

## **Research interview of Boris Mitić for Ana Iliesiu's PhD thesis on Ethics in Documentary Film**

### **1 In your personal view, what does it mean and how can we expose the real truth in a documentary film?**

Most stories have already been told. The goal of documentary film is to expose a "different" kind of truth, which we can then add to all the "real" truths we've experienced so far, and hopefully reassess them all. This works best when a strong story is combined with appropriate and skillfully applied cinematographic craft, which provides this "different" angle.

### **2 Is the phrase “ realist documentary film” redundant?**

No. It just pertains to one genre in documentary film - the one that pretends to be realistic. The earlier in the film a filmmaker establishes or makes clear his relation to realism or reality, the more interesting the film gets. Docs don't necessarily have to be realistic to tell a larger truth. My latest film GOODBYE, HOW ARE YOU? features a satirical narration which is fictional but sounds very true, and satirical documentary images which are totally true but look almost fictional. From this double contrast comes out what I call "satirical vérité", which was the goal of the film -- this being a story about a satirical literary movement.

### **3 What is the relationship/the difference between the “true” truth and the cinematographical truth? (speaking of documentary film)**

True truth is a subjective assessment of supposedly objective facts, cinema truth is subjective assessment of subjectively presented impressions. Nobody believes in true truth, everyone likes to believe in cinema truth.

### **4 What is your opinion on “takes” in a documentary film? Is a “take” exclusively a fiction film characteristic?**

Takes are ok as long as they are not used for manipulating or directing the story. With gypsies in *Pretty Dyana*, I often rephrased the question for several days and with several days in between, just to get a clearer and more expressive answer. With non-verbal shots, I always film as many different angles as possible, for editing sake. I think that's ok. But sadly, many people do script docs, just like most journalists just wait for that one quote they wanted to hear to build their story upon.

### **5 How is the presence of the filmmaker in the film (by voice and/or image – audio, visual or audio-visual presence) perceived by the viewer? Is the “reality” more credible for the viewer if the filmmaker is “there”, that is if his presence is directly perceived?**

Film reality is most credible when the audience feels the director is INSIDE his or her film, i.e. if he feels, controls and breathes with the subject. The fact that a director appears on screen or not is in this light completely irrelevant to me.

### **6 What are the advantages/ disadvantages in making a documentary film in which the filmmaker is also fulfilling other crew tasks: image, sound, editing? Isn't there the risk of a much too personal filtering of the truth so that it becomes spoiled, as in much too subjective? And isn't there otherwise the risk that the crew members eventually grow apart from the intended perspective by each having their own filter?**

Multitasking is cheaper and allows for greater creative control, which is crucial in certain conceptual films, as well as not missing out on key moments and for maintaining a sense of intimacy. Working with a symbiotic crew allows the director to concentrate more on the course of the filming and to react accordingly, but good directors always predict various outcomes in advance.

In GOODBYE, HOW ARE YOU?, in the beginning I hired quality DOPs who would film beautiful shots, but would miss out on the crucial, most satirical ones, which represent the essence of the film. So I gave up on them and chose to film myself. As for sound, it was becoming too expensive over time, which made me rethink my film and eventually introduce a first-person, studio-recorded narrator who covers the whole film, without any live sound. So, crew symbiosis is great but exceptionally rare, while crew limitations are good for maintaining full control and can sometimes lead to very creative solutions.

**7 How much are you allowed to lie if by lying you are telling the truth? (this question was born from a personal experience: an old man made a confession to us while we were in pre-production but then denied it in front of the camera. While editing, we tried to suggest what the old man initially had told us, without having actual proof of it, in that sense.)**

If you are honest and well-intentioned, it's ok. If you can manage to lie by using quality film language, even better. There is no pure truth anyways. But the problem is that too many docmakers these days abuse the credibility that they have by default, and they lie blatantly just to fill up parts of their story or to make them more appealing. I have seen it happen so often that I am now very suspicious of every occasion when I simply have to trust the filmmaker, without any proof or argument. For me, it's the red line that I would never cross. I even lost friends when they crossed that red line, and I don't regret it.

**8 If, while shooting, it's being revealed, unintentionally, an embarrassing truth about the character, what should the filmmaker do? Expose it in the film or protect his character?**

Doc films are not total diagnoses, we should only focus on those elements of the characters which are meaningful for the overall story of the film. In PRETTY DYANA, I noticed a posteriori that I had portrayed the most positive and uplifting parts of their lives, which ultimately IS the message of the film. If I had shown the darker side as well, it would break the energy and relativize its meaning. The audience is not stupid, they know people are not perfect and that life exists beyond the content of the film. But if this sudden revelation you are mentioning would alter significantly the meaning of the film, then yes, it must be included or reacted upon.

**9 How long does it take for a character to accept and to stop minding the camera? Were there cases of people denying a confession made off-camera? What is the best way to solve the problem?**

A lot of confidence building, self-exposure and honesty from the filmmaker are crucial. Repeated visits, preparations and follow ups as well. Show them you care, explain what you want and why. Self-irony always helps, and so does sarcasm about docs in general. When filming, film intimately and a lot. Be very prepared, set up many ENTRY POINTS into your character. Keep rolling all the time, audio at least.

**10 What is the decisive link in the process of deliberate misrepresentation of truth in favour of making a documentary film?**

\$\$\$ and the lack of anticipation skills.

**11 Kieslovski talks about an incident that made him give up on documentary films: after he finished shooting his last documentary, "The Station", the police asked for the entire footage in order to see it. After they saw it, Kieslovski found out that the police was looking for a girl in the footage, who killed her mother and sliced her into pieces, and apparently left the two suitcases at the central station baggage claim. The girl wasn't found in Kieslovski's footage, but was taken under arrest later. But if she would have appeared in his material? If accidentally the police would have seen her in the crowd who was filmed by Kieslovski with the candid camera? What does it mean for a filmmaker to accidentally capture another slice of reality which can become decisive for the character's life or even for the filmmaker's one? Did you have similar experiences during your cinematographical career? If so, how did they influence you? Did they change your life or your way of thinking?**

Single images have lost their power today. Even when they are very compromising, they are easily drowned in a sea of other images and impressions and seldom make a difference. Kieslovski's argument is pathetic. It that's the real

reason why he quit docs, then it's a good thing that he did. It is exceptionally difficult to film something that can make a change intentionally, let alone accidentally.

**12 But if we think from the character's point of view: what influence should the final cut of the documentary have for him? Once the documentary is seen by the character, who is happy with how he's been represented in the film, can we think that the "real" truth was almost fully accomplished? Should this documentary influence in any way the character's life or his perceptions?**

The character's satisfaction usually tells more about his ego or self-image than about the film. If the filmmaker is honest, then the character shouldn't have any reason to complain. But filmmakers are often more pragmatic than honest, unfortunately, and their characters end up regretting their participation in the documentary, or they abuse it to embellish their public and self-perceived image.

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