

## Participate YourSelf: A Mid-Process Case Reflection on Collaborative Authorship

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*Through a case study of his most recent documentary Control YourSelf—in which participants interview themselves and deliver the raw materials for the film via YouTube—the author explores the relationship between filmmaker and participant in an era when almost everyone is a media maker and consumer. Under scrutiny the documentary sub-genres of VideoVoice and Camera Movies, which purport to offer participants greater influence over the resulting documentary reveal a superficial reflexivity and a reaffirming of traditional filmmaker/participant power imbalances. To explore more inclusive and ethical means of story creation, the author seeks to elucidate the fluidity of power relationships in the era of the “digital native.” More inclusive participant involvement and authorial reflexivity provide ways to address the author’s main concerns: power, participant voice and 3-way trust relationships between filmmaker, participant, and audience.*

### Introduction

It’s amazing what you can do just posting stuff on YouTube and gettin’ the, you know, exposure. That’s why I’m in this film right now hopefully—hopefully in this film. (Matty G the Musician)

On its surface this interview quote from a participant in my latest documentary film suggests an asymmetrical power relationship between filmmaker and participant. Conventional wisdom figures that the social, personal, and economic, stakes are higher for participants represented in a documentary film than for those behind the camera. It is, after all, this filmmaker’s decision whether or not any of Matty G the Musician’s interview makes it into the final film and the amount of context conveyed with each sound bite. This is the crux of the typical discussion of documentary ethics, a binary distinction of power between *haves* and *have-nots*. But there can and should be a more nuanced view of the ethical

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relationships circulating between documentary producer, participant and audience.

As a documentary filmmaker I find myself constantly wrestling with the notion of film as either a singular authorship experience or a communal process of knowledge seeking. The former seems to entrench a lopsided power balance, with participants serving merely as referents to the worldview the filmmaker aims to present. The latter promises a more egalitarian, inclusive approach to filmmaking. But does it? It would seem that, surely, the more participants are involved in the decision-making processes of a film, the fewer ethical dilemmas will arise. Following this reasoning I have attempted a more participatory approach in several of my recent films with mixed results.<sup>1</sup>

In the documentary discourse, the term participatory often refers to the prominent, visible presence of the filmmaker within the text as described by Nichols (*Introduction to Documentary* 115-123). I use the term related more to the participatory culture phenomenon identified by Jenkins, wherein participant-subjects<sup>2</sup> are invited to have a hand in the content and/or conceptual aspects of media creation (7-8). In documentary this can take the form of participants recording their own video footage, as opposed to a camera-toting interloper. This substitution aims to draw participants into the filmmaking process, giving them a say in the composition of the film, therefore elevating them beyond a simple signifier. The participatory approach promises more ethical engagement with participant-subjects but does not avoid all ethical concerns.

In what follows, I elaborate and confront some of the problems inherent to collaborative, participatory documentary production through a case study of my documentary film project *Control Yourself*, currently in production. I explore the relationships between participant, filmmaker, and audience and their three main points of encounter: power, voice and trust.

### ***Control Yourself*—A Case Study**

In late 2012 I reached out to 380 YouTube performers from all over the world whose only commonality was that they had performed their own version of the

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<sup>1</sup> Sadly, in one film—for expediency's sake—I relegated participant video to the role of simple visual evidence ("b-roll"), which had the unintended effect of co-opting the participant's voice. In another, the film's sponsors dropped the use of participatory cameras entirely over message control concerns.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will often hyphenate the term participant (e.g. participant-subject or participant-director) for the sake of specificity and accuracy. As I see it, in the filmmaking process we are all participants.

song “Kids” by the band MGMT.<sup>3</sup> This served as a helpful limiting factor when approaching a subject as large as musical performance on YouTube. My goal was to explore, through a documentary film, the motivations and intentions behind performing on YouTube. The film’s interview process involved crowdsourcing material from participants all over the world. Following in the footsteps of films like *The War Tapes* and *Chain Camera*, I situate the film in the documentary sub-genre termed “camera movie” (Tarrant 149). Here, participants are given cameras, or in my case, use their own webcams, to generate video content, which is then combined and constructed into a documentary film by the initiating director (Tarrant 149). The approach seemed fitting for a film about YouTube performers and, given the far-flung locations of the participants, a practical necessity as well.

After I sent out the initial wave of invitations I heard back from 58 individuals interested in participating. Eventually that number dwindled to 42 through self-selection. Once the number settled out I e-mailed participants a list of general topic areas to discuss in the form of very open-ended questions. The degree to which they discussed any particular topic area was left completely to the participant’s discretion.

While it would have been possible to interview participants face-to-face via Skype or other video conferencing service, I felt that having participants address an unseen audience/director was more apropos to the YouTube experience. This also aligned with my intention since the inception of this project to afford greater participant autonomy. Upon receiving their responses (usually via private YouTube video), I thanked the participants and added them to an online group where they have been kept abreast of the film’s progress and invited to view and respond to various rough cuts as the film came together.

At this point, the process of selection and inclusion began in earnest as I loaded response videos and hundreds of performance videos into the nonlinear editor, arranged and rearranged. The process is ongoing as the film is still in production. Being in the middle of the ethically fraught decision-making this entails seems the perfect time to step back and reflect on the ethical accountabilities inherent in the camera movie. Therefore, I use this opportunity to merge current thinking and my own insights on the development of a fair participatory project.

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<sup>3</sup> This common song was chosen quite accidentally while researching another project involving Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*. Apparently, some think that this book inspired the lyrics of “Kids.”

### Documentary Ethics

Discussions of ethics in relation to documentary are largely concerned with filmmaker/participant rights and consequences rather than a complex examination of relationships (Nash, "Documentary" 224). Most often criticism of filmmakers regards informed consent and the ethical demand for disclosure, lending a legalistic tone to the debate (Winston, "Ethics" 186-190). Indeed in a recent survey of 45 leading documentary practitioners much of the discussion was concerned with participant compensation and image ownership. The Center for Social Media study synthesizes anecdotal evidence into patterns of practice. Not too surprisingly, "do no harm" and "protect the vulnerable" were two common credos found among documentary filmmakers in the study (Aufderheide, Jaszi and Chandra 6). These concerns echo throughout the discourse of documentary ethics (Winston, *Lies* 124,132). Documentarians are not alone, contemporary ethnographers constantly confront issues of researcher/subject power relationships and authorial reflexivity (Cole 51). Given the commonalities, I find it productive to draw on theorists and practitioners from across disciplines as I enter this unfamiliar terrain.

### Cultural Entry/Access

They speak my language, their houses look like mine and they dress like me (sort of), but I do not belong to their culture. Prior to this project, I had uploaded no more than a dozen videos to YouTube—mainly of an instructional nature for my students to view outside of class. My most common interaction with YouTube is viewing embedded videos on other people's websites. I do not check the YouTube home page for what is trending or comb through its pages for entertainment. I am an outsider looking in. Most of my participants have posted numerous videos to YouTube ranging from covers of popular songs to video diaries and how-to clips. They are almost all younger than 25 years old, which, by Prensky's definition, casts them as "Digital Natives" and myself as "Digital Immigrant" (1-2).

The word native calls to mind the fieldwork of an anthropologist or ethnographer and certainly there is much crossover between these fields (Coffman 62). In fact, the collaborative impulse behind my project is not all that different from Jean Rouch's *Les Maîtres Fous* (1956) or Sol Worth and John Adair's *Navajo Film Themselves* (1966), all notable anthropological filmmakers. The examination of my entry into another culture of sorts profits from the insights of contemporary ethnographers, whose situation in the field depends on extensive interaction with participants in their native environment (Cole 60). My physical sojourn begins and ends at my computer screen but my journey brings me squarely into

unfamiliar terrain. Understanding that “fieldwork is a serendipitous and unpredictable process” was my foremost expectation for this endeavor (Cole 66).

It is certain that gaining access to an individual willing to be *exploited*<sup>4</sup> in the making of one’s film is central to the process and one of the first requirements when evaluating a potential project’s viability (Bernard 141). Participant-driven projects such as Video Voice<sup>5</sup> or camera movies offer more of an invitation to collaborate than the traditional documentary appearance requires. Still, as is the case in all documentaries, ethical conundrums abound.

Convincing another to appear on camera is undeniably an imposition and can at times require pressure or deception on the part of the director. Coercion by the filmmaker can take the form of incomplete disclosure about the true nature of the film, false promises, or simply interpersonal pressure. For *Control YourSelf*, to avoid this and truly leave the decision to contribute with the participant, I aimed to keep the invitation process as unimposing as possible. In previous projects, I have been in the room or on the phone with a potential participant, requiring a response of some kind then and there. This time I sought collaboration via a series of invitation e-mails. Participants were free to respond or ignore my message, affording a relatively opt-in experience. This was nerve wracking to me as someone who has entered into most other documentary projects with a high level of control. The 11% response rate, while respectable, was in stark contrast to my more targeted face-to-face approaches of engaging participants in previous projects.

If the outreach process was nerve wracking, then the “interview” process was oddly liberating. Offering up topics of discussion rather than concrete questions seemed the best way to avoid excessive directorial control given that my goals for this project included a good deal of participant autonomy<sup>6</sup>. In every

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<sup>4</sup> I digress at this point to call attention to a persistent problem in the field of documentary production. In my career, every participant release form I have ever found or used has employed various conjugations of the word “exploit” in reference to the use of a participant’s voice and image. This has complicated interactions with potential participants on a number of occasions. While perhaps this is the appropriate word in legalese, it is a charged word—particularly for documentarians.

<sup>5</sup> For a better sense of “VideoVoice” see: *The New Orleans VideoVoice Project*, <http://reachnola.org/vvproject.php> and “Using Videovoice to Enhance Community Outreach and Engagement for the National Children’s Study,” <http://www.ruchigupta.com/community-engaged-research/44-using-videovoice-to-enhance-community-outreach-and-engagement-for-the-national-children-s-study>.

<sup>6</sup> The list of “talking points” reads as follows:

- Your motivations for performing songs on YouTube
- Your audience. Do you primarily post for friends and family or a broader audience? Do you ever find unintended audiences?

response, I found the unexpected. Some responses delighted and some (initially) disappointed. One participant created his own mini documentary in response, complete with cutaways and transitions. The editor in me bristled, “how can I intercut something that is so heavily edited already?” But as I lived with the responses, watched and re-watched them, the videos’ unique personalities captivated me, reshaping my concept of the overall film. Cole echoes this reaction, explaining it this way:

As a researcher, I was at my best when I constructed my research agenda based on the access I had and the logics of the context I engaged. In short, I had to consider what [participants] had to tell me, rather than imposing what I wanted to learn on them. This meant giving up what I had planned in favor of the situational knowledges the research context and participants offered me. (67)

I thoroughly embrace this idea of letting others challenge my preconceptions guide my work in new directions.

While I am learning a lot from the unexpected participant input, I want to avoid overstating the level of subject-participation. This is a propensity that is common in camera movies (Tarrant 159). The title *Control Yourself* is perhaps a tad ironic as I am the participant with the final decision over what is included or omitted. On the other hand, participants had the opportunity to rehearse and re-record their responses as many times as they pleased, giving them a great deal more control over their representation than most interviewees. I drew new insight from these formulated responses and the experience of inviting unguided

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-Audience feedback. Do you find the feedback from your posts a) positive, b) negative c) constructive d) hurtful e) annoyingly positive f) something I haven’t thought of?

-Fulfillment. Has posting this video achieved what you hoped it would?

-The reason you chose “Kids” by MGMT. Was there something beyond its musical appeal (message, theme, etc.)?

-Performance. Do you feel you present your genuine self in a video performance or a persona/alternate identity that you have created for your self.

-Environment. Do you give any thought to the location in which you film your performance? Do you alter the location prior to filming or is it a simple matter of recording where the camera and computer are?

-Discuss the level of anonymity you feel performing on YouTube and compare it to the anonymity of users who post feedback on your videos. Does YouTube move to use real names effect the experience for better or worse?

-Would you ever or have you ever confronted a person who posted negative feedback on your video through their user profile?

-Social networking. Is your YouTube experience an extension of school, work or other social situations? Or is it something completely different?

-Anything you think I have failed to touch on.

input from participants. By allowing their responses to percolate and play off of each other, I created connections I might not otherwise have made. At the outset I had planned a film that would explore the free-for-all nature of YouTube, especially performers' attempts to gain notoriety and the frequently harsh criticisms they face. But through the process of entering into this foreign culture with a willingness to receive guidance from "natives," what has emerged is a much more nuanced representation of YouTube performance culture and the unique personalities involved. Despite this, I still struggle with concerns about my role as participant-director in charge of the final cut.

### Power

In reviewing my work thus far one of my main concerns is the power balance in my relationships with participants and feeling like I have so much more control. I am surely not alone in this concern. Through the self-report process of the *Honest Truths* study, most filmmakers relate their desire and efforts to avoid abuse of power when representing subject-participants. Interestingly, in the case of subjects with celebrity status or their own access to media platforms, survey respondents tended to be less empathetic or concerned with the consequences of their editorial decisions on those subjects (Aufderheide, Jaszi and Chandra 1).

When it comes to social media, however, such clear distinctions become blurred. YouTube performers, especially the participants in *Control YourSelf*, may seem like culturally anonymous individuals—those who might be characterized as "vulnerable." But in many cases they have a significant web status, albeit not quite "celebrity status." Some have thousands of views on their videos and thousands of followers on their YouTube channels. Their combined audience reach may well eclipse the audience of the film, calling into question the presumed imbalance of power between the filmmaker and participants.

Yet the ethical leeway that practicing documentarians feel entitled to when dealing with powerful public figures does not seem appropriate when applied under these circumstances. A YouTube channel is not equal to other more established media platforms and the reach of the performers is often limited to niche segments of society. What develops is a power relationship with much more equanimity and one that is more ethically complex.

It is comfortable and tidy to say that in the observer-observed relationship the former has all of the power. It allows us to focus solely on the filmmaker's ethical behavior, excesses, and constraints. But this belies the fluidity of the two-way relationship: "Power circulates in documentary, with both participant and documentary-maker seeking to influence the actions of the other" (Nash, "Facing" 80). Power is not a thing to be held, the possession of one individual or another, it is a "complex interplay of strategies" between participants (Nash, "Facing" 83). Given participant prerogatives on the manners in which they repre-

sented themselves, the interplay of my filmmaking agenda with theirs results in a hybridized outcome—me struggling to maintain a coherence to the overall film and the participants crafting and asserting their identities. This unspoken collaboration does not create the mythical “Truth” often sought in documentaries, but a new collaborative knowledge, the product of power passing back and forth between participant-maker and participant-subject. Understanding this can liberate us from constantly wrestling with the question of who is taking power from whom, as if it is a zero-sum possession. I am not trying to absolve myself of the filmmaker privileges that have been and will be addressed in the course of this article. However, given the freedom to participate or not, delve into a particular topic or not, and control their personas through total control of the image creation, participants enacted their own agendas—defining themselves as they pleased.

### Voice

Regardless of their motivations for contributing to this film, participants have a vested interest in maintaining onscreen personae and furthering the narratives they have created on YouTube. So the interplay of these voices with the overall aims of the film is central to an analysis of ethical relationships. Nichols writes of documentaries:

The voices of others are woven into a textual logical that subsumes and orchestrates them. They retain little responsibility for making the argument but are used to support it or provide evidence or substantiation for what the commentary addresses. (*Representing Reality* 37)

My instinctual reaction to cut up the previously discussed and carefully edited documentary produced by a participant stems from this well-established proclivity. For their part camera movies are often “valued for the simple fact that non-professionals participated in their making”(Tarrant 151), but those non-professional voices are no more immune to being subsumed than interview subjects and b-roll<sup>7</sup> in more traditional approaches. Simply handing over the means of production without also handing over the means of postproduction does nothing to prevent this subsuming. How then can I honor the autonomy of the myriad voices presented by 42 participants while maintaining a coherent argument that is not consumed by this documentarian’s own voice? The answer lies in authorial reflexivity.

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<sup>7</sup> B-roll is commonly understood as footage that supports the arguments being made in the narration and interviews of a documentary film.

Reflexivity is central to contemporary postcolonial research and has, for more than 50 years, been a fixture of documentary discourse<sup>8</sup>. Rather than an unquestioned representation, reflexivity in documentary is commonly understood as self-examination of the trouble with the representation of the “historical world.” Nichols characterizes the use of reflexivity in the form of a question:

How can the viewer be drawn into an awareness of this problematic so that no myth of the knowability of the world, of the power of the logos, no repression of the unseen and unrepresentable occludes the magnitude of ‘what every filmmaker knows’: that every representation, however fully imbued with documentary significance, remains a fabrication? (*Representing Reality* 57)

Reflexivity is the answer to this rhetorical question, a sort of “optical ethics” that shows the process of production, literally (as a visible camera), figuratively (through inner-textual disclosure) or through a combination of both. In theory this will make us aware of not only what is represented but also what is concealed (Butchart 681).

The camera movie shifts our awareness of representation in this direction. This is particularly the case in camera movies like my film where participants directly address the camera. Butchart refers to this as a “doubling” of the visual mode of address; “it is a look that looks back at us looking” (Butchart 681). The break from a sense that we are watching life unfold before us *as it happened* and instead seeing it as it is (re)presented, affords a measure of reflexivity.

The camera movie’s inbuilt reflexivity and grounding in the democratization of media heightens the sensation that we are watching others represent themselves. Simultaneously however, the act of eschewing a purely directorial perspective in favor of the participatory camera makes conspicuous the “director’s ingenuity,” prohibiting the audience from “forgetting whose camera it [really] is” (Tarrant 150). It would seem from this observation that there is another level of reflexivity –albeit problematic– in the formal elements of a camera movie. The premise of the camera movie, they said it about themselves in front of their own camera so it must be true, in effect is the embodiment of Nichol’s myth of knowability. I see this as passive reflexivity. By this I mean that when participants generate their own footage we are more superficially aware of the process and its relation to the producer. Such films celebrate the novelty of the form without confronting acts of representation and concealment. In short, the filmmaker is not overtly reflecting on or critiquing her own process of representation. Allowing an awareness that the director handed over the recording process may not be reflexivity at all.

To be reflexive a researcher should actively acknowledge within the text that it is the researcher, not the researched, conveying the results. Thus reflexivity dictates that the ethnographic researcher makes the reader aware of the

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<sup>8</sup> Evinced by Ruby 1977 and 2005.

multiple voices and perspectives through a deconstruction of the research process (Cole 53). Unfortunately, film is even more opaque than the written exposition of researched subjects. There is a seamlessness to the final product, often through smooth editing and the imposition of cinematic time, which elides the messiness of the lived filmmaking process. Filmmakers and audiences alike have come to accept this concealing of untidiness, thus producing a higher degree of difficulty for reflexivity on film.

As I explore the possibility of employing more overt reflexive techniques in my film I hope to honor the voices of participants along with the voice of the film(maker) in full view of the audience. By including participants' meta-commentary, their references to my own involvement, and stylistic choices that confound the seamless presentation of the real, it is now my aim to reject "authorial trickery" (Tarrant, 150) and do my best to empower all participants through directorial reflexivity.

### **Trust**

Directorial disclosure and participant empowerment are rare in a camera movie, a sub-genre where, often, the means of production are handed over in order to "...[give] subjects enough rope to hang themselves" (Tarrant 156). Many documentaries in the canon trade on this, garnering acclaim but often creating rifts with stakeholders. Filmmakers like Frederick Wiseman and the Maysles offer "piercing insights" but their sites for filmmaking are often closed off to further collaboration due to violations of confidence (Coffman 65). Pryluck further laments this situation, "They have shown us aspects of our world that in other times would have been obscured from view; in this there is gain. In the gain there is perhaps loss" (194). Thus far I have attempted to avoid possibilities for such violations of confidence. I have been as forthright as I can in the explanation of my goals and process to participants. I eschewed a heavy hand and leading questions in seeking information from participants. Most recently, I shared my first rough cut with participants and sought their feedback. While disingenuousness on my part would probably not close off YouTube as a site for other filmmakers to explore, it would still break the trust I have formed with participants through the response and review process. In my approach so far there is one notable trust-forming deficiency, namely the amount and frequency of contact I have with my participants. Earlier I promoted it as an asset, not imposing on subjects and unduly influencing them, but it might also be seen as a weakness. Frequent close contact is how we as documentary filmmakers build trust: "Documentary filmmakers generally spend long periods of time with the 'social actors' who feature in their films, and the development of a trusting relationship is essential" (Nash, "Documentary" 225). For this reason, the glacial pace of documentary production is often celebrated as one of its strengths. Documentar-

ian Gordon Quinn states, “We say to our subjects, ‘We are not journalists; we are going to spend years with you. Our code of ethics is very different’” (qtd. in Aufderheide, Jaszi and Chandra 10). The inference then is that my few interactions with participants and more open approach have limited opportunities for trusting relationships. Contemplating this I return to Nash who argues that while trust comes slowly it is based on “mutual values, goals and vulnerabilities” (“Stealing Moments” 67). I find these three criteria to be useful in measuring my progress thus far.

### *Goals*

I’m not sure that the goals of the filmmaker and those of the participants can ever truly be the same. The filmmaker will always have more of a stake in the success of the whole film and the participants in the accuracy and impact of their own portrayal. Add to this difference in goals the obstacle of empowering one participant–subject over another. Not all 42 participants will be empowered equally, or even at all, if by empowered you mean visible in the final film. The act of inclusion and exclusion in the editing of a film seems to inhere a divergence in goals between participant–subject and participant–filmmaker. But a goal is, put simply, a priority. Even if priorities do not converge, trust can still be maintained if values are truly shared.

### *Values*

I recall a message from one of my participants early on expressing her interest in creating a video response. She was glad that I was making the film and bringing attention to such an “important topic.” At the time I found this statement a little over-the-top. We’re just talking about self-posted YouTube videos after all. I mean people are just sitting down in front of a camera and playing a song; day in and day out, for hours on end. They’re just trying to get it right, seeking feedback from peers and enduring criticisms from “haters.” I’ve seen this play out dozens of times—no, more like 400. I hear the song *Kids* in my sleep, perhaps because I catch my spouse humming the tune at the oddest of times. This project is as old as my toddler. I’m no longer surprised when Google+ asks me if I want to add this or that participant to my circle of friends (aren’t they there already?) After all, I know each of them backwards, (fast) forward and paused. So yes, these values feel mutual; this is important.

### *Vulnerabilities*

To discuss Nash’s third trust condition, vulnerabilities, I turn to a discussion of the audience role in all of this. Since we have already established the complexity of power relationships between observer and observed, it is these relationships with audiences that beg examination. What I mean is the participant–audience has both a linear and circular relationship to the participant–subject and partici-

pant-filmmaker. Tarrant refers to the director's role in all of this as a "hinge" joining "participant-subjects" and "participant-audience" (153), suggesting a linear flow. If the director as hinge is able to bring the two other participant groups closer together, perhaps even touching, then the three-way circular connection is complete. As we will see in the coming paragraphs, bringing the audience, filmmaker, and participants closer together requires reflexivity and through it vulnerability.

Audiences tend to be left out of the discussion of documentary ethics. The perceived power binary does not include the audience—a passive receiver by most accounts. Tarrant places responsibility for this relegation of the audience to the role of "cog" (164) squarely on filmmakers. On the other hand, this view may be letting the audience off too easily. By inhabiting an impassive role audience members are safe from harm, secure in their privileged status as onlooker. A documentary is at its worst when the audience is comfortable—invulnerable—in the act of staring at others, hoping to see the worst in others' experiences to feel better about our own (Godmilow 8). When we the participant-audience let privilege and apathy stand in for active participation then we are as distant from the participant-subject as we can be; the hinge is wide open. For camera movies to move beyond the novelty of their form and involve the audience as more than a cog, the filmmaker must actively invite a challenge to her own authority and in the process invite her own vulnerability.

Butchart refers to this next level of reflexivity as "redoubling the visual mode." In addition to the aforementioned direct address by the participant, here the filmmaker endeavors to "unconceal the work of image making" with her own direct address (683). Redoubling the visual mode of documentary's address complicates the viewer's experience and disrupts notions of objectivity. Furthermore, employment of an "optical ethic draws our attention to how an image-making apparatus disappears (hides itself, cannot easily be seen) behind what it gives us to see" (684). In practice this might take the form of: narration or titles, on-screen directorial presence or the inclusion of normally omitted visuals that reveal her choices of showing and suppressing. A purposeful, thoughtful confrontation of the visual evidence—one that appears within the film—subverts the claim that these life-like images actually represent the real world.

This subversion can then serve to jar the audience from the passive, comfortable, and ultimately detached role in which it has settled. I contend that this subversion, while simultaneously empowering them, makes the audience vulnerable. It is dangerous to be an active participant. If the filmmaker's authority is not omnipotent, then we as participant-audience must find our own way to meaning. Who are these people, what is real, what should we believe? Answering this question is a dynamic process for an active participant.

Lest we forget, as a filmmaker I am also a participant and the act of challenging my own authority is problematic. Giving up authority and revealing the loose ends of documentary production removes many of the tools in my kit. It shows the seams of my construction. This may even put off the viewer, but it could also build trust. Acknowledging that viewers are competent enough to find their own meaning in the material presented builds a trusting rapport. Through my methods I am communicating that, “I respect you, the audience, and will not try to deceive you with my craft.” At the same time deferring authority can also build rapport with participant-subjects. My reflexive actions will, in effect, say to them, “I will not co-opt your voice or image and imbue them with a divergent meaning.” Trust comes through disclosure, and there is no purer form of disclosure than revealing the workings of process and calling in to question the representation of reality. Both participant-audience and participant-subject arrive at a level playing field when the ethical demand for disclosure is satisfied.

Thus I return to Nash’s third condition of mutual vulnerability. Participants offer up their presence as a contribution to the shared vulnerability. The filmmaker, precariously connecting participant-audience and participant-subject, agrees to embrace a method of reflexivity that reveals her successes and failures in the process of representation. She submits a film that is not *real* to an audience craving nothing other than real—thus becoming mutually vulnerable. The audience, released from the unspoken documentary reality contract, warily examines themselves as consumers of representation with a newfound sense of vulnerability. When we are vulnerable, trust is what we reach for to keep from falling. The more vulnerable the three groups are the more they must trust each other.

## Conclusion

Surely it is unusual to self-critique a film that is not finished in the form of an academic case study. But the form and function of this paper afford a pause, mid-process, for reflection. This is not the first time I have contemplated (or attempted) applying reflexivity to a project. Reflexivity in documentary is not a novel concept in the discourse or practice. But applying overt reflexivity to the camera movie, a form imbued with the promise of reflexivity that rarely delivers, is worth exploring. Similarly, awareness of trust and power issues in documentary relationships is not new, as evinced by the *Honest Truths* study. But I submit that filmmakers might tweak the common credos found therein. “Do no harm,” while a good way to approach life, reinforces the reductive view that participant-filmmakers hold all of the power. We might say instead “distribute the harm;” let all participants (subject, -maker, and -audience) acknowledge the problems inherent in representing the historical world. “Protect the vulnerable” sounds like

a noble but unfortunately paternalistic goal. Again, it assumes no power or agency for the participant. Imagine instead turning the phrase on ourselves by demanding that we “become the vulnerable.” By breaking from the imperative to present what is real, tearing up the “unspoken contract” with her audience, and visibly acknowledging the acts of representation and concealment—she is vulnerable. Pulling back the curtain she not only eschews the protections afforded by seamless formal elements, she challenges the audience. It is a call to actively participate with a new awareness of their own gazing and of the stakes for subject participants.

This is all well and good on the page but now is the time for praxis. As I close my word processor and launch my non-linear editor, the bins of clips are bursting with fresh demands. My timeline looks sad and hollow in a way that I didn’t notice the last time I pressed “save.” It is time to revisit, to circulate, to honor, to learn and teach, to challenge the audience I can only imagine. I feel vulnerable. It feels good.

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