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The Visible Camera:
Hand-Held Camera Movement and Cinematographic Embodiment in Autobiographical Documentary

Abstract

This paper presents a new theoretical framework for examining the relationship between the hand-held camera and the camera operator’s body in autobiographical documentary. While many documentary scholars have written extensively on cinema vérité and direct cinema, they have not examined how the camera can embody the movements and perceptions of the cinematographer. In this analysis, I reexamine the relationship between hand-held cameras and the cinematographer to better explain how the operator’s hands help construct an image and reveal off-screen space in autobiographical documentary. Drawing from examples from the autobiographical documentaries *A Silverlake Life: The View From Here* (Friedman and Joslin, 1993), *The Gleaners and I* (Varda, 2000) and *War Photographer* (Frei, 2001), this paper highlights instances where the camera operator’s hands and body movements are made visible. As I argue, the recorded material is not only the cinematographer’s visual depiction of the world but is also a record of his or her intentionality and bodily movements as they happened at a given space and time.

This paper is part of a larger project that seeks to establish a theoretical framework for rethinking the cinematic properties and tactile dimensions of the hand-held camera by analyzing moments in documentary video practice where the off-screen space of the cinematographer’s body becomes visible through the movements within the frame. Despite the array of visual metaphors that still dominate film and media studies’ understanding of cinematography, camera operation is a tactile practice that requires the use of the hands, fingertips and shoulders. As such, camera operation and hand-held cinematography is more fully immersed in the body than has been acknowledged previously. This new understanding of hand-held camera movement provides the initial framework for what I classify as “cinematographic embodiment”—instances when the camera operator’s bodily movements and perceptions are recorded or “embodied” along with the subject(s) in the frame. Whether these movements are spontaneous or rehearsed beforehand, I seek to more fully address the choreography and improvisation that transpires between a cinematographer and the subject being filmed. This relationship is similar to what Jean Rouch calls the “cine-trance.” As theorized by Rouch, this symbiotic transformation between a cameraperson and his subjects is the “harmony of a traveling shot that articulates perfectly with the movements of those being filmed.” [1] Building upon Rouch’s idea of the “cine-trance,” I will examine the tactile dimension of hand-held cinematography and underscore the self-reflexivity of the cinematographer whose off-screen presence (and in some cases, personality) become embodied onscreen by the movements of the camera.

In this analysis, I will examine how documentary filmmakers interact with the camera and analyze instances when the cinematographer’s body becomes observable in the frame through the movements of the camera itself. Although documentary filmmakers do not always operate their own cameras, I will primarily focus on directors who perform the majority of their own
In doing so, I will problematize conventional understandings of cinema vérité and direct cinema through an analysis of the autobiographical documentaries Silverlake Life: The View From Here (Friedman and Joslin, 1993), The Gleaners and I (Varda, 2000), and War Photographer (Frei, 2001). While these documentaries are examples of cinematographic embodiment, they are also examples in which the camera is utilized at crucial moments in their respective narratives, at moments of critical insight as a provocateur or as a mediated instrument for “embalming” one’s life experiences. These filmmakers do not simply use the camera to observe their subjects. They are performers from both behind and in front of the camera. Although the camera operator’s body is often out of the frame, in all three examples, the filmmaker uses the camera to construct and perform a documentary persona. As such, the movements in the frame created by their hands constitute the unseen body movements of the cinematographer that are made visible by the camera. These implications broaden our larger understanding of documentary practice as a phenomenological process of experiencing and witnessing history.

In The Autobiographical Documentary in America, Jim Lane writes, “At the core of this exploration lies a tension that hinges on the documentary impulse to objectively record a historical world ‘out there’ and on the autobiographical impulse to subjectively record a private world ‘in here.’”[2] While Lane’s divisions provide a useful framework,—distinguishing autobiographical documentary from other forms of documentary (particularly direct cinema), his distinctions of “out there” and “in here” suggest that observational and self-reflective documentary practice are polar opposites. While there are certainly ideological differences between these modes of filmmaking, hand-held cinematography is a form of cinematographic embodiment that traverses these divisions, regardless of whether the filmmaker uses the camera to subjectively record their own private world “in here” or a historical world “out there.” Lane asserts that, “By repositioning the filmmaker at the foreground of the film, the new autobiographical documentary disrupt[s] the detached, objective ideal of direct cinema, which excluded the presence of the filmmaker and the cinematic apparatus.”[3] Again, although Lane wants to make a clear distinction between direct cinema and autobiographical documentary, these divisions do not account for the slippages between different forms of cinematographic embodiment in hand-held camera movements in different documentary registers or traditions. The cinematographer and the camera apparatus produce or imply their presence through the shaky movements caused by holding the camera. The filmmaker is not necessarily any more or less present simply because he or she is also in the shot. Moreover, Lane believes that a direct cinema filmmaker is a non-participant who has no personal stake in the profilmic events. [4] Examining direct cinema from this limited perspective does not account for the embodied presence of the cinematographer holding the camera and participating in the event, nor does it clarify the nuances between the wide range of direct cinema films and filmmakers. [5] This is the case regardless of whether or not the cinematographer’s body is visible in front of the camera or visible only through the movements of a hand-held camera. Rather than belaboring the differences between cinema vérité or direct cinema and autobiographical documentary, I will examine hand-held cinematography as a distinct mode of film practice that is simultaneously “out there” and “in here.” In the case of hand-held cinematography, the implication of this designation is always both.

Although cinema vérité and direct cinema contain significant differences in their approach

As Agnes Varda videotapes herself in front of the mirror this self-reflexive moment from The Gleaners and I reveals her fascination with the increasing accessibility and portability of digital video cameras.
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to their subjects and their degree of self-reflexivity, both documentary approaches imply hand-held, non-directed filmmaking—that is, both of these forms reside in the absolute contingency of the moment. [6] As Vivian Sobchack points out, these methods of documentary filmmaking cannot pre-plan to any great degree the movements of the body-subjects who are the objects of their vision. Rather, they both predominately respond to that movement. [7] In other words, although the structural organization of the narrative may be pre-planned (around crisis, for example), the existential movements of the body-subjects being filmed are immediate and not rehearsed beforehand. More importantly, if less emphasized, the same can be said for the cinematographer adapting to the movements of the subjects that he or she is filming. As stated by Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz:

Observation then meant the development of a particular kind of alertness to the unexpected. It meant being open to the spontaneous or to the overlooked as potentially yielding new insights into a situation or personality. These skills hinged greatly on intuition and on the fine-tuning of the senses. [8]

Grimshaw and Ravetz’s emphasis on the senses is an important intervention that begins to recontextualize hand-held camera movements as a series of conscious perceptions and actions of a cinematographer that have been recorded by a camera and made visible in the footage. For example, in Silverlake Life: The View From Here, Tom Joslin documents his bedroom with a point-of-view, hand-held shot:

Well, this is my bedroom. The shelf here with flowers and food and tapes to be edited. The camera I do my diary with. There’s Mark. This is the camera that I do my diary with. And then one, two, three cups of medicine that I drink. And there’s the tape deck. And here’s the monitor, which is on a comfiture device, which can be raised and lowered and pulled out and pushed away. This was designed with the idea that I would be sick in bed all the time and still be able to make my movie.

In this scene, Tom uses the camera to explore his own personal space, focusing on his tapes and camera equipment. He also fixates on dexterity, things he does with his hands. The camera is part of that routine, part of that orbit of interaction. Moreover, Tom’s camera movements have a degree of spontaneity as he moves from object to object. Similar to other moments in the documentary, this lack of certainty and of never knowing what will happen next affects how a cinematographer’s body, and particularly his hands, function in an uncontrolled situation at a given space and time. Indeed, autobiographical documentaries shot in the self-reflexive, hand-held tradition of cinema vérité and direct cinema are perhaps the most notable and noticeable method of filmmaking where the spontaneous and uncontrolled movements of the cinematographer’s body become visible. In other words, one can actually see the conscious decisions and spontaneous movements of the cinematographer that happen in relation to events occurring in the world. We see the decision-making process as it unfolds because the cinematographer will occasionally, for example, look in the wrong direction or need to readjust focus and framing to capture the unfolding events. Consequently, the recorded footage from a hand-held documentary personifies more tactile and visual human characteristics and seems to reflect the personality of its author more noticeably than any other style of filmmaking, [9]

Although scholars have argued that these technologies disguised or limited the presence of the cameraperson, these assertions only begin to scratch the surface and leave much to examine. According to William Rothman,

Because the cinema-vérité camera is perceived as an extension of the filmmaker’s body, the camera’s presence is identified first and foremost with the person of the filmmaker. This means that there is a limit, in cinema-vérité, to the camera’s ability to establish an identification with its (other) human subjects. [10]

As Rothman argues, there is perhaps more at stake in the filmmaker’s presence than the subjects
He suggests that the apparatus functions as a physical extension of the cinematographer's body. The relationship between the camera and the hands is particularly useful in thinking about the vérité cinematographer, through which the body and the camera move together simultaneously. In these instances, each movement of the hands is visually embodied through the camera and produces a recorded testimony of a body's presence in the profilmic scene. This perspective is often most common in "observational" direct cinema documentaries where the cinematographer is behind the camera documenting his or her subject. As these initial observations indicate, a cinematographer and a hand-held camera share the same physical space and function in accordance with one another through shared movement.

Silverlake Life: The View From Here contains several moments where the cinematographer's hands reach out in front of the camera to reveal bodily presence behind the camera. The film also contains several shots of Tom and Mark's hands as they are treated by doctors and healers. In these films, the focus on hands seems to have a strong connection with mortality. Likewise, Agnès Varda's The Gleaners and I is also full of these instances. A telling example is a scene in which she combs her hair and says, "No, it's not O rage. No, it's not O despair. It's not Old age, my enemy. It might even be Old age, my friend, but still, my hair and my hands keep telling me that the end is near." Soon after, she shoots her wrinkled hands as she drives her car. In another instance, when Varda is going through her things and opening letters her hand comes across the images of Rembrandt paintings. She states, "this is my project: to film one hand with my other hand. To enter into the horror of it. I find it extraordinary. I feel as if I am an animal, worse, I am an animal I don't know.”

As Varda drives through the Paris countryside, she uses one hand to film the other as trucks pass by. In several instances, her hand enters the shot and cups a giant truck much like the closing iris of a camera aperture, as she says, "I'd like to capture them. To retain things passing? No, just to play." As Varda repeatedly puts her hand out in front of the camera to explore her body, she seems fascinated by its size and bewildered at the same time.

In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes states, “Every photograph is a certificate of presence.” In this sense, a photograph is both a certificate of the presence of the person in the photograph as well as the photographer who took the photograph. This notion of photographic presence is particularly important in this analysis especially in relation to cinematographic embodiment. In Christian Frei’s War Photographer, a video camera is attached to a photographer's still camera and records his perspective every moment that a picture is taken. In some instances, the moving image actually stops when the shutter clicks on his still camera providing viewers with the image as it was captured at a given space and time. In the Kosovo war, photographer James
Nachtwey snaps shots of women and children crying and people uncovering mass graves. As he sends these images back to *Stern* magazine in Hamburg to be examined by editors, we gain an increased sense of how a series of traumatic and vivid photographs end up on the cover of a magazine. It also seems to literalize the thinking process of the filmmaker: the very thing that hand-held-ness does in the act of capturing the historical moment. However, since these images are often interspersed with a point-of-view shot of Nachtwey taking the photos, we are reminded that the body of the photographer is always present. As Barthes writes,

I might suppose that the Operator's emotion (and consequently the essence of Photography-according-to-the-Photographer) had some relation to the “little hole” (*stenope*) through which he looks, limits, frames and perspectives when he wants to “take” (no surprise). Technically, Photography is at the interaction of two quite distinct procedures; one of the chemical order: the action of light on certain substances; the other of a physical order: the formation of the image through an optical device." There is also the photographer. The body and the hands that click on the button at a specific moment in time. One instant later at it would be a different photograph. [13]

As eloquently underscored by Barthes, images are always filtered through a body and constructed by a point-of-view. In this sense, the hands and eyes work together to produce an image. In *War Photographer*, a video camera is attached to Nachtwey's still camera and provides access to each instance when his finger presses the button to take a photograph. In this sense, photographic choice is made visible. While we often think of photography in terms of an eye-line match, in a phenomenological analysis, we also must account for the hands and other sensory organs as essential in producing the image and in witnessing history. As stated by Barthes, a photographer's finger is also an essential component in this process:

For me, the Photographer's organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens, to the metallic shifting of the plates (when the camera still has such things). I love these mechanical sounds in an almost voluptuous way, as if, in the Photograph, they were the very thing – and the only thing – which my desire clings, their abrupt click breaking through the mortiferous layer of the Pose. [14]

This passage alludes to the Bazinian notion that the photographic image can mimetically preserve and “embalm” reality. [15] As Barthes suggests, the clicking of the camera transcends the “mortiferous layer of the Pose.” [16] Like Barthes, I would like to move beyond thinking of the construction of an image in visual terms and instead also consider other parts of the body that constitute its production. In *War Photographer* we see the construction of an image and gain a more nuanced understanding of how an image is produced, even if the photographer's voyeuristic interactions with his subjects are uncomfortable to watch. This heightened reflexivity is consistent with ethics of cultural anthropology. Jay Ruby also underlines this notion: "the maker of images has the moral obligation to reveal the cover – to never appear to produce an objective mirror for the world to see its true images...So long as our images of the
world continue to be sold to others as the image of the world, we are being unethical.” [17] In *War Photographer* there are multiple layers of point-of-view. We have hand-held cinematography by Peter Indergand which follows James Nachtwey as well as a video camera's perspective of Nachtwey's still camera as he takes photographs. In this sense, reflexive documentaries like *War Cinematographer* remind viewers that images are always constructed and contain an embodied point-of-view.

As hand-held cameras become increasingly portable and accessible it is important to establish a theoretical account of how an image is constructed as well as how other parts of the body, particularly the hands, work to create an image. As the predominant aesthetic in contemporary filmmaking, hand-held camera movements are not only a common characteristic of documentary and amateur user-generated content, but are now just as common in commercials, television, and Hollywood and independent features. [18] Despite the hand-held camera's ubiquity in contemporary film practice, this mode of filmmaking has been widely under-theorized by film and media scholars. As this analysis illustrates, *Silverlake Life*, *The Gleaners and I*, and *War Photographer* are examples of autobiographical documentaries that contain moments when the body of the cinematographer is visible or implied in the act of image production. While these initial observations provide the foundation of a theoretical framework to more closely examine the relationship between the hand-held camera and the filmmaker's body, particularly in relation to how the invisible (off-screen) body holding the camera, further analysis must account for fiction films shot on hand-held cameras as another form of cinematographic embodiment. The degree to which any of these characteristics are related to human modes of viewing, moving, thinking, or feeling will determine the extent to which the camera might be considered anthropomorphic. As these examples indicate, this phenomenological understanding of hand-held camera movement in autobiographical documentary provides the initial framework for conceptualizing cinematographic embodiment. It also seems that our attentiveness to these documentary modes can help to make sense of non-documentary hand-held camera movements which have become increasingly commonplace, if not the accepted norm in contemporary film and television practice. While these films have co-opted the style of cinema vérité and direct cinema documentaries, their aesthetics and production practices carry different implications, particularly in respect to the agency and authorship of the camera operator. In many documentaries, including the ones analyzed in this paper, the filmmaker is also the camera operator. However, in live action film and television, there are often multiple camera operators. More importantly, in these modes of production, the camera operator's body is a proxy for above-the-line talent. Although the movements are often rehearsed beforehand, it is still a form of cinematographic embodiment, but not as I have identified the concept in this analysis. The hand-held camera movements may not embody the intentionality of the camera operator, but rather the complex industrial hierarchies and spatial delineations on set that John Caldwell examines in *Production Culture*. [19] While more work needs to be done in this area, these initial observations mark a departure from textual analysis of the mise-en-scène and introduces a more phenomenological understanding of off-screen space that highlights the tactility of hand-held camera movement in documentary production practice.

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has made films about several musicians including Sonic Youth, Mount Eerie, Califone, and Sonny Smith. His research interests include, documentary theory and practice, phenomenology, and production culture and technology.

End Notes

[5] Erik Barnouw highlights some of these differences: “Direct cinema documentarist took his camera to a situation of tension and waited hopefully for a crisis; the Rouch version of cinema-vérité tried to precipitate one. The direct cinema artist aspired to invisibility; the Rouch cinema-vérité as often an avowed participant. The direct cinema artist played the role of uninvolved bystander, the cinema-vérité artist espoused that of provocateur.” *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 254.
[14] Ibid., 15.
[16] Barthes, 15.