Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies, 24 (2023) 80–91

DOI: 10.2478/ausfm-2023-0014

Filial Care and Familial Postmemory. On the Uncanny and Affective Intermediality of Analogue Media Use in Recent European Documentaries

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Abstract. Found footage filmmaking, or "archiveology" (Russell, 2008), has become a contemporary mode of understanding the collective past. At the same time, in some recent European documentaries we have a more intimate, personal use of archival (and animated) images. They construct two-strand narrative structures showing both the trauma of losing a parent and the excavation of the unresolved traumas of those ailing and passing. In *Us against Us* (*Noi împotriva noastră*, Andra Tarara, 2021) the director/daughter initiates a highly reflexive video dialogue with her schizophrenic father. *Fragile Memory* (*Крихка пам'ять*, Igor Ivanko, 2022) is a grandson's story about a former cameraman affected by Alzheimer's. Postmemory and post-generational trauma work is in the focus of Aliona van der Horst's films like *Love is Potatoes* (2017), in which her own mother's emigration story is recovered through intermediality, or *Turn Your Body to the Sun* (2021), in which the digitally manipulated archival footage accompanies a woman's quest for her father's repressed memories. These are all medially hybrid films, which rely on the affordances of intermediality, and which combine present day footage with images from personal or public archives. Archiveology becomes in these films an affective tool in caring for family, and a reflection on the precarity of life and memory in general.[1]

Keywords: found footage, photography, familial postmemory, affective intermediality, uncanny.

Introduction

There is an identifiable tendency within contemporary documentary cinema, where the filmmaker makes a film in an autobiographical mode as a son or daughter,

1 This work was supported by a grant of the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitization in Romania, CNCS - UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-PCE-2021-1297, within PNCDI III.

grandchild or relative of a person belonging to a different generation than his or her own. Within these films the director fulfils multiple roles: he or she is the first person narrator of the autobiographical act, but also functions as a subjective entry point into a story other than his or her own, resulting in a kind of a crossover between performative and participatory documentary modes. Moreover, with the recent boom of archiveology fuelled by extensive digitization, these types of documentaries have become more and more reliant on archival images stemming from personal or family archives, leading to new forms of medial hybridity. The examination of the selected examples aims at a better understanding of this new type of medial hybridity in European cinema closely related to issues regarding self-representation, postmemory and embodied viewing. Intricate inscriptions of the self produce reflexive narratives and also complicated interplays between life and representation, which calls for the Rancière-ian emancipated spectatorship. According to Jim Lane "reference [to the real world] in these documentaries functions in a bifurcated flow in which the self and external historical events compete for representation" (2002, 32).

Jim Lane, in his book dedicated to American autobiographical documentary covers more than just contemporary confluences between autobiography and documentary, as he also presents historical connections. Different types of subjective documentary techniques are presented, from a more classical autobiographical representation to a contemporary reinterpretation of the role of subjectivity. This tendency can be related to several issues that stirred debates in documentary theory, such as the outbreak of subjectivism in the documentary landscape, identified by Michael Renov in the films of the 1980s and the 1990s (2004, xxii). Among others, Laura Rascaroli and Julia Lesage have convincingly argued that there is a strong link between the foregrounding of subjectivism as a filmmaking strategy within the documentaries, and a growing awareness in terms of class and gender debates from the 1970s onwards (Rascaroli 2009; Renov 2004; Lane 2002; Lesage 1999).

Thus subjectivism is as much related to the shift to the autobiographical, as to the critical deconstruction of the authoritarian voice of the documentary narration, which can be seen according to Anette Kuhn as a move toward a specifically feminine mode of cinematographic writing. Lesage argues that: "unlike social-issue documentarists working in a realist mode, (many) women artists do not presume to represent a continuous stable identity or a cohesive self. Rather they pursue an epistemological investigation of what kinds of relations might constitute the self, using as a laboratory their own consciousness (Lesage 1999, 311).

According to Lane (2002, 26) the return of the subject, of the "enunciating I" is not a nostalgic one, or its main focus is not the construction of a coherent identity through representation, instead it is a rather decentered subject, and the films become sites of instability or revision rather than coherence (see: Renov 1989, 4). Arguably, the emergence of this type of subjectivity in documentary is as much related to cinema's digital turn and its relation to the real as to gender or postcolonial issues. "The relationship between self and cinema and other media remains a preoccupation in the self-portrait documentary" – writes Lane (2002, 129), which, according to him, can take the form of the family portrait or of the self-portrait.

The transmission, the diffusion of embodied experience through mediation is also what Marianne Hirsch theorizes in *Generations of Postmemory* (2008), ideas which add a new layer to the importance of the filial relations in family portraits or filmic autobiographies. In Hirsch's seminal article a distinction is made between two postmemory transmission structures: the familial and the affiliative one: the first one being intergenerational and vertical, while "affiliative postmemory would thus be the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation combined with structures of mediation that would be broadly appropriable, available […] Familial structures of mediation and representation facilitate the affiliative acts of the postgeneration" (2008, 114–115). Thus, postmemory works are not merely about identity, they are also about a type of mediation that challenges authority and direct transmission, which according to Hirsch is best grasped in the way a photograph (both as an indexical sign and affective presence) is part of this mediation. The selected documentaries viewed as family portraits conceived in the autobiographical mode, do present fragmented stories about filial postmemory, but at the same time, the viewer is intrinsically drawn into a process of affiliative mediation. The forementioned hybridity mediates more than just genealogical memory, the subjective, affective POV of the narrating self and the affective use of media calls for an embodied viewing.

In the article entitled *To Narrate or Describe? Experimental Documentary beyond Docufiction* Erika Balsom builds a new framework for the return of the referential and the observational in contemporary art's documentary impulse. By doing so she formulates a critique of the current state of the art of the documentary "understood as a fatigue with postmodernist textualism," (2021, 181) yet the postmodernist assault against objectivity and authenticity still persists. According to Balsom, images are not conceived "as much as traces but as products of representational conventions, a picture constituted by the play of codes" (2021, 182). Instead of

documentary's dependence on the indexical claim, contemporary documentary is expected to "reinvent itself on the new groundless ground of hybridity," to more "sophisticated approaches to questions of truth" (2021, 187).

Through the selection of films to be scrutinized I propose to revisit the status that photography and analogue media in general, hailed as the prototypical index in this kind of docu-hybridity. What happens to Roland Barthes's idea that the noeme of photography is the "this has been"? What is the role of the analogue media inserted in the digital imagery of a contemporary documentary film? Are they reappropriated in order to achieve an archive effect, a temporal, metaleptic leap into the past? Are they used to perform an ontological statement, or are they viewed as merely images that produce medially a different type of reality?

In the essay entitled "*Analogue:" Conceptual Connotations of a Historical Medium*, Sara Collahan argues that the so-called digital turn opens the possibility of tapping into analogue photography as a conceptual and cultural sensitivity distinguishable from the technique. Collahan (2018) suggests that the notion of the analogue offers a useful way of thinking about media in terms of ontological and conceptual possibilities, by focusing not on what it means to shift from one medium to another, but what it means to evoke a medium as conceptual content. She proposes a method of analysing relations between media, that one does not just consider the relation between old and new media, but specifically the way these are used as already theorized media-conceptual clusters in a specific set of photographic practices at the turn of the twenty-first century. The analogue can be understood as a figure that mobilizes the classical definition of the photograph as objective, truth telling, indexical, but within the context of a contemporary digital media culture its material, auratic and mystical aspects are also highlighted. In order to entangle the different media relations when "analogue media" is represented, inserted in a contemporary video, an intermedial analysis needs to be carried out.

The Materiality of the Analogue and a Metaphor for the Human Mind and Body

In *Fragile Memory* (*Крихка пам'ять*, Igor Ivanko, 2022) the materiality of nitrate based negatives found by the grandchild-director are brought to the fore as a forthright analogy with the mental and bodily state of the grandfather [Figs. 1–2]. The decaying nitrate substrate of the film negative become analogies of the ageing body and ailing memory of the grandparent suffering from Alzheimer. As the former cameraman is not able to recognize the faces captured in his photographs,

fails to recognize his wife or daughter, the film negatives cannot perform their role as an imprint of memory: faces are blurred, fading, disintegrating surfaces which cannot perform their function as an index, as a pointing to reality [Figs. 3–4]. The films render the decaying images both as inserts performing metaleptic leaps, and both as intradiegetic objects in recurring scenes with the grandfather watching his recently digitized negatives on a laptop screen. He cannot remember, he cannot answer the questions of his grandson. These images can be said to exemplify the materiality of the analogue photographic technique; although non-decipherable as imagery, what they show and bear witness to is the passage of time and the decay and loss resulting thereof. The material decay becomes an analogy of the aging person who is gradually losing his identity, he is alive but his personhood is not accessible, just as frail and precarious as the material mortality of the photographs. This conceptual analogy about the ephemeral character of photographs is famously described by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* also: "even if it is attached to more lasting supports, it is still mortal: like a living organism, it is born on the level of the sprouting silver grains, it flourishes a moment, then ages ... Attacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes; there is nothing left to do but throw it away. Earlier societies managed so that memory, the substitute for life, was eternal and that at least the thing which spoke Death should itself be immortal: this was the Monument" (1981, 93).

The inserts made from the disintegrating photographs enhance this "living organism" character through a very subtle digital manipulation of the still surfaces: there is a very discreet, slow dynamic zoom in to the surface of the photograph. Definitely not intended as a fake panoramic camera movement, the slow zoom in-s function here is less to mobilize the immobile images a la Ken Burns, but rather to generate a 3D effect of the material stratification of the decaying images. The result is reminiscent of the way microscopic images of biological samples are reproduced in documentaries, or recall the visualization of the in uterus development of a fetus when small particles are shown as floating in a thick liquid substance. This digital rendering of the materiality of the analogue is an instance of intermediality which paradoxically foregrounds the sensuality of a surface, as a living organism with the aid of digital tools.

Analogies between the mental state of a parent and of home videos taped on VHS cassettes are made evident in the Romanian film entitled *Us Against Us* (*Noi împotriva noastră*, directed by Andra Tarara, 2021). The director visits her father, turn their cameras on each other and film their conversations in which they discuss schizophrenia, their memories, and their personal relationship to

filmmaking. The film consists of statements of two vulnerable people, the father forced to live with a mental disorder – and a daughter who had to grow up without a father. In the process of recording their video, they try to understand each other while revealing their inner thoughts and feelings. The original home videos made by the father are easily recognizable by their low resolution and some electronic noise as a footer on the image. The videos are presented as the memories of the father which the daughter finds hard to relate to. The film consists of metaleptic leaps from the home videos as media of memory to present day images filmed simultaneously by the father-daughter pair, visually also reminiscent of the precarious aesthetics of home videos. These recent images are shown in split screen [Figs. 5–6]. – which can be interpreted either as a postcolonial stance, where the monoperspectival home videos of the father are rewritten by the split screen embracing the multiplication of perspectives, and the daughter becomes visually an equal filming partner and an equal party in communication. The splitscreen can also be seen as a rendering of the mental states of the father suffering from schizophrenia. By embracing low resolution, rawness and the disorienting dual view as a main stylistic choice – the film sensitizes the viewer, creates a space for empathy and acceptance towards this illness [Figs. 7–8]. This intention is reinforced verbally in the discussions about what it is like to undergo clinical treatment for schizophrenia in Romania, as the father expresses his disagreement with the way he and his condition are handled by the healthcare system. The personal becomes political in a subtle way. The digital video capitalizes upon the home video style: it captures the personal, intimate character implied by the analogue VHS, and also captures the idea of the analogue set of connotations that stem from its material substrate.

The Temporal Distance Assumed by the Analogue

A frequently evoked symbol of the photographic process is that of freezing a moment, and that of the analogue in general is that of being a trace, an imprint. Photographs and other type of analogue images are conventionally used to visually represent past tense. Within the context of the filial narratives about parents and grandparents photographs are being used often as diegetic objects to signal generational gap and the temporal distance of the parents' life story, or become substitutes for those already gone. Within this filial-generational narrative context analogue images are also present as metaleptic leaps, as inserts displaying a variety of media, designating temporal leaps. These type of inserts

are photographs in *Fragile Memory*, home videos in *Us against Us*, but an idea of pastness can be conveyed through other type of analogue media such as drawings and other handmade images. The distinction between diegetically present and inserted analogue media can be observed in Aliona van der Horst's film *Love is Potatoes* (2017). As the daughter of a Russian woman who left her country in order to leave in the Netherlands and as a director who tries to deal with her mother's unspoken reasons that led to emigration, Aliona van de Horst undertakes several journeys to Russia to take care of her mother's heritage, a sixth of the surface of a small village house. Filmed in participatory and observational style, the director is an actor participant who finds letters, personal belongings and photographs related to her mother and her the five aunts [Figs. 9–10]. Several scenes show the director searching for explanations in private letters, getting in physical contact with the objects that had become mere memorabilia of the past, and are seen as litter by some of the family members. The photographs and the letters become catalysts of the epistemic search, but the director chooses not to use these indexical documents as illustrations of the past. The past is understood phenomenologically, as coming alive in the present, in the imagination of the filmmaker by reading the letters of her mother and by spending long periods of time in her ancestor's house. The imagined past is presented in the film in the form of animated inserts that perform not just a temporal leap, but also a leap to the inner images of the daughter. Although obviously not indexical, and loosely related to the iconography of the Soviet propaganda (images of Stalin, the use of the colour red), the animation invokes the idea of the analogue through the hand drawn, 2D style, imitating wood carved imprints [Figs. 11–12].

Despite severing the head of the hydra of indexicality – i.e. avoiding the evidential use of photography and other media, the metaleptic jump into the world of animation preserves the markers of materiality, by using highly abstract, yet haptic images. Through these conjunctions the film mediates the traumatic experiences of Russian women under socialism, but also positions the filmmaker as a woman who takes care of this past as postmemory, through collecting and archiving not just images but also producing haptic postmemory objects, such as her film. This is the reversal of the mother-and-daughter roles that Patrizia de Bello (2007) described in her theoretical work on photo albums: in the era of analogue photographs usually mothers assumed the role of the family archivists who used the photobook as a site for family identity construction, but also designed it as a haptic object.

Reproduction and Manipulation of the Analogue with Digital Tools

Aliona van der Horst's film *Turn your Body to the Sun* (2021) is not an autobiographical one, but it tells the story of a female protagonist, a Ukrainian emigrant performing a similar quest into her family past. As an allegory for the phenomenological quest, the daughter, Sana embarks on a long train journey to Ukraine, following the path of her father, a former Soviet soldier who was captured by the Nazis, and in consequence he was sentenced to a brutal work camp by the Stalinist regime. He survived the camp by writing letters to an unknown young girl, who became his wife after his liberation. Their daughter, the protagonist of the documentary tries to understand what made him the silent, reserved person she knew as a child, through his diaries, various personal and public archives, and registries. Throughout the journey Sana can be seen reading letters, browsing through documents, she even finds photographic evidence backing up her father's story in a journal. Yet, within the metaleptic leaps into the past, the film refrains itself from the evidential use of indexical media again. A distinct space is created for the visualization of the processes of postmemory: Sana is pictured in a black box-style screening room, where newsreel images about the life of unidentified Soviet soldiers from the Second World War are screened in the background. The gallery space with no seats, without the conventional distance between the space of the viewer and the screened image – signalled by the seats in this environment allows for a different contact between the image and the beholder. As Sana watches the images in the dark, she merges into the image of the screen, sometimes her body becomes a surface to be screened upon. During one of her interactions with the screened images she tries to capture the images with her hands, literally performing an allegory about the wish of getting in contact with the past [Figs. 13–14]. The newsreel footage contains visceral images like images of hunger, of the dead, or images of full nudity, capitalizing upon the analogy between the nude bodies and the body of the 16mm film. These are not singular bodies, the faces of the unknown persons become collective representations of any soldier.

Sometimes the 16mm newsreel footage about soldiers fills the screen, it is slowed down and fragmented into close ups. These inserts surprise us with the combination of these already conventional techniques with digital colourization and digital image corrections. The shortcomings of the digital manipulation are made visible, there are variations in sharpness, images become legible, then disappear again in a blurry blind field and even falling apart into pixels. These

failures of the digital enhancement render these images ambiguous, their visibility becomes frail, their faces become uncanny, reminiscent of deep fakes [Figs. 15–16].

In *Turn your Body to the Sun* not photographs, but analogue film fragments are screened and become spaces of projection – within this film the character of Sana is the one who projects her longing for his father in these picture, but virtually it could activate any viewer's screening. By renouncing traditional tropes of authentication, such as evidentiality, particularity and also the materiality of the analogue Aliona van der Horst opens up the found newsreel image not just to narrative elaboration but also to a contemporary culture embracing the digital, AI tools for maybe less information and confirmation but offering new possibilities for affective connection.

The leap between the present and the past, between the first person docu-footage and the archival images result in poetic, essayistic visuals, and create incongruous moods on the level of spectatorship. While the personal archiveology becomes a narrative stimuli for the filmmaker immersed in his/her own story, they also elicit "another kind of empathy" with a wider, collective appeal for the viewer. Within this context the haptic visuality of archival images become "lures to feeling and thought" (Marks 2015, 173), sites for meta-communication and abstraction, and call for a "reflective spectatorship" (Plantinga 2019).

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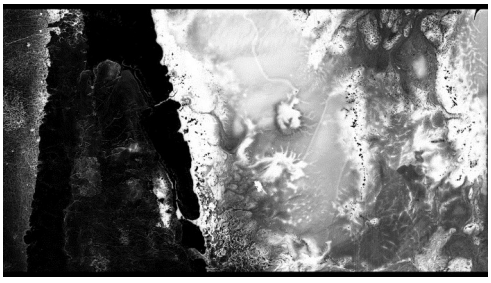
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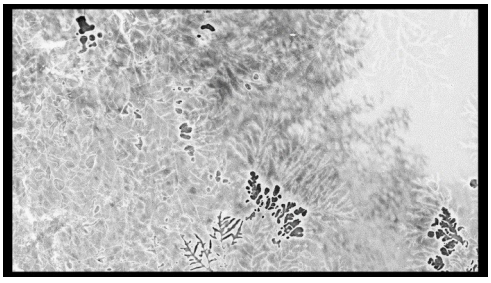
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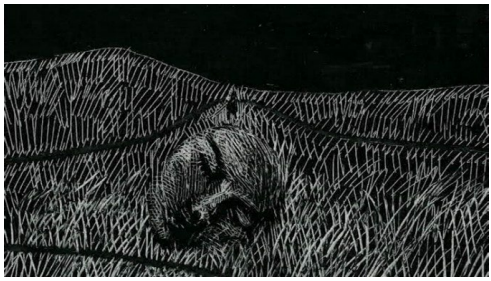



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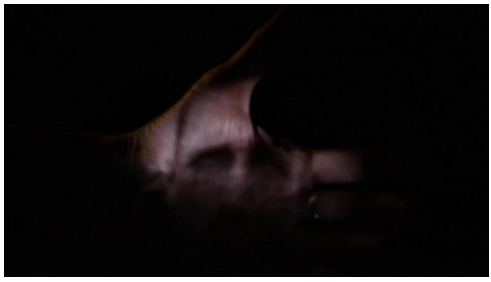



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