Beyond Narrative

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BEYOND NARRATIVE

A THESIS submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN PHOTOGRAPHY, FILM, & DESIGN at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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BACHELOR OF FINE ARTS, ITHACA COLLEGE, 2005

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Virginia Commonwealth University
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Acknowledgement

For Nunna, you have always shown me how to be humble and love without reward. This film is for you.

Special thanks to my wife Kristy for all of the love and support given to me throughout the making of this film. Nothing is impossible for the two of us.

To my parents David and Josie Dodd, your constant encouragement has truly lifted me far beyond my own abilities.

And very special thanks to the many gifted individuals who helped make this motion picture a reality. You spark my creativity.
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Abstract

BEYOND NARRATIVE

By Jacob Adam Joseph Dodd, M.F.A

A THESIS submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN PHOTOGRAPHY, FILM, & DESIGN at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Major Director: DAVID WILLIAMS
HEAD OF THE PROGRAM IN FILMMAKING, PHOTOGRAPHY & FILM
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

My graduate film at Virginia Commonwealth University, “Nunna Mia e la Barca,” explores the traditions behind narrative and documentary film construction. With this project, my goal was to blend narrative story telling techniques - for example continuity editing - with that of documentary approaches in order to communicate the story of my Italian grandmother, Nunna, and her journey on the Andrea Doria in 1956. These documentary approaches focus more on the specific details of Nunna’s American home as I have experienced them growing up. Everything in the motion picture frame has been lit, composed, rehearsed, and edited as in any fictional film, but the actors are my family and do play themselves and others throughout the piece. Although the work is scripted, the actuality of Nunna being herself and acting out her daily tasks creates a soft merging of fiction and nonfiction that makes the film nearly docudramatic. The docudramatic elements (elements dramatized from a true story) stem from both the biographical information as well as the perception of the abstracted objects in Nunna’s house. As in most of my films, my interest lies in the relationship between past and present events and the effect they have on the individual experiencing them. In order for me to tackle the combination of narrative and documentary, I had to define the terms as I understood them to be.
CHAPTER 2 QUESTIONS AND DEFINITIONS

WHAT IS DOCUMENTARY?

The understanding of documentary has evaded the language of cinema since its earliest conception. The Lumiere brothers’ films of everyday life, the watering of the garden and the crying child, have since created a boundary in the mind of many a film-viewer of what is to be perceived as reality and what should be acknowledged as fiction. The early distinction was that the Lumieres created documentary film and the French filmmaker George Melies (A Trip to the Moon), with his constructed sets, trick camera lenses, and multiple exposures, birthed fantasy and fiction film. However, as numerous nonfiction films were later released, such as Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North and Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi propaganda film The Triumph of the Will, the shroud of complete objectivity fell. Documentary no longer was perceived as only images which have been captured without direction and staging. Documentary film had been reevaluated and discovered to be a highly subjective visual essay. The visual essay contained research and examples focused around a thesis similar to the written word.

In Nanook of the North, Flaherty’s thesis is to make known the lost customs and traditions of a specific Inuit tribe living in the North Arctic region. Flaherty casually admitted to dressing the Eskimos for the camera in the film and working with them to illustrate the
traditional way of Inuit living. Flaherty, however, does maintain a natural atmosphere in having the Eskimos work in their environment and wrestle with nature as their ancestors once did. “What I wanted to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible – before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well” (Barnouw 45). Here Flaherty successfully describes that *Nanook of the North* is the presentation and preservation of “traditional” Eskimo practice not the current Eskimo practices of the 1920s. Flaherty did not try to hide his collaboration with the Eskimos. It has even been said that some Eskimos knew Flaherty’s camera better than he did and even helped repair and clean the camera when it fell into the sea (Barnouw 36). Flaherty displays his affection for Nanook and his family by allowing them to collaborate with him. Nanook was highly enthusiastic about the film or “aggie” as Nanook called it. Nanook even suggested that Flaherty should capture the walrus hunt, acted out in the way Eskimos used to hunt before the explorers arrived (Barnouw 36). Here the drama of the Eskimos, although staged, is strongly rooted in reality. “Having gotten to know his “actors” over such a long period of time, Flaherty’s relationship with them was so natural that they could continue their lives quite unself-consciously before his camera” (Rabiger 21). Flaherty’s inspiration, like many documentarians, came from his collaboration with his subjects. Similarly to Flaherty in *Nanook of the North*, “Nunna Mia e la Barca” uses film “grammar,” as it had been known to fiction film, to state material that has not been invented or acted but lived.

A well staged collaboration can toy with any viewer’s expectation. Viewer expectation in documentary film is both powerful and puzzling. The *Blair Witch Project*,
for example, attempted to blur the line of nonfiction and fiction by using nonfiction
techniques, such as handheld camera, roaming focus, and underexposed/overexposed
image to pose the film as truth. Some audiences were baffled at first to this type of
blending in the Blair Witch Project but now have come to expect the documentary
approach in narrative filmmaking. Whether nonfiction or fiction, films have a purpose: to
enlighten, entertain, or politically motivate. Documentary film often uses audiences’
expectations in order to achieve its goal of persuasive informing - this is why documentary
closely resembles the essay.

Similar to Flaherty, Riefenstahl makes use of
narrative techniques to persuade her audience in her
visual essay, The Triumph of the Will. She uses
extreme high and low camera angles to emphasize the
dominance of the Nazi party as seen in figures 2 and 3 to
the left. Figure 2 shows an extreme low angle looking
up at Hitler to emphasize his power while Figure 3
displays a high angle shot looking down at Nazi
supporters to show the awesome scope of their numbers.
Riefenstahl’s thesis stresses the superiority of the Nazi
party and their divine right to rule. Riefenstahl’s artistic direction and camera position pose
some questions in regard to the construction of documentary film. How do filmmakers and
audiences define the border between fiction and nonfiction? Is the representation and
perception of a fabricated set emotionally different from that of a place that actually
existed? Does not the camera capture both sets similarly whether staged or captured live? Is the line drawn between narrative and documentary techniques just a tool for marketing or is it an element used to create a greater depth of realism and emotion in any particular film? Further breakdown of documentary techniques aided me in finding some answers to these questions.

Traditional documentary style usually consists of several technical elements working in unison, most of which have later been adopted for use in fiction films to create a heightened sense of realism. In the Normandy Beach sequence from Saving Private Ryan, for example, the use of the handheld camera to relate this fiction film to actual archival film footage captured during the D-Day invasion in World War II. The audience is not fooled by Saving Private Ryan, but is immersed in its seemingly accurate depiction of the D-Day events. Traditional documentary elements usually include natural looking lighting that is permitted to be under or over exposed with a certain amount of graininess (Ross McElwee’s Sherman’s March has numerous interiors that were very dimly lit.), handheld camera movement that creates an immediate shakiness (In Michael Moore’s Roger and Me, the camera shakes as it follows Moore around.), interview style voice over with a subject directing the viewer (Errol Morris’ The Thin Blue Line contains a plethora of formalized sit down conversations with investigators.), and currently, a digital video image for added immediacy and authenticity (All television news is now captured on
video, so audiences have a tendency to perceive the hard, flat, video image as real).

WHAT IS DOCUDRAMA?

Documentary films do not follow these exact styles; however, the elements mentioned above are what general audiences associate with nonfiction. These elements come to one’s mind subconsciously when we decipher “reality” in the motion picture. Siegfried Kracauer said that “when great amounts of reality content are no longer visible in our world, art must make do with what is left, for aesthetic presentation is all the more real the less it dispenses with the reality outside the aesthetic sphere” (Kracauer 477-480). Therefore, film, as a representation of reality, should just be as effective in representing “reality” using fiction filmmaking techniques as that of a film using traditional documentary approaches. The deciding factor depends on the filmmaker’s ideas and intent, but some questions remain. What happens when some, if not all, of the elements that are associated with current documentary trends are broken down? If one changes the lighting to a more dramatically staged approach, adds the use of fluid camera movements, discards the directing audio or standard sit down interview, and captures the information on a higher resolution 16mm or 35mm film format, will the film still be accepted as documentary to a contemporary audience or will the film be a narrative piece based on a true story? If all of these elements are stylistic choices then in what way do they function in changing a film from nonfiction to fiction?

A term that often floats around is docudrama; it is used to describe a fiction film that takes a documentary style and manipulates it for dramatic emphasis. How can an audience be sure of the type of film that they are watching if all of the current traditions of
style are mixed up? The answer lies in the awareness that all film contains both fact and fiction because all film is an illusion, simply shadows on a two dimensional surface. Style then becomes a choice based on an emotional response that the filmmaker attempts to evoke. The challenge then for an audience is to observe and not merely look for common fiction/nonfiction signs through mere technique.

One could call my film “Nunna Mia e la Barca” a docudrama or a film that attempts to convey nonfiction information using tools associated with fictional storytelling. Perhaps, in some ways, the film falls closer to a film based on a true story because of the fiction techniques. Also, one can tell that the actors, in particular my sister - who plays Nunna at 24 and my brother who plays Nunna’s brother Ralph are indeed performing for the camera. In fashioning the film based on the life of my Italian grandmother, Nunna, I address numerous truths. I address the truth of her journey from Italy to the United States on the boat the Andrea Doria in 1956, the truth of her life now in the small town of Kittanning, Pennsylvania, and emotionally, the truth of my childhood perceptions upon hearing Nunna’s unique story.

To convey these truths, the dependency on having Nunna portray herself and reenact her daily routine in her home is crucial to delivering the audience’s expectation of reality. In numerous ways “Nunna Mia e la Barca” is similar to Nanook of the North in that Nunna collaborates heavily with me as Nanook did with Flaherty. The parallel between Nunna acting out her daily routine in her own space and that of the standard social actor (documentary subject) being captured on film is unmistakable. The social actor like my Nunna or even that of a narrative actor is still deliberately cast by the filmmaker
whether the film is deemed nonfiction or fiction. An audition still takes place in the filmmaker’s mind. He or she is looking for a very specific subject. As Elizabeth Cowie notes, “The “believability” of the documentary’s world - its verisimilitude - is produced when that world and its people appear recognizable, familiar, and thus, in some sense, as the same as what we already know” (Cowie 19-45). If one were to show images of human poverty in Africa and only show sleek urban settings, the viewer may be more inclined to doubt the issues debated about poverty within the film because the viewer’s expectations of seeing a human in a rural impoverished African hut would not have been met by the filmmaker. This is the dilemma of actuality – what is the difference between what the audience perceives as real compared to the reality of the situation itself.

In one sense my film does deliver the actuality of an Italian immigrant journeying to the United States through the person of Nunna as herself, but on the other hand the film strips down other conventions such as available lighting, handheld camera, and a direct narrator, often used in documentary, to illustrate the viewer’s already preconceived notions. My interest here lies in the blending of familiar signifiers and visual semantics in order to challenge the viewer in such a way that he/she has to discern what of the content is nonfiction. In “Nunna Mia e la Barca” the combination of deliberately staged scenes, such as the boat scene and the scenes of Nunna performing her tasks, gives the audience the inclination that Nunna’s tasks are indeed real. However, they are staged as well. Here, by seeing the contrast between two styles (the reenacted scenes with my siblings and the scenes with Nunna), the viewer’s interpretation has the potential to be more personal to them. The heavy focus on familiar imagery and sounds, such as the tomatoes, the pasta
machine squeaking, and the basil picking, invite the audience to think about their family. Every individual has a different association to their senses. The focus on the integration of familiar imagery with historical reference has been a staple of my VCU graduate work.
CHAPTER 3 FILMMAKING

In my first graduate film “Canticle,” (based on the life of St. Francis of Assisi), I present two conflicting signs - one of medieval religion through the monk robes and one of contemporary homelessness shown through the cityscape and props.

The challenge here for audiences is to see beyond the signifier and not jump to the first idea attached to that signifier. For example, one might see the monk robes in “Canticle” and skip all the urban details, such as the pipes in the cellar, the pie tin, the metal night stand, the sounds of city traffic, and the monk’s undershirts in order to complete the already pre-established notions of Medieval Europe in association to Christianity. One may even be inclined to think the contemporary setting is a mistake, especially if one would compare the film to a “traditional” American narrative. The discarding of information in the film takes place more so in the viewer’s head; than on the screen; therefore the city and contemporary information is lost. The viewer is then left with his/her incomplete thoughts. An audience constantly tries to finish any motion picture before its conclusion and in the process loses valuable information. As Walter Benjamin states, “The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed” (Benjamin 525). Humans, in general, constantly filter information - filtering information that the brain perceives that it
already knows or thinks is conflicting. In terms of cinema, the filtering can be at a large loss especially when the signs are wed in such away as to convey a new or uncommon idea – like monks practicing their traditional beliefs in an urban setting and what that means to a contemporary society.

For me the idea of giving the audience signs that seem extraordinarily different but yet are wed is quite interesting and a challenge. In life, one has to wade across the river of polar perspectives (fiction and nonfiction exteriorly seem quite polar, but in fact they are not) in order to come to some understanding of one’s experience. Life is full of fantasies and realities which hold equal truth. Great works of fiction illustrate well the truthful frailties of humankind (Example: *Paradise Lost* or *The Odyssey*). Essentially we process what we experience and then ultimately make a deduction in order to simplify. I find interest in slowing down the deduction process through apparently unrelated signifiers. Another example of how I have been working with film construction and distinct visual signifiers can be noted in “Undefined,” the experimental narrative film that I collaborated on with fellow VCU graduate student Bryant Dameron.

“Undefined” explores the complexities of control, guilt, and self help as seen through the lives of five distinct characters. One character is a blue collar factory worker, one a psychiatrist, one a church minister, one a nurse, and one a super hero. All of these characters suffer from their past, and the past events manifest themselves in their present state. For example, Dr. Calhoon, the psychiatrist, carries the guilt from the suicide of a former patient named Ben Somers. Somers haunts Calhoon (visually and audibly through voice over) so that Calhoon can no longer function in his daily routine without paranoia.
Calhoon hears his own words in the therapy sessions with Ben Somers, causing him to blindly seek out answers. Calhoon’s guilt ultimately leads to his own destruction when he falls down a flight of stairs while searching for Somers: Calhoon falls onto his own knife, a weapon used to defend himself from his demons. Nathaniel, the alcoholic factory worker and former patient of Dr. Calhoon’s, hears his therapy sessions with Calhoon as well. However, Nathaniel never hears his own voice, only Calhoon’s voice, a voice that motivates him to change his actions. The major forces tugging at these characters come from the “Rightful Night Casino” and the “Pure Life Church” headed by Reverend Bob Calhoon, the church minister. Both institutions offer salvation, but at what cost? The film jumps in and out of filmic time and place to emphasize that the characters are never entirely healed for just as the Alcoholics Anonymous doctrine states - once an alcoholic always an alcoholic. The characters must continue to struggle.

“Undefined” can be understood through symbolic association and theme not through a standard linear narrative that contains a rise and fall in action. “Undefined is broken into eight segments, “Threads,” “Meaning,” “Reality,” “Frustration,” “Fantasy,” “The Void,” “Paranoid Eye,” and “Synthesis.” Together these segments weave the themes connecting all of the characters. “Undefined” lives mostly in the world of abstract narrative where connections are made by the filmmaker through editing and visual symbolism; a solid example is when Calhoon descends the red lit staircase and encounters...
Somers to foreshadow his death. My interest in visual symbolism comes from the idea of “pure cinema” or cinema which gives the image more power over the spoken word because the image expresses so specifically and concisely in an instant. Hitchcock, Leone, and Kurosawa ascribed to this “pure cinema” tradition because they understood that as soon as one sees, one instantly interprets.

To emphasize the strength of the image in the film, “Nunna Mia e la Barca” turns toward the concept of time and place to create a relationship. The film operates on a similar level of construction as “Canticle” and “Undefined” by integrating different time periods and places that are seamlessly blended without a consistent bold visual cue (such as black and white for the past). A documentary film that flows back and forth through past and present is the 1950s Holocaust documentary Night and Fog. The filmmaker, Alain Resnais, shows the present state of Auschwitz which has green, overgrown plants coupled with flashes back to archival footage of Jewish families crammed into sleeping quarters.

Night and Fog begins in 1955 with an image of a barren field of grass with rich romantic music in the background. The scene then abruptly shifts to the dark black and white past. The viewers are taken back to Auschwitz, where the Jewish prisoners arrive. The audience then sees shots of victims after liberation that are so shocking that they have never been made public outside of the film. Resnais does not hold information back; showing the hair shaved off the heads of women piled high on the floor,
and bodies -men, women, and children - are tossed into a trash heap, their fat displayed to make soap. The film runs thirty minutes, but is emotionally longer. The viewer sees the conscious distortion of the Holocaust past still going on today and is left to think about the relationship between the events of the past and of the present. There is validity to the film because it reveals to the audience where the devastation occurred in the present time. This showing of the Auschwitz of 1955 solidifies the bridge between the current political culture and the actuality of the horrors of past.

In a similar way, Spielberg, in *Schindler’s List* brings the surviving Schindler Jews to Oskar Schindler’s grave in order to make concrete the validity of the history of the Holocaust. Rudolf Arnheim says “Thus we can perceive objects and events as living and at the same time imaginary, as real objects and as simple patterns of light on the projection screen; and it is this act that makes film art possible” (Arnheim 29). Arnheim here points out the major dynamic of the moving image: “that film gives simultaneously the effect of an actual happening and of a picture” (Arnheim 29). In every moving picture there is a flow from past to present, real to imagined that creates an emotional, real response for the viewer. By fictionally portraying the Holocaust in *Schindler’s List*, then showing the real people in history, Spielberg conveys that the line between fiction and nonfiction film is thin. “Nunna Mia e la Barca’s” interest lies in this thin line because of film’s unique ability to create such a dichotic emotional response over what is, what was, and what will be.
CHAPTER 4 ISSUES & INFLUENCES

CONCEPTION

One method of allowing film construction to be noticed is by eliminating certain elements from the mise-en-scene that could be confused with “reality.” Expressionism was used early on in cinema to unfold the mind’s desires and fears with the likes of such classic German films as Robert Wiene’s The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and F.W. Murnau’s Nosforatu. In his essay “Activating the Differences: Expressionist Film and Early Weimar Cinema,” Dietrich Scheunemann says that “film offers a unique opportunity to externalize the fermentation of inner life,” (Scheunemann 125-157) which is indeed the element of cinema that I strive for in “Nunna Mia e la Barca” - to illustrate Nunna’s psychological and emotional states. In the vein of those expressionistic films, I use painted shadows, line delineations, constructed sets, high contrast lighting, and abstract forms to create a more “real” or “hyperreal” recollection of my grandmother’s tale.

According to Baudrillard, “Unreality no longer resides in the dream or fantasy, or in the beyond, but in the real’s hallucinatory resemblance to itself” (Baudrillard 1018-1020). Therefore, my childhood perception of Nunna’s home and her life reflects in my film with a deliberate delineation from that which appears true. The dispensing with
natural lighting and movement is aimed toward pushing the senses into the zone of the hyperreal.

The hyperreal for this portrait of my Nunna does not entirely function in what Bill Nichols calls the observational mode of documentary style, also known as the “fly on the wall” approach (Example, Fredrick Wiseman’s film *High School* captures the daily dramas in an American high school in Philadelphia, PA.), but relishes in the merging of the observational mode with directed re-enactments by Nunna, the social actor. One may categorize “Nunna Mia e la Barca” as falling into both Nichol’s participatory and reflexive modes as well as observational. At times the action of Nunna performing her everyday tasks appears to the viewer as observational, happening in her own time with a natural fluidity as if the camera were not present. At other times, elements such as lighting with its distinct colored gels give way to the more constructed atmosphere that is reflexive of the film’s construction. The participatory mode as defined by Bill Nichols functions in the collaboration between Nunna as subject and me as the filmmaker. My collaboration with Nunna can be witnessed in the moment when Nunna lifts her colander high into the air and when she opens the washing machine. These shots carry the staged, collaborative feeling. In these shots, one feels the filmmaker’s directing hand. The moments are over
exaggerated and feel seemingly unnatural. My structure of combining the fictional elements with conflicting signifiers can be addressed to Erik Barnouw’s words about Nanook of the North that “drama, with its potential for emotional impact, was wedded to something more real - people being themselves” (Barnouw 39). I have married Nunna’s historical drama with Nunna presently being herself.

THE HOME AS THEATRE

The constructed narrative elements in “Nunna Mia e la Barca” come from Robert Wiene and Steven Spielberg, particularly through Wiene’s The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari and Spielberg’s Close Encounters of the Third Kind. Through Wiene and Spielberg I channeled my thoughts and feelings from my childhood perspective. Breton once said that, “it is perhaps childhood that comes closest to one’s real life” (Breton 447-453). I wanted to express my childhood wonder through the retelling of the sinking of the Andrea Doria in a way that felt “real” to me.

In creating the film on my grandmother, I attempted to merge unique and differing styles and approaches from both narrative and non-narrative techniques. The nonfiction elements could be contributed to Errol Morris and his use of retelling an event by staging a fictional play. In The Thin Blue Line, actors reenact a scene where a police officer is shot and killed through a car window. The reenactment focuses on the logistics of the gun fire as well as the reaction of the second officer. Here, Morris uses fiction to pose possible scenarios of the crime scene. Gestures, such as when the milkshake cup flies out of the female officer’s hand and hits the ground, emphasize the abstract and dramatic qualities of
the chaos of the murder trial. Similarly, I had Nunna play herself. She performed her daily household tasks in her own space where I could emphasize small details (like the cup in *The Thin Blue Line*). I emphasize the small gestures: for example, Nunna rolling the dough, dusting, picking vegetables, and jarring tomatoes. These gestures have a strong connection to Nunna’s past life on her family’s Italian farm. These gestures are also the movements that I think of when I reflect on my childhood in Nunna’s home. In order to capture these gestures as I emotionally connect to them, I fashion the mood by having Nunna act out these movements.

These movements work in a way that makes the film function as a domestic play - a play being put on by a grandson who uses the home as a theatre.

One could relate the domestic theatre to Guy BenNer’s re-creation of Moby Dick in his kitchen with his daughter. Guy BenNer’s “Moby Dick” video installation captures Guy and his daughter acting out scenes from Herman Melville’s novel *Moby Dick* in their kitchen. In the video, Guy transforms the domestic space of the kitchen into a theatre. Common household items, like a dinner table, transform into objects of drama in a way not unlike the tomatoes with the red flashing light that I use in “Nunna.” I strive to make the similar connection of the house as stage. Most of the recreations in the film are shot to look as if they were photographed in or around Nunna’s home. Icons such as Nunna’s contemporary outfit packed by her younger self, the modern...
telephone in the siren scene, and the wood of the boat allude to the actors performing a theatrical rendition of Nunna’s life at her house. This idea of performance goes back to children and the imagination. I used to take pillows off of Nunna’s house and build elaborate tunnels and pretend I was on a journey to find artifacts. I would put on Nunna’s clothes and become my own superhero called Hatman. These are the activities that children busy themselves with while at grandma’s. “Nunna Mia e la Barca” takes the idea of childhood transformation and manifests it. My sisters literally become Nunna in their play clothes and my brother dresses himself as well to play along. The entire house becomes their theatre. The basement transforms into the heart of a ship, the porch becomes the boat railings, the bedroom seems timeless, and the garden becomes an Italian farm. “Nunna Mia e la Barca” even opens with the curtains being pulled back and closes with the closing of the curtain at the end of the film. The combination of domestic living and theatrical portrayal seems to make the documentary a stronger hybrid between the lived and the staged.

Another element that contributes to the lived as staged is the inclusion of my siblings to portray Nunna’s history or my family history. My older sister plays Nunna as she transitions from Italy to the United States, my brother plays her brother, my youngest sister plays Nunna at eight, and my one year old niece plays Nunna’s baby sister. Oral tradition has been the foundation of many belief systems. Humans pass down their ideas and way of life to their offspring. In order to keep Nunna’s oral history pure and
emphasize the spirit and appreciation that resides in the generations following her, the film needed to have my family presence. By including my immediate family, the film seems to speak of Nunna’s survival and perseverance. The idea that if it was not for her, none of us would be alive can be noted in the dinner scene where Nunna delivers the meal to the grandchildren at the table. Nunna’s hard work and love sustains the offspring seen in these shots. The film then directs one to the fruit of new life that exists in Nunna’s grandchildren and great grandchildren.
CHAPTER 5 EXPLORATIONS

The challenge of “reality” was a conceptual journey that I wanted to embark on. Having recently viewed *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* at the time that I was interviewing my grandmother and writing the film, I had rediscovered the beauty in the mise-en-scene. Nunna’s house had provided a rich mise-en-scene filled with artifacts and references (An example of artifacts include the deer heads on the wall as Nunna dusts the photos.) to Italy and her way of life, not to mention Nunna herself. However, I wanted to create with my hands as well. Having never experienced an ocean liner, I had no ambition of trying to create a perfect replica. A replica seemed emotionally dead and over done, but a set made of wood, fashioned by human hands seemed a perfect way to acknowledge Nunna’s narrative of hard-work and survival. The film functions like all of my film work – it’s about process and collaboration. Nunna’s work focuses on process of food making, and my work focuses on the process of filmmaking.

From “Caligari” I gained the use of line, light, space, and blocking in all the flashback and memory scenes. The scene of Nunna (Carmela) at twenty four packing her clothes in her suitcase used the gramophone’s arm and spinning vinyl to direct the viewer’s eye toward Nunna and her journey. The boat itself contains vertical railings that intersect with horizontal lines made by paint and the boat itself references Nunna’s porch. There is
a simple sense of stability through the set itself in a scene (the sinking of the Andrea Doria) that is emotionally unstable. In this way, the film illustrates Nunna’s actual solid grounding despite all the chaos. The shots of the boat are made more unstable by the extreme camera angles and montage. One edited montage sequence is as follows: there’s a high angle shot looking past Carmela as she looks out off the boat at her brother Ralph in the distance, a low angle shot of Carmela’s hands grabbing her chest, and a shot that swings on a crane past Carmela as she grabs the rope. These shots bring the dramatic elements, but the boat itself contains stable straight lines. It was the dual usage of mise-en-scene and editing that were utilized to connect the dramatic elements to the domestic elements.

One example of how past and present were edited is when Nunna, as a young woman, finishes talking to her grandfather on the telephone while on the Andrea Doria, then in a high angle wide shot she runs in slow motion toward the camera, then falls to the ground. The red emergency light flashes on her face followed by a cut to a slow zoom into the tomatoes on the counter with the red light flashing. The red light connects the danger of the past with the domestic reference to the threat of the sinking boat and Nunna’s life in Italy to the tomatoes seen in her house every day.
SCIENCE FICTION LIGHT

In order to capture images in the style of “Caligari” and make them function with the documentary style footage of Nunna cooking and cleaning, science fiction style lighting (Seen in Close Encounters of the Third Kind and E.T.: The Extraterrestrial) and framing was utilized to bridge Nunna’s home with the family reenactments. Science-fiction style lighting with its mixed light sources (blue and red) and chiaroscuro effect (dramatically motivated light with no natural source), function on two levels, one - sci-fi lighting awakens childhood wonder; and, two - it recalls dramatic light rays seen in Christian renaissance work (Chiaroscuro works to emphasize the drama but also Nunna’s strong Roman Catholic heritage and beliefs). By implementing shots of subtle abstraction through the editing transitions, such as the basil drying on the bed, the colander, and red lights flashing on the tomatoes, the film could move fluidly in and out of narrative and documentary approaches.

These shots come from the Spielberg influence, and the fascination with seeing an object or a space differently using a different perspective. Perhaps, one could relate this fascination of perspective to the images of Devil’s Tower in “Close Encounters.” Devil’s Tower was represented in the film through various media - sculpture, with the mashed potatoes and the dirt sculpture in the living room in Neary’s home and charcoal drawings on the wall in the character Gillian’s home. The characters in
the film were emotionally drawn to this shape of Devil’s Tower but could not figure out what it was. This mystery of object perception is valuable to the work on Nunna.

Object perception in the film is illustrated in several ways through light, effects, and framing. For example, shots in the basement are lit by red and blue gels. Fog also fills the room. Together these approaches cross the gap and connect Nunna to her past on the boat. In Paul Schrader’s film *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, based off of the life of the artist Yukio Mishima, Schrader combines documentary, dramatic past, and dramatic fiction to connect Mishima’s complex life - a life that exists in the “public, private, and literary” (Ebert 1995). Mishima’s last day is shot in a semi-documentary style; his past is cued with black and white flashbacks of his childhood; and, elements from his novels are illustrated with colorful theatrical sets. Schrader eloquently transitions between each style through his use of camera, such as when the camera moves from Mishima’s present day home to his childhood window, eloquently blending into black and white photography. Transitions for me are important to make the past manifest in the present.

An example of how the ideas of past in the present is manifested can be found again in the shot of the colander and the red tomatoes. A blinking red light connects the idea of emergency and rescue on the sinking Andrea Doria to Nunna’s act of jarring tomatoes. The red light blinks on the face of a young Nunna, then on the red tomatoes on her window.
seal, and finally a colander shoots up to the sky with blue water shooting out. Past and present become united through light and color. The colander becomes the alien mother ship in “Close Encounters” taking off into the sky - it seems to serve the idea of being an alien in a foreign world like Nunna living in the United States. The colander functions on an abstract emotional level - the fact that Nunna was pulled from the water and rescued and stranded in a foreign atmosphere.

Other shots such as the basil drying on the bed create a relationship to past and present within one frame. The basil drying on the bed can be broken down as such – there is the room with the bed in the foreground to signify contemporary home, the green basil on the blanket references the Italian past - the blanket serves as a carrying sack (Nunna brings Italy with her to America.), the window functions as a portal to Italy connecting the barn and blue sky to Nunna’s present day space. It seems all of the pieces exist in one shot - Nunna very much lives with Italy although she has not been there in fifty years. The reality of who Nunna is comes from all of the moments in her life both in Italy and now. It is important to emphasize these subtle moments and themes to create her multidimensional reality.
LISTENING TO THE IMAGE

Sound in film works in unison with the image but allows room for the image to guide it. Sound complements the image in order to immerse the viewer into the content of the work. Unlike the image which is restrained to the “presence of a frame,” sound can create a vast sense of space (Chion 41). In “Nunna Mia e la Barca” the sound design is minimal so as to encourage the visuals and not steal from them. The sound in the film works both to create atmosphere as well as to inform the viewer of Nunna’s memory. One way sound informs memory is through the sound of water. The sound of water is a reminder of the Andrea Doria as well as Nunna’s Italian past. Water drips onto plants; it rushes in the washing machine; it crashes into the boat; and, it swishes around inside young Nunna’s metal pot.

Being that cinema is primarily a visual language, sound has a brilliant way of connecting images and transitioning the viewer into the next emotional space. Note in the opening of “Nunna Mia e la Barca” the audience hears squeaks of Nunna’s feet on the floor, church bells in the distance, and the curtains being tied back. The sound design creates a soft introduction that gives the image depth and welcomes the viewer into the home of the woman being presented before them. As Nunna walks away, traditional Italian music fades in to give the viewer the cultural information that is paramount to the heart of the film. Here, sound sets the atmosphere and gives the audiences something to grasp onto. Sound guides and unites.

Along with guiding, sound can also evoke a new idea from the image. The slow
motion shot of Nunna and her brother looking at their Italian farm house before they make
the voyage opens with ambient nature sounds, then sounds of moving water, a buoy
bobbing, and of a nearby boat fade in as Nunna and her brother Ralph exit the screen. The
next shot is of Nunna walking up her porch. The sounds of the water and boat tie the
image of Nunna and her brother departing to that of the porch and Nunna walking up the
stairs – a reference to a passenger boarding a boat. This use of sound can raise important
questions to the audience: What is this? What is happening? As Michael Chion states,
this type of sound is active off-screen sound (Chion 85). The sound design makes the
viewer curious because it is not synchronous or directly related to the object in the image.
Here, the sound of Nunna’s past mixes with her present to create the sense that all of her
experiences are still strong within her mind. The viewer actively participates in the
language of the sound/image process to create the new idea of Nunna as a survivor.

Language plays a paramount role in the way audiences interpret. The sound of a
voice carries significant weight in terms of characterization, empathy, and identification.
“The first thing we observe about cinematic dialogue is that, whereas in general a stage
play demands constant talk, a film requires an absolute minimum of words. The essential
basis of cinema lies primarily in the realm of visual images, and such sound
accompaniment as is admitted must be reduced to the barest necessaries” (Nicoll 129). In
the process of creating the film, I discovered that Nunna’s perspective wasn’t manifest in
the film. Without Nunna’s voice in the film to invite the audience into her life
experiences, the film became emotionally thin. Nunna’s voice with her strong, Italian
accent brings with it her subjectivity. Nunna’s accent and inflection emphasize the point
that although Nunna has lived in the United States for fifty years, she has not fully assimilated into American culture. She has held onto her Italian heritage throughout and it only takes a small sample of her voice to discover this.

Also with Nunna’s language, the film needs the right selection and dose of dialogue to function with the images. The audience only needs that which is necessary. In this way, they have room to imagine between the image and sound. I narrowed down elements of Nunna’s conversation to words that addressed the Andrea Doria experience and her family, in particular her brother Ralph. With a specific focus on Nunna’s family and the boat, words could speak where image could not. For example, the image of Nunna jarring tomatoes comes up on screen, then we hear Nunna talking about being rescued from the ship by a rope and thrown into a passenger boat. The next shot that follows is Nunna tossing a narrow cooking spoon into a colander. The tension in Nunna’s voice marries to the tension created by the motion of and sound of the spoon hitting the tomatoes and metal colander. The voice illuminates the narrative, and the images along with sound-effects carry the dramatic subtext.

However, using Nunna’s voice in the film also created a problem in the interpretation of her words. Nunna’s Italian accent functioned both as a sweet melody and as barrier to the viewer. The viewer knew English was being spoken but struggled to translate. Ultimately, I subtitled with the intention of keeping true to Nunna’s words as much as possible without much adaptation. By staying true to Nunna’s Italian English, the film could reveal to the audience the beauty of Nunna’s accent without the frustration of trying to interpret. The following is an example of the subtitle of Nunna’s words from the
film.

“They, the people in the little barca get me and get Ralph too…was both in one barca. After maybe went far away…the over here to downtown. I don’t know what place. And was put the…the one, I don’t know if was German or French. Me and him was inside of there…in the boat.”

One can read the subtitle above and notice the word “barca.” The word “barca” is boat in Italian and is in the title of the film. Viewers may use the subtitles as a guide to understand Nunna’s speech. As the film progresses, some viewers may not need to read the subtitles because after a while they may be able to understand Nunna’s style. The subtitle then functions as an entryway just as the sound of Nunna opening the curtains and the Italian music are entryways into the film.
CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS & EVOLUTIONS

I believe that my attempt at making Nunna’s home feel inviting seems to be the most successful element of the film. Perhaps it is the fact that the seams of the film - the set, the lighting, and the acting are not as visible which makes the overall presentation more enticing to the audience. Also, the contrast between the boat shots that bear the mark of fabrication with wood and screws help to establish the organic feel of Nunna’s home and belongings.

The richness of Nunna’s home functions so well as “real” for the audience that the recreated shots of the boat and the immigration journey become even more “unreal” and emotionally distant from Nunna’s house. This revelation to me becomes another illumination of relativity. The audience compares all of the staged sequences and selects the scenes with Nunna to be “real” or documented even though they were staged the same way.

In the end, I decided to limit the past recreations and emphasize Nunna’s relationships through her voice-over coupled with her acting out her daily routine. The recreations function more as a punctuation mark. In this manor, my emotions seemed to unite more with the material, making the film more about my collaboration with Nunna and less about my conceptual journey with fiction and nonfiction filmmaking techniques. A personal film to me is a stronger film than anything that could be conceived through theory.
SYNTHESIS

Throughout my two years as a graduate student at VCU, I’ve learned more about the language of film by experimenting. I have experimented with the concept of time with all of my graduate films including “Canticle,” “Undefined,” and “Nunna Mia e la Barca.” In each of these films, I attempted to unite ideas that seem distant and unrelated in order to evoke the connection that all time is present and that individuals are composed of collective experiences. Frank, in “Canticle,” set out to give away his worldly possessions because of a dream and sacrificial actions he made as a youth. Nathaniel and Dr. Calhoon in “Undefined” are characters who constantly wrestle with their alcohol addiction and their past relationships.

All of my mentioned VCU graduate films taught me different ways to approach personal narrative, experimental, and nonfiction film. In addition to learning new ways to express an emotion or tell a story visually and symbolically, I have also discovered the honesty in my work. By receiving large quantities of feedback on all of my works, I found that a certain naivety and honesty lies in the subtext of my films. In “Canticle,” the honesty comes from the blending of Christian themes and merging medieval religious practice in the contemporary world; this is something not often done in film without proselytizing. In “Nunna” the honesty comes from the way I construct recreations using my brother and sister to define the relationship of Nunna to her history and my family. By not using professional actors, I am unconcerned with hiding the performance and more concerned with the authenticity of family. Michael Renov states that “domestic ethnography is a kind of supplementary autobiographical practice; it functions as a vehicle
of self-examination, a means through which to construct self-knowledge through recourse to the familial other” (Renov 141). For me, the blending of my differing interests while utilizing my family to search for meaning has become the strongest element in my work. No film is entirely fiction and no film is entirely nonfiction. A filmmaker only needs to choose the appropriate styling of elements to convey his/her ideas as best as he/she can.

I intend to keep exploring my distinct and differing interests of world history and family history using my family members. In my next project, I hope to either focus on my American Grandmother on my father’s side and her tragedy of losing her sister to a plane crash while a teenager or tackle the themes of reconciliation found in the Confessions by St. Augustine of Hippo. With my American grandmother, I plan on viewing her home similarly to how I viewed Nunna’s home, looking for symbolic images like the slippers on Nunna’s porch gate which become a reminder of her endurance. In place of the water so prevalent in “Nunna Mia e la Barca” with the washing machine and the plants, the film on my American Grandmother will focus primarily on air, and how air and flight have thematically played a role in my grandmother’s life. Objects, such as an oven door, may function more as the wing of an airplane and an attic can become an airplane hangar.

For the piece on St. Augustine, I plan on uniting my personal trials with my family and faith with that of Augustine’s to illustrate that struggles are not restricted to a specific
time and place. Dealing with temptation, guilt, and reconciliation play a significant part in human life, and it is this that attracts me toward Augustine’s labors. Again, my research draws me toward the domestic space whether from the past or from the present. The domestic space and its relationship to its owner, family players performing an oral history, and the blending of fictional and nonfictional elements through symbolic transitions are my cinematic passions. I intend to further explore these cinematic passions using the motion picture medium for what it does best - bring forth an emotional history.
LITERATURE CITED


VITA

Jacob Adam Joseph Dodd is originally from Kittanning, Pennsylvania. He graduated with honors from Ithaca College earning a B.F.A. in Film, Photography, and Visual Arts and a minor in Art History. Dodd is an M.F.A. graduate in Photography and Film from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. Dodd's work has been recognized at the Eureka Springs Digital Film Festival, Tartan Road Student Film Festival, the VCU Student Film Festival, and the Jacksonville Film Festival.