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Rethinking the space between filmmaker, subject and audience; reflections on the shifting nature of the authorial agency in the age of interactive documentary

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**Rethinking the space between filmmaker, subject and audience;
reflections on the shifting nature of the authorial agency in the
age of interactive documentary.**

by

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A supporting statement submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This dissertation presents an extended analysis of my three most recent works; two feature-length documentaries, *ABC Colombia* (2007) and *Home Sweet Home* (2012) and its companion piece, the interactive project *Ghost Town* (2013), the first chapter of an ongoing multimedia investigation of the transformation of cityscape over time.

It comprises an account of the genesis of the publications, the nature and scope of the research and research methodology informing the published works, a theorisation and analysis of the films and the filmmaking processes, along with a discussion of how they contribute to knowledge and advancement in the field of documentary filmmaking and interactive storytelling.

All three works explore places and communities I am personally connected to (and inhabit), questioning the relationship between place and identity and the notions of home and belonging, while at the same time interrogating and constructing my own particular belonging to each of the places they engage with.

Critically engaging with both the process of making and the works' final form, this dissertation examines the nature of documentary filmmaking as a cognitive and relational process, a form of engagement with the world that implicates subject, filmmaker and viewer alike. It also reflects on the shifting nature of the authorial agency in the age of interactive documentary.

Interrogating and contextualizing my personal developments within the evolving field of documentary filmmaking and new forms of storytelling, in particular the database interactive documentary, the dissertation engages with the critical discourse surrounding contemporary documentary production, drawing from existing scholarship and practice.

Note on Portfolio

The following films are supplied with this dissertation on DVD:

- *ABC COLOMBIA* (90min., 2007)*
- *HOME SWEET HOME* (90min, 2012)

* Please note that the screen needs to be set to 16:9 to view the film in the correct ratio.

Alternatively *ABC Colombia* can be viewed at:

<https://vimeo.com/111630428>

Password : ABCEnrica

The interactive work *GHOST TOWN* (2013) can be accessed at:

<http://ghosttown.entertheswarm.com/>

Table of content

Introduction.....	5
Prologue – Documenting a way of seeing.....	20
<u>SESSION 1 – FRAMING SPACE & TIME</u>	
1.1 The Space between the filmmaker and the subject.....	28
1.2 The insider/outsider perspective – <i>ABC Colombia</i>	35
1.3 The insider/outsider perspective – <i>Home Sweet Home</i>	60
1.4 Framing Time – Rendering the Transformation of Place in Time.....	74
<u>SESSION 2 – The Spatialization of Time: From Editing to Compositing</u>	
2.1 <i>Ghost Town</i> – The Urban Database Documentary.....	78
2.2 Deep Mapping – The archaeology of modernity.....	89
2.3 From editing to compositing & questions of authorship.....	93
Epilogue.....	100
Appendix One (List of Published Works).....	104
Bibliography.....	107
Filmography.....	115
Interactive Works.....	119
Appendix Two - <i>Home Sweet Home</i> 's Treatment. See separate document.	

INTRODUCTION

Face to face with the real your taut attention shows up the mistakes of your original conception. It is your camera that corrects them. But the impression felt by you is the sole reality that has interest – Robert Bresson – Notes on the Cinematographer

The image in cinema is based on the ability to present as an observation one's own perception of an object – A. Tarkovsky – Sculpting in Time

Corporal images are not just the images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera, and its relationship within the world.

– D. MacDougall – The Corporal Image

The world we are in the process of building, cannot be viable without a regard for cultural differences; the other cannot be denied as his image transforms. – J. Rouch – Camera and Man

Two journeys will alternate in this dissertation, two intertwined movements partaking in mapping and demarcating its field of enquiry, in framing its critical gaze. These are two reflective and reflexive narratives that feed off and inform each other: on one hand a journey unpicking the personal developments in my own practice within the evolving field of documentary filmmaking and new forms of storytelling; on the other, a critical exploration of the relationship between the published work submitted and the current body of knowledge and practice in the field, and how my work might be considered a coherent and significant contribution to documentary form and to some of the key notions that frame and inform this practice.

As in any proper journey, these will both trace and demarcate subjective paths, and take place within particular spatio-temporal dimensions, so crucial to existence and its perception, as well as to its mechanical and digital re-production.

In my attempt to unpick and chart my own work's trajectory (as well as to analyse how it intersects with other trajectories in its field), I thought it would be useful to employ notions of Space and Time as coordinates/metaphors to index some of its joints and nodes, starting and turning points, junctions, connections, links and so on, as well as to map the experiential, conceptual, creative/formal, and relational topographies of this process of discovery and making sense of the world, which is ultimately what I conceive documentary filmmaking practice to be. A cinematic form that – beyond its capacity to tell stories – has a distinctive power to explore and put us in touch with our humanity.

Many filmmakers, alongside engaging with their own practice, also reflect on it in very significant and seminal ways (see Tarkovsky 1986; Rouch 2003; Bresson, 1996; MacDougall 1998, 2006; Jonas Mekas various, just to mention a few), often clearly outlining film's potential as an analytical tool, a way of making sense of complex social interactions, as well as its potential to shift the paradigms through which we understand the world we inhabit. As filmmakers, they are uniquely situated to talk not so much about what their films mean to viewers, but about how they themselves and the subjects of their films experience the act of making them. In what follows I will also attempt to add my modest contribution to this debate 'from the inside'.

*

My filmography spans 25 years (18 of which have been within academia) and includes quite a few titles as writer/director/cinematographer (four feature-length films and many more shorts, realised within both a professional and an academic context), which have been screened at national and international festivals and broadcast on major television stations (Channel4, Arte, PBS, RAI TV, YLE TV, among others). Overall a significant and internationally respected track-record of producing award-winning socially engaged and politically aware films in the contexts of Latin American, European and British society and culture. More recently, I have also started to engage with new forms of storytelling, such as interactive database documentary.

While the list of published work presented for this PhD spans back to 1995, for this dissertation I will concentrate my analysis on my three most recent works: two feature-length films, *ABC Colombia*¹ (ABCC, 2007) and *Home Sweet Home*² (HSH, 2012) and HSH's companion piece, the interactive database documentary *Ghost Town* (GT, 2013).

My documentary practice started in 1988, with my first documentary film, *41bis Quai de la Loire* (20min, Video8) realised within the documentary filmmaking course at Les Ateliers de cinématographie VARAN (Jean Rouch's school of documentary in Paris). The time spent at VARAN, during which I also realised my second film *Les sardines, ça se mange debout* (20min. 16mm, 1989), was quite influential in laying the seeds for the development of my self-reflexive and interrogative practice combining personal stories with political mindfulness. I will be returning later to Rouch's influence on my own particular form of participatory observation, and in particular to the central role the camera plays in it.

¹ Submitted to the RAE 2008

² Submitted to REF 2013 alongside *Ghost Town*

Intriguingly *41bis Quai de la Loire* – like my most recent film *HSH* – explored the gentrification of a working-class borough. It engaged – albeit still tentatively - with themes that would become central to my documentary practice, in particular that of my recent works, such as the transformation of place in time, displacement, home and belonging. Exploring the relationship between place and identity *ABCC* and *HSH* also interrogate and construct my own particular belonging to each of the places they engage with.

I would like to highlight that the three works discussed in this dissertation all engage with communities I inhabit, while remaining nonetheless a *stranger*. The fertile, albeit at times unsettling, condition of *the stranger* – in Georg Simmel’s terms the *potential wanderer* ‘who comes today and stays tomorrow’ – is by far the best way to define the particular place I look from, my insider/outsider perspective within these works.

He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself.

The unity of nearness and remoteness involved in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him, distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near. For, to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation; it is a specific form of interaction. (Simmel, The Stranger, in Wolff, 1950:402).

ABCC - set in Colombia’s conflict area of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, where together with my Colombian husband I own a small piece of land - and *HSH*, set in the London borough where I reside, the Elephant & Castle, form the first two works of a trilogy exploring places and communities to which I am personally connected, questioning

– from an insider/outsider perspective – the relationship between individual, community and territory, and how this relationship contributes in defining both identity and destiny.

An Italo-French co-production³ *ABCC* was initially developed with the help of the European Media Fund till Thierry Garrel (ARTE France) came on board as commissioning editor of *Grand Format*, one of the most prestigious slots for authored documentaries in the world.

Former director of ARTE France’s Documentary Film Unit (1987-2008), as well as producer and director of numerous documentaries, Garrel is a towering figure for European documentary, having made a major contribution to the renaissance of the genre, both in terms of encouraging diversity and the emergence of an independent sector engaged in International co-productions. In his essay ‘The Renaissance of Documentary Filmmaking in France’ (2012), Michael Witt explores in details ‘the pivotal role Garrel played in relation to the renewal of documentary’ since his initial time at La Sept⁴ where he ‘systematically set about nurturing a documentary culture and cultivating a taste for ambitious documentary work’ and his continuous effort over forty years to defend and foster creative and auteur-driven television programmes made by committed filmmakers.

I will come back to this very influential figure in European documentary and to his commitment to the Deleuzian concept of cinema as a ‘*machine à penser*’ (thought-machine’).⁵ For the moment I would like to stress the importance of Garrel’s support to *ABCC*, and how much his presence and guidance both during development and editing

³ For Arte France *Grand Format*, Channel4 *True Stories*, PBS *Global Voices*, and the Finnish YLE TV.

⁴ La Sept became La Sept ARTE (a joint Franco-German venture aiming to produce and broadcast programmes of an ‘international and cultural nature’ to promote ‘mutual understanding and unity among the people of Europe’) in 1992, solidifying La Sept’s achievements and, as Michael Witt points out, providing the real ‘game-change in the regeneration of documentary filmmaking in France’, and I would add also in some European countries, such as Italy, where documentary was totally absent from television and considered a B genre (partly due to its association with fascist propaganda). A range of Italian authors were produced or acquired by ARTE helping to also foster Italy’s own ‘documentary renaissance’, slightly later in the mid 1990s.

⁵ In an interview with Marie-Dominique Arrighi for *Liberation*, Garrel stated: ‘Documentary isn't a machine for seeing, it's a thought-machine, for those who make it as well as those who watch it.’ (Le documentaire, ce n'est pas une machine à voir, c'est une machine à penser, tant pour celui qui le fait que pour celui qui le voit)
http://www.liberation.fr/medias/1997/01/08/thierry-garrel-responsable-de-l-unite-documentaire-de-la-sept-arte-voir-au-dela-du-miroir-du-reel_195334

allowed for a proper research process to take place. This is due to the fact that - increasingly rare in the present TV commissioning climate – Garrel had a way of thinking about documentary filmmaking, and consequently a way of working with the authors, which fostered ‘the construction and articulation of meaning’, rather than the spectacularisation of the real. Believing in the importance of television as ‘a crucial imaginary space in which society can interrogate itself critically’ - in what he termed ‘creative, authored television’ – Garrel put in place a production model based less on mass production than on the constant invention of prototypes.⁶

To document is to create knowledge. The subsequent editing process entails finding a form that allows for the communication of what has been found, thought about, and looked at. Television is a means of communication in so far as it is a means of expression like language, which creates meaning through inference. Together with the producers, directors, and writers, we work to articulate meaning audio-visually through non-literal means.

(Garrel, *Liberation* 8/01/1997)

I initially met Thierry in 1996 at Festival du Reel in Paris, where my N.F.T.S graduation film *Fine Pena Mai* (16mm, 90min. 1995) was screening, as he was considering acquiring the film for ARTE. However, *ABCC* was the first project I presented to him, together with the French co-producer Serge Lalou, from Les Film d’Ici⁷, another important presence on the team. With Lalou and Garrel on board, *ABCC* was presented at the Amsterdam Film Forum⁸, where it got funding from various other broadcasters, including Channel4 and ITVS (Independent Television Service US). This permitted a substantial research and shooting period in Colombia (on and off between August 2004 and December 2005) as well as to edit over seven months. This extensive fieldwork (comprising research and

⁶ Garrel, quoted in Witt 2012:16

⁷ ‘From the end of the ’80s Les Film d’Ici became the single most powerful independent engine driving the regeneration of documentary filmmaking in France’ M. Witt, 2012:20. One of the most experienced producers in Europe, Serge has produced more than 350 films, documentaries and feature films, including Nicholas Philibert, Avi Mograbi, Robert Kramer, Claire Simon, Ari Folman among others; many with the support of Garrel and ARTE.

⁸ One needs 25% of the budget in place and one commissioning editor attached to the project to submit the project to the Amsterdam Pitching Forum.

development as well as shooting – phases that often overlap in my work, as I tend to introduce the camera early on in the research), allowed for a particular way of working with the people I was filming, crucial to create the conditions for a substantial and meaningful encounter between the filmmaker and the subject to take place.

A long editing phase is however also important, as it not only enables a thorough revision of the material to properly articulate the final film-text but also provides extensive *exposure* to the film characters and situations beyond the shooting, which prolongs and deepens the initial encounter. A sort of double-exposure allowing for what Renov intriguingly theorises as ‘secondary revision’, with ‘the gap between experience (the moment of filming) and secondary revision (the moment of editing) producing an ineradicably split diaristic subject’ and effecting the ‘staging of subjectivity’ (2004:114). As I will discuss more specifically in relation to my own work, it is in this ‘secondary revision’ where the truly analytical power of film lies, with understanding arising from ‘the thoughtful interrogation of documents (the real in representation) and the contradiction they engender’. (Ibid)

ABCC’s editor was Ruben Korenfeld, a talented Uruguayan-born editor with extensive experience editing what in France is known as ‘authored documentaries’. Ruben could not only speak the characters’s language but also had personal experience of the Latin American reality, which helped him to develop an independent relationship with the material. Ruben went on to edit also my next film, *HSH*. The process of shaping a film – which often includes more professional figures, such as producer/s and commissioning editor/s – transforms the initially more personal experience of the shooting into a collective or multivocal one, well before the spectator is brought in. Finished in December 2006, *ABCC* was broadcast on ARTE France (Autumn 2007), *More4 True Stories* (December

2007), Yle Tv (Finland – May 2008), and premiered in the USA in July 2008 on PBS World, *Global Voices*. It was also presented at a number of national and international film festivals, winning several awards and nominations⁹ (for full list of festivals, please refer to submission).

The second film of the trilogy is *Home Sweet Home* (2012) a French/British co-production, realised with many of the persons I had collaborated with for *ABCC*. Produced by Serge Lalou (les Film d'Ici) and Sandra Whipham (for Tigerlily films, UK), who later became one of the directors of BRITDOC Foundation, *HSH* was also supported by ARTE France. However, as Thierry had left Arte by then, it was his deputy editor, Pierrette Ominetti, who had taken over from him, who finally commissioned the film for *Grand Format*. However, I did send Thierry a fine cut of the film before completion, as I was missing his stimulating input. This is what he wrote as testimonial for the Impact Case Study I presented to the REF 2013.

I discovered the completed film last winter, while in Vancouver, and was impressed by the quality of the documentary approach of an urbanistic topic – both from a large and smaller human scale – and the filmic achievements.

Enrica Colusso's works are part of the new visual anthropology school within documentary, where brave authors not only get a privileged access to strong characters on the field, but also commit themselves as protagonists and narrators, providing to large audiences very rich and complex discoveries of peculiar societies and topics.

Thierry Garrel Head of Documentary Unit at ARTE France 1987-2008

⁹ ABC Colombia won the *Spirit Award* for Documentary at the Brooklyn International Film Festival, the *Prix Média* 2009 (Documentary) Fondation pour l'Enfance (France), the *Youth Award* and the *Jury Award* at Cimameriche Film Festival (2009), and the Best Story Award at the International Festival 'A film for Peace' 2010. The International Academy of Television Arts & Sciences has selected ABC Colombia in the Documentary category for the 2008 International Emmy Awards competition. Nominations: Prix Italia; (Verona 2007); TV3 Award (la Corporación Catalana de radio y televisión - Corporació Catalana de Ràdio i Televisió – CCRTV) a platform for all productions covering the violation of human rights; 2008 Learning on Screen Award, BUFVC, UK, category: broadcast.

In terms of methodologies, *HSH* shares most of those already mentioned for *ABCC*, to which I shall return later:

1. Extensive fieldwork: research/development and shooting (*HSH* was shot over 3 years, between January 2009 and September 2011)
2. The identification of key ‘social settings’: privileged, meaningful arenas where social dynamics and conflicts are at play (the one-classroom school in *ABCC* and the Heygate Estate in South London in *HSH*; or the lifers’ prison in *Fine Pena Mai*).
3. The identification of key characters (or social actors) to accompany over time, as they engage with the challenges they are facing.
4. The importance of developing an intimate relationship with the main characters, who become to a certain extent partakers and accomplices in the filmmaking process
5. Shooting my own films: the centrality of the camera as a way of connecting to the world and of embodying the narrative gaze
6. Using a very small crew (often no more than two persons, myself and the sound recordist, but at times even shooting on my own) to foster a very intimate relationship with the persons/situations filmed, crucial to the kind of work I’m interested in producing.
7. A long editing phase where the film is constructed. For *HSH* editing lasted almost a year (overlapping with the shooting) and was divided in two phases phase interrupted by several months of shooting.

While both films explore places and communities to which I am personally connected, as well as share similar working methods, the formal, rhetorical strategies used in *HSH* are somewhat different, denoting a substantial stylistic shift incorporating the participatory mode within a more complex, mosaic-like, multi-layered and multi-vocal essayistic approach. Asserting and reinforcing the ‘first person’ mode of address already tentatively present in *ABCC*, the latter film breaks the continuity of space and time through the use of archives to introduce the historical dimension – as well as the question of personal versus official narratives – with the author’s voice assuming more clearly a leading role in bonding together the multi-perspective narrative the film constructs. This shift away from

linear storytelling will be later fully explored in *HSH*'s companion piece, the interactive project *GT*.

In *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, Laura Rascaroli convincingly argues the necessity – as the social and art context are transformed in postmodern societies – for the filmmakers to develop different tools ‘to gain access to the real’ (2009:5). One of the main topics addressed in this dissertation will be the shifting nature of the authorial agency within my work, discussed in the context of what – as a filmmaker – I feel to be the best strategies to ‘gain access to the real’ in the ever-changing postmodern and post-grand narrative scene (an experience of reality the filmmaker shares with both subject and audience).

The final work of the trilogy exploring the transformation of place in time, and interrogating notions of home and belonging, will be set in Rome, the city where I was born and lived for the first 26 years of my life, before moving abroad. Provisionally called *The Long Way Round*, this ‘homecoming’ through the process of making the film will be set within Rome’s monumental cemetery Campo Verano, where my younger brother – who died a year before I left Italy – is buried. The most autobiographical and self-reflexive of the three works, the film is conceived as a visual essay combining and negotiating a wide range of addresses, exploring not only the subjectivity of the maker, but also her implication in social and historical discourses. Looking at the city of the living from the city of the dead, *The Long Way Round* aims to expose and interrogate the transformation the ‘eternal city’ and Italian society have undergone since my departure, a quarter of a century ago.

The trope of the transformation of place in time is also crucial to my most recent,

interactive work *Ghost Town* (2013), the first chapter of a wider research project: an ongoing multimedia investigation of the transformation of cityscape over time, which engages with new forms of storytelling to provide an innovative framework for developing new perspectives on urban experience. Drawing on renowned archaeological theorist and artist Michael Shanks' notion of 'deep-mapping' and Jesse Shapins' theory and practices around urban representation, the final project will take the form of an interactive 'deep' map of the Elephant & Castle – an area of central London presently undergoing massive regeneration – and in particular of the Heygate Estate over the last hundred years. *GT* initial chapter – the last work submitted for this PhD – sets up the project's conceptual story space, introducing users to the idea of a story as a navigated, cognitive journey, as well as to the story protagonists. Co-produced by Jason DaPonte (The Swarm, a digital creative company that is also the publisher) and myself, *GT* was realised on a relatively small budget with the support and collaboration of a range of people. These include Sandra Gaudenzi as consultant, Francesco Fantoni and Ruggero Gallimbeni as Development, Programming and Animation.

*

The critical and reflective account that follows analyses in details my last three works – *ABC Colombia*, *Home Sweet Home* and *Ghost Town* – presenting notes on each item comprising an account of the genesis of the publications, the nature and scope of the research and research methodology informing the published works, a theorisation and analysis of the films and the filmmaking processes, along with a discussion of how they contribute to knowledge and advancement in the field of documentary filmmaking and interactive storytelling. It is structured as a Prologue, followed by Two Sections and a short Epilogue.

The Prologue, *Documenting a way of seeing*, addresses the historical background and some of the theoretical framework significant to my documentary practice. It discusses the premises of my *way of seeing* considering my overall filmmaking practice, a practice-as-research conceived as a cognitive and relational process. The *Prologue* also discusses the centrality of the camera – as a catalyst and conduit – to my practice (an idea further developed in the next chapter), through an engagement with both scholarship (Jean Rouch in particular, but also MacDougall and others) and specific film practices. Finally, I introduce another notion central to my practice, that of the ethical encounter, the face-to-face with the film subject¹⁰, which I address through an engagement with Emmanuel Levinas’ *phenomenology of the other* and the perspective of moral philosophy, of ‘a mode of thought that is better than knowledge’. What lessons can be learned for the construction of the subject in documentary filmmaking?

Section One – *Framing Space and Time*, uses notions of space (physical, perceptual, representational, social as well as notions of proximity) and of time (how questions of temporality affect film practice and the construction of the film-text) to engage with a number of areas of inquiry.

It opens with a chapter exploring the space between the filmmaker and the subject, addressing notions of proximity, the encounter between the filmmaker and the subject and the space ‘in-between’, also through an engagement with Levinas within others, with the frame posited as the space of inscription of ‘the other-as-seen-by-me’.

This chapter also retraces man’s relationship with the camera from its inception via Rouch’s seminal text ‘Camera and Man’, further articulating the camera’s crucial role

¹⁰ This will be further developed in the next chapter, *The Space between the filmmaker and the subject*.

within a certain tradition of participatory and self-reflexive ethnographic filmmaking, which has been very influential to my own film practice.

The following two chapters analyse in detail the insider/outsider perspective of the enunciating subject in *ABCC* and *HSH*, mobilising Simmel's notion of *the stranger* to define the particular place I look from. They also consider research and filmic methods during the projects' development and shooting, with a particular emphasis on the collaborative relations with the characters.

The chapters also address how each film articulates questions of authorship, enunciation, narration and communication via the analysis of the rhetorical structures implemented, while at the same time tracing and problematising the surfacing of the enunciating subject. How do I inhabit my films as an author? These chapters critically engage with the shift from a more traditional 'participatory observation' mode of address to the progressive negotiation of a plurality of modes and 'voices', and to a more explicitly articulated personal viewpoint, (and consequent foregrounding of my own partiality and multiplicity as a subject). With the postmodern having the 'matrix of all possibilities' (Rada Bensmania, 1987:92) the challenge for a filmmaker today, I would argue, is to develop a subjective cinema capable of negotiating the coexistence of different registers of address in open dialogue with each other, each interpellating the spectator in their own distinctive way, and generating – together – 'a thought-provoking reflection articulated through words and images, sounds and montage' (Rascaroli 2009:40) and defined by unorthodoxy and openness.

Section Two – *The Spatialisation of Time: From editing to compositing*, analyses in detail my interactive database documentary *GT*, also engaging with some timely questions concerning new forms of storytelling and the shifting nature of the authorial agency in the computer age.

What are the affordances of this new narrative mode that Sandra Gaudenzi suggestively defines as ‘*The Living Documentary*’ (Gaudenzi, 2013)? Which of my previous concerns and *modus operandi* survive into this new form and what new concerns have drawn me to it? How are notions such as *connecting* and *engagement* rewired by the enhanced relationship with the ‘world of the viewer/user’ it affords? How is the practice of ‘sculpting in time’ transformed within the context of digital cinema and, in particular, non-linear ‘open works’¹¹?

This chapter will also explore the notion of the spatialisation of time in interactive non-linear narrative. As William Brown posits in his recent *Supercinema: Film-Philosophy for the Digital Age*, ‘If Lev Manovich identifies digital cinema’s move away from editing towards compositing, then we might argue that film has shifted from being a temporal depiction of space (one analogue frame, then another, revealing a space over time via cuts) to being a spatial depiction of time (different digital/digitized elements forming a harmonious whole within the frame, without need to cut).’ Furthermore, Manovich likened digital cinema to a database, in that it is ‘made up of interchangeable moments in time that are ‘navigable’ in the same way that space is (we can travel through time, like space, in any direction we please).’ (Brown, 2013:103)

Questions of *temporality*, concerning not just its representation but also the way the experience of the viewer (turned internaut)¹² is modified through the process of actively engaging in the shaping of its own journey through the work, are central to this new mode of storytelling, and its complex, multi-vocal authorial agency. To what extent does the

¹¹ In the sense discussed by Umberto Eco – (Open Work 1962)

¹² internaut: any person well-trained in navigating and using the Internet. Word Origin: Inter(net) + (astro)naut. Usage Note: computing slang. Dictionary.com's 21st Century Lexicon. Dictionary.com, LLC. 07 Oct. 2014. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/internaut>>.

internaut, by customising his/her journey through the material, becomes the co-author of this living organism, continually redefined by each of its users?

If – as Pasolini argues in ‘Observation on The Long Take’ (1967) – it is thanks to death that our lives become expressive, and montage – rendering *the present past* through formal closure – gives the ultimate significance to the ‘chaos of possibilities, the search of relations among discontinuous meanings’ that make up our reality, what is the faith of the authorial agency in the interactive documentary practice? Are we witnessing the death of the author, (Manovich) or – more subtly, is the authorial agency reconfiguring itself for the post-digital revolution era (Shapins)?

This dissertation ultimately interrogates and contextualises the developments in ‘my poetics’ (and the formal/critical/theoretical framework they mobilise) within the evolving field of documentary filmmaking and new forms of storytelling, drawing from existing scholarship and film and engaging with the critical discourse surrounding contemporary documentary production. While I will be talking here mostly about my own poetics and practice of making documentary films, I hope that describing and theorising some of the challenges that I have confronted in the process of making them, and keeping to the specificity of my work will, however, allow the exploration of wider questions that are of concern to both filmmakers and theoreticians – in particular those concerned with questions of subjectivity, first person narratives, situatedness, the point of view, embodiment in and around film, and the construction of selfhood and identity through media practice – contributing to our knowledge of the workings of documentary and its ability to ‘gain access to the real’.

Prologue – Documenting a way of seeing

To reflect about one's own film practice is a challenging and often problematic task.

It is not just trying to give a name and a rationale to formal and stylistic choices which are often intuitive, or to considerations and suggestions born out of the encounter with a specific subject or context, or even to define the influences and the affinities with other filmmaking practices, but also, and most importantly, to question one's own way of looking at the world.

This is particularly important if one considers – as most filmmakers and viewers would do these days – that a documentary film is not the objective recording of a reality pre-existing the shooting, but rather the fruit of the encounter between this reality and that of the author, and that a film is always also the documentation of a way of seeing. The recording of the possibility of a contact between the author and the world: the world that she's filming, as well as the world of those who watch her films. (Colusso, 2003:67-68)

This is how I began the essay, 'Documenting a way of seeing', written in 2003 for a collection of essays by Italian authors and theoreticians – and in which I reflected on my documentary work and its poetics. Since then my work has more deliberately taken on what Alisa Lebow defines as a 'first person' mode of address, 'films that speak from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position.' (2012:1) In fact, it would be fair to say that one of the possible distinguishable trajectories within my body of work is that of the 'surfacing' of the authorial voice, with the traces of the 'body behind the camera' becoming increasingly visible, accessible constituents of the story being told.

In the following chapters, I will explore in detail the ways and modes this 'emergence' has manifested itself and how self-inscription and subjectivity has been increasingly constructed and expressed through its concrete signifying practices. There is little doubt however, that from the very beginning, documentary filmmaking has definitely and most

significantly been for me a personal process of discovery and interrogation of reality, a form of engagement with the world that implicates subject, filmmaker and viewer alike. A practice-as-research conceived as a cognitive and relational process that is also a way of creating models of subjectivity, of articulating the experience of being in the world and the process of making sense of it, of fostering film's transformational power and social impact *with an end-goal that exceeds and extends beyond the finished artefact*. A process that – using the camera as a lens through which to explore and connect – favours experience over explanation, and which proceeds more by implication than by demonstration, often resulting in works that are difficult to reduce to the simple idea of ‘a discourse about the world’, given that the significance of its imagery – as Barthes alerts us (1970:60) - at times resists linguistic or even metalinguistic translation.

My early work from the mid 1990s, and in particular *Fine Pena Mai* (*Life after Life*, 1995), has been identified by Italian film critics and scholars¹³ as crucial to the renaissance of Italian documentary at the end of the ‘90s, alongside that of a few other independent filmmakers such as Rossetto and Rosi. In discussing our work in his *A History of Italian Documentary: Images and Cultures of the Other Cinema*, filmmaker and scholar Marco Bertozzi asserts,

[t]he importance of an aesthetic awareness – beyond the historic and sociological dimensions – becomes essential again. (...) The poetic treatment of reality operated by these authors¹⁴ invests both the formal and the metalinguistic aspects of this cinematographic practice. (...) The battle is for the irreducibility of thought into images, in favour of the autonomous ontology of the latter. It is here that the best documentary cinema becomes an art of reference for philosophical reflection, a discipline capable of creating its own formal concepts, well beyond narrative or content analysis. (Bertozzi, 2008: 258-59, translation from Italian my own)

¹³ Adriano Aprà and Marco Bertozzi, within others

¹⁴ Colusso, Rossetto, Rosi

David MacDougall (2006) argues that rather than ‘trying to say something’ most of a filmmaker’s effort goes into ‘putting the viewer into a particular relationship to a subject and creating a progression of images and scenes to understand it.’ Thus, before films are a form of communicating and representing, before they express ideas, before they describe anything ‘they are a form of looking.’

In many ways filming – unlike writing – precedes thinking. It registers the process of looking with a certain interest, a certain will.

When we look, we are doing something more deliberate than seeing and yet more unguarded than thinking. We are putting ourselves in a sensory state that is at once one of vacancy and of heightened awareness. Our imitative faculties take precedence over judgment and categorization, preparing us for a different kind of knowledge. We learn to inhabit what we see. Conversely, thinking about what we see, projecting our ideas upon it, turns us back upon ourselves. So, simply to look, and look carefully, is a way of knowing that is different from thinking. (2006:7)

The ‘sensory state that is at once one of vacancy and of heightened awareness’ directly resonates with my own experience of the particular state one finds oneself in while filming; a sort of lucid trance many filmmakers (Rouch in particular, but also Vertov, Ivens and MacDougall) have vividly described in their own writings. An acutely receptive state, during which one *tunes in* to the slightest movements of the other’s body (mimesis) and *listens* to its faintest inflections, intentions and expressions with a highlighted focus and a concentration uncommon to daily encounters.

MacDougall’s suggestive passage also strikingly evokes Levinas’ idea of *proximity*, the call for a communication with the other effected through an openness and a passivity: the ethical encounter in which ‘thought finds itself *faced* with another refractory to category.’ (1969:40) While clearly filmmaking is far from passive, this mode of *attentiveness-to-the-other* attained during filming and a certain way of facing-the-other-through-the-camera – a

way that necessarily presupposes a relationship characterised by sensibility and affectivity, by caring and complicity – far from being inevitably a form of objectification and appropriation (as some critics have claimed) can be experienced and practiced as a form of ‘open reception’, a *silent* though alerted state where all sorts of epiphanies can thus become possible. An ‘exposure to the other’ capable of shifting the balance from knowledge/appropriation to awareness/understanding; a practice where ‘the problem of knowledge and truth must thus be put in relation to the event of meeting and dialogue.’ (Levinas, 1993:15)

Filmmakers who practice this kind of participatory observation, such as Kim Longinotto, have described their modes as receptive and ‘gentle’, collaborative and dialogic¹⁵. An approach which could not be further from the ‘soulless surveillance’ implicit in the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ notion and its ‘reality TV’ offsprings.

For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. This relationship established over the things henceforth possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said, is the relationship of conversation. The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face.

(Levinas, 1969:50)

The ethical encounter, where the self is ‘charged with a responsibility that alters being irrevocably and from which compassion, solidarity and social justice emerge’ (Renov 2004: 164) is a notion central to my filmmaking practice and I shall return to it to discuss how this applies to my work, and the key role the camera plays in it. Given the centrality of Levinas’s *phenomenology of the other* and his *ethics of alterity* to documentary practice, I would however first like to further explore the implications of some of his radical

¹⁵ FilmDoo’s interview with Kim Longinotto - Being a Documentary Filmmaker (Part One), www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mbhDKNqE9Y

propositions to both the documentary encounter, and to the debate about the kind of contribution documentary filmmaking can bring to the understanding of our shared humanity, to ‘a mode of thought better than knowledge’.

In *The Subject of Documentary*, Michael Renov reminds us that Levinas compellingly argues that a crucial element of our humanity eludes the very project of rational enquiry, rejects the ‘knowledge producing enterprise’ and invokes ‘an order higher than knowing. An order that, resounding like a call, touches his individuality... From unique to unique, from one to the other... the wonder of a mode of thought better than knowledge.’ (Levinas, 1993:3). Renov revisits Levinas’ reasoning for his shift away from Ontology: ‘*I think* comes down to *I can* – writes Levinas – to an appropriation of what is, of an exploitation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power... possession is pre-eminently the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine’ (Levinas, 1969:46). Justice on the other end – Renov reminds us – depends on the willingness *to receive* from the other beyond the capacity of the I. This relation is an ethical one and it is epiphanous: ‘reason, without abdicating, is found in a position *to receive*’. (Renov, 2004:151) While firmly positing the centrality of Levinas’s ethical philosophy to contemporary documentary practice, Renov puts a crucial and provocative question to the documentary practitioner: ‘What is the “mode of thought better than knowledge” to which Levinas alludes, and how can it be approached through an aesthetic practice such as documentary filmmaking in which (documentary) “subjects” are transformed into “objects” (of knowledge)?’ (Ibid:148) Renov questions if – in Levinasian terms – any documentary remains inevitably a form of appropriation and/or exploitation. ‘Is this not the price of any textual authorship? Can any documentary hope to escape unscathed?’ (Ibid:148)

But is the transformation into an ‘object of knowledge’ the inevitable fate of the documentary subject? Or else, can documentary practice – given ‘an investment in otherness, in the necessity of responsibility and of the ethical encounter’ (Renov, 2004:167) – rather engender a unique and fertile space where self and other come ‘face-to-face’, in an encounter that has the potential to transform them both profoundly? Has documentary the capacity not only to bear witness and document but also to partake in constructing the possibility of this meaningful ‘encounter’? And can some of the qualities identified by Rouch in the ‘camera as a catalyst’ extend beyond his notion of ‘psychoanalytic stimulation’ capable of precipitating action and character revelation, to precipitating the ‘face-to-face’ encounter?

Renov’s concerns about what ‘real conversation’ can happen on tape, might suggest that old qualms about supposed links between ‘spontaneous’ and ‘authentic’, (as well as a notion of the ‘real’ as somewhat independent from a specific relational process) die hard. As an active filmmaker I differ with Renov’s scepticism and I would rather argue that – while a relationship mediated by the process of filming is clearly different from one which is not – there is no reason to believe that given the proper conditions and attitude, the process of making a film cannot become a generative arena of mutual discovery, understanding and co-creation, of what philosopher of dialogue Martin Buber suggestively defines as the ‘sphere-of-between’. A sphere that Buber, in his reflection on ‘The Nature of Man’, defines as ‘rooted in one being turning to another as another, as this particular other being, in order to communicate with it in a sphere which is common to them but which reaches out beyond the special sphere of each.’ (Buber, 1992:39) A ‘non-indifference’ to the other that in Levinas’ recasting of Buber’s centrality of the relation, also becomes the founding moment of selfhood, the very pre-condition for the construction of subjectivity. He writes: ‘The other is in me and in the midst of my very identification’ (Levinas,

1998:125), with language – notes Renov – emerging ‘as the constitutive medium in the *relation* between self and Other... “The problem of knowledge and truth must thus be put in relation to the event of meeting and dialogue.” (Renov, 2004:151)

Considering the inevitable ‘co-creation’ a certain documentary practice enacts, as well as its potential to foster and enable self-reflexivity not only in the maker but also in the subject filmed, could one – taking a less dismissive stance - thus imagine filming as a process capable of creating the special conditions of *listening* and complicity that can actually facilitate this kind of epiphany? A process through which the ‘face-to-face’ becomes possible, allowing for the fundamental condition of alterity to be grasped and thus provoking a responsibility for the other, an ethical obligation. A relational process – between the filmmaker and the subject – that, inscribing itself in the film images and the film-text, becomes an integral part of the narrative the film delivers, thus also allowing the audience to partake and witness the unfolding of that particular encounter and of its ethical significance.

In the following chapters, I will engage with some of these questions through the analysis of my own films and working methods. I will argue that filmmaking before (and alongside) being a mode of communication also allows for a unique and significant mode of relating and communicating between the filmmaker and the film subject, a qualitative ‘listening’ and a mutual awareness capable of profound transformation in both.

I would like to stress that what I am mostly concerned with addressing here is the influence of Levinas’s *ethics of alterity* to my filmmaking practice at its moment of inception – rather than at the level of its reception – with the *exposure* to ‘the face’ of the Other as an encounter taking place in actuality, *in situ*, between human beings – a filmmaker and her subjects – sharing the same spatial and temporal coordinates, and partaking in the process

of making a film, rather than the aesthetic experience of spectatorship.

I leave the productive encounters that can be staged between Emmanuel Levinas's thought and cinema at the level of reception to scholars far better positioned than myself to argue this complex ground. As a filmmaker, I am both better positioned and more interested in reflecting on the staging of the ethical encounter as a self-reflexive narrative, with the film-body becoming a 'site of significance' for the audience not so much as far as the encounter with the Other, but rather as spectators of the face-to-face between the filmmaker and her subject; an encounter hopefully founded on an open and 'nonreductive relationship to alterity ... a way of encountering others through images that neither mirrors nor projects onto them the prejudices of our own self-conception.'¹⁶

¹⁶ Ethics in film philosophy (Cavell, Deleuze, Levinas), D. N. Rodowick (Harvard University) p.19. Unpublished essay

SESSION 1 – FRAMING SPACE & TIME

1.1 The Space between the filmmaker and the subject

There is no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything.

– Errol Morris¹⁷

I live, therefore I make films. I make film, therefore I live. Life. Movement. I make home movies, therefore I live. I live, therefore I make home movies. – Jonas Mekas¹⁸

‘To a certain extent at least’ - as film scholar Andre Bazin famously stated– ‘the auteur is always his own subject matter.’¹⁹ And if that is true for the mode of presentation that Christian Metz defines as ‘histoire,’ it is even more so for the documentary ‘discourse’, where the implication between the author and the world represented is much more significant.²⁰

In fact, if we agree that the heart of any documentary is, as Stella Bruzzi clearly points out, ‘the very juncture between reality and the filmmaker’ (Bruzzi, 2006:6), then I would argue that a film is thus not only the result of a negotiation between reality and interpretation, reality and image, but, by bearing the traces of the encounter between the filmmaker and the subject, it allows for the relational process through which the self engages with, gets to know and makes sense of the world, while making it at the same time visible, accessible to the viewer.

¹⁷ Morris, Errol. 1989. ‘Truth Not Guaranteed: An Interview with Errol Morris.’ *Cineaste* 17, pp. 17.

¹⁸ NOTES FROM ABOVEGROUND - JONAS MEKAS AND THE JOYS OF OPPOSITIONAL CINEMA by Aaron Cutler, in *The Believer* ed. March/April 2009

¹⁹ Andre Bazin ‘La politique des auteur’ *Chiers du Cinema* n.70 April 1957

²⁰ And where the source of enunciation rather than hidden or suppressed (as is in *histoire*) is actually present. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982;

If we imagine the self and the other – fragmentary and partial as they are – as mutually constitutive, coexisting in a shared, if shifting, field of consciousness, rather than completely separate entities, then David MacDougall’s assertion that ‘[t]he subject is part of the filmmaker, the filmmaker is part of the subject’ has possibly greater implications.

Not every documentary filmmaker shoots her own films, though for the many who do the identification of one's own gaze with that of the camera and the search for the ‘right distance’ from the subject, of which the image is a direct reflection, has an irresistible attraction. I clearly belong to this group, as filmmaking is for me inseparable from the act of filming itself. Though every phase of the film process, from the conception to the screening of the film with an audience has its fascination, personally, the most significant moment happens for me during the shooting, when with my hand-held camera I *take position* within the situation I’m sharing with my subjects, and look at them as images in the viewfinder. Through the camera – extension of the eye, of desire, of a way of thinking and looking at the world – the other stops, for a brief moment, to be inexorably ‘external’, separate. The image seems to offer itself as a possible space where self and world coexist, inscribed as one inseparable unity, *an image of the other as seen by me*. Or could we say, borrowing from Levinas, ‘the other in the same’?

...the irreducible paradox of intelligibility: the other in the same, the trope of the for-the-other in its antecedent inflexion. This signification in its very signifyingness, outside of every system, before any correlation, is an accord or peace between planes which, as soon as they are thematized, make an irreparable cleavage, like vowels in a dieresis, maintaining a hiatus without elision. They then mark two Cartesian orders, the body and the soul, which have no common space where they can touch, and no logical topos where they can form a whole. Yet they are in accord prior to thematization, in an accord, a chord, which is possible only as an arpeggio. Far from negating intelligibility, this kind of accord is the very rationality of signification in which the tautological identity, the ego, receives the other, and takes on the

meaning of an irreplaceable identity by giving to the other. (Levinas, 1998:70)

As MacDougall acknowledges, 'For many filmmakers, then, documentary is not just a way of representing the real, but of touching within themselves and others something more fleeting and precious.' MacDougall defines this contact as 'the quick', the 'deep inside' of representation, and wonders: 'Is the quick the pretext of the film, or the other way round?' (1998:49) A difficult question... What is indisputable is the significance of this 'connection' to a certain film practice. 'To the filmmaker, then, image-making is largely an extension of the self towards other, rather than a form of reception or appropriation.' (Ibid:29) What remains after the shooting is the registration of a memory, the memory of a possible contact. An intense emotion that – during editing – one seeks in the rushes, and upon which one builds, I believe, some of the strongest moments in the final film.

The camera as an accomplice

Many theoreticians and filmmakers alike have claimed the potential of the cine-eye as a catalyst of a 'deeper-truth', as well as of cinema as a '*machine a penser*' (see Benjamin, Vertov, Balatz, Rouch, Deleuze), capable of producing a 'different kind of knowledge', or even of radically transforming the way we think. Let's briefly explore these claims, which are of course significantly interrelated.

In his seminal paper 'Camera and Man' (1973), Rouch retraces man's relationship with the camera from its inception, reflecting on its fundamental double-nature:

*Was the cinema going to be an objective instrument capable of capturing the life and behavior of man? The marvelous ingenuity of Lumiere's *Sortie des Usines*, *Dejeuner de Bebe* and *Peche a la Crevette* permitted one to believe that it could.*

But from the beginning, the camera was equally revealed to be a 'thief of reflections.' Perhaps those workers hardly paid attention to Lumiere's little cranking box as they left the

factory. But some days later, upon seeing the projection of the brief images, they suddenly became conscious of an unknown magical ritual-that old fear of the fatal meeting with one's double.

Equally, Rouch identifies Flaherty and Vertov – two very different filmmakers sharing a fascination for the cine-eye and the filmic process, which they both conceived as a collaborative process – as the ‘two men that we owe everything that we are trying to do today.’

If Flaherty and Nanook were able to tell the difficult story of the struggle of man against a thriftless but beneficial nature, it was because there was a third party with them. This small, temperamental, but faithful machine, with an infallible visual memory, let Nanook see his own images in proportion to their birth. It is this camera that Luc de Heusch so perfectly called the ‘participatory camera’. (Rouch, 1973:3)²¹

By Rouch’s own admission, French *cinéma-vérité* – the movement he founded in the 1960s to experiment with the possibilities offered by synchronous sound and light portable cameras – was influenced by Flaherty’s participatory approach (also claimed by the more ‘observational’ American ‘Direct Cinema’, Leacock, Pennibacker, Maysles), as well as being inspired by Dziga Vertov’s theory of ‘kino-pravda’, which translates precisely to *cinéma-vérité*. ‘Kino-pravda is a new type of art; the art of life itself. The cine-eye includes: all shooting techniques, all moving pictures, all methods-without exception-which will allow us to reach the truth - the truth in movement’ (‘Kinok Manifesto’, in Rouch, 1973:3).

Clearly Vertov is also one of the forefathers of Deleuze’s idea of cinema as a medium wherein new forms of thought manifest itself for the first time, as cinema not only puts ‘movement in the image, but also puts movement in the mind’ (Deleuze, 2000:366). While

²¹ Flaherty developed *Nanook*’s rushes in his cabin and showed Nanook all the footage he shot. ‘He had no idea – reflects Rouch - that he was inventing, at that very instant, “participant observation”.’

Deleuze's reflections on cinema are too complex to properly address here, what is relevant to this discussion is his proposition of cinema as an art capable of producing new ways of thinking and of knowing. As MacDougall points out, however, a filmmaker's knowledge is often believed to lie in the film's conclusions, expressed through a visual rhetoric that juxtaposes shots and scenes, or at a more general level explains behaviour through narratives of power, exchange, belief and emotions. He writes: 'These are the "messages" that the film communicates. A kind of visual reasoning has taken place. Yet the filmmaker has seen and knows much more that can be communicated in this way. Is it possible to transmit this knowledge – which cannot be conceptualized to others? ... Showing becomes a way of saying the unsayable.' (2006:5)

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein famously draws a distinction between saying and showing: 'What can be shown cannot be said' (4.1212). However, as James Williams argues in *The Transversal Thought of Gilles Deleuze: Encounters and Influences*, Deleuze – by adding a third term, *expression*, and asserting that the 'most powerful things, things without which life is incomplete, can only be expressed' – 'sets an aesthetic dramatisation at the heart of his philosophy. His accounts of art insist on the expressive power of works over and above what they can represent.' (2006:46) This yearning towards filming the invisible – that which cannot be said or shown – or, to use Robert Bresson's beautiful metaphor, 'To translate the invisible wind by the water it sculpts in passing' (Bresson, 1996:76) is, I would argue as an active filmmaker, one of the most powerful and distinct drives of film as language and practice. One which is clearly brought to the fore by Joris Ivens' testimonial film *Une histoire de vent* (A Tale of the Wind, 1988), and in particular by the memorable scene where the aging filmmaker sits at the edge of the desert, awaiting the wind for what seems an eternity till he faints of exhaustion; and then again, until the wind finally – cathartic and beautifully entrancing – arrives. Merging landscape and mindscape with

breathtaking effects, the scene also upholds – through the image of a sorceress placing a ‘wind-machine’ next to Iven’s chair while tracing in the sand the silhouette of a dragon, the Taoist symbol of the autumn wind – the somewhat *magical* nature of filmmaking; a notion that is already central to Rouch’s approach, but also undoubtedly implicit in many of the claims concerning the cine-eye. That’s how Rouch describes his own way of working with the camera:

For me then, the only way to film is to walk with the camera, taking it where it is most effective and improvising another type of ballet with it, trying to make it as alive as the people it is filming. I consider this dynamic improvisation to be a first synthesis of Vertov's cine-eye and Flaherty's participating camera.

Thus instead of using the zoom, the cameraman-director can really get into the subject. Leading or following a dancer, priest, or craftsman, he is no longer himself, but a mechanical eye accompanied by an electronic ear. It is this strange state of transformation that takes place in the filmmaker that I have called, analogously to possession phenomena, ‘cine-trance’. (1973:8)

‘Walking with the camera’ was made possible by the new lightweight 16mm cameras and synchronous tape recorders which appeared at the end of the 1950s, liberating the camera from its immobility and transforming the camerapersons into ‘living cameras’. (Ibid:7)²² Among the first to use the equipment were Richard Leacock (*Primary*, 1960 and *Indianapolis* 1960) in the United States, and Edgar Morin, Michel Brault, and Rouch (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1961) in France.

Both Rouch and Leacock (who had recently moved to Paris) were my teachers at Les Atelier Varan in ’88 and ’89. Charismatic, in love with life, and with a child-like curiosity that made them always ready to innovate and experiment, these two towering figures of documentary filmmaking had of course a lasting influence on my formation as a very

²² The Living Camera was also the name of Richard Leacock production company in the early ‘60s.

young filmmaker. While Leacock and Rouch were closer (as friends) than either manifestos or indeed film practice might suggest, Rouch was a far more political and self-reflexive filmmaker, who never really shared Leacock's initial faith in the 'transparency of image-making', and who was far more interested in the camera's potential to 'unveil the hidden truths', in its qualities as a catalyst capable of precipitating action and character revelation. In that sense I have always felt closer to Rouch's 'way of seeing' and to his belief in the power of the camera to 'generate reality':

*Yes the camera deforms – says Rouch – but not from the moment it becomes an accomplice. At that point it has the possibility of doing something I couldn't do if the camera weren't there: it becomes a kind of psychoanalytic stimulant which lets people do things which they wouldn't otherwise do.*²³

According to Jean Rouch, Vertov and Flaherty had 'discovered the essential questions that we still ask ourselves today: must one "stage" reality (the staging of "real life") as did Flaherty, or should one, like Vertov, film "without awareness" ("seizing improvised life")?' (1973:3) Skipping a few generations I could, I suppose, say that Rouch and Leacock are the 'two men that I owe everything to that I am trying to do today.'

In the following chapter, I will further discuss the space between the filmmaker and the subject, and the role the camera plays in its construction and articulation, through the analysis of this aspect in *ABCC*, looking in particular at the camera as an accomplice, a presence capable of generating complicity and collaboration with the film subjects.

²³ Rouch, cited in G Roy Levin *Documentary explorations: Fifteen interviews with filmmakers*, Garden City, New York, 1971:137

1.2 The insider/outsider perspective – ABC Colombia

Their childhood has been a laborious learning about indifference, about fear, about uncertainty, about revenge. These children weaned by hatred, with whom was so stingy the milk of the human tenderness, preserve inside themselves a depth of innocence, of generosity and of cheerfulness, and deserve a society less selfish and less hypocritical, a society capable of putting in their hands something better than shotguns and machine guns.

William Ospina (Colombian poet and essayist)

The other is in me and in the midst of my very identification

Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*.

For me, Colombia is not a foreign country. Having decided to share my life with a Colombian, it has become one of the places of my existence, where I spend several months every year. The process of researching *ABCC* started in August 2004, alongside the construction of a home on a small piece of land in the Colombian Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta my husband and I had bought, together with some friends, almost 10 years before.

Along the Don Diego river, one of the many rivers that descend from the Sierra Nevada, there is a small building of white cement, on whose walls the children have drawn the flora and fauna of the region. This is the school class of the children of the ‘campesinos’ of the area. A single elementary class that gathers 25 children between 5 and 15 years old, the age at which school ends around here. But not all children finish it. Many at that age have already begun to work as ‘raspachines’ – coca leaf pickers – or to patrol the mountains as part of the paramilitary, to protect the area – in which there are enormous stretches of coca plantation – from infiltration by guerrillas or the army.

ABCC is an intimate portrait of a small rural community in a part of Colombia entirely controlled by paramilitary forces, rendered through the eyes of the children who grow up there, and are often forced into very difficult choices. The documentary accompanies its young protagonists in this problematic setting through an entire school year, exploring some of the realities that nurture and perpetuate the violence in Colombia.

It also represents the first work of a trilogy engaging with the significant places of my existence (the others being London and Rome), while at the same time interrogating and constructing my own particular belonging to each of these places. One could go as far as saying that each film also constructs a possible site of inhabitancy, a proxy *home*. While the transformation of place in time was already the subject of my first ever documentary *41bis Quai de la Loire* (1988), having left my original home, Rome, more than half a century ago, this personal condition of displacement (or self-exile) reinforces in me the already generalised experience of the *post-modern condition* that Rascaroli identifies as one of the underling causes of the recent surge in first-person films. She writes:

Subjectivity in non-fiction forms of contemporary filmmaking is, I would argue, a reflection and a consequence of the increased fragmentation of the human experience in the postmodern, globalized world, and of our need and desire to find ways to represent such fragmentation, and to cope with it. (...) autobiographical accounts feed the hope of finding and creating unity in a life that is increasingly experienced as disjointed, displaced and dispersed. (2009:4-5)

One of my recurring tropes to which I will be returning in my discussion of *HSH* and *GT*, where it becomes a major area of inquiry – this overarching theme only became evident in its full implications much later on in the process of making *ABCC*; possibly as late as during the very many discussions with audiences that followed the screenings at festivals

all over the world. As I was responding to the audience's questions about my insider/outsider perspective and how such an intimate film was possible in such a difficult-to-access reality, the complexity of my belonging to this reality, my own particular relationship to this place and to these people hit *home*. After all, wasn't this a film about the children, rather than myself?²⁴

This late epiphany might sound odd, yet it is also quite useful in denoting the unconscious components at play in the act of filming, even for experienced self-reflexive filmmakers (or so I thought, as this was my 3rd feature-length project, not to mention the many shorts...). It is increasingly evident to me, however, that the sub-conscious workings at play in the filmmaking process extend far beyond the actual shooting itself – the more obvious on-the-move responses to a situation that direct the camera choices on location. These seem to extend – unsurprisingly really – to the entire process: from the deep-rooted motivations that prod a filmmaker to engage with certain realities, to the strategies mobilised during the different phases of the process, to the kind of insights the process as well as the finished work unearth and deliver.

Moreover, this resistance to accept/admit – even to myself – that I could be, at least partially, the subject of my documentary work is, retrospectively, quite significant, as it could help to explain the tension between a practice that from the very beginning has had an existential dimension and is experienced as a personal commitment and a form somewhat shy of fully embracing the rhetorical strategies of the essayistic, self-reflexive, film. An approach that has been described by Rascaroli as metalinguistic, autobiographical and reflexive, positing a well-defined, extra-textual authorial figure as its point of origin

²⁴ This ambivalence towards foregrounding and expressing my subjective pov – beyond what is already a situatedness inscribed in the images by the relationship the film constructs and describes – is deep rooted, and I will attempt to analyze it at different levels in the chapter.

and constant reference (2009:3). Discussing the gradual surfacing of the authorial voice within both *ABCC* and *HSH*, and how this affected the formal communicative strategies it mobilised, will be an important aspect of the following chapters.

This tension is indeed quite meaningful, as it also attests to two major forces at play in the context in which a filmmaker produces her work: on the one hand what is acceptable and encouraged by the production/distribution as well as the critical apparatus of filmmaking, and on the other what a filmmaker feels to be the best strategy to ‘gain access to the real’ in the ever shifting postmodern and post-grand narrative scene; an experience of reality the filmmaker shares with both subject and audience.

Re-examining *ABCC*’s research and creative process, as well as the finished film, from today’s perspective (almost a decade and a few works on) gives me that distanced vantage point from which to reconsider and interpret some of these questions (and choices made at the time), some of which – while being pretty obvious even then – might have been too close to the mind’s eye to be properly put in focus at the time. But were these at least picked up by the lens’ eye?

Retrospectively, this apparent, at least partial, disavowal of how personal all this was is particularly striking, given that *ABCC*’s initial concept was clearly born out of a personal moral dilemma, an interior conflict that urged resolution: some of these children that I had seen grow up, and over the years transform into hardened adolescents, provoked complex feelings within me. What secrets were hidden in their elusive gaze? Could I still embrace them? Should I be afraid? Could I be at ease thinking myself as part of – albeit in my own particular way – this contentious community? How shall I respond to certain choices, which I found extremely difficult to come to terms with?

ABCC is, without doubt, principally an exploration of what it means to grow up in an area of conflict and to be confronted with very difficult choices. The extensive exposure and success this award-winning film has had with a variety of audiences has contributed in its own way to shaping public discourse and enhancing understanding of issues surrounding this disenfranchised and marginalised community. The film has also been used by several organisations engaging in conflict analysis and resolution, including USA Congress examining Colombian paramilitary communities to inform votes on an aid bill, and was screened at the Geneva Forum on Social Change organised by ITVS and Geneva University (June 2009) accompanied by a panel discussion.

In a sense, therefore, I am not entirely surprised that – as *ABCC*'s research and filming proceeded – the question of what would be the best strategies to tell the story from the children's perspective took over, overshadowing the more personal motivations that had initiated the process in the first place: my need to understand and come to terms with this reality, my necessity to situate myself within it. However, while this initial personal and emotional trigger had slightly retreated to the 'back of the mind', it was clearly still a powerful motivation working at the 'imaginative' level. The process of making the film thus also became my own way of engaging with this personal dilemma. And the frames, the shots, the scenes, turned into the arena where my own interior conflicts and resolutions interacted with the various conflicts and resolutions I was witnessing and mediating through the film; the sites where I dialogically situated myself in relationship to what I was witnessing. Now the question is: how much should this process have been more explicitly articulated and made part of the story?

In his introduction to *The Subject of Documentary*, Renov argues that the ‘repression of subjectivity has been a persistent, ideologically driven fact of documentary history’ (2004:xviii), however with direct cinema it became ‘a cardinal virtue,’ as clearly exemplified by Robert Drew’s assertion ‘The filmmaker’s personality is in no way directly involved in directing the action’.²⁵

Rejecting the American pretence of invisibility, Rouch had, to be fair, always believed in the necessity of acknowledging the impact of the filmmaker’s presence (as well as of involving the persons filmed in the filmmaking process) and preferred to ‘generate reality’ rather than passively observe it, pushing participant observation to a new level of interactivity while also rehabilitating the use of voice-over as a narrative device by severing its association with the authoritarian tone of the expository mode. ‘In the hands of Rouch and others... the filmmaker’s voice has come to imply not certainty so much as testimonial presence tinged by self-doubt or bemusement’ (Renov, 2004:xxi). And even Leacock – by the time he reached Paris in ’89 – had himself embraced a far more subjective stand in documentary, exemplified by his humorous *Les Oeufs à la Coque de Richard Leacock* (91 min, 1991).²⁶ Nonetheless at the end of the 1980s, Les Ateliers VARAN and later even more so the NFTS were still permeated by some of the ‘observational dogmas’, which were undoubtedly rather hostile to the emergence of the subjective voice or to the use of formal strategies that utilised hybrid forms.

While shooting *41bis Quais de la Loire* (1988), about the regeneration of the 11th arrondissement in Paris, I was considering editing a sequence that consisted of a montage of windows, some still lived in and others walled (the houses evacuated and sealed-off).

The idea was that over the walled windows there would be dead-silence, while over the

²⁵ quoted in Renov, 2004:xxi

²⁶ As Leacock himself put it ‘Inspired by both new love and Gulliver’s Travels, *Les Oeufs à la Coque* (aka Richard Leacock’s *Soft-Boiled Eggs*), is a ravishingly beautiful, important film about nothing in particular, a love song dedicated to France, French women in general and one French woman in particular, and a montage portrait of quotidian life in a country at peace’; source: <http://www.der.org/films/paris-years.html>

opened windows a series of daily situations (children playing, a mother and a daughter having a chat, a person watching TV, would be delivered by sound only. The feedback of the tutor in charge of the first workshop was rather lapidary: ‘Documentary filmmaking is not the *Commedia dell’Arte*’ (which, being Italian, sounded like a double indictment...)

It is quite possible then that all this ‘hostility’ and consequent sense of guilt were still playing somewhere in the back of my mind as I navigated my way to a more assertive surfacing of the subjective voice, to establish myself as the ‘well-defined, extra-textual authorial figure’. *ABCC* is, in fact, the first of a series of works which have a clear autobiographical component and where my persona becomes more than ‘a presence inscribed in the frame’; it becomes, albeit lightly, one of the characters. It is also the first film where my voice – speaking in the first person – is used as a narrative device, a way of locating myself in relationship to characters and situations. As Rascaroli argues, to speak the ‘I’ is ‘firstly a political act of self-awareness and self-affirmation’ (2009:2). However, while *ABCC* is undoubtedly a subjective (if not an autobiographical) film, this act of self-affirmation in the finished version of the film is still rather shy. Before looking more in detail at some of the research and filmic strategies used in the process of its realisation, here is a noteworthy anecdote, which might serve to elucidate the pressures in play that might have contributed to the muted aspect of this nonetheless emergent subjective voice.

During the shooting, my husband – a trained architect turned filmmaker, who collaborated on *ABCC* as field producer – was also overseeing the construction of our house in the Sierra. This process - which started together with the film research and finished with the completion of the shooting – was also filmed. Initially this was just a way of documenting the construction, but it soon became clear to me that the building of the house provided a telling metaphor of the process of ‘homemaking’ within the community, a process that

inevitably confronted me with difficult dilemmas. During the editing, this footage was woven in the film cut as a parallel story. This imagery of the construction of the house was actually the ‘place I spoke from’, where my voice could be heard. As the school year proceeded, the building blocks of both the story and the house were assembled and given shape, till the final scene/conversation with Miguel Angel, the young protagonist, which closes the film. This is set in the newly finished house, which is built in the land where Miguel Angel was actually born and where he had spent the first years of his life, till his father sold it to us to buy a bigger piece of land slightly removed from the river, to expand his illegal crop cultivations. Miguel Angel – now the age his brothers Pedrito and Chepe were when I first met them and we used to go fishing together, still-a-child-but-not-for-much-longer – reflects, sitting in my hammock, on the future and on growing up.

In the discussion following one of the last screenings we had with Garrel before delivering the film to ARTE in December 2006, he suddenly observed, ‘don’t you think you should take away the scaffolding now that the structure is complete? Everything it signified is by now inscribed in the film, you don’t need it any longer...’ I was puzzled: he had always encouraged me to include that material. We tried; the images of building were replaced by sequence-shots of journeying downriver and my voice, slightly re-worked, was placed over them instead. It worked. Thierry was right. The film stood on his own, and – to a great extent – the quality and intimacy of the dialogue between myself and the young protagonists spoke by itself. The final conversations with both Huriday and Miguel Angel are extremely personal, calling directly into question the nature of our relationship, one that clearly far exceeds, on both side, that of filmmaker/subject²⁷.

²⁷ In this last conversation Miguel Angel expresses regret about growing up ‘When one is little people cuddle you, when you grow up all this stops...’ When asked if people still cuddled him, Miguel Angel coyly answers ‘My mother does... and you’. For a discussion of my last conversation with Huriday see later in the chapter.

Nonetheless the effect of getting rid of the ‘scaffolding’ was to significantly transform the film’s mode of address, considerably weakening my position as the film’s point of origin and constant reference, with the question of ‘how I situate myself’ receding into the background, and the personal process of coming to term with this reality remaining mostly un-enunciated.

If we accept Rascaroli’s assertion that the essence of an essay film has to be searched in its deep structures, as well as in the modality of viewing that it produces, getting rid of the ‘visible structure’ that carried the metanarrative of the ‘home-making’ within the community rendered this process implicit, foreclosing audience access to my intimate journal of two significant parallel and entwined processes: that of coming to term with the moral dilemma that had motivated (and framed) the film and that of home-making. The latter, a process that could also be seen as symbolic of the filmmaking itself, conceived as an active process of construction of both meaning and selfhood. I can only imagine that – beyond the time constrains (the film could not be longer than 90 minutes) – the populist climate that was starting to permeate ARTE at the time²⁸ (and eventually led to Thierry’s departure less than a year after the completion of *ABCC*) also played its part. The film as it stands now is far more straightforward and ‘orthodox’ formally – ultimately privileging a fundamentally narrative, albeit clearly subjective, approach – than it would have been if I had kept the superstructure of my own ‘homemaking’ story as the film’s frame of reference.²⁹

²⁸ The La Sept/ARTE led *golden age* of French documentary filmmaking Witt describes in his essay was well gone.

²⁹ The instances in which I speak in *ABCC* are three, while in this more reflexive version there were two more moments. One – very significantly – bridged the last conversation with Huriday and with Miguel Angel. Between the two a sequence-plan panned from a lit stove over various kitchen objects ending on a wider shot of the wall-less kitchen revealing the finished house in the background. My voice-over mused on Huriday’s last words (his admission that – if asked - he will have to kill me in spite of his love for me), unpicking my emotions and my decision to nonetheless embrace him. A reflection that, after a moment of silence, concluded in my statement: ‘the house is finished’.

I must admit that I was initially quite troubled by Thierry's suggestion, which felt rather repressive of my desire, as an author, to shift towards a more complex range of rhetorical structures, one that combined several registers of address: pure observation, participatory and essayistic (explicitly subjective/autobiographical, addressing the spectator directly through voice-over). A formal approach ultimately negotiating non-fiction narrative and essayistic, self-reflexive modes, with the *performance of the self* been played at different levels. However, if I interrogate my reasons for finally agreeing to this, I find their roots, at least in part, in a personal ambivalence I still felt at the time towards shifting from a subjective presence inscribed in the images to a self-enunciating author(itarian) figure, framing the subjects filmed as functions of her discourse. This ambivalence included concerns about overshadowing, with my textual presence, the young protagonists, taking time and attention away from them and their challenges; about the (perceived) 'arrogance' of imagining my own personal story as equally important alongside the children's, as well as a resistance to 'narcissistic-self-revelation' and possibly even a die hard suspicion of voice-over. An ambivalence that, most likely, Thierry felt and used to persuade me to follow his suggestion. Moreover, at that point, I was already fighting for two other crucial aspects, which were also very important to me: to have the film subtitled rather than dubbed (something that was becoming increasingly common in ARTE, even for *Grand Format*) and having my own voice, in spite of its heavy accent, reading the text (rather than some French speaker).³⁰ So it also became a question of priorities.

Nevertheless, while Rascaroli reminds us that voice-over is the most simple and successful way of addressing the spectator (2009:38), she also agrees with Paul Arthur who argues cinema is able to express authorial subjectivity at different levels:

³⁰ I succeed in both instances, however the More4 version – which was reduced to 75min to allow for five 3min advertisement breaks – was finally broadcast with 'someone playing my voice'. This was done without consulting me.

Since cinema operates simultaneously on multiple discursive levels – image, speech, titles, music – the literary essay’s single, determining voice is dispersed into cinema multi-channel stew. The manifestation or location of the film author’s ‘voice’ can shift from moment to moment or surface expressively via montage, camera movement and so on. (2003:59)

It is likely that a series of ‘unresolved questions’ in my mind at the time of the completion of *ABCC* about how to best negotiate these different modes of address, led to a film that, while clearly subjective, was far less self-reflective than originally envisaged. The film reveals, nonetheless, the personal position of the author, which can be inferred by a number of means (including voice-over) through which I, as the enunciator, intervene in the material. Let’s explore the first movement of the film (around 10min.), from the beginning till we reach the film’s main setting, the one-room school.

The title adds a spin on what is presented. It refers to the Book of ABC, a clear allusion to the theme of schooling, central to the narrative, while also suggesting that this is only an introduction, an initiation, to the utter complexity of Colombian reality. Finally, for those who know it, it also invokes Abbas Kiarostami’s *ABC Africa* (2001).

An image of a spider weaving its web at dawn opens the film. This almost minute-long shot presents a visual metaphor of the filmmaking process’s ambivalent nature: patiently weaving together a coherent network of patterns of significance, a web, which is ultimately also a trap, an alluring tool for capturing and consuming. The shot sets the film’s slow pace while also suggesting some of the film’s themes, such as home-making and the remoteness of the rural context the film is set within, both beautifully enticing and deadly³¹.

The film then introduces the two main characters, Miguel Angel and Huriday. The informal conversation with Miguel Angel making lunch in his rudimentary rural kitchen is

³¹ The theme of paradise versus hell is weaved all through the film, also through images of animals (mostly insect, more or less dangerous, like the big scorpion that now bridges the last two conversations with Huriday and Miguel Angel).

a good example of participatory mode. It establishes our relationship's familiarity and intimacy, also, to a certain extent, introducing myself, the enunciator, as the dialogical other in the scene.

The enunciator is also evident, although in a different way, in Nichol's interactive documentary mode, in which the filmmaker presence in the film is apparent and synchronous to the film³², rather than superimposed in post-production (Rascaroli, 2009:37)

This scene introduces some of the key themes *ABCC* will explore – like that of coca crops as the area's main economy, in which the whole community (including children) partake, with Miguel Angel owning his personal field and negotiating the crops with the buyers from an early age. We also learn that both Miguel's brothers are fighting with the paramilitaries up in the mountains, and the rather nonchalant attitude he seems to have towards their eventual death, 'if they die we will have to bury them, what else can we do...'

Huriday's introductory scene raises the theme of coca cropping to another level, away from the family context into the wider local economy controlled by the *paras* (who not only grow it but also *cook* it, transforming it into cocaine), as local youth's main job provider. Over images of Huriday coca-picking, a co-worker's voice intones the notorious 'corridos prohibidos', the 'forbidden ballads' chanting the gestures of the local mafiosos³³. The *corridos* – introduced here for the first time – will be coming back throughout the film. A sort of counter-narrative presenting – in the form of codified and sung oral tradition - the local point-of-view, these glorifying self-portrayals of a certain sector of the

³² Through informal conversations and the subject acknowledging the filmmaker's presence.

³³ Originally of Mexican origins, but now singing about local stories – these *corridos* are forbidden as they glorify the narco/mafioso's culture and their values around violence, revenge, getting rich through illegal activities, defying the authorities, etc. Published illegally and distributed through the black market, the *corridos* are extremely popular with local youths, who feel a personal connection to the stories and know most of them by heart. What follows is the text of the *corrido* sung in this particular scene. *I love to sip good whiskey, while listening to Mexican corridos, and if I want to have fun pulling the trigger, believe me my finger will not tremble. Today I'm loaded, my dream has turned reality, I have become a great Mafioso, no-one will ever be able to catch me, I am more powerful than Pablo Escobar.*

local community embody the role models young boys look to emulate. Often played in their entirety over the images, listened to or sung by the young protagonists (including the children), the *corridos* – micro-stories within the story – are one of the ways the huge out-of-frame reality and culture of violence the children are confronted with is brought into focus. Another will be the school play, to be discussed later.

While Huriday's introductory scene is mostly observational, he also addresses the spectator directly, with a self-reflexive, auto-ironic comment about his condition as a *raspachin*: 'We are going to come out of here with a diploma for coca-picking and a recommendation for jail', an interpellation reinforced by a brief but direct look into camera.

Finally I present myself through my first voice-over, which leads us to the introduction of the teacher, Lucenid, and of the film's main setting, the one-room school.

Miguel Angel and his family are the first people I got to know when I discovered the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, almost ten years ago.

Miguel Angel was only three at the time and his older brothers Pedrito and Chepe, must have been 12/13. Five years later they left to join the paramilitaries.

It was then that I met Huriday. He was 12, the same age as Miguel Angel is today.

The following year Huriday left home. When I asked news of him I was told he was going from field to field with a group of coca-pickers. They hardly saw him anymore.

Today Miguel Angel is still learning to read and write in the small school attended by the children of the local campesinos. Last year there was much coming and going of teachers and most of the children failed. This year a new teacher has arrived.

While factual in tone, this initial voice-over performs several functions; the first and most important is to explicitly address the nature of the enunciator's position in the film-text and locate it in relationship to people and place. The short narrative spans over 10 years –

from when I first arrived to the Sierra till today – and is punctuated with several events that have happened in between, denoting a regularity of presence through time and familiarity with people and situations that set the extra-textual author in a particular position within this reality (someone who comes-and-goes, an outsider-insider, clearly not a journalist or a filmmaker who visits with the sole purpose of making a film). Second, the text, by establishing significant parallels between the different ages of the children mentioned, poses one of the film's main questions and sets what is at stake: will Miguel Angel eventually follow in his older brothers' footsteps? Education is suggested as the only thing that might transform his destiny; a new teacher has arrived, will she make a difference? For Huriday, now the age Pedrito and Chepe had when they joined the *paras*, might it be too late?

The main stage

My films - generally shot over an extended period of time – tend to have a central spatial unity, a sort of 'main stage' (skené) where the *drama* unfolds. In *Fine Pena Mai* (1995) the stage is the Lifers' prison on the Elba Island in Italy, in *HSH* the Heygate Estate, which is also the 'site of enquiry' of my interactive work *GT*. This significance of place is not only a recurring theme in my work, but it also denotes that traditional dramaturgical narrative devices are an important cinematic reference (with all the relative conventions of story and character development). The centrality of time and place – while still holding an important position in my overall style – will be gradually debunked and problematised alongside the multiplication of perspectives (and modes of address) in my most recent work. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Place also situates experience, contributing to articulating and foregrounding 'the place one looks from', while also delivering the coordinates for the more complex social space.

As Simmel points out in his seminal essay *The Stranger* ‘spatial relations are only the condition, on the one hand, and the symbol, on the other, of human relations’ (in Wolff, 1950:402).

When I started to research and develop *ABCC* it was immediately clear to me that the main setting of the film would be the one-room local school – which is also the place where the local council meets monthly to discuss the urgent problems of the community. The school, which gathers children otherwise dispersed among their farms, is their principal space of interaction and expression, both formal and informal. Moments of their lives in class and playtime, the interaction of the children among themselves and with the teacher, would enable us to share, intimately, attentively, the children’s interior world, their reflections and emotions. The ‘compositions’ given by the teacher, draw us into the children’s imagination, the stories by which they try to convey their feelings and perspective, exorcise their fears, and make sense of the experiences of their childish but also violence-ridden universe.

The reality of the paramilitary presence in the zone, the methods they use to control and militarise the rural communities, the ‘rules’ and values they impose, the ‘taxes’ they collect, the total cooperation and collaboration that they demand from the peasant communities they purport to ‘protect’; in short, their absolutism, are unfortunately part of the daily lives in which the children grow, and supply the models that inspire them. However no-one ever talks about this reality, and the *paras* are referred to, in a whisper, as “*los de arriba*” (literally “those above”, referring to the mountains, yet also implying the hierarchical relations). The school, apart from being the space in which the children’s framework and models are mirrored and reformulated, is also the place where principles and directions of growth are imparted to them as future adults. Schools and teachers are

therefore often used by the paramilitary that control the territory as the first and most effective instruments of ‘indoctrination’. The small school on the Don Diego river is no exception. Teachers who don’t follow directives, are suspected of socialist sympathies, or dare striking to protest against lack of payment for their work are promptly requested to leave the area. Finally, education is clearly one of the major issues for the local youth, as unfortunately poor education is rather the norm in these areas.

Initially I had not intended for the teacher to be a central figure in the film – as the children were the focus. However when I went back to Colombia in April 2005 for my second research period, a new teacher, Lucenid, had just arrived from teaching the children of the coca farmers at an even remoter place up in the Sierra Nevada. Apart from living locally, which made her part of the community, Lucenid was quite a different kind of person from the previous lot. A rural child raised in an area of conflict herself and someone who had fought hard to finish her schooling and realise her dream of becoming a teacher – going without eating to pay the school fee and walking long distances through unsafe territories to attend classes – Lucenid was both caring and determined to motivate the children to learn, which – much like myself – she saw as their only chance to improve their future.

I felt immediately drawn to Lucenid as a person, and curious to see how her challenge would play out. Moreover, when I learned that she had to leave the previous place because she didn’t feel safe any longer, after the play she had been trying to put on with the children was banned by the paramilitary, my Rouchian instincts – about situations capable of provoking the surfacing of latent, either unconscious or difficult to enunciate, truths – pricked up. To develop a play with the children imagining and acting out stories portraying their daily reality sounded like a great way to give them an unproblematic space of expression where – at least partially freed from the social taboo by performing – they could

enact their spontaneous emotions about their reality. But was Lucenid – given the previous experience – ready to take the risk? Amazingly, she was.

The role of performing, role-playing, re-enacting personal experiences and psychodramatic techniques in general can play in triggering and embodying ‘deep rooted’ emotional truths and/or taboos is well posited (as well as problematised) by Rouch, who implemented it in several of his early works³⁴. It has more recently been used by works influenced by his approach, most notably Rithy Panh’s *S21, The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2004) and Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012). This delicate and ethically controversial performative approach, while needing to be employed in a careful, thoughtful and considerate way, can produce extremely interesting results, as it has a distinct power to ‘access’ layers of experience that might otherwise be off-limits.

The school play and its process of preparation represent a small scale, but interesting, implementation of this technique. By constructing another level of narration and expression of the children’s daily experience running through the film, the preparation of the school play allows Lucenid to engage the children with themes that would otherwise be considered awkward or taboo (such as the armed conflict, the illegal crops, the way the *paras* control the area), while also allowing them, through discussions about what to ‘put-on-scene’ and through improvised role-playing, to vividly express their values and how they perceive their reality. For this to work, Lucenid’s imaginative involvement was, of course, crucial.

The trust and complicity I immediately felt towards Lucenid was clearly reciprocated by her openness to express dilemmas and taboos – like speaking overtly about the

³⁴ Such as *Les maîtres fous*; *Moi, un noir*; *Chronique d’une été*; *La Pyramide Humaine* (just to mention the most renowned). After this latter, Rouch felt this approach was quite problematic, from an ethical perspective, and decided not to use it any longer.

paramilitary presence in the area and its impact on the children – something I had never been able to do with anyone else in the community, let alone on camera! Considering I had known most people – to various degrees – for almost ten years, this was a truly remarkable encounter. After a few more meetings to discuss her work as a teacher and how the filming could work alongside it, we started. Much like the characters of *Sisters-in-Law* (2005) – Longinotto and Florence Ayesi’s film about women judges in Cameroon – Lucenid understood perfectly what was at stake and what the film was trying to explore and responded to this in a remarkable way. Each from our quite different and distinct roles – me the filmmaker and Lucenid the school-teacher – we undoubtedly collaborated in the making of *ABCC*. This shared process was further enhanced by – in particular at the beginning – Lucenid and myself sitting and looking together at some of the material I shot during her classes.

Digital video has clearly made the long tradition of showing the rushes to your characters – as a way of sharing the experience and process of filmmaking with them – a far easier task than when Flaherty had to built his developing lab at Hudson Bay to project his images for Nanook, or when Rouch showed his material on a small moviescope viewer. This experience is, of course, particularly significant in remote parts of the world, such as the Sierra Nevada, where people have no access to television (or indeed to cinema) and are totally unused to seeing themselves ‘from the outside’, to partake in the other’s gaze. In this circumstance, the camera-cum-projector can retain its full *magic* power as a catalyst. This process, as Rouch eloquently argues, not only produces a very particular, unique, kind of knowledge and insight into the reality explored and its layers of complexity, but it is also – at least for filmmakers working within a certain tradition of filmmaking – a fundamental condition of the ‘ethical encounter’:

By studying this film on a small moviescope viewer with my informants, I was able to gather more information in two weeks than I could get in three months of direct observation and interview. This type of a posteriori working is just the beginning of what is already a new type of relationship between the anthropologist and the group he studies, the first step in what some of us have labelled 'shared anthropology.' Finally, then, the observer has left the ivory tower; his camera, tape recorder, and projector have driven him, by a strange road of initiation, to the heart of knowledge itself. And for the first time, the work is judged not by a thesis committee but by the very people the anthropologist went out to observe. This extraordinary technique of 'feedback' (which I would translate as 'audiovisual reciprocity') has certainly not yet revealed all of its possibilities... But already, thanks to it, the anthropologist has ceased to be a sort of entomologist observing others as if they were insects (thus putting them down) and has become a stimulator of mutual awareness (hence dignity). (1973:11)

As far as *ABCC*, this kind of collaboration was even more far-reaching, with another of its central characters, Huriday, a local adolescent who turned 18 during the shooting. But before getting into this story I would like to say a few words about gaining access to film in this difficult-to-access, let alone to film, community.

The significant access was undoubtedly helped by a series of conditions. First, myself and my husband had been part of this community – albeit in our own way – for several years and we were also in the process of building, with local workmanship, our dwelling within it. This made us both known and to a certain extent I believe trusted, but also it put us in a position to eventually 'take personal responsibility' of any misuse of trust.³⁵ Nolasco, the community leader – who in these areas is also the go-between with the paramilitaries and the community – knew us well, as he was also the person in charge of the construction, and therefore agreed to present our plan to film to 'los de arriba', without whose consent nothing was possible. This was a particularly tense period, the Sierra had recently been

³⁵ In the sense that – if we broke our word, for instance, not to show the film in Colombia, we could not come back or otherwise we would be putting our lives at risk.

fumigated as part of the Plan Colombia³⁶, aimed to eradicate the illegal crops, and – even more problematically – *el patron* who had been ruling the area for 25 years was resisting calls to lay down arms and surrender himself and his splinter group to Colombian President Uribe, who was negotiating with the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), the so-called ‘peace process’. Second, the fact that I was a woman who wanted to make a film about children mostly set in the local school – rather than a man interested in more controversial issues – must have convinced *los de arriba* that this was something not to be taken too seriously or be too worried about. I must confess that being a woman filmmaker in a *macho* context – in spite of its many draw backs – often helps to move ‘under the radar’ and get away with a lot more, as a result of not been taken seriously.

We had nonetheless to agree not to screen the film publicly in Colombia, on TV or in the cinema. A decision that – to a certain extent – also reassured the community that feared being recognised and stigmatised, or worse.³⁷ *ABCC*’s main audiences were therefore the very local – the community itself, to whom I showed the final film – and the global, mostly a western (European and US) film and TV audience, as well as the human rights and academic research contexts. The film showed to the community was, however, slightly re-edited, with a few problematic scenes – both with Lucenid and with Huriday (more about this in a moment) – removed, as some of the things they said might put them at risk within the community. These were replaced by a couple of scenes which I had wanted to include in the film, but had to be cut out because of time constrains. One of these - an 11min long

³⁶ ‘Plan Colombia’ the name for the US aid package since 2000, was created as a strategy to combat drugs and contribute to peace, mainly through military means. The US government began granting large amounts of aid to Colombia in 2000 under the Clinton administration. Since the beginning of Plan Colombia, the US has given Colombia over \$5 billion with the vast majority going to Colombia’s military and police. These amounts are significantly higher than what is being given in economic and social assistance.

From Amnesty International: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/countries/americas/colombia/us-policy-in-colombia>, accessed 10 May 2015.

³⁷ The effect the film could have on its participants’ lives was indeed an extremely serious issue. Being identified as belonging to a paramilitary community could have life-threatening consequences, particularly for Huriday, who was considering joining the paras. I decided therefore to also block the VOD from ARTE (which is normally included in the contract of distribution), fearing someone could get hold of the film and this could find its way to Colombia. Since 2006 things have considerably changed and *ABCC* has been screened in Colombia in several contexts, festivals and private screenings.

scene in which Lucenid keeps after class two children who had been fighting during the recreation, and doesn't allow them to leave till they finally agree, extremely reluctantly, to make peace and shake hands, is a very moving and telling moment, delivering a powerful insight into the values that – even at that early age – perpetuate violence in a country which has not know peace for almost 60 years.

Crossing the line

The first time I met Huriday he was 12 years old. He was accompanying his father – a local stonemason very experienced in the indigenous art of stone terracing without cement – who had come to construct a stone terrace to prepare our rather steep land for the building of the house. Since the fumigation of coca crops there wasn't a lot of work for coca-pickers and Huriday was more around as he was also considering finalising his studies (he only had till 5th grade) to better his chances.

Huriday was looking for work and I was looking for a research assistant to help me identify adolescents who might agree to participate in the film. A very bright kid, coming from a broken family, Huriday, who had been taking care of himself since very young and knew this reality from the inside, seemed the ideal person. During a few weeks we set and talked about young people like him, about the challenges his generation faced – particularly as the situation was in constant flux – what did they think, how were they responding, what alternatives were there? And, more controversially, how did they feel about joining the paramilitaries - one of the few works on offer, as well as a wholesale set of values and attitudes?

Huriday was instantly fascinated by the camera and – as I taught him to shoot – he soon turned out to be a great camera assistant. Also, given that in the Sierra there are no roads

and one walks everywhere – sometimes for hours up the mountain – he also helped out with the equipment as we were a very small crew, made up by myself and my husband’s cousin, also a filmmaker, doing sound.³⁸ Finally, as my Spanish was still a bit rough and local people, in particular the kids, spoke with their own broken Spanish, after each shoot we would sit together to transcribe the cassettes. These moments turned out to be some of the most knowledge-rich moments of the entire process, as Huriday - in his attempt to explain what was said (which was also often ‘coded’) or the situation - was delivering the most insightful ‘translation’/cultural mediation allowing for a profound understanding of local situations and ways of thinking, which would have otherwise been way beyond my reach.

This proximity and collaboration created a strong bond and – while he did come up with some candidates for the ‘adolescent’ character, who eventually turned out to be minor characters in the film – I was becoming increasingly aware that it was his story I wanted to tell. The challenges he faced – his struggle to adjust to the increasingly sporadic work as coca picker, his toying with the idea of joining the paramilitaries – were those of all the kids of his age. Moreover, he had links to Lucenid and the school, which he had started to attend in the hope to further his education. But, most importantly, the trust and bond that had developed between us was priceless: given the context and the themes, he needed to feel secure that I would not put his life at risk. Nonetheless, given that Huriday was quite an introverted, guarded person hiding behind a dark, caustic sense of humour and the stakes rather high, the process of his opening up to the camera was not unproblematic. Initially he was mostly filmed during group situations, the coca-picking scenes or when he attended the school. However he was always present as part of the crew both during shooting and during the cassettes’ transcribing and his collaboration to the filmmaking

³⁸ To remain within the family was essential in this particular context, however small crews are rather the norm for this kind of filmmaking approach where – as Rouch highlights in his writings – long period of shooting as well as intimacy are crucial.

process can be best described a continuous and *in-crescendo* crossing-of-the-line; the line from behind to in front of the camera, the line between being a paid crew member and a character in the film, the line between being a character and collaborating in the making of the film, the line between his inner-self and the persona he was performing, the line between what he was and what he was becoming. I suppose that – to a certain extent – he was mirroring my own line-crossing; from visitor to dweller to documentary director, to film subject, to... The face-to-face encounter was transforming us both.

The turning point in our relationship through-the-lens happened towards the end of the shooting, when – during an interview - suddenly and unexpectedly Huriday confessed to having already taken part – as early as 15 - in helping with ‘dismembering’ bodies. A horrendous practice used by paramilitaries to ‘disappear’ people.

This chilling revelation – delivered while washing his trousers, rendering the interiorisation and normalisation of horror in its fully disturbing dimension – is a potent example of that rare phenomenon known as ‘an epiphany’, a revelation, which Rouch draws attention to when talking about the camera as a catalyst. While we had discussed many times the subject of people disappearance, and the psychological dimension of some of the chilling practices used by the paras, I had never dared asking him how close had he himself come to witness these acts. Was he speaking about something he had heard people talk about, or was he speaking from first-hand experience? Did I really want to know? Was I afraid that asking would put too much of a strain on our relationship? Was he ready to go that far?

But when Huriday – frustrated by the many failed attempts to resolve his economic situation – cracked a joke about setting up a business and becoming a contract killer I

suddenly felt the moment had arrived: ‘and do you feel ready to kill?’ After an initial attempt to hide behind his dark humour, he suddenly let go, and launched into a painfully detailed description of how you cut up a body, and confessing that – while the first time it was profoundly distressing – you then get used to it, ‘it becomes normal...’ I was left speechless.

This scene did not find its way into the film till very late in the process, as - having qualms with how it might portray him to those who didn’t know him well – I had left it out of the selection. One day the editor - who was unusually working on his own – found it and added it to the film. By then I must have been ready to take this on board, and while a lot of work went into it before it found its final shape, I had to agree it was too important to leave it out. I did, however, remove it from the film I brought back to the community.

After that moment my relationship with Huriday became, paradoxically, even closer. Had he feared that if he confessed I would withdraw? Had I been touched so profoundly by what a young boy was exposed to in this part of the world, that I felt like embracing him and getting him out of there as soon as possible, rather than disgusted? The last scene I shot with him – after he decides to join the paramilitary – is revelatory of this stepping up of the relationship. As I challenge him about his choice, he snaps, ‘I know what I am getting into, I do, believe me... but I will have to obey, even if it is going to be hard’. ‘And if they ask you to kill me?’ He laughs, the nervous laugh he has when emotionally challenged, ‘Pray you don’t fuck it up, otherwise you’re going to have it’ and then becoming suddenly serious ‘There is nothing we can do Enrica... That is life (Así es la vida, así es).’

A few days later – after the end of the shooting – I proposed to Huriday that he leave the area. My husband and myself would help him while he established himself in Bogota and found some steady work. He has now finished his secondary school, he's married and lives and works in Bogota. Many of the kids of his generation were not so lucky.

1.3 The insider/outsider perspective – *Home Sweet Home*

Home is no longer a dwelling but the untold story of a life being lived

John Berger – *And Our Faces, My Hearth, as Brief as Photos*

... the body politic practises power, and creates urban forms, by speaking that generic language of the body, a language which represses by exclusion.

Richard Sennet – *Flash and Stone – The body and the city in Western civilization*

It is not in spite of embracing contingency, but precisely because of it, that documentary continues today, in this post grand-narratives era, to gain access to the real, albeit on a radically different basis.

Rascaroli – *Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*

The second work of the trilogy, *Home Sweet Home* explores – like *ABCC* – yet another community I am personally connected to, that of the Elephant & Castle, where I have been living since 1997; an area of London undergoing a massive regeneration, which will profoundly transform it.

While the move from a rural, ‘third world’ context to a global metropolis clearly marks a major difference and sets quite different challenges, both films share nonetheless – as discussed in the introduction – similar working methods. These include extensive shooting and editing phases, a small crew, the identification of key settings as well as of key characters to accompany over time and, crucially, the importance of developing an intimate relationship with them, as they become, to a certain extent, partakers and accomplices in the filmmaking process. In the case of *HSH*, this is particularly evident in my relationship to Helen, its main character.

It is in *HSH*'s formal strategies, therefore, that the challenges posed by the complexity of the urban experience – its underlying ‘postmodernity’ – find their most obvious expression, pushing the observational/participatory approach to its limits and fragmenting the unity of time and space underpinning it. The result is a work considerably more self-reflexive and ‘open’ than *ABCC*, denoting a substantial shift in the authorial agency, explicitly articulating a personal viewpoint, while negotiating the co-existence of a plurality of modes and ‘voices’, of different registers of address, each interpellating the spectator in their own distinctive way, fostering his/her own critical subjectivity. Given the relatively reduced space in this dissertation I will thus, in this chapter, focus on this and others aspects marking a departure from *ABCC*.

Conceived as a personal journey presented in the form of a visual diary, *HSH*'s structure weaves together the unfolding story of the transformation of the Elephant and Castle and the various challenges its characters are confronted with via the filmmaker's perspective, which interacts and dialogues with the reality before it. Incorporating the participatory mode (and its narrative organisation) within a more complex, collage-like, multi-layered essayistic approach, the film multiplies the points-of-view, articulating a multi-perspective narrative – individual, often diverging, perspectives which counterpoint and play off each other – and breaks the unity of time and place characteristic of my previous works, also by introducing the historical dimension (both personal and collective) through the use of archives.

The Heygate Estate is the principal setting of the film and the focal point of all the other perspectives, including that from my window, which looked directly onto the now-demolished estate. The narrative trajectory of the film accompanies the Heygate's gradual transformation from a living community into an empty carcass ready to be dismantled. A

contemporary urban tale portraying the forces at play in the transformation of western metropolis and society, *HSH* tracks the people affected as well as the decision-makers behind the scenes, offering an intimate narrative of life and change in London.

If cities are the physical framework of our society, and images of a city-in-making reflect and construct social models, what can the master-plan of such an extensive regeneration – as well as its complex process of implementation – tell us about the transformation British society has undergone since the previous regeneration, almost forty years ago? What new ideas of social inclusion and sustainable development are here articulated and literally built into the fabric of the city by architecture, urban design and planning practice? With whom in mind has this latest ideal cityscape been envisioned? Set on an urban stage at the unfolding of one historical phase into another, *HSH* engages with issues of crucial importance to today's society, here enacted in the process of 'city-making', and finally asks: what kind of society are we in the process of building?

My own status as the extra-textual authorial figure in *HSH* is – as in *ABCC* – that of *the stranger*, the insider/outsider 'who comes today and stays tomorrow'. However, quite differently from my previous film, this condition here is not only evidently and explicitly articulated from the very onset (see later in the chapter) and throughout the film, but also literally stated through a direct quote of Simmel's concept in one of the voice-overs (@ 68min.)

We live in cities, cities live in us...

We move from one city to another, from one country to another

We change language,

we change habits

we change opinions

Strangers amongst strangers, potential wanderers who come today and stay tomorrow, we yearn to belong.

But what does 'belong' exactly mean to those of us who inhabit a modern city?

And to whom does the city belong?

The text's initial lines are also a direct reference, this time to Wim Wenders' 'diary film' (as he himself called it) *Notebook on city and cloth* (1989). Referencing is actually a constant feature of *HSH*, which uses a range of sources, from texts read from books³⁹ (onscreen and offscreen) to visual references, such as the various 'screens in the screen', also echoing Wenders' iconic visual meditation.

Situatedness, where one looks from, the point of view, becomes indeed an explicit theme in the film, addressed in different ways both visually and textually. The 'view from my window' – overlapping the literal with the metaphorical – is its most explicit visual example (others being the various travelling shots, both within the Heygate and around the city, forming a visual analogue of my voice's searching and questioning). A trope to which we come back season after season as the years go by and the story unfolds, *my* window frames the emptying estate, punctuating the passage of time while also establishing a visual link between my home and my characters' homes. Over an image of the Heygate at night merging, on the window's glass, with the interior space of my sitting room, we hear:

Back at home, I look at the Heygate estate through my window and try to picture Helen, Meurig, Ivy and the others moving around their homes, absorbed in their daily chores; the unwilling protagonists of a present-day drama still in the writing.

*Six characters in search of... a home*⁴⁰.

³⁹ The two books directly cited (and read onscreen) are Berger's *And Our Faces, My Hearth, as Brief as Photos* (2005) and Anna Milton's *Ground Control: Fear and happiness in the twenty-first-century city* (2012)

⁴⁰ This is also a reference to Pirandello's metatheatrical play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, a modernist piece exploring the relationship between an author and his characters, where the characters appear on stage to ask the author to 'finish' writing their story. The play critically and ironically explores the gap between reality and representation, performance and existence.

The existential and significant relation between my own self, my environment and the city – as well as the notions of sense of place, belonging, familiarity (and consequent disruption provoked by displacement) – is addressed in an earlier text (@ 5.30min), which also explicitly sets the idea of the *film diary*:

Since May 2008 I have been keeping a film diary.

(...)

Since I moved to the borough in 1997, the Heygate Estate has become such a familiar presence outside my window that it barely registers anymore.

Once this Brutalist citadel and its inhabitants have gone, my personal landscape, as well as part of London's core, will no longer be the same.

Will I miss it? And if so, what exactly will I grieve for?

The importance of place for creating and sustaining a sense of self is an idea captured in the environmental psychological concept of *place-identity*. As John Dixon and Kevin Durrheim point out “Questions of ‘who we are’ are often intimately related to questions of ‘where we are’.” (2000:39) The notion suggests that environments do not simply serve as settings for individuals’ activities, actions or behaviours but are instead actively ‘incorporated’ as part of the self. They write, ‘It is generally agreed that place identity is forged around a deep-seated familiarity with the environment, a sense of bodily, sensuous, social and autobiographic “insideness” (Rowles, 1983) that arises as the result of individuals’ habituation to their physical surroundings.’ (2004:457) As they remind us, place-identity ‘takes the form of a “psychological investment with a setting that has developed over time” (Vaske & Corbin, 2001:17) and that is captured in the everyday phrases such as feeling “at home” or having a “sense of place”.’ (Ibid:457). Such works

treat material environments as ‘landscapes of meaning within which individuals and groups may establish rich social and psychological connections’ (Ibid:458). Place-identity is sometimes described as an implicit psychological structure as:

... place behaviour and sense of ‘being in place’ unfolds largely without conscious reflection. However, at moments of change or transition, when the bond between person and place is threatened, the significance of place identity becomes apparent. Loss of place tends to provoke strong social and psychological responses precisely because it entails a loss of self. (Ibid:458)

As a local resident and a filmmaker particularly interested in the relationship between people and the place they inhabit, their intrinsic involvement with one another, charting the regeneration of the Elephant & Castle became a captivating and challenging journey of discovery and questioning of the city I had chosen, almost 20 years ago, as my home. A journey allowing me to bear witness to the ebb and flow of its development and its fast-fading histories, to decipher and measure change, to question the politics and practices of place-making and the increasing privatisation of the city.

The making of *HSH* – which extended over several years – turned out to be, however, also a process of interrogating and constructing my own belonging to a community I had been part of for over 10 years but – a stranger among strangers – I knew very little about. A process that while connecting me and unveiling the intimate fabric of the place (its *anima loci*) inevitably also became an interrogation of what it means to belong in a modern city such as London.

Work on the discursive construction of place-identity examines how the narrative ‘positioning of someone who is of a place can connect a speaker to the multiple established meanings and identities of that place’ (Taylor, 2003:193). Similarly Sarbin (1983) has observed that place-identity requires the analysis of processes of ‘emplotment’ – the

autobiographic rendering of self in terms of personal stories complete with plots, characters and, of course, physical and metaphoric settings.

Storytelling as a form of dwelling (the shaping of chaos into meaningful forms sheltering from ‘unreality’) is beautifully addressed by John Berger’s poetical meditation *And Our Faces, My Hearth, as Brief as Photos*, one of the key two texts of reference for *HSH*.

Over the first travelling shots along the Heygate’s notorious streets-in-the-sky – a movement that brings the spectator from the Heygate’s outside into the estate’s inner core where we meet its first inhabitant, Ivy, and enter her home – my voice explicitly addresses filmmaking as a process of transformation of my relationship with the place, of actively constructing belonging. The insider/outsider perspective, as well as how ‘where we look from’ defines ‘what we see’ are also addressed:

Even though with the years the Heygate had become a familiar presence outside my window, I had never actually entered inside. The long blocks that surround it don’t exactly invite you in. Like the walls of a fortified citadel, they guard its interior quarters from intruders.

Now that I walk its extensive grounds daily, and I have accessed some of its most intimate private corners, I have realised that you have a completely different feel for it depending if you’re an insider or an outsider, and I have grown quite fond of this outdated, decaying structure. Of the sharp contrast between its harsh exteriors and the homely richness of some of its interiors.

My characters’ homes.

Situatedness, the place one looks from, home (the original village) and the global village are themes conjured right from the very start, from the pre-title sequence (and the text that accompanies it.) Let’s briefly try to unpack it.

This is a 5min. montage piece cutting together found footage of the London riots posted and shared on the internet. The narrator’s voice – even before her hands holding the screen appear later in the scene – establishes these images as the subjective point-of-view of the

enunciator, who is looking at them streaming on her phone from another country; her country of origin.

August 2011

London is burning. People post dramatic images on You Tube.

I look at them on my phone from my family home in Italy.

For a moment, as the police charge, these images of authority surrounded by flames trying to re-impose order merge – in my mind – with those we have become so used to witnessing from Greece or the Middle East. As if London contained all possible worlds, streaming out through the countless screens of the virtual mega-city.

The second paragraph both reinforces subjectivity – ‘in my mind’ – and introduces a key concept, that of the *virtual megacity*, which coexists within the traditional city and complicates it, inevitably also complicating notions of belonging. At the antipodes of the *home* – “the original ‘village’, the centre of the world, the place from which the world could be founded”⁴¹ – the virtual megacity has neither centre nor periphery. It is – in Marc Augé terms – a ‘non-place’⁴². However, as Kazys Varnelis and Anne Friedberg more recently argue in ‘Place: The Networking of Public Space’, the everyday superimposition of real and virtual space, the emergence of popular virtual worlds, the raise of the network as a socio-spatial model restructures our concept of spatiality.

The always-on, always-accessible network produces a broad set of changes to our concept of place, linking specific locales to a global continuum and thereby transforming our sense of proximity and distance. (Varnelis, K., & Friedberg, A. 2008:1)

Place, it seems, is far from a source of stability in our lives, but rather, once again, is in a process of a deep and contested transformation. (Idib:39)

⁴¹ This is a fragment of a text taken from Berger (1984), reflecting on the meaning of home, which I read onscreen later in the film.

⁴² Augé distinguishes *place* as a physical space defined as ‘relational, historical and concerned with identity’ (p.77), from *non-places* – spaces of transition absent of identity, human relationships, or the traces of history – which increasingly dominate our existence, doomed to solitude, and suggests that our sense of place, as old as humanity, is coming to an end. For a further understanding of this fascinating, albeit historically connoted, notion see: Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 1995).

In the final section of the pre-title sequence (played over a black screen, as the ‘virtual city’ is disconnected when ‘my phone runs out of battery’), I am left to experience the here and now, and its incommensurability.

*Lying on my back on the top of the hill I climbed to get a signal, I look up and see a falling star.
Time is back.*

From the very beginning, *HSH* problematises the experience of both space and time, with the city becoming, once again, the ideal subject/stage where the paradoxes and tensions of (super)modernity are at play.⁴³ Similar to the experience of modernity, humanity is again confronted with the feeling of disorientation, dehumanisation and loss of connection to embodied experience (this time due to the overwhelming condition of the globalised *info-society*). In this sense, the model of the ‘open work’ theorised by literary critic Umberto Eco in the 1960s – works that, like epistemological metaphors, suggest “through the structure of the work, a structure of the world” (Eco, 1962:5) – might still prove of relevance today. I will be coming back to Eco’s notion of ‘open work’ in the chapter discussing my interactive project *GT*. For the moment I just want to point out that it was through the process of engaging with the complexity of depicting the urban experience in a contemporary metropolis and its increasingly mediated nature, that I was confronted with the necessity and the desire to address the question of authorial agency in this wired and wireless age, and to elaborate new ways of telling. *HSH* is a step in that direction.

Questions of authorship, enunciation, narration

When I started to research *HSH* at the end of 2007, certain things were immediately clear to me, while others – like to what extent the film would be self-reflexive and essayistic –

⁴³ As media theorist (and co-founder of the opensource platform *Zeega*), Jesse Shapins argues in his PhD dissertation ‘Mapping the Urban Database Documentary: Authorial Agency in Utopias of Kaleidoscopic Perception and Sensory Estrangement’ (2012), the city as environment and subject of artistic inquiry is central to modernity’s dialectic between eternal and transitory.

only emerged ‘on the road’, as I confronted the vastness of the theme/s and of the material gathered over the years. The question quickly became how to creatively document the radical multiplicity of urban environment, preserving attention to the details of the personal experience while constructing a legible and coherent whole. The essayistic style – capable, according to Renov, of encompassing all the functions that documentaries have displayed since its origin: to record, reveal and preserve; to persuade or promote; to express; and to analyse and interrogate (2004:74-85) and in which the ‘descriptive and reflexive modalities are coupled’ and ‘the representation of the historical real is consciously filtered through a flux of subjectivity’ (2004:70) – emerged as the most suitable way to tell this complex tale.

The Heygate was always intended as the film’s main stage, the *skené* where the drama unfolds, and in many ways a character in itself, with its transformation from a living community to an empty carcass as the main narrative trajectory. Memory, both individual and collective, also played, however, an important role. When the ‘local’ is surgically extracted from locality, it becomes necessary to retrace its hidden, faint narratives and to recover its memories embodied in the stories of the people who have inhabited it, to seek to capture the spirit of place before it succumbs to the expectations of a world-city on the make. To film the makeover of this lowly borough, between the memories of a sweet and sour past, was to register the destruction of something which existed there, that was not only cement, concrete, cheap paint and small flats, but a form of life, a frame of mind, the hinged collective memory of a fundamental part of the history of London. This historical dimension (also depicting British society transformation since the previous regeneration), together with the multi-perspectival nature of the overall narrative structure, thus fragmented the unity of space and time, multiplying the places and times characters spoke from and about, as well as the range of material used and the formats they were recorded

on.⁴⁴ There is no space here to discuss in details the different characters present in the film.⁴⁵ However it might be useful to briefly outline the various perspectives the film articulates:

- (i) The perspective from the inside: the Heygate tenants'
- (ii) The local government perspective
- (iii) The external perspective: the architects and urban designers.
- (iv) The financial perspective: the developers
- (v) The historical perspectives - This includes several elements, from Heygate's original architect Tim Tinker, to various kinds of archives, delivering both personal and official narratives.
- (vi) The filmmaker perspective – The view from my window

My presence in the film is inscribed and performed at different levels through:

- My text/voice-over
- Characters addressing me directly
- My hands shown holding the iPhone where images are playing, over the map of London, writing a diary or reading a book.
- Showing the process of reviewing the material - either my own footage or the archives, introducing the figure of the diarist/researcher.
- The pov travelling-shots through the city and around the estate

The film moves between two quite different scales: on the micro end, the personal, the autobiographical, the intimate relationship with characters and place, and on the macro, the historical, socio-political reflection, while also including a self-reflexive element depicting

⁴⁴ Apart from the archives – which came in all sorts of formats, from 16mm to Internet found footage – I used three main recording devices: the DVcam, used for the observational footage and the steady-cam shots along the Heygate estate, the Canon D7 and my mobile phone, used for the city travelling and other city shots.

⁴⁵ Those interested please refer to the treatment annexed.

the filmmaking process. These different layers are expressed by different modes of address.

The unfolding drama of the Heygate community's poignant demise is shot, much like *ABCC*, using participatory observation through mostly handheld DVcam accompanying the characters over time. Again this involved a very small crew, in fact I was often on my own (given the extensive period of filming, the proximity of my home, which allowed me to walk in and out of the 'set' whenever necessary, and the importance of intimacy). *HSH* approach, however, is considerably more participatory/interactive than *ABCC*'s (combining intimate moments of exchange with the main characters and more formal interviews with institutional figures), with the purely observational used mostly for the scenes representing collective moments, such as the local government's side of the story (Council and local community's meetings).

The second most prominent mode of address is the voice-over, which is not only far more extensive than in *ABCC*, but quite different in tone, responding to and interrogating the reality before it while also addressing and questioning the spectator directly.

According to film theorist Raymond Bellour (discussing Chris Marker's CDROM *Immemory*) the 'openness' of the essay resides in its dialogic structure: 'The only real exchange resides in the address, the way the person who speaks to us situates himself in what he says, with respect to what he shows' (Bellour 1997:11). While clearly the interactivity of the CDROM affords a different kind of openness, *HSH* significantly aspires to a type of open, dialogic text, working at the limits of what's possible in terms of 'openness' given its linearity. As I will argue in the chapter discussing *GT*, it was my

desire to fully explore this potential that led me to consider experimenting with non-linear narrative.

In *HSH*, there are several moments where I give a direct response to what I have just shown, to a character's comment or action. The first is right after the scene depicting the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, when I cut to myself in my home study (the Heygate seen in the background through my window) rewinding and replaying in my computer Southwark Council Deputy Head's last phrase "In terms of the way government arranges the finance it is not possible for us to build new housing". I then stop the image and start writing an entry in my diary, my voice speaking my thoughts aloud:

I had always thought that the pledge of a roof over people's heads was a core Labour value.

Was I wrong?

The film then cuts to another – much sunnier – 'view from my window', over which Harold Wilson's voice from a televised address in 1964 (his first year as Prime Minister) attests the huge gap between his vision then and New Labour's.

The interaction of the subjective perspective and the reality before it, the contrast between the voice-over subjectivity and the predominant objectivity of the images, become a testing and questioning of both, and the structure of the film follows the movement of that dialogue, with the audience included in the conversation and "allowed to follow through mental processes of contradiction and digression" (Philip Lopate, 1998:286); forced to "acknowledge a conversation with the filmmaker" (Rascaroli, 2009:30)

As an author, I inscribe myself in the *HSH* by playing several roles: the source of the act of communication 'who literally inhabits the text' (Ibid:33), a character personally implicated

in the unfolding story, a researcher/commentator/filmmaker who, rather than presenting a clear point of view, opens up problems and interrogates the spectator. Moreover, *HSH*'s structure is that of a constant interpellation, with each spectator 'called upon to engage in a dialogical relationship with the enunciator, hence to become active, intellectually and emotionally, and interact with the text. (Ibid:35)

As mentioned, my interactive project *GT* brings this 'openness' and possibility to interact with the text a step further, allowing for the potentialities of the 'urban database documentary'⁴⁶ to develop new perspectives on urban experience – already present in *HSH* – to be fully explored. But before leaving linear filmmaking behind (only in this dissertation of course, as my next project is again a linear film), I would like to say a few words about how *HSH*'s multi-layered structure engages questions of temporality.

⁴⁶ As theorized by Shapins (2012)

1.4 Framing Time – Rendering the Transformation of Place in Time

It is above all through sense of time, through rhythm, that the director reveals his individuality.

A. Tarkovsky - Sculpting in Time

Differently from my previous films, which are entirely told in the present tense and construct a progressive chronological narrative, in *HSH*, the present tense dramaturgy of existence (still a substantial component) is framed by the time of consciousness (and self-consciousness) of the author, who also calls into play the temporal dimensions of memory and history, performed in the actuality of the present and mostly rendered through a creative use of archives. These form the third most significant mode of address in *HSH*, and a clear departure from my previous work.

HSH's organisation and representation of time, while still linear, is far less homogenous than that of my previous works, combining 'continuity editing' within the observational scenes with a more conceptual, montage-film style editing, juxtaposing different kinds of material – including quotation as material form and conceptual link – counterpointing and playing off each other. This fragmented linearity is at times further complicated by the presence of frames within the frame, composing an image in which a multiplicity of *temporalities* co-exist within the image.

A recurrent feature of *HSH* (starting from the pre-title sequence already discussed), this 'reframing' happens on different occasions throughout the film, but it is most prominent – as a formal choice – in connection to my 'searching' movements through the city. Here the present tense of the journey, expanded to include the time of consciousness and rumination, is further complicated by the literal inscription of the past in the frame, with

the archives playing on my iPhone screen as I move through the city, itself often framed by the train's window⁴⁷. An example of this is the section starting after the juxtaposition of the two architects (where Tim Tinker questions Previc's rather (dis)ingenuous vision and the idea of a local authority engaging in 'gentrification'). The text that follows (@ 44min) retraces the root of the notion of Regeneration to Thatcher's 'idea that the creation of wealth in an area will *trickle down* to the poorest parts of the community. A notion which – in spite of much evidence that this fails to happen – has defined policies towards cities ever since, opening the way to their increasing privatisation.'⁴⁸ As the shining images of Canary Wharf roll by, Mrs Thatcher's emphatic voice states her faith in 'popular capitalism and the owning-property democracy' (1986), till she appears in person, first on my iPhone screen and later looming large over the city, her legacy still very much affecting our present day reality. Between her two appearances, Gordon Brown, travelling in the opposite direction only as far as the train goes, sheepishly admits (in a rare interview dating from 2002) that the left has finally realized that 'markets are in the public interest'. At the end of this sequence the film cuts to Barry moving out of his home, which is then boarded up. The mournful notes of The Specials' *Dawning of a New Era* accompany him as he leaves the estate for the last time, holding a few bags filled with his belongings. The irony of it all is that those most affected by the 'regeneration' were actually the leaseholders who, like Meurig, had bought into the Thatcher's dream of making 'their home their own'. With the meagre sum their compulsory orders provided it was impossible for them to buy locally, or indeed in London. Most of them have moved out of the city.

Set between two visions of society – that which delivered the Heygate at the end of the '60s and that responsible for its demolition – *HSH* inevitably gauges British society's

⁴⁷ This reflective layer is an aesthetic choice that exposes the highly mediated processes by which documentaries are made, prompting audiences to re-configure the scenes in their minds. The multiplication of windows and screens in the film also signposts the increasing mediated nature of our urban experience.

⁴⁸ From my text in the film, quoting at time from Milton's illuminating study *Ground Control*.

recent changes. The Heygate embodied the spirit of utopian socialism characteristic of the British modern architecture movement known as Brutalism, a spirit that informed most post-war redevelopments; an urban ideal that architects and planners were charged with translating into three-dimensional forms. This massive citadel-in-the-sky was nonetheless firmly rooted in Labour's 1950 pledge of 'the right to a roof over your head'; a promise – that of council housing – laying at the very heart of the Welfare State concept. The Heygate's dismantling can thus also be seen to epitomise a wider attack on the values underpinning the Welfare State. An idea evoked in *HSH*'s final text.

Behind the perimeter fence the Heygate is slowly draining out of life.

This white elephant - whose maintenance had become an unsustainable financial burden for the local authority, much as the Welfare State has for the government at large – will soon be an empty carcass, then rubble. A vast barren brown-field in the heart of the city.

What can grow on this site of loss?

As discussed earlier, there are substantial elements of continuity both formally and methodologically between *ABCC* and *HSH*. However, it is perhaps in *HSH*'s treatment of time (both as a theme and aesthetically) that *HSH* marks a significant shift, and where my subjectivity as an author most clearly emerges. This is hardly surprising if we recall what Tarkovsky considered to be the essence of a film director's work. "We can define it as sculpting in time" (1986:63).

In so far as sense of time is germane to the director's innate perception of life, and editing is dictated by the rhythmic pressures in the segments of film, his handwriting is to be seen in his editing. It expresses his attitude to the conception of the film, and is the ultimate embodiment of his philosophy of life. (1989:121)

To be fair to Tarkovsky – who always somewhat resisted Eisenstein's montage theory –

editing is not, to him, ‘the main formative element of a film’ or what defines its rhythm. He unambiguously believed that ‘the cinema image comes into being during shooting, and exists within the frame’, with time becoming ‘tangible when you sense something significant, truthful, going on beyond the events on the screen; when you realise, quite consciously, that what you see in the frame is not limited to its visual depiction, but is a pointer to something stretching out beyond the frame and to infinity’ (1986:117). However, he also recognised that editing, while bringing together ‘shots which are already filled with time’, also ‘disturbs the passage of time, interrupts it and simultaneously gives it something new. The distortion of time can be a means of giving it rhythmical expression. Sculpting in time!’ (1986:121)

By combining a multiplicity of perspectives and temporalities *HSH* – pushing at the borders of non-linearity – gives rise to a ‘conversation’ with the heterogeneity that constitutes the contemporary past of our city.

But, if the process of structuring time through editing is the expression of the author’s ‘attitude to the conception of the film, and is the ultimate embodiment of his philosophy of life’, how is the practice of ‘sculpting in time’ transformed within the context of non-linear, interactive works? And if montage – rendering *the present past* through formal closure – gives the ultimate significance to the ‘chaos of possibilities, the search of relations among discontinuous meanings’ (Pasolini, 1967:6) that make up our reality, what is then the faith of the authorial agency in the interactive documentary practice? Are we witnessing the death of the author, or – more subtly, is the authorial agency reconfiguring itself for the post-digital revolution era?

SESSION 2 –

The Spatialization of Time: From Editing to Compositing

2.1 *Ghost Town – The Urban Database Documentary*

The last work submitted for this PhD is the first chapter of an ongoing research project. It is important therefore to bear in mind that while some of the ideas discussed in this session – such as the notion of deep mapping – regard the overall concept of the project and how this new development expands upon (or departs from) my previous concerns, the work published so far is only an initial step in that direction.⁴⁹

The initial idea of *Ghost Town* (GT) started to emerge during the process of editing *HSH*, confronting the extensive material filmed and its multi-perspectival nature. Retrospectively, one can say that it was born out of two drives. On one hand the desire to create a resource in the form of a ‘curated’, searchable database for the local community, as well as for scholars and other researchers interested in using *HSH*’s archives as case-study material for their investigations. On the other, however, it responded to a deeper need, still unarticulated but felt — a yearning to break free of linearity, to ‘open the window’ and properly attend to the discontinuities and fragmentations of the world, to the polyphony and diversity of the urban environment I was encountering. Given *HSH*’s subject matter, the architectural/spatial nature of the interactive model of representation and the connectivity it enables offered a particularly meaningful tool to navigate this complex, multi-layered and multi-perspective material, presenting new ways for the user/participant to engage with it, and ultimately producing a completely different object:

⁴⁹ I am presently working on *GT* chapter2, which I intend to publish in early 2016.

an interactive database documentary creatively re-imagining the material filmed between 2009 and 2011 (as at this stage I wasn't as yet considering including other kinds of material). *GT*'s initial idea was thus to experiment with the way content is embodied and experienced by the user in an attempt to make storytelling more immersive and spatialized, exploring in particular the relationship between narrative and computational structure; in other words the design of interfaces⁵⁰ which function as narrative devices. As influential new media theorist Lev Manovich – comparing the relationship between interface and content within new media to that of form and content in old media – puts it:

It is the work's interface that creates its unique materiality and the unique user experience. To change the interface even slightly is to dramatically change the work. From this perspective, to think of an interface as a separate level, as something that can be arbitrary varied is to eliminate the status of a new media artwork as art.

The choice of a particular interface is motivated by work's content to such degree that it can no longer be thought of as a separate level. Content and interface merge into one entity, and no longer can be taken apart. (2001:78)

When I started to research this emerging field I knew very little about it, and the creative tools for making interactive interfaces were in their burgeoning infancy⁵¹ (i.e. Kosakow, Zeega⁵², Derivative, Hoppala). I therefore set out to study and experiment with these new tools, and to further my acquaintance with the range of interactive documentaries produced⁵³, to explore their creative affordances, their specific 'ways of forming', as well as the theoretical framework underpinning them. I soon realized that these forms of art practice were talking to me well beyond the specificity of the initial project, tapping into needs and desires born out of the engagement with questions – both formal and conceptual – that had arisen from my work

⁵⁰ Interfaces shape the interaction between the computer and its human user.

⁵¹ This form of factual narrative has only established itself in the last ten years (we can track its emergence through the evolution of Web 2.0).

⁵² The system developed by Shapins, allowing anyone to author open platforms within the larger constraints of an overarching framework.

⁵³ Interestingly, much like in the 1960's, Canada (National Film Board of Canada) and France (ARTE.tv) seem to lead the way, very likely due to their substantial public funding system, which fosters experimentation and artistic innovation.

on *HSH*, and that were begging to be addressed. Questions about new ways of exploring old concerns – such as place and its becoming, as a site of significance in the construction of selfhood, and the experience of time in our globalised world – as well as new ways of telling, and engaging with the world, of establishing new forms of connection between people and places.

Interactive documentaries emerge when collections of clips meet rules for navigation and a user's attention. These documentaries hint at worlds of images from which any viewing, and any interpretation, is just one possible path. They are, as Sandra Gaudenzi suggestively put it 'living documentary', 'living forms'. As Guadenzi clarifies, 'drawing on Maturana and Varela's notion of "autopoiesis" and Deleuze's assemblage theory the definition of "Living Documentary" wants to put the emphasis on the relational nature of interactive documentaries and on their capacity to engender change.'⁵⁴ As discussed in the Prologue, and further unpacked in previous chapters, the 'relational process' is central to my practice, which is conceived as a form of engagement with the world implicating subject, filmmaker and viewer alike, a practice also concerned with film's transformational power and social impact. Could the 'relational nature' of interactivity thus connect myself to my environment, and construct belonging (by generating a virtual community) in ways *HSH* had not achieved, while also offering the user a more fluid, dynamic, 'open' way to negotiate the plurality of its modes, perspectives and 'voices', interrogate the transformation of place and foster his/her own critical subjectivity? As Gaudenzi argues, '[t]hese interactive documentaries illustrate a world that is formed by a variety of points of view and where the user "makes sense" of the website by actively choosing content and then creating his own point of view out of a multitude of stories.' (2013:83)

⁵⁴ Doc On-line, n. 14, august 2013, www.doc.ubi.pt, p.10.

Clearly the way of relating, of ‘facing-the-other’, in the context of interactive media is substantially different from the embodied relation that sharing the physical space (and time) with your subjects during shooting affords. However, as ‘virtual’ forms of relating make up, these days (in an urban context), a significant proportion of how we relate to each other and to the world, the importance of this ‘connectivity’, and its power to transform not only the art object but also its maker and user, should not be underestimated.⁵⁵ From the maker’s perspective this ‘dialogue’ – while clearly retaining and encompassing the possibility of the author/subject ‘face-to-face’ on location, particularly in more cinematic forms of interactive media⁵⁶ – considerably augments the author/user’s *conversation*, via the user’s interacting with the system the author proposes, as well as through actively contributing material to it (user-generated content). It is through such interaction that users position themselves, and it is through such positioning that they build an understanding of reality. This clearly also enhances the user’s agency in the construction of meaning. Gaudenzi writes: ‘The cut, that allowed the creation of meaning by establishing a fixed chain of events, is now an opening to possibilities where the intentionality of the author is replaced by a dialogue between the user and the possibilities that the interactive documentary system offers.’ (Ibid:74)

Since the 1960’s art – reflecting a more generalised epistemological shift – has actively embraced this fluid view of connectiveness between author, artefact and audience, as Umberto Eco cogently describes in *Opera Aperta* (*OA*, first published in 1962): ‘In fact, rather than submit to the “openness” as an inescapable element of artistic interpretation he (the author) subsumes it into a positive aspect of his production, recasting the work so as to expose it to the maximum possible “opening”.’ (Eco, 1989:5). Intriguingly, the notion of a

⁵⁵ As an interesting example of the potentiality of virtual ‘face-to-face’ see *L.A. Link*, a project connecting L.A.-area youth from diverse backgrounds via computer-based, interactive video technology, created by artist Wendy Clarke in collaboration with M. Renov (1995-1998), discussed in Renov, 2004 ch.9.

⁵⁶ A excellent example of this is Elaine McMillion’s *HOLLOW*, an interactive documentary that examines the future of rural America through the eyes and voices of Appalachians (2014 Emmy Nominee in New Approaches for Documentary).

work of art as a *'living organism'* capable of 'increasing the subject perception of reality' is central to Eco's mentor Luigi Pareyson's aesthetics of 'formativity'⁵⁷; a theory crucial to Eco's notion of 'open work', as he himself states in the original introduction to his seminal text. 'If art can choose whatever *subject* it wishes, the only *content* that matters is a certain way in which man puts himself in relationship with the world, and resolves his stand at the levels of the structures, in his *way of forming*' (1962:14⁵⁸, emphasis original). Central to Eco's notion of 'open work' is thus the dialectic between 'form' and 'openness'. In other words – given the intrinsic ambiguity of any work of art, where 'a plurality of significations co-exist within a single signifier' – the question then becomes how 'to define the limits within which a work can realise the maximum ambiguity and depend from the active intervention of the user without stopping to be a 'work' (...) an object endowed with defined structural properties, that allow but also coordinate the sequencing of interpretations, the shifting of perspectives' (Eco, 1962:16). A tension – that between form and openness – that inevitably raises questions about the authorial agency within such works, and the ways authorship is reconfiguring itself within the emerging field of interactive practice.

While *OA* mostly addresses musical compositions (such as the aleatory music of Stockhausen, Berio, and Pousseur, but also Calder's mobiles and Mallarme's *Livre*) what these works have in common – as David Robey remarks in his introduction to the English translation – is 'the artist's decision to leave the arrangement of some of their constituents either to the public or to chance, thus giving them not a single definitive order but a multiplicity of possible orders' (1989:ix), and thus making the user, in a way, co-author. As Eco himself put it, 'listening to *Scambi* the auditor is required to do some of this

⁵⁷ Luigi Pareyson was Eco's tutor and mentor at Turin's School of Aesthetic, where Eco graduated with a dissertation on the problems of aesthetics in the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

⁵⁸ All quotations from the 1962 version refer to Eco's original introduction, which doesn't exist in English, therefore all translations are mine. For *OA*'s main text, quotes are from the 1989 English version.

organizing and structuring of the musical discourse. He collaborates with the composer in *making* the composition.’ (1989:12, emphasis original). However, as Manovich reflects, to partake in making your own *version* of the work and co-authoring should not necessarily be conflated:

It is often claimed that a user of a branching interactive program becomes its co-author: by choosing a unique path through the elements of a work, she supposedly creates a new work. But it is also possible to see the same process in a different way. If a complete work is a sum of all possible paths through its elements, then the user following a particular path only accesses a part of this whole. In other words, the user is only activating a part of the total work that already exists. (2001:123)

It may well be that, as Gaudenzi argues in her exploration of ‘the multiple ways in which we participate, shape and are shaped by interactive documentaries’ that ‘interactive documentaries are ways to construct and experience the real rather than to represent it.’ (2013:3). In other words, these works both visualize the dynamic nature of authorship, constructed in the interplay with the user (much like the observer/observed coupling), while also redefining it, as we will discuss later.

In his preface to the 1962 edition, Eco was adamant to stress that in addressing what he also calls ‘works-in-movement’ his intention was not to posit or propose a narrative mode, but rather to acknowledge a ‘fact’, ‘an evidence that requires an explanation’. *OA* thus becomes a lucid interrogation of the ‘reasons of existence’ of such works, with a lot of its intuitions and anticipations⁵⁹ still surprisingly relevant to today’s debate. Eco argues that the modern open work represents, through its formal properties, a characteristically modern experience of the world, offering ‘images of the world that function as *epistemological metaphors*: and that construct a new way of seeing, of perceiving, of

⁵⁹ Such as the element of multiplicity and plurality in art, the insistence on literary response as an interactive process between reader and text, and the relation between modern poetics and certain epistemologies.

understanding and of coming to term with a universe whose traditional ways of relating have been shattered and where new relational possibilities are wearily emerging' (1962:3). As I argued earlier, and as many scholars have noted, there are striking parallels, as well as elements of continuity⁶⁰ (alongside of course considerable differences), between the feelings of senselessness, disorientation, 'discontinuity' and fragmentation that both the industrial and the digital revolution have engendered. Interactive, open works are able to reflect this particularly *unstable* experience of the word, and – by activating users – they can also foster their critical subjectivity, empowering them to navigate today's uncertain waters and to enact change. The transformational properties and the 'special function or effect' of the open work in relation to the world we inhabit is an evident leitmotif of *OA*, directly addressed in the chapter 'Form as Social Commitment'; a notion that both Gaudenzi and Shapins, as I will discuss in a moment, appear to share. For Gaudenzi '(o)penness is only possible if the author allows the participator to enter in the creative process. This logic of creation is a participatory logic rather than a representational one.' (2013:77)

How then does participatory and collaborative practice – already discussed in my linear work – translate in interactive media? As we have seen, Rouch argued for collaboration and participation as not only producing unique insights but also having an ethical dimension (see chapter 1.2), using the words 'feedback' and 'audio-visual reciprocity' to describe a practice that 'has certainly not yet revealed all of its possibilities...' To properly attend to some of these possibilities, I soon realized that *GT* had to further 'open up' and transform into a more ambitious project, of which the interactive navigation of *HSH's*

⁶⁰ Shapin in particular argues that 'there are not any radical ruptures that distinguish modernity from postmodernity or other notions of periodicity. Cultural practice, albeit in always new and historically contingent forms, continues to grapple with the consequences of modernization, the processes of social transformation brought about by the massive changes in urbanization and industrialization instigated in the 19th century. (...) What remains central is precisely the constantly changing nature of values and rapidly rupturing effects of new technological inventions. Despite this state of continuous flux, my proposition is that there is continuity in the underlying dynamics, desires and aesthetic forms that drive cultural responses to the modern experience.' (2012:19)

database would be only a component. It needed to expand both through time (through history/ies and memory/ies) and in the range of material included, to enable for a real *conversation* about the transformations of this particular location through time to take place.

It was, however, the encounter with Jesse Shapins work that finally allowed me to put a name (and a frame) to what I was already trying to do, but hadn't quite found the way to express. Reading his thought-provoking dissertation made me immediately aware to what extent I had already engaged, through the making of *HSH*, in what he theorizes as the 'genre of the urban database documentary, a mode of media art practice that uses structural systems to uncover new perspectives on the lived experience of place.' (2012:1) A *genre*, Shapins argues, that emerges as a cultural response to the modern experience, 'meeting a collective need to create order from vast quantities of information and re-frame perception of daily experience.'

In the midst of all this, society had the ability for the first time ever to mechanically record on a grand scale audio-visual impressions of these changes to everyday life. The design of structural systems became a creative method for simultaneously addressing these vast new quantities of information, while attending to the particularities of individual experience.
(2012:1).

Shapins argues that – while particularly prominent in recent decades – the urban database documentary arises at the beginning of the 20th century, when the modern city engendered significant disorientation in its inhabitants. Analysing some of its early manifestations, 'incarnations before the invention of the computer', Shapins maintains that the so-called 'city symphonies' already 'demonstrate an approach to recording the city as a database'

(2012:6)⁶¹. By reading these artists' work⁶² in relation to contemporary practice, Shapins exposes 'the underlying, nontechnical ambitions that fuel this distinctive mode of media art practice' which, he argues, can be read as symptomatic of two cultural utopias responding to modernity's underlying paradoxes: kaleidoscopic perception and sensory estrangement.

Kaleidoscopic perception is the desire to present a portrait of a city as a totality while retaining the representation of its fragments. Sensory estrangement is the desire to use artistic mediation to foster defamiliarization, generating heightened awareness, new forms of sensory experience and new public venues for addressing ambiguity. Kaleidoscopic perception most poignantly responds to the modern city's radically new scale, while sensory estrangement challenges a perceived numbing of the sensorium due to overwhelming technological development. (2012:2)

In particular, kaleidoscopic perception felt like a rather familiar notion after *HSH*, and it is clearly still one of the drives underpinning *GT* which – by now – has evolved into a more ambitious research project, aiming to combine *HSH*'s archives with other relevant multimedia, including former tenants' personal archives, the extensive photographic work of local artist Eva Sajovis, content from the London Metropolitan Archives and the Cuming Museum of local history, as well as user-generated content and open data about the area, to allow users to spatially explore the layers of memory, stories and media latent within a single location. Drawing on Shanks's notion of 'deep-mapping' and Shapins' theory and practices around urban representation, *GT* will take the form of a constantly evolving interactive 'deep' map of the Elephant & Castle, and in particular of the Heygate Estate over the last hundred years and beyond.

GT's initial chapter (2013) sets up the project's conceptual story space (by structuring

⁶¹ One of the most famous examples of a city symphony is Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), with its 'reflective layer as the literal expression of the underlying database', the film is 'deeply emblematic of the urban database documentary's utopian drive to kaleidoscopic perception.' (2012:7)

⁶² Including Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* – one of the most remarkable explorations of the modern metropolis – that, as a constantly evolving collection of fragments, textual and visual 'is in many ways the prototypical urban database documentary.' (2012:21)

content within an immersive environment users can spatially explore), introducing them to the idea of a story as a navigated, cognitive journey. Engaging with one of modernity's ruins – the Heygate Estate – it invites users to discover this now abandoned estate by taking in its walkways and exploring its environment through steady-cam videos gliding along the ‘streets-in-the-sky’, and through 360° panoramic photos. To enter its boarded up buildings to visit the homes, look at an interactive documentary to meet its former residents and those who are planning its future, discover how life used to be when the Estate was inhabited, find out why it is now abandoned and who its future inhabitants might be.

Over time, participants will be able to unlock further layers of the story and reveal how the place has changed over the last hundred years and beyond. Users will be able to learn from the past, share their present experiences as well as partake in the on-going debate about the urban regeneration that will affect this area over the next 15/20 years, thus contributing to define its past, present, and future.

By building a whole environment to house the story fragments and memories of the place – a virtual ‘theatre of memory’ – *GT* bridges the gap between storytelling and archive, with users able to ‘walk’ around a place that no longer exists and – transformed into archaeologists-of-the-recent-past – unearth its secrets, encounter its previous inhabitants, critically engage with its traces and discover how it has transformed over time. Participants can approach it as an experience, a world to explore and unveil, a journey in time, a site of discovery and inquiry about local history, an environment to start or continue a meaningful conversation.

By collecting and curating stories and data that would otherwise be lost, *GT* aims to bring

together a community – even expand it – in virtual space, allowing users to develop new perspectives on urban experience, whether vis-à-vis the role of capitalism in shaping our cities, the biases of city planners or the myopia of accepted political rhetoric and, ultimately, empowering them to promote change and play an active role in our increasingly urbanized society.

2.2 *Deep Mapping – The archaeology of modernity*

One of the notions that Shapins introduced me to and that has become central to *GT*'s creative and conceptual framework is that of 'deep mapping', one of the methods that Shanks proposes for uncovering and establishing new forms of connection between people and places.

The deep map attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual. (Pearson and Shanks, 2001:64-65)

According to Shapins, who has written extensively about Shanks and his notion of 'deep mapping', for Shanks archaeology – concerned with the encounter of lived human experience and the past – is, 'like memory, performed in the actuality of the present, in a moment necessarily entwined with the past and projecting towards the future' (Shapins, 2009:3), a notion, this, particularly relevant to *GT*, which aims to interrogate the past to foster a critical participation in the construction of the future. In order to engage with modernity's ruins, Shanks argues, one must deploy both an 'Archaeological Sensibility' and an 'Archaeological Imagination', where 'Sensibility' refers us to the perceptual components of how we engage with the remains of the past, while Imagination refers us to the creative component, the transforming work that is done on what is left over. As Shapins thus notes, 'the practice of archaeology is necessarily both scholarly and artistic, equally committed to historical analysis and projective imagination, requiring traditional methods of academic research and the creative application of new media and modes of engagement.' (2009:4)

Drawing on this fecund notion, *GT* is conceived as a virtual archeological site, to be

excavated using both ‘archeological sensitivity’ and ‘imagination’ to interrogate its traces⁶³, with users able to dig through the *stratums* of both time and meaning via video-layering and hyperlinks, and with the past viewed from a present condition by embodied experience. While engaging with the past, the primary time of *GT* remains therefore actuality, what Shanks defines, expressing a particularly contemporary (as well as poetic) sense of time, as ‘a return of what is no longer the same, the conjunction of presents.’ Deep-maps don’t seek to be comprehensive or objective, but rather involve negotiation; between outsiders and insiders, between different kinds of contributors and over what is represented and how. Framed as conversations and not as statements, deep-maps are inherently unstable, continually unfolding and changing in response to new data, new perspective and new insights. *GT* is no exception.

Presently *GT* chapter 1 gives access – as database-content – mostly to my own archive from *HSH*. Some are to be found as discrete scenes, scattered around the Heygate’s grounds⁶⁴, however the majority are viewable via the interactive film. The *GT* site⁶⁵ can be accessed from four different entry points or Little Planets⁶⁶ (which randomly appear every time the site is visited). By clicking on one of these it animates, swirling around and drawing the user – like Alice down the “rabbit-hole” – into a whirlpool through space until a familiar 360° representation of a scene is rebuilt in one of the four possible starting points of this exploratory journey of the abandoned estate. Once the user has landed in a specific spot, the Heygate Estate’s grounds can be explored and navigated in different ways.⁶⁷ To play the interactive film users need to find their way to one of the buildings (or

⁶³ Traces clearly mediated by one or another media forms, thus also mobilizing questions of media archeology.

⁶⁴ These clips portray moments of life in the Estate’s extensive grounds and include former tenants’ Super8 materials from the Heygate’s early days in the ‘70s.

⁶⁵ <http://ghosttown.entertheswarm.com/>

⁶⁶ These animations were realised by Ruggero Gallimbeni, one of the programmers working on the coding of *GT*’s interfaces, by applying a stereographic projection to spherical panoramas images I had taken on several locations on the estate, using a special 360 panorama app. Little Planets allow you to seamlessly move from a birds-eye view (of the Estate) to that of a someone walking along the ground.

⁶⁷ For more information on how to navigate *GT* please visit <http://ghosttown.entertheswarm.com/>

click the building's icon on the Map⁶⁸) and select an 'active' window to enter a home.

The interactive film was created using the open-source software *Korsakow* (of which more in a moment). For the final project, however, we aim to develop a purpose-built authoring tool that, while retaining some of Korsakow's great features, will also allow for multiple access points into the interactive film, enabling users to explore it from each of the characters' different points-of-view/perspectives. A purpose-built video-layering app will turn audio-visual documents into hypertexts, with links displayed as overlays allowing users to *dig* through layers of content. Users will be able to focus, if desired, on each character's individual story by accessing all the relevant material through discrete 'photo albums', where they can view all the multimedia material relevant to that particular character (video, photos, newspaper clips, extras from diaries, etc.).

A 'user-generated content' arena equipped for media upload and public discussion area will be located in what used to be the former Tenant's & Residents Association building, providing a space where participants can upload their own archives and join the conversation. In the now familiar blurring of the professional and the lay versions of history, between private and public histories, the site aims to empower individuals to challenge official views of history, to complement, correct and offer alternative views to the public record. Users, by engaging, sending videos and collaborating in the documentary narrative, effectively act on the final shape of the work, but also on themselves. 'They become part of a community: those who have expressed themselves on a precise topic.' (Gaudenzi, 2013:82)

As Shapins convincingly argues, for artists 'deep mapping models a form of relational

⁶⁸ The idea is that, eventually, all Heygate's buildings will function as distinct databases, containing a range of archives, data, and user-generated content.

database design, the architecting of rich layering of interconnected media and information tagged with time and place.’ (2012:148) The relational and transformative nature of ‘living documentaries’ offers thus novel ways to interrogate notions of place-identity and belonging through the active, collaborative, construction of a virtual community ‘dialoguing’ around the shared significance of memory and place, and its becoming. As Gaudenzi argues, a ‘Living Documentary does not belong to anyone; not to its author nor to its user; it visualizes, in virtual space, the inter-dependent nature of our being.’

The user is actively affecting the reality of the interactive documentaries while browsing it, but he is also affected by it... and the result is dynamic change, world construction, and life.
(Gaudenzi, August 2013:27)

But if the interaction afforded by digital media has blurred the distinction between author and viewer/ user/internaut and the ownership of the production of the narration ‘belongs to the complex series of relations the interactive documentary is formed of’ (Gaudenzi, 2013:81), how is authorial agency reconfiguring itself in the age of interactive documentary? In other words, who’s ultimately responsible for its – however dynamic – significance?

2.3 *From editing to compositing & questions of authorship*

‘In general, creating a work in new media can be understood as the construction of an interface to a database’, affirms Lev Manovich in ‘Database as a Genre of New Media’, with Database becoming ‘the center of the creative process’; a ‘cultural form of its own’. Manovich argues that ‘after the novel, and subsequently cinema privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age, the computer age introduces its correlate – database.’ (2000: 1)

Following art historian Ervin Panofsky's analysis of linear perspective as a ‘symbolic form’ of the modern age, we may even call database a new symbolic form of a computer age. (1999:1)

However Manovich’s idea of ‘narrative’, based on literary scholar Mieke Bal’s definition feels somewhat restrictive (in particular from a non-fiction perspective)⁶⁹, and as a scholar he appears more interested in positing the general principle of new media as ‘the projection of the ontology of a computer onto culture itself’ (2000:5) than in exploring ways in which artists can use these new tools to interrogate the media and the reality that underpins it.

In summary, database and narrative do not have the same status in computer culture. More precisely, a database can support narrative, but there is nothing in the logic of the medium itself which would foster its generation. (2000:10)

The implication seems to be that it is the logic of a medium, in itself – rather than the artist’s intentionality applied to a specific media (and to its logic) – which engenders narrative. It is this technologically-determinist method, argues Shapins, that undergirds Manovich’s central claim that ‘database and narrative are natural *enemies*’ (italics in the

⁶⁹ It has to ‘contain both an actor and a narrator; contain three distinct levels consisting of text, story, and fabula; and its ‘contents’ should be ‘a series of connected events caused or experienced by actors.’ Mieke Bal, 1985:8.

original). For him, notes Shapins ‘there is no space for creative enfoldings of database and narrative, but instead he posits a strict binary, as “each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world”.’ (2012:60) Conversely, Shapins believes that, as city symphonies demonstrate, the database’s significance as a form of cultural practice precedes the invention of the computer.

This perspective shifts agency from the computer to the artist, foregrounding the conceptual design of the framework over the computational performance of the rule set. Moreover, by separating algorithms from automation, we gain greater nuance in analyzing contemporary database practice. Now, it becomes possible to easily distinguish works that actively utilize human curation in shaping the final content of a collection versus works that are strictly automated search queries. (Shapins, 2012:61)

In other words, ‘the significance of the algorithm is at the conceptual level of the structure, a structure that is crucially authored by the artist.’(Ibid:59) Shapins seems thus to reassert Eco’s principle of ‘formativity’, whereby an artist affirms his ‘stand at the levels of the structures, in his *way of forming*.’ (Eco, 1962) Shapins – defining the database as ‘a structural system and conceptual architecture’ – crucially thus argues that ‘the design of these systems is a vital form of authorial agency.’ (Ibid:2) I would tend to agree with Shapins that – while users are undoubtedly contributing to the final form of their own particular experience of the piece (as well as, in some cases, original material to the project) – it is in the conceptual design and the curating, in other words in the setting of the rules of the game (deciding what to include or exclude, as well as the relationship between the parts), where the authorial agency of new media works mostly resides. In particular, it is in the design of the interface – as works like *Gaza Sderot - Life in spite of everything* (2009)⁷⁰ demonstrate – where new media’s artists most clearly express authorial agency, *their way of forming*.

⁷⁰ “Gaza/Sderot” documents human resilience by capturing stories from neighbouring cities Gaza and Sderot, each on different sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. <http://docubase.mit.edu/project/gazasderot-life-in-spite-of-everything/> funded by Arte.tv.

The notion of ‘controlled chaos’, already prominent in Eco’s *OA*, is also shared by another important player in today’s new media landscape, the Berlin-based media-artist Florian Thalhofer; a documentary filmmaker and the inventor of *Korsakow*, the open-source software used to author *GT*’s interactive film. That’s how Thalhofer describes his creation:

*More than a software Korsakow is a way of thinking. It enables authors to organize their content in a new way. Creating the rules, but not pre-thinking the experience of their work.*⁷¹

What is particularly interesting about this system is that it generates works where the author, by deciding the rules by which the scenes relate to each other, creates narratives based on dynamic, associative relationships between the clips, rather than on predetermined paths. In order to achieve this, the *Korsakow* allows authors to add rules to their media clips or SNUs (smallest narrative unit), which will guide the relationship between each clip, by assigning ‘in’ and ‘out’ tags to each SNU. Whenever a clip begins, the database will be queried for other SNUs whose ‘in’ tags match the ‘out’ tags of the current video. Matches will be displayed as options for viewing, with the author deciding how many matches (up to six) to present for each individual clip. Queries can be cued at specific points during the SNU. Groups of clips are therefore associated through tags (normally several per clip), ranging from the factual, to the political, to the poetical, producing a multiplicity of significant relations between the clips. K-Films are generative, with the order of the scenes calculated while viewing.

K-films, starting with Thalhofer’s own work, stand in many ways as clear examples of database interactive narrative, with the scenes shot and edited by the authors, as in

⁷¹ <http://thalhofer.com/> accessed on 20 July 2015.

traditional filmmaking⁷². Sitting at the authorial end of ‘database logic’, Thalhfer (and others working in a similar mode, including *GT*’s interactive film) thus propose a form of contemporary non-linear filmmaking where the author is still ‘in control’ of crucial aspects of the process, such as framing, composition, shot duration and rhythm of each individual clip; these works substantially differ from the more complex new media objects, which often use the web itself as their database⁷³. In this sense K-films share many of the concerns discussed through *ABCC* and *HSH*, particularly as far as shooting and the relationship with the characters. The overall editing of a K-film consists, however, of two distinct phases: the editing of each SNU and the construction of the schema defining the dynamic, associative relationships between the clips. As Thalhfer suggests and as I have experienced myself working on *GT*’s K-film, not only the viewing, but also the process of editing a K-film is interactive and cannot be mapped out in advance.

The overall and ongoing *GT* project – the interactive deep-map of the Heygate footprint – can no longer be defined nor experienced, however, as a film (however interactive), being a far more composite and complex artwork: a virtual, *navigable* environment, where discrete films (some interactive) exist as ‘material objects’⁷⁴, to be encountered and experienced alongside a range of other materials and medias, most of them, eventually, curated but not authored by myself. This might better be described as a conceptual architecture, a virtual ‘theatre of memory’, a form of multi-authored exhibition space, a multimedia 3D meta-collage, where interactive elements (such as K-film) are reframed and re-assembled within a bigger dynamic whole.

⁷² Unsurprisingly quite a few also exist in linear form, like *Planet Galata* (2010) realised in collaboration with Turkish filmmaker Berke Baş both as linear film and web-doc for ARTE/ZDF and ARTE.TV.

⁷³ As Manovich argues, ‘Pulling elements from databases and libraries becomes the default; creating them from scratch becomes an exception. The Web acts as a perfect materialization of this logic.’ (2002:125) Manovich draws a link with what he calls the ‘cut and paste’ logic and postmodern culture, both arising during the 1980’s.

⁷⁴ In an archeological sense.

For this reason, while I feel it is still feasible to use the term editing for K-films, concepts like assemblage and compositing seem far more appropriate to describe the overall process of designing and structuring a work like *GT*, which ultimately *generates* (rather than represents) a virtual urban landscape to be *navigated* and experienced also in spatial terms. In other words, an object where the spatial dimension (and corresponding experience of time) implicit in non-linearity can now be sensed, albeit not as in a true 3D virtual space. As Manovich clarifies:

Digital compositing exemplifies a more general operation of computer culture: assembling together a number of elements to create a single seamless object.

If the general trajectory of computer culture is from 2D images towards 3D computer graphics representations, digital compositing represents an intermediary historical step between the two. A composited space which consists of a number of moving image layers is more modular than a single shot of a physical space. The layers can be repositioned against each other and adjusted separately. Yet such a representation is not as modular as a true 3D virtual space, because each of the layers retains its own perspective.

(2001:132-3, underlining in the original)

In this sense *GT* is closer, as far as its user's experience, to Katerina Cizek's on-going multi-year, multimedia documentary experiment *HIGHRISE*, exploring vertical living around the world. This outstanding multi-awarded project⁷⁵, and in particular its initial output *Out of my Window*, also shares *GT*'s key concerns about challenging the perception of urban experience, and was a clear reference in the development of my own project. As Cizek points out in her director statement:

For me HIGHRISE is a lens into the uncharted, undocumented territory of the suburban vertical city, challenging our own perception of the urban experience. The project fuses the intellectual with the emotional, the creative with the practical, the personal with the

⁷⁵ Realised with the support of the National Film Board of Canada, which has produced by far the most substantial and innovative contribution to the interactive genre so far.

*political, the domestic with the geographic. HIGHRISE is also an experiment in how documentary itself can drive or participate in social change rather than just documenting it.*⁷⁶

If intentionality and subjectivity are clearly possible, as we have seen, within interactive media, how does the emergence of audience participation and interaction within the narrative structures redefine the notion of authorship? Has the author finally expired?

As Gaudenzi proves in her extensive taxonomy of the genre, this emerging field encompasses a huge range of modes of interaction, which differentiate in fundamental ways between interactive documentaries, also crucially affecting the balance of agency between the author and the user. It is not the role of this dissertation to explore this, and when I discuss authorial agency here I mostly refer to my own (and similar) works, where the role of a database documentary ‘filmmaker’ might be better described also as a curator or designer, signaling a different relationship to the creative process and raising questions about the role(s) now required in the making of creative interactive media works. In my particular case, the process of making *GT*’s initial chapter involved, alongside my usual filmmaking skills – used mostly to edit the K-film (as I had already shot the material) – a wide range of new technical skills and conceptual frameworks, enabling me to collaborate with people with trendy names, such as ‘creative technologist’ (young coders coming from a creative, artistic background). Another proof that creativity and technology are entwined like never before.

As many new media scholars, with Manovich leading the way, clearly acknowledge, ‘with the computerization of culture we are witnessing the emergence of a new medium - the metamedium of the digital computer’ (2001:33), whose emergence redefines exiting ones,

⁷⁶ <http://highrise.nfb.ca/share/>

including cinema, and reconfigures traditional roles, including that of the author and of representation, raising difficult questions: is it necessary for the concept of the aesthetics to assume representation? Does art necessarily involve a finite object?

It will be only by engaging with this relatively new and fast evolving field (and its underpinning technologies) that authors might attempt to give their individual (albeit always temporary) answers to some of these questions.

Epilogue

This dissertation presents an extended analysis of my three most recent works, all engaging in different ways with communities I belong to and inhabit, interrogating notions of place-identity, home and belonging, as well as the transformation of place in time: its becoming.

Outlining film's potential as an analytical tool, a way of making sense of complex social interactions and of articulating meaning audio-visually through non-literal means, the dissertation delivers a 'view from the inside', reflecting on how both the subjects of my films and myself as filmmaker experience the act of making them.

Through the analysis of my two films, but particularly of *ABCC*, I unpack my filmmaking practice as a cognitive and relational process, a way of connecting and making sense of the world, also capable of precipitating the ethical encounter with the film subject, of raising awareness of the responsibility towards the other. I argue that filmmaking before (and alongside) being a mode of communication allows for a unique and significant mode of relating and communicating between the filmmaker and her subject, a qualitative 'listening' and a mutual awareness capable of profound transformation in both. Through the analyses of the initial chapter of *GT* I look at how the notions of *connecting* and *engagement*, key to my linear work, might translate in new media via the connectivity intrinsic to interactive media, with *GT* extending and augmenting the process of critically engaging with the transformation my borough is undergoing by generating a virtual community: an ongoing research project with the potential to drive and participate in social change rather than just document it.

Discussing the working methods, as well as the formal and the rhetorical strategies implemented in *ABCC*, *HSH* and *GT*, the dissertation unravels the developments in my own practice within the evolving field of documentary filmmaking and new forms of storytelling, mapping a trajectory that sees the gradual surfacing of the enunciating subject, with the traces of the ‘body behind the camera’ becoming increasingly visible, accessible constituents of the story being told. These chapters critically engage with and problematize the shift from a more traditional ‘participatory observation’ mode of address to the progressive negotiation of a plurality of modes and ‘voices’, and to a more explicitly articulated personal viewpoint (and consequent foregrounding of my own partiality and multiplicity as a subject).

‘Reality’ is a term ever more problematic, dynamically constructed in our interaction with others and the world we inhabit and permeated by the co-existence of a multiplicity and a diversity of ways of understanding our shared humanity. Filmmaking more than ever needs to be a process of ‘negotiation’, capable of encompassing diversity and plurality while attending to the responsibility of interrogating the world and its values, of fostering a critical understanding of our society and the forces at play within it.

In this dissertation I have suggested the surfacing of the subjective voice as one possible way of responding to this increasingly fluid sense of reality and belonging, and I looked at filmmaking as a process of dwelling, of constructing belonging, with the audiovisual works as problematized places of inhabitation the author constructs, inviting viewers/users to visit and experience.

I have argued that the challenge for a filmmaker today is to develop a subjective cinema capable of negotiating the coexistence of different registers of address in open dialogue with each other, generating thought-provoking reflections defined by unorthodoxy and openness; to respond to the demise of the 'naïve' observer by embracing the inherently performative nature of the 'society of the spectacle', by 'staging' works that foreground and critically engage with the constructed nature of any representation.

I have also pointed to new ways of 'generating reality', which explore and experiment with notions of participation and collaboration, while nonetheless retaining authorship of the design of the conceptual architecture of the system. I have argued that while a filmmaker has an undeniable authorial agency in assembling a work of cinema, this agency is fundamentally distinct from a work of interactive media. In the context of interactive media, time is complicated. Unlike linear media, where a final work has a set duration and an author has control over the timing of each moment, the temporality of interactive work is always different depending on how a specific user navigates a project.

As Manovich argues in his analysis of the shift between temporal editing (montage in time) and digital compositing (montage within the shot), this latter makes the dimensions of space (3D fake space) and frame (separate images moving in 2D within the frame) as important as time. In addition, the possibility of embedding hyperlinks within a moving sequence adds yet another spatial dimension, one crucial to deep mapping. Thus 'if film technology, film practice and film theory privileged the temporal development of a moving image, computer technology spatializes moving image making time just one dimension among a number of others.' (2001:147)

The essence of a new media artist's work thus seems to have less to do with 'sculpting in

time' and more with the articulation of a 'metaspace' that can be traversed and explored, more like an architectonic object, a landscape, or an archaeological site both horizontally and vertically; a spatial 'composition', which can contain, however, within its 'rooms', its openings and multiple layers, discrete media elements (thus still calling into play the ability to sculpt with time). Discussing database interactive documentary I suggest that new media narratives can explore these new compositional and aesthetic possibilities offered by a computer database.

Finally, I would like to clarify that interactive works, however alluring, are clearly not the only way to attend to the challenges posed by our increasingly wired, mediated and fragmented society, one in which most subjects are themselves, one way or another, media users and producers.

The radically different way linear filmmaking has to engage with the experience of time, to render the subjective nature of our existence and give, as Pasolini suggestively points out, the 'ultimate significance to the chaos of possibilities, the search of relations among discontinuous meanings' (1967:6) that make up our reality, has still a compelling attraction for me, and a lot to offer as an art. So much so that I am just about to travel to Rome to develop my next film, the final chapter of the trilogy, *The Long Way Round*.

APPENDIX ONE

LIST OF PUBLISHED WORKS

- 2013 ***Ghost Town*** (Interactive Web Doc) Project Concept/Creative director/Producer.
The first chapter of a wider research project, an on-going multimedia investigation of the transformation of cityscape over time designed to provide an innovative framework for developing new perspectives on urban experience. Ghost Town takes the form of an interactive "deep" map of the Elephant & Castle – an area of central London presently undergoing massive regeneration – and in particular of the Heygate Estate over the last hundred years and beyond. Produced by Enrica Colusso, Roehampton University and Jason DaPonte (the Swarm).
- 2012 ***Home Sweet Home*** (90min documentary) Writer/Director /Cinematographer
Filmed over four years, the film brings out the drama of a massive regeneration scheme unfolding in the heart of the capital. It is also a personal journey of discovery in the city the filmmaker chose as her home 20 years ago. Centred around the now derelict Heygate Estate in Southwark, *Home Sweet Home* tells a complex but intimate story of urban and social transformation, and asks: what kind of society are we building?
- Produced by Les Films d'Ici (France) and Tigerlily Films UK for Arté (France). Transmitted on Arté France 18th and 31st October 2012; and again in February 2014.
- Festivals:
Open City Docs Film Festival (London) June 2012. Nominated for the Time Out best city award.
Turin Film Festival (23rd November/1st December 2012)
- Home sweet Home has been published in DVD by Doriane Films in June 2014 (<http://www.dorianefilms.com/description.php?id=826&target=new>)
- 2007 ***ABC Colombia*** (90min. documentary film) Writer/Director/ Cinematographer
An intimate portrait of a rural community, exploring what it means to grow up in a rural area of Colombia, controlled by paramilitary forces and whose main economy comes from cocaine crops.
- Produced by Les Films d'Ici (France) and GA&A (Italy) for ARTE Grand Format (France) More4, Yle (Finland) and ITVS (USA).
- Transmitted on ARTE France (September and October 2007) More 4 "True Stories" (December 2007). Yle Tv (Finland – May 2008) and premiered in USA in July 20, 2008 on PBS World, "Global Voices".
- Festivals in competition:
Cinéma du Réel, France, March 2007,
The International Festival of New Film, Split, September 2007,
Sheffield International Documentary Festival, November 2007,
Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal, November 2007,
Torino Film Festival, 23 November- 1 December 2007;
7th WATCH DOCS. Human Rights in Film Int. Film Festival, Warsaw, 2007; Thessaloniki Documentary Film Festival (2008);
Rencontres Cinemas d'Amérique Latine (2008);
Brooklyn International Film Festival – New York (2008);

Bellaria Film Festival (Italy 2008);
XXII Pärnu International Film Festival (Estonia, 2008);
Bogotá International film festival (2008);
Annecy (France 2008);
International Latin American Film festival, London (2008);
Cimameriche Film Festival (Italy 2009)

ABC Colombia has won the Spirit Award for documentary at the Brooklyn International Film Festival, the Prix Media 2009 (Documentary) Fondation pour l'Enfance (France), the Youth Award and the Jury Award at Cimameriche Film Festival (2009).

The International Academy of Television Arts & Sciences has selected *ABC Colombia* in the Documentary category for the 2008 International Emmy Awards competition.

Nominations:

- *Prix Italia;*
- *TV3 Award (la Corporación Catalana de radio y televisión - Corporació Catalana de Ràdio i Televisió – CCRTV) a platform for all productions covering the violation of human rights; 2008 Learning on Screen Award, BUFVC, UK, category: broadcast.*

2002 ***Umberto Eco, Renaissance man*** (30min. doc.) Director/Cinematographer
A portrait on the Italian world acclaimed writer for BBC4 "Profiles"

2002 ***No risk no champagne*** (90min. documentary) Director/Cinematographer
Exploring women trafficking from Eastern Europe

Produced by Fandango for RAI2.

Special Mention:

Festival dei Popoli 2002

Premio Bizzarri (2003)

Other Festivals:

Parnau (Estonia) 2002

Torino Cinema Giovani, Italy 2002

Maremma Doc (Italy) 2002

Roma Int. Film Festival (Italy) 2002

Vision du Réel (Nyon, Switzerland) 2002

Screened in Sept. 2003 at the Politecnico Cinema in Rome, "No risk, no champagne" is part of a group of film produced by Fandango which are going to be released in several cinemas around the country and published for distribution in DVD.

2000/1 Director and Cinematographer of three episodes of ***Hidden Tuscany***, a 3x50min. series produced by Crimson Films for Channel4, Series director R. Williams.

2000 ***The Solitude of Memory*** (30min. documentary) Director and D.o.P.
Exploring the reality of immigrants in treatment at the Frantz Fanon Ethnopsychiatry Centre in Turin. Produced by Radix Films and Miro Film with the support of the Media II Program and the Soros Fund

- 1995 ***Fine Pena Mai - Life after Life*** (93' 16mm doc) Director/ Cinematographer
A documentary following the daily life of four inmates sentenced to life imprisonment in the island prison of Porto Azzurro (Elba).
Co-produced by the N.F.T.S. and Metafilm (Italy) in collaboration with RAI 3.

Awards:

Best Director Award at the Sulmona Cinema Giovani Festival 1995,
Best Film Award at San Benedetto del Tronto 1997.

Other Festivals:

Cinéma du Réel (Paris) – International Competition 1995
Pesaro International Film Festival (Italy) – 1995
International Women's Film Festival (Turin) – 1995
Amsterdam International Film Festival – 1995
Rassegna del Cinema Indipendente (Roma) 1996

"Fine Pena Mai" was released on RAI 3 in '95 and '96, and on SBS Australia in 1996.

- 1992 ***Non é vero ma ci credo*** (Just a matter of faith) (45min. 16mm documentary)
Director and D.o.P.
A portrait of fortune-teller and clients in contemporary Naples.
Co-produced by the N.F.T.S. and the C.S.C. (Italy).
- 1991 ***The Restoration of the Leopard*** (11min 35mm color documentary) Director
Following the restoration made by the world acclaimed director of photography G. Rotunno of Visconti's "The Leopard".
Produced by the Italian Cinémathèque in collaboration with the N.F.T.S.

Shown at the 1992 Venice Film Festival.
- 1989 ***Les sardines, ça se mange debout*** (20min. 16mm documentary) Director
A portrait of a family circus in France. Prod. Les Ateliers VARAN.
- 1988 ***41bis Quai de la Loire*** (20min, Video8) Director.
Exploring the gentrification of a working-class borough in Paris. Prod. Les Ateliers VARAN.

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Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975)

News from Home (1977)

Les rendez-vous d'Anna (1978)

De Seta, Vittorio -

Isole di fuoco (1955)

Lu tempu di li pisci spata (1954)

Bandits of Orgosolo (1961)

Diario di un maestro (1973)

De Sica, Vittorio -

Umberto D (1952)

Flaherty, Robert -

Nanook of the North (1929)

Man of Aran (1934)

Kiarostami, Abbas -

Close-up (1990)

ABC Africa (2001)

Kieslovskij, K. -

From the City of Łódź (1968)

Workers (1971)

Curriculum Vitae (1975)

From a Night Porter's Point of View (1977)

Railway Station (1981)

Kossakovsky, Victor -

Belovy (1994)

Pavel i Lyalya (1999)

I Loved You (2000)

Ivens, Joris -

Regen (1929)

L'Italia non è un paese povero (1960)

Far from Vietnam (1967)

A Tale of the Wind (1988)

Longinotto, Kim -

Divorce Iranian style (1998)

Sisters-in law (2005)

Hold me tight, let me go (2007)

Marker, Chris -

La jete (1962)

Le joilie Mai (1963)

Sans soleil (1983)

Tokyo Days (1988)

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McDougall, David -

Lorang's Way (1978, Co-directed with Judith MacDougall.)

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Tempus de Baristas (1993)

Joshua, Oppenheimer -

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Panh, Rhithy -

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Pasolini, Pier Paolo -

Comizi d'amore (1964)

Rosi, Gianfranco -

Boatman (1993)

Below sea level (2008)

El sicario (2010)

Sacro GRA (2013)

Rouch, Jean –

Les maîtres foux (1955)

Moi un noir (1958)

Chronicle of a summer (1961, co-directed with Morin, E.)

La Pyramide Humaine (1961)

Ruttman, Walther -

Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927)

Sukurov, Alexander -

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Russian Ark (Русский ковчег, 2002)

Van der Keuken, Johan -

Blind Kind (1966)

Face Value (1991)

Amsterdam Global Village (1996)

To Sang Fotostudio (1997)

Varda,, Agnes. -

Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse (The Gleaners and I), 2000.

Vertov, Dziga -

A man with a movie camera (1929)

Vigo, Jean -

A propos de Nice (1930)

Wenders, Wim –

Notebook on city and cloth (1989)

Wiseman Frederick –

Titticult follies (1967)

Primate (1974)

Welfare (1975)

Public housing (1997)

Domestic Violence (2002)

The last letter (2002)

Interactive Works

Cizec, Katerina -

Highrise – (2009-present) An Emmy-winning, multi-year, many-media, collaborative documentary experiment at the National Film Board of Canada, that explores vertical living around the world. <http://highrise.nfb.ca/>

Embury, Sean –

Hyperlocal (2013) Interactive stories about the places we live that challenge our notions of change. <http://hyperlocal.nfb.ca/#/hyperlocal/>

The Goggles - Simons Michael and Shoebridge Paul, collectively known as The Goggles –

Welcome to Pine Point – (2011) interactive web documentary exploring the memories of residents from the former mining community of Pine Point, Northwest Territories, and reflecting on how we remember the past. “Imagine your hometown never changed. That no one ever grew old or moved on.” Part book, part film, part family photo album, *Welcome to Pine Point* unearths a place frozen in time and discovers what happens when an entire community is erased from the map.

<http://pinepoint.nfb.ca/#/pinepoint>

McMillion, Elaine (2014) *HOLLOW*, an interactive documentary that examines the future of rural America through the eyes and voices of Appalachians (2014 Emmy Nominee in New Approaches for Documentary).

Mendes, J. & Anderson, Leanne -

Bear 71 (2012) A virtual experience of Banff National Park with Bear 71 as your guide. Her story explores how we coexist with wildlife in the digital world.

<http://bear71.nfb.ca/#/bear71>

Pepita, Ferrari –

Capturing reality (2009) Thirty-eight of the world's most influential documentarians discuss their approaches to non-fiction storytelling.

<http://films.nfb.ca/capturing-reality/>

Singer, Danny –

Main Street – (2011) Photographer Danny Singer captures large-format images of Main Streets across Canada. Interactive photo essay Main Street showcases his immersive panoramas. Visitors to the site can explore by town or weather conditions. The panoramas scale up to full screen, allowing audience members to explore them as if they were standing on the sidewalk. Audio from local radio stations trickles in, as if from the window of a nearby parked car.

<http://mainstreet.nfb.ca/#/mainstreet>

Thalhofer, Florian –

7 Sons (2003). Florian Thalhofer and Mahmoud Hamdy.

<http://www.7sons.com/>

Forgotten Flags (2006). Florian Thalhofer and Juliane Henrich.

<http://www.forgotten-flags.com/>

Planet Galata: A bridge in Istanbul (2010) co-directed with Bas Berke. The Galata bridge in Istanbul is a cosmos of its own. Between shops, restaurants and in-rushes of tourists we meet people for whom the bridge is home, hope and purpose in life.

<http://www.planetgalata.com/>

Sivan, Eyal –

Montage inderdit (2012) – *Forbidden editing* is a web-based documentary, realized in conversation with an online archive exploring the language and possibilities of montage in documentary work through the prism of Jean-Luc Godard's films. The

archive consists of film materials accompanied by interpretive commentaries from various thinkers.

<http://montageinterdit.net/>

Shapins, Jess –

Mapping Main Street (2008 - ongoing) – a collaborative documentary media project that creates a new map of the United States through stories, photos, and videos recorded on actual Main Streets. The goal is to document all of the more than 10,000 streets named Main in the United States. The project's website seamlessly integrates and automatically maps media pulled from the APIs of NPR, Flickr and Vimeo, creating nonlinear algorithmic narratives that traverse the country. Launched in 2009, Mapping Main Street is produced with AIR, NPR, the CPB, and the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University.

<http://www.mappingmainstreet.org/>

Szalat Alex, Ronez Joël & Lotz Susanna -

Gaza Sderot - Life in spite of everything (2009) documents human resilience by capturing stories from neighboring cities Gaza and Sderot, each on different sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. PRODUCER : Alma Films/Trabelsi Productions, Arte, Bo Travail!, Ramattan Studios, Upian

Various authors (interactive projects are often collaborative with big themes and different authorial roles)

Here at Home (2008-2013) A web documentary about mental health and homelessness that takes us inside the Mental Health Commission of Canada's At Home pilot project. <http://athome.nfb.ca/#/athome>

Territories (2011-12) An exploration of new urban landscapes that records the passage of time and the encroachment of consumption on the spaces in our lives.

<http://territories.nfb.ca/#/territories>