The “Other” in Observational Documentary

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Abstract
In this case we examine the documentary "The Other". The filmmaker, Loukia Rikaki, developed this documentary by observing the way people live in Patsidero, a region on the island of Crete, for two whole years. Through this documentary we seek to examine the way in which "The Other" is presented in the observational documentary, the way in which the truth is captured behind appearance which help the naturalness, the self, and the objectivity of the "Other" emerge. Consequently, an attempt is made reach certain conclusion regarding the observational documentary.

Keywords: Documentary, Observation, Objectivity.


Introduction
The village of Patsidero, in the regional unit of Heraklion, lived up to its name. The word "Patsos" means peace, and its inhabitants prove by their actions that they prefer peace and harmonious coexistence. The village's one-room school accommodated one Greek student and five Albanians. This is almost unattainable in other parts of Greece (judging by the disputes over who will carry the Greek flag during national celebrations), but Patsidero gives a strong lesson in social negotiation with the protagonists being the children themselves, as well as their teacher, G. Fragiadakis. Documenting for two years the daily life in the classroom with the camera as a medium, invading the children's homes, communicating with their parents, searching for emotions and ideas, director Loukia Rikaki created a documentary full of love, care, and significant editing. Step by step, she shapes the students' personalities, their relationship with their inspiring teacher Yannis, their kind naivety and their impressive intelligence. The director watches subtly, sometimes getting carried away by the children's grace and chatters too much, sometimes letting emotion cover the distance that is beneficial to her subject (using excessive and emotionally charged music).

The one-room school (which had been operating since 1873) has been closed down. Lucia Rikaki, however, with her documentary ensures a lasting testimony.

In other words, we examine what are the exact characteristics of the "other" who is filmed each time, how objective and accurate is the other's description, and how his or her own targeting and directing

1 "The Other", Directed by Lucia Rikaki, Year: 2004, Country: Greece, Language: Greek, Duration: 75’ - Color. Retrived from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8nTMGzUYkE
2 Loukia Rikaki (1961-2011) was born in Piraeus, Greece. She studied art history, cinema, graphic arts and photography at Dartington College of Arts in Britain. One of "the most creative voices in contemporary Greek cinema", she lost her battle with cancer on 28 December 2011, at the age of 50, leaving behind five feature-length documentary films, short films, theatre productions and stand-up comedy performances.

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influences the final result. At the same time, it is explored how the 'truth/truths' behind the physical, apparent or constructed through the image view is recorded.

So, it is evident that a film record can bring out a very strong sense of truth and naturalness and often this is a very realistic belief, a strong feeling, which becomes a certainty. But, in reality, it is just a constructed appearance, where a person is "acting", "playing", interpreting a role. When it comes to fiction, this is perfectly acceptable, since between the actor and the spectator an acceptable agreement is signed, in which both know that the events are not real, but they "pretend" that they are to satisfy the artistic creation (Savvakis, 2022).

The debate over objectivity in recording remains ever relevant in the field of documentary and especially anthropological documentary, with varying perspectives. At the same time, there is often talk not only about videography, but also about editing, which also creates a reality that depends on the approach to image processing and the material organization (Manthoulis, 2006: 114-118; Piault, 2008: 90-93).

The filmic intentions do not need to be the same, but the method can be the starting point for the creation of a Truth Documentary, which, however, does not attempt to present the objectivity of the events, but the filmmaker's perspective on the subject being filmed (Dimitriou, 2011: 92-93). This formulation brings the discussion back to Flaherty and Nanook of the North, which was the first attempt at anthropological documentary filmmaking, in which the filmmaker attempted to capture the habits and daily life of specific individuals, while highlighting the particularities of the society within which they live, although his own guidance was evident in the whole process (Gkefou-Madianou, 2011: 346-348).

Therefore, Flaherty has created - albeit in an ex-post interpretation - a staged record of reality. As he claimed, he intended to show the whole population and not just the actions of a few individuals, which is why he used people from the very place he was studying in his films. However, the patterns of behavior adopted by the people in the lens of the filmmaker, despite the director's desire to get to know the people in depth, flirted with the colonialist perception seen in other films of this genre. Even the beautification, embellishment or romanticization of elements of these societies can be seen as a colonialist approach. Such elements may include purity, functionality, solidarity, wildness, honesty, altruism, and closeness to the nature, which may be overemphasized to highlight how “good” rather than “savage” this society is (Piault, 2008: 106-114).

Main Part

The capture of “The Other”

The first issue concerns the capture of the real "Other" through observation. The "Other" is in this case the filmmaker's chosen subject. The choice of subject is based on the search for that through which one will speak and give shape to the self. For this reason, it is important to find a story that is not only interesting for the creator but also can engage him/her emotionally and intellectually (Stefani, 2016: 76). In this case, the documentary initiates an autobiographical presentation and statement on the creator's part. The filmmaker makes two kinds of juxtapositions to assist the viewer in the following and in relation to the perception of what is to follow. The first form of juxtaposition has to do with her own family and her father's life while living in Germany. The second juxtaposition has to do with the impact these events had on the researcher. Indeed, in this case, these events are related to the emotional impact caused by her father's death and life in Germany.

Therefore, at first, the creator leads to the initial identification and delimitation of the "Other". But then, the "Other" is reproduced at various points, throughout the documentary, as a function of the scenes that the filmmaker chooses. The "Other" is captured as a condition of negotiated identity in the 16th
minute when the views about him by various community members are listed. The author therefore shows us how the "Other" is captured through the subjective perceptions of the community members, by using observation to quote them.

In some cases, the delimitation of the "Other" may be more specific and is deliberately chosen by the filmmaker, because of her own personal influences and experiences. One such relevant scene can be found at the 23rd minute. In this minute, the views of a young girl from Albania are presented, who, speaking to the camera, explains her goals and dreams in Greece. It is possible that the "Other" depicted in this scene is the creator, identifying herself, when she was in Germany, with the girl presented in the documentary. Interestingly, in the same scene the views of the girl's father are also presented. The girl's father refers to bureaucratic issues related to the paperwork of Albanian immigrants, presenting himself as a meek man who wants to live peacefully in Greece and contribute to progress. The "Other" of this scene can therefore be identified with the father of the documentary's creator, who faced considerable difficulties in life in Germany.

In general, the "Other" can be found at various levels within the documentary. Initially, the viewers can identify the “Other” as the documentary’s creator and as her father. Both lived as others in Germany, thus leading to a strong emotional impact and an intense experience, which is presented to the viewer of the documentary. On a second level, the "Other" is presented throughout the documentary in the form of the persons chosen by the filmmaker, and the situations she presents are in correspondence and congruence with the "Other" of her initial placement at the beginning of this documentary. The "Other" can therefore be found along the length of the documentary. Capturing the actual "Other" is practically impossible since it is addressed to anyone outside of its home country. The real "Other" is a subjective experience, which is perceived differently by anyone.

It is important to note that the "Other" is created through the views and perceptions of the local community. The filmmaker does not depict the “Other” as a legal and bureaucratic situation, although this takes place at various points in the documentary. The "Other" in the documentary is a creation of the subjective views, perceptions, and practices of the community members. It is the resistance to the “Other” and its acceptance that determines the extent to which a person develops his/her full potential as a human being in the new society, something she and her father were unable to do. Having faced obstacles and difficulties, the creator presents the views of individuals who may have also prevented her from developing and progressing as the "Other" in Germany. In the 10th minute, the perceptions of a member of the local society with traditional views are presented, i.e. creating the "Other" himself by resisting its acceptance. Afterwards, the schoolteacher’s views and his practices within the classroom are presented, promoting the inclusion of Albanian children. Through these practices, the “Other” is constantly created within the documentary as a function not only of the subjective experience of being a foreigner in another country, but also of the way in which this experience is created through the views and practices of the local community.

As Stefani (2016) states, the creators of a documentary actually wish to rewrite the world on their own terms, thus choosing the appropriate subject for their documentary. It is therefore impossible to separate the choice of a documentary's subject from the subjective experiences of the filmmaker. Such is the case in this instance, thus choosing the the "Other's" depiction as a result of the author's own experiences. In fact, a key element confirming this positioning can be seen in the quotation of the teacher's argumentation, trying to convince a father of the local community, referring to the experiences of Greek immigrants abroad and in Germany. The 'Other' is therefore chosen as a result of the filmmaker's own experiences, which is in congruence with the more general principles and assumptions of observational documentary, where choosing the subject is a deeply subjective matter (Stefani, 2016: 77).
Capturing the truth behind appearances

In this documentary it is also interesting to capture the truth behind appearances. The observational documentary certainly does not aim at capturing an objective truth, but instead seeks to present the truth through the perspective of those involved in the issue at hand. The observation of the subjects of the documentary lives of the constitutes a central pillar of observational documentary (Stefani, 2016: 86) and thus truth emerges through it.

The truths presented in this documentary are many and varied. On the one hand, the truth of the members of the local community who resist the integration of Albanian immigrants is presented. On the other hand, the truth is presented from the point of view of the members of the local society, such as the teacher, who help the immigrants to integrate. These are therefore two different truths from the point of view of the members of the local society, which are shown together in the documentary. Each group has its own arguments and discourse, which is presented in a phenomenological way. The aim is therefore to present the way in which the documentary participants develop their own truths about this issue, rather than to establish an objective truth.

The documentary also reveals the truth of the filmmaker’s own experience. This truth is also developed in a phenomenal and deeply subjective aspect. By choosing to project the children’s truth, the filmmaker projects her own perception of the difficulties she faced as an immigrant. The choice of presenting the classroom space at length within the documentary therefore represents her own truth about the difficulties and obstacles she encountered in Germany.

Considering the above in relation to the trends found in observational documentary during the recent decades, a related trend concerns the reduction of the ethnographer's authority and the removal of minority groups from the study (Gefou-Madianou, 2011: 33). However, it is impossible for the researcher to remove herself from the group she studies as she is a member of it. In terms of ethnicity, the researcher is differentiated from the group she observes. However, by looking at the larger group of immigrants independently of spatial, geographical, cultural, and linguistic contexts, the documentary filmmaker constitutes a member of this larger group that she observes.

Attempting to present her own side of the truth, the documentary's creator speaks herself between scenes, giving her thoughts and reflections. For example, at the 35th minute she talks about how immigrants think in their native language, developing their dreams. The documentary maker therefore refers to her own subjective dreams as a truth that may be relevant to all immigrants.

In conclusion, the author of the documentary does not "force" the observers to present a truth that is in congruence with her own. Besides, the presentation of the different views along with the resistance of the local society constitutes a form of confirmation and validation of her own subjective truth about the difficulty of her life in Germany. However, for the researcher to be completely detached from the attempt to create truth would be a fallacy. The researcher projects her own truth already from choosing the documentary’s subject, even directing it during its development towards the various truths she herself may have encountered as an "Other" in Germany. Subjectivity is not negated at any point in the documentary, that is, by projecting people's subjective truths in a way in which the viewers could encounter their own subjective truths in interpreting the recorded observation (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2012).

Naturalness

Evidently, naturalness in observational documentaries is inextricably linked to their truth. Naturalness refers to the true and authentic content presented, which is evident in this observational documentary (Nichols, 2010a,108-109). From the very beginning of the documentary, the author cites her own authentic and emotionally coloured experiences while living in Germany. Throughout the documentary,
the filmmaker speaks and projects other authentic thoughts as a function of associations that arise during the development of the documentary.

Based on the above, naturalness emerges in this observational documentary as a conscious construction of its creator (Nichols, 1991: 77-94; Nichols, 2010a: 114-124). It is possible that there may be some conscious constructions throughout the documentary's development, i.e. as a function of the evolution and the course the documentary follows, as the observational documentary evolves gradually and progressively (Nichols, 2010a; Στεφανή, 2016: 87). However, the creator starts from a clear intention to report her own authentic experiences and thoughts, presented through the many different “others” shown. In this way, the researcher uses her authenticity, lending naturalness to the documentary as an implicit construction.

The Direction of the Self

One of this documentary’s main concerns, as it happens with all observational documentaries in general, has to do with whether the subjects observed are acting natural and whether they are directing themselves during the course of the documentary (Nichols: 2010a; Nichols: 2010b). Indeed, the subjects’ awareness of how they are observed may also potentially lead to a differentiation of what they quote during the documentary. As Zheutlin (2005: 158) has pointed out, the use of the camera alone makes objectivity a romanticism, since the observed subjects are directing themselves (Goffman, 2006).

In this documentary, in some cases, rather than a direct narration in front of the camera, a simple observation takes place. In cases of distant observation, it is even possible to achieve a degree of objectivity in the absence of a relative direction from the observers (Abbott, 2019: 110; Nichols: 2010a; Stefani, 2016, pp.48-49; Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2009).

However, in most cases, the documentary is a direct narration to the camera. It is possible that during some outdoor activities, such as those taking place in the 9th minute, observation without narration to the camera is dominant. Nevertheless, in most of the relevant cases, observation takes place in enclosed spaces, such as the school and the home of the subjects, resulting in a short distance from the camera, and consequently the subjects are directed towards it and speak.

As the research subjects speak, in a great extent they cease to be natural. However, what they quote is not altered neither due to their awareness of being observed nor their intention to speak to the documentary maker. There are too many spontaneous statements within the documentary, which add a great deal of naturalness and negate the claim that the participants could be directing themselves. In the 27th minute, the migrant father from Albania expresses a free association, referring to events of life in Albania, some of which could even be avoided, as they would probably clash with the norms of his own social group, the political and religious norms of his home country, or the values of the documentary's creator. This migrant speaks in a spontaneous way, projecting his feelings about the oppressive regime of the Hoxha and how it suppressed the religious freedom of the Albanians. His spontaneity and the subjects he brings to the table therefore negate the claim that he is directing himself. The directing exists in a literal sense for the purposes of documentation, but not in the sense of the implicit and conscious presentation of a few elements that would steer the documentary in a particular direction.

However, there are moments where a more rigorous and structured discourse, in the form of an argument in front of the camera, can be identified, which could be seen as if the subjects direct themselves. This is very much the case with the teacher. Both in scenes where he speaks to the students, as in the 52nd minute, and in scenes where he speaks directly to the camera, the teacher seems to follow a structured argumentation influenced by the recording. Indeed, the same can be seen in the conversation with the father of a Greek family in the 13th minute. The teacher seems to have a structured argumentation, as if he is in a public exchange and debate, while in contrast the father follows a completely different approach,
being spontaneous in front of the camera, expressing views that could be criticised, making it clear that he hasn’t planned his argumentation beforehand. On the other hand, the teacher has a structured argumentation, which he may have repeated several times, and which may have to a greater extent the essence of staging compared to the father.

The objectivity of the other

According to Goffman (2006:59), most of the data concerning the observational documentary is paradoxically located beyond its place and context. Such is the case in this instance. The filmmaker captures the other in a way that would be impossible to be considered objective (Manthoulis, 2006: 114-118; Piault, 2008: 90-93; Nichols, 1991). This is not necessarily a negative thing, given that observational documentary does not seek objectivity (Carta, 2015: 4). The starting point for finding the subject is purely subjective (Stefani, 2016: 76). It would therefore be a fallacy to assume that the researcher is pursuing objectivity. The researcher is in fact the 'Other' herself, as well as any human being who has lived in a foreign country. Her father, the Albanian immigrants who are in our country, the Russian immigrants who are mentioned at one point in the documentary as people who alter Athens city’s character by a local and in general any person in the world who has experienced marginalization away from their home country is the "Other".

The "Other" was therefore chosen as a function of the creator’s interest and experiences. It is her own "Other" that interests her and is presented through the documentary. The recording of the Other is non-objective, deeply subjective and a function of her own world. The way in which the creator perceives the "Other" also lead the documentary’s viewers to create a similar perception.

The ultimate purpose of the documentary is the creation of an expanded sense of the "Other". At the end of the documentary, the viewer cannot and should not identify the Other with any person in particular. The "Other" can be anybody and most "Others" that exist on this earth are never presented in the documentary. The researcher's personal experiences and consequently the example of this small village in Crete are used to highlight an Other that transcends the narrow boundaries of this documentary, stretches the length and breadth of the earth and travels across different times, societies, and historical conditions. The filmmaker therefore succeeds in presenting the "Other" through the documentary, while the Other is also consciously "outside" the documentary. The "place of the lotus eaters" mentioned in the 26th minute could be seen as the spatial boundary setting of the "Other" in the documentary.

Conclusions

Based on the above, the "Other" is in fact the researcher herself, the documentary's subjects, as well as every person who experiences marginalization in foreign countries. The 'Other' may also be the documentary’s viewer or a person with whom she has come in contact with. By attempting to identify the Other in specific persons, she achieves her basic goal to generalize the "Other" beyond space, time, and human history. Even if the authentic experiences of those who are observed are presented, objectivity may be impossible in this case since the choice of the documentary’s subject and the personal experiences of the filmmaker direct the way the documentary unfolds. This is not necessarily a negative thing, as it demonstrates the deeply subjective nature of observational documentary. The filmmaker is in deep reflection as the documentary unfolds, selecting the elements she considers important and intervening verbally between scenes. It would be utopian to think that her deeply subjective experience would not be tied with the content she creates.

After all, in such a scenario she might not have been in sync with her pursuit and goals in the making of this documentary. Besides, with all the means available to cinema today, a wide range of audiovisual
options are at hand, which enable the filmmaker to capture what he or she perceives as the truth, taking into account first of all the people themselves and what they testify in front of the camera.

Image and sound in contemporary filmmaking do not only accompany anthropological or social studies, but also highlight people and their habits, in a way that transport the viewer to the cinematic present, to their own truth. Documentaries now are not just plain recordings accompanied by an explanatory text, as was the case with earlier anthropological documentaries. Today, both at the time of filming and during post-production, it is possible to create a result that will provoke social reflection and pave the way for a fruitful and productive debate between all those involved, both the creators and participants and the viewers who watch the documentary. At this point it is emphasized that the purpose of the image is not only to observe or to confirm the possible impressions that one may have, but to sharpen the penetrating gaze, both of the cinematographer who creates, and of the viewer who processes the result, drawing his own conclusions.

The cinematographic recording of a distant, ostensibly objective, reality that is coldly captured, whether it is a matter of geographical, ideological or cultural distance, is superficial and does not penetrate the essence of things. However, there is a subtle difference with the Observational Cinema, which presents to the viewer the facts by which a society, a social group, a party of people, a family or an individual lives and acts. Here the truth is constructed from the data itself. In this case, the truth is constructed from the data. The Observational Cinema perceives reality as a multiple and not an absolute concept, which is shaped according to the observer’s experiences and perspective. In contrast, documentaries are characterized by the attempt to transmit the data, setting as a basis a particular conception of what is real and how it is conveyed through the image.

References


