Documentary tensions and the Filmmaker in the Frame

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Abstract

This thesis examines in detail three films in which the filmmaker is present within the frame: Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* (2005), Anna Broinowski’s *Forbidden LieS* (2007), and Jafar Panahi’s *This Is Not a Film* (2011). Each of these films offers a distinct insight into the conceptual tensions that arise when a filmmaker is framed as both a specific subject and the author of the film. On this basis the thesis proposes a significant category of contemporary documentary – here called the Filmmaker in the Frame films – of which the three films analysed are emblematic. Defining this category brings to the fore the complex issues that arise when filmmakers engage with their own authorial identity while remaining committed to representing an ‘other.’

Through detailed textual analysis of these documentaries the thesis identifies how questions of authorship are explicitly shown as negotiated between the filmmaker, the people they film, and the situations in which they participate. This negotiation of authorship also reveals the authority of the filmmaker to be constructed as a particular kind of performance, enacted in the moments of filming. In order to analyse the presence of the filmmaker in these films, the thesis draws together Stella Bruzzi’s notion of documentary as the result of the ‘collision’ between apparatus and subject, and Judith Butler’s notion of the performativity of identity.

The idea that documentaries might propose forms of negotiated and performed authorship is significant because it disturbs the theoretical opposition between subjectivity and objectivity that underlies dominant discourses of documentary. Instead, in the case of Filmmaker in the Frame documentaries, the filmmaker’s subjectivity is shown to be inseparable from the ‘objective’ truth of the reality produced and recorded by the filmmaking process. The intersection of subjectivity and authorship in these films is not entirely captured by theories that consider the filmmaker’s presence in terms of reflexive revealing, acting out an authorial persona, or autobiographical projects.

The analysis of these three key Filmmaker in the Frame films demonstrates how each is uniquely structured around the filmmaker’s self-reflexive consideration of their
own authorship. The thesis concludes that the respective tensions between subjectivity and authorship explored in these films are more usefully characterised as productive points of engagement with the world represented, rather than problems of documentary representation. By investigating how certain nonfiction filmmakers provocatively recast the relationship between subject/author and subjectivity/objectivity within their films, this thesis offers an original contribution to documentary studies.
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Introduction: The filmmaker’s presence in the frame

*Documentary appears to express attitudes toward the world by appearing to allow the world to speak for itself.*

– Dai Vaughan

This thesis investigates a key trope of contemporary documentary film: the filmmaker’s presence on screen as both subject and author. It examines the conceptual tensions that arise when filmmakers self-reflexively consider their subjectivity and authorship within the frame, and considers how these presences complicate and extend existing theoretical frameworks of documentary. The research analyses in detail three recent documentary films in which the authority of the filmmaker is challenged, contested, or questioned: Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man* (2005), Anna Broinowski’s *Forbidden Lie$* (2007), and Jafar Panahi’s *This Is Not a Film* (2011). Analysing the presence of the filmmaker in the frame of each of these films shows documentary authorship to be a process of negotiation between the filmmaker, the people they film, and the situations in which they participate. These films also show the authority of the filmmaker as a kind of performance, enacted in specific moments of filming as much as it is defined by discourses of documentary authorship.

In each of the films analysed, the filmmaker’s negotiation of authorship and performance of authority reveals tensions between their subjective experiences, their responsibility to represent shared social reality, and the contingent processes of documenting reality. Axiomatic notions of documentary imply such tensions are problematic to documentary representation; however in these films they are shown to be productive points of engagement with the world represented. Examining authorship as negotiated and the authority of the filmmaker as performative therefore adds needed nuance to established ideas of documentary representation.

A telling example of the conceptual tensions raised by the filmmaker’s dual role as author and subject is a scene in Louis Theroux’s documentary *Louis and the Nazis* (2003) in which Theroux is directly threatened by the people he engages with. After a day spent filming a family of neo-Nazis, Theroux is confronted by a husband and
wife who demand to know whether he is Jewish. When Theroux refuses to answer, the male interviewee turns to the camera operator and demands: ‘Can we turn the camera off for a second? Pull the plug for a second?’ Theroux’s nervous glance to the camera in this moment acknowledges that the separation between his presence as a filmmaker and as a subject has been violated. When questioned as a subject, Theroux’s assumed authority as a filmmaker – which gives him the authority to represent and judge his subjects’ lives while remaining at a critical distance – is destabilised.

Theroux’s response to the initial questioning is to emphasise his passivity, suggesting he has remained true to the unwritten contract of the documentary filmmaker as a dispassionate observer at arms length from the situations being represented. In an almost pleading tone he states, ‘I don’t feel as though I’ve compelled you to say anything, I feel as though I’ve been respectful. … And I honestly don’t think I would interrogate you to the point where if you said, ‘I don’t want to talk about that,’ I would say, ‘Okay, that’s fine, let’s talk about something else.’ While positioning himself as no more than an interlocutor in this scene, Theroux here also subtly tries to reinstate his authority to direct the topics of conversation. The filmmaker’s suggestion of both his authority and his critical distance does not deter the Neo-Nazi’s line of questioning. Theroux’s performance of ‘being a filmmaker’ in this moment is not enough to insulate him from being recognised as a specific subject, just like the people he documents.

Theroux’s presence in the frame here highlights a tension between his role as the author of the film and his involvement as a subject in the world represented. While these roles are inextricably linked, Theroux’s effort to assert his professional perspective and distance himself as a subject of interest underlines the different investments associated with being a filmmaker and being a subject of a film. Rather than an obstacle to documenting the lives of the Neo-Nazis, however, the tension between Theroux’s subjectivity and authorship brings to light the complex ways in which the filmmaker shapes and is shaped by the world they represent. This thesis analyses three films that foreground the filmmaker working through this kind of tension, and considers how the negotiation of authorship and performance of authority in these films can contribute to conceptual frameworks of documentary.
Grizzly Man is Herzog’s portrait of the life and death of grizzly bear conservationist and amateur filmmaker Timothy Treadwell. Throughout the film, Herzog’s presence is felt in his constant voiceover, as well as in one key scene where he is framed listening to the audio recording of Treadwell’s fatal attack by a grizzly bear. Through his felt presence, Herzog reveals a deep conflict between disapproving of Treadwell’s romanticised view of nature and admiring the amateur filmmaker’s commitment to filmmaking. Herzog’s personal perspective, rather than simply narrating the story of Treadwell’s life and death, transforms Grizzly Man into a kind of ‘argument across time and space’ that revolves around the difference in their relationship to nature and their contrasting approaches to filmmaking. The staging of this virtual argument destabilises the sense of Herzog’s authorial control, at the same time as it highlights the possibilities of documentary filmmaking to produce unique relationships between filmmakers and their subjects.

Forbidden Lie$ begins as an expository documentary about defamed author Norma Khouri, in which the filmmaker Broinowski gathers evidence and interviews subjects to discover the factual truth behind Norma’s book Forbidden Love. The book claimed to tell the true story of the honour killing of her best friend in Jordan but was later revealed as a hoax.¹ As Norma masterfully evades Broinowski’s questions and builds new versions of her story, the filmmaker abandons her initial expository aims and enters the frame opposite Norma, wilfully becoming her dupe. By giving herself over to follow Norma’s lead, Broinowski also surrenders a measure of her authority, blurring the distinction between ‘author’ and ‘subject.’ This move results in an intimate character study and an enlightening portrait of the writer’s manipulative powers, while also laying bare the filmmaker’s compromised position in representing reality.

This Is Not a Film is Jafar Panahi’s video diary of his time under house arrest while facing a six-year jail term and twenty-year directing ban for allegedly planning to make a film critical of the Iranian regime. It shows Panahi acting out the line between being a filmmaker and being a citizen while recording his daily life, a performance that exposes the consequences and frustrations of his censorship.

¹ Norma Khouri is the name under which the author published her defamed book Forbidden Love (2003), but the film reveals that Norma has a married surname of Toliopoulos, and her maiden name is Bagain. Norma also lived in Australia for a time under the name of Albaqeen. Khouri is her pen name. For ease of reference as well as to reflect the shifting persona Norma presents throughout the film, I refer to the author by her first name in this thesis.
Turning the camera on himself and showing his effort to ‘speak without appearing to have spoken’ enables Panahi to ostensibly disavow he is making a film, while still representing his experience of censorship in a way that defies the authorities and powerfully criticises his creative oppression. Panahi’s self-reflexive consideration of his own identity as a filmmaker becomes an effective form of political protest and exposes tensions fundamental to the process of documentary filmmaking.

Each film foregrounds authorship as a negotiation, presenting the filmmaker’s authority as a performance enacted through their specific interactions with the world they represent. My analysis of these qualities draws on and extends existing theoretical frameworks of documentary, making an original contribution to documentary theory and focusing on an issue that has increasingly demanded further critical attention. In particular, the self-reflexive engagement of Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi with their own authorial identity disrupts the division between ‘objective’ representation and ‘subjective’ expression in documentary discourse. Historically, this division has suggested that documentary representation must be careful in marrying subjective perspectives with the objective re-presentation of historical realities. At worst, such a division idealises objectivity as the ideal aim of documentary representation, marginalising subjectivity as a barrier to the representation of reality. In practice, however, ‘subjective expression’ and ‘objective re-presentation’ are both representational strategies, and they are often encountered as interdependent and intersecting within the same film. Each of Grizzly Man, Forbidden Lie$, and This Is Not a Film recast the subjectivity/objectivity division because the filmmaker’s presence becomes a key point of engagement with the reality represented. Issues of documentary representation conventionally aligned with objectivity – including the assertion of the filmmaker’s authority and their critical distance from the world represented – are explored through each filmmaker’s experience of the process of representation; their subjective perspective is inseparable from the ‘objective’ truth of the reality produced and recorded by the filmmaking process.

The presence of the filmmaker in Grizzly Man, Forbidden Lie$ and This Is Not a Film can be considered as part of a growing trend in contemporary documentary cinema to portray the complex interactions between filmmakers and the people they film, often to the extent that the clear division between author and subject blurs. Such
films depict the filmmaker as a subject within the frame, negotiating their authorial identity at the same time as they aim to represent the shared social world. This phenomenon has crucial implications for the meanings generated by documentary films and for theorising documentary representation. As mentioned above, representing the shared social world through the filmmaker’s experience of authorship challenges the binary division between subjectivity and objectivity in traditional documentary discourse. I argue that films in which filmmakers negotiate their dual role as subject and author – which I call ‘Filmmaker in the Frame’ films – constitute a distinct and significant category of documentary.

Other notable examples of Filmmaker in the Frame films that centralise the filmmaker’s experience of representation while aiming to represent a shared social reality include Dennis O’Rourke’s *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991), Agnès Varda’s *The Gleaners and I* (*Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, 2000), and Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me* (2004). Defining this category emphasises the complex issues that arise when filmmakers engage with their own authorial identity while remaining committed to representing an other, and presents a useful way of rethinking the intersections of subjectivity and authorship in contemporary documentary film. The three films chosen for analysis in this thesis are particularly interesting examples of the phenomenon of the Filmmaker in the Frame: in each, the challenge to the filmmaker’s authority produces a tension between their subjectivity and their authorship that stresses the way in which they negotiate expressing their subjective perspective while also representing shared social reality.

Several scholars have investigated the effect of the on-screen presence of the filmmaker; however, the negotiated authorship and performance of authority analysed in this thesis is not entirely captured by existing theories. Theories of reflexivity consider what the filmmaker’s presence reveals about their authorial assumptions and investments, but fail to account for the registers of meaning produced through the filmmaker’s self-reflexive consideration of their own interactions with the world they represent. Existing theories that analyse the performance of the filmmaker ‘being a filmmaker’ tend to emphasise the alienating effect of such a performance, overlooking the degree to which the filmmaker in the frame can be felt as a specific subject. Finally, theories of autobiography do not fully capture the extent to which certain filmmakers in the frame are also engaged in
representing the shared social world, directing the camera at others while also revealing and exploring their own identities as authors. Therefore while a substantial amount of recent documentary scholarship has focused on the productive possibilities of subjectivity, current theories of documentary are unable to articulate and clarify the diverse nature and implications of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame. Specifically, the presence of the filmmaker working through their own authorial identity and experience as a subject while remaining committed to representing an ‘other’ requires closer examination. Analysing how particular filmmakers negotiate their authorship and perform their authority addresses this theoretical gap. The analytic framework used in this thesis draws on Stella Bruzzi’s conceptualisation of documentary as resulting from the ‘collision’ between reality and representation, and Judith Butler’s notion of the performative construction of identity, linking a close analysis of the films with an analysis of their contexts of production and reception.

This thesis makes three original contributions to knowledge. Firstly, it defines a growing category of documentary – Filmmaker in the Frame films – characterised by the filmmaker’s presence in the frame negotiating their dual role as author and subject. Detailed analysis of three films in this category focuses on how the filmmaker engages with their own authorship within the frame. Secondly, the thesis proposes an analytic framework based on the notions of collision and performativity, conceptualising authorship as a negotiated process in which the filmmaker’s authority is performative – an approach that challenges and extends existing discursive documentary frameworks. Analysing authorship in this way problematises the axiomatic opposition between subjectivity and objectivity in documentary discourses, which has implications for rethinking traditional investments in documentary as a social discourse. Finally, analysing how the filmmaker represents their own encounter with the processes of representation and negotiates their authorship within the frame articulates an important difference between reflexivity and self-reflexivity in the context of documentary film. In the films analysed, meaning is made through the filmmaker’s exploration of their own experience of representation (a kind of self-reflexivity), rather than solely through their presence reflexively revealing the construction of the film. As nonfiction filmmakers are increasingly appearing on-screen, this thesis contributes to documentary studies by theorising how certain filmmakers constructively engage with their own authorship
within the frame and represent the relationship between author and subject in new ways.

A history of documentary tensions

Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d’un été*, 1961) is a key example of how the filmmaker’s presence in the frame productively complicates the conceptual tension between ‘subjective’ expression and ‘objective’ re-presentation of reality. *Chronicle* follows the filmmakers’ investigation of the documentary camera’s ability to prompt insight into how ‘ordinary’ Parisians feel about their lives beneath how they present themselves in everyday contexts. Morin and Rouch stage scenes to provoke social actors to perform different versions of themselves in different contexts: for example walking through the streets interviewing strangers, at a dinner party with friends, or during a lunch with strangers. Among those social actors are the filmmakers, who are framed as subjects involved in the conversations unfolding at the same time as they explore their role as authors of the film.

The conversation that closes *Chronicle* between Morin and Rouch reflecting on their own experience of filming is particularly telling of the camera’s role in producing the reality it records, and the tension the filmmakers feel between their perspective as subjects and authors of the film. This closing scene follows one in which the filmmakers screen a rough cut of their film for the participants to comment on their own portrayal. In their reflections on making the film, Morin and Rouch confront a contradiction between how the participants viewed themselves as having failed to perform ‘authentic’ or ‘truthful’ versions of themselves, and the filmmakers’ own feeling that they had uncovered a rare truth in the way their subjects behaved for the camera. While Morin and Rouch do not resolve this contradiction, the conversation restates the power of filmmaking to provoke insights into how people perform for others, and how the filmmaking process shapes those performances. *Chronicle* is structured around a tension between the filmmakers as participants and observers, and a parallel tension between recording reality as it unfolds and intervening in order to produce new kinds of truth. This example represents an innovative response to the apparent opposition between ‘subjective’ expression and ‘objective’ re-presentation.
characteristic of Filmmaker in the Frame films, focusing on the imbrication rather than the separation of these two interconnected aspects of documentary filmmaking.

Although ideas of what documentary can and should represent have been debated throughout documentary history, different concepts of documentary representation have continually been characterised by a tension between objectivity and subjectivity. This divide follows from a particular interpretation of John Grierson’s foundational definition of documentary as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ (quoted in Hardy 1979, 11), where he infers a separation between objective recording and subjective manipulation of those recordings (see Winston 2008, 14–15). Implicit in this Griersonian understanding of documentary is a Bazinian belief in the inherent power of the camera as a mechanical recording device; a ‘credibility’ in the objectivity of the image re-presented that constitutes an ‘irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith’ (Bazin 1960, 7–8). The legacy of Grierson’s separation of subjective ‘treatment’ and the objectivity of the reality ‘captured’ by the camera still underpins many contemporary discussions of documentary (even those that aim to rethink the hierarchy between objectivity and subjectivity), resulting in notions of ‘proper’ documentary that are as persistent as they are impossible to realise in practice.

The ideal of documentary objectively re-presenting reality has developed through specific historical contexts. For example, early uses of moving pictures in the study of anatomy and movement positioned the camera as a scientific instrument that could accurately and reliably record physical phenomena (see Chanan 2007); the direct cinema of the 1960s in the United States claimed to ‘capture reality’ by virtue of the filmmaker recording situations unfolding while remaining a ‘fly on the wall’ (see Geiger 2011); and the recent rise of ‘citizen journalism’ uses amateur footage from witnesses with hand-held recording devices as a key form of evidence in contemporary news reporting (see Allan and Thorsen 2009). Each of these movements emphasise the power of the camera to mechanically and ‘objectively’ record reality, an investment that has significantly shaped ideals of ‘proper’ representation of such material in various documentary forms. These historical contexts are examined in more detail in Chapter 1.

Opposing this history of documentary as a means of objectively re-presenting sounds and images is a tradition of the form being used for personal and expressive ends.
From the poetic ‘city symphony’ films of the 1920s to the rise of autobiographical filmmaking in the 1980s, many forms of documentary representation have problematised the notion that the power of the form lies primarily in its objective representation of historical, factual reality. Prevalent in this tradition of more ‘subjective’ documentary forms is the filmmaker’s on-screen presence, felt to varying degrees through their physical appearance or intrusive voice from behind the camera. In contemporary work, the filmmaker is increasingly seen or heard openly interacting with the people filmed, and revealing their personal perspective on the situation unfolding. Films as diverse as Salaam Cinema (1995), Histoire(s) du cinéma (1998), Bowling for Columbine (2002), This Film is Not Yet Rated (2006), RiP: A Remix Manifesto (2009), Catfish (2010), 5 Broken Cameras (2011), and Stories We Tell (2012) all assert the filmmaker’s personal involvement with their subjects as key to the film’s meaning.

The meeting of the historical emphasis on the camera’s power to objectively represent reality with documentary’s ability to express subjective perspectives produces a paradox in documentary discourses. Dai Vaughan describes this paradox in terms of how documentaries ‘speak’ about the world they represent: ‘Documentary appears to express attitudes toward the world by appearing to allow the world to speak for itself’ (1999, 90). Documentary discourses have traditionally treated this paradox as a problem of documentary representation to be overcome. In earlier notions of documentary, the paradox could be resolved by emphasising the objective quality of the image (guaranteed by the indexical relationship between the image and the scene it depicts) and accepting acts of ‘creative treatment’ only insofar as they structure the raw documentary materials into specific educational and informational forms that seem to speak for themselves. This view idealises objective re-presentation of reality as the key axis of documentary, treating subjective expression with suspicion. More recent theory has argued that emphasising the construction of the text and revealing the filmmaker’s ideological investments can resolve the same paradox. This kind of reflexivity qualifies any ‘truth’ presented as the result of the filmmaker’s (subjective) manipulation of the (objective) reality represented, acting both as a guarantee of the filmmaker’s trustworthiness and exposing a more critical context through which the film’s claims can be evaluated. Both views place subjectivity and objectivity in tension: in the former, subjectivity
INTRODUCTION: THE FILMMAKER’S PRESENCE IN THE FRAME

‘disappears’; in the latter, ‘objective’ re-presentation is qualified in terms of the filmmaker’s ‘subjective’ perspective.

The films examined in this thesis recast the tension between documentary communicating subjective perspectives and objectively re-presenting reality. They do this by emphasising how the ‘truths’ documentaries convey are constructed by and emerge from the meeting between the filmmaker and the world they represent. Stella Bruzzi calls this meeting the ‘collision between apparatus and subject’ – a meeting that ‘constitutes a documentary’ (2006, 10). Understood as the result of this collision, the reality re-presented in documentary is created in the moment of filming, which is inseparable from the interaction between the filmmaker and the world they film. Similarly, the subjective perspective of the filmmaker arises from their specific experiences of filmmaking, rather than simply being brought to the process of representation. Elements of documentary representation that have previously been considered as incompatible or oppositional, distinguished along the lines of subjective expression or objective re-presentation, are shown as imbricated and indivisible in these Filmmaker in the Frame films, all emerging from the filmmaker’s involvement in the frame. The films examined in this thesis therefore represent a dynamic area of contemporary documentary, where two contrary impulses underpinning traditional notions of the form – that documentary should let the world speak for itself while also expressing the filmmaker’s attitudes – collide through the presence of the filmmaker in the frame.

**Key concepts, framework of analysis, and chapter outline**

The framework I use to analyse the significance of the filmmaker in the frame of *Grizzly Man, Forbidden Lie*, and *This Is Not a Film* is based on two key concepts: Stella Bruzzi’s conceptualisation of documentary as constituted by the ‘collision’ between apparatus and subject, and a notion of performativity following Judith Butler’s theory of the performative construction of identity. Bruzzi characterises documentary as the dynamic intersection of filmmaker, filmmaking apparatus, and the world represented. Bruzzi presents this idea in response to the persistence of theories that imply the documentary camera can ‘capture’ a reality not contingent on the camera’s presence, and that this objective quality of sound and image is the basis of documentary representation. This view prioritises approaches to documentary
representation that emphasise the objectivity of those sounds and images: realist aesthetics that minimise the filmmaker’s presence, or reflexive forms that expose and qualify their subjective interventions. By contrast, Bruzzi’s framework rethinks subjective expression and objective re-presentation as being produced in the same moments of filmmaking, offering a way of thinking about the productive possibilities of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame.

Butler’s notion of performativity (outlined especially in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990) offers another valuable means of analysing the presence of the filmmaker in the frame, as it specifically negotiates the filmmaker’s dual role as author and subject. As Butler describes it, performativity is a process of repeated but specific actions (both bodily and discursive) that produces the phenomenon it anticipates (see 1999 [1990], xiv). When applied to the presence of the filmmaker in the frame, this idea of performativity focuses on how the filmmaker’s authorial identity – including the authority they assume to represent the ‘other’ – is enacted and negotiated through their actions within the frame. By applying Butler’s notion of performativity to the filmmaker in the frame, I explore how the filmmaker’s authorial identity and authority are shaped by and challenge discourses of documentary authorship. I use these concepts of collision and performativity to underpin a close analysis of the three key Filmmaker in the Frame films, and consider how the representation of authorship in these films challenges and extends existing understandings of documentary authorship.

My approach to analysing the link between documentary texts and discursive contexts follows the work of documentary scholars such as Bruzzi in *New Documentary* (2000; 2006), John Corner in *The Art of Record* (1996), and Michael Renov in *The Subject of Documentary* (2004), who each focus on the complex interactions between specific films, critical reception, and theoretical frameworks to interrogate documentary’s social and political power. This approach has also underpinned recent work in literary and performance studies. For example, Catherine Belsey’s work emphasises the mutual influence between text and context, and highlights the performative interaction between criticism and the objects investigated (2002). The analysis of key documentary films in the following chapters emphasises this link between text and context, consistently interrogating the relationship between the films examined and the discourses of documentary framing their reception.
INTRODUCTION: THE FILMMAKER’S PRESENCE IN THE FRAME

Belsey’s definition of discourse is also particularly useful for considering how documentary works as a social discourse: ‘[Discourse is] a domain of language-use, a particular way of talking (or thinking or writing) … [that] involve[s] certain shared assumptions which appear in the characterizations that formulate it’ (2002, 5). This thesis employs Belsey’s insights to unpack several key assumptions characterising discourses of documentary authorship and representation.

My analysis also follows from contemporary performance studies, in the sense that I view performativity as a framework for understanding how notions of ‘reality’ are produced via a dynamic interaction between discourse and embodied acts. According to Gade and Jerslev, performance studies is characterised by a concern with the ‘intersection between performance and performativity, located in the shared part of both found in “reality”’ (2005, 10). The analysis of key films in this thesis highlights this intersection of performance and performativity by focusing on how the presence of the filmmaker in the frame is informed by and problematises discursive notions of the filmmaker’s role in representing reality.

In the field of film studies, Cecilia Sayad (2013) takes performativity as a useful analytic framework for understanding the significance of the director’s on-screen presence in various fiction films and documentaries. Analysing the on-screen appearance of directors as diverse as Orson Welles, Jean-Luc Godard, Woody Allen, Agnès Varda, Jean Rouch, and Wes Craven, Sayad argues that thinking of authorship in terms of Butler’s performativity is crucial to understanding how the felt presence of these filmmakers in the frame of their films make meaning. Sayad focuses on how these performances work to ‘assert their authorial presence … and somehow reclaim a voice in the critical discourses on cinematic authorship, repossessing a title relegated to abstraction’ (2013, xxii). The ‘relegation’ of authorship Sayad refers to follows poststructuralist arguments about authorship, which consider the author as a constructed identity – a subject-position imagined (or disregarded) by the reader. Sayad argues that the presence of the filmmaker in the frame complicates this idea of the author as constructed identity by asserting the author as an empirical person, which also entails the potential to destabilise their authority over their films’ meanings. Ultimately, Sayad argues, these authors’ performances contribute to a more complex understanding of the relationship between authors, audiences, and film texts.
This thesis shares Sayad’s use of performativity as a means of reconsidering theoretical perspectives on authorship, but differs from Sayad’s focus on how the on-screen performances of filmmakers – in documentary and fiction alike – consciously confront their own authorship through their performance of particular ‘authorial expressions’ (such as directing actors or commenting on their role as director). In contrast, my focus is on documentary filmmakers who negotiate the tension between their role as subject and author as a result of being challenged in their authorship by the world they seek to represent. The aim of my study is to rethink certain assumptions of documentary representation, moving away from a view of a necessary opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, and thereby rethinking the productive possibilities of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame.

Applying the analytic concepts of collision and performativity to the three films examined in this thesis offers a means of considering the presence of the filmmaker in the frame beyond the subjectivity/objectivity binary. The intersection of subjective expression and objective re-presentation in documentary authorship that has been previously approached as problematic is instead treated as a key way in which documentaries make meaning from the world they represent. In particular, my analysis highlights how the collision between reality and representation produces rather than precludes documentary meaning.

Chapter 1 explores how existing documentary theory has considered the presence of the filmmaker in the frame. I examine theories of reflexivity, performativity, and autobiography, explaining how these are (or are not) able to adequately articulate the significance of the filmmaker’s presence as subject and author. Chapter 2 will flesh out the key concepts of my analytic framework, and explain how these key concepts help identify the unique issues raised by the three emblematic films in relation to documentary discourses. In Chapter 3 I analyse the negotiation of authorship in *Grizzly Man*, focusing on how Timothy Treadwell’s commitment to his cause challenges Herzog’s self-projected authorial identity, and how the film becomes an ‘argument across time and space’ between Herzog and Treadwell. Chapter 4 considers how Anna Broinowski’s entrance into the frame transforms *Forbidden Lie$* from an expository investigation into a battle of wills between filmmaker and subject played out through the process of filmmaking. In Chapter 5, I examine Jafar Panahi’s *This Is Not A Film*, focusing on how Panahi’s consideration of his own
censorship becomes a powerful statement of political protest while also exploring the performative dimensions of the filmmaker’s authority.

The filmmaker’s self-reflexive consideration of their own authorial identity in each of these films highlights how ‘being a filmmaker’ – and the authority that comes with that role – is negotiated, contested, and enacted through the process of representing the other. Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi’s respective presences in the frame become crucial points through which meaning is made of the world they represent, showing ‘subjective’ expression and ‘objective’ representation to be produced in the same moments of collision between reality and representation. In the conclusion, I revisit how analysing these films as a group presents an important picture of documentary authorship, offering a way of rethinking tensions that have previously defined discussions of documentary and highlighting the productive possibilities of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame.
Chapter 1: Theorising filmmakers in frames: the presence of the filmmaker in documentary theory

Distinct theoretical issues arise when the filmmaker is present within the documentary frame, actively engaged in the ‘collision’ between reality and its representation. The filmmaker’s felt presence in the frame foregrounds the subjectivity of film-making as a specific, personal, and material process, which sit in tension with traditional ideals of documentary to represent reality according to ideals of truth, objectivity, and reliability. Existing literature around the on-screen presence of the filmmaker can be divided into two major strands of thinking: the filmmaker as autobiographical subject, and the filmmaker as authorial object. Theories that focus on the filmmaker as an autobiographical subject consider how the filmmaker uses the apparatus of film to performatively reflect on or enact their own subjective identity. Theories that consider the filmmaker as an authorial object emphasise how the filmmaker’s felt presence organises the film’s argument in particular ways. The latter group of theories that regard the filmmaker in the frame as an authorial object can be further broken down into two categories: the filmmaker as a reflexive presence, and the filmmaker as a performer acting out a specific authorial role. Considering the filmmaker in the frame as a reflexive presence emphasises the extent to which the filmmaker acknowledges their perspective and reveals their investments in the world represented, intended to ground a more critical framework for interpreting the film’s argument or to act as a guarantee of the filmmaker’s truthfulness. Theories that reflect on the filmmaker in the frame as a performer emphasise how their acting out a particular (authorial) role deflects attention back onto the other social actors represented; a notion of self-conscious performance that plays off the notion of the journalistic investigator witnessing reality as it unfolds, standing in as a proxy for the viewer. In both cases the filmmaker is regarded as an ‘object’ in the structure of the film’s argument: presented as committed to discovering the truth of the situation while remaining at arm’s length from it. In these theoretical frameworks, the significance of the filmmaker’s presence is measured against how it advances the argument the film makes.
Within these different theorisations of the on-screen presence of the filmmaker, the filmmaker framed as both a specific subject and an author representing the ‘other’ is still under-examined. Documentaries in which the filmmaker is felt as both (a) subject represented and (the) author representing are increasing in prevalence, and in this thesis I term this group of documentaries the Filmmaker in the Frame films. In these films where the filmmaker is felt as both subject and author, there arises a conceptual tension between accepting documentary as subjectively authored and investing in documentary as an objective representation of reality. The three films examined in this thesis highlight and subvert that tension by showing the filmmaker’s authorial role structuring the representation of reality and their place as a subject emotionally and materially engaged in the reality represented being performed in the same moments. In the first section of this chapter, I explore the development of axiomatic notions of documentary truth and objectivity that these films challenge. I then proceed to unpack previous theorisations of the filmmaker in the frame under the general headings of the filmmaker as reflexive presence, the filmmaker as performer, and the filmmaker as autobiographical subject. In doing so, I distinguish the Filmmaker in the Frame films from other documentaries featuring the on-screen presence of the filmmaker, in particular those in which the filmmaker’s presence has the effect of creating a reflexive distancing and those in which the filmmaker’s presence is felt as part of an autobiographical project. Throughout this chapter I also emphasise the ways in which the films examined in this thesis exceed existing theoretical frameworks, identifying the gap in existing knowledge this thesis addresses.

1.1 Investments in documentary and the authority of the filmmaker

Key to the way the films examined in this thesis challenge and extend existing theories of documentary is the way in which each filmmaker is provoked to reconsider their own authority as a filmmaker. Therefore, to understand how these films prompt a rethinking of existing documentary discourses, it is useful to take a closer look at how notions of the filmmaker’s authority link to traditional investments in documentary. In the context of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame, the ‘authority’ of the filmmaker refers to the assumed right of the filmmaker to speak
about the ‘other’ or represent the shared social world, and the power that controlling the apparatus of documentary representation has in ‘framing’ particular perspectives on reality. Historian Robert Rosenstone’s work on film as a form of historical record foregrounds the way in which the filmmaker’s authority is assumed in the process of them representing ‘reality.’ Rosenstone asks, ‘By what right do filmmakers speak of the past, by what right do they do “history”?’ (1995, 7, emphasis added). The answer Rosenstone gives is that ‘Filmmakers speak of the past because, for whatever reasons … they choose to speak’ (ibid). Rosenstone here is interrogating the authority of makers of historical fiction films; however comparable issues of authority attend the practice of documentary filmmakers. In fact, in the domain of documentary the questions Rosenstone raises about the authority of the filmmaker are even more relevant, because the indexical relationship between documentary sounds and images and the world they represent entails even greater the investments in documentaries as a ‘truthful,’ ‘reliable,’ or ‘authentic’ representations of reality. This section unpacks these questions of authority and representation to interrogate traditional conceptual assumptions of documentary that the presence of the filmmaker in the frame as both subject and author challenges.

Notions of the filmmaker’s authority are most evident in critical and theoretical discussions of the ‘responsibility’ of the filmmaker. The notion of the documentary filmmaker having a responsibility to represent reality in specific ways is evident in John Grierson’s influential early writing on the form. Grierson described the documentary filmmaker as caught between a responsibility to make films that interpret reality in ways that motivate good citizenry and the perceived need to represent reality in a truthful and authentic way. In Grierson’s view of documentary, the filmmaker must strive to be simultaneously absent and present – absent to let the sounds and images of actuality speak for themselves, and present in how those sounds and images are crafted to make meaning of unstructured actuality. These dual investments in documentary place upon the filmmaker what Grierson called a ‘sense of social responsibility’ (1979, 41): responsibility to motivate positive social change by representing the world objectively at the same time as ‘creatively treating’ sounds and images of reality in a way that makes meaning of them.

The particular sense of social responsibility Grierson argued documentary should serve has changed in three-quarters of a century since his writing – the didacticism
and romanticised view of working life he favoured has been largely rejected by contemporary audiences (see Winston 2008, 278-286) – but the link between social instrumentality and the responsibility of the filmmaker in documentary discourses has persisted. Carl Plantinga argues that the power of documentary to influence public opinion and shape social reality places a responsibility on the filmmaker to surrender a degree of personal expression and creativity in the goal of remaining as truthful as possible to the reality represented. Making a documentary film ‘requires that the filmmaker give up an element of freedom in the name of accuracy, for to preserve truth in discourse, one’s assertions, to the best of one’s knowledge, must be accurate’ (1997, 125). Plantinga’s definition reinterprets Grierson’s end goal of documentary being civic edification, instead emphasising the value of documentary lying in making truthful assertions. Equally, however, Plantinga’s argument separates the film and the reality it represents, and places the responsibility of the filmmaker in relation to ideals that position objectivity, reliability and authenticity at the heart of the documentary form.

Bill Nichols’ influential definition of documentary as a ‘discourse of sobriety’ (1991, 3) articulates a conceptual link between the social instrumentality of documentary to move and motivate its viewers and the responsibility that accompanies such power:

> Documentary, like other discourses of the real, retains a vestigial responsibility to describe and interpret the world of collective experience, a responsibility that is no small matter at all. But even more, it joins these other discourses (of law, family, education, economics, politics, state, and nation) in the actual construction of social reality. (1991, 10, emphasis in original)

Considering documentary as a discourse of sobriety (or at least as aspiring to be) defines the form by its capacity to shape social reality through the representations it makes, which entails a significant responsibility on the part of the filmmaker – invested with the dual tasks of (objectively) describing and (subjectively) interpreting reality. By ‘construction’ here Nichols is not referring to the distinct realities produced by the presence of the camera in the filmmaking process so much as the power of finished films to move, motivate, inform, and educate communities of viewers. Paula Rabinowitz is more direct in her assertion of this power of documentary as a social discourse, arguing that the ‘status, meaning and
interpretation, and perhaps even control of history and its narratives’ are at stake in representing reality (1994, 7).

The broadly instrumental power of documentary as a social discourse is inscribed in and reinforced by individual films through the use of specific conventions. Nichols explains these conventions in terms of a positive correlation between the degree to which a documentary presents an objective stance through conventions of realism (expert voices, emphasis on the camera having been there, and an explanatory voiceover chief among them) and the degree of reliability and trustworthiness a documentary is seen to have (1991, 190). Being seen as ‘objective’ mobilises the film’s representations on the level of social (rather than personal) discourse, in which the film becomes a kind of critical evidence of ‘how things are’ in relation to historical or social issues:

The claim that ‘This is so,’ with its tacit ‘isn’t it?’ – a request for consent that draws us towards belief – makes objectivity, and the denotative, a natural ally of documentary rhetoric. … A more complex notion of objectivity centers around those conventions that govern the fairness and impartiality of a representation. (1991, 30)

In the context of the socially instrumental power of documentary, objectivity is seen to be more ‘proper’ for speaking about the shared social world because it is typically aligned with values of fairness and impartiality. Conventions of documentary that have come to suggest an objective approach – for example an emphasis on information, explanatory voiceovers, a diversity of interview testimonies, and presenting images as evidence – have become aligned so closely with other fundamental social values that ‘being objective’ has become the standard horizon for judging documentary practice (Nichols 1991, 101-103).†

Implicit in the prioritising of objectivity within documentary discourses is a marginalisation of subjectivity; within an ideological system that values ‘sobriety,’

† Both Nichols (1991) and Brian Winston (2008) note that the values of fairness, impartiality, and ‘objective’ representation have become cemented in Western cultures as the standard operating principles for social discourses such as science, law, and economics. Respectively, Nichols and Winston note the continuing influence of the scientific revolution and modernist thinking in maintaining these values as the organising principle of social discourses.
subjectivity comes to be viewed with suspicion. Despite Michael Renov’s convincing claim that the power of objectivity as the most compelling social narrative has waned in recent times (2004, xvii), the values that objectivity speaks to – fairness and impartiality among them – persist as touchstones for discourses concerned with the representation of reality. In short, objectivity is still taken to be a more ‘trustworthy’ or ‘reliable’ approach to representing reality. Nichols emphasises that documentary objectivity is a constructed stance that relies on conventions of realism – conventions such as an emphasis on observation and narration that emphasises facts over interpretations – but he also makes the point throughout his volume *Representing Reality* that documentary remains most compelling as a social discourse when it works towards the horizon of objectivity.

One consequence of the social instrumentality of documentary is therefore in shaping expectations of what documentary can and should represent. Representing history or the shared social world – where the ‘status, meaning and interpretation … of history and its narratives’ are at stake (Rabinowitz, ibid) – involves attendant expectations that the representation will more or less follow conventions of objectivity. Such expectations regarding subject and form are built on an implicit acceptance of a tension between subjectivity and objectivity. In his historical genealogy of the documentary form, Brian Winston describes the expectations that continue to underpin the use of the term ‘documentary’:

The application of the adjective ‘documentary’ to film (and the use of ‘documentary’ as a noun meaning a documentary film) most appositely flags the fact that, despite claims to artistic legitimacy (‘creativity’) and dramatic structuring (‘treatment’), when dealing with this film form we are essentially and most critically in the realm of evidence and witness (‘actuality’). (2008, 13)

In this description of the fundamental investments in the notion of documentary, a tension between subjective elements (artistry and dramatic structuring) and objective elements (evidence and witness) is evident. Winston suggests here that common understandings of documentary still regard subjective and objective aspects of the film as issuing from different places; the ‘artistry’ and ‘structuring’ is a process apart from (in this case, after) the camera witnessing and recording reality unfolding,
capturing sounds and images that serve as evidence of ‘what really happened.’ It is important to note that throughout his work Winston emphasises documentary has affective and epistemological power beyond its capacity to present evidence and bear witness, but his history of documentary also emphasises the persistence of a very specific ideal of documentary representation based in notions of objectivity.

These implicit and ongoing investments in documentary shape expectations of authorship in particular ways. To maintain the sense that a documentary allows the world to ‘speak for itself’ while also presenting a perspective that makes meaning of the reality represented (but separate from the process of filming), authorship is understood in a limited sense. The role of the filmmaker becomes that which negotiates these oppositional forces of re-presenting reality and making meaning. Linking the diverse range of films historically called ‘documentaries’ is an emphasis on those styles and conventions that ‘work to produce a realistic and authoritative representation of the socio-historical world’ (Beattie 2004, 14); the task of the filmmaker dealing with history and shared social reality is to ‘creatively treat’ that reality only insofar as it produces a ‘realistic’ and ‘authoritative’ account of an objective, verifiable historical truth. In other words, traditional investments in documentary as a social discourse favour forms that ‘express attitudes toward the world by appearing to allow the world to speak for itself” (1991, 90). At one end of the spectrum of these ‘realistic’ and ‘authoritative’ representations is observational filmmaking, where the filmmaker is guided by the unfolding situation while their specific perspective disappears behind the world represented. Observational documentaries present the world unfolding in front of the camera, without seeming intervention or manipulation from behind the camera. Albert Maysles, a pioneer of the direct cinema movement and lifelong advocate for the power of observational filmmaking, stresses the importance of this emphasis on reality in terms of authenticity:

For non-fiction film-makers, reality is our food and substance and the closer we adhere to it, the better it looks over us to ensure that our tales maintain their honesty and authenticity. (Maysles quoted in Cousins and Macdonald 2006, 446).
In Maysles’ formulation, the power of documentary depends on the filmmaker minimising their subjective intervention. The authority of the filmmaker in this style of filmmaking is asserted (somewhat paradoxically) by emphasising the filmmaker as a passive witness, pointing the camera and acting as a conduit for the world represented to speak for itself. The observational filmmaker’s authority to represent reality is accepted because they maintain a distance from that reality: a quasi-scientific observer.

At the other end of the spectrum of what has traditionally constituted ‘realistic’ and ‘authoritative’ documentary representation is expository documentary. Keith Beattie describes expository films as following an ‘argumentative thrust … that can be surmised as “telling,” a mode that primarily seeks to explain, impart information and convey knowledge’ (2008, 5). Emblematic of this kind of authority is the nature documentary, where the secrets of the natural world are explained with visual evidence to support the claims made, and the filmmaker’s investment in the reality represented seeming to be no more than an investment in scientific knowledge. Both kinds of filmmaking – observational and expository – emphasise that what is represented corresponds to a reality that exists (or would have existed) without the intervention of the camera and outside of the film frame. In terms of the filmmaker’s authority, by subsuming the expression of a subjective point of view in favour of either ‘capturing’ reality or presenting a more generalised argument, the authority of the filmmaker rests on the perception that they remain at arm’s length – a concerned but objective outsider to the world represented.

When the filmmaker is framed as a subject, however, the ideal of the author representing reality from a relatively ‘objective’ distance is destabilised. This, in turn, complicates the notion of the filmmaker’s authority. The filmmaker’s subjective involvement in the reality unfolding disturbs the ‘impartiality’ and ‘fairness’ usually signalled by the filmmaker’s ‘disappearance’ behind the camera (whether that disappearance is enacted through the silence of observational filmmaking or through recasting the voice of the filmmaker as the more ‘objective’ voice of an explanatory or informational expository argument). The felt presence of the filmmaker as a participant in the world represented destabilises the authority of ‘objective’ distance; the filmmaker’s subjective perspective is shown as necessarily entangled in the reality that is re-presented.
Yet many films in which the filmmaker is framed introduce a different kind of authority that (re)inscribes the filmmaker’s critical distance from the world represented: the authority of ‘being there’ as a witness to history unfolding. In films where the filmmaker acts as a journalistic investigator, the filmmaker’s commitment to their cause and their presence as witness to the reality represented underlines their authority to speak about that reality, acting as a guarantee that the argument they present is realistic, authoritative, and reliable. For example, Louise Spence contends that Michael Moore’s on-screen persona combines the authority of ‘being there’ with an authority rooted in his performance of cynical investigator, which produces an ‘authoritative certainty, a confidence in the ability to know and understand, and skepticism about the ability of others to know and understand’ (2010, 370).\(^2\) The presence of the filmmaker as a journalistic investigator performatively assumes the authority to represent the world they enter – pointing a camera and asking questions already assumes a right to enter that world, to interpret it, and to invite judgement of it. These journalistic filmmakers demonstrate concern for the issues they represent, but also suggest maintaining a critical distance from those issues, able to see them first hand but interpret and evaluate them at arm’s length on behalf of the viewer. Therefore, even an event like a door slamming in their face (as happens repeatedly in Moore’s films), the sense of the filmmaker’s authority as privileged witness is subtly reinforced.

Through the filmmaker’s presence as journalistic investigator, the conceptual opposition between objectivity and subjectivity in traditional discourses of documentary is restated as a tension between witnessing and involvement: between reporting what is discovered and manipulating the world the camera captures. To be consistent with the traditional concept of documentary as ‘striving to represent reality as faithfully as possible’ (Bruzzi 2006, 186) and adhere to the conventions of documentary realism, the filmmaker in the frame needs to be simultaneously part of the world represented and remain at arm’s length from it. Robert Paine considers exactly this contradiction in relation to anthropological representations, arguing that anthropological texts are torn between “‘objective” or “scientific” authorial

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\(^2\) It is worth noting that in the wake of the success of his 1989 breakout debut *Roger and Me* and subsequent controversies over the way Moore manipulated timelines and staged scenes in that film, Moore’s presence on screen is also more cynically interpreted as peddling his particular ideological agenda. In the eyes of some critics his involvement is read as part of stage-managing set-ups to a pre-determined ending, undermining any sense of his authority in ‘being there’ (see Corner 1996 and Winston 2008).
authority and the “subjective” or personal authority of the anthropologist’ (Paine 1990, 40, emphasis in original). Paine argues that one of the key issues anthropologists face is navigating the tension between their authority as a scientific observer and the authority of their individual experience living as part of the culture they observe and the insights that come from that experience. That tension, Paine argues, has remained largely unspoken in the history of anthropological studies. Instead, the seeming-contradiction between these two positions has been papered over by emphasising the former – the anthropologist as scientific investigator – at the expense of the latter – the personal experiences of the anthropologist as fieldworker, personally and emotionally invested in the world they study. Paradoxically, however, Paine argues anthropologists have also relied on the fact of their having ‘been there’ as fieldworkers to authenticate the assertions they make in their ‘objective’ observations. Paine’s discussion highlights how the authority of the author is inscribed in a text at various and often contradictory levels, which nonetheless work together to naturalise the sense that the anthropologist has both a right to represent the other and does so in a way that offers objective insight.

Paine’s observations on the paradoxical nature of the authorial authority can apply equally to many films in which the filmmaker is present in the frame, positioned as s/he-who-knows by virtue of ‘being there’ while also maintaining a sense of critical distance. The intersection of these two kinds of authority in documentary is at work in Josh Fox’s Gasland (2010), a film about the consequences of natural gas mining by the process of hydraulic fracturing (‘fracking’) in rural areas of the United States. The film begins with an autobiographical account of the filmmaker’s own investment in the issue: the viewer learns Fox received an offer of a substantial sum of money from a natural gas company to lease his property, on which his childhood home still stands, for drilling. This personal story unfolds seamlessly into an overview of the political situation that lead to the aggressive pursuit by gas companies for leasing of private property and a detailed description of the process of fracking itself, including a catalogue of the chemicals involved. The five-minute sequence ends with romantic images of the Delaware River and Fox’s voiceover explaining, ‘From 1972 until now – my whole life – all this has been protected.’ The next sequence displays Fox on the phone to a series of gas companies seeking interviews with executives about fracking, and from this point the film proceeds as an expository documentary, with
Fox in the role of journalistic investigator interviewing landowners and executives and travelling around the country to fracking sites, the film’s purpose clearly outlines as to uncover the ‘truth’ about the harmful consequences of this mining practice. Fox’s authority depends on the double move of his being personally invested in the consequences of fracking, while also presenting factual evidence (such as a sequence in which a Pennsylvania resident lights his tap water on fire) and maintaining the role of ‘objective’ reporter at arm’s length from the situations he reports on. That authority is maintained through the structuring of the film, where Fox’s autobiographical commentary about how he came to be invested in the issue and the consequences of the mining to his beloved home town serves as a framing device to a more investigative, expository film based on evidence and argument. At one point, Fox’s voiceover asks rhetorically, ‘Was I actually going to become a kind of natural gas drilling detective? Well, okay, I guess.’ The representational strategies Fox uses in the film, including the sequence of water being lit on fire, interviews with a wide range of affected farmers, and an explanatory voiceover weaving together scientific facts, reinforces a separation of Fox’s own stake in the issue from the visual evidence that seems to ‘speak for itself.’

The effect of this structure is a conceptual disjuncture between Fox’s presence in the film as a subject personally affected by this issue and his presence in the film as a ‘detective’ with a camera. Reviews of the film emphasised this distinction between the film’s ‘showing’ (‘objective’) and ‘telling’ (‘subjective’) sections; for example, according to Trevor Johnston in Time Out London, ‘While the hushed tones of Fox’s would-be naïf commentary slightly grate after a while, his film’s images, contrasting natural beauty with industrial horror show, are bracingly effective indeed’ (11 January 2011). The former is perceived as ‘subjective’ and the latter is perceived as ‘objective,’ and according to Johnson the success of the film relies on the power of the ‘objective’ elements despite the subjective ones. Yet such a perspective of authorship (the separation between Fox’s personal commentary and his structuring of the sounds and images) is a simplified one. From the start of the film, Fox emphasises his investment in the issue as a personal one, and the possibility of his ‘objective’ representation of the situation is predicated on his subjective engagement and experiences as a filmmaker; the reality depicted does not in every sense pre-exist his shaping of it.
CHAPTER 1: THEORIZING Filmmakers In FRAMES

The question then arises why subjective expression and objective representation are separated when considering filmmaker’s presence in the frame. One explanation lies in Nichols’ suggestion that documentary is invested with telling the truth as objectively as possible because as a film form, the experience it offers is most commonly framed in terms of factual knowledge:

Documentary convention spawns an epistephilia. It posits an agency that possesses information and knowledge, a text that conveys it, and a subject who will gain it. He-who-knows (the agency is usually masculine) will share that knowledge with those who wish to know; they, too, can take the place of the subject-who-knows. (1991, 31)

While Nichols argues epistephilia – which he elsewhere defines as ‘a pleasure in knowing, that marks out a distinctive form of social engagement’ (1991, 178) – is not an essential or necessary quality of documentary but a desire uniquely fulfilled by certain documentary conventions, he also asserts that this ‘desire to know’ has driven and shaped conventional understandings and expectations of documentary as a social discourse. Through its specific historical development, ‘Documentary calls for the elaboration of an epistemology and axiology more than of an erotics’ (ibid).

To fulfil the epistophilic desire to know, the kind of knowledge communicated through documentary is the knowledge of evidence, fact, and certainty. The role of documentary considered through this epistophilic lens is to offer knowledge of realities already in existence, communicated authoritatively through the film. The author of documentary – as Nichols puts it, ‘he-who-knows’ – is also therefore ‘he-who-already-knows.’ For epistephilia to be satisfied, the communicative act posits that the knowledge shared is fixed and verifiable, transferred through the film rather than created in it. In this view, the process of documentary authorship is not one where the filmmaker comes-to-know through the act of filming, but a process of communicating knowledge from filmmaker to viewer. Yet there are many documentary films where the presence of the filmmaker disrupts this notion that the film is a vehicle for communicating knowledge of existing realities. Specifically, in the Filmmaker in the Frame films analysed in the following chapters, the process of filmmaking is primarily one in which new perspectives are produced and meanings are negotiated rather than serving the transference of epistophilic knowledge.
Stella Bruzzi notes how the notion that the primary pleasure of documentary is in communicating epistemologically sound knowledge leads to an unproductively negative theoretical framework for interpreting documentary films. Bruzzi takes particular issue with Erik Barnouw’s conclusion that the intervention of the camera unavoidably distorts the ‘truth’ of the world being filmed; meaning that the act of documentary film making necessarily fails. Barnouw’s conclusion rests on the assumption that documentary is primarily concerned with communicating factual truths and that in communicating those truths objectivity and subjectivity are incompatible. Bruzzi counters:

Why failure? It is perhaps more generous and worth while to simply accept that a documentary can never be the real world, that the camera can never capture life as it would have unravelled had it not interfered. (2006, 10)

Despite Bruzzi’s convincing argument that documentary representation is both more straightforward and more complex than the traditional notion of documentary as a socially instrumental ‘discourse of sobriety’ suggests, the persuasiveness of that idea persists. For example, one recent commentator characterises the increasing on-screen presence of the filmmaker as a ‘plague’ of ‘firstperson-itis’ (Murray, 8 July 2009). More generously, another recent commentator describes the increasing embrace of subjective perspectives in documentary narration as a provocative blurring of ‘verifiable fact’ and ‘movie truth,’ which complicates the very label ‘documentary’ (Corliss, 11 October 2010). These two critical discussions, while different in tenor, rest on both the notion that ‘documentary’ is properly defined by its relationship to the ideals of objectivity, accuracy, and authenticity, and the assumption that elements of subjectivity and invention undermine the integrity of the form. Regarding the latter commentary, for example, the on-screen presence of the filmmaker as a subject is cause enough to rethink the parameters of the term ‘documentary’ itself. The ongoing persuasiveness of the idea of ‘proper’ documentary striving to communicate truthful and reliable knowledge about the world is relevant to this thesis because knowledge seen as pre-existing the making of the film reinforces the axiomatic

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3 Corliss’s piece discusses the documentaries Catfish (2010) and Exit Through the Gift Shop (2010) as sharing similarities with the mockumentary I’m Still Here (2010). His suggestion that the documentaries discussed would better be described by neologisms such as ‘fakeumentary,’ ‘crockumentary,’ or ‘prankumentary’ playfully recalls Brian Winston’s more serious assertion that the term ‘documentary’ ‘most appositely flags the fact that … we are essentially and most critically in the realm of evidence and witness (‘actuality’))’ (2008, 13).
divide between subjective expression and objective representation. What is known becomes the object, communicated in a more or less authentic and reliable way by the filmmaker-subject.

The above commentaries on the term ‘documentary’ indicate that just as a conceptual framework of ‘proper’ documentary representation emerged according to a specific history (from investments in the scientific value of photography to statements about the objectivity of the camera in direct cinema of the 1960s), the critical frameworks of documentary continue to evolve. One of the main shifts within documentary discourses in recent times is an attempt to theoretically account for the increasing range of documentary expression, in particular an increase in subjectivity as a lens for representing the shared social world. Just three years after outlining the dominant discourse of documentary in terms of sobriety and epistephilia, Nichols himself acknowledged that framework of understanding was shifting in response to documentary increasingly representing personal experiences and subjective perspectives, writing ‘What counts as knowledge is not what it used to be’ (1994, 1).

Recent work by scholars such as Trinh T. Minh Ha, Michael Renov, Jon Dovey, Stella Bruzzi, Cecelia Sayad, Laura Rascaroli, and Belinda Smaill has addressed this shift, examining the address of documentary and the nature of documentary authorship through different conceptual lenses than the investments Nichols described earlier. Each of these theorists re-examines axiomatic notions of the value of objectivity and reconsider the idea that factual certainty and sober discourse are the most compelling points of engagement with documentary films (I return to these arguments in section 1.3 of this Chapter). In light of this theoretical work, it is important to reiterate that filmmakers and viewers are not necessarily (or even significantly) bound by such critical discourses of documentary, producing films and making meaning in ways that continually demand rethinking the frameworks through which we critically discuss films.

This thesis contributes to the broader rethinking of the place and purpose of documentary – in particular in relation to the link between subjective expression and representing the shared social world – by examining how certain documentary filmmakers engage with their own authorship as a negotiation and their authority as a kind of performance. Proposing a distinct group of Filmmaker in the Frame films presents a challenge to the idea that documentary knowledge sits along a spectrum
between objectivity and subjectivity, and that between these poles is a necessary tension. In the films examined in this thesis, knowledge is not proposed but emerges out of the process of representing reality, seen as a negotiation between the filmmaker, the people they film, and the context of filming. In these films, then, the process of documentary authorship is shown not as a means to re-presenting a known truth, but the site in which truth is created.

To engage with the increasing diversity of ways in which filmmakers are representing reality (including engaging with their own identity as authors), the relationship between the filmmaker, their subjects, and the community of viewers must be reconceptualised in terms beyond the communication of knowledge. Dave Saunders is one theorist who has rethought traditional investments in documentary, and his discussion of the responsibility of the filmmaker links back to the issues raised at the start of this section. Saunders’ notion of responsibility is based on the understanding that documentary is not always aligned to making objective representations of reality (2010). Saunders sees the responsibility of the filmmaker as personalised and dynamic, shaped by the processes of filmmaking as much as it is set as a deliberate ‘community dedication to truth-telling’ as Carl Plantinga argues (1997, 219). Quoting Michael Rabiger, Saunders argues that there are no ‘rules’ to documentary except being ‘consistent to the contract you will set up with your audience,’ a contract that is not set up in advance but written through the specific interaction between the filmmaker and the world they represent (2010, 18). This idea that the responsibility of the filmmaker to their audience is a contract specific to each film rather than a universalised ideal further highlights how documentary can be thought of in terms other than a discourse of sobriety. Saunders’ ideas also suggest that it is through the filmmaker’s specific authorial acts – including their experience of ‘being a filmmaker’ – that the authority to represent reality is enacted and the meanings of the film are produced.

Crucial to understanding the responsibility and authority of the filmmaker, then, is the way in which the contract with the audience is set up. As suggested above, theories of documentary reflexivity emphasise that the authority of the filmmaker lies in the extent to which they ‘show their hand’ in authoring their representation of reality. This reflexive showing of the filmmaker’s personal investment sets the terms of the contract that Saunders argues forms the basis of the relationship between
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filmmaker and viewer. As I will now demonstrate, however, theories of reflexivity also tend to consider the filmmaker as an authorial object. Seeing the filmmaker’s presence primarily in terms of how it reveals assumptions and structures the film’s argument cannot fully account for the diversity of ways in which the filmmaker’s presence in the frame makes meaning – specifically, films in which the filmmaker self-reflexively negotiates their own authorial identity, where that consideration of authorship becomes key to the perspectives created through filming.

1.2 The filmmaker as authorial object: reflexivity and revealing

Theories of documentary reflexivity are heavily implicated in the phenomenon of the presence of the filmmaker in frame – whether explicitly seen and heard, or implied through techniques that emphasise the film’s construction – and thus provide important context for this study. Reflexivity can most broadly be defined as the way in which a text deliberately draws attention to its own construction (Stam 1992, 7). Reflexivity is therefore understood as an intentional act. Nichols defines documentary reflexivity in terms of a conscious and deliberate concern with the process of representation itself, comparing this concern about the construction of the text with the more straightforward interaction of the filmmaker with the world they film in interactive documentaries:

Rather than hearing the filmmaker engage solely in an interactive (participatory, conversational, or interrogative) fashion with other social actors, we now see or hear the filmmaker also engage in metacommentary, speaking to us less about the historical world itself … than about the process of representation itself. (1991, 56)

Theories of documentary reflexivity focus on the nature of the filmmaker’s ‘metacommentary’, and the degree to which the filmmaker ‘shows their hand’ in terms of what perspective they bring to the process of representation. For Nichols, reflexivity underpins more sophisticated kinds of documentary knowledge because it addresses the question of ‘[how] can the viewer be drawn into an awareness … that every representation, however fully imbued with documentary significance, remains
a fabrication’ (1991, 57). In this understanding of reflexivity, more complex knowledge of the world represented is grounded in the revealing of the filmmaker’s intent that underpins the film’s ‘metacommentary.’

Jay Ruby, one of the first theorists to theorise reflexivity in the domain of documentary, suggests that reflexive documentaries are characterised by their specific reference to the interventions of the filmmaker. For Ruby, the reflexive filmmaker

deliberately and intentionally reveals to his [sic] audience the underlying epistemological assumptions which caused him to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally to present his findings in a particular way. (1977, 4)

Ruby further argues that assuming a reflexive stance entails the proposition that revealing underlying assumptions and investments grounds inherently better kinds of knowledge about the world represented: ‘assuming a reflexive stance … suggest[s] that unless audiences have knowledge of all three [producer, product, and process], a sophisticated and critical understanding of the product is virtually impossible’ (ibid). While Ruby does not entirely agree with this implicit proposition of epistemological superiority that underpins reflexivity, he does suggest that reflexivity is crucial to documentary’s capacity to grapple with moral issues and comment on politics and society (1977, 8). Ruby also proposes that the emergence of more reflexive documentaries reflects a broader social concern with moving away from the positivist notion that ‘meaning resides in the world and human beings should strive to discover the inherent, objectively true reality of things’ (1977, 5). Instead, reflexive documentaries express a more general preoccupation with how meaning is constructed socially. Ruby’s argument is based on his observation that most documentaries problematically assume a verisimilitude to the world they represent, and seek to hide the subjective perspective that underpins all documentary filmmaking. In short, Ruby sees reflexivity as a counter to the naïve positivism of documentary realism.
For both Ruby and Nichols, reflexivity highlights the contingent relationship between documentary representation and the world represented in a more complex way, which acts as an index of the honesty and authenticity of its own argument. Paradoxically, while reflexivity ‘emphasises epistemological doubt’ (Nichols 1991, 61), by deliberately revealing the fabrication of ‘objective’ truth, reflexive films underline their own truthfulness. Ruby and Nichols’ respective notion of reflexivity also stress the way in which showing the process of representation and the interventions of the filmmaker reveals meaning, which overlooks the ways in which showing the process of representation and the interventions of the filmmaker itself produces meaning.

Theories of documentary reflexivity therefore tend to focus on the presence of the filmmaker in the frame as an authorial ‘object’ (rather than also as a specific subject) because these theories treat that presence in terms of the same ‘revealing’ effect as other structural elements of the film. The interventions of the filmmaker seen and heard in the frame are analysed in the same way as stylised recreations or abrupt edits are read as revealing their epistemological assumptions or ideological investments. While the explicit presence of the filmmaker in the frame is sometimes considered particularly powerful in reflexive analysis – more ‘directly’ revealing the assumptions and investments motivating a film – reflexive analysis still counts the significance of the filmmaker’s presence as comparable to how other textual cues reveal their hand in constructing the text. Yet, as I argue later in this thesis, the presence of the filmmaker in the frame is often (if not always) more significant than this kind of revealing. The Filmmaker in the Frame films analysed in this thesis add complexity to the relationship between truth and revealing by stressing the meanings produced through the process of representation itself; rather than effecting an epistemological revealing, the presence of the filmmaker in the frame of these films opens up distinct perspectives on the world represented and becomes its own point of affective engagement.

Nonetheless, while I argue that notions of reflexivity do not fully account for the range of meanings produced by the filmmaker’s presence in the frame, reflexive techniques do usefully emphasise the author and their interventions as key objects of analysis. Analysing how a film points to own construction implicitly links the meaning of that construction to the intent of the filmmaker as a specific authorial
figure. While knowing the filmmaker’s biography, catalogue of work, and thoughts on their own film helps to ‘flesh out’ the interpretation of their intent revealed in reflexive techniques, even without this knowledge reflexive techniques underline point to the filmmaker as a specific subject communicating a particular set of ideas through the film.

When reflexive revealing can be interpreted as a bridge between the filmmaker’s intent and the film’s meaning(s), reflexivity works to reinforce the truthfulness of the argument being made. The revealing of intent becomes a testimony of the filmmaker’s honesty and trustworthiness. While on one level reflexive revealing contextualises the assumptions and investments of the filmmaker and qualifies their claim to know about the world they represent, it also inscribes a different kind of authority for the filmmaker – the reliability of the filmmaker’s perspective comes to speak for itself, as the world represented in observational film was once taken to speak for itself. The power of this reasserted authority of the filmmaker to speak in contextualised and qualified ways about the world they represent is evident in Brian Winston’s hope that out of the ‘wreckage’ wrought by digital image manipulation technologies on the indexical truth of the image, ‘Documentary will emerge in the hands of filmmakers unafraid of revealing how they mediate between the world and the representations of it they present to us’ (2008, 289).

While investigating the link between a film’s meaning and the filmmaker’s intent can be fruitful, this link becomes problematised when the possibility of knowing the filmmaker’s intent is called into question. Randolph Lewis’ work on what he calls the ‘authorial fallacy’ of documentary describes the traditional understanding of the link between the filmmaker’s intent, the voice of the text (the way the film’s argument is structured), and the meanings a documentary makes:

what has been said in our broader culture tends to presume an uncomplicated relationship between intent and meaning – in other words, that a documentary film is a precise rendering of what the film-maker meant and hardly anything more. (2007, 265)

Lewis argues that this understanding of documentary authorship is entirely adequate for many kinds of films in which a clear argument is identifiable and each element of
the film fits within the structure of that argument; unless specific moments within the film challenge the relationship between authorial intent and meaning, the voice of the text is taken as the voice of the author. Reflexive revealing draws attention to this relationship between authorial intent, the voice of the text, and meaning to underline its importance, while not necessarily being able to satisfactorily determine the terms of that relationship.4

Reflexively revealing the filmmaker’s mediations therefore presents a compelling solution to the problems posed by the erosion of faith in the documentary image in the contemporary digital media landscape, but analysing reflexivity has limits. The promise Winston sees in reflexivity ‘rescuing’ the reliability of documentary representation is complicated by the fact that reflexivity can only ever be partial and incomplete in terms of revealing the filmmaker’s intent, and is therefore ultimately unreliable in terms of providing an index of intended meaning or a guarantee of the filmmaker’s trustworthiness. Broadly, Michael Lynch has noted that across different disciplines and in different contexts of research, reflexivity takes on different significance: ‘conceptions of reflexivity are diverse, and the implications of reflexive inquiry remain unspecified until we learn more about the relevant theoretical investments and contextual applications’ (2000, 47, emphasis added).

Randolph Lewis considers these investments and applications in the domain of documentary specifically, proposing that even if the intent of the author can be recognised through careful reading of the text (a kind of reading that is invited by the seen and heard presence of the filmmaker within the frame), the communication of this intent is far from the only way documentaries make meaning of the world they represent:

Even when we uncover such intentions to our satisfaction, we have not necessarily solved the interpretative riddle that some films present. Indeed, relying too much on the film-maker’s intentions can be a limitation that prevents us from seeing the full range of interpretive possibilities. (2007, 266)

4 Cecilia Sayad makes the same observation of the ‘givenness’ of an equivalence between authorial intent and the interpretations of the viewer in her book Performing Authorship, where she compares this general assumption to more complex representations of authorship in films where the director appears on screen (2013).
In other words, the meanings of a film exceed the intent of the filmmaker, regardless of how well these intentions seem to be revealed through the film or how closely a viewer’s interpretation aligns with the intent of the filmmaker (an alignment which is itself difficult if not impossible to reliably determine). Nonetheless, certain filmmaking tropes – including the reflexive presence of the filmmaker in the frame – invite consideration of the intent of the filmmaker. Their seen and heard presence reveals them as a specific social subject – a material presence, concretely involved in the world represented – which can prompt more specific questions of their agenda and their aims. It is therefore important to consider how questions of intent raised by the material presence of the filmmaker relate to how they perform their authority and trustworthiness within the frame. Later chapters of this thesis analysing the emblematic Filmmaker in the Frame films explore how each filmmaker’s authority is produced as a semantic consideration – while also being destabilised and complicated – through their specific interactions with the people they film, while also intersecting in sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory ways with extra textual statements and their known persona outside the frame. Such analysis inevitably proposes particular interpretations of the significance of each filmmaker’s presence both inside and outside the frame of each film. It is important to emphasise, however, that these interpretations must be qualified within the terms of this study, and that other critical perspectives will yield different interpretations of the filmmaker’s intent and different responses to their on-screen presence. The underlying point of this analysis is to highlight the link between the filmmaker’s performance within the frame and the construction of their authority, which is negotiated through the process of filmmaking as well as intersecting with and building upon discourses of authorship and their authorial personas beyond the film frame.

As suggested above, questioning the intent of the filmmaker as revealed within the frame must also acknowledge the contribution of knowledge about the filmmaker outside the frame, which highlights the limitations of reflexive techniques used within a film to in and of themselves reveal the filmmaker’s intent with any transparency. John Corner elaborates this limitation when he argues that documentary reflexivity (where films ‘show their hand’ more fully) does not necessarily lead to more reliable or insightful kinds of documentary knowledge or a
more complex understanding of the filmmaker’s relationship to the reality they represent (1996, 25). As Corner points out, ‘A problem here is the extent to which reflexive practices work only as occasional, peripheral indicators of the problematic status of the main depiction or, conversely, are integrated into the very production of that depiction’ (ibid, emphasis in original). Because the process of unmasking can only ever be incomplete, and ‘being reflexive’ can itself become a trope that produces its own set of underlying assumptions, Corner is hesitant to place too much trust in the power of reflexivity to reveal any special kind of understanding or guarantee of the argument made.

Stella Bruzzi is also sceptical of the value of reflexivity to reveal key insights into the producer and process of production. Bruzzi argues that revealing the producer and the processes of production for their epistemic value is a false goal – at least for the contemporary documentary audience – because the audience already reads documentary film as contingent and qualified regardless of how it addresses its audience (be it through ‘naïve’ observationism or ‘sophisticated’ reflexivity): ‘the spectator is not in need of signposts and inverted commas to understand that documentary is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other’ (2006, 6). Annette Hill’s research into audience perceptions of nonfiction texts supports Corner and Bruzzi’s suggestion that documentary reflexivity does not necessarily reveal what the audience doesn’t already know (2007). Hill concludes that audiences on the whole define documentary in terms of truth claims, but are equally aware of the possibility of those claims being false and take the film text as a construction regardless of whether that construction is reflexively revealed (2007, 94-105). Bruzzi claims that redemptive views of reflexivity are the result of theorists trying to resolve two contradictory ideas: ‘on the one hand, of the pure documentary in which the relationship between the image and the real is straightforward, and on the other, the very impossibility of this aspiration’ (2006, 5). Championing reflexivity for being able to ground more critical knowledge of the world represented is an awkward attempt to resolve these two conflicting positions. What results, according to Bruzzi, is the contradictory idea that reflexivity can acknowledge the limitations of representation to reveal truthful and authentic knowledge about the real world, while at the same time validate the truth and authenticity of its own representations because they are reflexive. Examining the
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contradictions that underpin the ideas that reflexive revealing can act as a guarantee of truth suggests that existing theories of reflexivity are not sufficient to account for the increasingly diverse ways filmmakers are present within documentary frames.

Important reservations persist, then, about what reflexivity can reliably or meaningfully reveal of the filmmaker’s intent. However, documentary reflexivity can also be conceptualised in other ways. Several theorists have suggested reflexivity is one way of emphasising the multiple perspectives that contribute to the making of a film and the multiple ‘voices’ at work in a documentary. This argument is based on the view that contemporary viewers are literate in the processes of filming and being filmed, and through this literacy viewers understand that the process of filmmaking is one of negotiation in a ‘communicative effort’ rather than a straightforward process of revealing (see Ellis 2012; Dovey 2000; Dovey 2002; Lebow 2012). Another line of argument takes certain cues from Barthes’ notion of the ‘death of the author’ (1977), while also re-introducing the author as an empirical subject. Trish Fitzsimons (2009), Paul Sellors (2010) and John Ellis (2012), for example, argue that documentary authorship – and the construction of meaning – is dispersed between the director, writer, participants, editors, and viewers. In different ways, each of these theorists suggests that the ‘voice’ of the film is not simply the result of the filmmaker expressing their ideas and arguments through the text (even in the realm of independent documentary where the collaborative demands and commercial compromises might be minimal). It follows from this notion of the film’s voice as ‘braided’ that reflexive elements cannot reveal a singular or coherent intent, as certain notions of reflexivity propose.

Understanding documentary meaning as the product of multiple voices in a complex communicative exchange entails an idea of the filmmaker as an individual with views, biases, shortcomings, and limitations in terms of access to the truth and knowledge about the world they represent. The filmmaker has a reason for making the film, but that reason may be known or unknown and the film is never a ‘precise rendering’ of what the filmmaker meant. The filmmaker’s presence in the frame as a subject contributes to increasingly complex understandings of documentary authorship, and also opens the door for the link between intent and meaning assumed by theories of reflexivity to be destabilised further. If the filmmaker is contradicted by the people they film, if their authority is challenged, if their control over the
situation unfolding in front of the camera is indicated to be limited, or if they question their own authorship themselves, then the relationship between intent and meaning fractures. Clearly, the theories of reflexivity outlined above do not capture the significance of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame when that presence is not oriented towards revealing but instead works towards constructing and negotiating meaning through their interaction with the world represented.

While the presence of the filmmaker in the films analysed in this thesis can be considered reflexive insofar as the filmmaker ‘shows their hand’ in constructing the film and ‘engages in metacommentary’ about their own authorship, that concern with the processes of representation is aimed at least as much at producing new perspectives through their subjective engagement as it is aimed at questions of epistemological knowledge. I therefore suggest a different concept than reflexivity to explain the significance of the presence of the filmmaker in these Filmmaker in the Frame films, involving a more complex notion of the relationship between filmmakers, the process of representation, and the reality they represent. A productive framework is found in the distinction between reflexivity, and self-reflexivity.

The valuable distinction between reflexivity and self-reflexivity can be elaborated with reference to two films that have been repeatedly referred to in documentary theory as emblematic reflexive films, but that I argue approach ‘revealing,’ truth, and meaning in significantly different ways: Errol Morris’ The Thin Blue Line (1989) and Jill Godmilow’s Far From Poland (1984). Morris’ film uses overtly stylised recreations and unnaturalistic staging of interviews to highlight the unreliability of witness testimonies in the case of a contested murder trial. These reflexive techniques are employed in an attempt to uncover the factual truth of what happened on the night of the murder under investigation. The viewer’s attention is drawn to the construction of the text, which mirrors the construction of the story told by the key witness in the murder trial and question the truthfulness of that story. The perspective of the filmmaker as doubtful of the verdict passed down in the case is in turn implied in the way the stylised elements of the text frame the witness’ testimony as doubtful.

In terms of the film’s relationship to the objective, factual truth of the story being told, Morris claimed, ‘For me there is a fact of the matter … [and] I wanted to make a movie about how the truth is difficult to know, not how it is impossible to know’
Morris’ film works towards uncovering that factual truth, and he uses reflexive techniques to both muddy certain facets of the story previously accepted as true while proposing a different version of events. The reflexive effect of stylised recreations and staged interviews reflect and reinforce the filmmaker’s position: namely, Morris’ conviction that the wrong man was charged with murder because of legal incompetence and misinterpretation of physical evidence. While the film questions the reliability of the testimony and evidence previously given in the case, it also asserts its own truthfulness in exploring these questions. By extension then, the film’s reflexive elements also reinforce Morris’ authority; he reveals the deeper truth of the story in this more complex version of events.

At the other end of the spectrum of reflexivity, Godmilow’s *Far From Poland* is at least as self-reflexive as it is reflexive, where this self-reflexivity is grounded in the filmmaker’s presence as a specific subject in the frame. The film shows the filmmaker deliberating over her right to make a film about the political upheaval in Poland from her place on the other side of the world. The questions explored are not only about the facts of the Polish Solidarity Movement, but also about the adequacy of Godmilow’s film to represent that historical situation with any authority. Showing the process of representation as a process of (self-) discovery and negotiation, Godmilow’s deliberation not only qualifies the argument the film makes as incomplete and uncertain, but also emphasises how the filmmaker’s engagement with her own position in the frame both makes possible and destabilises the possibility of representing the ‘other.’ The truth is not something to be uncovered by the film, but is instead constructed by the unfolding interaction between the filmmaker and the process of representation.

Reflexivity (in the sense defined by Ruby and Nichols) is a useful framework through which to analyse *The Thin Blue Line* since that film is concerned with questions of how past truths have been constructed, and draws attention to the construction of its own argument for the sake of more critically evaluating the facts of the situation represented. As a framework for analysing *Far From Poland*, however, the traditional notion of reflexivity does not entirely capture how Godmilow’s presence in the frame makes meaning. The way the film represents diasporic anxiety and the conflicting narratives around the Polish Solidarity
Movement is through Godmilow’s experience of frustration in not being able to go to Poland to film. Meaning is made through the filmmaker’s own attempts to understand the situation from a geographical distance. The ‘truth’ of Godmilow’s perspective is produced through the process of filming; the film does not communicate knowledge already known but creates a singularly new perspective. Put another way, beyond being reflexive, *Far From Poland* is markedly self-reflexive. The distinction between reflexivity and self-reflexivity is well defined in Alan Casebier’s discussion of Morin and Rouch’s *Chronicle of a Summer*, which Casebier notes is not only ‘about the process of documenting a subject (hence reflexive), but it is also … self-reflexive – it is about the self’s encounter with the cinema’ (1991, 145). This distinction recognises that in certain films in which the filmmaker is present, the process of documentary representation becomes a space in which subjectivities are negotiated as much as one through which truths are revealed. In self-reflexive films, the presence of the filmmaker engages viewers through subjective identification as much as asserting an epistemological argument, and meanings arise out of contradictions and unresolved questions as much as in any answers the film works towards.

In relation to the Filmmaker in the Frame films, the distinction between reflexivity and self-reflexivity is particularly productive. The conjunction of ‘self’ and ‘reflexivity’ in this context indicates that filmmaker’s presence is significant in revealing the process of representation, but that this revealing is more complex than being only about epistemological questions. In these films, the filmmaker’s involvement in the frame as both subject and author produces affective meanings and intersubjective perspectives as well as ‘shows the hand’ of the filmmaker in the film’s construction. Each of the films examined in this thesis does feature moments that can be productively analysed in terms of reflexivity, for example the awkward staging of interviews in both *Grizzly Man* and *Forbidden Lie*$, or the discussion of whether giving the directive to ‘cut’ marks Panahi as a director in *This Is Not a Film*. However, the significance of the presence of the filmmaker in the frame in each film also cannot be fully explained by theories of reflexivity that emphasise problems of epistemic certainty and an implicit oppositionality between subjective expression and objective representation. I suggest that the notion of self-reflexivity is crucial to analysing these films. In my discussion of these films in subsequent chapters, I use
the notion of self-reflexivity as a productive way of thinking through the different ways in which each filmmaker considers their own authorship and negotiates the authority of ‘being a filmmaker.’ Analysing authorship and authority in this way highlights the contingency and subjectivity that underpins documentary filmmaking not as a more or less ‘adequate’ way of representing reality, nor a ‘failure’ to be overcome, but as a productive process of interaction between filmmaker and the world they represent from which new perspectives and insights emerge.

Any discussion of self-reflexivity in terms of the filmmaker’s consideration of her or his own experience of ‘being a filmmaker’ also highlights the centrality of the notion of performance to theorising the presence of the filmmaker in the frame. Many theorists have used the notion of performance to critically explore the significance of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame. These discussions define performance either in terms of theatricality, or in terms of the filmmaker ‘performing’ the role of author bound by certain discursive rules and expectations. In the following section, I critique some key arguments of these theories, and consider how an emphasis on the alienating effect of performance in many of these theoretical discussions requires rethinking in relation to the films examined in this thesis.

1.3 The filmmaker ‘being a filmmaker’: performance and reporting

Reflexivity offers a compelling – if problematic – critical framework for analysing how the presence of the filmmaker in the frame can reveal their epistemological investments, question the construction of social truth in the world they film, and interrogate the adequacy of documentary to represent reality. Yet when the filmmaker encounters the world as a participant, another set of conceptual issues to do with their performance of ‘being a filmmaker’ come into play. The filmmaker picking up a camera, following a situation as it unfolds and interacting with the people they film situates the filmmaker in a different role – as both author and subject – thus entailing a different set of expectations. Questions of the filmmaker’s intent and the degree to which the world represented ‘speaks for itself’ become focused around the specific actions of the filmmaker within the frame. These specific actions raise further questions about the performance of authorship: how does the
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The filmmaker’s performance embody and disrupt traditional investments in documentary authorship? How is the filmmaker in the frame encountered as a performer? In what ways does the performance of documentary authorship shape the representation of reality as well as the relationship between the arguments a film makes and the world it represents?

A useful perspective to address these questions of performing authorship is found in Stella Bruzzi’s discussion of the recent trend towards more self-conscious and expressive forms of nonfiction filmmaking (2006, 185-199). Bruzzi argues that modern audiences accept that documentary authorship involves both staging and spontaneity. According to Bruzzi, this acceptance is in part because the filmmaker’s presence in the frame as an authorial ‘personality’ is in tune with the contemporary viewer’s understanding of the staging of reality for the camera, heralded by the evolution of reality TV and digital filmmaking technologies in everyday life. The performance of the filmmaker in the frame makes explicit the inherent performativity of documentary as a negotiation between reality and representation, interrupting ‘the privileged relationship between the filmed subjects and the spectator’ while still being understood and accepted by viewers (2006, 198). This authorial performance emphasises the creative dimension of documentary filmmaking over its capacity to reveal existing realities.

However, Bruzzi also argues that the performance of the filmmaker in the frame works primarily as an ‘alienating, distancing device, not one which actively promotes identification and a straightforward response to a film’s content’ (2006, 185-186). In other words, the performance of the filmmaker foregrounds the constructionality of documentary representation in a way that distances the viewer both critically and affectively. Bruzzi highlights this performance of performativity with reference to filmmakers like Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore who construct very particular personas through their performances in the frame. Making a distinction between ‘Nick Broomfield’ – the character appearing as a filmmaker in films like Kurt and Courtney (1998) and Biggie and Tupac (2002) – and Nick Broomfield – the person who makes films for a living – Bruzzi argues that the construction of an in-film persona is crucial to interpreting meaning in Broomfield’s films:
It is over-simplistic to argue that Nick Broomfield, the author beyond the frame, is irrelevant to how one views and interprets the films in which ‘Nick Broomfield’ appears; rather it is the dialectic between the two that motivates the documentaries and informs our responses to them. … Complicating matters is that the two are indisputably the same person, they just perform different functions for the purposes of making a documentary and it is this difference and the dialogue that ensues which informs the films. (2006, 208)

Bruzzi’s observations about Broomfield introduce a tension between the audience’s understanding of the filmmaker-as-author and the filmmaker-as-subject, opened up by his performance of ‘being a filmmaker.’ Rather than being problematic, however, this tension is central to interpreting the ‘reality’ that Broomfield’s films represent. In other words, Bruzzi’s argument is not that the filmmaker’s presence privileges intent as the locus of meaning, but introduces gaps between different roles of the filmmaker that inform the way the world represented is interpreted. Nonetheless, Bruzzi convincingly suggests that the presence of ‘Nick Broomfield’ in the frame – the performed role of bumbling filmmaker – does alienate the viewer from engaging with him as a ‘real world’ subject. In Broomfield’s case, his performance registers as playing a pre-determined and consciously constructed part which mitigates how far the audience can identify with him as a subject; therefore ‘Nick Broomfield’ is felt more as an authorial object structuring the text than a subject with whom the viewer can identify.

A further example of this sense in which the performance of the filmmaker enacts a critical and affective distance is in the work of Michael Moore. Bruzzi argues that Moore puts forward a ‘stridently defined (and some might add simplistic) argument and viewpoint’ that does not communicate a sense of the filmmaker as an individual, but rather as a representative of a political position (2006, 240). Brian Winston also notes how the audience has become interpellated to Moore’s ideological agenda, which allows him to appear to engage with the world as it unfolds while still assert a very clearly defined argument (2008, 205). Moore’s performance therefore registers as the expression of his social/political argument; at the same time working to deflect attention back onto the people he films. While ostensibly revealing his ‘authentic’ self as just ‘a simple guy looking for answers to a few simple questions’ (Sharrett and Luhr quoted in Spence 2010, 370), Moore’s presence has the more subtle effect
of distancing himself as a specific character to become representative of a broader set of social concerns. Paradoxically then, through his performance he is both felt as the organising voice of the text but also effaces the subjectivity of his authorship by suggesting his investment in the story is on behalf of a collective point of view rather than personal perspective.

The examples of Broomfield and Moore raise the question of ‘authenticity’ in regards to the filmmaker’s performance. Belinda Smaill suggests in her analysis of emotionality and documentary that empathy and identification are greatest when tied to the spontaneous physical and emotional expressiveness of social actors rather than when perceived as self-conscious ‘acting’ (2010). For example, moments when filmmaker Morgan Spurlock reveals his personal discomfort and disillusionment with his mission to live off a month-long McDonalds diet in Super Size Me (2004) engage the viewer more affectively than more staged moments when he explains his plan to his doctor or goes to order his first meal. While Smaill does not suggest that the affective dimension of documentary is more significant than its informational or argumentative functions, she does argue that these affective aspects are crucial to how documentaries make meaning and are not well accounted for in most documentary theory. Considering the affective resonance of documentary performances as tied to the perception of authenticity suggests that moments when the filmmaker is framed as a subject responding in the moment to the situation unfolding has a different effect to moments when the filmmaker is felt as an authorial object structuring an argument. Bill Nichols also argues that considering the authenticity of performers in the frame (or at least the perception of authenticity) is crucial to understanding how audiences connect with documentary subjects. He writes that we gravitate towards ‘expressive individuals [that] heighten the possibility for empathetic identification and involvement on the part of the viewer,’ and that we have a ‘desire for performance that is not performance, for a form of self-presentation that approximates a [normal] person’s self-presentation’ (1991, 121-122). Considering these alternate potentials of documentary performance, the performances of filmmakers like Moore and Broomfield can be understood as not necessarily alienating, but deliberately constructed as such for particular ends. Those ends are, as indicated in the above discussion of Moore’s performance paradoxically

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5 See especially Smaill’s discussions of Super Size Me and The Day I Will Never Forget.
advancing his ideological agenda, about communicating an argument and underlining their authority to represent reality. Yet, as Smaill and Nichols’ discussions above indicate, it is crucial to acknowledge that performance can as easily engage viewers as alienate them. The performances of Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi explored in the following chapters work in both ways at various times, which is one of the elements of these films that marks them as part of a distinct and significant group of Filmmaker in the Frame films.

The films examined in this thesis therefore add nuance to the more straightforward sense of the filmmaker’s performance in the frame being a deliberately alienating device to emphasise a critical distance from the unfolding reality they represent. These films also, then, borrow and extend from the much longer history of the filmmaker in the frame as a journalistic reporter. Filmmakers like Broomfield and Moore, who mark their distance from the situation they encounter through performing the character of naïve or ‘everyman’ investigator, build upon the work of journalists like John Pilger and Edward Murrow. The work of these latter producer-journalists is similarly structured by their performance of a particular version of the committed investigator. When they are present in the frame, it is as witnesses to reality, ‘being there’ to uncover the factual truth of historical situations. Their critical distance from the world represented is inscribed in their interrogative stance and insistence on information, which itself acts as a guarantee of their trustworthiness and reliability. The filmmaker-journalist is firmly positioned within a documentary framework of communicating knowledge, in which the filmmaker’s authority as (s)he-who-knows is given (often with a problematic note of paternalistic didacticism).

Exploring the overlap between discourses of documentary and discourses of journalism, Søren Birkvad argues that while documentary and journalism are distinct enterprises on the level of processes of production, institutional support, and

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6 Pilger began his career as a journalist in Sydney in the late 1950s and began making documentary films in the early 1970s. He has produced or directed over 50 films (mostly for television) and appears within the frame as a reporter in many of these, increasingly so as he became a known personality from the 1980s onward. Murrow is best known for his work as anchor and producer of the CBS show *See It Now* in the 1950s, where Murrow’s interview with 1954 interview with Senator Joseph McCarthy was instrumental in bringing an end to the Senator’s anti-Communist campaign. However, Murrow was also one of the first on-the-scene reporters from Allied forces to cover the beginning of WWII in Austria and Germany. His reporting style and self-produced approach was highly influential in the development of on-the-scene news journalism.
aesthetic characteristics, the approach to representing the shared social world in
documentary has long been defined by the values of journalistic discourse. These
common values are characterised by a ‘neutral or consensus-oriented focus on
matters of common interest in society’ (2000, 292). Birkvad notes this link between
documentary and journalistic discourse can especially be seen in the increase of
documentary ‘portraits’ – in depth portrayals of public figures – which has been
crucial to the ongoing legitimation of documentary as a social discourse: ‘an
adoption to modernist criteria of “psychological depth” [in documentary] has been
important means to gain journalistic and artistic respectability’ (2000, 298). Such an
emphasis on character portraits and ‘psychological depth’ has links back to the work
of both Broomfield and Moore. Broomfield’s work tends to focus tightly on single
characters for his film narratives (for example his 1991 film *The Leader, His Driver,
and the Driver’s Wife* about controversial South African leader Eugene
Terre’Blanche, and his recent 2011 profile of US politician *Sarah Palin: You
Betcha!*). Moore’s films take up the kind of ‘matters of common interest to society’
Birkvad describes through staging a series of encounters with people invested in
those matters (such as his investigation into the US motor industry in *Roger and Me*
from 1989, and his study of gun culture in the US told largely from the point of view
of everyday Americans, Canadians, and survivors of the Columbine school
massacres in *Bowling for Columbine* from 2004).

In contrast to Birkvad’s emphasis on the similarity between journalistic discourse
and documentary, Patricia Aufderhiede notes that documentarians typically aim to
tell stories in preference to simply documenting events (as journalists aim to do),
which leads to a different emphasis on how the filmed material is assembled.
Aufderheide argues that documentarians do not intend to provide a distanced view and certainly not a ‘balanced’ one,
if it means telling people ‘both sides’ of a story. Rather they expect to
immerse a viewer in experience that helps explain a reality that previously
would have been invisible, opaque, or misunderstood. (2012, 366)

Following Aufderheide’s observation about the differences between what
documentarians and journalists perceive themselves to be doing, on the level of how
reality is ‘creatively treated’ there are also important differences between
documentary filmmakers and journalists. News reporting, the province of journalists, is traditionally charged with emphasising ‘facts’ over interpretation. Narrative is accepted insofar as it helps make logical sense of the information related to the situation represented, but generally stays away from overt identification with people in favour of giving a more precise and complete picture of historical events. Journalists aim to ‘explicate evidence,’ and their intervention (ideally) limited to ‘cover narrative gaps’ (Winston 2008, 197). Reflection and opinion on the part of the journalist is often featured in news reporting, but is usually explicitly separated from the reportage part of the program. Even when they are displayed interacting with the people they film or embedded in the community they report on, the journalist aims to preserve an ‘objective’ distance between themselves and the world they report on. By contrast, there is an expectation of documentary filmmakers that they do interpret the reality they represent by building an argument. However, as we have seen above, within different conventions of documentary there are still specific limitations to the extent and nature of how that interpretation is communicated and how the argument is developed.

Despite the differences that Aufderheide notes, crucial similarities can therefore still be drawn between the level at which the investigative filmmaker and the journalist represent their own intervention in the frame. Documentarians in the style of Broomfield/Moore and film journalists in the style of Pilger/Morrow emphasise their place ‘in the field,’ and their presence at the site of the events as they unfold reinforces their credentials as a committed observer of reality, reporting back to the viewer what they discover. Through the combination of their interactions with the people they film and their commentary on the world represented, their performance in the frame works as a reflexive guarantee of authenticity and reliability – indexes of the sincerity and commitment with which these filmmakers represent the historical truth of the stories they report on. In particular, performatively maintaining a critical distance from the world filmed is equally crucial to producer-journalists and interactive filmmakers. In both cases, the presence of the journalist/filmmaker in the frame points less towards a specific subject encountering the world on a personal level and more towards them as a proxy for the audience – a witness to the unfolding world and a presence structuring the representation of reality. By enacting a distance from the world represented through the performance of either documentary or
journalistic conventions, the journalist’s/filmmaker’s authority to represent the world they enter is taken as given, and any sense of their subjectivity is framed in terms of the broader social truth of the story they portray.

Claude Lanzmann’s presence in the frame as interviewer and investigator in his Holocaust documentary *Shoah* (1985) highlights how the filmmaker’s adherence to the role of ‘being a filmmaker’ constructs the way in which they are experienced as a specific subject. For the majority of *Shoah*, Lanzmann’s on-screen presence is felt as an interlocutor for other social actors, speaking only so far as to catalyse those other people to speak. In other words, he is seen or heard in the context of his role as a filmmaker intent on finding out certain details or eliciting certain testimonies; an authorial foil for other people to narrate their own stories while maintaining his position as the authorial hand structuring those stories into a broader picture of history. One telling example is Lanzmann’s gentle but determined questioning of survivor Abraham Bomba about his experiences cutting the hair of women about to enter the gas chambers. When Bomba becomes choked with emotion, Lanzmann urges him to continue. Bomba replies, ‘I won’t be able to do it,’ but Lanzmann continues pressing: ‘You have to do it. I know it is very hard.’ Eventually Bomba takes a moment, composes himself, and relents, ‘Okay, go ahead.’ While the personal connection between the two men is evident in this scene, Lanzmann remains unseen and his encouragement of Bomba is framed in terms of the importance of Bomba’s testimony for the film being made. Lanzmann’s presence is felt in this scene as an authorial object rather than as a subject with whom the viewer can identify. The distance he maintains is something Lanzmann himself has said he aimed for in filming *Shoah*, stating that his constant battle in the making of the film was

> how to transmit, how to instruct, how to remain dispassionate while … methodically unveiling hell; how to remain calm in the face of grief and tears, without letting oneself get carried away by the emotion which would preclude all work. (Quoted in Cousins and Macdonald 2006, 437)

On the other hand, there are also key moments throughout *Shoah* where Lanzmann does get carried away by the emotion, framed as a specific subject alongside the other social actors represented. In particular, moments when he betrays his
frustration at, disgust with, or sympathy for the people he films powerfully foreground his own subjective investment in the reality represented. In these moments, the specificity of his authorship and questions of his intent – including his motivations and biases – highlight the degree to which his subjectivity as the film’s author structures the representations made. While not necessarily providing clear answers to his intent, these moments do suggest how his subjective investment in the story makes possible all the other moments when survivors, perpetrators, and witnesses ‘speak for themselves.’ For example, when Lanzmann barely contains his revulsion at a Polish peasant bragging about life without the Jews, the audience is reminded of the filmmaker’s own ethical opinions and personal connection to the story. Writ large in Lanzmann’s body language in this scene is a tension between his role as filmmaker seeking these kinds of on-camera confessions, and his experience as a subject angered by what he hears. The impact of Lanzmann’s presence in the frame in this moment is not in the critical distance it enacts but in its affective spontaneity; the debris of the ‘collision’ between reality and representation overwhelms the sense of the filmmaker’s authorial control and foregrounds his presence as a real-world subject. Rather than undermining the film or his position as the film’s author, however, these moments deepen the complex picture of memory and trauma that the film paints. In particular, moments like his disgust at the Polish peasant resonate with his overall approach to trying to understand genocide through exploring its narrative contradictions, fragmented memories, and lived paradoxes.

The films examined in this thesis invert the different effects of Lanzmann’s presence in the frame of Shoah. For the most part, the intimate and personal engagement of Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi with the world they represent is emphasised over moments in which their performance enacts an alienating distance from the world represented. Nonetheless, as in Shoah, in each of the three films analysed there is slippage between these different positions of the filmmaker. Most significantly, however, the presence of the filmmaker in the frame breaks down the distinction between the filmmaker-as-author and the filmmaker-as-empirical subject. Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi are each felt within the frame as both authors and subjects. The self-reflexive consideration of their authorial identity invites viewers to not only judge the way they represent reality, but also to identify with their experience of representation. Their respective presences form examples of Smaill’s argument that
the performance of subjectivity opens up the possibility for empathy in documentary, which she defines as ‘the capacity to be aware of the other’s perspective, or more specifically, it is the ability to state: “I can perceive as you perceive” and “I can feel as you feel”’ (2010, 63). In each of *Grizzly Man*, *Forbidden Lies*, and *This Is Not a Film*, the emphasis on the filmmaker as a specific, feeling subject provides a perspective with which the viewer can empathise. The intimate personal connection that these films invite between the filmmaker and the viewer highlights one final theoretical framework relevant to considering the presence of the filmmaker in the frame – that of the self-performance of autobiography.

1.4 The filmmaker as subject: self-performance and autobiography

In response to the proliferation of self-representation in recent documentary films, several theorists have conceptualised the presence of the filmmaker in the frame using a different conceptualisation of performance than the distanciation and alienation that characterises the work of Broomfield and Moore. This difference is grounded in Erving Goffman’s study of the performance of people in different social contexts in his influential book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). More an idea of quotidian self-performance than consciously theatrical performance, Goffman nonetheless uses the metaphor of ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’ to differentiate between interactions where our behaviour is shaped and measured in response to the ‘audience’ we interact with, and those moments when our guard is down or our reactions are more immediate and revealing of parts of ourselves usually kept hidden. Goffman uses this distinction to consider how everyday interactions are defined by processes of ‘concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery’ ([1959] 1990, 20). According to Goffman’s theory, the presentation of self to an ‘other’ is a process of performance, albeit one that oscillates between self-consciousness and unreflectively being ‘in the moment’. Goffman’s work crucially emphasises that the way we present ourselves to others is both subjectively crafted and shaped by social conventions. In the context of considering the filmmaker in the documentary frame, adopting Goffman’s theory highlights how the process of filmmaking can offer a unique stage for performing the self.
Self-performance in documentary employs the apparatus of filmmaking in ways significantly different from the traditional documentary ideals of asserting truths and making arguments about the historical world. That said, the authenticity of the performance of social actors for the benefit of the documentary camera has been considered by several theorists in relation to the truthfulness and reliability of the situations a documentary presents. The question of the authenticity of performance has especially arisen in discussions of observational cinema where the ‘virtual performance’ of social actors – expressing themselves for the benefit of the camera while still asserting that they are presenting their ‘real’ selves rather than ‘acting’ – problematises the film’s claim to ‘capture reality’ (see Nichols 1991, 122, and Corner 1996, 52). More recent theories that interrogate the performance of the filmmaker in the frame have delved deeper into the way self-performance problematises a film’s claim to represent reality according to traditional ideals of documentary. These theories, explored in depth below, consider self-performance and self-representation in the context of first-person and confessional nonfiction forms, where the speaking subject actively uses of the apparatus of filmmaking to express her- or him-self.

John Corner argues that the emphasis of self-performance in contemporary nonfiction film and television has fundamentally shifted the notion of documentary away from its informational and educative past. He writes, ‘The viewing invitation slides from the dynamics of understanding to the involving, but at the same time more passive, transaction of vicarious witness and empathy’ (2002, 256). While Corner doesn’t acknowledge Goffman directly, his assertion that contemporary documentary is increasingly a space of self-performance rather than civic politics adopts similar ideas of self-presentation mapped in Goffman’s work. Corner proposes considering contemporary nonfiction in terms of an age of ‘postdocumentary television’ heralded by reality TV, where ‘documentary as diversion’ has taken on greater currency (2002, 260-261). In documentary as diversion, self-performance and an emphasis on relationships shaped by self-performances are crucial to affectively engaging the audience, in equal parts through identification and spectatorship. Yet, Corner argues, in their representation of the historical world (however much that world is constructed), these programs still reference the documentary tradition and force a rethinking of the place and purpose.
of documentary as a representation of reality. Self-performance therefore becomes a key consideration for evaluating contemporary documentary forms.

Jon Dovey similarly argues that first-person confession in contemporary nonfiction formats – both television and film – breaks from traditional investments in documentary as a ‘sober’ social discourse while also offering productive new ways of representing reality. Dovey proposes that self-performance in the form of confession, while undeniably often self-indulgent, can also ‘assert the inner experience of the self in a way that is implicitly linked to a collective identity’ (2002, 15). For Dovey, showing the construction of self through using the camera as a confessional tool positions the viewer as interlocutor, which has the power to bridge the private and public spheres in ways that are inclusive and culturally productive. While Dovey does not distinguish between filmmakers representing themselves or other social actors represented by someone else, his argument about the possibility of performance to ground meanings beyond the communication of knowledge or the assertion of objective truths is crucial to considering the presence of the filmmaker in the three films examined in this thesis. These Filmmaker in the Frame films enact the bridge between public and private spheres described by Dovey by highlighting the intersubjective relationships between the filmmaker, the people they represent, and the audience addressed through the film.

In the same way that Corner and Dovey use ideas of self-performance to understand the cultural significance of the proliferation of first-person speech in nonfiction media, other documentary theorists have turned to autobiography as a productive framework for understanding the significance of filmmakers appearing as subjects within the frame. An idea of self-performance following Goffman equally underpins these discussions of filmic autobiography, which consider how the filmmaker’s expression of their subjectivity opens up distinct ways of engaging with reality through documentary film. For example, documentary theorist Michael Renov quotes Jerome Bruner’s more general formulation of autobiographical acts as ‘life construction through “text” construction’ (2004, xiii), a definition that strongly implies the performative ‘coming-to-know’ that characterises a great deal of contemporary subjective, first-person, and confessional documentary work. Renov goes on to argue that cinematic autobiography, while sharing this general character of autobiography as life construction, is also importantly different from written
autobiography because it entails a visual dimension – a ‘showing’ – that more powerfully presents the self in relation to a culture dominated by images and mediated experiences (see especially 2004, 130-147). For Renov, documentary autobiography asserts the power of individual subjective expression and marks out an ethics of self-presentation in a historical moment where images are increasingly controlled by institutional powers that treat individuals as undifferentiated consumers. In the context of this social power he sees in contemporary film and video autobiography, Renov’s work over a number of years has been committed to exploring the potential of documentary as a site for representing subjectivity – both as a representation of the other as a subject and as a site for constructing the self. In Renov’s view, subjectivity is a ‘multilayered construction of selfhood imagined, performed, and assigned’ (2004, xvi), a process of self-becoming that filmmaking is uniquely suited to enacting. Subjectivity broadly relies not just on the self, but also on the other, and subjectivity is known in the relationship between self and other, which is at once personal and intersubjective; ‘Self entails other; the other refracts self’ (2004, xiii). In autobiographical documentary, subjectivity is felt through filmmakers using the apparatus of film to not only place themselves in relation their world, but also construct the self they present to the other through the processes of filmmaking.

What Renov’s definition of documentary autobiography crucially highlights is the tenuously of maintaining an oppositional distinction between ‘subjective’ expression and ‘objective’ representation in films in which the filmmaker is framed. Renov points to this tenuously when he insists that autobiographical work is ‘deeply dialogic’ (2004, xvii): the self and other are constructed in the same processes of representation, and the self-representing subject is always already imbricated in the shared social world. The challenge autobiographical films present to the traditional oppositionality between subjectivity and objectivity in documentary discourses is further explicated by Alisa Lebow, who takes Renov’s characterisation of the recursive relationship between self and other and applies it to the more general category of first-person address in documentary. Lebow quotes Jean Luc Nancy’s notion of the ‘singular plural,’ where the relationship between ‘I’ and ‘other’ is not based on alterity but on relationality. Lebow argues that the ‘I’ always embodies the ‘other’ and vice versa: ‘The “I” is always social, always already in relation, and
when it speaks … it is always in effect, the first person plural “we” (2012, 3). According to Lebow, the self is made into a subject by its relation to other(s), and that subject is produced, defined, and interpellated by the political and social landscape. The intersubjective relationship between the subject and the other equally determines the possibilities for expressing personal experiences and for representing realities. Thinking of the relationship between ‘I’ and ‘other’ as inherently relational rather than inherently oppositional is particularly useful when considering the self-reflexivity of Filmmaker in the Frame films. The notion of an authoring self and a represented other as mutually imbricated in a process of defining and redefining subjectivity offers a way to conceptualise the presence of the filmmaker in the frame as a subject as productive rather than problematic for representing the ‘truth’ of the reality they depict.

In terms of questions of authorship and the authority of the filmmaker, a fruitful distinction can nonetheless be made between autobiographical films that are framed as an introspective engagement with the self through the apparatus of film, and films in which the experience of the filmmaker is a lens for exploring the shared social world. This distinction can be characterised as the difference between the ‘filmmaker-as-subject’ and the ‘subject-as-filmmaker.’ I propose this distinction not along aesthetic or industrial lines, but revolves around the way that the connections between personhood and social politics – and subjectivity and social reality – are performed. The filmmaker-as-subject, found in films such as Nick Broomfield’s *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (2003) and Kirby Dick’s *This Film is Not Yet Rated* (2006), uses the personal experience of filmmaking as a lens through which to engage with broader social issues. In Broomfield’s film, the filmmaker appears as a subject personally invested in the story to the extent that he ends up giving testimony in court, but it remains a film about Aileen Wuornos, the Florida serial killer sentenced to death for the murder of seven men. The filmmaker’s presence (and purpose) in the frame is as Wuornos’ interlocutor, having developed a connection with her during the filming of another documentary a decade earlier.

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7 The use of handicam video technology and direct to-camera confessional address are useful cues that a project is autobiographical in nature, and therefore presents a subject-as-filmmaker rather than a filmmaker-as-subject. However, even the films examined in this thesis – which I argue each present a filmmaker-as-subject more than a subject-as-filmmaker – blur these aesthetic lines of distinction since each utilises both confession and footage shot on hand-held camera in various ways. Therefore the distinction between autobiography and the Filmmaker in the Frame films is best conceptualised in terms of the tenor of the filmmaker’s performance in the frame.
Broomfield’s involvement as a subject opens up complex insights into Wuornos’ story, and his subjective involvement is felt through his sympathetic voiceover and his interactions with Wuornos, but the film remains clearly about telling her story. In a much more performative and constructed way, Kirby Dick frames himself in *This Film is Not Yet Rated* as an *enfant terrible* director, pulling back the curtain on the secretive world of film ratings in America. Playing a version of himself, Dick narrates the film as a personal detective story, but the subject of the film remains the film ratings industry. In both films, the filmmaker is clearly invested in the story, but the story told is not their own. In short, these filmmakers are in the first place present in the frame as authors of a broader story, representing their authorial self in relation to the other(s) they represent.

On the other hand, the subject-as-filmmaker, emblematically represented by the highly personal films like Jonathan Caouette’s *Tarnation* (2001) and Jonas Mekas’ *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), uses the process of filmmaking to explore dimensions of the filmmaker’s own subjectivity. These films are motivated by an autobiographical impulse, described by Laura Rascaroli as fundamentally a ‘practice that asks the question “who am I”’ (2008, 8). According to Rascaroli, autobiographical films – those I characterise as presenting a subject-as-filmmaker – ‘imply strong enunciators, who produce an audiovisual discourse that asks to be experienced by the viewer as eminently personal’ (2008, 12). In Caouette’s *Tarnation*, the filmmaker looks back at his turbulent childhood growing up with a schizophrenic mother, and the film is composed of home video footage, photographs, answering machine messages, and video diaries. The making of the film is described as a personal project. The filmmaker reconstructs his past self through his archival records, using that image of his past self to reflect on and enact his identity in the present. Mekas’ *Lost, Lost, Lost* is more essayistic, with the filmmaker often reflecting on how his personal narrative is shaped by social turmoil and his place in a diasporic community. It is also firmly produced from the point of view of the filmmaker asking himself the question ‘who am I,’ wherein the process of filmmaking is one way of searching for an answer. In other words, the film is first and foremost a means of personal expression and self-actualisation, with its function as historical document and social critique following on from that autobiographical beginning. In both of these films, as opposed to the filmmaker appearing as an authorial object, filmmaking is a means to considering
selfhood first. The other is placed in relation to the self rather than the self in relation to the other, and the authority of the filmmaker is anchored in the implicit authority of speaking about the self. That authority is not questioned in the film, since the enunciator and the subject are the same. For example, since Caouette’s is a cathartic project of coming to terms with his own past he assumes the authority to speak about that past, which is reinforced by the journey of self-discovery that the film becomes.

Michael Chanan’s characterisation of non-autobiographical films that feature the presence of the filmmaker captures the distinction between the filmmaker-as-subject and the subject-as-filmmaker. Teasing out the different modes of filmmaking that fall under the umbrella of ‘first-person documentary,’ Chanan writes:

Some of them are fully autobiographical, many of them inspired by identity politics, but there are also those that choose to speak from a first person position in the role of witness, and sometimes participant observer, without being centred on the autobiographical self; in other words, where the filmmaker is present, on the soundtrack and often in view of the camera, embodying an individual and not an institutional point of view, addressing a piece of world in front of them. (2012, 23-24)

The makers of the films examined in this thesis fit more into the ‘participant observer’ that Chanan describes than the category of autobiographical filmmakers; they investigate the world in front of them as an individual subject, but concerned with the world beyond their own biographies.8

The three films I analyse in depth in this thesis invariably include some facet of constructing the self through the construction of the film text, but each nonetheless present the filmmaker-as-subject more than they present a subject-as-filmmaker. The self-reflexive consideration by each filmmaker of how the process of filmmaking defines their identity is crucial to the narrative structure of each film, as well as to how each film engages the viewer affectively, but this process is always set in terms

8 Hinting at a similar distinction, Renov explains that he would not count the ‘participant camera style’ and ‘first-person voicings’ of Jean Rouch’s subjectively infused ethnography (especially in Chronicle of a Summer) as autobiographical practice ‘per se,’ instead noting Rouch’s link with autobiography in terms of textual tropes (2004, xxi–xxii). Renov’s discussion emphasises that there are crucial connections and overlaps between autobiography and other kinds of subjective documentary, but there is also meaning in their difference.
of the representation of an ‘other’ first and foremost. Put another way, the expression of the filmmaker’s subjectivity is a consequence of their exploration of broader social and political issues.

Discussing the work of Werner Herzog (explored further in Chapter 3), Eric Ames makes a useful distinction between autobiographical work and key titles in Herzog’s documentary catalogue in which the filmmaker explores the relationship between himself as a filmic author and the people who compel him to tell stories (2012). Borrowing from John Eakin’s idea of ‘relational autobiography,’ Ames describes Herzog’s film *My Best Fiend* (1999), a tribute film to his long time collaborator, friend, and antagonist, the actor Klaus Kinski, as structured around a relational paradigm. The relational paradigm is a model of documentary representation in which the filmmaker encounters and explores their own specific subjectivity via their performance in the role of being the author to another’s story. Quoting Eakin, Ames notes that in relational modes of representation, ‘the stress is on the performance of the collaboration and therefore on the relation between the two individuals involved’ (2012, 228). The relational paradigm therefore stresses intersubjectivity as the key axis around which meaning is created, which marks these meanings as both specific to the subjects involved, and also as communal, part of the ongoing relations of culture and society that shape the historical world. The Filmmaker in the Frame films adopt this relational paradigm, where the filmmaker is both a subject in a collaborative (if not always positive) relationship and the author setting the terms of representing that relationship.

In the films examined in this thesis, the intersubjective negotiation of meaning and the relationship between authoring-self and the subject represented become central to the narrative structure. Significant to how authorship is represented in these three films, one of the relationships they each explore is between the filmmaker-as-author and the filmmaker-as-subject. In *Grizzly Man* and *Forbidden Lie*, while representing an other, Herzog and Broinowski each also negotiates the construction of their own identity as both author and subject. In *This Is Not a Film*, Panahi as-author makes himself the subject of the film, exploring the relationship between his authorial identity and his experience of censorship in the moment. Each of these films is structured as a manifold dialogue – between the filmmaker-as-author, the filmmaker-as-subject, and the ‘other’ they seek to represent – and through that
dialogue a particular picture of authorship emerges. By self-reflexively exploring their own authorial identity at the same time as they represent the ‘other’ in the shared social world, each of these filmmakers highlights authorship as a negotiation and authority as a performative process. The next chapter defines the concepts of negotiated authorship and performing authority, and these two key concepts of authorship and performativity underpin the film analysis of later chapters. In defining these concepts I draw on Stella Bruzzi’s theory of documentary as ‘collision’ and Judith Butler’s theory of performativity respectively. I then explicate how I use this analytic framework to understand how Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi use their own subjective experience of filmmaking as a productive lens for representing the other.
Chapter 2: Concepts and analytic framework

This chapter outlines the concepts forming my analytic framework used to analyse the presence of the filmmaker in the frame of *Grizzly Man, Forbidden Lies*, and *This Is Not a Film*. This framework combines two key theoretical concepts – Stella Bruzzi’s notion of documentary as a ‘collision’ between reality and its representation, and Judith Butler’s theory of the ‘performative’ construction of identity. Applying these related concepts to an analysis of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame emphasises how meaning is performatively constructed in the Filmmaker in the Frame films through the representation of the process of authorship. My analysis of emblematic films according to this conceptual framework also demonstrates how theorising documentary authorship as performative intersects with and disrupts existing discourses of documentary.

Within the analytic framework proposed here, the notion of documentary as collision provides points to the ways in which the filmmaker’s subjectivity becomes a key site for making meaning of the shared social world represented, rather than an obstacle to meaning-making. Examining the filmmaker’s authorship in performative terms focuses on how the filmmaker constructs their own authorial identity within the frame, and emphasises how their actions therein both enact and disrupt expectations of their authorial role. Both these focal points of my analysis of the key films – moments when the collision of representation is focused around the filmmaker’s experience of ‘being a filmmaker’, and moments when the filmmaker performs that authorial identity in distinct ways – challenge and extend existing theoretical notions of documentary. In particular, such moments complicate the axiomatic opposition between subjectivity and objectivity that has historically characterised documentary discourse, as well as challenge traditional assumptions about the authority of the filmmaker. My approach to analysis therefore combines the theoretical framework of collision and performativity with a consideration of discursive contexts. In this sense this thesis follows a recent tradition in documentary studies of analysing the link between documentary texts and documentary discourse with the aim of deepening and extending critical engagement with documentary as representation of reality (for example, the work of Bruzzi, Corner, Renov, and Sayad). In the following sections, I
more precisely define the concepts underpinning my analytic framework and explain in more detail how they apply to the analysis of the films in the following chapters.

### 2.1 Documentary as ‘collision’

Stella Bruzzi’s concept of documentary as ‘collision’ is a response to theories of documentary that marginalise subjective expression and treat the interventions of the filmmaker with suspicion. Bruzzi’s argument aims to rethink the traditional emphasis on the idea that documentary can and should ‘capture reality,’ instead proposing to think about documentary as a complex interaction between filmmaker, subject, and situation. Taking particular issue with Erik Barnouw’s conclusion that the intervention of the camera unavoidably alters the world being filmed – meaning that the act of documentary film making necessarily fails – Bruzzi counters that ‘the results of this collision between apparatus and subject are what constitutes a documentary – not the utopian vision of what might have transpired if only the camera had not been there’ (2006, 10, emphasis added). Under Bruzzi’s definition, documentary filmmaking is not based on an inert recording of ‘objective’ reality; there is no essential objectivity to the image that is then ‘creatively treated’ by the filmmaker. Rather, documentaries are records of the meeting between the filmmaker-subject and the people they encounter in specific situations – situations that are inescapably produced and shaped by the process of filming. Bruzzi’s use of the term ‘collision’ to describe this meeting is particularly useful for considering the presence of the filmmaker in the frame because it emphasises that this meeting does not enact a distance between the filmmaker and the reality they film, but that the filmmaker and the perspective they represent through the documentary is entangled with, invested in, and influenced by the situation filmed in a recursive process.¹

¹ Carl Plantinga has suggested a similar notion of the ontology of documentary resting on a collision between reality and representation in his criticism of the way observational documentary disavows the presence of the filmmaker, and therefore disavows the meeting of filmmaker-subject with the people they film. Quoting David MacDougall that ‘The observational ideal actually distorts the situation because it implicitly denies the presence of the filmmaker … [and] the meeting of two cultures that actually occurs – that of the filmmaker and the people he seeks to photograph’ (1997, 197), Plantinga argues that the ‘shadow’ of the filmmaker in the form of their subjective direction of the recording of events is always visible, even if the material shape of the filmmaker is kept invisible. While not going
Bruzzi’s proposition that documentary can only be understood as the result of the ‘collision’ between reality and its representation is based on an understanding of documentary filmmaking as a performative act of the kind described by J. L. Austin. Performative acts in the sense explicated by Austin are those actions that bring into being the same reality they describe (1962) 1975). Bruzzi translates this notion of performative acts to the act of documentary filmmaking, explaining that ‘a documentary only comes into being as it is performed … [and] the film itself is given meaning by the interaction between performance and reality’ (2006, 186). This is an understanding of documentary as ontologically performative, which reconfigures traditional understandings of documentary as ontologically representational (or more precisely, as re-presentational). Rather than documentary being built upon a Bazinian notion of the power of the camera to ‘capture reality’ through the indexical relationship between recorded image and the extant world, seeing documentary as performative emphasises how new realities are produced by the ‘multi-layered performative exchange between subjects, filmmakers/apparatus and spectators’ (Bruzzi 2006, 10). This ontology of documentary as a performative ‘collision’ makes it nonsensical to call a subjectively oriented documentary film a ‘failure,’ as Barnouw implies. Considering documentary as performative fits with Austin’s notion of performative speech acts that cannot be called ‘true’ or ‘false’ since the reality they describe is enacted by their saying (1975 [1962], 12-14). In terms of the filmmaker in the frame found in the films examined in this thesis, analysing these documentaries as performative ‘collisions’ rethinks the traditional opposition between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ elements of documentary. Seen through the figure of the filmmaker, the perspective of the filmmaker that has previously been defined as ‘subjective’ and the ‘reality’ captured by the camera that has previously been defined as ‘objective’ are instead shown as produced in the same dialectical space of the collision of representation.

Despite taking issue with specific theories that emphasise proper documentary representation as a process of ‘capturing reality,’ Bruzzi notes that common understandings of documentary implicitly conceptualise documentary in more

so far as Bruzzi to suggest viewers implicitly understand what is kept invisible in these films, Plantinga does go on to argue that hiding the meeting of filmmaker and the people filmed is misleading and unconstructive.
complex performative terms. Discussing the impetus of documentary filmmakers to represent the world around them, Bruzzi writes:

Documentary is predicated on a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential, that the text itself reveals the tensions between the documentary pursuit of the most authentic mode of factual representation and the impossibility of this aim. (2006, 6-7)

Here Bruzzi argues that on the level of social discourse, the notion of documentary is at once more complicated and more straightforward than previous theory has suggested. The community of practitioners and viewers maintain a notion of the ‘most authentic mode’ of documentary representation – which in the past has been largely defined by ideals of objectivity, truth, and reliability – but this community also understand that aspiring to such ideals is practically impossible. This discursive tension between ‘aspiration’ and ‘potential’ is not something that Bruzzi thinks needs to be resolved, but is instead a natural consequence of the complex ways in which documentary represents reality – as a negotiation between perspectives, intentions, and meanings. Moreover, Bruzzi argues that this tension is fundamental to the place of documentary as the foundation of the pact between the film, the viewer, and the world represented. That pact involves documentary accepting the tension between the ideal of documentary as a social discourse and the recognition of subjectivity and contingency of filmmaking. According to Bruzzi, documentary viewers are capable of holding these contradictory ideas simultaneously because of an implicit understanding that documentary film is not an objective representation of reality, but that the image is nonetheless connected to the world represented as a trace of the collision of filmmaking (2006, 6).

Far from undermining the documentary project, the understanding that documentary produces the reality it records is fundamental to the socially instrumental power of documentary, creating new ways of looking at the world that have the power to move, motivate, and inspire audiences. Even if the filmmaker is not seen and heard within the frame, understanding documentary as collision considers documentary meaning to be based not on a Bazinian emphasis of the objectivity guaranteed by the mechanical recording of the camera, but on a performative negotiation of subjectivities on both sides of its lens. Within this general understanding of
documentary, the representation of the filmmaker as a specific subject focuses documentary meaning on the processes by which representation is negotiated, contested, incomplete, and often uncertain, without also seeing this as a failing or insufficiency of such films.

Paula Rabinowitz has similarly argued that the political power of documentary lies in the meanings it performatively produces (1993). Rabinowitz’s argument focuses on how the process of filmmaking ‘produces’ specific kinds of subjectivity in the people it represents – as authorities, or victims, or cultural heroes and so on – which opens up distinct subjective perspectives on the social world the viewer shares with these people. Because documentary represents historical rather than imagined subjects, the narrativisation of those subjects gives them a powerful kind of historical agency: ‘The subject produced and provoked by documentary … is a subject of (potential) agency, an actor in history. And the performance of documentary is precisely to remand, if not actively remake, the subject into a historical agent’ (1994, 8). For Rabinowitz, the way in which documentary creates new modes of subjectivity for the people it represents is crucial to the capacity of documentary to effect change in the audience; viewers identify with this process of ‘remaking,’ and that identification with documentary subjects as historical agents mobilises their own sense of agency in the world (1993, 8-9).

It is important to note that theorising performances within documentary has not necessarily been linked to the theoretical consideration of documentary as ontologically performative (built on the collision between reality and its representation rather than being an inert mechanical recording of the reality represented). Anne Jerslev points out that there are complications in using such closely related terms as ‘performance’ and ‘performative’ to describe such different dimensions of documentary films and filmmaking, arguing instead to talk of ‘performing performativity’ (2005). Jerslev’s work relates to the questions this thesis raises by emphasising that the performance of social actors can deflect from the performativity of documentary as a negotiation between filmmaker and reality, as much as it can highlight that performativity. Nonetheless, in the context of considering the filmmaker in the frame and how those presences can challenge traditional notions of documentary, as much as there is a useful distinction to be made between documentaries that feature particular kinds of performances and
documentaries that highlight their *performative nature* there is something to be gained from considering how particular films represent the intersection of individual performances and documentary’s performativity.

Considering Rabinowitz’s notion of how documentary representation produces the subjects it represents alongside Bruzzi’s notion of collision understands documentary meaning as located in an active process of negotiation between the filmmaker, the people filmed, and the viewer rather than simply communicated through the assertions a film makes. In short, both Rabinowitz and Bruzzi’s ideas are built on a belief that documentary is most usefully thought of as a fundamentally creative and subjective act. In particular, Bruzzi’s idea of documentary as collision maps a theoretical ground in which the traditional conceptualisation of ‘documentary’ is broadened, embracing documentary works that perform reality and bring avowedly subjective perspectives to the shared social world.

Considering the on-screen presence of the filmmaker in light of Bruzzi’s notion of collision repositions Bill Nichols’ earlier work that theorises the representation of the filmmaker in the frame in terms of epistephilia. Discussing particular cases of the filmmaker appearing as an interactive subject within their own film (such as Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in *Chronicle of a Summer* or Claude Lanzmann in *Shoah*), Nichols writes:

> The filmmaker’s felt presence as a center of attention for the social actor as well as the viewer leads to an emphasis on the act of gathering information or building knowledge, the process of social and historical interpretation, and the effect of the encounter between people and filmmakers when that experience may directly alter the lives involved. (1991, 49)

Here Nichols emphasises how a filmmaker’s presence in the frame discovers meaning through the act of filming and also affects the subjects involved on both sides of the camera lens. However, this creative dimension of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame is also qualified in terms of its contribution to the information conveyed by the film, still working towards particular kinds of epistephilic knowing. On the other hand, adopting Bruzzi’s notion of documentary as collision emphasises how the meeting of filmmaker and the people they film can result in complex and
sometimes contradictory meanings that do not necessarily resolve to an identifiable argument. If documentary is a collision, it is not only one between the camera and the world it moves through, but also a collision between the experiences of the filmmaker and the people filmed in that moment. The affective dimensions of this collision are as significant to the way reality is represented as the information conveyed.

In the Filmmaker in the Frame films, documentary authorship is revealed as a negotiation staged through the process of representation, and the filmmaker’s self-reflexive engagement with that process is key to the narrative structure of the film. Following an understanding of documentary as the result of the ongoing collision between apparatus and subject, my analysis of the presence of the filmmaker in the frame focuses on moments in which the collision between the filmmaker-subject and the process of representation is specifically seen and heard, especially moments when the filmmaker is confronted, questioned, or challenged in their role as author.

For example, in *Grizzly Man* Herzog’s emotional and sympathetic response when listening to the tape of Timothy Treadwell’s death collides with the judgement previously communicated by Herzog’s voiceover regarding what he saw as Timothy’s recklessly romanticised view of the grizzly bears. In *Forbidden Lie*, filmmaker Anna Broinowski’s trustworthiness is challenged by Norma Khouri because she is ‘being a filmmaker’ rather than being sensitive to the personal stakes of telling the story; the roles of the filmmaker-as-author and the filmmaker-as-subject collide in the moment of confrontation between the Broinowski and Norma.

In *This Is Not a Film*, Jafar Panahi’s highly reflexive consideration of his situation as a censored filmmaker breaks down in several moments when he is overwhelmed with frustration or anger at his sentence, and at one point he walks out of the frame of his own film. In each of these moments, the collision between filmmaker, subject, and situation that underpins documentary representation is writ large in the experiences of the filmmaker, caught between their performance of authorship and their immediate subjective experience of filmmaking.

On one level, the filmmaker’s presence as a subject negotiating the process of authorship more strongly inscribes their authority as a committed documentarian, both witnessing and structuring the reality that unfolds. Yet the presence of these filmmakers in the frame also entails moments when that same authority is challenged
or destabilised. Moments of uncertainty or a lack of control cast the filmmaker’s position in relation to the people they film as more complex than traditional understandings of documentary authorship assume. Randolph Lewis calls these kinds of moments where the filmmaker’s authority and control is questioned ‘dissonant’ moments. Lewis argues that dissonant moments disrupt the assumption of a straightforward relationship between authorial intent and meaning:

when a documentary provokes confusion or even discomfort in the audience [they ask]: ‘Why did the film-maker do this? How am I supposed to understand this?’ During these moments of dissonance, the relationship of intention to meaning becomes crucial, as the viewers look past the screen for flickers of illumination. (2007, 266)

For Lewis, dissonant moments resist traditional expectations of documentary to be ‘legible’ and ‘didactic’ (to use Lewis’ terms) and challenge the assumption that the meaning made of those moments by the viewer is a ‘precise rendering’ of the filmmaker’s intended meaning. While not specifically referring to dissonant moments as performative in the sense Bruzzi describes, Lewis’ definition is underpinned by the understanding that these moments make meaning performatively in the collision between camera, the world filmed, and the viewer. Furthermore, Lewis argues these moments become productive points of engagement with the world represented rather than problems of interpretation.

An illustrative example of dissonance produced through the filmmaker’s felt presence in the frame is the Australian documentary *Bastardy* (2008), an observational film about Australian Aboriginal actor Jack Charles as he tries to kick a heroin habit that has seen him on and off the streets for four decades. Director Ameil Courtin-Wilson follows Charles over several years, and there is only one sequence in which the filmmaker is seen involving himself directly in the action unfolding. It comes 55 minutes into the film, after Charles had stolen some jewellery from a friend of Courtin-Wilson who had been working on the film. The filmmaker confronts Charles to find out where he sold the jewellery, wanting to try and return it to his friend and keep Charles out of trouble with the police: ‘She’s called the cops on you, and she’s given them my number, and I haven’t wanted to call them back yet. I haven’t called them back yet because I haven’t known what to say. I wanted to
speak to you first about it.’ Charles replies, ‘Yeah. Wow. Well, I did do her place. I might have to go under for that one.’ The result of this conversation is that Charles agrees to track down the ring he stole and return it to Courtin-Wilson in exchange for the charges being dropped. In the context of the film’s structure, this moment ruptures the observational distance that the filmmaker had maintained to that point. Courtin-Wilson’s presence in the frame here creates dissonance with the notion of the film as a strictly observational piece. The concern of the filmmaker for his friend emphasises the performative dimension of the film, as the result of an intimate exchange between filmmaker and subject rather than an ‘objective’ re-presentation of Charles’ everyday life. The subjectivity of the filmmaker is central to producing the reality of this moment, complicating the separation of subject/author and of subjective expression/objective re-presentation.

Throughout the analysis of key films in the following chapters, I focus on moments of dissonance as emblematic of the collision defined by Bruzzi. I stress the ways in which the filmmaker negotiates this process through self-reflexively considering their experience of filmmaking, and argue that the self-reflexivity of these films offers important possibilities for representing reality. Bruzzi’s analysis also focuses on moments of dissonance, but her emphasis is on analysing how the performance of the filmmaker can produce a sense of alienation, distancing the filmmaker-performer from the world they represent and recuperating a sense of their authorial control in the midst of recording unpredictable situations. With particular reference to Nick Broomfield, Michael Moore, and Molly Dineen, Bruzzi applies the notion of documentary as collision to interrogate the filmmaker’s performance as a tactic that marks out their authorship at the same time as deflecting attention away from themselves as a specific subject.

In contrast to Bruzzi’s focus on the filmmaker’s performance underlining their authorial control and their distance from the world they represent, the films I examine frame the filmmaker as more intimately and personally engaged with the reality represented. In this intimacy, they are framed as a specific subject – a figure of empathy and identification. The way in which these filmmakers represent their experience of authorship is crucial to how they are felt as specific subjects. Therefore, to analyse the presence of the filmmaker in the frame as both a specific subject and the documentary author, I depart from Bruzzi’s application of the
concept of collision to consider performativity as a more specifically subjective experience. In doing so, I appropriate Judith Butler’s conceptualisation of performativity from her work on gender (1999 [1990]; 1993), which focuses on how particular kinds of identity are simultaneously performed through specific bodily acts and framed by discourse.

2.2 Performativity, documentary authorship, and authorial authority

Butler’s explication of gender performativity relates to Bruzzi’s idea of collision in that both theories describe the ontological reality of their objects of analysis in terms of being constituted by specific acts. However, Butler’s analysis of gender performativity differs from Bruzzi’s analysis of documentary in that Butler focuses more acutely on the relationship between specific human acts and the discourses that shape those acts, in particular focusing on the power dynamics that emerge out of and become embedded in the recursive interplay of social discourses and human behaviours. Butler’s approach can therefore be used in a productive way to analyse how certain filmmakers self-reflexively confront and negotiate their own authorial identity, which is both performed in specific actions within the frame and shaped by discourses of authorship circulating beyond the frame.

It is important to note that the analysis in this thesis translates rather than transposes Butler’s notion of performativity to the domain of documentary, acknowledging that the effects of power as performed through processes of documentary authorship are of a markedly different nature and magnitude than questions of power related to gender. For one, the process of filmmaking as represented in Filmmaker in the Frame films – specifically the interaction between the people being filmed and the people doing the filming – can itself act as a signifier of the different kinds of power entailed in documentary film, namely the power to speak or the power to frame speech. Whether or not that power dynamic plays out in specific films according to expected or accepted conventions, the ‘authority’ of the filmmaker and the difference in power between filmmaker and the people they film is not necessarily hidden or necessarily repressive. Moreover, in the examples of performativity discussed in this thesis the power relationship between the filmmaker, the people they film, and the
context in which they are filming is often made explicit through self-reflexive questioning and playful exchanges represented on screen. By contrast, Butler argues that gendered behaviours involve power that is concealed and naturalised, while at the same time producing discourses that repress certain forms of individual expression. In Butler’s examples of performativity, gender involves power that has far-reaching consequences for the material experience of the complex transaction between the subject, the body, and individual identity, making gender performativity more visible a key concern of identity politics in contemporary society. Despite the clear differences in the kind of power underpinning gender performances and the performance of documentary authorship, using Butler’s general notion of performativity as a recursive process to investigate the negotiation of authorship and the performance of authority in documentary film is helpful. It allows a distinction to be drawn between ‘performativity’ as a term describing kinds of documentary performance that emphasise the centrality of subjective perspectives (following Corner and others as outlined above), and ‘performativity’ in the sense of a process of exchange between discourses of authorship and specific authorial acts that produce and inscribe representational authority.

Butler’s view of gender as performative proposes that categories of gender are not fundamental ontological categories of being, but socially constructed and discursively policed. According to Butler, there is nothing ‘given’ about gender identity, despite the apparent naturalness of the binary distinction between male and female taken to marry with the biological distinctions of sex; gender ‘has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute [that] reality’ (1999 [1990], 173). The ‘acts’ Butler refers to here are both embodied performances of particular gendered behaviours, and the articulation of certain notions of gender through social discourses. The performative ‘reality’ of gender is marked out by specific bodily acts and experiences, which is in turn held in place by discursively defined expectations and norms of gendered behaviour. These norms themselves end up producing the state that they anticipate (gendered behaviour). Overriding discourses of gender then become reinforced through the repetition and ritualisation of certain gendered behaviours. Butler argues that it is this recursive relationship between discourse and bodily actions that mask the fact that the ‘reality’ of gender is performative (1999 [1990], xiv-xv). Gender is thus naturalised because it is so
pervasively enforced by long-standing codes of normal social behaviour (1999[1990], 168-169). In short, for the ‘reality’ of gender categories and gendered behaviours feel like fundamental facets of being human, but are actually performatively produced in the recursive relationship between discourses of gender and behaviours labelled as gendered.

Cecilia Sayad examines how Butler’s broader notion of identity being constituted by repeated acts and performative gestures is utilised by certain auteurs to mark out their distinct identities as authors. Focusing on fiction films and documentaries in which the filmmaker is framed playing a version of their authorial self, Sayad is concerned with how the filmmaker’s presence in these films self-consciously comments on the relationship between artist and work as well as offering a critical avenue for rethinking how audiences relate to authors. Sayad argues that the filmmaker’s performance of the role of author emphasises and reifies specific gestures as what constitutes authorship. Seeing authorship as (re)embodied in specific acts ‘offer[s] not only self-conscious commentaries on the relationship between artists and their works, but also an understanding of the perception of authors by audiences and critics alike’ (2013, xxii). This understanding of authorship is communicated through the author in the frame playing a character, asserting a point of view, disrupting a narrative through voiceover, or through other interventions that overtly structure the ‘voice’ of the film. In Sayad’s words,

Irrespective of whether or not authors succeed in subverting codes or breaking off from structures, it is their very interactions with these codes and structures that define them as authors – their presence in the more or less dramatic struggle with language on one hand, and with the idea of an inner essence waiting to be revealed on the other, a struggle that is in addition continuous, constituting an endless battle. (2013, 11)

Characterising the performance of authorial identity as a ‘struggle’ and a ‘battle’ underlines the dimension of power that is at stake in enacting authorship within the frame, and points to how specific performances of authorship link to expectations and investments in film authorship more broadly.
Sayad goes on to examine the ways in which certain films articulate the known identity of their authors in different ways. Sayad’s work therefore also links the performance of authorship by filmmakers within the frame to discourses of authorship circulating outside the frame. Sayad’s connection of performance with power and her reflections on how the filmmaker’s authorial identity is (at least in part) constituted by their embodied acts of authorship is nonetheless related to the questions of documentary authorship that this thesis addresses. Sayad also makes clear that an increasing number of films engage with and creatively respond to the idea that authorship is constituted by the gestures of filmmaking and the performance of ‘being a filmmaker.’ This phenomenon can be seen in the example with which this thesis began, where Louis Theroux is faced with the limitations of that performance in the face of subjects who challenge his authorship. As his identity and authority as a filmmaker is challenged, however, Theroux is also framed more strongly as a subject entangled in the same world he is representing. This entanglement breaks down the conceptual distinction between his ‘subjectivity’ as a social actor and his ‘objectivity’ as a documenter of reality.

As the Theroux example indicates, documentarians are also increasingly concerned with their own authorial identity, including the ways in which their authority is constructed and contested within the frame. In the domain of documentary, the stakes of representing reality mean that authorial authority is both of primary concern and tightly policed by critics, viewers, and practitioners alike. These stakes include the instrumentality of documentary films to move and motivate viewers toward social action, the contribution documentary as a social discourse makes to historical, political, and cultural narratives, and the contribution of individual films to the horizon of (relativised) truth and objectivity that representations of reality are more broadly judged by. Yet, as the films examined in this thesis make clear, the given-ness of the identity of the filmmaker and the authority married to that authorial identity are far from stable.

Taking Sayad’s work as one point of departure, this thesis considers how the notion of authorship as performative introduces not only the understanding that authorial identity can be constructed within the frame, but also that notions of authorship can be challenged and negotiated through the process of filmmaking. In contrast to Sayad’s emphasis on the relationship between the (known) author and their
appearance in their work, this thesis focuses on questions of how the filmmaker’s identity as both subject and author is negotiated within the frame. In the films examined, the filmmakers’ authorial identity is challenged through their authorial authority being challenged. Put another way, the assumed right of the filmmaker to represent reality, speak about the ‘other,’ and to interpret and make meaning of the world they represent is questioned via questions about how they see themselves as an author. In each case that questioning is born out of the interaction between the filmmaker, the subjects they film, and the situation they enter. Each of the three filmmakers studied is forced to negotiate their authorship within the frame, highlighting the ways in which authorial authority is performed through the process of filmmaking.

The analysis of the presence of Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi within the frame introduces the more general idea that the identity of the documentary filmmaker as a filmmaker is constituted by the act of making films. The kinds of films they make, the way they speak about their films, and the way they appear within the frame all contribute to the specific authorial identity of particular filmmakers. Authorial identity is also, however, defined by discourses of documentary authorship; discourses that both interpret and mark out the role of the author in relation to the films they make. Reviews, interviews, scholarly articles, filmmaker biographies, and director commentaries all produce the ‘reality’ of documentary authorship at the same time as they describe it. For example, Grierson’s notion of documentary defined it in civic and educative terms, where the filmmaker's proper role was to ‘creatively treat’ actuality in ways which edify society. As the influential head of government film production in Britain (and later Canada) in the first half of last century, Grierson’s definition mapped the boundaries of ‘proper’ documentary representation in that historical context, establishing a broader documentary movement of informational and educational films based around these values (see Aitken 1990; Winston 2008). This example highlights how authorship is interpreted and recognised in discourse, which in turn informs practices of authorship. Notions of the filmmaker’s relationship to the world they film, of their control over the process of filmmaking, questions of the extent to which they speak for the world or let the world represented speak for itself, and the extent to which they are judged as
making a ‘fair’ and ‘balanced’ representation, are all shaped by collectively defined notions of documentary authorship.

In this sense of the link between specific acts and discourses, I am indebted to Butler’s argument that the performance of identity becomes displaced from specific (bodily) acts and is also enacted through discourse about identity (see in particular her discussion of the discursive positioning of AIDS as a ‘gay disease’; 1999[1990], 168). Considered in relation to the identity and authority of the documentary filmmaker, I argue that what constitutes the notion of documentary authorship is be displaced from the seen and heard acts of filmmaking to also be enacted through discourses of documentary authorship. These discourses have consequences for how filmmakers portray themselves and are judged both inside and outside the frame of their films. The authority of the filmmaker to represent reality is performatively produced by specific authorial acts, discourses of authorship, and the recursive relationship between them.

Viewing the identity and authority of the filmmaker as performative is highly valuable to any analysis of the presence of the filmmaker in the frame. In the films examined in subsequent chapters, the filmmaker’s authority to represent the other is not simply assured in the act of making the film, but is challenged and questioned, becoming something negotiated through specific interactions within the world represented. In other words, these films display the filmmaker’s authority as performed through the process of representation rather than simply performatively assumed in the fact of making a film. The way in which this performative negotiation of authorship and authority is shown is through the filmmaker’s self-reflexive consideration of ‘being a filmmaker.’ Each of the three films examined represent a filmmaker directly confronting the contingent nature of their authorial control, the performance of their identity as a filmmaker, and their authority to represent their world. To analyse how the process of documentary filmmaking can act as a space through which authorial identity is both challenged and (re)asserted in new ways, in the following chapter I consider Herzog’s presence in the frame of Grizzly Man. For Herzog, his auteurist identity as a uniquely committed filmmaker, dedicated to doing whatever it takes to capture transcendent images and discover the ‘ecstatic truth’ of the world, is challenged by his virtual meeting in Grizzly Man with Treadwell, a filmmaker who literally died for his filmmaking cause. That meeting forces Herzog
to rethink his own self-identity; a rethinking that comes to structure the film as an ‘argument across time and space.’
Chapter 3: An argument across time and space: mediated meetings in *Grizzly Man* (2005)

*In making Grizzly Man, Herzog has opened a kind of portal through which he can talk to, and even argue with, Treadwell across time and space.*


In Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*, the apparatus of filmmaking becomes a place for the metaphysical meeting of two filmmakers working in different times, re-imagining the relationship between the past and present through documentary film. Herzog’s documentary is about the life and tragic death of grizzly bear protectionist and amateur filmmaker Timothy Treadwell, who spent thirteen summers camping in the bears’ habitat and, in the last five of those summers, filming the bears on digital video camera. From over 100 hours of footage filmed, Treadwell turned his experiences into educational presentations, screening his footage in schools throughout Alaska as part of his overall mission to educate a wider audience about the bears and contribute to their protection. In the summer of 2003, Treadwell and his partner Amie Huguenard (who had also accompanied him on the previous few summers’ stay) were attacked and killed by a grizzly. Audio of the event was captured on digital videotape, as Treadwell turned on his camera as the bear approached but did not have time to take off the lens cap. *Grizzly Man* is comprised almost as much of Treadwell’s handicam footage as Herzog’s own filmed material, distinguished by the different qualities of light and resolution in the images and different clarity of sound in the audio. Herzog is seen within the frame only once – obscurely framed listening to the audio recording of the attack through headphones while the camera operator zooms in on his face – but his presence is felt constantly throughout the film through his voiceover interpreting Treadwell’s material.

Reviewing of the film for *Variety*, Scott Foundas emphasised the material sense of presence in the meeting between Herzog and Treadwell, describing *Grizzly Man* as ‘a kind of portal through which [Herzog] can talk to, and even argue with, Treadwell across time and space’ (11 January 2005). The film is structured around this temporal and spatial ‘argument’ and the tensions that circulate between the two filmmakers. Through their virtual interaction in the frame, the two filmmakers offer differing
conceptualisations of the world they represent, but also cross the boundaries between past/ present and present/absent in their meeting within the frame. The ‘argument across time and space’ of *Grizzly Man* therefore reframes the relationship between Herzog and Treadwell as a dialogic interaction between the (present) filmmaker and the (absent) subject.

The sense of *Grizzly Man* as a dialogue between two filmmakers (rather than an articulation of Herzog’s point of view or assertion of his judgement) plays out through the breakdown of the very distinction between the roles of ‘filmmaker’ and ‘subject.’ While it is ‘A film by Werner Herzog’ (announced in the opening title over a black screen), the most powerful images of that film are found in Treadwell’s amateur recordings. Moreover, Treadwell’s recordings more often than not show him in the process of filmmaking (for example reaching behind the camera to pause or stop recording, or running out of frame to set up another take), which further emphasises his identity as a filmmaker in his own right. Conversely, the one time Herzog is bodily present in the frame, he is framed as a subject of the film – not directing the camera but being recorded as he listens to the tape of Treadwell’s death. The same blurring of the usual distinction between filmmaker and subject happens in the temporality of presence and absence in the film: Treadwell is absent through his death but present in his images; Herzog is absent behind the camera (apart from the one moment of listening to the tape) but forcefully present through his voiceover and off-screen direction. That unique temporal quality of the film relies on both filmmakers being felt alternately as author and subject within the frame. The reframing and overlapping of the notional filmmaker/subject distinction within the time and space of the film can be read as a manifestation of the performative ‘collision’ between filmmaker, subject, and apparatus in the process of filmmaking.

Through representing Treadwell’s story and trying to understand what drove this man to die for his cause, *Grizzly Man* provides Herzog with an opportunity to reflect on both his beliefs about filmmaking and about (human) nature, as well as redefine his own role as an author who represents reality. Most significantly, in terms of the relationship between the two filmmakers, the skill and commitment Herzog recognises in Treadwell’s footage becomes a challenge to the persona Herzog has curated for himself since the beginning of his career as a uniquely committed and visionary auteur. In this chapter, I argue that the ‘argument across time and space’
between these two filmmakers – both felt as distinct presences within the in the frame – teases out a complex relationship between documentary authorship, the desire to record reality, and the possibilities of using past images to explore the present. Put in terms of the main contention of this thesis, Herzog opens up a dialogue with Treadwell as a way of self-reflexively considering his own relationship to filmmaking, revealing a need to reconsider the place of the filmmaker in the frame. Herzog’s broader body of work is represented through his self-reflexive exploration in this film of the nature of his own filmmaking, and through the way in which his authorial identity is defined through the lens of Treadwell’s story. Reflecting on this point, Eric Ames notes that

*Grizzly Man* appears to be a film about Treadwell, but it doubles as a film about Herzog, about his attitude toward nature and matters of life and death, and about the camera’s role in his staging of subjectivity. (2012, 256)

Extending from Ames’ characterisation of the film as a doubled narrative, in this chapter I argue that the film is structured as a dialogue between the two filmmakers, ultimately not concerned with telling the biographical story of either filmmaker, but with exploring the power of filmmaking and the possibility of self-expression through its apparatus and process. Such a dialogue is made possible because of Herzog’s presence within the frame, and that dialogue is characterised by a tension between his consistent voiceover, his physical appearance in the film’s pivotal scene, and Treadwell’s trace in archive footage incorporated into *Grizzly Man*. Taking Herzog’s self-reflexive negotiation of his identity as a filmmaker as crucial to understanding the film, the following analysis will examine how Herzog’s identity as an auteur is constructed both inside and outside the frame. Since Herzog’s auteurist personality is fundamental to the nature of the ‘conversation’ at the film’s core, I begin with an analysis of Herzog’s history as a filmmaker and the development of his identity as an auteur.
3.1 Werner Herzog, documentary auteur

*If someone was ever to represent the concept of auteur filmmaker (a director who is so involved in his productions that his personality comes through in almost every aspect), then it is this man [Werner Herzog].*

– Chris Wahl, 2013

Herzog’s work in both fiction and nonfiction modes has established him as an emblematic auteur, heralded as the pioneering leader of the New German Cinema. Across a diverse body of work that has mixed conventions of fiction and documentary from the beginning, his films have consistently been read in terms of having a distinctive authorial voice and recognisable cinematic style. Specifically in his documentary films, Herzog’s characteristic voiceover – full of irony and dry wit – corrals the diverse scope of his documented subjects into a definable body of work attributable to his singular creative vision. Stories of his creative exploits are the stuff of legend, from eating his own shoe to honour a bet (captured in Les Blank’s 1980 short film *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe*), to hauling a steamship over a mountain in the Amazon jungle to create an authentic period sequence in his 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*, to carrying on an interview with a BBC journalist after being shot with an air rifle mid-conversation (see Ames 2012, 317). His physical profile – deep-set eyes and long forehead – is immediately recognisable to cinephiles, and the familiar drawl of his accented and elliptical voiceover has been mimicked in countless short films and online parodies. Despite his familiarity as a character, however, Herzog is a filmmaker in many ways defined by his rhetorical elusiveness, his contradictory declarations, and the indeterminability of the stories he creates on screen. Accepting Herzog as an auteur, then, invites fundamental questions concerning the notion of auteurism itself and the degree to which auteurist authorship is the articulation of a cinematic vision or the performance of an authorial identity. Questions about Herzog’s authorial persona and his profile as an auteur converge sharply in *Grizzly Man*, a film in which Herzog encounters a filmmaker whose commitment to the process of filmmaking and gravitas in front of the camera rivals Herzog’s own self-curated status as a uniquely committed auteur.
In terms of the use of conventions of interview and use of archive footage to tell the story of Treadwell’s life, *Grizzly Man* is ostensibly a portrait film; about a man who cast himself as a crusader and defied the rules of nature to live among bears, tell the world about them through film, and ultimately paid with his life for his commitment to his cause. Even in this general description of Treadwell’s story, however, there are resonances with Herzog’s own biography which hints at the doubled narrative and dialogue at work in the film. Herzog is a filmmaker who has cast himself as a crusader for cinema itself, engaged in an ongoing quest to find ‘adequate images’ to represent the elusive meanings and existential complexities of contemporary life.¹ The authorial image Herzog has created is of a man who lives by his own rules, going to extremes as a filmmaker on the level of both physical commitment and creative manipulation. In short, Herzog defines himself by his films, and simultaneously declares himself a dedicated servant to the stories he tells and a singular creative visionary.² In a 1983 day-long seminar and series of screenings held in Melbourne Herzog declared about his vocation as a filmmaker:

> somehow and I don’t know why, I can articulate certain things and I have to do it [make films] for that, no matter how difficult it is, no matter how much time it costs, no matter how desperate I might get – all this doesn’t count. I do not have the privilege of private feelings anymore. I don’t have the privilege of getting tired anymore. This distinguishes me from the people who do not make the films and just see the film. It’s not an easy profession, but I have accepted it as it is, as simple as it is. (Herzog 1983, 14)

While this interview occurred twenty years before Herzog took on the telling of Treadwell’s story, these words seem to foreshadow what Herzog finds so compelling about the amateur filmmaker – both uniquely defined by their work and uniquely committed to their cause. As Herzog’s voiceover notes with no small measure of respect in *Grizzly Man*, ‘Timothy used his camera as a tool to get his message

¹ This phrase ‘adequate images’ comes up repeatedly in Herzog’s early interviews, often as a way of establishing the uniqueness of his approach as distinct and distinctly imbued with insight. One telling example is a 1978 conversation with Roger Ebert, in which Herzog stressed that ‘we live in a society that has no adequate images anymore … we absolutely need new images’ (Ebert and Herzog 1979, 21).

² Eric Ames notes that Herzog’s identification of his self through his films is uniquely enacted in the 1978 biographical film about Herzog made by Erwin Keusch and Christian Weisenborn, which is un-ironically titled *I Am My Films*. In this film, Herzog subtly adopts the role of director, telling the young filmmakers what to film and how to film it, and ends up dictating the shape of the representation as a kind of author-by-proxy. (2012, 217-222)
across.’ Treadwell’s message through his films was directed towards a very specific and very practical end: his perception of the threat to the wellbeing of the bears (which Herzog suggests throughout *Grizzly Man* may have been overblown). In contrast, Herzog’s aim through his filmmaking is more esoteric. Through the images he creates and the stories he films, Herzog aims to access what he calls a ‘deeper strata of truth,’ an ‘ecstatic truth’ (a point I return to later). The difference between the ways the two filmmakers use the medium makes Herzog’s admiration for Treadwell’s filmmaking all the more remarkable. Yet they also share a common attraction to poetic images, and a common commitment to document the world around them. *Grizzly Man* is built around these similarities and differences between Treadwell and Herzog, with the exploration of the relationship between the two highlighting a tension between authorship and subjectivity that shapes the work of each filmmaker.

Unlike Treadwell, however, Herzog is able to draw on his auteurist identity outside the frame to inform the perspective he presents inside the frame. *Grizzly Man* trades off Herzog’s auteur status from the film’s opening sequence. Following a brief scene showing Treadwell standing on an open plain in front of grazing grizzlies, Herzog invokes his own personal history and his privileged eye as an experienced filmmaker to assert the beauty of Treadwell’s footage:

> Having myself filmed in the wilderness of jungle, I found that beyond a wildlife film, in his material lay dormant a story of astonishing beauty and depth. I discovered a film of human ecstasies and darkest inner turmoil.

Tellingly, Herzog’s address here assumes a level of familiarity with his previous work – his filming in locations such as Amazonian jungles in *Fitzcarraldo*, Cambodia in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997), or Peru in *Wings of Hope* (2000). While these references aren’t crucial to understanding Herzog’s meaning, his voiceover does assume a certain familiarity with his own work. More overt, however, is the self-ordainment of insight at work in this statement. In the notion that he ‘discovered’ the latent beauty of Treadwell’s footage, Herzog advances the idea of his own auteurist vision. He suggests that his past experiences as a filmmaker have given him an eye for the true beauty of Treadwell’s images, beyond their surface appearance as amateur wildlife films. By the same token, this voiceover
statement also implies that Herzog’s eye for cinematic beauty has grounded his longevity as a filmmaker – he has been there and done that himself, and it is his capacity to see beyond the surface of images that allows him to keep making films.

The conceptualisation of the film as an ‘argument’ between Herzog and Treadwell is also seeded in these opening lines: an argument between Herzog as the visionary director who ‘discovers’ the dormant story, and Treadwell, the author of these images that command Herzog’s respect. The terms of this argument centres around Herzog’s suggestion that Treadwell had made a story of beauty and depth, but one that needed Herzog’s creative intervention to realise this potential. This reflection poses a question that follows this opening scene: how much of the beauty and depth is Herzog’s hand and how much is inherent to Treadwell’s material? This opening scene sets the course of *Grizzly Man* as the work of an auteur reflecting on the significance of his own work through trying to understand the work of a very different kind of filmmaker. The sounds and images of the film alternate between the work of the two filmmakers: on the one hand, location shots and interviews conducted by Herzog abound, including reflections by Treadwell’s friends and family, the coroner who examined the bodies, and the pilot who flew Timmy in and out of the area he called the ‘Grizzly Maze.’ On the other hand, footage that Treadwell shot of himself living and interacting with the grizzly bears pervades the film. Treadwell’s own narration can be found across most of this footage, and he frequently appears in front of the frame as a kind of nature documentary presenter. Herzog interweaves this footage liberally with his own interviews, and throughout the film the two sources often overlap, with Herzog’s voiceover commentating over Treadwell’s footage. Herzog repeatedly questions what to make of Treadwell’s behaviour, both as he performs for the camera and as a character more generally.

Sequences in which Herzog’s voice speculates about Treadwell’s actions take on significance beyond straightforward commentary, also coming across as Herzog competing with Treadwell for authorship, and more fundamentally competing for authority of meaning. In editing and (re)contextualising Treadwell’s footage, on the one hand Herzog asserts his authorial vision and on the other hand seems to contend with Treadwell as the structuring presence of the film. Deliberately or not, in making *Grizzly Man* Herzog enters into a negotiation of authorship with Treadwell that challenges the authorial persona Herzog has curated throughout his career – an
element of the film that has been acknowledged in its critical reception. Michael Atkinson identifies this sense of contested authorship in his review of the film for *The Village Voice*: ‘Herzog admits admiration for Treadwell’s camerawork, considering him more of a compatriot than a subject, but the film is nevertheless the work of two men, two competing visions, two antithetical agendas’ (2 August 2005). In a feature article for *Film Comment*, Paul Arthur similarly notes the uneasy negotiation of authorship simmering below the surface of the film, which destabilises Herzog’s self-presentation as a director in total control of the ‘truth’ his films present. Arthur writes that in *Grizzly Man*, ‘an issue entirely foreign to the director’s ethos, that of divided or decentered authorship, slips in like a postmodern visitor’ (2005). As these comments highlight, by incorporating so much material from a different director with a vastly different ideology and sensibility, Herzog’s authority as the organising voice of the story is challenged. The sense that the film is the articulation of Herzog’s auteurist vision is thrown into tension with the competing presence of Treadwell as an equal directorial force with an equally compelling and singular vision. The questions *Grizzly Man* raises in relation to auteurist authorship revolve around the way in which notions of authorial control and the possibility of a filmmaker articulating their creative vision are complicated when the filmmaker reveals their specific material and subjective engagement in the documentary frame.

**Competing narratives of Herzog’s auteurism**

The concept of the auteur has always referred to more than elements of style, recurring motifs, or thematic concerns across the body of a filmmaker’s work. Even defining auteur theory in the broadest sense as a framework for historically linking and analysing groups of films according to the distinctive stamp of a director’s unique style (following Andrew Sarris’ initial translation of the idea from the French to the American context in 1962), recognising the presence of the filmmaker outside the frame as a personality and cultural icon is crucial to the act of interpretation. Sarris took his appreciation of the artistry and aesthetic style of certain directors from French film criticism and linked it to an archaeology of film history in which individual directors create the artefacts, with those called ‘auteurs’ infusing these works with a personal style that distinguished them from the general industry of filmmaking (see Sarris 1968; Sarris 2004 [1962]). In Sarris’ characterisation, auteur theory can be seen as a kind of interpretive feedback loop: films are read as the work
of a particular director articulating their creative vision through recurring thematic and stylistic characteristics, and the films made by that director are then interpreted in terms of these characteristics for how they express an ‘interior meaning’ (Sarris 2004 [1962], 563).

Auteur theory has been criticised as both exclusionary and arbitrary for how a director and their work enters into this conversation, which is by dint of critical reception (see Sellors 2010; Grant 2008). Sarris and the French Cahiers du Cinema critics in particular have been criticised for how the theory supports and lends credence to the validity of their own work as critics (Sellors 2010, 18-24). Proponents of auteur theory have also been criticised as creating a problematic canon of ‘significant’ filmmakers (somewhat ironic given the theory’s initial intent to broaden the horizon of critical appreciation), as well as marginalising the contributions of other participants in a film’s production. Nonetheless, despite contradictions and problematic assumptions in various incarnations of auteur theory, its general principles of investigating the distinct style of certain film authors captured the imagination of audiences and theorists alike. As a result, auteur theory not only gained popular purchase as a shorthand way of categorising films, it also contributed to turning directors into celebrities which helps feed the industry of cinema more broadly. Because of these various appeals, auteur theory persists as an often-valuable way of describing filmmakers and their work. It helps theorise the work of the director in the process of filmmaking, understand filmmakers as social personas (and often celebrities), and underpins one way of conceptualising film as a communicative medium: the communication, more or less successfully, of a set of unconscious or conscious meanings and ideas from the filmmaker to audience (see Wollen 2004, 566-579; Ellis 2012).

Crucially, however, any analysis of the relationship between a filmmaker and their work that considers the dual contexts of what is inside and outside the film frame – a central concern of auteur analysis – involves ruptures and inconsistencies. Deb Verhoeven points out that ‘the auteur will not be coherent, nor consistent, nor canonical in her every iteration’ (2008, 23). Thus the general idea of an auteur circulating in popular culture as ‘the single image of the individual author, a driven artist struggling to overcome a variety of institutional obstacles in order to find an outlet for their expression’ is far from a stable image, and becomes a shaky
foundation upon which to build an analytic approach to authorship (ibid). As Verhoeven’s general characterisation suggests, the term ‘auteur’ still tends to be used to downplay differences in style, theme, and technique across the body of work of a filmmaker in favour of highlighting common threads between these elements and attribute them to the socio-political personality of the filmmaker outside the frame.

In his 1986 analysis of Herzog’s work, Timothy Corrigan pinpoints some of these inconsistencies in relation to Herzog’s auteurist persona:

Whereas [the] illusion of a singular, controlling presence has traditionally been naturalized quite effectively to the personality of the director holding a camera-stylo, with Herzog the stability and density of that position frequently seem the function of mirrors and unmistakable exaggeration, removed from the abstractions of the writer as individual and rebuilt as a dense body of work. The institutional systems that might underline the ruptures and inconsistencies in the traditional auteur are reassembled through Herzog as part of a thicker, less personal body. (1986, 5-6)

Corrigan emphasises the instability of the concept of auteur in analysing Herzog’s authorship because his persona is so distinctly performative that it works to ‘parody the very pose of the auteur’ (1986, 6).³ Herzog’s voiceover and intermittent on-screen presence, which borders on outright fictive acting, paradoxically highlights both the ways in which he can be understood as an auteur and the ways in which auteurist analysis in unable to explain the diverse and sometimes-contradictory meanings of his work.

In relation to Herzog, the ruptures and inconsistencies in his auteurist personality also extend to categorising his work as either or fiction or documentary, with his films often incorporating a mix of the two. Having established his international profile through such fiction films as Aguirre, the Wrath of God (1972), The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser (1974), Nosferatu the Vampyre (1979) and Fitzcarraldo (1982),

³ It is worth noting that Corrigan’s observations were written at a time when Herzog’s best known film work was his fiction filmmaking, against which his documentary films and his odd performative presence within them could be read as a kind punctuation and glimpse into the persona behind the grander fiction films. This perspective has both intensified and shifted as Herzog’s documentaries have become his best-known works in recent years, but as Corrigan’s work highlights, he has always loomed large within his work.
Herzog turned his focus to making nonfiction films. Beginning with his abstract reflection on the Iraq war in *Lessons of Darkness* in 1992 and continuing with *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* in 1997, *My Best Fiend* in 1999, and *Wings of Hope* in 2000, common perception of Herzog moved from him being a fiction filmmaker who also made documentaries, to a documentary auteur who was once better known for his fiction films. In any case, and despite the contradictions inherent in the label, Herzog has consolidated his place as one of the world’s most identifiable auteur directors; a recognisable personality with a distinct directorial style that is often communicated through his presence within the frame of his films.

A compelling example of Herzog’s auteurist presence being felt within the frame is the final scene of his documentary *Echoes From a Somber Empire* (1990). The film is a loosely structured exploration of the fallout of Jean-Bédel Bokassa’s oppressive regime in the Central African Republic, seen through the eyes of British journalist Michael Goldsmith, who in 1977 was imprisoned and tortured by Bokassa’s regime on suspicion of being a French spy. Herzog films Goldsmith interviewing several members of Bokassa’s family, and accompanies the journalist back to the African nation to discover what has become of the country in which Goldsmith had been imprisoned years earlier. Herzog appears in the frame in the opening scene of the film, reporting that since the film’s completion, Goldsmith had apparently disappeared and was feared to be dead. In fact, Goldsmith was alive but suffering a range of health issues; he passed away in Southern France just before the film’s release (*New York Times* 1990). While Herzog’s appearance is framed in informational terms – giving the viewer specific historical context – it does flag the filmmaker’s authorial hand early on in the film. For the remainder of the film, Herzog is not seen or heard, and only fleetingly referred to by Goldsmith’s glances towards the camera until the documentary’s final moments.

The film’s last scene shows Goldsmith visiting a zoo where Bokassa allegedly threw victims to lions and crocodiles to be eaten alive. Standing in front of an enclosure, the zookeeper asks Goldsmith for a cigarette, which he reluctantly passes over. The keeper lights it and passes it to a chimpanzee, which eagerly takes it and puffs away. The camera lingers on the chimpanzee, then turns to Goldsmith, who leans against the rail with his shoulders slumped. The impression is of a man finally worn out by the ordeal of revisiting the scene of his incarceration and seeing the dire state the
nation is still in. Looking just past the camera Goldsmith says, ‘Werner, I can’t see this anymore. Can you turn this off now?’ From behind the camera Herzog replies, ‘Michael, I think this is one of the shots I should hold.’ Goldsmith relents: ‘Well, you promise that this will be the end shot – it will be the last shot of the film?’ Herzog’s voice is the last heard in the film, saying, ‘Yes, I promise.’ Goldsmith nods slightly and looks back to the chimpanzee. The camera cuts to the chimpanzee in close up before fading to black. In this moment, Herzog not only has the last word, but that word performatively asserts his authorial control over what the film’s final shot would be. In short, it marks Herzog as an auteur in both vision and action.

The sense of auteurist control communicated through his films is, however, destabilised by the competing narratives Herzog builds around himself in the media. As Eric Ames notes, there is a kind of longing in Herzog’s self-narrative to be seen to be both exceptional and self-effacing (2012, 215). He seems to want to both stand apart as a filmmaker who is willing to go to lengths other filmmakers will not for the sake of his films, while also promoting the idea that he sees himself as a ‘craftsman’ rather than an ‘artist.’ Such contradictions play out in some measure through his fiction films (insofar as themes of exceptionalism and the mundane collide in these films), but particularly define his documentary work and his existence as a celebrity filmmaker outside the frame. These contradictory impulses meet in his performance of being a filmmaker – in interviews, autobiographical projects, and moments when he appears within the frame of his own films.

The contradictory impulse to be seen simultaneously as exceptional and ordinary is one of the qualities that unite Herzog and Treadwell. As Herzog makes clear in Grizzly Man, Treadwell longed to be both famous and accepted into a community, exceptional and normal. These parallel desires bind Herzog and Treadwell’s perspectives on the world and unite them as filmmakers, despite differences over their respective beliefs about nature (as I explore in more detail later, Treadwell is decidedly more romantic in inclination). Grizzly Man then becomes a space through which these contradictions of personal identity are negotiated. The process of documentary representation allows both filmmakers a forum to voice their own perspective on the world while creating a text about an ‘other’ – whether that ‘other’ is a bear or another filmmaker. Each filmmaker enacts a reflection on the self by ostensibly training their lens at a different subject. Herzog’s film, however, adds a
3.2 A cinematic ‘duel’: presence and absence in *Grizzly Man*

*Herzog engages in a kind of cinematic ‘duel’ with what he regards as Treadwell’s sentimentalised view of nature.*

– Benjamin Noys, 2007

The film opens with credits over a black screen, announcing that this is ‘A film by Werner Herzog.’ This title fades and the first image is drawn from Treadwell’s footage: a long shot of grizzly bears grazing in a green pasture. The title of the film is overlayed and disappears, followed by Treadwell’s entry into the frame, crossing to squat down in the foreground on the right of screen facing the camera. Treadwell tells the camera he is in an area known as ‘the Prime Cod.’ He discusses the two bears behind him, Ed and Rowdy, delivering an enthusiastic nature-film style explanation of the territorial instincts of these two grizzlies: ‘They’re challenging everything, including me – goes with the territory. If I show weakness, if I retreat, I may be hurt, I may be killed. … [But] I will not die at their claws and paws.’ This speech of masculine bravado is followed by further images, in the same location and seemingly on the same day, of a family of bears grazing while two large males fight in the foreground, butting heads and swiping at each other. Apart from being a
chilling portent of Treadwell’s death, these scenes equally foreshadow the complex and somewhat antagonistic relationship that develops throughout the film between past and present filmmakers: the fighting bears become a metaphor for the ‘argument’ enacted through the film between Herzog the professional auteur, and Treadwell the amateur enthusiast.

The first time Herzog is heard within the film is in his voiceover response to Treadwell’s nature-show host delivery:

All these majestic animals were filmed by Timothy Treadwell, who lived among wild grizzlies for thirteen summers. He went to remote areas of the Alaskan peninsula believing that he was needed there to protect these animals and educate the public.

There is a sense of irony to Herzog’s tone here, evident in the implication that while Treadwell ‘believed’ he was needed to protect the bears, this belief may have been out of step with reality. From this initial implied question, Herzog repeatedly challenges Treadwell’s motivation and sensibility. In one sequence, for example, Herzog juxtaposes the voice of a Native American scientist talking about the line that must be respected between humans and bears with footage of Treadwell reaching out to touch a bear while swimming. Herzog himself goes on to speculate that ‘It seems to me that this landscape in turmoil is a metaphor of his soul.’ More pointedly, towards the end of the film Herzog directly challenges Treadwell’s romantic view of nature and feeling of kinship with the bears: ‘To me, there is no such thing as the secret world of the bears,’ he comments. Moreover, Herzog’s repeated narration over the top of Treadwell’s footage also underlines his authorial power, giving more weight to Herzog’s judgement. Herzog selects these sequences from the volumes available and edits them into a specific narrative offering one interpretation of Treadwell’s life.

Yet Herzog’s respect for Treadwell’s commitment and the beauty of his images arguably transcends the judgement implied about the amateur filmmaker’s motivations. Although obviously unaware of his place in this future argument, Treadwell’s presence in the frame seems to answer the questions posed by Herzog about his reasons for repeatedly putting himself in harm’s way to record these bears.
Treadwell’s ‘answer’ plays out on two levels: firstly through his sheer dedication to the cause, which Herzog is compelled to respect; and secondly through the grace and beauty of his footage that captures Herzog’s own imagination. In these two qualities, Treadwell as a character and as a filmmaker eludes a simplistic characterisation as ‘crazy’ or ‘self-deluded,’ and the power of these qualities is felt so strongly in Herzog’s film that judgement of Treadwell’s actions is left open-ended. This open-endedness is evident in Herzog’s voiceover, which while repeatedly criticising Treadwell’s actions also often expresses genuine admiration. Moreover, within the wider fabric of *Grizzly Man*, Treadwell’s sounds and images are given enough time to unfold at their own pace, taking on an ontological and epistemological power in and of themselves. The archive footage comes to speak directly of Treadwell’s experiences and perspective, rather than simply speaking for Herzog’s interpretation of him. It is in the back and forth between the two filmmakers’ voices that the film works as a dialogue ‘across time and space.’

Throughout the film, then, Treadwell is ‘felt’ as an interlocutor as well as a (past) subject. His presence in the film collides with Herzog’s own felt presence as narrator of Treadwell’s story.\(^4\) In other words, it is the unusual structure of the film as an ‘argument across time and space’ that produces a powerful sense of Treadwell’s presence. Nonetheless, it remains a presence always performatively mediated through Herzog’s competing presence in the frame; the possibility of Treadwell ‘speaking for himself’ is still determined by Herzog’s process of authorship. Therefore while the temporal spaces of Treadwell’s past and Herzog’s present seem to collide, Herzog’s maintains the distinct privilege of authorial power in the narration of Treadwell’s story, re-inscribing Treadwell’s absence on an authorial level. Key to this complex intersection of authorship, power, and presence in the film is Herzog’s treatment of Treadwell’s footage at various times throughout the film as different kinds of documentary trace.

\(^4\) Interestingly, in interviews after the release of the film, Herzog still spoke of Treadwell as though he had agency in telling his own story through Herzog’s film: ‘Actually Treadwell somehow stumbled into me, like many other of these figures’ (Herzog 2006).
Time, trace, and the meeting of past and present

In making *Grizzly Man* a dialogue between ‘past’ and ‘present’ filmmakers, Herzog presents an unusual image of documentary time. This image relies on the dual presence of Herzog and Treadwell in the frame, interacting in the same conceptual space. The metaphysical meeting of Herzog and Treadwell through the technology of film adds complexity to the usual temporal quality of documentary films that use images of the past, where archive footage is made into a film in the present, aimed at a future (imagined) audience. In *Grizzly Man*, however, Treadwell’s presence felt through his archive footage brings the past more directly into contact with the present through indexical records. It particularly strongly evokes the ‘uncanny’ sense of the documentary trace described by Malin Wahlberg:

> In film, the trace has the complicated status of referring to the inscription of images and sounds, to the uncanny presence of the past invoked in photographs and archive film, as well as to the banal sense employed by historians and documentary filmmakers, according to which the trace is the source material … out of which events of the past may be reconstructed as narratives. (Wahlberg 2008, 35)

As Wahlberg’s passage suggests, this ‘uncanny’ in relation to documentary traces is a function of film’s capacity to manipulate time, reconstructing the past into narratives. Manipulating documentary time by collapsing past and present amplifies this sense of uncanny presence because not only is the past invoked in image, but the sense of lived time is also disrupted. The possibility of disrupting the sense of lived time depends on the unique durational quality of cinema described by Andre Bazin: ‘The cinema is objectivity in time. … Now for the first time, the image of things is also the image of their duration’ (1960, 8). The objectivity that Bazin speaks of is aside from the intent or interventions of the filmmaker, but the indexical relationship between photographic image and the reality it (photochemically) imprints. In making films, these ‘images of duration’ are structured into narrative sequences, but each recording still always exists as a temporal object that bears an ontological relationship to the scene it recorded: ‘In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space’ (ibid). This persistent ‘real’ of the image
has even more significant weight in *Grizzly Man* because Treadwell is so strongly felt as both subject *and* as filmmaker; he is not only the subject re-presented in Herzog’s film, but also the object of his own filmed footage.

However, the difference in aesthetic qualities between Treadwell and Herzog’s footage emphasises the function of the former as traces and the latter as the ‘present’ framing of those traces. Treadwell’s images have the grainy quality of digital video while the sections Herzog filmed have the resolution of professional film. The temporal distinction of these sources is also emphasised by Treadwell speaking in the present tense over his own footage, while Herzog’s voiceover speaks of Treadwell in the past tense. Within the film, Treadwell’s footage therefore takes on the function of trace not only on its own terms but also in relation to Herzog’s footage. The distinction between the two kinds of footage further stresses Treadwell as ‘absent’ and Herzog as ‘present,’ which does undermine the sense in which the film can ultimately be read as an open conversation between filmmakers on equal footing. In short, on the one hand the structure of the film as a conversation strongly invokes Treadwell’s presence in the frame, while on the other hand his footage is read as trace (in relation to Herzog’s footage), which underlines his absence. His felt presence is both asserted and disrupted by the simultaneous use of his trace in dialogue with Herzog and in reference to the irretrievable past. Herzog’s handling of Treadwell’s death as something not relegated to the past but an event open to re-thinking, re-living, and conversing with through the traces (of) Treadwell left behind gives the film a distinctly uncanny quality.

Treadwell’s absent presence in the film also recalls Bazin’s consideration of the unsettling power of death captured on film, where death is simultaneously recorded in its finality and can also be repeated over and over again on filmic record in defiance of that finality (2003). While *Grizzly Man* never includes the image (or the sound) of Treadwell’s death, the fact of his fate underpins the entire film. Images of Treadwell living among the creatures that would eventually kill him ring loudly with this uncanny sense of these traces, both defining and resisting his death. Christian Metz famously considered this ‘presence of absence’ of the trace as part of the fundamental character of cinema as symbolic:
in order to understand the film (at all), I must perceive the photographed object as absent, its photograph as present, and the presence of this absence as signifying. ... [It] is not fantasy, a ‘purely’ symbolic imaginary site, for the absence of the object and the codes of that absence are really produced in it by the *physis* of an equipment: the cinema is a body. (1975, 58-59)

In *Grizzly Man*, the presence of Treadwell through his archival images is both literal and symbolic: his footage is a literal indexical record of the fact of his having once lived in the Grizzly Maze, and it is symbolic in the sense of his presence as the person with whom Herzog converses, made ‘alive’ again through Herzog’s use of his footage. Treadwell the ‘object’ is absent, but his presence persists in the film record in both a symbolic and bodily sense.

In the crucial scene in which Herzog is physically present within the frame listening to the tape of Treadwell’s death, Treadwell’s presence is signified most powerfully in a symbolic rather than a literal way through Herzog’s mediation of the moment and omission of the indexical record of the audio itself. I return to the ethical problems of Herzog’s strategy regarding the tape later in this chapter, but here I suggest that when Herzog shows himself listening to the content of the tape rather than playing it in the film, Treadwell’s *symbolic* presence becomes a kind of haunting of the present – an intensely present absence. This is in part because Herzog stepping into the frame brings Treadwell’s absence into even sharper relief. Seeing Herzog in this moment implicitly asserts his difference from Treadwell by the mere fact of his existence as a (present) subject; yet the moment is also about Treadwell’s absence, which returns Treadwell as a symbolic presence.

Treadwell is felt as an absent presence not only in this key scene but also throughout the film, as early as the opening moments of *Grizzly Man*. As mentioned above, the first figure seen and heard in the film is Treadwell, addressing the camera on an open plain in front of grazing bears. A caption underneath him appears with the simple text, ‘Timothy Treadwell (1957-2003).’ This small detail immediately raises the tension between past and present at work in the film: Treadwell is framed as the subject of the film, addressing ‘us’ – the imagined audience – as if we are with him in the present moment, yet through Herzog’s authorial gesture of the caption he is also framed as speaking from the past. In the tension between Treadwell’s presence
on screen and the captioned reminder of his death, this moment foregrounds the complex dimensions of time represented in *Grizzly Man*.

In another sequence, six minutes from the end of the film, Herzog’s voiceover introduces another moment of tension between Treadwell’s presence and absence in the trace of his archive footage. Over a long shot of a bear hunting in a stream, showing Treadwell sitting still on a rock about twenty meters behind, Herzog tells us that this is the final tape Treadwell recorded. ‘Here he may have filmed his murderer,’ Herzog speculates. The juxtaposition of the peaceful-looking image with such a blunt reminder of Treadwell’s death is jarring, made more so by Herzog’s use of the term ‘murder,’ implying the bear’s killing was conscious rather than instinctive. In his commentary, Herzog places Treadwell firmly in the past – not only ‘murdered,’ but also unaware of the larger story that Herzog understands because of the auteur’s privileged place in the present. Yet two shots later, Herzog contradictorily implies Treadwell’s prescience to his own fate. After showing the bear diving for salmon in a different part of the river, the image cuts to the bear grazing on a hill with Amie Huguenard framed in the foreground less than twenty meters from the bear. Amie tries to duck out of shot – by far the clearest image of Treadwell’s companion in all of the footage seen throughout the documentary. Herzog asks, ‘Is Amie trying to get out of the shot? Did Treadwell wait until his last tape to put her in his film?’ This moment is shocking for how it suddenly gives Amie material form, depth and shape: until this shot, she is felt only as a vague spectre; the unknown woman who unwittingly met her death with Treadwell. Yet in her sudden appearance, Huguenard becomes a specific person, anchored in a physical form. Because of her absence – both literal and symbolic – up to this point, Huguenard is strikingly present in this moment. More subtly but no less significantly, Treadwell is given authorial agency beyond his death. Herzog’s voiceover implies that Treadwell knew it would be his last tape – the last chance to put Amie in his film – strangely resurrecting him in the present through his decision to film in this past moment.

In *Grizzly Man* then, Herzog’s use of Treadwell’s footage traverses the multiple functions of the documentary trace. The archival footage attests to the fact of Treadwell’s past existence (as an amateur documentarian), and is also used as the building blocks for Herzog’s narrative of Treadwell’s life. I would argue, however, that despite Treadwell’s footage on some levels acting as a trace of the past,
Herzog’s use of this material is most powerfully used to invoke Treadwell as a present figure. The viewer is shown the world of the Grizzly Maze from Treadwell’s perspective alongside (and sometimes in contradiction to) the narrative told by Herzog. The meeting of Herzog and Treadwell through the medium of film invokes a particularly uncanny presence of the past, because it bridges – however incompletely – the usually definitive boundary of death, impossible but for the filmic record Treadwell left behind.

Beyond allowing Herzog to introduce Treadwell as a felt presence through seeing and hearing him on screen, the extensiveness of Treadwell’s filmic record also allows Herzog to evoke him as a kindred spirit. Treadwell’s archive represents a commitment to the process of filmmaking and a belief in the power of images to change people’s mind about the bears – an investment that resonates with Herzog’s own approach to cinema. Herzog believes that the ‘authenticity’ of documentary images lies in how they reflect a physical commitment to the process of filming, and he sees in Treadwell’s archive precisely this absolute dedication to capturing reality. Treadwell’s approach also, however, presents an interesting challenge to the German filmmaker’s ideas about documentary as a creative art form.

3.3 Herzog’s documentary: authentic images and ecstatic truths

_I just see something at the horizon and try to articulate it._

– Werner Herzog speaking to Jonathan Cott, 2 December 1976

While Treadwell’s images clearly captivate Herzog, his attraction to this kind of archive footage is an exception in the scope of Herzog’s work. Aside from confessional moments where Treadwell talks directly to camera about his own life, Treadwell’s footage is strongly marked by an observational and informational quality, and its appeal to Herzog’s poetic sensibility is illuminating (and, to some degree, ironic) in relation to the German filmmaker’s previous declarations about documentary as a filmmaking form. Eric Ames argues that Herzog’s relationship to documentary is a paradoxical one: ‘Herzog dismisses documentary as a mode of
filmmaking to creatively intervene and participate in it’ (2012, 3). This dismissal largely revolves around his rejection of verité filmmaking as anything more than the most banal kind of audiovisual account keeping, a criticism that he has stated time and again but made most famous in his 1999 *Minnesota Declaration*. Herzog delivered this opinion piece on documentary at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, on 30 April 1999. Point 1 reads, ‘By dint of declaration the so-called Cinema Verité is devoid of verité. It reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants’ (Herzog 1999).

The ‘cinema verité’ Herzog criticises in his *Declaration* refers more closely to the direct cinema movement started in the US in the early 1960s, rather than the participatory approach that emerged in France at the same time.5 Direct cinema adopts a so-called ‘fly-on-the-wall’ approach to filmmaking, where the intervening presence of the filmmakers is minimised (or at least shown minimally) and reality is captured as it unfolds, often effacing the presence of the camera in the scene, and this seems to be the mode of filmmaking most targeted in Herzog’s declarations. It is a style of filmmaking that stresses the quality of the sounds/images it presents as trace – a trace of real events that unfold over real time. Significantly, the assumption of direct cinema to reveal truth through observation echoes Bazin’s argument about the inherent power of the ontology of the cinematographic image. Bazin proposed that ‘the objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility,’ and that there is an ‘irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith’ (1960, 7-8); a credibility and power of ‘capturing reality’ that the direct cinema movement emphasised. In terms of this power in the indexical quality of the image, Herzog does not deny that what the direct cinema camera captures is what ‘really’ happened, but instead dismisses the significance of that kind of cinematic realism. He argues that it amounts to a banal representation of things already known. For Herzog, the power of cinema – documentary included – is not in its indexical quality but in its expressive style.

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5 Given Herzog’s propensity for fabrication and provocative reframing of facts, it is likely he is well aware of the complications involved in his use of the term ‘cinema verité,’ but deliberately chose this term (rather than ‘direct cinema’) to highlight the arbitrariness of such category distinctions or the slipperiness of the concept of truth underpinning these approaches. To reflect this ambiguity, I here use the phrase ‘cinema verité/direct cinema’ in reference to the films Herzog dismisses. See Geiger (2011, 154-185) for the history of the two terms ‘cinema verité’ and ‘direct cinema,’ and problems relating to past scholarship using these terms interchangeably to refer to these two very different traditions.
Herzog’s position is therefore also a rejection of the kind of realism Bazin advocated. Bazin believed that the most powerful forms of realism emphasise the relationship between cinematic images – even images in fictional narratives – and the concrete historical world (see Andre Bazin 1971; Prince 2010). Bazin’s idea of truth based on the ontological correspondence of the fictional image to historical reality does not translate directly to the domain of documentary; for documentary the correspondence between sounds/images and reality is assumed rather than something to be emphasised. Nonetheless, underpinning both Bazinian realism and traditional conceptions of documentary is a shared belief that showing the world in ways that are recognisably ‘real’ underpins the possibility of critically engaging with what is represented. Herzog rejects such recognition as the basis for cinematic truth, instead asserting the power of invention in the relationship between creative treatment and actuality. In the *Minnesota Declaration* he argues documentary should strive for a ‘poetic, ecstatic truth … mysterious and elusive, [which] can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization’ (1999). In opposition to Bazin’s conceptualisation of truth through realism, Herzog argues that cinematic truth – specifically in the domain of documentary – depends on abstraction from the known or familiar; on making the known world strange.

There is, however, a paradox underlying Herzog’s idea of the relationship between his notion of ecstatic truth and the indexical quality of the image. While he dismisses the inherent power of the image as trace, he emphasises the physical exertion of the process of filmmaking as crucial to the power of the images produced. In this emphasis on the importance of the *process* of filmmaking, Herzog re-introduces a notion of indexical significance centered on the involvement of the filmmaker. In interviews he frequently speaks of the physical effort he had to exert to achieve a particular shot, and the degree of danger that is often involved, suggesting that this dangerous ‘collision’ between filmmaker and apparatus is crucial to the life of the film on the screen. For example, his discussion in a 1983 interview of the filming of *La Soufriere* (1977) on a volcano about to explode in the Caribbean is typical of this rhetoric. Herzog claimed that he and his two cinematographers deliberated only for a short time before deciding that the film was more important than their lives: ‘what was more important in this moment … should we do the film or was our private life, our life and limb more important – we decided to make the film’ (Hewitt, Lawrence,
and Hewitt 1983). Linked to this self-aggrandisement of his commitment to the physical crafting of the shot, Herzog also speaks of the images produced being imbued with a quality of that effort, indexically reflective not of the ‘reality’ of the scene before the camera lens, but of the work put in to capturing the shot. In an interview with Scott Murray for Cinema Papers, Herzog claimed, ‘I like to have a real body feeling for things I direct’ (1974, 5).

One year later, in a 1975 interview with Michel Ciment, Herzog more directly links this ‘body feeling’ of his filmmaking process with a quality of truth and authenticity to the images produced. Describing his film Aguirre: The Wrath of God, Ciment notes, ‘the maniacal care that you take in recreating the very conditions for this kind of expedition, the physical effort you demand of everyone, give the film the factual feel of the document’ (2009[1975], 159). Herzog agrees, and further claims that the images reflect the ‘life’ of the landscapes and people represented. By equating the notion of ‘documentary’ with a ‘factual feel’ stemming from both the artifice of fiction and the concrete physical properties of the world represented, this conversation highlights Herzog’s paradoxical notion of ecstatic truth based on the blurring of fictional and nonfictional elements. Later in the same interview, Herzog reiterates his belief in an indexical relationship between the effort of filmmaking and the quality of the images: ‘while editing at the Moviola, I look at the material and I see if it has genuine inner life’ (2009[1975], 165). While there is a distinct note of mysticism in these assertions, they also reveal in Herzog’s approach a clear connection between physical commitment to the process of filming and the beauty of the filmic image. Filmmaking itself is elevated to a physical feat – a specific and corporeal experience – which translates to a quality of the footage recorded. Of course, the conversation here refers to the ‘factual feel’ of a fictional film, which is invested with a different demand for truthfulness and authenticity than a film approached as a documentary. As mentioned above, translating this notion of the documentary quality of a fiction film to a framework for analysing documentary film is tenuous, even when considering Herzog’s catalogue of work where documentary and fiction tropes are repeatedly and deliberately blurred. What this conversation

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6 This commitment to physically investing in the image arguably culminated in the infamous story of Herzog demanding to actually haul a steamship over a mountain – rather than reproduce the scene with miniatures – in his 1992 film Fitzcarraldo.
does emphasise, however, is how Herzog invests in the indexicality of the image, albeit with a different emphasis than on verisimilitude to detail.

For Herzog, what matters is not the correspondence between the representation and the details of the pro-filmic world it represents, but the register of effort and the depth of subjective experience that the film can communicate. Brigitte Peucker characterises Herzog’s approach to documentary filmmaking as ‘the desire of the subject to engage with the pro-filmic in order to register as a trace in an “authentic” image,’ arguing that this understanding of the relationship between representation and reality extends the ontological indexicality that underpins Bazin’s idea of filmic realism into a mystical realm (2012, 40). The ‘life’ of the image relies both on its status as an index of the process of production and the abstraction of that image into a narrative, but also that, ‘Mystically, the real of the body imbues the image with authenticity’ (2012, 42). In other words, meaningful filmic images at once resonate with the feeling of what is represented and echo with ideas and experiences more universal than those representations. It is in these dual registers of corporeality and poeticism that, for Herzog, documentary films can approach the representation of any kind of ‘truth.’

The seeds of Herzog’s notion of ecstatic truth are evident much earlier than his famous Minnesota Declaration, including the title of The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner (1973) and his stated mission to find ‘new’ and ‘adequate’ cinematic images. Herzog also repeatedly decried cinema verité long before the Declaration, such as in the Rolling Stone interview with Cott more than 20 years earlier: ‘There is such a thing as plain truth, but there are also different dimensions in truth – and in film there are different dimensions to the cinema verité truth.’ These early articulations of a notion of ecstatic truth undercut his claim that the Minnesota Declaration was conceived and written during a single sleepless night, inspired by the authenticity of pornography when compared to the routine documentaries he had been flicking through on television (see Herzog 2002, 239). These contradictory claims about the origin of the idea of ecstatic truth only highlights the how the ideas it puts forward are part of Herzog’s much longer deliberate effort to challenge to the conventions of documentary cinema. The religious overtones of the notion of ecstatic
truth also emphasise the sense of Herzog’s challenge to convention. Ecstasy – at least as understood in Western religious contexts – follows the Christian idea of the rapture, an ecstatic revelation of God, which suggests a communion with some kind of immutable force of life. Herzog himself invites these religious connotations, repeatedly defining and elaborating on the concept of ecstatic truth by using terms like ‘sublime,’ ‘absolute’ and ‘illumination,’ invoking theologians in his explanation of the concept, and capitalising the term ‘Truth’ in the manner of scriptures. In a sense, by asserting ecstatic truth as arising from fabrication and imagination, Herzog is using the rhetoric of religion against itself, linking the ‘deeper truth’ of religion with fictionalisation. Yet these connotations also point to the essentialism underpinning this notion of ecstatic truth – that there is a transcendent truth waiting to be discovered. This idea flies in the face of definitions of documentary truth outlined by theorists such as Nichols, Plantinga, and Williams (described in Chapter 1), which lie beyond the judgement of any one filmmaker. By setting his notion of ecstatic truth against a ‘truth of accountants,’ Herzog asserts the filmmaker’s role as the singularly committed author of meaning.

The felt presence of the filmmaker in the context of ecstatic truth

Herzog’s general idea of ecstatic truth charges the documentary filmmaker not with the responsibility of accuracy and reliability, but with the responsibility of being a seer. Their task is to perceiving the essence of reality behind superficial facts and the didactic outlines of traditional expository argument, and realise that essence through whatever creative means are necessary. Herzog thereby frames the process of documentary filmmaking as a search for elusive, almost mystical meanings – meanings that take hold beyond the recollection of details, the ways people make sense of the world in the face of trauma, danger, and extreme conditions, and the choices people make to live in ways that defy rational explanation. Herzog exemplifies these ideas by using explicitly mystical terms to describe his own work.

In a 1976 *Rolling Stone* interview with Jonathon Cott, Herzog described his filmmaking as an effort to articulate ‘visions at the horizon,’ a statement that replaces

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7 Herzog has often stated his aversion to religion and lack of belief in God in interviews and in many of his films, including *Grizzly Man*, where he says, ‘I believe the common character of the universe is not harmony but hostility, chaos and murder.’ Most recently, Herzog appears in Gus Holwerda’s film *The Unbelievers* (2013) speaking supportively of renowned atheist scientists Richard Dawkins and Lawrence Krauss and their efforts to revive the profile of science and reason and counter religious thinking.
cinematic truths rooted in the mechanics of the camera with cinematic truths are rooted in the perception and effort of the filmmaker. Through statements like this, Herzog’s persona looms large over his films; it is his insight, his search, and his ability to perceive beyond the surface truth of the images that makes ecstatic truth possible.

In Herzog’s dual claims about the embodied effort of his filmmaking and his capacity to find the ecstatic truth of reality, there are clear links between self-reflexively considering his role as author, his vision of what he sees his films as ‘saying,’ and the use of fictionalisation and invention to render that vision. The intersection of these ideas sheds light on the way Herzog has justified the manipulation of details and invention of scenes in his ostensibly ‘documentary’ work, such as his scripting of the deaf-blind woman’s description of her experience of touch in the opening scene of *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971),⁸ and his invention of Dieter Dengler’s remembered dream in *Little Dieter Needs To Fly* (1997).⁹ While several commentators have pointed out that it would be a mistake to take Herzog at face value in his definition of ecstatic truth,¹⁰ these examples highlight how this definition has real consequences in the making of his films. Within Herzog’s notion of cinema, these fabrications are justified because they reveal an immutable truth beyond factual details. His willingness to merge fact and fiction and evasiveness as to what moments he has staged and what moments are ‘authentic’ attest that he believes the verifiability of the details portrayed matter less than giving filmic shape and ‘inner life’ to the images represented. Herzog’s manipulations and fabrications connect ecstatic truth to the notion of authorial control, where the inventions of the author rather than the re-presentation of existing reality produces the ‘true’ meanings of the film.

In Herzog’s idea of cinema, the filmmaker is therefore both the material and the intellectual fulcrum of truth, balancing reality and representation through their creative vision. Within this broader conceptualisation of cinema, the filmmaker in the frame holds particular promise for resolving this apparent contradiction, as they are registered forcefully in the moment of filming and also understood as responsible

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⁸ See Herzog’s 1976 *Rolling Stone* interview with Jonathan Cott for an admission of his intervention in this scene.
⁹ See Prager 2012, 155.
¹⁰ See for example Prager 2012; Ames 2012; Corrigan 1986; Peucker 2012; Zalewski 2006.
for the film’s overall creation. Seen from the perspective of Herzog’s ecstatic truth, the presence of the filmmaker in the frame anchors the inner life of the images through their specific engagement and commitment to the filmmaking process, while also having the power to performatively shape these raw images, structuring them into a form that speaks to the ‘deeper strata of truth’ (Herzog 1999) possible through the creative craft of filmmaking.

Tellingly, it is the mode of documentary where the filmmaker is least obviously involved – direct cinema – which Herzog rails against most passionately. In light of his ongoing project of self-presentation as the enfant terrible auteur who challenges the boundaries of filmmaking, Herzog’s objections to direct cinema seem to be motivated as much by the erasure of the filmmaker in this form of documentary as any epistemological or aesthetic insufficiency in the films themselves. Despite assertions like ‘I don’t feel like an artist, I feel like a craftsman’ (quoted in Cott 1976), and ‘when I make movies [it is] never a journey of self-discovery’ (quoted in Ames 2012, 215), Herzog’s specific authorial vision and his material involvement in the filmmaking process is essential to his notion of documentary truth and indelibly feeds into the interpretation of his films. For example, summing up his filmmaking motivation, Herzog has said ‘the poet must not avert his eyes. You have to take a bold look at what is your environment, what is around you. Even the ugly things, even the decadent things, even the dangerous things’ (interview with Mark Kermode, 6 February 2006). Documentary truth, then, rather than striving to objectively represent the shared social world, is the articulation of subjective experience, made subjective through the figure of the filmmaker.

In Grizzly Man, Herzog suggests this kind of truth is possible even by accident, through the filmmaker giving themself over to their work. At one point his voiceover states: ‘Treadwell probably did not realise that seemingly empty moments had a strange secret beauty. Sometimes images themselves develop their own life. Their own mysterious stardom.’ In this way, a Bazinian sense of the power of the indexical trace returns to in Grizzly Man, but Herzog suggests that his creative intervention is still needed to reveal their ‘inner life’ and ‘ecstatic truth.’ Yet in light of Herzog’s paradoxical brand of realism – predicated on a physical commitment to process while also relying on invention and fabrication to represent the ‘ecstatic truth’ of reality – Grizzly Man still presents a challenge to Herzog’s authorial vision. The physical
effort of capturing the images rests less with Herzog than with Treadwell. Treadwell’s footage has an ‘inner life’ of its own, imbued by his own commitment to filmmaking. Treadwell’s physical investment in capturing this footage means it is not in need of Herzog’s ‘fabrication,’ ‘imagination,’ or ‘stylisation’ to give it a quality of truth. In this footage, Herzog encounters a filmmaker whose reputation and physical commitment to filmmaking rivals his own. That encounter challenges the persona of exceptional and dedicated auteur of new images that he has constructed for himself and highlights the contradictions and paradoxes underpinning that persona. Herzog’s approach to deal with the challenge posed by Treadwell and his images is in part to enter the frame himself, revealing his own specific subjective experience of the process of filmmaking.

Through his voiceover and the brief scene depicting of his physical presence as he listens to the tape, Herzog’s asserts his presence as key to the truth the film tells of Treadwell’s story. His persona felt through commenting on Treadwell’s footage acts as a declaration that Treadwell’s material cannot ‘speak for itself’; to reveal the ‘astonishing beauty and depth’ that lay dormant, Herzog must narrate it for us. And in the critical moment where the maker of this footage is most powerfully present – the playing of the tape – Herzog again places himself as the mediator of meaning, the conduit to the deeper strata of meaning lying otherwise hidden in Treadwell’s work. Through his presence in the frame, Herzog is able to both assert the beauty of Treadwell’s footage and maintain his own crucial place in reaching the ecstatic truth of that footage. By entering the frame as a subject, however, Herzog also reveals the paradoxes that underpin his rhetoric, expressed through the meeting of Treadwell’s verité footage with Herzog’s felt presence in the frame. Bringing to light these paradoxes has the effect of turning the film back on itself, becoming a film that seeks the ecstatic truth of Herzog’s authorial identity and the process of representing reality as much as it seeks the ecstatic truth of Treadwell’s story.

The effort of Herzog to restate his authorial identity also helps make sense of the structuring of Treadwell’s narrative into a relatively conventional story of redemption and tragedy. The explanatory arc that this narrative provides is somewhat surprising for a filmmaker closely associated with breaking convention and pushing cinematic boundaries, but makes more sense in light of the challenge Treadwell poses to Herzog as a filmmaker. By presenting Treadwell’s life according to a
recognisable, archetypal narrative structure, Herzog is further able to distance himself from the amateur filmmaker and reinforce the tale of selfless dedication to cinema that he claims as uniquely his own.

**Redemption, tragedy, and reticent moments in the ‘Grizzly Maze’**

*Grizzly Man* structures Treadwell’s life according to a narrative of redemption and tragedy, which finds its greatest meaning in his role as a filmmaker. We are told through Herzog’s interviews of Treadwell’s demeaning job in a theatre restaurant; his invented story of a childhood in Australia; his change of surname from Dexter to Treadwell (to sound more theatrical as well as to distance himself from his past); his obsession with his boyish appearance; his teenage ambitions to be a Hollywood actor, apparently just missing out on being cast in the hit TV sitcom *Cheers* (a claim made by Treadwell’s father in the film, apparently still unverified); and his years in his twenties spent as a drifter, alcoholic, and something of a social outcast. These details are presented as both formative to the character we encounter in the archival footage, and as evidence of Treadwell's search for self that was eventually satisfied in his living with the bears. While Treadwell spent thirteen summers camping in the bears’ habitat acting as their self-appointed ‘protector,’ the purpose of his visits was really only validated in the eyes of the wider community when he began recording his visits and turning them into educational presentations screened at schools throughout Alaska. In his amateur films, his overall mission to educate a wider audience about the bears and contribute to their protection was given a specific form. ‘The studies they give me: the photographs, the video. … It’s good work,’ Treadwell says to the camera in one sequence of *Grizzly Man*. ‘I feel good about it; I feel good about myself doing it. … I had no life, and now I have a life.’

Many of the interviewees profiled in Herzog’s film criticise Treadwell’s naïve perspective and chastise him for the example he sets of anthropomorphising dangerous, undomesticated, and untamable animals, yet throughout the film Herzog is more equivocal in his assessment of Treadwell. Through his voiceover narration, Herzog is torn between respect and admiration for Treadwell’s commitment, resourcefulness, and aesthetic sensibility, and his negative judgement of Treadwell’s cavalier approach and lack of respect for what Herzog sees as the more primal and bleakly unsentimental laws of nature. At one point, in response to letters criticising
Treadwell’s actions read out by one of his friends, Herzog interjects: ‘I too would like to step in here in his defense, not as an ecologist but as a filmmaker. He captured such glorious improvised moments, the likes of which the studio directors with their unionised crews could never dream of.’ In contrast, at another moment towards the end of the film, over a close-up of a bear that Herzog speculates may have been the one that killed Treadwell, the German filmmaker muses:

What haunts me is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy; I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me, there is no such thing as the secret world of the bears.

This statement not only transforms the meaning of Treadwell’s close-up from an image of intimate connection to one of unsettling alienation, but also directly judges Treadwell’s idealised view of the bears as his friends and companions. This moment not only juxtaposes Herzog’s previous praise of Treadwell’s filmmaking, but also unsettles the many moments seen earlier in the film when Treadwell talks to the bears as though part of their ‘secret world,’ anthropomorphising them with cute names like Tabitha and Mr Chocolate. In another sequence, Treadwell is reaching out to touch a bear cub while Herzog’s commentary asserts that he crossed an ‘invisible border line,’ implying that his fate was inevitable. Later in the film Treadwell is shown raging against the park rangers for what he perceives as their complacency and uselessness. Halfway through the rant, Herzog mutes Treadwell’s voice, commenting, ‘Now Treadwell crosses a line with the Parks Service which we will not cross. He attacks the individuals with whom he worked for thirteen years.’ Treadwell’s voice cuts back in with a slew of profanities, before Herzog again speaks over the images, saying, ‘It is clear to me that the Parks Service is not Treadwell’s real enemy. There is a larger, more implacable adversary out there – the people’s world, and civilisation.’ While Herzog oscillates between admiration and condemnation of Treadwell throughout the film, the overall trajectory of his telling of the story builds towards a sense of concurrent sympathy and judgement for the tragedy of Treadwell’s end.

On one level, the degree to which Herzog narrativises Treadwell’s life according to this archetypal redemption/tragedy story is a conspicuous case of what Jay Ruby
calls ‘speaking for’ – a form of documentary that offers the definitive truth of someone else’s reality (1991, 53). While Herzog’s interpretation of Treadwell’s story is not presented as ‘objective’ in the traditional sense of presenting facts as though they are self-evident, his persona as a cinematic visionary and his claim to have found the hidden meaning in Treadwell’s footage still implicitly asserts his take on Treadwell’s story as definitive. Ruby argues that such definitiveness in representing the other not only risks simplifying and essentialising complex historical and social situations, but can also exploit that other at the service of advancing the filmmaker’s perspective. Yet the narrative arc Herzog gives to Treadwell’s life also allows room for him to empathise with a man he never met in real life. Juxtaposing Treadwell’s life among the grizzlies with the aimlessness of his life before he found the bears, Herzog echoes Treadwell’s own sentiment that this work gave his life meaning. Implicit in this approval is also that Treadwell’s filmmaking made his life meaningful. Subtly but undeniably, Herzog suggests that the value of Treadwell’s life lies in the films he made and his performance as a filmmaker rather than in his time ‘protecting’ the grizzlies. It is on these terms that Herzog claims to understand Treadwell. This empathetic identification is interesting in the context of Herzog’s body of work, because in empathetically aligning himself with Treadwell as a filmmaker, he reinforces his own dedication to a life of filmmaking.

Herzog identifies with Treadwell especially in moments where Treadwell performs for or confesses to the camera. While the verité quality of Treadwell’s footage is also crucial to their power – the palpable sense of his commitment to his cause represented by the constant filming of wild bears at close range – it is in Treadwell’s moments of rage, excitement, introspection, and self-pity that Herzog looks for clues to constructing the narrative of redemption and tragedy he eventually tells. The way Herzog structures Treadwell’s footage into the film makes it seem that Treadwell performs this narrative arc himself, reflecting on his past struggles, asserting his present satisfaction, and even explicitly stating that the bears were his redemption. Treadwell’s performances take on further meaning in the film through Herzog’s focus on the tension between moments of self-conscious acting and the moments between these performances, where Treadwell moves in or out of frame, turns away from the camera, gathers himself before performing another ‘take,’ or mutters inwardly about his own performance. In these unguarded ‘empty’ moments, clearly
intended to be cut from the films Treadwell made to present to the public, Herzog finds particular power. His voiceover notes Treadwell’s vulnerability at these times, interpreting them as moments of introspection and a search for self worth that reveal Treadwell’s true motivation to live in the Maze.

These moments of empty time in Grizzly Man share an interesting parallel with Rouch and Morin’s Chronicle of a Summer, aligning Herzog’s film with the tradition of French cinema verité. Distinct from the strictly observational style of American direct cinema Herzog dismisses using the term ‘cinema verité,’ the cinema verité of France is a tradition where truth comes out of intervention in the profilmic rather than observation of it. Ivone Margulies notes Morin and Rouch’s ‘attentiveness to the moment in which thought becomes expression,’ which manifests in the film as moments of stillness (2004, 173). This stillness is, however, charged with the tension of documentary performativity, moments that enact an awareness of the presence of the camera and respond to the demand of the conditions of filming to perform in certain ways. These are not pauses in the flow of the everyday, but pauses informed by the presence of the camera and the particular nature of performing for it:

The focus on empty time lends the film a puzzling mixture of intensity – in its search for truth – and vagueness – in the questions it asks and answers it gives. Hence, despite, or because of the extensive apparatus mobilized to access truth – from the Nagra synched to a person’s speech to the belief in the ultimate value of a revealing, screening mirror – the film is beset by an intriguing reticence, generating as it speaks, the need for more statements. (Margulies 2004, 173-174)

Grizzly Man is charged with similar reticent moments, both in the transitional moments between performances in Treadwell’s footage and in Herzog’s staging of interviews. In his own footage, Herzog repeatedly lets the camera linger on the speakers well beyond the usual point at which the image would cut away, capturing moments when the speaker transitions from interacting with the camera filming them to interacting with the filmmaker directing them. This is especially evident in the sequence where the coroner verbally recreates the scene of Treadwell and Huguenard’s death. After a dramatic and highly physical retelling of what he thinks happened on that tragic afternoon, during which he looks straight down the barrel of
the camera, the coroner drops his shoulders and stands awkwardly, glancing off to the side as if awaiting instructions on what to do next. A similar moment occurs in filming Treadwell’s parents, who seem not to know if they are being recorded as they sit in a tableau surrounded by Treadwell’s childhood things.

The effects of these moments of awkward performance are two-fold. First, they have an alienating effect, drawing attention to the imposition of the camera and the ‘inauthenticity’ of the process of filmmaking. To borrow Margulies’ term, they are very much moments of ‘reticence’. Framing the supporting characters as uncomfortable in front of the camera creates an emotional distance between them and the implied viewer, marking out Treadwell and Herzog – the two presences comfortable with the camera – as the key figures of empathy. Through juxtaposition, the performance of filmmaking that Treadwell and Herzog enact becomes a more authentic kind of performance than the performance of being filmed. Distinguishing the performances of the interviewees from the performances of Treadwell and Herzog along these lines amplifies the sense of the whole film being a conversation between the two filmmakers. Secondly, these performances implicitly inscribe Herzog’s authorial control, relying as they do on the interviewees waiting for the filmmaker’s direction. The interview then becomes a means by which Herzog distinguishes himself from Treadwell; the subjects Herzog films respond to his direction, whereas the subjects Treadwell films – the bears – are beyond his control. While not the first film in which Herzog leaves the camera focused on his subjects after the interview conversation has seemingly concluded (there are several of these moments at the end of Echoes From a Somber Empire, for example) in Grizzly Man these hanging moments can be read as the filmmaker’s response to the ‘empty’ time in Treadwell’s footage that he finds so compelling. Yet such reticent moments in Herzog’s interviews fail to achieve the same poetic beauty that so attracts him to Treadwell’s footage. This may be because the ‘dead time’ in Treadwell’s footage is more than a performative trope, but also indexes of authenticity: of the degree to which he fully lived the part of protectionist and amateur wildlife filmmaker, of the beauty he found in the nature around him, and the degree to which his sense of self was defined and realised through his camera. In these moments, Treadwell, his mission, and the landscape he films converge rather than become alienated through his performance.
Treadwell’s footage therefore represents a unique kind of verité, bringing performance into contact with an observational approach that can claim to ‘capture reality.’ The collision between performance and observation in Treadwell’s footage represents a challenge to Herzog’s definition of ecstatic truth, which maintains that observation – even the observation of performance – is incapable of deep insight and poetic revelations. As I suggested above, Herzog’s entry into the frame (both in voiceover and in the moment of listening to the tape) can be read as a response to this challenge, emphasising his material involvement in the process of filmmaking: as the poet finding the strange secret beauty in the ‘raw’ footage. Herzog’s voiceover fills the space created by moments of empty-but-charged time by interpreting their meaning. While on one level Herzog structures the film as a ‘conversation,’ he also uses that structure to overlay his own interpretations over Treadwell’s observational images, subtly but forcefully reclaiming his own authorial control of the film and restating the distinctiveness of his notion of ecstatic truth through poetic intervention and fabrication.

Yet the trace of Treadwell in the footage Herzog includes is not entirely contained by Herzog’s mediation of it, and its observational quality is not entirely erased. While Herzog tries to dictate the terms of the ‘conversation’ he has opened up with Treadwell, the film nonetheless still presents two distinct perspectives: on one hand living amongst the bears alongside Treadwell, experiencing his joys and anxieties; and on the other hand seeing Treadwell’s fate from Herzog’s perspective as a tragic inevitability. This is a battle over the power of verité where the viewer alternately feels the exhilaration of ‘being there’ with Treadwell and is reminded of the folly of these action through Herzog’s interpretation – and therefore for control of the meaning of the film itself. By filling ‘reticent’ moments and attempting to speak for Treadwell’s footage rather than letting it speak for itself, Herzog marks the film not only as a conversation but also as a contest. Furthermore, through these interventions of ‘speaking for’ Treadwell, Herzog also frames himself as equally one of the film’s subjects. He not only interprets Treadwell’s life, but also performs a version of his own.
3.4 Performing the self across time and space

*Though Herzog would probably find the idea detestable, his recent documentaries do find their place more easily in a world in which media entertainment has become fascinated with the ‘reality’ of testing people to the extreme.*

– Nick James, *Sight and Sound*, February 2006

In a sequence of Treadwell standing waist deep in water, panning the camera around as if acting out the role of ‘adventure documentarian,’ Herzog speculates on how far the act of filming defined Treadwell’s sense of self. Herzog’s voiceover draws a link between Treadwell’s performance for the camera, his commitment to his cause, and the possibility that the camera became a confessional interlocutor:

> Beyond his posings, the camera was his only present companion. It was his instrument to explore the wilderness around him, but increasingly it became something more. He started to scrutinise his innermost being, his demons, his exhilarations. Facing the lens of a camera took on the quality of a confessional.

Here Herzog doesn’t distinguish between Treadwell’s performances as wildlife crusader and as filmmaker – a connection that resonates with his own identification as a filmmaker who has surrendered his private life for his filmmaking craft. In these descriptions, Treadwell’s embrace of the camera as confessor and his dual performance as subject and filmmaker is elevated to the realm of ecstatic truth. Herzog suggests that the camera catalysed a deep level of self-realisation in Treadwell, fulfilling the promise of personal redemption that (at least in part) motivated his decision to live with the bears in the first place.

Compared to Treadwell’s often-fevered performance, Herzog’s presence in *Grizzly Man* is more considered, but retains that same sense of the camera being an instrument of *personal* as much as public reflection. In judging Treadwell’s perspective, Herzog implicitly works through his own. What makes *Grizzly Man* powerful in terms of Herzog’s body of work is the extent to which Treadwell both
perplexes him as a character, and also challenges Herzog’s own legacy as a filmmaker. Herzog finds Treadwell fascinating both for his commitment to his cause, and for his approach to filmmaking. The quest for self-actualisation through the process of recording Treadwell’s archive of quasi-nature footage is something that resonates with Herzog’s own performance of self

For both Herzog and Treadwell, *Grizzly Man* represents a deeply personal journey, but both filmmakers are also aware of an imagined audience for their work. The camera gives each man an opportunity to transcend their own perspective and connect with others. For Treadwell, showing his footage in schools validated the risk he took in going to the maze and gave broader meaning to his personal quest. For Herzog, engaging with Treadwell’s footage was an opportunity to re-examine key motifs of his career such as the specter of death, the limits of human understanding, and the poetic possibilities of cinema. These motifs of Herzog’s work are expressed clearly in the opening scenes of *Grizzly Man*, where his voiceover extols the latent poeticism of Treadwell’s footage:

> I found that beyond a wildlife film, in his material lay dormant a story of astonishing beauty and depth. I discovered a film of human ecstasies and darkest inner turmoil. As if there was a desire in him to leave the confines of his humanness and bond with the bears, Treadwell reached out, feeling a primordial encounter, but in doing so he crossed an invisible borderline.

Herzog himself tries to bridge that invisible borderline by inserting himself into the film, and position himself as Treadwell’s confessor. As interlocutor for Treadwell’s speeches to camera, Herzog adopts the role of advisor and judge that his voiceover suggests Treadwell was unable to adopt for himself. Yet still, Herzog acknowledges that it is only by crossing this invisible borderline that Treadwell could capture such extraordinary images. Reflecting on the making of the film in a piece on his own website, Herzog recalls his fascination upon first viewing Treadwell’s raw footage: ‘It couldn’t have been our wildest fantasy to find something like this,’ he said. ‘It was one of the great experiences I’ve ever had with film footage. It was so beautiful’ (wernerherzog.com 2009). To some degree, Herzog’s evident respect remediates the imbalance of power, and allows the film to work in some ways as a performative dialogue rather than a straightforward process of judgement.
The complexities of Herzog’s alternate respect and judgement does not, however, resolve the deeper ethical questions relating Herzog’s felt presence within the frame. I have argued that Treadwell is felt throughout the film as an empathetic subject able to more or less speak for himself through his own footage. Yet this sense of Treadwell’s presence as a character with agency does not dismiss the ethical problem of Herzog assuming to make meaning of Treadwell’s life story. Regardless of how much Herzog’s structuring of the film might introduce a notion of divided authorship or work as an ‘argument’ between two filmmakers about the nature of filmmaking itself, it is not a true conversation between equals; one has the ultimate power of authoring how the other’s life is represented. Moreover, while both Herzog and Treadwell use the camera to perform their own identity – Herzog to (re)state his cinematic exceptionalism, and Treadwell to fashion himself as conservationist crusader – it is only Herzog able to pass judgement on the other’s performance. The final section of this chapter will explore these ethical problems in Herzog’s aesthetic decisions, especially the structuring of his own presence within the frame.

**Clashes with reality: the ethics of Herzog in the frame**

*There are always compromises with reality, but sometimes out of these clashes with reality something new emerges.*

- Werner Herzog in conversation with Roger Ebert, 1979

The contradiction in how Herzog views Treadwell – on one hand respecting Treadwell’s commitment as a filmmaker and on the other hand judging his world view as naïve and sentimental – converges in the climactic scene of the film. In it, Herzog appears physically within the frame listening to the tape of Treadwell and Huguenard’s death. This moment is especially powerful precisely because of Herzog’s status as a filmmaker of extremes, and that auteurist persona here gives way to a more equivocal sense of his control. Treadwell’s affinity with the camera is consolidated by the fact that he recorded his own death. This commitment to the documenting of reality rivals Herzog’s public persona as a filmmaker of extremes, willing to do whatever it takes to find ‘adequate images.’ Herzog’s presence in the frame at this moment is at once key to him asserting his authorial control and in
destabilising the notion of ecstatic truth that he holds so dear, challenging the ecstatic with the brutal and raw fact of Treadwell and Huguenard’s fate.

The scene shows Herzog sitting with Treadwell’s friend Jewel Palovak, listening to the audio recording of the fatal attack. It frames Herzog not just as an authorial hand shaping the film, but also as a specific subject within the film. In an interview with Joe Robinson of the *Los Angeles Times*, Herzog explains his reasoning for appearing in the frame at such an emotionally eruptive moment:

I did not want to appear in person in the movie with the exception of one key moment where I’m listening to the tape. … And, actually, I’m not important in this moment. You see me from the back with earphones on. But you see the face of the woman who owns the tape [Palovak] who was very close to Treadwell. She’s trying to read my face. Like almost a mirror image of my face and the anguish on her face. It has great intensity and great anguish. (2 August 2005)

Herzog explicitly rejects that he is the emotional fulcrum of the scene, yet admits that it is through his reactions, reflected in (and amplified by) the face of Palovak, that the viewer understands the ‘great intensity’ and ‘great anguish’ of the moment. The contradictions in this claim reverberate with the ongoing contradictory rhetoric around Herzog’s authorship, between his unique place as a cinematic visionary and his disavowal of his uniqueness in being merely ‘an artisan, a stone-cutter’ (Malcolm, 20 January 1976). By listening to the tape on screen, Herzog simultaneously denies the viewer the same access (and answers), directly mediating the viewer’s engagement with Treadwell’s death through his own physicality.

Herzog is visibly disturbed during his only physical appearance in the film, his voice cracking as he describes the sounds he hears. The camera zooms in to focus on his reaction, unprompted by his direction, which further cues how Herzog may have been the author of the situation but is not necessarily directing the moment. In other words, his presence focuses questions of his authorial agency and intention, but leaves these questions frustratingly unanswered. His presence in this moment jars against his presence throughout the rest of the film as the ‘knowing’ voice of the text (most notably through his distanced and judgemental voiceover that we hear
throughout, and through his directive presence implied by the interviewees looking expectantly off-screen as if awaiting the unseen filmmaker’s instruction or approval). Whether or not the viewer identifies with Herzog in this moment, the filmmaker’s personal involvement in the process of representation destabilises the sense one otherwise acquires of Herzog as the organising voice of the text. Yet this is arguably the most pivotal moment in the film, where the tragedy of Treadwell’s death is understood through Herzog’s experience of it. The filmmaker’s presence in the frame in this moment breaks down the critical distance his voiceover had built until that point, positioning himself as not only the figure through which the viewer can understand Treadwell’s fate, but also as a subject of the film himself.

Despite the filmmaker’s (unconvincing) interview disavowal of not being important in this moment, his experience of listening becomes the most important point of engagement to the moment of Treadwell’s death, and by extension, to the investigation into the meaning of his life. In this scene Herzog exploits his authority as a filmmaker, invested with the responsibility and the privilege to represent the contents of the tape as he chooses, while also framing himself as a subject whose experience the viewer is offered to identify with. The viewer is implicated (and defeated) in a voyeuristic position of wanting to hear the audio, but not being allowed. Herzog offers both the safety and the frustration of censorship: a sense of the magnitude and the duration of the event, but not the immediate visceral experience that he was allowed in his privileged position of author. On one hand, his urging to Palovak that she ‘must never listen to this’ is convincing, underwritten by his obvious shock at listening for himself. The urging seems to be directed as much at the imagined audience as Treadwell’s friend in the room with him, and the fear in Palovak’s face confirms for the viewer the horror contained in the tape. On the other hand, denying the viewer the same experience amplifies the voyeuristic urge to ‘hear for ourselves.’ Herzog’s aesthetic decision to mediate this moment through his own presence is a profoundly ethical one on two levels: firstly, it is an act of (positive) censorship, where the filmmaker’s presence in the frame spares the viewer the horrors he has (just) experienced. Secondly, and more problematically, by placing himself in this scene Herzog ‘stands in’ and ‘speaks for’ Treadwell who cannot speak for himself. Through his presence at this key moment Herzog reinforces his authority over the telling of Treadwell’s story by positioning himself as the key point
through which the scene can be interpreted. The significance of Treadwell’s act of recording the attack, and the meaning of that trace of the last moments of his life, is interpreted and decided by Herzog, and Herzog alone. Yet Herzog’s presence in this scene and the bodily interpretation he offers is also insufficient to entirely stand in for the drama we know is captured on tape. This knowledge is in tension with the muted reaction we see in Herzog’s bodily response, which creates its own problematic voyeuristic curiosity.

Herzog has explained his decision to not play the tape in terms of sparing the viewer the horror of its content:

> When I listened to it, it was so horrifying, it is beyond all description, I’ve never heard anything like this. And it was instantly clear, number one, I’m not going to do a snuff movie; number two: there is such a thing as dignity and privacy of an individual’s death. So you just do not show it, you just do not do it. And I said only over my dead body is this going to end up in the film. (Interview with Mark Kermode, 2 February 2006)

While Herzog’s discussion here does frame his decision in terms of protecting both Treadwell’s dignity and the viewer’s sensibility, it does not account for the affective power this absence takes on in the finished scene. That absence is signified in the duration of the take, and the time we spend watching Herzog (and watching Jewel watching Herzog) gives space for Treadwell to return through our imagination. The precise rendering of the event as a duration of listening – the charged emptiness of this moment – communicates a sense of the actual event. This emptiness links back to Marguiles’ notion of the power of ‘reticent’ documentary moments to invite, and perhaps demand, more to be said.

Treadwell’s presence therefore powerfully returns in the imagination through the reticent space created by Herzog’s mediation of the tape. Herzog’s expression can only be read via Palovak, and this distance creates a gap for the viewer’s imagination to mentally compose the scene, cut together from the detailed footage of Treadwell and the bears we have seen so far in the film. Treadwell’s presence-through-absence in this moment highlights how archival material cannot be fully contained, mediated, or explained by its re-use. The trace of the past exceeds the boundaries of the
present. Malin Wahlberg notes that often the materiality of the trace in documentary is secondary to the absence it indicates:

Originally, the trace has less to do with the materiality of the vestige, than with its uncanny presence of absence. The trace is a trace of something, and therefore it stands out as an intentional object whose mode of being is equivalent to its function as an inscription of the past within the present. (2008, 35)

In mediating the experience of the trace in this scene, Herzog reintroduces the materiality of the filmic record. The tape is rendered more ‘real’ because of its ambiguity, and the fact of its existence takes on equal importance to what it represents. Denying the viewer direct access to this recording paradoxically makes the indexicality of that trace even more significant. Layered onto this material significance of the trace is the sound and image of Herzog’s experience, which takes on its own material significance because the moment is directed through his physicality. We are left to read the trace in his movement and tone, which become sites of specific interpretation of meaning in their own right rather than simply indexes of something else.

While Herzog suggests his presence in the frame is divorced from the ethical problems of the film (‘I’m not important in this moment’), his presence actually transforms the ethical question of Treadwell’s decision to stay in the Grizzly Maze with Huguenard into questions of the ethics of representation. In other words, the aesthetic structuring of the scene around his act of listening conveys its ethical dimension. The emotional stakes are known through the composition of the image: the viewer looking at Palovak looking at Herzog listening to the tape. Into the void left by Treadwell’s absence in this moment, Herzog offers a different experience. He makes that absence materially present through his own embodied response to hearing the tape, a response that is as powerful for its temporal duration as it is for the image of Herzog’s listening. This re-embodiment of the trauma of the attack through the figure of the filmmaker is unsettling on several levels: epistemological, ethical, and conceptual. What is actually on the tape? What clues does Herzog reveal in his reactions? And what right does Herzog as a filmmaker have to decide for us – himself listen and not let us hear? While in theory these kind of aesthetic decisions
can be separated from the ethics of those decisions, in Herzog’s film they become inseparable.

Herzog’s act of listening to the tape also raises ethical issues on a more literal level; particularly insofar as his presence allows him to directly impose (or attempt to impose) his will on the future life of the tape. ‘Jewel, you must never listen to this,’ he tells Palovak after listening to the tape himself. ‘I think you should not keep it. … Because it will be the white elephant in your room all your life.’ Herzog’s intervention here is at once on the level of filmmaker – constructing the reality he represents (and indeed not allowing Jewel or the viewer to listen, at least in this moment) – and as a paternalistic protector. This intervention is problematic in terms of the exercise of power from a gender standpoint and Herzog’s assumption of (possibly unwarranted) authorial authority. He can be seen to taking his role as a filmmaker ‘directing’ the world beyond the boundaries of his right to do so. By speaking authoritatively on what should happen to the tape, Herzog reveals the tension between the authority assumed in the act of ‘being a filmmaker’ and the subjective opinion that guides that authority. Here, Herzog himself crosses an ‘invisible borderline’ between filmmaker and subject, and renders his own judgement questionable at best and objectionable at worst.

While ethical questions about Herzog’s intervention in this moment remain, through his mediation of the documentary trace the film becomes inescapably about Herzog as much as it is about Treadwell. Returning to Corrigan’s quote at the start of this chapter characterising Herzog’s authorial presence as conscious to the point of parody (1986, 5-6), in this moment the filmmaker isn’t performing a self-conscious notion of ‘Werner Herzog, auteur’ but revealing the intensely personal experience of negotiating the dual roles of subject and filmmaker in the frame. During this pivotal scene, the image of Herzog as the ironically detached filmmaker peering into a strange world as a curious outsider is re-cast as the image of a filmmaker grappling with the limits of what his process of filmmaking can make sense of. He relinquishes his distance as the considered, reflective filmmaker to engage immediately and emotionally in the drama unfolding in front of the camera – a camera that he does not fully direct.
Writing in 2001 of Herzog’s tendency to focus his films on social outcasts, Alkan Chipperfield observed that ‘Herzog presents his characters without comment … stepping back and allowing them to articulate their own inimitable personalities’ (2001). If we take this as generally true of Herzog’s approach to representing his characters, then in \textit{Grizzly Man} he certainly violates that distance. Both filmmakers are present in the frame in a material and symbolic sense, and their closeness destabilises the sense of Herzog’s auteurist vision that articulates ‘visions at the horizon.’ Part of the fascination of the film is Herzog’s obvious intent to pass judgement on Treadwell, but eventual failure to resolve the tension between Treadwell’s love of the bears, his own much more cynical view of nature, and the commitment to filmmaking that unites the two men.

I argue that the power of \textit{Grizzly Man} lies in it being both a representation of Treadwell’s story and an expression of Herzog’s authorial identity, which collide through the overlapping of temporal and spatial dimensions of the film. Herzog’s felt presence of both filmmakers turns the process of making the film into a virtual argument about the natural world and about filmmaking itself. Treadwell’s story is therefore understood not only through Herzog’s interpretation of it, nor simply through his own presence felt in his archive footage, but in the interplay between Herzog ‘speaking for’ him and the moments he seems to ‘speak for himself.’ By the same token, Herzog’s authorship is understood not only through the expression of his auteurist style, nor in his claims to reveal the ‘ecstatic truth’ of Treadwell’s story, but in the destabilisation of those ideas through his presence as a subject arguing with Treadwell. Having entered the film as a confident authorial voice, Herzog ends up self-reflexively (re)considering and (re)enacting his authorial identity. In the following chapter, the sense in which the process of filmmaking becomes a means by which authorial authority is challenged and the process of authorship is negotiated comes more directly into focus in the confrontational relationship between filmmaker Anna Broinowski and her subject Norma Khouri.
Chapter 4: The filmmaker drawn into the frame: negotiating control in Forbidden Lie$ (2007)

‘Norma, you lied to us –’

‘There’s a lot of lack of trust going on…’

‘You lied!’

‘No no no, even before we had… Before I had started lying to you. Even before I had started lying to you.’

‘So I told the first lie?’

‘Did you tell the first lie? To the public? I told the first lie, didn’t I? Come on!’ [Laughs]

– Filmmaker Anna Broinowski and defamed author Norma Khouri in Forbidden Lie$.

When accused of repeatedly lying during the process of filming Forbidden Lie$ (2007), defamed author Norma Khouri/Bagain/Toliopoulos1 turns the tables on filmmaker Anna Broinowski, implicating the filmmaker in a similar process of manipulation and falsification to serve the ends of telling a cinematic story. Norma’s facetious admission not only deflects the accusation, but also flips the script on Broinowski by suggesting that behind the documentary camera, the filmmaker is practicing her own kind of duplicity. The conflict in this moment between the filmmaker and her subject, in which Broinowski tries to hold onto the position of objective investigator, and Norma refuses to work towards revealing the truth,

1 In the film, Norma is referred to by the surname ‘Khouri,’ under which she published her book Forbidden Love (2003); however, the film reveals that Norma’s real maiden name is Bagain and her married name (her legal name at the time of the book’s publication) is Toliopoulos. After moving to Australia in 2002, Norma also lived under the name of Albaqeen. For ease of reference – and to suggest that none of these ‘versions’ of Norma have privileged place as the ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ Norma – I have opted to refer to her throughout this thesis by her first name. The triumvirate surname does nonetheless point to the fluid re-construction of identity and the negotiation of subjectivity that is a key theme of the film, and how this theme intersects with the form of the film to make it significant for thinking about the place and purpose of documentary.
Chapter 4: Forbidden Lies

highlights how the presence of the filmmaker in the frame can complicate the perspectives shown and the possibility of judging the characters represented. This scene foregrounds a different relationship in documentary film between meaning, subjectivity, and the process of authorship than in Grizzly Man. While the previous chapter revealed how Herzog’s film is structured as an argument across time and space, Forbidden Lies pivots on an argument within time and space. Nonetheless, the same tensions between the filmmaker’s place in the frame as both subject and author are evident in both films, with Broinowski’s self-reflexive consideration of her own experience of authorship reminiscent of Herzog’s multilayered ‘presence’ in Grizzly Man.

Forbidden Lies centres on the charismatic author Norma Khouri, whose 2003 book Forbidden Love (released in the US as Honor Lost) became an international bestseller. The book was sold as the true story of the honour killing of Norma’s best friend – ‘Dalia’ – in Jordan. Norma claimed that Dalia had been stabbed to death by her strict Muslim brother and father because she was being courted by a Catholic Jordanian man. In Norma’s story, Dalia’s father and brother were remorseless for the murder because it had brought shame upon the family, and were protected from prosecution because of patriarchal Jordanian laws that accept honour killing as a legitimate defense. Norma claimed she was forced to flee Jordan because as Dalia’s confidant, her own life was in danger. The story captured the imagination of readers around the world and catapulted Norma to international fame. However, suspicions about the veracity of her story soon began to emerge, fuelled by contradictions noted by readers and journalists alike. In July 2004, Australian journalist Malcolm Knox, aided by Caroline Overington, published a series of articles in the Sydney Morning Herald newspaper exposing the story as a hoax (see Knox, 24 August 2004). Among the evidence Knox presented were documents showing that at the time the killing was supposed to have occurred in Jordan, Norma was living in Chicago with her husband and two children under the family name of Toliopoulos. Knox emphasises how crucial Norma’s charisma and the complex persona of strong but guarded ‘woman-on-the-run’ was to both the popularity of her novel and the oversight of any initial doubts that surrounded her story. Throughout the ensuing scandal, which included the book being pulled from publication and re-labelled as a work of fiction, Norma (now returned to her maiden name Bagain) continued to protest that it was in
essence a true story that necessarily consisted of changed names and locations ‘to protect the innocent.’

The film begins as an effort by the filmmaker Broinowski to uncover the ‘truth’ of Norma’s story. The initial scenes are set up to follow an expository structure, albeit with many reflexive flourishes. The focus on facts and interviewee accounts and expert testimony frames the film as a search for the truth behind the competing versions of the story played out already through the media scandal surrounding Knox’s article. Broinowski matches sequences of Norma giving her own account with accusations from experts and firsthand witnesses about her manipulations and chequered past. With articulate charm and careful cunning, Norma leads Broinowski on a wild goose chase, following one lie after another. In desperation, Broinowski enters the frame and surrenders herself to following where the lies lead; abandoning the search for the truth in the hope that Norma would reveal something deeper about herself. The film becomes a meditation on the fluid nature of truth, as well as a firsthand look at Norma’s manipulative powers as the filmmaker becomes another of the writer’s dupes.

This chapter analyses the significance of the filmmaker’s entry into the frame in terms of enacting a shift from the film following a conventional expository documentary structure to become a self-reflexive exploration of the relationship between filmmaker and subject and their battle over authorship of the story. I analyse the way in which this shift adds complexity to the notion of judgement in the film, specifically the repositioning of the viewer in relation to the judgement usually invited by the voice of the film aligned with the filmmaker’s perspective. I consider the film’s turn away from its initial expository aims, and the way in which judgement is thereafter problematised, in relation to a tradition of ‘failed’ documentaries and also explore the ethical debate around this ‘failure’ in light of the broader issue of honour killing raised by Broinowski’s film. Suggesting that the film’s ethical imperative rests less on how Broinowski does (or does not) engage with this cultural issue than on its exploration of an ethics of representation itself, I analyse the film in relation to Deleuze’s notion of the ‘power of the false.’ Finally, I closely analyse the use of direct address in the film as moments in which the tension between truth and lies become powerful points of affective engagement. Through this analysis, I argue that while the presence of the filmmaker in the frame forecloses certain possibilities
of telling Norma’s story, the collision of filmmaker and subject in the frame, negotiating authorship and performing their own subjective identities provides the structure for a distinct and compelling film about documentary representation itself.

The film has variously been described as ‘more of a journey into the strange mind of Khouri … than an objective inquiry into the facts’ (Martin 2009), ‘a compelling narrative about the unreliability of narratives’ (Bartlett 2007) ‘a documentary about lies’ (Kroenert 2008), and ‘an exploration of cinema’s power to deceive’ (Wilson, 13 September 2007). The common thread linking these critical reviews is their focus on how the film approaches Norma’s powers of manipulation via the manipulations of the filmmaker, a kind of recursive narrative effect where Norma’s story highlights the deceptions of the filmmaker and vice versa. Broinowski has stated that her original intent in the film was to give the beleaguered writer a chance to tell her version of events beyond the single television interview (on an Australian current affairs program) that had taken place since the scandal made headlines; however, as the film unfolded, that objective became increasingly untenable. Rather than presenting a comprehensive account of the story, the filmmaker submitted to follow Norma’s lead and accept whatever eventuated from the uncertainty of the situation of filming. Broinowski admitted in an interview for the Australian film magazine Encore,

The film became about the relationship between subject and filmmaker. And when Norma points out that she can’t trust me because I was being a filmmaker, she’s quite right to do that, and I want the audience to walk out not just not trusting Norma but also questioning me. … I wanted her to dupe me, I wanted her to betray me, I thought that it was what would enable me to get as close as possible to capturing who she really is. (Griffiths 2009, 17)

Broinowski’s characterisation of the connection between her intent, the positioning of the audience, and her relationship with Norma that develops throughout the film makes an interesting link between the lack of trustworthiness in the subject and the strategic approach of the filmmaker.

An exclamation point is put on the idea that the viewer is left not being able to trust either the filmmaker or her subject in the final scene of the film, where the
relationship between the two again takes centre stage. Norma is framed in mid-shot facing the camera against a backdrop of a staircase splitting in two directions, and as she summarises her version of the events her book describes, the image cuts to rewinding footage of recreations seen earlier in the film. The juxtaposition of Norma’s repeated claims of telling the truth with the deconstruction of scenes that initially served to illustrate her side of the story casts Norma’s insistence on the truth of her claims in an ironic light. The image cuts back to Norma as she declares, ‘You’re not going to get one version of the truth, ever, about anything, because life is a paradox.’ Norma then breaks character of being an ‘interviewee’ and asks Broinowski behind the camera ‘Coffee? I feel like coffee. Let’s cut. Coffee…’ Broinowski agrees and as Norma gets up from her chair, a grip walks into frame and carries away the screen on which the backdrop is superimposed to reveal a soundstage. Norma follows the grip off to the left of screen, the camera pulls back, and Broinowski enters from the right of screen, standing where Norma once sat, now looking into the camera herself. A cover of the song ‘Smooth Operator’ plays as the credits start to roll. The cumulative effect of the ironic use of music, the revealing of the scene’s ‘real’ setting, and the switch of the camera’s focus from Norma to Broinowski after Norma’s claim about the impossibility of a single ‘truth’ is to further rupture the believability of Norma’s account produced by the conventions of interview and testimony that otherwise structure the scene. This final sequence enacts Broinowski’s interview claim that the film is ultimately about the impossibility of certainty played out through the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject she films.

4.1 Complicating judgement: the shift from reflexivity to self-reflexivity

The reflexive style that characterises the final scene of Forbidden Lies is introduced in the opening scene. It shows Norma leaning against a wall in an alley at night, backlit by a streetlight, smoking a cigarette and blowing smoke into which the credits appear. The mise-en-scène here recalls the film noir genre, suggesting Norma in the role of the duplicitous but seductive femme fatale and also implying a degree of fiction in the story to come. These aesthetic elements combine with the effect of the dissolving titles to highlight the building and breaking down of artifice at play.
Throughout the film. The second scene introduces more cues to the unreliability of the claims made throughout the film, framing Norma in front of a staircase that splits into two directions. As her voiceover introduces herself with ‘My name is Norma Khouri, I’m thirty-five years old,’ Norma appears out of thin air, superimposed onto the staircase background, looking directly into the camera. This ‘breaking the fourth wall’ (a device used to various effects throughout the film that I return to analyse in more detail later) draws the viewer into the story as the interlocutor for Norma’s ‘confession,’ while also serving as a reminder that this confession has been staged and performed specifically for the benefit of the camera. Juxtaposed with the simple words of introduction Norma begins with – words that are at once sincere in their simplicity and indicate a willingness to ‘open up’ to the imagined audience – the images that Broinowski chooses as backdrops for these opening moments of the film become powerful metaphors for the twists and turns of deception that unfold. The reflexive elements of these opening moments foreground the tension that runs throughout the film between what is said and what can be believed.

The theme of staging and re-staging truth through storytelling is reinforced in the following sequence. With all the apparatus of filming visible, Norma is shown seated on a sound stage, poised to read the opening lines from her discredited book Forbidden Love. Broinowski’s voice calls out ‘Action,’ drawing on the filmmaking convention of ‘acting’ most often associated with fiction films. These reflexive tropes continue throughout the documentary, which also contains heavily stylised recreations, interviewees watching screens-within-screens, split screens showing Norma’s critics speaking while she is shown visiting tourist destinations or shopping in Jordan, and set pieces featuring Norma herself acting out vignettes of her past.

Despite these reflexive elements, however, the first fifty minutes of Forbidden Lie$ unfold very much in an expository mode. The reflexive elements described above serve to highlight and advance the ostensible aim of the film to uncover the verifiable truth about Norma’s story, rather than to interrogate the premise of those aims. Keith Beattie describes expository documentary as a mode of address following an ‘argumentative thrust … that can be surmised as ‘telling’, a mode that primarily seeks to explain, impart information and convey knowledge’ (2008, 5). In the first half of the film, the reflexive elements form a key part of this ‘argumentative thrust,’ crucial in the ‘telling’ of the different sides of Norma’s story and contributing to the
rallying of information and evidence that point towards a resolution to come. These techniques invite the viewer to critically analyse the reliability of the claims being made by the interviewees, and privilege some voices as more reliable than others. In other words, in the first half of the film the reflexive style (often playfully) feeds into the film’s apparent expositional aim, shifting the viewer from one perspective to the next while maintaining the promise of some overall revelation to emerge.

The initial aim of Forbidden Lies$ to expose the factual truth of Norma’s story is also suggested in the narrative structure. The first sections of the film are arranged according to titled chapters (including ‘The Artist’ and ‘The Con’), which present Norma’s version of events alongside oppositional accounts given by publishers, Jordanian academics, journalists, judges, and experts in Muslim culture, and of the incidence of honour killings. A scene in which a lie detector expert submits Norma to a test, which she passes convincingly, caps these differing accounts. These accounts combine with reflexive devices in this first half of the film, which has the overall effect of a conventional (if often surprising) working through of the available evidence. The idea of the film advancing towards an ‘answer’ to the truth of Norma’s tangled story is also advanced by Norma herself when she solemnly swears to Broinowski, ‘I will do everything in my power to help you prove that she did exist and that she was killed.’ Halfway through the film, however, this hybrid expository/reflexive approach takes a distinct turn, as the filmmaker is drawn into the frame as a subject.

The filmmaker’s entry into the frame is prompted by the ‘failure’ of Broinowski to find the kind of proof Norma promises, in no small part because Norma’s participation produces an increasingly dense web of contradictions and half-truths. Norma’s explanations of the inconsistencies in her story are just plausible enough to keep the trail of investigation going. That trail eventually leads to Jordan on Norma’s promise of witnesses and concrete evidence to validate the story. When in Jordan, however, every lead becomes a dead end, there is no one to verify or authenticate Norma’s story, and the questions about only mount. To borrow Nichols’ definition of the expository text, ‘[these films] take shape around the solution to a problem or puzzle’ (1991, 38), and in Forbidden Lies$, no solution emerges; Norma carefully avoids indicting herself while also not convincingly dispelling the doubts that Broinowski puts to her. In short, rather than present a clearer picture of the factual
truth of Norma’s story, what Broinowski’s investigation ‘exposes’ is less and less clarity.

After a frustrating series of investigative dead ends, and facing the prospect of making an expository documentary in which nothing is explained with any certainty, Broinowski changes tack and enters the frame as Norma’s foil. This entry into the frame marks the filmmaker abandoning the search for the ‘truth’ of Norma’s story, instead turning the critical lens of the film onto the relationship between filmer and filmed to explore how the usual structure of that relationship blurs, collides, and becomes interchangeable. Once Broinowski enters the frame opposite Norma, the contradictions of Norma’s fragile claims mount, but these claims now work to highlight how both women are acutely aware of the power of the camera in provoking this series of deceptions.

The filmmaker’s entry into the frame turns Forbidden Lies from being an expository film that uses reflexive techniques into a film that is also distinctly self-reflexive. As raised in Chapter 2, Alan Casebier’s distinction between reflexivity and self-reflexivity in Chronicle of a Summer (1960) is useful for thinking about the effect of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame as a subject. Casebier describes this distinction as the difference between a film being ‘about the process of documenting a subject (hence reflexive),’ and a film being ‘about the self’s encounter with the cinema [hence self-reflexive]’ (1991, 145). Broinowski entering the frame as a subject represents the abandonment of the aim of presenting a reliable and authentic representation of this reality, and also marks a deeper engagement with the process of filmmaking than simply revealing the process of documenting Norma’s story.

Rather, Broinowski’s involvement in the frame as a subject reveals the process of representation as a (volatile) negotiation between two women vying for control over storytelling. The self-reflexivity of Broinowski exploring her own power as a filmmaker therefore ties her personal encounter with the cinema to a notion of documentary authorship being both a performative and a negotiated process.

The self-reflexivity of the second half of Forbidden Lies allows the competing voices of ‘filmmaker’ and ‘subject’ to blur, problematised in the power play between Broinowski and Norma over control of how the story is told. By entering the frame and placing herself in the same space as the subject she films, Broinowski erases the
initial distance set up between herself and her subject through the film’s expository address. In this way, Forbidden Lies highlights the contingency and subjectivity underpinning the process of filmmaking, and explores the notion of judgement that is often straightforwardly invited in the representation of documentary subjects.

‘Judgement’ in this sense refers to both epistephilia and an ethical judgement: the way in which the argument of a documentary invites viewers to judge the stories it represents for their factual and conceptual accuracy, and to judge the people it represents for their conduct within the context shown. These two levels of judgement are invited through the ‘voice’ of the film, defined by Bill Nichols as the collection of textual elements that convey the film’s argument and perspective (1983). Nichols explains how the voice of the film works to ‘establish a preferred reading’; a framework through which the film’s argument is interpreted and the actions of its characters morally assessed (1983, 17-19). Judgement within this system works on two levels: firstly, the arrangement of material within the documentary communicates a judgement – usually taken to be that of the filmmaker – as to what are the most important facts, whose voices should be heard and in what context. Secondly, the voice of a documentary presents an overall argument about the people and the world represented that invites the viewer’s own judgement. This invited judgement relates to both the reliability of that argument presented and the behaviour of the people represented. John Ellis argues that such a process of making judgement is a key component of interpreting documentary representations: ‘The double security of the documentary viewer is a security of distance and knowledge. This enables – if not requires – an activity of judgement on the part of the viewer. The evidence is assembled for our inspection’ (2012, 101). The judgement of the viewer therefore relies on perceiving a distance between the filmmaker and the subjects she films, insofar as the notion of ‘assembling evidence’ relies on an understanding of the filmmaker actively standing back from the evidence they present. In this notion of judgement, the filmmaker presents the ‘evidence’ impartially and objectively – letting sounds and images ‘speak for themselves’ – while at the same time framing that evidence for the viewer.

The ‘problem’ of judgement in documentary is the tension between the notions of ‘assembly’ and ‘evidence.’ What is presented is always relative to the perspective of the filmmaker and the context of the film’s making, so that which seems to ‘speak
for itself’ is always already ‘spoken for.’ The kinds of truth taken from documentary judgement are also relative in relation to the processes of interpretation and the prior knowledge, assumptions, and emotional engagements of the viewer. Just as the assertion of documentary truth is relative, then, judgement of documentary truth can only ever be partial and qualified. The dual factors of the contingency of documentary filmmaking and the polysemy of textual representation means that there is always the possibility of dissonance between the argument made and the interpretations the viewer makes. To return to Ellis’ description, judgement may indeed be required, but the terms of that judgement – the distance and knowledge it is born from – can also only be partially or problematically realised. *Forbidden Lies* highlights the tension between the invitation to judge and the problem of judgement through the filmmaker’s presence in the frame. In the unfolding relationship between Broinowski and Norma, the filmmaker herself is increasingly unable to judge the ‘truth’ of what she discovers.

**The challenge of the filmmaker entering the frame**

*The best thing about Forbidden Lies* … *is the way it puts your sense of reality into jeopardy. By showing Khouri in action, by letting us not just witness but actually experience what it feels like to have a master of deception in your life, it allows us to understand how and why these people have such a hold on the unwary."

– Kenneth Turan, 10 April 2009

After the film shoot shifts to Jordan and the filmmaker is compelled to enter the frame, Broinowski refocuses the film on her relationship with Norma, using the process of their journey there to draw out the complexities and contradictions of Norma’s character. Yet Norma also uses the process of filming as an opportunity to reprise her role as manipulator in a new context; performing the role of a ‘survivor’ returning to the traumatic scene allows her to reformulate her story on the run, keeping her one step ahead of the filmmaker. Complicating matters even further is the affectionate nature of the relationship between the two women, especially evident in Broinowski’s willingness to follow increasingly improbable leads and her reluctance to call out Norma directly on her lies.
As the two women compete for control of the camera and the telling of the story – Broinowski pushing for hard evidence and Norma concocting more and more excuses – the roles of filmmaker and subject become increasingly blurred. The promise of a resolution to the story in the form of an argument conveyed by the voice of the text begins to break down. Instead, the film comes to revolve around two opposing wills forging a new kind of truth between them. This is a truth paradoxically built on uncertainty and doubt, predicated on the process of filming. For example, in a key scene staged after their return from Jordan Norma’s unreliability reveals the truth of her manipulative powers and the extent to which the filmmaker was compromised in her efforts to find factual evidence. In the scene, Broinowski sets aside her sympathies and finally confronts Norma outright, accusing the author of repeatedly lying and wilfully leading her astray:

Anna Broinowski: Everything you promised was going to happen in Jordan did not happen.

Norma Khouri: No, it didn’t, because I did not trust you! When we were going through Jabal Al Natheef, okay, and we passed that section, you drove back and then you wanted to film street signs, and you wanted to film buildings. That’s not hiding locations, that’s not – that’s you being a filmmaker, not you realising that certain locations can’t be shown.

Broinowski: Norma, you lied to us –

Norma: There’s a lot of lack of trust going on –

Broinowski: You lied!

Norma: No, no, no, even before we had… Before I had started lying to you. Even before I had started lying to you.

Broinowski: So I told the first lie?

Norma: Did you tell the first lie? To the public? I told the first lie, didn’t I? Come on! [Laughs]
That this scene ends with Norma laughing is a telling suggestion that she is in control of the process of filmmaking far more than the frustrated filmmaker. The scene also foregrounds the many competing dimensions of Broinowski’s role as filmmaker: as the organising voice of the text, still trying to uncover the truth (despite the film increasingly shifting between different perspectives); as a camera-wielding investigator building a particular argument; and as a personally invested subject who is no more in control of the situation than Norma. The emotional and irruptive negotiation of power in this moment questions Broinowski’s authorial authority. Specifically, Norma’s challenge to the filmmaker’s trustworthiness questions the filmmaker’s privileged position of having the power to judge her subject. By accusing Broinowski of not being able to be trusted because she is ‘too concerned with being a filmmaker,’ the sense of the filmmaker at a critical distance from the reality being represented is erased. On deeper level, Norma implicitly challenges the commonly-held idea that ‘being a filmmaker’ is an automatic license to trustworthiness, which raises questions of the truthfulness and authenticity of the representations that result. In this accusation of untrustworthiness, the camera is shown as an obstacle to deciphering factual truths rather than the means by which they can be discovered. The subject being filmed may be an unreliable witness, but the process of filmmaking is equally indicted as unreliable.

The filmmaker’s presence in the frame is key to the affective power of Norma’s pivotal admission to having lied. It is through seeing the filmmaker’s specific and corporeal experience of filmmaking – her frustration with Norma not only having lied but continuing to evade responsibility for that lying – that viewers are able to witness Norma’s powers of persuasion at work to a degree that, in Kenneth Turan’s words, they can ‘actually experience what it feels like to have a master of deception in your life’ (10 April 2009). Broinowski’s presence thereby introduces a new affective dimension to the film, opening the possibility for empathising with the filmmaker being seduced by her subject. This form of empathy with a documentary subject is characterised by Belinda Smaill as ‘the ability to state “I can perceive as you perceive” and “I can feel as you feel”’ (2010, 63). Broinowski’s personal investment in representing Norma’s story and her struggle to control that process grounds this empathetic possibility. The authorial privilege of ‘being a filmmaker’
does not protect her from being seduced by the very con-woman she seeks to expose, and in this the filmmaker is framed as a subject just like any other.

The representation of the filmmaker’s experience of being deceived also sheds light on the more fundamental ‘deceptions’ involved in representing reality on film. Broinowski’s insistence that Norma admit to lying, for example, highlights how things did not go according to plan, generating frustration in the filmmaker due to Norma’s refusal to play by the usual ‘rules’ of documentary. Considered within this framework, Broinowski’s repeated appeals to Norma that she admits to lying say as much about Broinowski and the process of filmmaking as it does about the elusive author. The filmmaker’s presence in Forbidden Lies therefore comes to embody, through her antagonistic relationship with Norma, the fact that the effort of the filmmaker to uncover epistemological truths does not guarantee that any verifiable kind of truth will emerge.

As the relationship between Norma and Broinowski becomes increasingly complicated and the story’s telling increasingly contested, reflexive elements are used to highlight the contesting of authorship as much as questioning Norma’s trustworthiness. The tensions between authorship and subjectivity surrounding the filmmaker’s presence in the frame are contributed to by moments such as Norma snatching the phone number away from Broinowski played in slow motion, recreations where the actors break character and the footage is rewound, hard cuts between Norma’s version of events and other speakers, and a key moment where Broinowski looks exasperatedly to the camera (which I return to analyse in more detail at the end of this chapter). While these moments are reflexive in the sense of drawing attention to the framing of the events depicted, they also highlight the limits of Broinowski’s control over the film. These effects do not clarify the filmmaker’s assumptions or ground a more reliable context for interpreting the representations made; rather they become indexes of the lack of certainty in Broinowski’s perspective. In other words, the reflexive elements of the film work in a more self-reflexive sense, pointing to the intensely personal encounter of the subjects filmed (which now includes both Norma and Broinowski) with the apparatus of filmmaking.

A revealing example of how the unfolding relationship between filmmaker and subject informs the way reflexive elements work differently after the filmmaker
enters the frame is in a section titled ‘Norma’s other Jordan video.’ This two-minute sequence, located twenty minutes from the end of the film, shows home video shot by Norma of a conversation between a bodyguard who accompanied them on their journeys and herself. During this filmed conversation, which Broinowski had no knowledge of at the time, Norma confesses to a series of lies and half-truths designed to throw the filmmaker off the investigative trail. This film-within-a-film subverts the aesthetics and the discursive investments of video confession by being a confession about deception, and moreover a confession that is unreliable and deceptively staged. The sequence opens with Norma admitting ‘It’s gonna take me a month to two months to realise if she took my fucking bait or not,’ and ends with her gleefully asserting, ‘And she still has to run with the film!’ On the one hand, this reflexive film-within-a-film sequence is an implicit admission of a lack of authorial control on the part of the filmmaker. It demonstrates how Norma manipulated real world events for the purpose of manipulating the film being made about her, and the viewer learns of the filmmaker being manipulated though footage not filmed by the filmmaker. On the other hand, Broinowski reclaims authorship of this footage by splicing it in among her own footage. Incorporating Norma’s footage at this point contrasts with the much more sympathetic depiction of Norma as alternately charming and misunderstood, instead showing Norma’s self-awareness of her duplicity. Coming after the Jordan sequence where Broinowski seems to have been run around and continually frustrated by Norma’s mounting lies, this reflexive moment raises suspicions about how much Broinowski was actually taken in by Norma’s version of events or was ‘playing along’ for the sake of the film. Complicating matters further still is Broinowski’s failure to explain how she got hold of this incriminating footage, which further twists the sense of authorial control. The scene is self-reflexive in relation to Norma’s perspective (as an amateur filmmaker in this moment) as it reveals Norma’s encounter with the process of filmmaking. I also suggest that the scene has a certain self-reflexive effect in relation to Broinowski as well: while not directly seen or heard in this scene, it nonetheless highlights how Broinowski’s experience has been shaped by Norma’s manipulation of the process of

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2 Broinowski has outlined the origin of this footage in several interviews, explaining that the tape was sent to her from Norma when the film’s editing was almost finished. Broinowski decided it was too fascinating not to include in the film, but didn’t have time to film a sequence explaining where it came from, so included it with no explanation of its genesis. The result in watching the documentary without the privilege of this knowledge is being left with the question of how the footage was discovered, and even with this knowledge, the displacement of authorship and Norma’s controlling influence still stands.
filmmaking, highlighting how she has been forced to restructure her film because of Norma’s duplicity.

Despite the destabilisation of authorial control underpinning the structure of Forbidden Lie$, the filmmaker is present in a less overt sense than the other two films examined in detail in this thesis (where Herzog is felt as a known auteur and Panahi represents his own domestic life). In the pivotal moment when Broinowski challenges Norma about her lying, for example, the filmmaker is heard but not seen in the frame. And while the filmmaker’s voice can be heard in the opening moments of the film calling ‘Action,’ she only surfaces visibly in front of the camera at the fifty-three minute mark. Even from this moment, where Broinowski pleads with Norma to give her the real name of her allegedly murdered friend, the filmmaker enjoys significantly less screen time than her subject. Reviewing the film for The Age, Jake Wilson goes so far as to suggest that, ‘Unlike Nick Broomfield or Michael Moore, Broinowski doesn’t put her own investigation at the centre of the narrative’ (13 September 2007). Despite Wilson’s observation that Broinowski’s presence does not dictate the film’s structure, I suggest that Broinowski’s investigation is at the centre of the narrative because her entry into the frame to become Norma’s foil is what shifts the film to the direction it eventually follows, investigating the nature of deception and the power relationships at work in the telling of ‘nonfiction’ stories.

Likening Broinowski’s ‘presence’ in Forbidden Lie$ with the on-screen personas of her higher-profile colleagues Broomfield and Moore does, however, suggest that the filmmakers’ on-screen presence is more meaningful when it reflexively reveals their ideological investment. In other words, such a comparison implies that the filmmaker’s presence should serve epistemological rather than affective ends, revealing to the viewer why the filmmaker is engaged in telling a story rather than adding to that story through their involvement. This notion of reflexive revealing follows from Jay Ruby’s definition, who argues that the value of reflexivity lies in how a filmmaker deliberately and intentionally reveals to [her] audience the underlying epistemological assumptions which caused [her] to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions in a
particular way, and finally to present [her] findings in a particular way. (Ruby 1977, 4)

As suggested above, however, the filmmaker’s presence in the frame of Forbidden Lies further clouds rather than clarifies any sense of a coherent authorial agent, and raises more questions about Broinowski’s aims in making the film than it supposes to answer. A further question raised by the filmmaker’s entry into the frame is whether or not the frustration and lack of control revealed in her interactions with Norma are ‘authentic,’ or are instead orchestrated to construct a more compelling narrative. While there is compelling evidence within the film (such as her look directly to camera while in Jordan, which I return to analyse in detail later) and in extra textual material (such as the extra scenes in the DVD special features ‘Director’s Diary’ in which Broinowski films herself in various hotels confessing to the camera her doubts about what to believe and fears for the integrity and structure of the film), the question of the filmmaker’s part in the construction of the narrative remains unsettled. In other words, the filmmaker’s presence in the frame contributes to the density of the film’s meanings rather than making those meanings more transparent. I argue that Broinowski’s presence in the frame is therefore unlike Broomfield and Moore, but for reasons other than Wilson suggests. Her presence in the frame as a subject and the tension between ‘being a filmmaker’ and being sympathetic to Norma does form the conceptual centre of the narrative, anchoring the exploration of power and manipulation the film ultimately presents. Broinowski’s presence might not end up revealing to her audience her ‘underlying epistemological assumptions’ that structured the questions she sought answers to (especially considering answers are hard to come by in this film), but it does open up the possibility to ‘actually experience’ Norma’s powers of manipulation, which grounds a unique affective understanding of the subjects portrayed – both filmmaker and defamed author.

On one level, the self-reflexive turn prompted by Broinowski stepping on front of the camera can be seen as ‘failing’ the terms of reference set up in the early scenes by the reflexive / expositional address of the text. Yet it is precisely through this ‘failure’ that a new kind of truth emerges. Produced out of the process of negotiation between filmmaker and subject, this truth relies on the apparatus of cinema becoming a tool in the negotiation of authorship and the performance of self. The ‘failure’ of the film therefore becomes the very space in which the film’s power as a
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Self-reflexive representation emerges. However, because of the complex politics of the social world referred to by the film (specifically, the issue of honour killings and the misrepresentation of the Middle East by the West), this self-reflexive turn is also problematic. The following section considers the political and personal investments in the social world of the film and the different stakes that play out in these conflicting investments.

4.2 The ‘failed’ exposé

*It would be amazing to find at the end of all this that, you know, something was true.*

– Patrick Walsh, Norma’s former literary agent, in *Forbidden Lies*

While contemporary notions of documentary acknowledge the complex ways in which the world represented is contingent on the processes by which that representation is produced, the investment in documentary to ‘claim the real’ still tends to overdetermine expectations about the kind of truths documentary can and should represent (see Brian Winston’s discussion of the persistence of Griersonian ideals, 1995; 2008). In particular, films structured according to conventions of expository documentary – utilising interviews and documented evidence; piecing together facts into threads of a story; and so on – anchor an expectation that the film will present historically verifiable and reliable truths (as outlined in Chapter 1). Expository conventions set up terms by which a specific film in this mode can be judged as ‘failing’: when the film does not arrive at the verifiable and reliable truths promised by its structure. *Forbidden Lies* is a particularly interesting film to consider in the context of such ‘failure’ because its success in highlighting that the complex power dynamics involved in documentary representation depends on its ‘failure’ as an expository film. As I have argued, in Broinowski’s film the filmmaker’s entry into the frame comprises a shift away from its direction of being an exposé film (where reflexivity is employed to highlight the unreliability of the subject). Instead the film becomes a more self-reflexive exploration of the relationship between the filmmaker and her subject. The kind of insight and knowledge about the film’s subject promised
by the initial expository structure likewise shifts with the filmmaker’s entry into the frame.

The film’s shift in focus has considerable consequences not just in terms of judging the film itself, but also for the broader social discourses around honour killing and the Middle East that the film engages (and then disengages) with. Looking at how *Forbidden Lies* comes out of the tradition of ‘recuperated failure’ in documentary film, and how Broinowski’s film diverges from that tradition, is useful in contextualising the political stakes that the film (problematically) engages with.

*Forbidden Lies* is not the first documentary to shift focus during the film and subvert expectations of convention set up in the opening sequences. There is a tradition within documentary of this kind of shift, first fully explored in Rouch and Morin’s *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), a film in which the potential of the camera to follow the characters through their unfolding lives was realised as a series of scenes not fully controlled by the filmmakers. Failure to fulfil the promise of the film being recuperated by what is newly discovered through the process of filming is particularly relevant to the interactive documentary style *Chronicle* was foundational in starting, given that it is the interactions of the filmmaker with the world they represent that contain the possibility of the film taking unexpected turns.

Edgar Morin, co-creator of *Chronicle of a Summer*, wrote an article for the *France Observateur* entitled ‘For a New Cinéma-Vérité,’ in which he outlined his aim to make a documentary film in which the essence of human relationships, motivations, self-awareness, and self-performance would be revealed. Morin described this approach to filmmaking as one that could ‘penetrate the depth of daily life as it is really lived,’ going on to sketch the skeleton of what would become *Chronicle of a Summer* (quoted in Rouch 2003 [1960], 230). Morin’s description goes so far as to anticipate the key moment of reflexivity at the end of the film in which the characters filmed were shown a rough cut of footage, commenting on how they are represented and what they learned about the other participants. This aim of revealing a deeper understanding of the nature of everyday existence (in Paris in 1960) is evident in the opening scenes of the film, which includes a conversation between Rouch, Morin, and one of their main subjects, Marceline. Rouch outlines his concern about the effect of the camera: ‘A round table discussion is an excellent idea, but I wonder if
it’s feasible to record a conversation naturally with a camera present?’ After some
debate where Marceline expresses her reservations, the three agree that Marceline’s
nervousness in front of the camera can be overcome, and Morin explains, ‘What we
have in mind is a film on how people live.’ Yet by the end of this ‘experiment,’ the
film is far less an illumination of ‘how people live’ and more an exploration of the
different performances people enact in different social contexts. Rouch’s fear of
people not acting ‘naturally’ with the camera present is constantly realised
throughout Chronicle as the participants talk obliquely or with obvious reservation
rather than directly addressing their concerns in front of the camera. In the famous
penultimate scene where a rough cut of the footage is screened for the participants,
the conversation revolves around the authenticity of their performances and the
different interpretations each had of the situations represented rather than how well
the film represents everyday Parisian life. One of the participants, Jacques, criticises
the reticence of the social actors in front of the camera, claiming that ‘For most,
whenever trying to express themselves, they spoke in general terms. You don’t do
that in life.’

The conversation between Morin and Rouch in the final scene, which reflects on the
statements of the subjects, is worth quoting at length in relation to the notion of the
‘failure’ of the film in its stated aims:

Morin: Either our characters are blamed for not being true enough. Or they’re
blamed for being too true. … What does that mean? We’re reaching a stage
when we question truth, which is not everyday truth; we’ve gone beyond that.
As soon as they’re labelled more sincere than in life they’re labelled either as
hams or as exhibitionists. That’s our basic problem. If the audience thinks
these are actors or exhibitionists, our film’s a failure. But I know and I feel
that they’re neither.

Rouch: But they won’t know.

Morin: Who?

Rouch: The audience won’t.
This consideration of the possible failure of the film entails two aspects related to performativity: firstly, the filmmakers wonder if performative nature of the film will prompt the viewer to doubt the sincerity of the performers and question whether any kind of personal truth is ‘authentically’ revealed. Secondly, Morin admits that their approach did not achieve a ‘realistic’ depiction of life in Paris at the end of the 1950s (Morin and Rouch’s initial aim for the film). Yet failure on these two fronts – determining authenticity and representing everyday life – actually anchors the power of the film as an exploration of the presentation of self and the capacity of the camera to provoke distinct kinds of insight, giving birth to the French style of cinema vérité as a documentary movement.

The enduring influence of Chronicle in documentary history highlights how ‘failure’ can serve as fertile ground for exploring issues of representation. The history of documentary since Morin and Rouch’s film is punctuated by notable works that follow the filmmaker as their plans take unexpected directions. One example is Michael Rubbo’s 1974 documentary Waiting for Fidel. The film begins with Rubbo setting out with two Canadian officials to film a rare interview with Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Rubbo and company end up being stood up by Castro for that initial interview, and instead recorded their repeated setbacks to track the dictator down. Waiting for Fidel shows the filmmakers’ ‘improvised’ encounters with members of the Cuban bureaucracy and local workers, delicately portraying the simmering tensions between the fragile nation state and everyday life in 1970s Cuba. The film ‘fails’ to achieve its stated objective, but recuperates that failure to become a fascinating work measurable by other terms.

Broinowski’s portrait of Khouri/Bagain/Toliopoulos in Forbidden Lies in many ways fits this lineage of ‘failed’ documentaries, but the underlying notion of failure takes on a particularly complex dimension here. The filmmaker clashes with her subject for authority and control of the film, yet still provides that subject with a platform to further push the film away from its ostensible aim. The first half of the film ‘fails’ in the terms it sets up as an exposé because Norma consistently undermines those terms through her carefully scaffolded lies. It is these lies – and Norma’s skill at ‘stringing along’ the filmmaker – that prompts Broinowski to pursue the exposé in the first place, while also ultimately marking its failure.
While following an expository structure in the first half of the film, there are ways in which the filmmaker foreshadows the ‘failure’ of the film as an exposé and the subsequent self-reflexive turn it takes. Equal airtime is given to accusations against Norma and to Norma’s deflection of these accusations, where she maintains that her overriding objective was to highlight the issue of honour killing rather than give a precise account of her friend’s story. As the film unfolds, the weight of the author’s charisma and sincerity matches the weight of contradictory evidence assembled against her. Importantly then, the lack of certainty in any of the ‘facts’ presented is not only the result of Norma’s involvement but also the product of Broinowski’s process of filmmaking. Throughout *Forbidden Lies*, she juxtaposes shots of Norma’s accusers with shots of the author addressing those accusations, including having Norma watch and respond to rushes of interviews with other people and vice versa.

Through the opportunities Broinowski gives to Norma to respond to her accusers, a sense of the filmmaker’s personal involvement and sympathy towards her subject becomes apparent. What results is notably sympathetic portrait of Norma in the first half of the film. Once the filmmaker enters the frame, it becomes even clearer that because of her closeness to her subject Broinowski is increasingly unable to mediate between Norma’s version of events and the facts that point to her duplicity. The ‘failure’ of the film to expose the truth is therefore both the product of the material Broinowski had to work with (an elusive and manipulative subject) and the result of the filmmaker’s own perspective and personal investment in the film. In a sense, the filmmaker herself fails to follow through with a dispassionate and even handed account of the ‘facts’ as an expository investigation usually supposes to do.3

3 Interestingly, Broinowski’s follow-up film *Aim High in Creation* (2013) is framed as the result of a similarly failed project. The film opens with Broinowski trying to secure interviews with multinational gas companies to talk about coal seam gas mining and being repeatedly ignored. The filmmaker explicitly outlines that in the face of ‘failing’ to get interviews for what was intended to be an avowedly oppositional documentary film, she would try to make a propaganda film for the cause instead, travelling to North Korea to ‘learn’ the style from filmmakers there. Broinowski is a central presence in this film from the outset; her subjectivity as a socially engaged activist filmmaker structures the whole film. Broinowski’s performance is also much more measured and self-aware throughout this film than in *Forbidden Lies*, as in the former she overtly adopts the role of the stunt-doc filmmaker overcoming obstacles to realise her vision (and she actually makes the short propaganda film). *Aim High in Creation* is structured around this performance and catalysed by the (restaged) failure of the film she initially intended to make. In short, the filmmaker’s presence in the frame forms a structural trope rather than being a consequence of filming as it is in *Forbidden Lies*.
Indeed, the filmmaker has admitted that her personal stance towards her subject was flipped during the early stages of filming. In an interview with Monique Rooney, Broinowski confesses:

“I turned up for our first interview not believing her, telling the crew to hide their equipment, that she was not to be trusted and within eight hours of interviewing her, the sound recordist had fallen in love with her, the DOP wanted to buy her book and she’d convinced me that she was telling the truth and that if I took her to Jordan she would prove that the Western media had conducted this merciless witch-hunt, they were out to get her, and she wasn’t a hoax author, but they’d buried her because they liked the idea of the conniving femme fatale. (Rooney 2010, 137)

The structure of Forbidden Lies reflects the tension Broinowski expresses here between wanting to believe Norma and knowing she was being misled. The inclusion of the two-minute segment ‘Norma’s other Jordan video,’ during which Norma admits to duping the filmmaker, underlines the extent to which Broinowski allowed herself to be conned. While the placement of this scene just after footage of the trip to Jordan gives cause to the filmmaker to hold Norma more harshly to account, scenes that follow this film-within-a-film undo the implicit judgement of Norma’s actions in this sequence. At one point, for example, Broinowski gently asks Norma ‘Do you hate men?’ with what sounds like genuine concern. This moment of sympathy helps render the ambiguity that is integral to the film. The closing scene in which Norma and Broinowski banter affectionately as they wrap filming is another case in point highlighting the complex negotiation of roles Broinowski had to perform throughout the making of the film. Revealing authorship as a negotiation in this way highlights the filmmaker’s authority as a performance, in which any perception of her ‘authenticity’ is contingent on how she chose to represent her relationship with Norma throughout the film. Through these moments Broinowski simultaneously represents the extent to which Norma lies to her and the extent to which she is seduced by those lies, raising ethical questions about the filmmaker’s personal investment in the subject she is filming.
Debating the ethics of the film’s failure(s)

In Broinowski’s representation of her experience of being lied to, the social context of honour killings in Jordan that Norma claimed to want to highlight through her book slides from view. By focusing on Norma ‘The Con’ or Norma ‘The Artist’ (as the intertitles declare), Broinowski’s film appears to contextualise the significance of this broader issue of honour killing in terms of the truth and lies told by Norma. This focus on Norma’s character has been criticised as problematic in relation to the fallout from the scandal surrounding the book Forbidden Love, with both film and book accused of trivialising the issue of honour killings by sensationalising it in a ‘true’ story about which the truth is impossible to determine. On the other hand, the possibility of Broinowski dealing truthfully and sensitively with that subject matter is undermined – and I argue made impossible – by Norma’s duplicity throughout the (re)telling of her story for Broinowski’s camera. Nonetheless, ethical questions about how the film addresses the issue of honour killing are not entirely answered by Broinowski’s approach. I will explore both sides of this ethical issue before suggesting how Broinowski’s film recuperates an ethical stance towards the subjects it raises.

Within Forbidden Lies, Broinowski acknowledges the destructive legacy of Norma’s book through interviews with women in Jordan campaigning around this issue of honour killing. In the early parts of Broinowski’s film, the significance of uncovering the truth of Norma’s story is explicitly linked to the problem of honour killing and the (mis)representation of that issue in the West. Broinowski gives a lot of screen time to journalist and honour killings expert Rana Husseini and Jordanian women’s rights campaigner Dr Amal Sabbagh, who catalogue the ways in which Norma’s book misrepresents, and at times completely fabricates, its picture of Jordanian society. These women convincingly argue that Forbidden Love muddied international perception of the issue of honour killing, undermined the work of women’s rights activists in Jordan, and perpetuated a patronising and simplified Western perspective on the Middle East. Importantly, this acknowledgement occurs early in the film, foregrounding these broader concerns about representing the issue of honour killing as important within the context of the film. The tone and structure of these interviews within the film frames the story as clearly leading towards rectifying these misrepresentations. The placement of these interviews, however,
does not guarantee the issues raised remain a concern of the film as it becomes fixated on the motivations of the individual responsible for writing *Forbidden Love*. While this thesis is premised on the notion that the filmmaker is under no *necessary* obligation to present the issues they engage with impartially or with the aim of representing factual truths, the ethical stakes of every situation needs to be taken into account, and the ethical responsibility of the filmmaker in the case of this volatile issue are particularly complex.

It is clear from the book’s success that Norma’s story in *Forbidden Love* touched a social nerve. When it was revealed as a hoax, rhetoric of Norma’s motive focused to seeing her actions as cynically cashing in on a highly inflammatory topic, feeding cultural stereotypes of the Middle East at a time when these stereotypes were at an all-time high. Coming in the wake of September 11 and the Western intervention into Iraq in the so-called ‘war on terror,’ where the Muslim world as a whole was turned into an object of difference and fear, *Forbidden Love* polarised people along cultural lines (see Whitlock 2011, 352-353; Rooney 2010, 130). Norma’s story tapped into post-9/11 anxieties, mined a seam of cultural condescension (the perspective of the book suggests that the Middle East is culturally regressive and barbaric), and undermined the conversation around a real social issue by fabricating and sensationalising it. But, as Dr Amal al Sabbagh notes in the film, the actual issue of honour killings was quickly lost in the media circus around Khouri/Bagain/Toliopoulos.

On one level Broinowski’s film can be read as compounding the problem of drawing attention away from the issue of honour killings, focusing instead on the politics of truth and lies in the realm of documentary, keeping a safe distance from cultural tensions in favour of exploring the intrigue of literary hoaxes. While the film was generally well received, many critical reviews of the film raised this problem of deviating in focus from the social issue in favour of making a spectacle of the fraud. Jake Wilson was one such critic for whom the film did not pay off on its promise. For example, reviewing the film for *The Age* Wilson noted the ethical stakes of the film’s subject matter. Wilson draws a distinction between Orson Welles’ playful study of the relatively benign duplicity of art forgery in *F For Fake* (1975) and Broinowski’s similarly playful treatment of a much more fraught social situation in *Forbidden Lie$: 
while Welles was able to present art forgery as essentially a victimless crime, Khouri stands accused of exploiting the suffering of others or, worse, of compiling an anti-Muslim tract. Clearly, in this case, the facts do matter, and presenting the Khouri saga as a trip through a hall of mirrors won’t entirely do. (13 September 2007)

According to critics like Wilson, leaving the question of Dalia’s existence more or less unresolved is one thing, but distracting attention from the broader social issue of honour killings to concentrate on the personality of the defamed author is much more questionable. When Broinowski’s film takes a sharp turn into exploring the relationship between filmmaker and subject, the promise that the film will deal with the misrepresentation of Jordanian life is left unfulfilled. Given the emphasis in the early stages of Forbidden Lies on the importance of rectifying these representations – not only for the record in Norma’s case but for the advancement of the work of people like Husseini and Sabbagh in Jordan – this transformation does in a more consequential sense ‘fail’ the issue it sets out to represent.

On the other hand, Broinowski’s film does keep tight focus on Norma’s story and only supposes to remediate the lies Norma told, not directly comment on the issue of honour killing at large. Broinowski asks the Jordanian women interviewed about the legacy of Norma’s book in the context of trying to ascertain its truthfulness, not necessarily to comment on the existence or otherwise of the practice of honour killing more broadly. Moreover, the account of Jordanian culture and the social status of Jordanian women is given by Jordanian women themselves, not by the filmmaker’s voiceover or titles and graphics. In this letting the women interviewed speak for themselves is an implicit assertion by Broinowski that she does not suppose to speak for a culture she does not know. Instead, the filmmaker focuses on crafting a portrait of Norma and giving an insight into their relationship.

I would argue, then, that while the issue of honour killings doesn’t feature prominently in Broinowski’s film, the filmmaker does recognise her own limitations in engaging with that issue. She acknowledges being implicated in Norma’s story, but takes Norma’s lies as a starting point for a different conversation. Keeping this in mind, the film does still give significant airtime to an image of Jordan that counters the image put forward in Forbidden Love through the sequences shot in Jordan and
the voices of the Jordanian interviewees who testify against the book. More subtly, through exploring her own seduction by Norma and the complex nature of representation itself, Broinowski turns the critical gaze back onto the film’s audience; the same broad Western audience that voraciously lapped up Norma’s original story. In an indirect way then, the popularity of Broinowski’s film does raise important broader issues of how Western audiences conceptualise, represent, and ‘consume’ other cultures. This is a form of social critique displaced through a focus on interpersonal relationships, but I would argue one that does act as a powerful comment on a key aspect of shared social reality. In keeping the focus on Norma’s story and the problems of representation, Broinowski also avoids passing the kind of totalising judgements and blinkered perspectives that characterised Norma’s book. Allowing Broinowski to bring the politics of representation to the fore in the film is her presence in the frame, implicating herself in the uncertainty and untrustworthiness of the story being told and questioning her own role in representing ‘truth’ as a filmmaker. In other words, showing the tension between her authorship and subjectivity grounds a different but still significant political power of the film. While Broinowski’s presence in the frame reinforces her ‘failure’ to mediate the facts of the story, this failure also highlights the limitations of her authority to tell Norma’s story – or to tell the complex cultural background to that story – beyond her experience of it.

The kind of ‘truth’ the film offers is therefore not factual information about past events or about the broader social context, but subjective truths produced in the moments of ‘collision’ between the filmmaker and her subject. While the film does not convincingly expose the extent of Norma’s past deceptions, it turns that breakdown into a new horizon of meaning by exploring the subtle mechanics of the unusual relationship between Broinowski and Norma. Like *Chronicle of a Summer* and *Waiting for Fidel*, the power of the film relies on the eventual failure to fulfil its stated aims, but in this case the remediation of ‘failure’ into a more complex cinematic portrait lies in the filmmaker being drawn into the frame rather than setting out from within it.

Key to the ethical framework of Broinowski’s film is therefore how the filmmaker herself responds to Norma’s story. Broinowski becomes the viewer’s barometer for how to respond to Norma’s claims, and a guide to the significance of various truths
and lies told. The way in which Broinowski works through – and ultimately leaves unresolved – the truth claims made in her own film recalls Dirk Eitzen’s argument that deliberating about truthfulness is often not the primary concern of the documentary viewer (1995). Eitzen cites a poetic sequence from the Ken Burns series *The Civil War* (1990) to make the point that determining the ‘truth’ of a representation is not paramount in making meaning of many documentary moments. Eitzen’s argument focuses on films (or moments from films) in which specific truth claims are not made, so does not directly account for a film like *Forbidden Lie*$ in which many claims are made but none settled as definitively true. Nonetheless, Eitzen’s argument is illuminating in relation to Broinowski’s film for the emphasis he places on documentary meaning emerging from elsewhere than the truths a film claims. *Forbidden Lie*$ foregoes claims to factual truth and instead makes meaning out of the compelling relationship between filmmaker and filmed. The subtlety and complexity of how Broinowski’s film turns factual ambiguity into a strength of the film play out in the tension between the voice of the film, the perceived intent of the filmmaker, and her presence within the frame – a productive ‘dissonance’ that highlights the power of the false in documentary film.

### 4.3 Lies, judgement, and the positive power of the false

*Once Broinowski becomes a character in her own film, all objectivity has flown out the window.*

– Mark Peikert, 2009

I have suggested that the key moment on which the film pivots is the entry of the filmmaker into the frame, marking a turn away from the conceit of the film as an exposé of Norma and towards a self-reflexive exploration of the negotiations of documentary representation. This shift in the focus of the film, grounded in the overt involvement of the filmmaker, underlines the complex connections between authorial intent and the framework for interpreting a documentary’s meanings. Randolph Lewis’ notion of dissonance raised in Chapter 2 is particularly useful in thinking about the presence of the filmmaker in *Forbidden Lie*$, because Broinowski’s entry into the frame brings to the fore specific questions about the filmmaker’s approach:
as Lewis phrases them, ‘Why did the film-maker do this? How am I supposed to understand this?’ (2007, 266). These kinds of questions indicate a tension between the perceived intent of the filmmaker and the meanings made. When Broinowski becomes part of the unfolding narrative of *Forbidden Lies*, the viewer is compelled to reassess whether the film is an exposition of Norma’s back-story, or a film about the experience of being deceived. Lewis’ idea of ‘dissonance’ holds that, paradoxically, the discursive power of authorial intent lies most potently in moments when the connection between intent and meaning is destabilised, and authorial intent becomes something interrogated rather than something to be discovered.

In *Forbidden Lies*, the direct engagement of the filmmaker in the unfolding process of representation elicits a sense of dissonance because it involves a surrender of the control of the direction of the film, with Broinowski surrendering to Norma’s trail of lies. While on reflection the film’s meanings can be seen to lie in offering the viewer the vicarious experience of being deceived, questions of intent are nonetheless pressing as the film unfolds. Moreover, Norma seems to delight in these manipulations, stringing Broinowski along almost at will, and the film could be interpreted as at least in part the product of her intent. By the time the two women return from Jordan, they have eroded any trust between them, and with it any trust the viewer can invest in the reliability of what either woman says. Ultimately, uncertainty over where the line between truth and lies takes the place of the ‘argument’ of the film.

Whereas expository films invite judgement of their argument from a considered distance (what Ellis argues is the ‘double security of the documentary viewer’; 2012, 101), the self-reflexivity and negotiation of control in *Forbidden Lies* makes difficult any notion of ‘secure’ judgement. The possibility of judging the argument of film is effectively nullified because no argument is convincingly presented. When Norma and Broinowski accuse each other of lying, they express a personal judgement, but neither ends up holding a privileged position of judgement in the sense of being able to claim the truth of the story overall. This complication of judgement amplifies the sense of dissonance in the film. When Broinowski pleads with Norma to give her more details, when the filmmaker looks straight into the camera with a look of exasperation and defeat, or when the two women argue over who told the first lie, the connection between the filmmaker’s intent, the argument carried by the voice of the
text, and meaning breaks down. The text retains a kind of ‘voice’ in the sense that its materials are organised in a particular way, but this voice does not offer certainty, nor is it firmly aligned with the perspective of the filmmaker. Instead, the voice of the film becomes a new perspective resulting from the collisions between filmmaker, subject, and situation. This voice is structured by the tensions between Broinowski and Norma, and between the past and present lies being told.

While *Forbidden Lie*$ trades in uncertainty, falsity, and manipulation, the film does not end up in a meaningless spiral. It is a powerful representation of the ways in which documentary representations are grounded in specific interpersonal processes, and an incisive investigation into the performance of lying. Deleuze’s notion of the ‘power of the false’ (1989) is a useful way of theorising how meanings can arise from this unreliable kind of documentary representation. The ‘false,’ as Deleuze describes it, occurs when a film inspires doubt about the reliability of its images, when the narrative splinters or overlaps with itself, or when conflicting threads of the story are presented as equally possible within the world of the film, thus creating unexpected relations between the characters and actions shown. In the domain of documentary specifically, the false refers to a turn away from searching for reliable epistemic truth and towards an exploration of the possible meanings that come out of doubt and indeterminability. Rather than assuming a truth exists ‘out there’ to be discovered, and pursuing that truth through evidence and argument, the false traverses the multiple threads of a story that open up when a documentary is driven by contradictions. The false creates multiple truths from the manifold subjective perspectives represented, with each truth predicated on the specific interaction between subjects and the process of filmmaking. The power of the false in documentary therefore lies in reconfiguring the relationship between representations and what they represent. In the case of *Forbidden Lie*$, the presence of the filmmaker works as a power of the false in that the antagonistic relationship between filmmaker and filmed creates the possibility for unearthing new dimensions to the story.

At one point in the film, Norma writes down what she promises is the real name of her murdered friend, only to playfully snatch the piece of paper away before Broinowski can take it. The filmmaker plays this clip in slow motion, accompanied by the sound of a rattlesnake, underlining Norma’s calculating duplicity at the same
time as reinscribing the filmmaker’s control of how Norma is represented. This moment highlights both the extent to which Broinowski was at the mercy of Norma’s whim and the filmmaker’s knowingness about the situation. It is a telling example of how the film offers insight into Norma’s Machiavellian personality not through evidence and argument but through artifact and performance, and the contradictions that thereby emerge. In this moment, emphasising the false reveals more than emphasising the truth. The power of the false in this moment reframes the process of documentary representation as a creative act where doubts, manipulations, and uncertainties can take centre stage, not as problems of the story but as the crucial space in which the meaning of a film can play out.

Broinowski’s decision to enter the frame and invite an untrustworthy relationship with Norma becomes a form of what Deleuze calls ‘falsifying narration’ – a framework of storytelling driven by lies and deceptions. Broinowski’s film represents falsifying narration because the story progresses through a series of mounting lies. According to Deleuze, falsifying narration ‘shatters the system of judgement because … [it] affects the investigator and the witness as much as the person presumed guilty’ (1989, 129). In falsifying narration, the notion of building an argument gives way to an exploration of the affective relationships between the subjects represented, and judgement of any ‘true’ account becomes impossible. In the first half of Forbidden Lies, the reflexive/expository structure creates a system of judgement that positions the filmmaker as investigator, the viewer as witness, and Norma as the party presumed guilty. However, after the filmmaker enters the frame and the tensions between Broinowski and Norma escalate, these positions become more fluid. Broinowski is both a witness and a subject, admitting guilt for her own manipulations; Norma takes on the role of antagonist and investigator. Following the exchange during which Norma teasingly admits that she was the first to lie to the public but that Broinowski is also lying, the viewer becomes implicated in all three roles: investigator into the ‘truth’ of the story, witness to the duplicitous relationship unfolding, and guilty party insofar as both Norma and Broinowski are performing this duplicity – at least in part – for an imagined audience. On each level, judgement of the subject(s) and the story is complicated, but in the absence of the security of judgement a different level of engagement is introduced.
The creative power of embracing the false through the presence of the filmmaker in *Forbidden Lies* has been highlighted in several reviews of the film, most explicitly by Kenneth Turan’s review in the *LA Times* cited above. Turan’s review emphasised the way Broinowski’s involvement within the frame opens up new possibilities for affective engagement and making meaning. In place of the argument and epistemic knowledge produced by ‘truthful’ narration, seeing the filmmaker affected by the false in the process of representation opens up a space for identifying with her experience. Elena Oumano of the *Village Voice* echoes Turan’s reading of how the presence of the filmmaker is affectively engaging. Oumano empathised with Broinowski being ‘as captivated by Khouri’s cunning and charisma as her victims were,’ going on to assert that ‘one of *Forbidden Lies*’s deepest pleasures is watching Broinowski’s struggle to resist her subject as Khouri’s story gradually falls apart’ (2009). As these reviews highlight, there is an affective power in the turn from pursuing the truth of the story to embracing the uncertainty, doubt, and indeterminability in the relationship between Broinowski and Norma. That turning creates new ways of understanding the relationship between the filmmaker and her subject, and also shows the possibility of documentary to entail meanings more complex than explaining the world or asserting truths.

The positive power of the false as a creative force also has an ethical dimension, insofar as it points to the responsibility of the individual to negotiate and interpret the competing narratives of reality and to form one’s own ethical framework. In documentaries aspiring to educative or socially instrumental ends, the ethical dimension is tied to the judgements made through the voice of the text and the invitation for the viewer to judge within that discursive framework. On the other hand, as the relationship between Norma and Broinowski shows in *Forbidden Lies*, films driven by the power of the false problematise how judgement is communicated in and through a film, which compels the viewer into a more active part in determining the ethics of the situations represented.

Michael Renov’s work on historically based digital artwork outlines a link between an ethical imperative, and works that invite uncertainty and doubt rather than offer certainty:
current instances of electronically and digitally based representations of the historical real have begun to shed the epistemological and ethical burden of single-minded truth-telling. … Instead they have opened up a field of uncertain but open-ended exploration that sets aside rational proof in favor of receptivity, understanding that, as moral philosopher Emmanuel Levinas has described, ‘problems of knowledge and truth must … be put in relation to the event of meeting and dialogue.’ … Documentive work that invites radical doubt, ambivalence, and the embrace of contingency rather than certain knowledge should not be viewed as simply fashionable or facile in its skepticism. Its value exists both as a challenge and affirmation: provocative in its refusal of individualist truth, profoundly moral in its call for, and reliance on, individual moral responsibility. (2004, 147)

While Renov is theorising non-narrative installation works here, the invitation of radical doubt, ambivalence, and an embrace of contingency over certainty can be considered as an example of the power of the false, equally applicable to the exploration of subjectivities that drives Forbidden Lies. Broinowski’s subjective engagement in the process of representation shifts the focus of the film away from ‘single-minded truth telling’ towards the articulation of subjective experiences in a comparable way to the digital artworks Renov considers. The ethics of the false therefore evokes both the ethics of filmic representation and the ethics of the world represented. Interpreting these ethics likewise becomes a matter of subjective rather than objective engagement, wherein the viewer is asked to be more active in working through the ethical dimension of a representation. In this way, Broinowski’s antagonistic and ‘falsifying’ relationship with Norma in Forbidden Lies rethinks the potential of documentary to create meaning, what kinds of meaning are produced, and the ethical orientation of the filmmaker/subject/viewer relationship.

Broinowski’s decision to enter the frame, which entails surrendering the discursive distance that makes judgement possible, can therefore be seen as a distinctly creative act. When Norma implicates Broinowski in the process of falsity and lying, it does not leave the film in a spiral of meaninglessness. There is vitality in the way each woman manipulates the line between truth and falsity, and the palpable tension in their relationship opens up a way of reconsidering the potential of documentary representation beyond a quest for epistemic certainty. The act of filming creates a
distinct space in which subjectivities can be negotiated. As Broinowski’s role as filmmaker becomes more and more indistinguishable from Norma’s role as subject, the film creatively plays out an answer to Norma’s question of who told ‘the first lie.’ By the end of the film that question remains unresolved – along with the more general questions of what is authentic or reliable in Norma’s account or in how Broinowski’s film presents that account. Instead of providing answers to these questions, the film performatively makes meaning in specific moments of interaction between the filmmaker and her subject. In the context of this film, which trades in uncertainty and doubt more than assertions or argument, bodily gestures and reactions take on special significance. In particular, looks to the camera work as proxy indexes of a certain kind of truth, becoming moments of potential empathy and identification that give meaning to the uncertainty and doubt at the heart of the film.

4.4 Forbidden looks: direct address and the documentary fourth wall

[The] acknowledgment of the camera is not only part of the charm of the film but becomes part of the transparency of the illusion.

– Michael Chanan, 2000

Moments of direct address in Forbidden Lies do more than reflexively ‘break the fourth wall’ and draw attention to the construction of the film. These moments also resonate on a deeper level, as an appeal to the (imagined) audience to believe the version of events being told. By addressing the viewer directly, Norma and Broinowski’s looks to the camera also draw the imagined audience into the space of the film unfolding. The viewer is positioned as an interlocutor in the performance of testimony, and as a witness to the specific experience of the situation unfolding.

While Norma looking into the camera telling her story is a stylistic feature of the film from the opening scenes, Broinowski looks directly at the camera only once, in a key moment of the trip to Jordan. Broinowski is shown pleading on the phone with Norma to tell the real name of ‘Dalia,’ the friend Forbidden Love claims was killed by her father and brother, so that the filmmaker can pass it onto the coroner of the
city hospital and possibly provide concrete proof of the ‘Dalia’s’ murder from the hospital records. The filmmaker urges, ‘This is the best chance we’re going to have of ever proving it, do you know what I mean?’ After this plea for the truth, Broinowski hangs up the phone, stares down the barrel of the camera, and smiles ruefully (see Figure 1). It is a brief moment that distils the filmmaker’s mounting frustration at having given herself over to be led by Norma’s tenuous claims and her growing uncertainty about the direction of the film. It also serves as a powerful counterpoint to Norma’s repeated direct-to-camera monologues that rationalise away the inconsistencies of her story and perform her version of events for the camera lens (and the imagined audience beyond it). Broinowski’s look to the camera is one of barely repressed exasperation, which apparently recognises the irony of her own part in creating this situation. Her expression pleads for the audience to witness the ordeal of dead-ends she is being put through, drawing the viewer into an empathetic relationship with the filmmaker.

Figure 1: Anna Broinowski pleads for Norma Khouri to disclose the real name of her friend ‘Dalia.’

When Broinowski as filmmaker looks to (and through) the camera, her look implores the viewer to witness her experience of being duped. In doing so, Broinowski both
admits her lack of authorial control, and recuperates some measure of that control by making the audience complicit in the unfolding situation. Invoking the audience as witnesses in this way – using the look to the camera to bridge the spatial and temporal distance that usually exists between the viewer and the world represented, invites the viewer to both observe and share the experience of this filmed goose-chase. Her look towards the imagined audience suggests that the experience she is putting herself through is for them, that the author is sacrificing her control of the immediate situation for the benefit of showing deeper levels of Norma’s manipulation. Despite how fleeting it is in the context of a feature documentary, Broinowski’s moment of looking down the camera is particularly powerful, and illustrative of the distinct discursive and affective possibilities entailed by the presence of the filmmaker in the frame.

As for Norma’s moments of direct address, her looks to the camera simultaneously testify to her version of events, perform her innocence of past events in the present of recording, and re-live these past events (and deceptions) in a new context. Invoking the viewer through direct address ironically gives Norma both another audience for her testimony of innocence and another target to reprise her role as charismatic charlatan in the present. Importantly, however, the (imagined) audience in this sense is an extension of Broinowski-as-filmmaker in these same roles. Norma’s direct address is not spontaneous but a formal strategy of the film’s deliberately staged interviews. In this staging, Norma’s direct address is registered as first and foremost ‘for’ the film/filmmaker, rather than an appeal directly to the viewer. In other words, the power of Norma’s looks to the camera is refracted through these looks being framed as a specific kind of performance, still serving the logic of the film as an (attempted) exposé. The viewer is invoked less in terms of empathy and identification, and more in terms of the familiar position of judgement. The contrast between moments in which subject and filmmaker respectively look at the camera – Broinowski’s tight frustration and Norma’s expansive story spinning – forge a strong link between the different kinds of performance that structure Forbidden Lies and the imagined audience those performances are directed towards.

Direct address is defined here as a look directed from a (social) actor in the film through the camera towards the (imagined) viewer, directly connecting this social actor ‘inside’ the film’s frame with the viewer ‘beyond’ the film’s frame. This
definition follows Tom Brown’s work in *Breaking the Fourth Wall* (2012), where he studies the variety of ways in which direct address is used to break the artifice of realism or to draw the viewer into the time and space of the film. Brown’s study focuses particularly on fiction film, but notably avoids a prescriptive definition of the technique because, as he repeatedly emphasises, it is a technique deployed across a wide range of styles and genres to as many different effects, and what direct address does in terms of interpreting the world(s) it addresses is different in every instance (2012, 13-17). The closest to a categorical definition Brown comes to is in the term ‘cross-diegetic.’ Cross-diegetic are moments that bridge the diegetic world contained by the narrative on screen and the ‘outside’ world of the viewer watching in a specific historical context of reception; a concept applicable to the way direct address in *Forbidden Lies* positions the viewer as both interlocutor and witness.

Taking into account the complex ways in which different kinds of direct address work, Brown does assert that direct address as a technique is uniquely positioned to address moments of paradox within the logic of a film’s narrative, precisely because it is ‘a position somehow both inside and outside the fiction’ (2012, 167). His work aims to account for not only how direct address draws the audience into the film through dramatic irony, but also how direct address takes on meaning as a metaphor for the gaps, ruptures, and unresolved tensions within a narrative:

> direct address [is] not only as a gesture towards what is outside the film fiction (we, the viewer, the material act of filming and so on), but also as a potentially rich metaphor for the problems of vision (insight, foresight, other kinds of perceptiveness) that are so often the currency internal to movie narratives. (2012, xii)

While Brown does not consider documentary films specifically in his study, these ideas of how direct address imbues the contradictions in a fictional narrative with dramatic irony – as different levels of a character’s ‘knowing’ – can be applied to these looks in Broinowski’s film taking on an analogous dramatic irony. In *Forbidden Lies*, the dramatic irony created by the looks to the camera operate on the level of the intersubjective relationship between filmmaker, subject, and viewer; these looks communicate a ‘knowing’ on the part of each woman that the other is manipulating facts and projecting a particular performance invested with their own
desire to shape the viewer’s response. Broinowski’s look to the camera also positions the filmmaker in the same space as the film’s ostensible subject Norma: not only the literal diegetic space in front of the camera but also the subjective space, as the focus of the viewer’s attention and (judgemental) gaze.

Brown also emphasises how the literal look of the actor breaking out of their fictional world and looking at the actual viewer becomes a metaphor for more allegorical ideas of looking (‘insight,’ ‘foresight,’ and ‘perceptiveness’; 2012, xii). In the realm of documentary, such looks also become metaphors for a more specific sense of vision – that of control over the vision of reality presented in the film. Considering direct address in this metaphorical sense, looks to the camera in documentary can be thought of as powerfully articulating the inherent performativity of documentary filmmaking because the speaker explicitly recognises and embraces the performance of appearing in a documentary. Seen within this framework, the looks in Forbidden Lies are variously a plea to believability, a gesture of frustration, or a confessional address, each of which recognises the way the process of representation produces the social actor as a particular kind of subject. These moments of direct addresses in Forbidden Lies therefore also work as metaphors for the tension of authorship grounded in the competition between the filmmaker and subject for authorial control.

Looking at the camera and ‘being in the moment’

Scholars writing on direct address in the more specific domain of documentary have primarily theorised looks to the camera in terms of interrogating the ideological and political issues that the social actors in the film speak of (see Nichols 2001, 8). Alex Gerbaz argues that direct address in documentary is a particularly powerful way of articulating social concerns:

[Direct address] is an example of how the film camera brings a social dimension into its perception, so that it not only faces a social world but is

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4 It is worth noting that throughout his work, Nichols uses the term ‘direct address’ more broadly to include the voiceover that speaks to the viewer and the interviewer on camera. Brown and Gerbaz, however, each argue that there is something specifically powerful about looks to the camera. The unique power of a visual connection between documentary ‘character’ and imagined viewer is evident in the effect of Broinowski’s silent look to the camera to draw the audience into a sympathetic relationship with her as a subject.
also literally faced by it. Society is reflected and implicated in its perceptions rather than simply displayed objectively before them. (2008, 18)

While direct address often does function on this more abstract level of grounding a reflexive relationship between the apparatus of filmmaking and the society it is institutionally a part of (what Gerbaz calls a ‘socialised cinematic perception’), direct address in documentary is also always the address of specific social actors. Without erasing reference to the broader social context in which the representation is produced and circulates, direct address therefore works more immediately on the level of bringing the people represented into a relationship with the people watching. This more immediate sense in which direct address works – as a kind of invitation from the social actor to the imagined audience to recognise their experience of ‘being in the moment’ – is pertinent for thinking about the power of the (fleeting) moment in *Forbidden Lies* during which the filmmaker looks at the camera. The film itself moves from a concern with the shared social realm to the interpersonal realm, and Broinowski’s look functions as an index of that narrative movement.

Of relevance to this analysis is an understanding of direct address in terms of the conventions of the documentary interview, where looking straight into the camera places a particular focus on the interviewee’s expressions as a key part of the communicative act. The interviewee is framed as a conversational participant rather than a distanced expert ‘talking head,’ and some emphasis shifts from the information presented to consider the meanings carried by nonverbal cues. Such cues revolve around issues of authenticity, openness, and honesty in relation to what is being said. Gerbaz’s work is useful here in terms of the linkage he makes between Levinas’ philosophical work on the complexity of meaning and the affective power of the human face, and the unique capacity of film to focus closely on facial expressions. Gerbaz argues, with reference to Levinas’ philosophy, that direct looks to the camera are ethically-charged filmic moments in which issues of vulnerability, intimaey, and openness are key, creating in the viewer a desire to engage with and ‘read’ the face before them, while also becoming aware of their own body and consciousness.

In the case of documentary faces, the look into the camera shifts the focus of scrutiny and judgement from the informational content of the social actor’s testimony to the
emotional honesty and authenticity in *how* they say what they say. Following Gerbaz, this also focuses the viewer’s judgement onto his or her own presentation of self. In Levinas’ terms, the face ‘tears consciousness up from its center, submitting it to the Other’ (2002 [1969], 524). It is this kind of destabilising of the positions of the ‘self’ and ‘other’ in the documentary process that underpins the relationship between Broinowski and Norma in *Forbidden Lies*. The film’s moments of direct address involve the viewer in a more intimate relationship with the subjects depicted. In Norma’s case, the intimacy of direct address grounds the possibility of more critically viewing her testimony, and in Broinowski’s case the intimacy of direct address grounds a more sympathetic and empathetic relationship with the filmmaker. Broinowski’s moment of direct address also temporarily erases the distance between the world represented and the world of the viewer, as the filmmaker appeals directly to the imagined audience.\(^5\)

By contrast, Norma’s moments of direct address in *Forbidden Lies* reference both the present interlocutor (the filmmaker) and an imagined interlocutor (the future audience). While Norma’s position facing the camera directs attention to not only what she is saying but also how she is saying it (‘reading’ her body language as much as hearing her words), her ‘direct address’ still fits within the recognisable conventions of the talking-head documentary interview. The looks to camera create intimacy through the ‘virtual’ eye contact, but the filmmaker behind that camera is also strongly implied, creating a distance that implies the primary purpose of this setup is to convey information and provide testimonial evidence. Throughout the film, these interviews with Norma are also treated reflexively, where techniques such as Norma appearing superimposed onto a backdrop or shown speaking out of sync with the soundtrack lend the performative aspects of her address an alienating effect. For example, the opening sequence juxtaposes Norma’s first line spoken straight to the camera (‘My name is Norma Khouri. I’m thirty-five years old,’) with a shot of

\(^5\) Relevant to the difference between Norma’s and Broinowski’s respective looks to the camera is Errol Morris’ ‘Interrotron,’ a camera setup that allows subjects to be filmed looking straight into the lens but who themselves, instead of seeing the camera, see a screened image of the director interacting with them virtually but in real time. Morris’ films and the specific effect of the Interrotron setup are the focus of Gerbaz’s article, and it is important to note that this effect and the direct look to the camera by Broinowski’s in *Forbidden Lies* are significantly different. Morris’ Interrotron works more as a ‘subjective or optical point-of-view’ shot (Brown 2012, xi). In other words, the look to the camera in these moments positions the ‘character’ as talking to an interlocutor within the diegesis rather than ‘directly’ to the imagined viewer. This is a different kind of direct address because the viewer understands the look is not directed only at them.
Norma reading from her book on a soundstage where Broinowski’s voice is heard calling ‘Action.’ Juxtaposing the first time Norma is shown giving her ‘testimony’ to the camera with images that reveal the staging of that testimony places Norma’s looks to the camera within the broader reflexive strategies of the film. These strategies work to question her version of events, meaning the ‘direct address’ here has less an effect of ‘breaking the fourth wall’ as enacting a reflexive distance from the subject at the same time as it allows her to be scrutinised in close-up. The audience is positioned as a privileged onlooker, at a critical distance from the world represented and maintaining what John Ellis describes as the ‘double security of the documentary viewer [in] distance and knowledge’ (2012, 101).

Figure 2: Norma Khouri appears ‘out of thin air’ in the opening sequence before the image cuts to a soundstage.

Read as one of the reflexive strategies of the film, Norma’s looks to camera contrast sharply with Broinowski’s look to the camera, which highlights the filmmaker’s personal investment in the process of filmmaking and emphasises her place in the frame as a subject of the film in her own right. In Broinowski’s look to the camera, the framing of the viewer outside the space of the film is ruptured rather than reinforced. Instead of inviting a more critical appraisal of the truth of what is being
said (as is the effect of ‘staging’ Norma’s moments of direct address), Broinowski’s look draws the viewer into the affective space of the film to share the frustration of the filmmaker in the moment of filming. It is an intense, interpersonal moment, inviting empathy with the filmmaker. It also underlines the vicissitudes of filmmaking rather than its certainty. Thus, while Broinowski’s look could be characterised as reflexive insofar as it indicates the filmmaker’s investment in the process of representation and points to the film as a construction, it also engages the viewer more deeply and more affectively in the world represented. Her look tells the viewer that the film’s elliptical approach to the truth is not so much a strategy of the filmmaker or a refusal to present a judgement, but that the film did not unfold in a way that the filmmaker was able to present such a judgement. So while the look down the camera is an index that the filmmaker ‘failed’ to tell the story the way she had planned to (in a way that social actors cannot, even in outright lying, be said to ‘fail’), it also turns that ‘failure’ into a powerful point of affective engagement.

Broinowski’s direct address also creates a distinct temporal quality that reinforces the sense of intimacy at work. In the moment of watching, the imagined audience to whom Broinowski directs her look become specific viewers, and the look to the camera becomes a look to them. The direct address collapses the temporal distance between the moment of filming and the moment of watching, creating a unique connection between the subject(s) in the film and the subject(s) watching the film. In other words, direct address in documentary can be thought of as grounding a particularly strong kind filmic intimacy, speaking through the camera to the imagined audience as the interlocutor(s). By explicitly acknowledging the communicative relationship between the speaker and the imagined audience, the terms of documentary address shift away from constructing arguments about the historical world and towards the articulation of subjective experiences, creating a connection between the people within the film and the people watching the film.

Through an intimate form of direct address, Broinowski’s look through the camera to the imagined audience both reinforces and problematises the investments in this film as reliable representation of reality. On the one hand, this look highlights the indexicality of the film – that it is representing historical agents invested on a personal level with the world represented. On the other hand, the look highlights the film as a ‘communicative effort’ (to borrow John Ellis’ term) between the audience
and the filmmaker, an effort in which the intent of the filmmaker impacts on the way the viewer makes meaning by signaling the former’s ongoing efforts to find discover the truth. Yet this look of uncertainty and exasperation also frames this communicative effort as one that is not entirely within the control of the filmmaker, one that does not take the form of an argument presented to the (imagined) viewer, but is a much more unstable and open representation in which the ‘truth’ is contested rather than claimed.

Through the invitation to empathise with the filmmaker opened up by her look to the camera (to ‘perceive as she perceives’ and to ‘feel as she feels’ as Smaill puts it), Forbidden Lies offers the possibility for rethinking axiomatic notions of documentary representation as most properly ‘truthful,’ ‘reliable,’ and ‘authentic.’ In Broinowski’s film, exemplified by her look of frustration to the camera, the process of documentary filmmaking is shown as a set of specific emotional and corporeal experiences as much as it is a development of argument and judgement. Broinowski’s moment of direct address encapsulates the issues of judgement, ‘failure,’ and the intimacy of self-reflexivity in documentary that this chapter has investigated. This direct address also emphasises that documentaries produce meaning out of the collision between reality and its representation, and how the filmmaker’s authority is performed through the process of making their film; the key concepts of the category of documentary I call the Filmmaker in the Frame films. In this moment, the frustration of the filmmaker represents a tension between the investments of documentary to reveal certain kinds of epistemological truths and the process of filmmaking as a specific encounter between the filmmaker and what they film. Rather than undermining the possibility of the film to ‘objectively’ represent reality, however, this tension highlights the productive potential of documentary to represent the ‘other’ through self-reflexively exploring the negotiations staged between the filmmaker and the people filmed.

Broinowski’s presence in the frame of Forbidden Lies highlights the productive possibilities of contradiction, dissonance, and authorial uncertainty in documentary representation. Authorial control becomes a contest between the filmmaker searching for the factual ‘truth’ and the subject determined to hide behind various lies. In this contest, the notion of the filmmaker’s authority to represent reality is shown as a performance, enacted in the exchanges between Broinowski and Norma over which
version of the story can be believed and the question of who told the first lie. As I have shown, Broinowski’s presence in *Forbidden Lie*$ is not without ethical problems, but the ‘failure’ of the film as an exposé does open up the story to be told in newly creative ways that give insight into the power of falsity and the problem of judgment that results from the filmmaker’s personal investment in the representation of reality. In the next chapter, I examine Jafar Panahi’s *This Is Not a Film*, analysing how this filmmaker’s negotiation of his authorship is prompted by censorship rather than the kind of direct challenge Norma poses to Broinowski in *Forbidden Lie*$.

While the ‘other’ Panahi represents is far more abstract, his film equally reveals how the filmmaker’s subjective experience of representation creates distinct possibilities for representing reality and rethinking documentary authorship as a performative process.
Chapter 5: This is not a filmmaker: authority and censorship in *This Is Not a Film* (2011)

*They have deprived me of seeing the world for twenty years. ... For the next twenty years, I’m forced to be silent. I’m forced not to be able to see, I’m forced not to be able to think, I’m forced not to be able to make films.*

– Jafar Panahi, open letter read at the opening of the 61st Berlinale, 10 February 2011

An empty chair sat on stage at the opening of the 61st Berlinale film festival in February 2011 to represent the absence of Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi. Panahi was scheduled to serve on the judging panel for the film festival, but had been arrested at his home in Tehran on 1 March 2010 on charges of collusion and intent to produce propaganda against the Islamic Republic. Forbidden from travel and talking to the press while awaiting an appeal for his sentence – six years house arrest and a twenty year ban on directing – Panahi penned an open letter to the Berlinale festival, which was read at the opening ceremony by jury president Isabella Rossellini. In the letter, as shown in the above epigraph, Panahi equated his fundamental capacity to think, speak and see with his ability to make films. Through this letter, Panahi speaks passionately and personally about the consequences of his sentence at the same time as defying its terms, constituting both a form of testimony and a form of protest. While constituting a political act in its own right, this letter also set the scene for Panahi’s much more visible act of protest enacted in the making and release of *This Is Not a Film* (*In film nist*, Panahi and Mirtahmasb 2011).

Structured as a video-diary of his time under house arrest, *This Is Not a Film* was made while Panahi was still awaiting the outcome of his appeal. After completion, it was smuggled out of Iran on a flash drive hidden inside a cake and premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, where it was celebrated for its artistic merit and prompted indignation from the international film community in response to Panahi’s situation represented in the film. Descriptions of the film as being ‘a courageous act of non-violent protest’ (Debruge, 20 May 2011) and ‘a statement of creative resistance in the face of tyranny and a document of intellectual freedom under political duress’ (Scott, 28 February 2012) were common. *This Is Not a Film* went on to be released
in cinemas around the world; it was subtitled in over a dozen languages and nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary.\footnote{A similar strategy attended Panahi’s follow-up film \textit{Closed Curtain/Pardé} (2013, Panahi and Partovi). Again made while under house arrest, \textit{Closed Curtain} premiered at the Berlinale in 2013 and won the Silver Bear award for best script. Shot at Panahi’s holiday villa at the Caspian Sea, it tells of a filmmaker (played initially by co-director Kambuzia Partovi and later by Panahi) hiding from authorities and tapped out of inspiration. In response to the film’s screening and award, the head of Iran’s national cinema organization Javad Shamaqdari told Reuters news service, ‘We have protested to the Berlin film festival. Its officials should amend their behavior because in cultural and cinematic exchange, this is not correct’ (quoted in George 2013). Shamaqdari also stated that the film was a violation of Panahi’s still-standing sentence, but that the authorities had not yet chosen to take any action: ‘This is an offense … but so far the Islamic Republic has been patient with such behavior’ (quoted in Vivarelli 2013). The fact that the Iranian authorities were more publically vocal in denouncing Panahi’s making of \textit{Closed Curtain} than the release of \textit{This Is Not a Film} can be seen as a response to Panahi’s increasing public profile as much as a reflection of the content of the respective films.}

While the Berlinale letter, in which Panahi describes his agency and experience as a human being in terms of his identity as a filmmaker, did not refer specifically to \textit{This Is Not a Film}, it foreshadowed the crucial role of performance in his video diary. In the context of his house arrest and censorship by the Iranian regime, Panahi’s performance in the film can be seen as a self-reflexive enactment of his identity as a filmmaker, paradoxically performing the role of an author who actively disavows his right to authorship. His self-reflexive performance raises some of the assumptions of authority that underpin documentary authorship – specifically that the filmmaker has authority to represent reality by virtue of the fact of their making a film – while at the same time becoming a way for Panahi to continue ‘saying things without appearing to have said them’ (Bahram Baizai quoted in Naficy 2012, 236). In reading the film through its political and historical context, Panahi’s video diary can be interpreted as a work exploring the tension between his subjective experience of censorship and the limits of what counts as ‘being a filmmaker,’ intended as a powerful political statement.

Again, considering it’s political and historical context, Panahi’s (not)film engages much more directly with social politics and the instrumentality of documentary film than either \textit{Grizzly Man} or \textit{Forbidden Lie}$\$, but the significance of the filmmaker’s
presence in the frame of This Is Not a Film equally lies in how he negotiates the tension between his experience as a filmed subject and his power as the film’s author. Panahi’s presence within the frame is registered on three levels: as the subject of the film, as the subject making the film, and as a political subject within the Iranian regime. In this chapter I argue that through his self-reflexive consideration of the different ways these subjectivities are enacted through the process of filming, Panahi’s presence in the frame acts as both a form of protest and a form of testimony. At the same time, I suggest that the self-reflexivity of the film is also a kind of performance that problematises his role as the film’s author. I also propose that the social instrumentality of the film lies in the simple fact of Panahi’s making of the film and his presence in the frame as both censored author and performative subject, rather than in the situation it explicitly represents. The film can therefore be used to rethink the usual notion that the social instrumentality of documentary rests on its informational or educational qualities. Throughout this chapter, I analyse how Panahi’s presence in the frame can work to challenge, reconfigure, and blur notions of voice and performance to produce a work that reimagines the possibilities of documentary to make meaning of his society at the same time as it constructs a powerful political statement, while also performatively distancing Panahi as the film’s author. I specifically focus on the ways in which Panahi produces a text that provokes and critiques social discourses while not directly speaking of them, considering this ‘speaking without appearing to have spoken’ in terms of its debt to and subversion of key tropes of contemporary Iranian cinema. Through the questions the film prompts about the social instrumentality of documentary, the ways in which Panahi can and can’t speak about his experience, and his negotiation of what is and is not defined as ‘making a film’ – questions he is forced to confront through the politics of his situation – I argue that Panahi is able to create meaning in exactly the space where meaning has been denied: in his role as a filmmaker.

The dual registers of testimony and protest at work in This Is Not a Film play out through Panahi’s representation of his everyday experience as an artist living under censorship. Beyond this self-reflexive approach simply re-presenting a personal experience, however, Panahi’s video diary also intervenes in the space where art and politics overlap in two significant ways. The first is in giving a unique insight into the way in which art is politicised in contemporary Iran, especially through
censorship, and the way in which the link between art and politics structures the everyday life of one Iranian artist. The second is in highlighting the possibility of artistic self-representation to enact a kind of protest when other forms of political engagement are denied. In seemingly saying very little, Panahi’s self-reflexive presence opens up the possibility of documenting his reality in a distinct way when other possibilities – more identifiably ‘documentary’ possibilities – are foreclosed.

Described by one critic as ‘a logical end point to the reflexive tradition in Iranian filmmaking,’ (Wilson, 5 November 2011), the complex history and particular politics of Iranian cinema offer productive ways of reading the significance of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame, and the significance of the film in the context of rethinking the social instrumentality of documentary film. Iranian cinema has itself come to itself represent for Western audiences a particular kind of political filmmaking, unique among world cinemas (see Gow 2011, 11-13). Given how much the cultural and political context of Panahi’s Iran informs the tone and shape of the film, as well as the filmmaker’s elevated place in the landscape of contemporary Iranian cinema, the first sections of this chapter will explore in detail the cultural and political frames that surround This Is Not a Film and Panahi’s presence within it.

5.1 Reflexivity, power, and seeming not to speak in Iranian cinema

Iranians have learned to engage in ‘saying things without appearing to have said them.’

– Hamid Naficy, quoting Bahram Baizai, ‘Neorealism Iranian Style’

Reflexively considering the process of filmmaking and playing with the lines between life, fiction, reality and fabrication has become a hallmark of Iranian cinema since the 1979 revolution. Following a period of relatively high creative output from the mid-1960s dubbed the ‘Iranian New Wave’ (see Tapper 2002), the establishment of the new Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 ushered in specific restrictions on artistic expression. These restrictions led to the development of a new cinematic grammar in which reflexivity and allegory became key modes of expression. Narratives featuring
the making of films, textual references to the act of viewing, and slippages between fiction and documentary modes have appeared prominently in many Iranian films released internationally over the last thirty years. These modes of expression developed in response to the particular political climate and the direct influence of politics over cinema in the period following the revolution.

By 1978, conservative Islamic forces strongly opposed the Westernisation of Iran under the rule of US- and UK-backed leader Pahlavi, and demonstrations and strikes crippled the country. Cinema became emblematic of the imperialist power of the West, culminating in the razing of a cinema in Abadan in 1978, tragically killing the 400 civilians inside, with 180 more cinemas being destroyed across the country in the months that followed. In 1979 the Shah fled to exile and was replaced by the leader of the popular civil uprising, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the Islamic Republic of Iran was established.

In the wave of conservatism that followed, the link between cinema and social politics was thrust into the spotlight. The new regime recognised the dual potential of cinema to either mobilise support or to undermine their strict value system. Rather than being a political afterthought regulated through censorship, the new leaders claimed the cinema industry as an intrinsic part of the state apparatus, putting the industry under strict control of the newly established Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance. Thus, Iranian cinema became wedded more deeply to the machinery of politics. In his first public address as leader, Ayatollah Khomeini outlined the attitude of the new party toward audiovisual media: ‘We are not opposed to cinema, to radio, to television. … The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people’ (quoted by Mottadeh in Badley, Palmer, and Schneider 2005, 176). Elsewhere, Khomeini was even stronger in his positioning of cinema’s social function, claiming that ‘Cinema is one of the manifestations of culture and it must be put to the service of man [sic] and education’ (quoted in Tapper 2002, 6).

Khomeini’s attitude towards the social instrumentality of cinema somewhat ironically recalls Grierson’s writings about the educative and civic purpose of documentary, a link realised in Khomeini’s continuation of the previous regime’s state-sponsored documentary work (albeit with distinctly different guidelines for
what could be shown). However, Grierson’s definition of documentary had emphasised its difference from fiction film, claiming that in representing the real world documentary offered greater informational and educative potential. By contrast, Khomeini’s instrumentalist view of all kinds of film – both documentary and fiction works – blurred the distinction set up in the British tradition between the two forms. This blurring of form at the level of a government that both censored and sponsored films can help explain the treatment of ‘documentary’ and ‘fiction’ elements as complimentary and interchangeable in the work of Post Revolutionary Iranian filmmakers. Within the context of what film was seen to do in Iranian society, fiction and documentary films were given the same value.

The most overt example of the new regime’s ideas about the place and purpose of cinema was in the ‘rule of modesty,’ which severely restricted the representation of women on screen, and forbade any contact between men and women (including certain acts of looking):

Women were constrained to portrayals that upheld their dignity, and were to avoid activities that would reveal the contours of their body. Men and women would have no physical contact and were prohibited from looking at each other with desire on screen. (Mottahedeh 2005, 17)

These dictates of modesty applied equally to fiction and nonfiction films, which presented particular challenges and led to the development of unique approaches to filmmaking. Many filmmakers set their films in the countryside to avoid the confines of private urban spaces as representing everyday interactions between family members in private homes was impossible. Children often took centre stage in the narrative of films, since they were allowed interactions forbidden to adults. The limits of the modesty rule also extended beyond character and setting when it came to representing interactions between men and women, with many techniques of conventional Hollywood realism – such as shot matching, close ups, and point-of-view perspectives – also off-limits.

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2 Significant films that have used children as central characters in this way include Amir Naderi’s *The Runner* (1990), Bahram Beizai’s *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1990), Majid Majidi’s *Children of Heaven* (1997), Bahman Ghobadi’s *A Time For Drunken Horses* (2001), and Ghobadi’s *Turtles Can Fly* (2003).
Increasingly, Iranian filmmakers abandoned trying to work within the double bind of the modesty rule and the conventions of realism, and opted to explore a new cinematic grammar. This grammar is highly reflexive in nature, and consists of various uses of intense colour to represent emotions or love, the use of nonprofessional actors, heavily stylised acting sequences, suggestive symbolism, the voice of the filmmaker, and the trope of films-within-films. Moreover, focusing on form, working in allegory, and leaving works open to multiple interpretations became a safeguard against any possible accusation of sedition or stirring controversy, and saved Post Revolutionary filmmakers the headache of navigating the uncertain and ever-shifting processes of censorship. This ambiguity has continued to inform the structure of Iranian films, readily slipping between fiction and documentary styles.

**Politics and self-censorship in Post Revolutionary Iranian cinema**

Post Revolutionary Iranian films reveal a complex understanding of both the implicit contingencies of representation and the explicit limits imposed by the government. These films are in many ways defined by reflexivity, scrutinising the process of representation as much as the world the film represents. As Negar Mottahedeh puts it, ‘In Iranian cinema, the characteristic blending of documentary and fiction, of the everyday and the extraordinary … emphatically forces viewers to contemplate the relation between the cinematic and the real’ (2005, 183). This generic blending manifests in a multitude of ways, from ostensibly simple stories loaded with intertextual references, to films-within-films, to sweeping camera movements, to surreal characterisations, to a lack of narrative closure. Hamid Naficy expands on filmmaker Bahram Baizai’s characterization of the creative process as a kind of ‘visual duplicity,’ arguing that Post-Revolutionary Iranian films reflect a more general approach to artistic expression in Iranian society that

 distrust … manifest surface values and instead valorize latent core meanings. … Instead of practicing clarity and frankness, which can cause problems in a highly collective, dual, and hierarchical society, Iranians have learned to engage in ‘saying things without appearing to have said them.’ (Naficy 2012, 236)
Therefore, viewed as an expression of a broader cultural attitude, reflexivity in Iranian films is also strongly political. This politics plays out in individual films through a double movement: on the one hand, more reflexively-oriented texts seem to distance themselves from unmediated reality while muting any political elements inherent in a story; on the other hand, that same reflexivity implicitly codes a film as the product of a politically restrictive culture.

Many recurring tropes in Iranian films can thus be seen as political in what they point to but don’t explicitly address. For example, the representation of children struggling to be understood in the world of adults can be interpreted as allegorical of the control of the state over its artists. Similarly, human affection for animals becomes a displaced symbol for intimacy between people (Mottahedeh 2005, 182). Women being shown as veiled in private spaces can be seen as confronting the ‘voyeurism inscribed in cinematic spectatorship’ and representative of the problematic rendering of all public space as male space (Mottahedeh 2008, 8). These ‘realist’ representations of children, animals, or women take on a reflexive function, often problematised in their formal structure but also ‘revealing’ ideas beyond what they literally represent. They ‘say’ more than what they appear to say on the surface, and this saying takes on a political dimension by virtue of the context in which it is said.

Western critics have repeatedly read Iranian films (specifically those of the Post Revolutionary Iranian cinema that have circulated on the international film festival circuit since the 1980s) for these kind of sub-textual political critiques – critiques that are rarely acknowledged by the filmmaker. Jafar Panahi’s debut feature film The White Balloon (1995, written by Abbas Kiarostami) was described by the film critic for The Australian at the time of its release as ‘an eloquent protest against outdated stereotyping [of Iran]’ (O’Neill, 29 August 1996). However, Panahi explicitly rejected this kind of political reading, declaring that ‘My intention was not to make a political film’ (ibid). Arguably, this disavowal can be read as an attempt at professional self-preservation – Panahi avoiding recriminations in his home country. The effect of this kind of denial, however, is to allow room for more complex political interpretations to be made by critics outside the Iranian context.
Panahi’s third feature film *The Circle* (2000) was much more directly controversial, representing the cultural oppression of several different women whose lives intersect on the streets of Tehran. Reviewing *The Circle* for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Wesley Morris asserted that leaving the backstory of these women unexplained is ‘not for dramatic effect but to assign political blame: Iran as unthinking persecutor’ (4 May 2001). The film was banned in Iran – a predictable outcome given the content – but again Panahi claimed that while he meant to show sympathy for the difficulties of these particular women negotiating everyday life in Iran, he did not intend for the film to be taken as a critique of Islamic culture more generally. Speaking to *The Age* critic Tom Ryan in 2002, Panahi said ‘This is a film about people in a particular situation. I’m just giving shape to their feelings’ (1 March 2002). The tension between what Panahi’s film seems to allegorically represent and Panahi’s explicit explanation of its meaning highlights the difficulty in interpreting Iranian films from the outside.

The combination in Iran of filmmakers reluctant to talk about their own work and the distinctive cinematic grammar of the films ensures that interpretation of any Iranian film’s meaning is particularly fraught. Critic Azadeh Farahmand analyses this situation through the lens of the reception of recent Iranian films on the world stage, arguing that filmmakers have been lead to refrain from making confrontational and socially critical films for fear of being held accountable for making anti-system or anti-establishment statements through their work. This repressive situation fosters self-censorship in ways that become additional impediments to the creative activity and critical expression of filmmakers. (Farahmand in Tapper 2002, 91)

Farahmand’s reflection on self-censorship hints at one of the paradoxical consequences of Iranian filmmakers working within a difficult social context: in carefully managing the representations they make, the filmmakers themselves have become more visible. The possibility of individual filmmakers being held personally accountable for any messages their films are thought to convey, facing censorship or even incarceration if their film is deemed to undermine Islamic values, has developed a strong kind of auteurism within Iranian cinema.
Auteurist thinking tends to resolve the multiple and often contradictory contexts of authorship around a fixed and interpretable figure of the auteur. Catherine Grant explains these processes of contemporary auteurism as ‘underpinned by a shared belief in the specific capability of an individual agent – the director’ (2008, 101). According to Grant, the figure of the director works to ‘marshal and synthesize the multiple, usually collective, elements of filmmaking for the purposes of individual expression’ in the eyes of the community of viewers, whether or not there is any actual correspondence between the meanings made and their intent or the filmmaker was solely responsible what is taken as individual expression (2008, 101). While film authorship as a specific process is understood as more individualist or more collaborative in different contexts, Grant argues that thinking of authorship in terms of auteurism entails the same fundamental process of attributing the sum of the meanings of a film to the focused vision of a single author. The logic of the Iranian authoritarian system, which insists on someone being accountable for any meanings a film makes, conceptualises film authorship in this auteurist way – as an intentional and considered communication of meaning by an individual filmmaker. The personality of the filmmaker therefore becomes directly associated with the meanings of their films.

The broader emphasis on a link between meaning and the filmmaker’s intent in the Iranian political context plays out through the subject matter of the films themselves. Filmmakers are acutely aware of the consequences of getting offside with the authorities: consequences that range from films being banned to incarceration. Even directors that engage with social issues do so obliquely, tending to avoid certain culturally sensitive subject matter such as criticising the clerics, and treating other controversial topics such as the place of women or the influence of the West through allegory and symbolism rather than directly through the narrative. Nonetheless, a significant number of Post Revolutionary Iranian films do identifiably tackle politically sensitive topics. Key examples include: Kiarostami’s 1989 documentary *Homework*, which subtly indicts the insufficiency of the Iranian education system; Makmalbaf’s semi-autobiographical 1996 film *A Moment of Innocence* that looks at the relationship between the police and civilians; and Bahman Ghobadi’s *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009), which portrays the efforts of a young punk band from Tehran trying to con the authorities into securing visas to play a gig in London.
Homework was initially banned in Iran but released three years later, A Moment of Innocence never received an Iranian cinema release, and No One Knows About Persian Cats has not been released in Iran and since its release internationally, neither the director nor stars have worked again in Iran (during shooting of No One Knows About Persian Cats, Ghobadi and the lead actors were arrested and released several times). These cases show how Iranian censorship is both a sliding scale and an uncertain business, highlighting how filmmakers are regularly held accountable for any perceived slight. As I explore later, Panahi’s experience is no exception.

The figure of the filmmaker thus looms over every Iranian film, a perpetual point of reference for meaning that defies Barthes’ idea of the death of the author. In a culture where the processes of censorship are impossible to predict and filmmakers rely on allegory and various reflexive strategies to ‘speak without appearing to have spoken,’ analysing and scrutinising interviews and statements from filmmakers becomes key to interpreting meaning in their films. As Randolph Lewis points out, when a film is open to multiple interpretations – something that has become characteristic of Iranian films as a strategy for dealing with censorship – the viewer will ‘look past the screen for flickers of illumination’ (2007, 266). Those flickers settle on the intent of the filmmaker, and in the absence of clear or sufficient clues within the film itself, the words of the filmmaker about their films film take on greater significance in the process of interpretation. The ambiguity at the heart of Post Revolutionary Iranian cinema therefore thrusts the filmmaker into the spotlight in the spaces around their films as well as within them.

While politics, censorship, reflexivity, and narrative have been deeply entwined throughout the history of cinema in Iran, these connections took a particular turn in the arrest of Jafar Panahi in 2010. Both inside and outside the frame of his films, Panahi had repeatedly overstepped the shifting line that separates interpretive ambiguity from unacceptable criticism of the regime, and his arrest became an example used by the government to (re)mark out their authority. The diaristic This Is Not a Film is the filmmaker’s sophisticated and defiant response to their charges. The film consciously invokes the complex history and specific tropes of Iranian cinema, redefining the use of reflexivity as a politically aimed representational tool. While Panahi repeatedly disavows his authorship of the film, his presence within the
frame is crucial to how it constructs meaning and offers a way of representing a situation that has been explicitly denied by the authorities.

5.2 The author arrested: Jafar Panahi

*I don’t want to give a political view, or start a political war. I think that the artist should rise above this.*

– Jafar Panahi speaking with Stephen Teo, July 2001

Jafar Panahi made his first feature film in 1995, emerging as a filmmaker at a particularly thorny time in Iranian cinema. The tight controls on the industry from the early days of the Khomeini regime were being relaxed during this period; from 1989 to 1993, scripts did not need approval to begin production, and for these few years Iranian films were given more leeway to cast a critical eye over Iranian culture (Tapper 2002, 8). Concurrent with this relaxing of content censorship, Iranian cinema was being increasingly ‘discovered’ by international audiences and programmed in film festivals across the world. The interaction between domestic and international production and reception contexts produced vibrancy in Iranian cinema not seen since before the revolution. Panahi’s social conscience and his deep love for cinema, in particular its capacity to represent reality in creative and revealing ways, developed in the context of this creative community that was finding space to breathe after being constricted by the mechanics of strict creative regulation.

Prior to making *The White Balloon*, Panahi spent time in the Iranian army where he worked as a cinematographer. During this time, he was deployed to cover the ethnic conflict in the north of Iran, where he was captured by Kurdish forces and held prisoner for seventy-six days. His half hour film of that experience was shown on Iranian television, earning him a place at the College of Cinema and TV in Tehran (Stone n/d). Panahi completed his cinematic apprenticeship with Kiarostami, serving as an assistant on *Through The Olive Trees* (1994), and from then quickly emerged as one of the leading directors of the New Iranian Cinema movement. Panahi’s first two feature films – *The White Balloon* and *The Mirror* (a.k.a. *Ayneh*) from 1997 – were critically acclaimed internationally. Both followed Kiarostami’s lead in painting a multifaceted picture of Iranian life through the eyes of a child. However,
in contrast to Kiarostami, who has actively rendered his own political opinion ambiguous within his films (Gow 2011, 26-27), Panahi set about directly challenging the established social order through his films from relatively early in his career. His agenda was most notable in his third feature *The Circle* (*Dayereh*, 2000). The film focuses on the difficulties of women living under the rule of modesty, following the intersecting stories of several women living in Tehran over a single day. One critic called it, ‘overtly political, breaking the (enforced) trend towards submerged, codified meaning in Iranian films’ (Byrnes, 7 March 2002). The script was denied approval for over eight months, and the film is still banned in Iran despite having won several international awards, including the Golden Lion at the Venice film festival. The international attention that *The Circle* received, in particular how its success shed light on the plight of women in Iran, thrust Panahi front and centre on the authorities’ radar.

Despite *The Circle*’s controversial content, at this stage of his career Panahi was still wary of film’s content being read as an expression of his own partisan political stance. In a long interview with Stephen Teo for *Senses of Cinema*, the director went to great lengths to emphasise a fine-grained distinction between what he calls ‘a political view,’ and merely commenting on ‘social issues’ that are not specific to any political context:

> I have to tell you again that I’m not a political person. I don’t like political movies. But I take every opportunity to comment on the social issues. I talk about the current issues. To me it’s not important what is the reason for what has happened. Whether it’s political reasons or geographical reasons: these are not important – but the condition, the social issues. It is important to me to talk about the plight of humanity at that time. I don’t want to give a political view, or start a political war. I think that the artist should rise above this. (Panahi quoted in Teo 2001)

While laced with overt disavowals of any intent to be polemical, there are several lines of thought here that reveal Panahi’s careful management of what *The Circle* is taken to be ‘saying’ about Iranian society or what the film suggests of his personal opinion. By drawing a tenuous distinction between ‘political views’ and ‘commentary on social issues,’ Panahi here highlights the competing demands of
working as an Iranian filmmaker. Similarly, Panahi’s separation of the artistic realm from the political – suggesting that an artistic approach inherently transcends politics – also highlights the continuing need for the filmmaker to tread with caution in his public commentary, in contrast to the critical representation of women’s repression in *The Circle*.

**Panahi as political commentator**

As seen in the example of *The Circle*’s content and its reception, Panahi’s early work was characterised by tensions between his films and his words about his films, common to this period of Iranian cinema. Panahi’s comments about the film assert a strong link between politics and filmmaking through so stridently rejecting such a link. This example highlights the broader tensions in the Iranian filmmaking context between narratives that are historically specific and an exploration of representation that is ahistoric, between comment and criticism, between forcefully saying and qualifying what is said. These tensions raise questions of authenticity, power, and the possibilities of documentary to represent different realities.

Jaques Rancière’s work on the intersections of politics and aesthetics is a useful framework for understanding how this tension between Panahi’s work and his words takes on discursive significance. Rancière’s theory bridges structuralist understandings of the power of discourse with a poststructuralist emphasis on individual agency and subjectivity, arguing that politics is a state that precedes any specific political subjectivity, but that political thought only emerges in specific circumstances where the order of things (the sensible) is destabilised (Rancière 2001). Rancière defines aesthetics as the regimes of thought by which art is understood as art, which in turn shapes the production and circulation of creative and expressive practices including art and film. For Rancière, aesthetics is involved in the negotiation of politics by ‘(re)distributing the sensible’ (2006). Art configures politics ‘as a form of experience … [that] revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the

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3 Panahi reiterated this distinction in his letter of defense presented to his sentencing court in 2010, writing ‘All through my career I have emphasized that I am a socially committed filmmaker not a political one. My main concerns are social issues; therefore my films are social dramas not political statements. I never wanted to act as a judge or a prosecutor. I am not a film maker who judges but one that invites other to see.’ The authorities were evidently not swayed by this distinction, and handed down Panahi an exceptionally severe sentence.
properties of spaces and the possibilities of time’ (Rancière 2006, 13). While Rancière’s theory does not render every artistic act a political act, thinking of politics in this way casts Panahi’s films as emblematically political. For example, The Circle is political for how it presents politicised subjects, and how it negotiates the limits of acceptable behaviour and the possibility of critically engaging with dominant social structures. Despite its obtuse structuring and deliberate focus on the immediate problems of these women rather than the broader issues these problems are symptomatic of, The Circle explicitly questions what can be made visible, the possibility of representing certain situations, and who has a voice within the space and time of contemporary Iran. These aspects of the film make it political to a far greater sense than simply in having ‘some political background,’ as Panahi claimed in his interview with Teo.

Reading between the lines of Panahi’s discussion with Teo, it becomes clear that the filmmaker does mean for the film to be a direct comment on, and challenge to, the current social status quo. As a filmmaker who acutely understands the power of discourse in shaping society – having lived through a revolution where criticism and dissidence were both tightly controlled and extremely powerful – his declaration that ‘It is important to me to talk about the plight of humanity at that time’ can be read as a declaration of political intent. In the same interview, Panahi also talks about the particular neo-realism of Iranian cinema and how this is intended to evoke sympathy in the audience:

The Iranian cinema treats social subjects. Because you’re showing social problems, you want to be more realistic and give the actual, the real aesthetics of the situation. If the audience feels the same as what they see, then they would be more sympathetic. (Quoted in Teo 2001)

Using films to comment on the ‘plight of humanity’ in the time and place of Panahi’s Iran, and deploying a specific style (neo-realism) to evoke sympathy in the audience, equates to a political act. Reading The Circle as a political film, intended to critique Iranian society and perhaps mobilise viewers to challenge the system, Panahi’s insistence on making a distinction between ‘commenting on social issues’ and ‘political commentary’ can be attributed to his continuing awareness of the culture of censorship he is still bound by. Despite pushing the envelope so far in The Circle,
Panahi still feels bound by a sense of having to ‘say things without appearing to have said them’. Structuring the film around the intersecting stories of everyday women, showing what cannot be shown (women alone in the crowded city, a woman seeking an abortion), and refusing to judge his characters (many of whom are breaking Islamic law) can all be read as evidence of Panahi voicing his politics by negation. In short, the film makes a strong political statement while Panahi feigns ignorance of that statement.

Panahi made two feature films after *The Circle* – *Crimson Gold* (*Talaye sorkh*, 2003) and *Offside* (2006) – both of which were well received internationally but banned domestically. He ran into particular problems with the making the latter, which, while not as overtly polemical as *The Circle*, picks up the refrain of the earlier film in implicitly challenging the Islamic laws that deny women access to certain social spaces. Despite again claiming upon *Offside*’s international release that his film was not intended to be political, Panahi was aware that the film would have political repercussions. He submitted a false script for the film to the authorities before shooting to circumvent that stage of censorship, and tried to keep word of the filming out of the press to avoid unwanted attention from the authorities (*Offside* Press Notes 2006). One local newspaper found out about the filming and ran a story on it, leading to the army threatening to shut down the shoot and demanding that Panahi hand over his rushes for ‘verification’ (ibid). According to the Press Notes for the film’s Australian release, Panahi defied the authorities, told them he would not let military personnel onto the set, and finished the film sixty kilometres outside of Tehran. In the same press kit Panahi writes, ‘There was the issue of my reputation as a director, which we knew from the start would be a problem.’ This statement further reveals his awareness of the reputation he had garnered in his homeland as an agitator, and

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4 Dabashi’s article ‘The tragic endings of Iranian cinema’ accuses Panahi (alongside Kiarostami, Makmalbaf, and other Iranian cinema luminaries) of running away from controversy and his power as a filmmaker to challenge the authorities. Dabashi argues that many contemporary Iranian filmmakers have more or less abandoned their obligation to engage with the everyday politics of their homeland. Dabashi calls out Panahi and Kiarostami in particular for working on projects further and further removed from the ‘social issues’ films that deal with the many dimensions of Iranian life. Dabashi mitigates his criticism of Kiarostami in noting his last few films are actually set outside of Iran, but is more scathing of Panahi, claiming that *This Is Not a Film* and 2013’s *Closed Curtain* are ‘self-indulgent vagaries … [and] precisely the selfsame social punch that have made his best films knife-sharp precise has now dulled the wit of the filmmaker that was once able to put it to such magnificent use.’ I would argue that in *This Is Not a Film* so explicitly showing the difficulties of making a film at all (let alone one with ‘social punch’) under an oppressive regime is equally if not more effective at representing and critiquing the cultural conditions of the time, and that Dabashi has perhaps underestimated the discursive power of the reflexive play between the film being made and the context it is made in.
also highlights the degree to which this auteurist link between the filmmaker’s persona and their work exists in the Iranian context.

The ‘problem’ of Panahi’s reputation as a director culminated in his arrest at his home in Tehran on 1 March 2010. Scholars have emphasised that such paradoxical states of affairs as filmmakers denying their political intent in obviously political films are characteristic of Iranian society generally, and filmmakers find ways to continue working even if they occasionally clash with the authorities (see Mottahedeh 2008; Gow 2011). However, having repeatedly defied the authorities and consistently pushed the boundaries of political criticism underlying his films, the newly re-elected government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad finally found cause to silence Panahi. Upon his arrest the filmmaker was charged with sedition related to his filmmaking activity, specifically ‘colluding with the intention to commit crimes against the country’s national security and propaganda against the Islamic Republic’ (Shoard, 21 May 2011). Mohammad Hosseini from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance accused Panahi of ‘making a film against the regime … about the events that followed the election’ (AFP, 14 April 2010). The ‘events’ referred to by Hosseini include a series of often-violent demonstrations in 2009 against the re-election of Ahmadinejad, which was controversial because of serious concerns about the legitimacy of the polling process. Panahi participated in several of these protests, and the authorities alleged that he filmed footage of demonstrations for use in his next film. Panahi refuted those charges, maintaining that the film he had in development at the time was a domestic drama with nothing to do with the disputed elections. Despite his protests, Panahi received the severe sentence of a six-year jail term, and a further twenty-year ban from directing, appearing in the media, or from leaving the country (Shoard, 21 May 2011).

Panahi’s claims of innocence regarding the content of his unmade film take on an ironic shade when seen within the body of his work and within the spoken/unspoken dialectic of Iranian cinema generally. The tensions at the heart of Post Revolutionary Iranian cinema between social commentary and reflexive allegory took on particularly pronounced political overtones in Panahi’s films. The complex intersections of his voice inside and outside the frame of his films has positioned him as a heroic symbol of the artist overcoming the restrictions of a regime in the eyes of the international film community, and as an unpatriotic troublemaker in the eyes of
Iranian authorities. His arrest was therefore relatively unsurprising (even if the charges were less than convincing), but the extent of his sentence was notably severe. Panahi himself angrily ridiculed his sentence in a letter to his sentencing court: ‘It is unprecedented in Iranian cinema to arrest and imprison a filmmaker for making a film, and harass his family while he is in prison. This is a new development in the history of Iranian cinema that will be remembered for a long time’ (Panahi 2010). Panahi’s assessment has been supported by the international film community, with his arrest and sentence being viewed as the Iranian authorities making an example of Panahi – a way of drawing a line, not only in terms of what they will tolerate in internal dissent from its artists, but also in terms of how Iran is to be represented. Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, said that Panahi was certainly becoming a thorn in the side of the government and his detention not only prevents him from being a cultural ambassador globally, it also sends a strong message to the film and artistic community that no one is immune from the ongoing harsh repression and that attempts at using art to display popular discontent will be met with brute force. (Ghaemi quoted in Barber, 24 April 2010)

As Ghaemi points out, the tensions between truth and fiction, representation and censorship, and allegory and reflexivity in Post Revolutionary Iranian film became particularly focused on the figure of Panahi. Through his work as a filmmaker, he represented a particular image of contemporary Iran that undermined the authorities, but his role as a social commentator also exceeded the content of his films. Panahi’s felt presence as a filmmaker both inside and outside the frame of his films is what became so problematic to the authorities. In sentencing him, the court sought to contain him both physically and discursively, banning both his speech and his movement.

Ironically, Panahi’s arrest only cemented his international profile and his symbolic status as a dissenting voice against the regime seeking to censor him. The filmmaker’s own response to being deprived of his substantive presence as a filmmaker was to speak out more loudly against his situation. He wrote open letters (including the one read at the Berlinale), and he published his ‘Defense presented to
the court’ on his Facebook page (Panahi, 13 November 2010). His most concerted effort to speak out against his sentence, however, came in the making and release of This Is Not a Film. As much as it is the testimony of a frustrated filmmaker expressing his experience of house arrest, the (not)film is also a pointed gesture of defiance against the regime censoring him. In the film, Panahi’s material experience of censorship works as a kind of political reflexivity, revealing the routine consequences of being denied the right to make a film, which implicitly reveals the machinations of the political context in which he does (or does not) make this film. And while it clearly shows him making a kind of film, he is also obviously denied the usual freedoms he has previously enjoyed. Instead of having access to actors, sets, and crews, Panahi positions himself in the frame, as both the author and the subject of the film, and in doing so creates a new kind of documentary politics.

5.3 This is not a filmmaker: performing and disavowing authorship

If this is not a film, it is, among other things, a statement of creative resistance in the face of tyranny and a document of intellectual freedom under political duress. ... [Panahi] is clearly more accustomed to observing and reflecting on the actions of others than to being the center of the action. And so he does both, turning a highly personal video diary into a charged and expansive historical narrative.

— A. O. Scott, 28 February 2012

The notion of documentary performance is key to This Is Not a Film. Performance structures the film in two senses: firstly, because it reflexively represents the filmmaker engaged in the process of filmmaking as a performative process (in the sense following Stella Bruzzi’s concept of documentary as the result of the ‘collision’ between reality and its representation). Secondly, the question of what performative acts constitute ‘being a filmmaker’ is directly addressed within the film as a topic of conversation between Panahi and his cinematographer friend Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, who operates the camera for about half of the screen time. (I return to Mirtahmasb’s key role in the film later in this chapter.) Moreover, Panahi self-
consciously ‘acts’ the role of the frustrated censored filmmaker struggling to comply with the terms of his arrest.

Paradoxically, it is Panahi’s carefully constructed performance of not being a filmmaker that indelibly marks him as a filmmaker, because such a performance entails a sophisticated understanding of the processes of representation. His constant references to his own performance offer a way of speaking while still acknowledging the suppression of his speech. A similar paradox is at play extra-textually through the Berlinale letter quoted at the start of this chapter, where Panahi speaks of his silence and makes his presence felt through a self-reflexive consideration of his absence. In This Is Not a Film, it is via Panahi’s performance that the film recuperates political power in exactly the space it has been denied – the realm of filmic representation – by directly considering processes of filmmaking as the specific experience of the filmmaker. This performance, however, doesn’t define itself in binary opposition to observation or a different ‘authentic’ way of being, but instead suggests performance as constitutive of both filmmaking and of everyday life.

The link between everyday behaviour and the performance of filmmaking is built into the film’s loose narrative arc. The film is set on the day of the Iranian New Year, bookended by an opening scene of Panahi eating breakfast at his kitchen table and an end scene showing him filming the New Year’s fireworks at nightfall. While implying a highly restricted duration of one day in Panahi’s life, the film was actually shot over a period of ten days. The way in which the film intersects performance and authorship begins with this small detail: it is structured to appear as if recorded on a single day, but is not in fact a record of the day it represents. Rather, it is a carefully structured, deliberately ‘authored’ text, representative of Panahi’s general experience rather than an observational account of a particular time. Yet this detail of form is not explicitly flagged in the film. Is this then a document, or a recreation? If it is a film (contrary to its title), what kind of film is it? Raising these questions of form without offering any clear answer not only plays to Panahi’s ironic title, but also implicitly asks whether it matters to the meanings carried by the text what it is called.

Recalling the complex history of reflexivity and the blurring of boundaries between fiction and documentary in Iranian cinema, Panahi leverages this ambiguity of form.
to resonate with his own experience of uncertainty, and focus attention not on the ‘authenticity’ of his performance but instead on the political reasons for so carefully constructing this representation of his experience. As Peter Bradshaw observed in his review of the film for *The Guardian*:

Panahi’s title hints at the Magrittean absurdity of what he has to do to get round the law. Technically, it is the work of its cameraman Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, and Panahi is not being ‘interviewed’ but rather speaking lines, like an actor, on the subject of film-making. (29 March 2012)

Considering that Bradshaw precedes his discussion of who is ‘technically’ the author of the film with the attribution of the title as ‘Panahi’s,’ the distinction marked by the term ‘technically’ here is infused with irony. Bradshaw’s point is to highlight the indistinct and shifting lines between performance and ‘mere’ observational recording in the film, and draw out the dramatic irony that frames the Panahi’s filmmaking exercise.

The dramatic irony of the making of a film built upon the performance of not being a filmmaker is pointed to in the film’s title. The title also highlights the complex intersection of social, political, personal and documentary discourses Panahi negotiates throughout. At one level, it is a mocking political statement: since Panahi has been stripped of his identity as a filmmaker, this cannot be a film. On another level, the title works as a reflexive comment on form – it is a meandering, diaristic record without an overt epistemological argument or narrative resolution. Finally, it also implicitly admits to the limits of documentary as an epistephilic discourse, since the process of filming cannot fully represent Panahi’s situation. As the work of an author denied the authority to represent, Panahi’s video document questions the assumption of the filmmaker’s authority to (re)present reality in a meaningful way, and begins to dissolve the distinction documentary often invokes between the act of representation and what is represented. The paradoxes pointed to in the title – that this film is not a film, and by extension that this filmmaker is not a filmmaker – are made political in the film through Panahi simultaneously voicing his experience of censorship and criticising the logic of the regime that has censored him. The film therefore raises complex issues of historical politics and censorship, and offers a unique way of engaging with and rethinking the ‘felt tension between representation
and represented’ (Nichols 1994, 2) that arises when subjectivity and personal experience are the axis around which documentary representation revolves.

Through its particular consideration of documentary performance, *This Is Not a Film* tackles head on many of the tensions within documentary discourses outlined earlier in this thesis, especially between the filmmaker’s authorial control and their subjectivity, and between viewing documentary as a reliable representation of actuality and the acknowledgement that documentary representation inherently involves creative interpretation. These tensions underpin the narrative of the whole film (as slight as that narrative initially seems); it is premised on negotiating what the process of documentary filmmaking can and cannot represent of his situation. By turning the camera on himself and representing his own experience of censorship, Panahi directly explores the tension between the act of representation and what is represented. Throughout the film, Panahi describes how he is forced to be silent, and shows his perspective on being deprived of seeing the world. He questions what constitutes a film and what constitutes a filmmaker, pushing the line between fact and fiction, between staging and spontaneity, and between performance and observation. In doing so, he explores and exposes the ambiguities of nonfiction film forms in complex and nuanced ways.

**Representing censorship: ambiguities of form in Panahi’s (not)film**

*This Is Not a Film* lies somewhere between a video diary and an experimental film. It comprises a representation of a day-in-the-life of Panahi’s time under house arrest, showing the censored filmmaker shuffling around his apartment, rewatching some of his previous films, talking with his lawyer on the phone about his pending appeal, and bantering about the definition of his sentence and the nature of filmmaking with his friend and colleague Mojtaba Mirtahmasb (who also acts as part-time ‘director’ in Panahi’s film). In essence, *This Is Not a Film* is a film about not being able to make a film. Rather than being solipsistic or self-indulgent, however, Panahi’s careful performance as both subject and filmmaker creates a work that powerfully engages with issues creative oppression in his homeland. It is through Panahi turning the lens on himself and representing his own experience of censorship, utilising as well as problematising the tropes of first-person video work, that the filmmaker is able to ‘speak without appearing to have spoken.’
In the context of a filmmaker explicitly denied his authority to represent the world, a not-film – a diary-record without argument, resolution, or obvious educative and informational value – offers a way of representing reality where the more traditional form of documentary representation (at least in the conventional sense of expository, epistephilic documentary) fails. The film’s form (hinted at in its title) can also be read as a calculated challenge to the authorities, using their own adherence to discursively defined laws and technicalities against them. Panahi was arrested because his work was interpreted as seditious towards a religiously defined regime, and in this not-film he is daring that same regime to redefine the social instrumentality of film that his sentence implies. The form and title of the film therefore also invokes one particular group of the imagined audience to whom Panahi addresses this work – the authorities in whose hands the status of the film as a film will be judged. Self-reflexively considering his own encounter as a documentary subject and as a subject in a repressive Iranian regime also ironically recalls Khomeini’s project to coerce the cinema industry in Iran for the purposes of bolstering the regime.

Ambiguities of form are especially acute in moments when performance and observation are most closely aligned, such as the opening scene where Panahi quietly eats breakfast alone, positioned squarely facing the camera but never acknowledging its presence. The scene reads as both the observation of a daily ritual and a performance for the benefit of the camera. In this simple staging, Panahi’s simultaneous awareness and ignoring of the camera suggests that observation and performance are not mutually exclusive nor even points along the same spectrum, but that they are co-present and co-dependent: performance shapes all observation and observation shapes all performance.

Panahi’s self-awareness of his own performance also structures the second scene of the film, in which Panahi walks around the bedroom of his empty Tehran apartment, sliding his slippers on while listening to his voicemail messages on speaker, apparently unaware of the camera recording him in the corner of the room. This scene of unremarkable domestic routine offers a glimpse into the oppressive banality of house arrest, but the everyday-ness also invites the question of why such a scene is filmed. That question is answered by the voice of Panahi’s teenage son on voicemail message telling his father that he has set up the camera and left it recording. Panahi
strides over to the camera and switches it off, abruptly ending the scene. This unremarkable moment becomes infused with dramatic irony through the performance of both Panahi and his son. That this experienced filmmaker would not have been aware he was being recorded, much less had anything to do with the camera’s presence, and the subsequent performance of routine carried out in front of it, sharply echoes the irony of the film’s title. His obvious ignoring of the camera in this scene advances his claim that what we are watching is not a film: in this case, the ‘Filmmaker in the Frame’ is identifiable through his performed pretence to not be in control of this act of filming at all. Panahi’s deliberate disavowal in the staging of this scene mockingly acknowledges the limitations placed on his filmmaking activity and at the same time asserts his corporeal existence as both a filmmaker (albeit a censored one) and as a citizen of Iran, invested in the politics of his situation not just on a conceptual level but in a domestic and personal way. Panahi’s act of shuffling around his bedroom and feigning unawareness of the camera is a performance that invites the viewer to (re)consider the place of this filmmaker in the frame as both author and subject, at the same time as both authorship and subjectivity are questioned.

Two scenes later, Panahi sits at his kitchen table talking to his lawyer about his pending appeal. His phone is set on speaker mode and the camera is positioned to frame him in a perfect mid-shot; his body language – slightly turned away, looking out towards his balcony as he talks – serves as a further cue as to the performativity of this moment. The viewer knows that Panahi knows the camera is there, and so interprets his reaction to the conversation in reference to this performativity. Panahi asks his lawyer what the chances are of his sentence being overturned – both the twenty year ban from directing and the six year prison sentence: ‘Do you think the appeals judge will confirm the verdict or not? I need to know.’ The lawyer is confident that the directing ban will be overturned, and that the length of the jail term will be reduced (though not overturned). Panahi asks his lawyer if he will definitely go to prison. The blunt reply tells him, ‘Yes, the prison is certain. They’re not going to acquit you.’ Panahi’s reaction to this news is stoic. He sips his tea and stares into the distance as the news sinks in. He continues the conversation, but his body language suggests his attention is elsewhere. In this moment, Panahi’s expression reveals not only his shock at the news he was hoping not to hear, but also the tension
between performance and emotion – between being a director orchestrating the scene and the subject caught up in the world unfolding. The filmmaker’s presence in the frame here communicates what is not spoken in his exchange with the lawyer: that he identifies as a filmmaker even in this difficult moment, but that even in making this film he is unable to express his experience fully. While filming this moment is a deliberate act of defiant expression, it limited in what it can express.

Panahi’s acknowledgement of the limits of representation works as a particular kind of reflexivity in This Is Not a Film. By making the (in)sufficiency of ‘telling’ compared to ‘showing’ an explicit concern of the film’s narrative, the film constantly turns back on itself to consider the problems and politics of representation. The reflexive turning of This Is Not a Film, however, does more than only draw the viewer’s attention to the formal dimensions of the film’s construction or the political dimensions of power and authority at work in the film. Reflexivity in This Is Not a Film constitutes the fundamental logic by which the film unfolds; Panahi positions the process and problems of making the film as the central ‘story’ that the film follows. In other words, the film is about reflexivity. It also introduces a distinctly self-reflexive dimension because it is also about Panahi’s emotional and everyday experience of being censored, negotiating the possibilities of representing his world through film despite that censorship.

Reflexivity as a subject of the film is especially evident in one particular conversation between Panahi and Mirtahmasb. The two men are talking just after a phone call to Panahi’s lawyer. After saying his piece to the camera, Panahi instructs Mirtahmasb to ‘cut,’ to which Mirtahmasb replies, ‘You are not directing. It is an offence. You just read the screenplay.’ Panahi laughs and rhetorically asks ‘So I’m not a director anymore?’ Panahi here ironically defines the limits of authorship in terms of the performative act of saying ‘cut.’ It is a definition of what constitutes a filmmaker that at once qualifies Panahi’s role as this film’s author (since he retracts his calling of ‘cut’), while at the same time deriding and satirising the parameters of his sentence. While the terms of his sentence may not authorise Panahi to perform the role of ‘cutting’ the scene (that a long history of films about filmmaking have made symbolic of ‘being a filmmaker’), his reflexive consideration of what does and does not define him as a filmmaker self-reflexively inscribes his control over the process of making this film.
This Is Not a Film shares parallels in its approach to reflexivity with Jill Godmilow’s 1984 film Far From Poland. Rather than considering reflexivity as a question of style that ‘solves’ certain representational problems and enables ‘better’ kinds of knowledge about the world represented, Panahi and Godmilow each take the question of the very possibility of representing a political situation that defies simple representation as the starting point for filmmaking. These films both ask ‘Can a film represent this reality?’ rather than ‘How can a film represent this reality?’ However, while Godmilow makes herself a key character in her film, the crucial difference between the representation of the filmmaker in Far From Poland and This Is Not a Film is that the situation represented in Godmilow’s film does not revolve around her personal experience to the same extent as Panahi’s film revolves around his experience. Despite Godmilow revealing her personal investment in the political turmoil in Poland, and despite her explicit acknowledgement that the film is a contingent and insufficient representation entirely shaped by her subjective decisions, Godmilow still stands at some critical distance from the world she seeks to represent. On the other hand, Panahi’s video document shows the filmmaker unable to separate himself from the reality he represents. The closeness of Panahi to the reality he represents has specific consequences that do not apply to Godmilow’s situation: in making his film, Panahi also in a sense ‘legitimates’ the charges against him. By making This Is Not a Film he has in fact created a ‘seditious’ kind of film – one that can easily be read as being against the regime, as his initial charges claimed in relation to his banned script. The making of This Is Not a Film therefore retrospectively (and ironically) ‘proves’ the authorities’ charges of Panahi’s intent to criticise the regime. Using filmmaking to self-reflexively consider his own role as a filmmaker therefore constitutes Panahi’s way of actively responding to, criticising, and redefining the ‘reality’ that the film addresses.

The way in which Panahi’s representation of his experience produces a form of protest points to the different senses in which documentary representation can be theorised as ‘performative,’ which raises attendant questions of authorship, particularly in terms of the assumed authority of the filmmaker to represent the world. Through representing his experience of censorship, Panahi holds the

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5 I would still argue, as outlined in Chapter 1, that Far From Poland is based more around exploring the self-reflexive encounter between the filmmaker and the process of filming than it is based around reflexive revealing, but the reflexive elements of Godmilow’s film are relevant to raise here in comparison to the overtly reflexive aspects of This Is Not a Film.
assumptions attached to ‘being a filmmaker’ up to scrutiny. The filmmaker is forced
to explicitly disavow his authority to represent his world, and is unable to directly
speak of his situation, while at the same time reinscribing his authority through the
act of filming. Through this tension between authority and meaning, This Is Not a
Film reveals that the responsibilities assumed through the performative act of
filmmaking are contingent on a much larger web of sociohistorical conditions –
conditions which are as much bound by the filmmaker’s personal politics as by the
responsibilities of the documentary community.

Panahi’s explicit consideration of his experience of censorship therefore highlights
how the authority of the filmmaker depends not only on a ‘community dedication to
truth telling’ (Plantinga 1997, 219) or on the filmmaker’s commitment to ‘describe
and interpret the world of collective experience’ (Nichols 1991, 10), but also on the
personal context of the filmmaker. Panahi’s compromised position as an author in
This Is Not a Film draws an important link between self-reflexivity and performance.
His performance entails a degree of self-conscious ‘acting’ that in other contexts
might undermine his trustworthiness and therefore his authority, but here becomes an
effective articulation of the ‘truth’ of his situation. Performance links the
filmmaker’s specific subjective experience with the possibility of making a film,
showing the filmmaker’s subjectivity and his authorship as produced in the same
moments of filming.

Panahi-as-author / Panahi-as-subject

In Nichols’ definition of the ‘performative mode’ of documentary, he suggests that
the performance of the filmmaker in the frame is alienating in a way that deflects the
possibility of engaging with them empathetically as a specific subject. He defines the
performative documentary as one structured around the performances of individual
social actors (or groups of individuals) in moments that are ‘staged’ in the theatrical
sense, utilising choreographed and expressively coded filmmaking techniques. For
Nichols, the poetic and expressive engagement with reality in these films also
‘overshadows their reference to the historical world’ (1994, 94). Nichols
distinguished these performative documentaries from reflexive or interactive films;
the former engage poetically and expressively with the reality represented, and the
latter engage with documentary representations as being primarily informational and
realist. Attendant to this definition is the idea that while performative documentaries are more fully ‘about’ subjectivity, this subjectivity is less anchored in specific experiences than in a generalised emphasis on affect and expressivity. Crucially, in his initial definition of the performative mode Nichols also doesn’t distinguish the effect of performative filmmakers from other performative subjects; a distinction that Panahi repeatedly invites throughout his (not)film.

In contrast to Nichols’ characterization, Stella Bruzzi’s notion of performativity does account for this difference between performative filmmaker and other performative subjects. Within Bruzzi’s definition of documentary as the result of the ‘collision’ between apparatus and subject, the performativity of the filmmaker in the frame has particular resonance because they act as both part of the apparatus of filmmaking and as a participant in the intersubjective exchanges recorded. Yet Bruzzi also illustrates her definition of performativity in relation to filmmakers with examples of filmmakers whose presence in the frame has an alienating or distancing effect – filmmakers like Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore. The performance of these kinds of filmmakers is registered primarily as part of the process of authorship – as a part of the authorial structuring of the film’s argument (insofar as an argument is presented) – and therefore resist ‘identification’ with the filmmaker as a subject (Bruzzi 2006, 185-186).

In the case of This Is Not a Film, different ideas of performativity to either Nichols’ or Bruzzi’s respective theories are teased out through the filmmaker’s self-reflexive consideration of his own performance as a filmmaker. In one telling scene twelve minutes in, Panahi watches clips from his second feature film Mirror and draws comparison between the performance of the little girl in that film, and his own performance here. Mirror begins as a simple story about the journey home from school by Mina, a little girl with a broken arm, but soon becomes an intricate reflexive meditation on the line between fiction and reality. Half way through filming a scene, the little girl pulls off her fake cast and declares that she doesn’t want to act anymore, storming off the set. This Is Not a Film shows Panahi standing in front of his television watching this example of his earlier work. After he views the girl’s revolt against the filmmaker’s authority, Panahi tells Mirtahmasb, ‘I think right now I’m in exactly a similar position as Mina. Somehow I must remove my cast and throw it away.’ The ‘position’ Panahi refers to is being ‘directed’ by the
authorities to remain in his house and refrain from filmmaking, as well as his dissatisfaction with the ‘performance’ he has so far given in the film he is presently making.

Karina Longworth of the *Village Voice* notes that this use of this film-within-a-film ‘powerfully demonstrates that Panahi’s artistry has always been defined by his ability to adapt to life happening in front of the lens’ (Longworth, 29 February 2012). On the other hand, these film-within-a-film moments in Panahi’s film also work in the other direction, drawing attention towards how his life ‘happening’ at this moment is being adapted for the camera lens recording him. Explicitly considering the fragile line between performance and life in the realm of fiction filmmaking draws attention to the performance of ‘being a filmmaker’ that Panahi enacts in the film. By directly considering performance in this way, *This Is Not a Film* presents a rejoinder to the idea that documentary performance is alienating from either reference to the historical world or from identification with the performer. Rather than assuming a reflexive distance in order to consider questions of authorship, in *This Is Not a Film* that distance is erased by focusing on the filmmaker’s specific and corporeal experience of authorship. The power of Panahi’s film is therefore different from documentaries that reflexively consider authorship through creating an alienating effect. It is through the immediate subjective experience of the filmmaker grappling with the limits of representation that the processes of filmmaking – including the assumption of the filmmaker’s authority – are explored and negotiated, rather than being held up for rhetorical consideration from a distance. Panahi’s film therefore gives a particular material shape to what Nichols describes as ‘felt tensions’ between representation and that which it represents (1994, 2): not felt obliquely or from a distance, but through the filmmaker’s experience of censorship.

The most striking example of how the tension between subjectivity and authorship takes on significance in *This Is Not a Film* is a scene in which Panahi acts out his banned script within the confines of his living room. He marks out a makeshift set with tape on his dining room floor and recites the lines of dialogue; a creative gesture of defiance within the larger gesture of resistance in making the film. As Panahi is blocking out the scene, the footage suddenly cuts to a tighter shot of him hunched on the ground, in the middle of the marked-out set, struggling to hold back tears. Behind the camera, Mirtahmasb gently asks, ‘What is it? Why don’t you continue?’ Panahi
replies, ‘In a moment.’ He does continue reading, but it is short lived as he is again overwhelmed by emotion. Letting his composure and defiant performance slip for a moment, Panahi shakes his head: ‘If we could tell a film, then why make a film?’ Panahi here appears to feel the full force of the denial of his freedom to make a film. His frustration in this moment is also in one sense about a ‘failure’ of documentary filmmaking: the failure of this film to substitute for the film he wanted to make; the failure of the act of filming to find a way to speak directly of his censorship and his sentence; and the failure to find meaning or make sense of his situation through this act of filmmaking.

Through an address that follows the form of a video confession, where the gaze of the camera confers discursive significance on Panahi’s experience of being both author and subject, the distinction that usually underpins documentary between the act of representation and what is represented blurs in this scene. As Panahi’s emotional reaction to the moment exceeds the structuring of his performance for the benefit of the camera, the tension between the filmmaker existing in the frame as an author and as a subject of the film comes to the fore. This tension is cast as the crucial point through which Panahi’s situation can be understood – representing the disappointment and discontent of being censored – which in the context of Panahi’s sentence also becomes infused with political meaning.

**5.4 Politics, performance, and social instrumentality**

*Ultimately, the reality of my verdict is that I must spend six years in jail. I’ll live for the next six years hoping that my dreams will become reality.*

– Jafar Panahi, open letter to the 61st Berlinale, 10 February 2011

The diaristic day-in-a-life mode of *This Is Not a Film* allows Panahi to explore what does and does not performatively constitute ‘being a filmmaker’ while still using the apparatus of filmmaking as a powerful tool for representing his reality. Panahi’s exploration of his subjective experience of censorship creates a space in which the personal collides with the political. But the degree to which this not-film is ‘political’ is clearly complicated by the restrictions on Panahi being able to speak directly about
his situation. The sense in which the film is political and the kind of politics it engages with therefore requires more detailed analysis.

Reviews have described Panahi’s film as a ‘forceful assertion of the most stifling brand of auteurism and a radical reconfiguration of its political potential’ (Coldiron, 13 October 2011), and ‘a political statement, an act of defiance … and a document of a life unseen’ (Longworth, 29 February 2012), both of which clearly refer to two related but distinct senses of politics that the film engages with. The first is social politics: the film is a specific engagement with authority and dialogue (in this case, an ironic and antagonistic one) with the structures of social power. The second sense in which Panahi’s film deals with politics is in considering the limits and possibilities of representing reality; specifically, considering the investments in documentary authorship and the possibility of documentary film to make sense of the world it represents.

These two senses of politics at play in the film overlap through the figure of the filmmaker. The social context of the film involves the authority of Panahi as a filmmaker to speak his mind and (cinematically) represent his reality. The ban on directing that is part of his sentence is not only a targeted form of punishment but also acknowledges the political power of any potential film Panahi could make that represents his situation. Because of this censorship, the fact that Panahi did represent his experience of being censored brings the politics of representation into direct dialogue with social politics. By self-reflexively considering his own role as an artist interpreting the society around him, This Is Not a Film also enacts and extends the axiom that ‘the personal is the political.’6 Through Panahi’s presence in the frame the film show how the self is made the site of politics, and presents one avenue for how politics can be engaged with through personal experiences. In other words, it is in the tension between Panahi’s role as the ‘representing’ self and his role as the ‘represented’ self that both the political and the personal the consequences of his censorship are made manifest and the film becomes an act of protest against his sentence.

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6 This phrase was popularised by Carol Hanisch as part of the feminist movement, and has been considered within documentary discourses and the politics of (self-)representation by Bill Nichols in Blurred Boundaries (1994), Paula Rabinowitz in They Must Be Represented (1994), Michael Renov in The Subject of Documentary (2004) and Alisa Lebow in The Cinema of Me (2012) among many others.
The key scene of Panahi acting out his banned script is a telling example of how the personal and the political collide in the film to work as a form of protest. The opening scene of the script that Panahi acts out is about a depressed girl living alone in a Tehran apartment who begins to fall in love with a delivery boy. Panahi’s ‘performance’ of the script here works to both prove that the film he was making had nothing to do with the disputed presidential elections, and more subtly shows the filmmaker making a version of the film he has been banned from making. In this scene, where Panahi both performs his role as a filmmaker and reveals his frustration to the camera, the film simultaneously testifies to his version of events and enacts a kind of protest against his sentence.

Read as an act of protest, Panahi’s film enters a complex discourse of opposition against the Khomeini/Ahmadinejad regimes from Iranian artists and intellectuals both within Iran and abroad. Richard Tapper notes that the political opposition of the Iranian diaspora ranges from middle class monarchists to post-revolutionary exiles, and their resistance to the status quo politics of their homeland leads to heated debates about individual films and Iranian cinema more generally (2002, 21). Panahi’s film circulates on this world stage, making a very specific statement about the injustice of the Iranian authorities’ stance towards creative expression. Undoubtedly, *This Is Not a Film* presents one small slice of Iranian life, but it also addresses the social politics of censorship, an issue that in many ways cuts across class lines. Panahi therefore deliberately positions his film to be more broadly representative of a facet of Iranian life that matters more broadly than the specific issues he faces or the upper-middle class world of his apartment. It is also, however, a film of intensely personal experience, and Panahi’s fears, frustrations, and defiant resolve punctuate the film. Moments of frustration, during which he is unable to express himself fully, also act as evidence of the potentiality of expression that he is capable of but denied access to. It is a definition of authorship by negation – marking out what should be possible by highlighting what is not possible – which is known through how the filmmaker represents himself. The making of this film is therefore at once a political move (defying the regime that censored him) and also an intensely personal one, revolving around self-identity and self-actualisation. If ‘seeing’ and ‘thinking’ are tied to filmmaking for Panahi (as his Berlinale letter suggests), then
Chapter 5: This Is Not a Film

This Is Not a Film is a work also invested with the filmmaker’s corporeal being and fundamental idea of himself.

In making a film about not being able to make a film, Panahi raises important questions about the limits of representation and the possibilities of social instrumentality through an exploration of the tension between his dual roles of filmmaker-as-author and filmmaker-as-subject. Politics, performance, and representation converge around the figure of the filmmaker in a way that extends and reconfigures understandings of the performance of authorship. The film not only (re)presents Panahi’s situation, but also opens up the possibility of rethinking what ‘counts’ as a documentary. The question then becomes what is the significance of this film in the context of rethinking discourses of documentary more broadly?

Chapter 1 argued that the investments in documentary as a social discourse frame the expectations of particular films to represent reality in particular ways; traditionally, to make sense of some aspect of the world through exposition and argument by rallying evidence. This assumption in particular holds true for documentary films explicitly concerned with social politics, which are intended to work as social artefacts that can inspire, challenge, and mobilise viewers through their production and circulation (see Nichols 1991; Corner 1996; Ellis 2012). In the case of This Is Not a Film, however, no act of filming can adequately explain the logic of Panahi’s sentence. As I argued above, the conditions under which the film was made set up a logic wherein Panahi making this is an act that retrospectively ‘proves’ the charges against him of ‘making a film against the regime’ (as Mohammad Hosseini from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance characterised Panahi’s offence at the time of his arrest). Within the context of the charges levelled against him, the initial act of filming and the subsequent circulation of This Is Not a Film perversely ‘prove’ the accusation that the filmmaker conspired dissidence against the Iranian regime. Ironically then, the social instrumentality of This Is Not a Film, insofar as the film addresses the unjust sentencing of Panahi, is precluded before filming even begins.7

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7 This paradox played out in a more direct sense in the months following the film’s Cannes Film Festival debut and subsequent international distribution. Panahi’s directing ban and jail sentence were upheld, in no small part because of the dissidence Panahi displayed through the act of filming and smuggling the film out of the country for release.
This Is Not a Film cannot therefore be a documentary film, at least in the sense of being performatively authorised to represent reality in some intended way, because it is has been denied legitimacy before it was even made. It is therefore also denied the possibility of social instrumentality that the documentary form is traditionally constituted on. Without social legitimation, the not-film is simply a diary or a filmed experiment. Yet the making of This Is Not a Film in defiance of Panahi’s charges is an act of resistance to censorship, and regardless of the form it takes, the fact of its creation does performatively intervene in the reality it represents. In showing the specific process of this intervention, This Is Not a Film demonstrates how social instrumentality is entailed in the process of representation as much as the completed film, and foregrounds the key part the subjectivity of the filmmaker plays in the politics of documentary representation. Panahi’s not-film discovers its social power in the very space where that power has been denied – the specific and corporeal process of filmmaking.

The link between performance and the social instrumentality of filmmaking in This Is Not a Film can be illustrated through in a key scene thirty-two minutes in, in which Panahi sits in his living room and begins scanning through a DVD copy of his 2003 feature Crimson Gold. He eventually finds what he is looking for: a pivotal moment in the narrative in which the amateur star of the film diverged from the script and improvised his performance without any direction from Panahi. The scene in question shows the lead character Hossein slumped against the wall outside the jeweller’s store, staring into the distance while his friends watch him closely, asking if he is okay. It is a scene reminiscent of Panahi’s ‘performance’ in the present film, moving purposelessly around his apartment while Mirtahmasb records and occasionally converses with him. Before playing the scene, Panahi explains how the actor ‘acted in such a way that was beyond my control. You write some things, but when you go on location, and the amateur enters, he does the directing on you. He leads you to how to explain the film. What I mean is that the film must first be made for us to be able to explain it later.’ Panahi’s observation suggests that the meanings of a film lie in the negotiation of meaning between filmmaker, audience, and the social contexts in which the film circulates, rather than in the intent of the filmmaker. This idea is particularly apt to explain This Is Not a Film: Panahi’s performance throughout suggests that the meaning of the film lies not in his intent but in the
intersection of the facts of his incarceration, the political context it is made within, the imagined audience it speaks to, and the epistemological and ontological distinctions between documentary/fiction, film/not-film, and filmmaker/not-filmmaker it blurs.

Through the way in which *This Is Not a Film* finds political power in blurring the distinction between documentary/fiction, film/not-film, and filmmaker/not-filmmaker, Panahi’s film challenges the distinctions of form that have preoccupied discussions of the social instrumentality of documentary. By reflecting on his own process of filmmaking – both in the present film and in his previous work – Panahi suggests that the significance of such distinctions is not universal, but constitute one possible framework for interpreting the text at hand. In the case of *This Is Not a Film*, the usefulness of these distinctions lies in complicating them, because this indeterminacy of form allows the filmmaker to reflect circumspectly on the circumstances he finds himself in and make his political statement understood.

**This is not an(other) filmmaker: the multiple roles of Panahi’s collaborator**

To consider the power of *This Is Not a Film* as a form protest in the context of the filmmaker’s presence within the frame, it is important to locate the place of Panahi’s friend Mirtahmasb, who in some ways stands as a collaborator and in others as a witness to Panahi’s experience. Mirtahmasb’s presence in *This Is Not a Film*, acknowledged repeatedly throughout by Panahi’s interaction with him, begs the question of whether this work can be seen as merely a representation of personal experience (however performative) or as a construction more akin to fiction. Panahi himself voices this question of locating authorship. After screening the clip of *Crimson Gold*, he tells Mirtahmasb, ‘I feel like what we are doing here is also a lie, like the first scene that we saw [of Hossein acting]. The rest will certainly turn out to be lies, no matter how it proceeds.’ In this admission of doubt about what kind of film they are making, Panahi both suggests certain dishonesty in their approach and implicates Mirtahmasb as an equal party in the ‘lie’ they are constructing. This admission thus destabilises the sense of Panahi’s authorial control over the narrative unfolding. Adding to the sense of authorship of the film being divided, at key moments throughout the film Mirtahmasb overtly adopts the role of ‘director,’
prompting Panahi to follow a train of thought or telling him what can and can’t be
done. One clear example of this is in the scene analysed earlier where Mirtahmasb
continues filming after Panahi calls ‘cut.’ Here Mirtahmasb performatively becomes
the film’s director by virtue of deciding to continue filming. The notion of divided
authorship returns in the last scene in which Mirtahmasb appears – ten minutes
before the end of the film – in which the two men are shown filming each other. The
image cuts between Mirtahmasb recording with his video camera and Panahi
recording with his phone; a reflexive technique that positions the two alongside each
other as equal hands in crafting the film.

Mirtahmasb’s crucial role in the construction of the film is most strongly signalled in
the moment when Panahi reveals his vulnerability most clearly. In the crucial scene
where Panahi is overwhelmed by emotion when acting out his banned script,
Mirtahmasb prompts, ‘What is it? Why don’t you continue?’ Panahi replies, ‘In a
moment,’ and he does continue, but soon stops again, throwing down his script and
walking into the adjacent room. While elsewhere in the film Mirtahmasb’s presence
as camera-operator either facilitates Panahi’s self-expression or playfully presses him
on, here he clearly makes the judgement that it is important for the film to keep
recording. Through Panahi’s departure, Mirtahmasb’s presence is configured not as a
mute witness to the scene but as a distinct authorial presence, whose authority to
record this moment is inscribed in his decision to continue recording. The uncertain
status of Mirtahmasb as co-director/ cameraman/ interlocutor that results from these
moments is an index of how their collaboration subverts both the social politics of
the situation and the status of the work as a ‘film.’

Panahi appears to encourage the subversion of the film’s status through his
interactions with Mirtahmasb. In a number of the scenes the two men share, Panahi
openly questions who the author of this film is, which raises further questions about
the usually assumed link between authorial control and the production of meaning.
The filmmaker’s statement, ‘The film must first be made for us to explain it later’
points to the intersection of these questions. Here Panahi suggests that the discursive
significance of a film, including ideas of authorial intent and responsibility, is located
in the act of reception rather than the act of production. By suggesting that meanings
are made in reception rather than imbued by the filmmaker (regardless of whether
authorial responsibility for this film is seen to lie with Panahi or Mirtahmasb),
Panahi’s statement ‘absolves’ both of them from being accountable for the meanings the film might later be taken to communicate. In this disavowal, Panahi also challenges more fundamental assumptions of the link between authorial intent and meaning in film. Given the history of Iranian cinema in foregrounding the filmmaker as the locus of meaning due to the particular climate of censorship and social politics, Panahi’s statement explicitly disavowing his authorship is particularly ironic. Rather than claiming his film is not political (as he did in relation to his earlier film *The Circle*), Panahi instead claims that meaning is not up him as the filmmaker. In locating meaning in the act of retrospective ‘explanation,’ Panahi’s statement ironically implicates the authorities in the ‘meaning’ of his banned film script, suggesting that their interpretation of Panahi’s unfinished script as subversive and propagandistic is an interpretation belonging to the mind of the censors rather than what the filmmaker meant. Thus, asserting that meaning lies in the act of interpretation rather than creation is more than a discursive comment on the act of meaning-making, but also a political statement that implicates and criticises as hypocritical the regime that interpreted his film as subversion.

Panahi’s assertion that meaning is only made after the fact of making the film conflicts with the notion of authorship raised in the earlier scene where Mirtahmasb films him acting out the banned script. As suggested earlier, that earlier scene can be read as staged ‘proof’ that the content of the banned script was not seditious or propagandist, but rather a tragic love story set against the complex background of contemporary Iran. Contrasting these two scenes highlights a contradiction in Panahi’s approach to authorship and meaning: in the scene acting out his banned script, he is claiming that the authorities’ interpretation is not what he ‘meant.’ In the later scene reflecting on his past work, he claims that meaning doesn’t lie with the filmmaker’s vision. On the one hand, meaning lies in authorial intent, and, on the other, meaning only emerges in the moment of viewing. Considered side-by-side, these scenes reveal the complex ways in which Panahi considers authorship in this film. Furthermore, rather than attempt to *define* the link between authorial intent and meaning, Panahi instead suggests that the intent of the author – made known through their presence in the frame – opens up the meanings of nonfiction representation in complex ways. By foregrounding the link between authorial intent and what the film is taken to mean, and, moreover, by describing this link in directly contradictory
ways, Panahi’s film is able to both explore the nature of filmmaking and his role as a filmmaker and criticise the authorities and their interpretation of his work. In this way, the specific and corporeal experience of the author in *This Is Not a Film* becomes the crucial locus of the meanings the film creates, regardless of how contradictory those meanings about the author’s involvement from moment to moment might be.

The contradictions in Panahi’s position throughout the film regarding his own authorial intent underline the complexities of how the meanings of a documentary are linked to its contexts of production and reception. Panahi’s ambivalent relationship to his own authorship expressed throughout the film recalls Roland Barthes’ questioning of the centrality of authorial intent to the possible meanings of a text (1977). In positing the death of the author, Barthes specifically excluded talk of nonfiction representation, which he acknowledged has different investments in terms of the author’s intent and voice in the narrative fabric:

> As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (1977, 142)

Nonfiction representation is seemingly excluded from Barthes concern here because it assumes a direct relation to reality and a social instrumentality beyond ‘intransitive’ symbolism. The distinction Barthes makes between fiction and nonfiction is a reminder of the myriad of contradictory ways documentary has been defined, and also a reminder that each of these definitions is united by the common understanding that a documentary text has a more direct relationship to the real world it represents. Implicit in Barthes’ argument for reading fiction texts independent of the specter of the writer is that when a text is meant to act directly on reality, the author is present and interpretively relevant. In this reading of Barthes’ theory, the death of the author seems not to apply to documentary; however in *This Is Not a Film* Panahi directly raises questions related to Barthes’ argument about how meaning lies outside of authorial intent. As an author, Panahi finds himself
displaced, and through that displacement brings questions of intent more acutely into focus than ever.

By raising tensions between meaning being located in intent or in viewing, Panahi’s film suggests that meaning does not exist at one end or the other of this spectrum, but that documentary authorship is a negotiated process between intent and interpretation. Reviewing This Is Not a Film for Australian newspaper The Age, Jake Wilson borrows Kiarostami’s term of the ‘half-finished film’ where ‘part of the meaning must be supplied by the viewer’ (5 November 2011); a description that captures the openness of meanings that Panahi’s authorial presence heralds for this film. In other words This Is Not a Film, the filmmaker’s specific and subjective voice constitutes a crucial but not overwhelming factor in the interpretation of his film. The film instead represents authorship as alive in the filmmaker’s performance of ‘being a filmmaker,’ which paradoxically also include his staged disavowals of that role – a performance of authorship that welcomes multiple interpretations.

Through highlighting the ways in which authorial intent can laid open to interpretation, Panahi is able to critically respond to the judgements of the regime that he is a subversive and seditious filmmaker, as well as argue against the logic of a system that would even make such judgements. Reviewing the film for Variety, Peter Debruge identified exactly this kind of criticism lying in the ambiguity of where to attribute the film’s meaning:

Panahi can call this assembly whatever he pleases … but Iranian authorities aren’t likely to share his sense of humor. Besides, Iranian directors are notorious for spinning elegant parables from minimalist situations … and this project feels none the slimmer for its humble constraints. If anything, it marks a courageous act of non-violent protest. (20 May 2011)

The author thus returns as a crucial site for the interpretation of meaning, not in terms of definitive correspondence with his intent, but as the site through which

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8 An interesting representation of protest against Panahi’s censorship is the background image of the filmmaker on the film’s official website. The image is a pencil drawing showing an outline of the filmmaker holding up his camera phone. The trademark mop of hair, heavy eyebrows, and v-neck t-shirt are recognisable, but the face has no features. It is literally expression-less, a comment on the evisceration of Panahi and his specific subjectivity as a filmmaker, a deprivation of his identity.
understanding the political and emotional significance of the film is possible. The emotional stakes are his frustrations and fears expressed through his performance in the frame, and the political stakes rest in his performative act of speaking when he has been expressly denied the right to speak. In neither case are the stakes of the film resolved in any way – Panahi doesn’t get emotional release in the form of a definitive answer to his sentence or to his pondering of his situation, and although the viewer might anticipate that the authorities will come down hard on the making of this film, the text leaves one to discover this aftermath for oneself (if it is not already known). The film is therefore no less ‘open’ to be read because of the presence of the filmmaker, but his experience is the lens through which we come to understand the broader politics that the film engages with. The gap created by Panahi’s self-reflexive exploration of the notion of authorship – between authoring the film and authoring the self through performance – allows him to ‘speak without appearing to have spoken.’ He thus re-opens a dialogue with the authorities and the film community he finds himself excluded from in precisely the space where that dialogue was supposed to have closed.

‘What matters is that it is documented’: testimony, protest, and a new way of speaking

When considered in terms of the specific politics of the culture in which the film was produced and of which it speaks, Panahi’s turning of the camera upon himself achieves an intimate revelation of his own experience, a connection to a broader experience of creative oppression, and a politically powerful defiance of his sentence of censorship. The ‘argument’ in This Is Not a Film is muted, both because of the context of its production and the mode of address chosen. In place of an obvious argument, however, is an arguably more pertinent connection to the reality represented – an understanding of the politics of the situation through seeing the personal experience of the filmmaker navigating that world. In this way, Panahi exploits the conventions of first-person nonfiction representation to draw the viewer into a different, politically charged space via what is left unsaid.

Within the context of Panahi’s political situation, the representation of his domestic life, confined within his apartment, constitutes a kind of testimony. Panahi is asking us to witness his experience, and the sounds and images he records ‘testify’ to the
realities of his situation. Considering this function of the film as a kind of testimony makes sense of the film’s repeated focus on the domestic and mundane details of Panahi’s situation. Scenes portraying Panahi eating breakfast, reading from his laptop, shuffling around his apartment, or feeding his daughter’s pet iguana, all testify to the details of his experience, forcefully declaring his existence, despite his uncertain status as a filmmaker.

The film is set in the days around the New Year celebrations, and the sound of fireworks resembling gunshots add another layer of irony to the oppression Panahi is subject to. Yet the broader social politics that have led to Panahi’s house arrest are rarely directly referred to in the film. Even in the conversation with his lawyer or his description of the terms of his charges, Panahi only obliquely refers to the censorship of artistic pursuits, the fear of arrest, the civil unrest, and the oppressive policies of the government at the time. To contextualise the representations made in This Is Not a Film and understand the socio-political resonance of the film, the viewer is left to rely on their existing understanding of the political situation in Iran and a handful of moments when the world outside the apartment imposes on the simple day-in-the-life narrative, such as Panahi’s exasperation that all the websites with information about his case are blocked or filtered.

While clearly the result of Panahi’s conscious decision not to speak directly of the broader social politics of his situation, in one sense portraying these social politics as the pervasive but indistinct background to the particular story he tells renders them more powerful. The film shows creative oppression as it is lived, as a matter of the fact of being an active part of this world, as a background condition that shapes every facet of life in an almost banal way – dictating breakfast routines, phone calls, holidays, and even the disposing of trash. The pervasive shaping of life by politics is particularly evident in Panahi’s stilted conversation with his lawyer, in his frustration with the firewalls on the internet, and in his phone call with a colleague who can’t get to his office because of blockaded streets. In creating a testimonial record of his experience of censorship, Panahi also transgresses that censorship and enacts a protest against his sentence and incarceration. Protest in this sense is distinct from the way the film criticises the logic of the authorities in interpreting his banned script as seditious. Rather, this kind of protest lies in the performative sense touched on
earlier in this chapter: Panahi’s defiance of his censorship by the act of making a film.

These dual performative acts of testimony and protest underpin the closing scenes of the film, in which Panahi glimpses the world beyond his compound gates but stops at its boundary. He follows the janitor down to the ground floor of his building, daring to venture a few steps out onto the street and look up at the New Year fireworks overhead. The janitor implores him: ‘Mr. Panahi, please don’t come outside. They’ll see you with the camera.’ Yet Panahi and his camera remain on street level, filming young men near the gates of his apartment building pouring gasoline onto a bonfire. It is an apt metaphor foreshadowing how Panahi’s present act of filming would fanned political flames upon the film’s eventual release. This scene testifies to both the specific political conditions and spatial dimensions of his imprisonment, while also performatively protesting these conditions through the fact of their being recorded.

Working as both testimony and protest links the politics of representation that Panahi focuses on throughout the film with the broader social politics that he explores (mostly) under its surface. This link is most explicitly voiced within the film – somewhat paradoxically – not by Panahi but by his collaborator, Mirtahmasb. In an exchange between the two friends towards the end of the film, when Panahi begins filming Mirtahmasb with his camera phone, Mirtahmasb quips, ‘They say, when hairdressers have nothing to do they cut each others’ hair.’ Panahi replies ‘But what good can it do? The quality is too low.’ Mirtahmasb continues more solemnly:

Listen Jafar; I believe that what matters is that it is documented. Since the day those things happened to you, and after you left the prison, if you had turned on your cell-phone’s camera, you would have recorded a lot of important moments. We won’t know if they can be turned into a film or not – even the things we have been doing today, if you want to turn it into a film, I doubt it, but – if you’re documenting the days, then go ahead. … Take a shot of me in case I’m arrested, there will be some images left. … It’s important that the cameras are on.

Mirtahmasb understands it is important that the cameras are on because the act of filming itself is political, both in representing the (censored) self and in defying his
CHAPTER 5: THIS IS NOT A FILM

censorship in a performative form of protest. The film’s functioning as a form of protest in turn invites consideration of the public sphere into which this protest enters, and the possibilities of documentary film to both represent politics and be political.

Considering the way in which This Is Not a Film operates at the intersections of film forms and within the political context of Iranian filmmakers needing to ‘speak without appearing to have spoken,’ the way Panahi speaks in the film is crucial to how it is able to work as a form of both testimony and protest. Panahi utilises conventions of video confession, autobiography, essay film, and video-diary, talking directly to the camera, inviting viewers into his domestic space. He reflects on and reminisces about his previous filmmaking work, ponders his present situation, and considers the apparatus of filmmaking itself. However, confessions, autobiographies, essay films, and video-diaries all usually operate on an assumption that the speaking subject is free to speak. In contrast to this, Panahi is operating in a space where he is explicitly denied that authority to speak, and where the meaning of what he says is necessarily made oblique or deferred. There is therefore a paradox in the film’s form: utilising tropes of representation in which speech is assumed to be freely spoken, but not in this case being able to speak freely. The effect of this paradox is that the viewer is encouraged to look for the subtext of staged moments. The metaphorical nature of seemingly simple scenes such as Panahi eating breakfast on his own, or getting dressed apparently unaware of being filmed, emphasises what is implied or left unspoken.

In lieu of what he explicitly voices, Panahi’s material presence – his expressions of frustration, ironic laughs, rhetorical statements, and hesitant pauses – become more significant to the act of interpretation. When the filmmaker is overcome with emotion or overwhelmed with frustration, fracturing his otherwise measured performance, these moments become indexes of the greater meanings the film points to, prompting the audience to look closer. In other words, the specific and corporeal presence of the filmmaker in the frame becomes a unique and powerful site of the production of meaning in the film. Panahi’s presence in the film does not seek to convince through perceptible argument, but creates meaning through the act of expression itself – validating, qualifying, and challenging the social structures with which he engages. Panahi creates a searing protest film out of the representation of
his subjective experience of authorship, and in the process reimagines the ways in which documentary representation performatively makes meaning of the shared social world.
Conclusion: negotiating authorship, performing authority, and (re)presenting reality through the filmmaker in the frame

One goes somewhere as a documentarian ... the documentarian is drawn elsewhere by an other.

– Paula Rabinowitz, 1993

The presence (and absence) of the filmmaker in the image, in off-screen space, in the acoustic folds of voice-on and voice-off, in titles and graphics constitutes an ethics, and a politics of considerable importance to the viewer.

– Bill Nichols, 1991

The three films analysed in the preceding chapters – *Grizzly Man*, *Forbidden Lie*, and *This Is Not a Film* – are linked through the common trope of the filmmaker’s presence in the frame and their authorial identity being challenged by the people or the situation they seek to represent. This challenge comes in the form of questions about their assumed authority to represent the ‘other’ and the possibility of making meaning of the world they are themselves a part of. Each filmmaker responds to this challenge by making the negotiation of authorship key to the narrative structure of their film. In my analysis of these three films, I have argued that by engaging with the process of authorship as a negotiation, these filmmakers also highlight the way in which their authority to represent the other is performative – enacted, asserted, destabilised, and reinscribed through the filmmaker’s specific authorial actions in the frame. The filmmaker’s felt presence in the frame in these films therefore raises existing notions of documentary authorship, but also challenges and extends those notions by emphasising the subjective, contingent, and emotional aspects of documenting reality. In contrast to existing theoretical frameworks that focus on analysing filmmaker’s presence in terms of reflexively revealing epistemological assumptions and investments, I have argued that the filmmaker’s presence as a subject in these films is significant for the meanings it performatively produces in the collision between filmmaker, subject, and the apparatus of filmmaking. Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi each self-reflexively explore their relationship to the process
of filmmaking and the world they film, and each film therefore emphasises the filmmaker’s role in shaping what meanings emerge.

In Chapter 3, I examined Werner Herzog’s presence in the frame of *Grizzly Man*, focusing on how Herzog’s dual presence as both subject and author transforms his story about amateur conservationist Timothy Treadwell into a virtual argument across space and time. In telling Treadwell’s story, Herzog asserts his own authorial vision in uncovering its ‘ecstatic truth,’ but Treadwell’s own felt presence in the frame through his archive footage destabilises the sense of Herzog’s control over the film. The strength of Treadwell’s commitment to filmmaking and the beauty of his footage work together to challenge Herzog’s perspective and his identity as a uniquely committed auteur. Throughout the film, the two filmmakers’ differing perspectives on nature converge and diverge, and while Herzog’s ultimate authorship of the film entails ethical questions of his treatment of Treadwell’s story, Treadwell’s felt presence is not entirely contained by Herzog’s narration. Through the felt presence of these two authorial figures, the process of filmmaking becomes a space in which Herzog reconsiders his own authorial identity and the notional distinction between subject and filmmaker is complicated.

I argued in Chapter 4 that the distinction between filmmaker and subject is even more blurred in *Forbidden Lies*, but that the conflict between filmmaker and subject produces a distinct understanding of the process of documentary representation itself. Throughout the first half of the film the constant deceptions of Norma Khouri – defamed author and the subject of Broinowski’s film – undermine the possibility of Broinowski making an expository film aimed at discovering the factual truth of Norma’s story. The filmmaker’s eventual entry into the frame as a subject involves surrendering both the pursuit of the factual truth and an erasure of the conventional distance between the investigatory filmmaker and the subject they represent. Broinowski’s entrance into the frame to become Norma’s dupe shifts the film from a ‘failed’ exposé to a multifaceted portrait of the relationship between the filmmaker and her filmed subject. The competition between Broinowski and Norma for authority over the telling of the latter’s story becomes the spine of the film, from which new perspectives on Norma’s powers of manipulation and Broinowski’s compromised position emerge. Like *Grizzly Man*, through the negotiation of authorship, the distinction between filmmaker and subject in *Forbidden Lies* breaks
down, and judgement of the notional ‘subject’ of the film becomes more and more complex. Ultimately, the presence of Broinowski in the frame further obscures the story of Norma’s past, but results in a telling portrait of Norma as a character and an intriguing film about the power of falsity in the process of representing reality.

The final substantive chapter of this thesis analysed Jafar Panahi’s *This Is Not a Film*, a video diary of the Iranian filmmaker’s time under house arrest. Here, I considered how the presence of the filmmaker in the frame allows the filmmaker to ‘speak without appearing to have spoken.’ Panahi defies his censorship by making a film at the same time as he exploits filmic conventions to ironically disavow his status as the film’s maker – an act made possible by his constant presence in the frame. He begins from the position of being a filmmaker denied his right to make a film, yet the process of reflexively deconstructing what constitutes a film also entails a self-reflexive consideration of his own authority as a filmmaker. The (not)film is then structured around a series of self-reflexive moments in which he tests the limits of his censorship and explores the possibilities of turning the camera on himself to represent his political situation. Emphasising a false division between the process of making a film and acting like a filmmaker paradoxically becomes a way of performatively inscribing his authority as *This Is Not a Film*’s author. By performatively making a distinction between ‘being a filmmaker’ and making this film, Panahi is able to create a protest to his creative oppression at the same time as representing his own experience of being censored.

The distinctness of these films as a group rests in how they reveal authorship to be both a concrete process involving the filmmaker and the world they represent, and a performance of authority that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated throughout the filmmaking process. In each film the filmmaker’s presence as a subject is felt most sharply in moments where they are forced to consider their own position as the film’s author, which become key moments structuring the narrative that unfolds. Analysing authorship in these films as both a negotiation and a performance, I have suggested that the films studied offer a way of rethinking how documentary theory has previously conceptualised authorship, which has tended to rest on a seemingly necessary binary between subjectivity and objectivity. This opposition is based on an idea of documentary that rest on the two assumptions: firstly, that the ‘truth’ of documentary lies in the objectivity of the image, and that subjective expression has a
negative relationship with more objective ways of representing documentary images; and secondly, that the process of documentary authorship is primarily a process of communicating existing knowledge and articulating a specific argument about the shared social world. In Filmmaker in the Frame films, the tension between the filmmaker’s subjective experience and their role as the film’s author constructing an argument about the world represented beyond their experience becomes key to how that world is understood. Herzog disagreeing with Treadwell’s take on the bears as friends, Broinowski asking if she told ‘the first lie,’ and Panahi wondering in dismay ‘If we could tell a film, then why make a film?’ all frame the filmmaker torn between their place in the film as a subject and their purpose to tell a larger story. Each moment is defining in the picture painted of these different worlds. In short, in these films the tension between the filmmaker’s subjectivity and their authorship is not an obstacle to other meanings but a source of meaning in itself.

While the films analysed emphasise meaning in the process of filmmaking, I do not suggest that the notion of documentary as an epistephilic enterprise is not a productive way of understanding and analysing many films. There are, indeed, many documentaries that follow an expository, observational, or reflexive structure that are meaningfully judged by the knowledge they communicate, the arguments they assert, and the factual truths they reveal. However, I do argue that the conceptual frameworks used to analyse such kinds of documentaries are not able to fully account for the complex ways in which an increasing number of films represent reality as something constructed, contested, and produced in the processes of filming through the presence of the filmmaker in the frame. I term this latter group of films the Filmmaker in the Frame, characterised by filmmakers’ creative response to representing their own authorial identity and process of authorship. By outlining the presence of the filmmaker negotiating their dual roles of subject and author as constituting a distinct and significant group of documentary films, this thesis expands on recent scholarship around film authorship and documentary performance.

The gap in existing knowledge this thesis addresses was detailed in Chapter 1, where a survey of the diversity of literature on documentary film highlighted the dominant ways in which the on-screen presence of the filmmaker has been theorised. In these theories I identified a gap between the filmmaker being understood as an authorial object structuring the film’s argument, or being analysed as an autobiographical
subject telling their own story. The category of the Filmmaker in the Frame addresses this gap and makes an original contribution to documentary scholarship by theorising the filmmaker in the frame as both subject and author. More specifically, my analysis of the dual presence of the filmmaker in the frame as both subject and author represents a contribution to the existing scholarship on two levels. Firstly, I present a detailed analysis of three films in which the filmmakers negotiate their own authorship within the frame, using the concepts of collision and performativity to understand the significance of the presence of the filmmaker. Using this distinct analytic framework, this thesis presents a way of theorising the presence of the filmmaker in the frame in new terms: as a productive presence rather than as a problem to the ‘proper’ representation of reality, that highlights documentary authorship as a process. Secondly, by analysing both documentary authorship as a negotiation, and the filmmaker’s authority as a performance, I challenge the axiomatic opposition between subjectivity and objectivity that has traditionally defined documentary discourses. In the films analysed, the ‘subjective’ experience of the filmmaker in the frame produces the ‘objective’ reality filmed – the subjectivity and objectivity usually separated in the analysis of documentary meaning collide. Filmmaker in the Frame films therefore complicate any clear separation between subjectivity and objectivity, recasting them as different aspects of the same performative moments of filmmaking.

The distinct notion of documentary authorship as both a negotiation and a performance analysed in Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi’s films also articulates an important conceptual difference between reflexivity and self-reflexivity. Filmmakers are increasingly turning the camera on themselves at the same time as they train their lens on the world around them, and the space of documentary film has become one in which subjectivities are often negotiated as much as one through which information is relayed or epistemic knowledge built. The three films examined are representative of an increasing number of filmmakers who place themselves in the frame, engaging with their own identity and authority as filmmakers and using their subjective experience of representation as a lens through which to make meaning of the shared social world. Indeed, the ways in which the filmmaker’s presence as both author and subject structures reality and shapes its representation has been explored in productions released over the last three decades by Nick Broomfield, Michael
Moore, Ross McElwee, Michael Rubbo, Abbas Kiarostami, Jean-Luc Godard, Morgan Spurlock, Agnes Varda, Claude Lanzmann, and Molly Dineen. In Filmmaker in the Frame films, the presence of the filmmaker as a subject is key to both their narrative structure and their affective power. Self-reflexivity has therefore become a significant trope in contemporary documentary practice. My analysis of the presence of the filmmaker in the frame in specific documentaries also contributes to a broader rethinking of problems of representing the encounter between the self and the other in a more and more mediatised world, one in which modes of representation are increasingly diverse, increasingly accessible, and increasingly contested. While this thesis focuses on the way in which the encounter between filmmaker-self and filmed-other plays out as a negotiation of authorship and a performance of authority, my concern to distinguish reflexivity and self-reflexivity therefore has implications for theorising other modes of self-representation.

While I do suggest a growing significance of self-reflexivity in contemporary documentary film, I do not intend to propose self-reflexivity as a totalising theory that can explain the range of meanings made by films in which the filmmaker’s presence is felt. Even the three films studied here feature many moments that do not fit the rubric of self-reflexivity. Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi appear within the frame as specific subjects, but each of their films also feature observational sequences, staged moments, and the deliberate use of reflexive techniques, the effects of which defy easy explanation in terms of self-reflexivity. Moments such as the opening sequence of Forbidden Lie$ framing Norma as a film noir femme fatale, for example, highlight less of the performative collision between filmmaker and the world they film than a tradition of using fictional tropes within documentary narratives. Moreover, the expressed opinions and perspectives of these three filmmakers when they are directly felt within the frame also entail contradictions, uncertainties, and gaps in understanding. In other words, they are each multivalent authorial identities that shift between different perspectives, and different registers of performance in their interactions with the world they represent. Rather than proposing a theory of the filmmaker in the frame that aims to explain the sum of ways in which the filmmaker’s on-screen presence makes meaning, I have instead utilised the concepts of collision and performance to analyse some of the ways in which certain filmmakers negotiate their authorship, perform their authority, and
CONCLUSION

construct new truths and perspectives on the world represented through their presence in the frame.

The importance of reconsidering the intersection of subjectivity and authorship in documentary is taken up by John Corner in his review Michael Renov’s 2004 collection, *The Subject in Documentary*. Corner argues that where subjectivity was once seen as problematic for achieving the ideal of an ‘objective’ account of a world represented in a documentary, the ‘recognition of the subjective as an inevitable and enriching dimension of documentary work rather than a problem to be contained by rigorous methods and technology is now the dominant attitude’ (2006, 125). While I agree with Corner’s assessment that subjectivity is generally much more accepted in documentary work, I would argue that it is not so well understood in documentary theory. What is at stake in examining the intersection of the filmmaker’s subjectivity and authorship within the frame, then, is a deeper understanding of the way in which documentary films make meaning through representing reality. As Chapter 1 outlined, even for some theories that consider the productive possibilities of subjectivity in documentary, there remains a sense of necessary oppositionality between subjective expression and objective representation. The three films examined in this thesis complicate that idea by showing the ways in which ‘objective’ representation and ‘subjective’ expression emerge from the same negotiations of authorship, produced in the collision between the filmmaker, subject, and the world filmed. The truth that Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi offer in their work is the ‘filmic truth’ or ‘cinema vérité’ Jean Rouch spoke of – the truth of the collision between the filmmaker-subject, the filming apparatus, and the world filmed.

The notion of the ‘truth’ that documentary works towards is clearly at stake in reconsidering the presence of the filmmaker in the frame. Linda Williams argued over twenty years ago that for all the contingency and relativity of the truths offered by more subjective documentaries, the idea of truth ‘still operates powerfully as the receding horizon of the documentary tradition’ (1993, 11). The question then becomes: what contingencies do the truths of particular films entail? What are those truths relative to? In the case of the films examined in this thesis, the presence of the filmmaker is key to interpreting those contingencies and relativities. I have shown that existing theories of documentary need to be rethought to account for the way that the presence of the filmmaker in the frame as both subject and author constructs
the truth of the world they represent. These are truths about the relationship between the filmmaker and the people they film, the truth of how the filmmaker negotiates their authorship within the frame, and the truth of how the people represented (both the filmmaker and other social actors) are produced as documentary subjects through the process of filmmaking. In showing the process of their making, *Grizzly Man*, *Forbidden Lie$*, and *This Is Not a Film* each retain a socially instrumental power to inform and affect viewers about the reality they represent, but also show that reality as – at least in part – created in the process of filming.

In the introduction to this thesis, I argued that historian Robert Rosenstone’s work on film as a form of historical record asks similar questions about the relationship between filmmakers, their films, and the world they represent, to those that underpin this thesis. Rosenstone’s questions are worth revisiting to highlight the significance of critically engaging with the presence of the filmmaker in the frame, and the challenges and possibilities those presences offer. Countering the simplistic assumption that historical filmmakers are motivated by informational and educative intents, creatively treating the past while maintaining the integrity of its ‘objective’ historical truth, Rosenstone asks:

> By what right do filmmakers speak of the past, by what right do they do ‘history’? The answer is liberating or frightening, depending on your point of view. Filmmakers speak of the past because, for whatever reasons – personal, artistic, political, monetary – they choose to speak. Filmmakers have no … standard training, and no common approach to history. (Rosenstone 1995, 7)

Rosenstone’s observations about the realm of historical fiction film are highly relevant to the documentaries I have examined for two reasons. The first is because documentary as a genre assumes to speak with more authority and reliability about the historical world. Traditional notions of documentary emphasise the reliability of the truth claims presented by the voice of the film as the key criteria of good filmmaking. The stakes of representing reality in documentary are therefore greater than even the historical fiction films Rosenstone speaks about, which entails an even greater notion of (perceived) responsibility on the part of the documentary filmmaker. While Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi do not disavow any sense of responsibility to what they represent, their films do show their responsibility as
anchored in their specific experience of representation rather than being judged according to an abstract academic standard. Secondly, my analysis of the presence of the filmmaker draws attention to the contingencies and subjective dimensions of documentary authorship, which destabilises traditional investments in documentary as a discourse of sobriety and in the assumed authority of the filmmaker. Seeing the filmmaker negotiating their authorial identity and authority invites a consideration of this underlying and often overlooked fact of the representation of reality: that the privilege of filmmakers to represent their world is self-appointed. Regarding this fact, I argue that the three films examined in this thesis fall on the ‘liberating’ side of Rosenstone’s assessment. In each film, tensions between the filmmaker’s dual role as subject and author do not present a problem or a failing of the documentary, but one key aspect of documentary authorship that the presence of the filmmaker in the frame allows us to interrogate.

An area of future research suggested by this thesis is to consider more deeply how the performative aspects of documentary authorship relate to the more complex notion of authorship considered in contemporary auteur studies. While the term ‘auteur’ has often been used in relation to documentary authors, it has more often referred to a simplified notion of the filmmaker as the singular controlling voice of the text. Auteur theorists have argued of fiction films that the figure of the filmmaker is constructed, and that any authority of meaning is dispersed across the various contexts in which films circulate (see Verhoeven 2008; Bordwell 1979). The meaning of a film, and the ‘voice’ that communicates that meaning, is therefore constructed by and negotiated between the interpretations of the viewer, the words of the filmmaker, the analysis of critics, paratexts such as commentaries and marketing materials, and in discourses about genre, filmmaking, and cinema more generally. Yet this understanding of the complexity of authorship from auteur studies has been uneasily translated to documentary because documentary discourses hold on to the notion of the filmmaker as a marker of reliability and authenticity. The term ‘doco-auteur’ has been used as often to cohere the meanings of the film more closely with the figure of the filmmaker as to complicate the notion of authorship (see, for example, McCredie 2008). While an idea of the doco-auteur that emphasises the film as the committed vision of a single filmmaker does tend to collapse the oppositionality of subjectivity and objectivity, it also tends to canonise the filmmaker
in problematic ways. Cecilia Sayad (2013), Randolph Lewis (2008), and Trish Fitzsimons (2009) have considered the relationship between the voice of the filmmaker and the voice of the documentary film in the more complex terms of contemporary auteur studies, but there is more work to be done in order to understand how the presence of the documentary filmmaker in the frame informs notions of auteurism – and vice versa.

A final area of further research that would expand on the findings of this thesis comprises a broader study of the ethical questions raised by the self-reflexive presence of the filmmaker in the frame outlined here. Throughout the analysis of the key films I have raised various ethical issues pertinent to the particular relationship between the filmmaker and the world they represent. For example, Chapter 3 considered how Herzog’s authority to tell Treadwell’s story is destabilised, but the imbalance of power between the two men remains because Treadwell ultimately cannot speak back to Herzog within the film. In Chapter 4, I reflected on the implications of Broinowski’s abandonment of the pursuit of the factual truth of Khouri’s claims about an alleged instance of honour killing in favour of focusing on the growing complexities of their interpersonal relationship, and how this might be interpreted to devalue the important discourses around a key feminist concern. In Chapter 5, I considered how the act of making *This Is Not a Film* is empowering for Panahi not only in terms of his status as a filmmaker, but also in his position as a political subject. As these examples reveal, one consequence of emphasising authorship as a performative negotiation in these films is a foregrounding of the ethical dimension of the relationship between filmmakers and the people they film. Yet, as Kate Nash highlights (2010), discourses of the filmmaker’s authority are inextricably linked to considerations of the power imbalance between filmmakers and the people they film, and in light of how this thesis rethinks the filmmaker’s authority it would be timely to re-examine the shifting ethical territory these films sit within.

Finally, the significance of this research to better understand the productive possibilities of the presence of the filmmaker in the frame connects with broader questions of the relationship between personal expression and social politics. Throughout this study, I have sought to emphasise how these filmmakers’ representations of their own subjective perspective and authority both reimagines and
intervenes in the social politics of the world represented. Jon Dovey has described the increasing proliferation of first-person media as aiming at ‘an understanding of mutuality based on difference, not homogeneity … a public speech which is responsive to the pressures of identity politics and grounded in first-person experience, but which crucially is also inclusive’ (2002, 17). Dovey goes on to locate this first-person turn as a unique response to the contemporary (Western) historical moment, the result of ‘the crisis of subjectivity which the breakdown of the family and the breakdown of the public and the private distinctions entail.’ He suggests that people are increasingly seeking meaning in subjective expressions and the communication of individualised experiences:

As a result of the decline of the traditions of early modernity, the changing status of ‘nature’ and the change in gendered power relations, more and more ethical questions become part of our everyday world. … In this context, the rise of first-person media can be seen as a response to the need for a public space in which ‘life world politics’ and ‘emotional democracy’ are fundamental. (2002, 17)

Dovey understands the proliferation of first-person address in nonfiction media as being motivated by a political impulse: the need to locate the self in relation to the shared social realm. In the films I have examined, I see a powerful form of this same political impulse, each of which shows the filmmaker performatively exploring the intersection of their own subjective experience with their authority as filmmakers representing the shared social world. These films are political in the sense following Jacques Rancière’s notion of politics as a form of experience (outlined in Chapter 5). Through the self-reflexive consideration of their own authorship, Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi create films that revolve ‘around what is seen and what can be said about [them], around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time’ (Rancière 2006, 13). The politics Rancière outlines is lived and realised through both discourse and action, and intimately tied to representation as a way of seeing, speaking, and encountering space and time.

The Filmmaker in the Frame films engage with the politics of experience by bringing to the foreground the processes by which documentary filmmaking both re-presents
and creates the shared social world. As my analysis of *Grizzly Man*, *Forbidden Lies*, and *This Is Not a Film* has revealed, the presence of the filmmaker in the frame can open up new ways of considering the processes by which the authority to see, speak about, and document reality is made possible. In each film, the presence of the filmmaker not only expresses the subjectivity of documentary filmmaking, but also produces new realities, challenging and extending existing notions of documentary authorship and the relationship between truth and representation. This thesis has shown how these three films creatively intervene in the boundaries between individual subjects and the social world they inhabit. As filmmakers in the frame, Herzog, Broinowski, and Panahi each discover a distinct form of documentary expression, performed through the collision between the authoring self and the world they represent.
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