

UNIVERSITY OF THEATRE AND FILM ARTS

Doctoral School

**Boundaries of the self**

Effects of the director-subject relationship in longitudinal,  
personal documentaries

Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation

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In my thesis I deal with one of the most burning, personal and creatively exciting problems of my own creative activity: documentary filmmaking. I am aiming to explore the problems that the director's persona poses during the making of a documentary, and how his/her presence and the evolution of the relationship with the subject affect the film itself. I do not explore this question from an ethical point of view, - I believe there are many in depth text about the issue, - but rather I bring psychology into the theoretical documentary discourse. How does the creator affect the subject of the work and vice versa? Is what happens in front of the camera at all separable, and to what extent is it separable, from who is behind the camera? Moreover, how that person shapes the 'reality' in front of the camera?

In contemporary documentary film, in addition to observational films, the director appears in an increasing number of films, openly assuming and showing that the reality seen in the film is seen through his or her eyes. The reality that the viewer sees as a film is nothing other than the encounter between the director and the subject in a given situation and in a limited time frame, with the aim of making a film. The documentary shows the reality of this encounter.

The relationship between director and actor is an "*intermediate, personal space*" of "*performative*" reality, since it is brought to life by the intention of making the film, the presence of the camera and the director influencing the events, of which both parties show as much and as little as they themselves allow or see fit. I explore all these issues through my own documentary films, and through interviews with the most influential documentary filmmakers of my generation. I also mention several contemporary international examples. I am analysing in more detail the oeuvre of Helena Třeštíková, one of the most important figures in feature filmmaking, including her film shot over twenty years, *René (2008)*.

For me, the fundamental essence of the documentary is the exciting tension between life and art. In my thesis, I have been exploring longitudinal, character-driven documentaries, linked by a sense of deep personality. In the making of these films, I hypothesise that emotional involvement is inevitable, that various psychological processes are triggered by the relationship between the subject and the director through the filming, processes that influence both the participants and the film being made. In my hypothesise, this is not at all a problem, since the filmmaker is both involved in the lives of the characters as a human being and outside their lives as an artist, but it is important for filmmakers to be aware of the processes that arise from this dual role. On the one

hand, because if these emotional processes are not unexpected, then we dare to work with them during the making of the film, dare to incorporate them into the dramaturgy and even make them a visible part of the film. On the other hand, the dual state of consciousness that the director has in the process of filmmaking due to the specificity of the documentary genre: both involved and keeping the distance, can cause difficult moments like a split consciousness, especially for young filmmakers, which can have long-lasting negative effects and for which I believe filmmakers can be prepared. Also, of course, more attention can be paid to the emotional reactions present in the subjects. Can empathy and involvement, which are inevitable in interpersonal professions, be a creative tool to help the process, rather than an inhibiting factor?

One of the fundamental dilemmas of contemporary documentary theory is what makes the image seen authentic. I assume in my thesis that one of the most obvious means of authenticating the images we see is the director herself, his or her relationship with the character, and the reflection on the fact of intervention. The director's presence, her intrusion into and influence on the reality filmed, is not an ethical and aesthetic error, but an essential aspect of documentary filmmaking, which the viewer must be warned from time to time.

As both the maker and the viewer of the documentary, I am interested in the borderline situations where the film becomes "*performative*" (by the definition of Stella Bruzzi and not by Bill Nichols), that is, the observing filmmaker, under the influence of the filmed scene or person, steps out of the external, observer position and reflects on his/her own presence and relationship with the subject: the director becomes a participant in his/her own film (even if this is only a nuance in the whole film). I would like to explore the parallel presence of the observational and participatory film attitudes, and the impact of these two attitudes on each other, through the analysis of my own documentary films, Hungarian and international examples. I am putting an emphasis on longitudinal films because I assume that the role of time is of paramount importance: the longer the filming, the more profound and complex the psychological relationship between director and actor, thus deepening the psychological processes.

The hypothesis of my thesis is that directorial involvement and the development of different directorial roles are inevitable during the making of a personal documentary film shot over several years, and that the dramaturgical responses to emotional influences shape the narrative, genre and cinematic language of the documentary. It is therefore not necessary to exclude these processes, but to turn them into creative film-language tools.