jules Breton's canvas '*La glaneuse*' the playful substitution of an ear of wheat by her small camcorder). It is only when she confers herself this strong symbolic identity that she feels the competence to occasionally 'digress' from that subject (others) and talk about herself (her aging body) (Lomillos, 25).

Varda speaks candidly in an interview about how she admires her subjects: "as for *The Gleaners*, people compliment me about this film, but I say it's the people in the film who are incredible. I met them, but they tell us things about how they behave, where they sleep, how to eat, and how to go on the ground, to pick up something that someone has left. I was really impressed by them. When people say they are extraordinary, it's also because they are related to a society creating waste, and they do seem so smart in the way they discuss that" (Barnet & Jordan, 190-1). The reason Varda holds her subjects in such

high regard becomes clear when considering *The Gleaners* as an essay film; it is Varda's personal investigation into a broken system, and her subjects are all further along in their thought process about gleaning than she is because they have already incorporated it into their lives. Therefore, she views them as having a wisdom that she is only just beginning to seek out and understand in this later phase of her life—and she is acutely aware of her dwindling time for exploration and understanding.

Varda's filmmaking decisions reflect her humble attitude toward her subjects. She films people in their own elements, often in the middle of doing something they would naturally be doing, so that we are on the subjects' terms instead of hers. In the potato patch, for example, the single mother and the unemployed man collecting potatoes for the charity seem fairly comfortable talking on camera because they are doing something within their usual repertoire. In this scene and throughout, Varda avoids staged setups that can easily make people feel awkward or self-conscious. Additionally, she chooses to “[interact] openly with the interviewees but prefers to stay off-screen as a voiced presence in order not to overshadow the gleaners” (Lomillos, 26). The only instances in which she allows her own image to be on film are when she herself is gleaning—such as her hand reaching into the frame to grab the heart-shaped potato and her subsequent search for more of them (Neroni, 181). Her willingness to show herself and her impulses, essentially, acting the same way as her subjects, that is, gleaning in her own way, she puts herself on an equal playing field as her subjects. Other filmic decisions that demonstrate Varda's respect for her subjects are evident in her editing choices. At 18:00 she cuts from the men living in the caravans, explaining how they get their food from dumpsters, to the

chef cooking in the commercial kitchen. This cut substantiates the actions of the homeless men; if a cultured chef also gleanes, it implies that the men's food allocation choices are credible and not merely a result of desperation.

Another decision Varda makes is to avoid lower thirds, which has the effect of letting people's experiences speak for themselves. If every subject were to have a title, the viewer would have a difficult time refraining from assigning each one a worth or credibility based on preconceptions. Without titles, though, Varda can essentially use her exploration of a theme as a social leveling device, since each person's experience is equally valid with regard to her investigation. She appears genuinely grateful for them sharing their experiences, and thus making the investigation stronger. She describes her subjects in an interview, "they are so honest, so hiding nothing, and being trusting, trusting me, even if I would tell them I have a bed, I eat every day, but my job is to make a documentary, would you like to help me, to be in it, I need your *témoignage*, your statement. What I need is if you could help to tell who you are" (Barnet & Jordan, 191). Lomillos points out that there is a further distinction between those subjects that she interviews and those that she simply catches on film in the act of gleaning. "Varda shoots these anonymous people with a profound sense of respect – the camera carefully avoids showing their faces – and also stresses the individuality and loneliness of mostly elderly bending women of a similar age to Varda's" (34). This suggests that Varda identifies with her subjects, and one could thus conclude that her approach is not simply a set of decisions based in ethical filmmaking, but a personal search for understanding a

particular aspect of humanity and her role in it, using the public exploration that is her essay film.

CONCLUSION

The essay film, and in particular, the essay film that presents material from several viewpoints, jibes with how we process the world—that is, assembling evidence or clues to support or refute initial impressions. In making judgments or conclusions we compile all the knowledge we have and synthesize an impression out of that amalgamation. We constantly revise and add to our world views based on a continual feed of new information. That is how we grow as individuals and as a civilization. So it is only logical that using this method of presentation in films would be effective as well—as a distilled rumination on any given topic in life. Likewise, people are wont to be skeptical of someone else’s word if it seems unreasonably biased or slanted. This is also how the director’s approach will be read if the subjects are seen as manipulated or misrepresented. It has been my hope that by investigating these two aspects of filmmaking, my own documentaries, and specifically my essay films, can be more poignant. In the world of social and political documentaries, there is no shortage of heavy-handed material, and this investigation has been an attempt to avoid those pitfalls with my own work in the future.

Effectiveness of Multiple, Respectfully-handled Perspectives

Morris seems to approach the making of *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* with an open attitude, one of true curiosity for what his subjects had to bring to the table. Varda treats her subjects with respect. Both of these approaches tend to increase trust in the filmmaker for allowing their subjects to speak for themselves. Further investigation,

particularly of the plentiful instances in the documentary film world in which the filmmaker has a strong opposition to their subjects' views and the exploration of how that situation is handled, might yield further insight on messaging between the lines of an essay film.

The overall outcome for the viewer of an essay film with multiple subjects is a better understanding of the world. That may seem an overstatement, but we cannot interpret our world without first having a sense of how we each perceive it through our own unique filters and how those filters differ from anyone else's. Any glimpse into another person's experience gives us more context through which to view our own. Morris and Varda have given their viewers the gift of collecting multiple people's views on a particular issue, be it the understanding and control of our worlds or adaptation to a faulty system of distribution. They have not only gone on a thematic exploration, concentrating its most essential elements and poignant nuggets into one cohesive display of many varied viewpoints, but publicly processed their own understandings of these topics through their respective lenses.

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