

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Higher truths and so-called lies: Documentary's animated authenticity

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Abstract

A masterclass in Serbia on documentary film debates creativity. Experimental and documentary filmmakers in the region assert the boundaries of documentary in order to transgress them. Creativity offers a means to authenticity, animated through viewers' projection. Approaching authenticity as animated rejects preoccupations with the *mechanical indexicality* of the camera. Rather than focusing on index as trace, the ambivalence of indexicality productively moves between representation and reality. This highlights two paradoxes of documentary: that fictional techniques create a real world and that individuals animate types. Authenticity is fragile. Documentary creativity celebrates this vulnerability, inviting visual anthropology to experiment, as well.

KEYWORDS

animation, authenticity, documentary, experiment, indexicality

INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Perović announced a huge infection. He declared that if he succeeded in transmitting just a bit of it to us over the course of the next two days, he would be happy. Thus, he introduced creative documentary to the masterclass he was leading in Western Serbia in the summer of 2019. There was evidence, however, that his students were already infected. The Montenegrin filmmaker was the second instructor of three during a weeklong masterclass.¹ Our first, Croatian documentarian Nebojša Slijepčević, had quoted documentary film scholar Bill Nichols by writing on the board: "Every film is a documentary" (Nichols, 2017). The quote was meant as a provocation, but the first participant to speak up immediately agreed. She insisted it was wrong to ask what a documentary should be. She was against borders. It is all the same. It is all film.

Slijepčević worked to clarify—it was not all the same. The distinction between documentary and fiction became a consistent point of conversation for the masterclass, which had brought together participants from all over the world to be taught by seasoned documentary filmmakers from the former Yugoslavia. While participants prepared to dissolve definitions and to embrace creativity, these two instructors insisted on identifying the limits of documentary and on specifying the genre's unique ability to represent reality, while also pushing participants to transgress accepted boundaries. I met other filmmakers similarly questioning distinctions between fiction and nonfiction film during my fieldwork in the region in the

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summer of 2019. The question that emerged on documentary filmmaking was the following: Why maintain a line between documentary and fiction, while simultaneously setting out to complicate the relationship? In other words, what makes a definition of documentary film at once desirable and difficult?

When participants insisted, at the masterclass, that it made no difference if we categorized a film as documentary or fiction, I worried that everyone would agree, and the discussion would end. I interjected that when viewing a film labeled as a documentary, I bring certain expectations regarding the action onscreen and their relationship to real events. If a film shows aliens and calls itself a documentary, this distinction matters to my reception of it. If I accept it as documentary, it matters to my worldview. Slijepčević described this as an unacknowledged contract between filmmaker and viewer. Regarding what makes something a documentary, Slijepčević ultimately answered his own question for the participants: In fiction and documentary films, there might always be a combination of truth and fiction. However, he argued, documentary ultimately prioritizes authenticity over drama, whereas fiction is weighted toward drama.

I use Slijepčević's definition of documentary—as prioritizing authenticity, even as directors manipulate situations to achieve this—alongside examples of creativity in documentary that I found in the masterclass and during fieldwork in the region, to develop my argument: Instead of a film's authenticity being threatened by creativity, authenticity emerges through creative techniques. Documentary indexically animates authenticity. The masterclass offers a way to look at local documentary ideologies, and thus to gain a grounded study of the ethnography of the moving image in the former Yugoslavia. These discussions, moreover, offer insights into anthropological questions regarding our own animations of authenticity.

Treating creativity as the means to authenticity, rather than a threat, moves beyond the narrow conception of film's indexicality that has traditionally focused on what I term mechanical indexicality, discussed below. The documentary as animated highlights two paradoxes of documentary film—that it uses fictional elements to create real worlds, and that it uses real particulars to portray general types. It highlights the delicacy of authenticity, its vulnerability rendering it potentially uncanny. Audience projections contribute to animation, raising questions of authority. The vulnerability of documentary authenticity keeps it alive as a filmmaking mode, tempting filmmakers to play with boundaries. The fragile liveliness of the truth provokes experimentation.

CREATIVE EXPERIMENT AS DOCUMENTARY IDEOLOGY

The masterclass staged a meeting of various documentary ideologies, which anthropologist Ilana Gershon and film scholar Joshua Malitsky have defined as "...the set of beliefs, attitudes, and strategies about documentaries with which filmmakers, viewers, and critics explain or justify perceived film structure and meaning" (Gershon & Malitsky, 2011, 46). In a town in Western Serbia of about 13,000 inhabitants, the masterclass brought together participants from North and South America, Africa, Eastern and Western Europe, and South Asia. Most had recently finished studies in filmmaking and arrived with a variety of experiences. We attended lectures during the day, where we discussed clips and short documentaries. A filmmaking camp ran concurrently, where international teams of film students made documentaries in neighboring towns in under 3 weeks. In the evening, we attended public screenings of films made by the instructors, masterclass, and film camp participants, followed by Q&A, held in a former factory (Figure 1). My attendance at the masterclass was part of ongoing fieldwork in the region, including 3 months in Serbia and Croatia in 2019. I interviewed instructors and participants from the camp and masterclass and other filmmakers in the region. The masterclass provided explicit metacommentary on the relationships between documentary, fiction, and experimental film, while other engagements contextualize the instructors' views.

The camp, compelling international teams to shoot and finish documentaries in compressed time frames, combined social and artistic experiment. This fits with regional histories



FIGURE 1 Documentary masterclass and camp participants have gathered for an evening film screening open to the public in Western Serbia. Photograph by author, August 2019.

of documentary and experiment working hand in hand. During the masterclass, we watched and discussed examples of films that pushed the limits of documentary—a film that consisted entirely of reenactment, for example, or one that featured a funeral for a person who was not yet dead. We watched films from the region that used experimental methods to prompt social action and blurred the line between fiction and documentary. Film clubs of socialist Yugoslavia gave birth to a rich network of experimental filmmakers (Milošević, 2011). From this scene emerged the so-called *Crni Talas* (Black Wave) in the 1960s and 1970s, a movement that gained international fame and local controversy (Beard, 2019; DeCuir, 2011). These works frequently slip between documentary and fiction, such as Dušan Makavejev's creative montage piecing together archival footage with new storylines (Levi, 2017).

Besides this masterclass, I visited film festivals and film clubs and participated in film-related workshops in Belgrade, Serbia, and in Split and Zagreb, Croatia. Contemporary film clubs in the region still encourage experimentation. Filmmakers I met experimented various hybrid forms, fake documentaries not meant to mock anyone, and docufictions that circulated documentary festivals but could only have been shot with multiple takes. Such films referenced realist styles and observational documentary forms—that is, films that are perceived as un-stylized, as if the camera merely captured a slice of life with minimal distortion or intervention. Such expectations of documentary needed to exist so that artists could play with documentary's unstated rules.

Slijepčević and Perović, as invited instructors, were asked not only to discuss their own films as individual artists, but led discussions at a more general level regarding what

constituted documentary and what its goals should be. Slijepčević's film *Srbenka*, discussed below, had garnered a great deal of attention, both locally and at international festivals, during the previous year. Both, moreover, set agendas documentary film in the region through pedagogical and curatorial work: Slijepčević taught at a documentary filmmaking program in Zagreb. Perović organized and selected films for ethnographic film festivals in the region. In the masterclass, they provoked and led analyses of documentary films, which I observed through the masterclass. Recent anthropological interest in analysis highlights its creativity as "...a process that can be full of space for imaginative thinking while resolutely grounded in a distinct understanding of empirics that is thoroughly ethnographic" (Ballesterro & Winthereik, 2021, 3). The masterclass offers insight into dialogic constructions of analysis designed for artistic output, as the discussions sought to expand filmmakers' visions for their own future documentaries.

ANIMATING AUTHENTICITY AS ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPERIMENT

This fieldwork offers a lens into issues central to visual anthropology, as nonfiction film acted as both object of analysis and method for creative knowledge production, and with filmmakers' openness to experimentation. Acknowledging the epistemic value of local filmmakers can be another way of doing shared anthropology (Ginsburg, 2018; Rouch, 2009), by treating ethnographic interlocutors as theorists. Film scholar Catherine Russell has pointed out the experimental foundations of ethnographic film and the ethnographic "undercurrents" found in experimental films (Russell, 1999, 17). The reflexive turn in anthropology at the end of the twentieth century provoked many to emphasize ethnography as fiction (Behar & Gordon, 1995; Segal & Handler, 1989). It has now become commonplace to admit to the situated positionality from which we write or film (Ruby, 2000; Trinh, 1989). Anthropologist Arndt Schneider argues that we can nonetheless continue "to prize open the huge and radical epistemological potential of expanded cinema and experimental film for anthropology" (Schneider, 2021, 1). We can use these insights to interrogate continued conventions of knowledge production, through which we protect and enforce anthropological legitimacy, its own type of authenticity.

For filmmakers and anthropologists, a central preoccupation has been creating representations that can be traced back to a moment of authenticity. Film and anthropology, two projects born with a certain urgency at the turn of the twentieth century, offer "two sides of a similar modernist preoccupation with loss" (Russell, 1999, 9). Their portrayals of ruin offer a "model of representation that is in constant flux, bearing a shifting relation to a prior state of authenticity" (Russell, 1999, 10). Authenticity brings up various related terms that do not align perfectly. It can suggest truth and reality or a virginal purity, a fidelity to untainted original conditions. Fakeness might stand in contrast, or it might disqualify something from having any status as a product at all (Vann, 2006). For example, the question posed in the masterclass was not, "Is this an authentic documentary or a fake one?" but "Is this a documentary?" The fantasy of authenticity illuminates understandings of self and other, of modernity and tradition, of here and there (Bruner, 2001; Lindholm, 2007; Parish, 2009). Objects, media, and tourist experiences present authenticity as constructed for outsiders' consumption (Cavanaugh & Shankar, 2014; Raibmon, 2000; Shepard & Pace, 2021). Rather than regarding claims to authenticity with hostility or cynicism—as inherently a mere marketing ploy, for example—we might think about how quests for authenticity bring about particular interactions between the makers and consumers—or animators and spectators—of these authentic products.

Slijepčević argues that documentary by definition prioritizes authenticity. Perović invokes the notion of a film's poetic truth (discussed below), which is the result of careful direction, rather than the faithful capturing of a fleeting moment. Perović dismissed filming

without a clear plan as a “catch-as-catch-can” approach to documenting reality. The documentary authenticity presented here, then, is the relationship between the represented and the real, held to be indispensable and animated by the viewer, without which a film loses its documentary status.

The authenticity animated in documentary film depends on indexical processes, which are productively ambivalent. Focusing on the creative potential of indexicality moves beyond what I term the mechanical indexicality of the camera itself. I use this to refer to the preoccupation with the photograph as a specific sort of trace. That is, mechanical indexicality describes the relationship between a photographed or filmed image and the material that appeared in front of the camera, as mediated by photographic processes (of exposure and development) and the technology of the camera as a correspondence that has been photochemically or photodigitally forced upon it. Cinema scholars have long circled around the usefulness and pitfalls of attending to indexicality as defining film in relation to photography (Ball et al., 2020). Examining photographs within philosopher Charles S. Peirce's trichotomy of signs, they are iconic in their likeness to the thing they represent. However, because they were “physically forced to correspond,” they are also like the second class of signs—the index, which represents an object through a relationship of causality, connection, or contact (Peirce, 2011, 106). Digital video seemed to transform or threaten the process by which the filmic image is made, prompting some scholars to reassert indexicality as the photography's defining feature (Doane, 2007a, 2007b). Others expressed alarm, that the advent of the digital could bring about the demise of the documentary, if documentary truly depended upon film's ability to guarantee a physical connection to that which it portrays (Winston, 1995).

Too much focus on this mechanical indexicality can distract us from the many ways indexicality is, in fact, constantly enmeshed with iconicity onscreen. Images can do indexical work—or stand in indexical relationships to other objects—in a variety of ways. The “[p]roductively unresolved...ambivalence” that fuses the represented and the real means that indexical signs at once depend upon—and thus promise—a real connection to the object (Nakassis, 2018, 286). Yet, by virtue of the fact that an index acts as a sign of that object, it simultaneously offers presence and mediates it through its existence. As such, the index moves us between the worlds of real and represented, again and again. This occurs in all genres of cinema, including science fiction films full of special effects (Lefebvre, 2021). Indexicality is what allows us to represent real existents, even in entirely fictional worlds. This approach emphasizes that images not only show or represent but also do things in the world, theorizing images as acts or events (Strassler, 2020). Films and images participate in public and political life as sites of struggle. It is not only a matter of tracing back to the physical reality of the recording. Indexicality also has performative or entailing effects (Silverstein, 2003). Through indexical processes, the mass of a screen hero in fiction films, for example, can render the actor really there, in the character portrayed onscreen and in the cinema (Nakassis, 2020). The productive ambivalence of indexicality serves as a creative force for documentary.

Viewers attribute a particular liveliness of truth to the world they view. Puppet animation occurs when the theatergoer agrees that what appears onscreen is alive—even while knowing that the liveliness of a puppet is the result of human effort (Barker, 2019). Similarly, the creative interventions of documentary are justified, according to Slijepčević and Perović, if they succeed in conveying an emotional, social, or historical truth to the viewer, and if the viewer accepts what they view in this light. Beginning with animation enables us to study how documentary films creatively achieve authenticity. A film creates a world indexically linked to a world outside it, one that filmmakers and viewers agree to be—or to have been—actually existing. Whereas representation emphasizes the film world as a copy of the real world (Nichols, 1992), animation stresses the film's documentary value—its authenticity—as a living, breathing quality, subject to contestation and failure. Animation has gained attention in anthropology as intersubjective process of attributing life to phenomena (Barker, 2019; Manning & Gershon, 2013; Silvio, 2010). The concept attends to the distribution of labor in bringing a character to life (Silvio, 2019). Local beliefs and social conditions create contexts

through which characters become animated (Nozawa, 2013). Animation attempts to recover lost persons and sustain tenuous knowledge through creative revivification (Ennis, 2019; Hales, 2019).

In film studies, animation emphasizes the viewer's perception of movement. Some have used this to distinguish film from photography: "In cinema the impression of reality is also the reality of the impression, the real presence of motion" (Metz, 1990, 9). To view motion is to participate in it, and to participate in motion is to project: "Motion always has a projective aspect, a progressive movement in a direction, and therefore invokes possibility and a future" (Gunning, 2007, 42). Film scholars continue to debate the status of animation: Is it a particular (non-indexical) film technique, or is all film animation? "Put simply, for us animation is the first, last and enduring attraction of cinema, of film," animation scholar Alan Cholodenko proclaims (2022 [2008]). Animation scholar Donald Crafton opposes the historical claim of Cholodenko and others, as conflating "animation" with pictures that move (Crafton, 2011; Manovich, 2001). To some extent, these debates matter more to film's historiography than to its ethnography. I propose taking up the expansive sense of animation to prioritize attention to the perception of movement onscreen—but without setting it against indexicality. Theories of animation offer analytic tools to attend to how authenticity is achieved.

One key insight from scholarship on animation is that the viewer does the animating, through acts of projection (Barker, 2019; Silvio, 2010). Projections move in time and space—the space between the projector and screen, and between the viewer's gaze and the action onscreen. The attribution of authenticity is a kind of projection that motivates the distinction of documentary film. This authenticity happens because of creative decisions. "Invention is a vital element for fidelity to construct itself," an invitation to experiment announces (Garcia, 2017, 223). This notion—of fidelity constructing itself—emerges both in experimental filmmakers' attempts to de-familiarize the materiality of the medium and in linguistic anthropologists' interventions opening up film's indexicality. Experimentation reinvigorates representations of authenticity.

DOCUMENTARY ANIMATION

To argue that film's origins were rooted in documentary tendencies, Slijepčević showed the Lumière brothers' *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* (Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory) (Lumière, 1895b). The novelty of the camera's ability to capture and represent a simple event in another context sufficed to impress late nineteenth-century audiences, according to Slijepčević. Soon this would bore audiences, however, he said, and the brothers would begin to intervene to make the action more interesting. *L'Arroseur Arrosé* (The Sprinkler Sprinkled) was the result (Lumière, 1895a): A man waters plants with a garden hose. A boy comes from behind to stand on the hose, blocking the water. The man looks down at the hose's spigot, the boy releases his foot, and water shoots up into the man's face. Slijepčević tells us this gag was staged, and here we see the birth of the distinction between documentary and fiction. A participant argued, however, that the factory workers in the previous example knew they would be filmed that day and dressed accordingly. Even without explicit intervention, documentary subjects themselves might manipulate their worlds for the camera, what filmmaker and writer Jean-Louis Comolli described as an *auto mise en scène* (Comolli, 2004; Martin, 2014). There was no first documentary, free from art. However, Slijepčević again resisted dismissing the possibility of nonfiction film, instead moving ahead with a historical trajectory in which the advent of portable sound recording enabled new forms of "fly-on-the-wall" documentary. Direct cinema, such as *Salesman* (Maysles et al., 1968), of which we watched an excerpt, initially offered innovation. However, this style quickly became the standard, against which future innovations would constantly have to justify themselves.

Slijepčević spoke of his own interventions for his film *Srbenka* (Slijepčević, 2018). *Srbenka* follows the staging of a play about Croatian soldiers' gruesome murder of a Serbian family



FIGURE 2 Nina, the protagonist of *Srbenka* (Slijepčević, 2018). Photo Credit: Nebojša Slijepčević.

in Croatia in the 1990s, including 12-year-old Aleksandra Zec, for whom the play is named. Despite controversy surrounding the play and its director, Oliver Frlić, Nina emerges as the film's protagonist. An adolescent girl with a small part in the play itself, Nina reveals that the play is giving her nightmares about Aleksandra and unsettling her regarding her own Serbian background. The documentary adheres to a fairly observational style: We see, onscreen, a series of rehearsals, protestors opposing the play, and opening night. We watch as tensions mount—among the actors, as Frlić receives threatening messages in opposition to the play, and as Nina struggles with whether to disclose her own descent onscreen when asked, as part of the play. It is as if we are given a backstage view of the unfolding of multiple crises that then inform the drama that playgoers will ultimately see onstage.

Slijepčević carried out interventions outside the scope of the camera, particularly in the way he structured the film, with editor Tomislav Stojanović. They shaped the story not according to the progression of actual events, but instead constructed a timeline based on expressions of emotions of various characters, especially Nina (Figure 2), and built a dramatic arc in this way. The film avoids the action of the play itself. We hear bits of the script rehearsed by the actors, and we see the reactions of others. *Srbenka* relies on facial expressions indexing the emotional significance of actions unfolding offscreen. The screen offers, in other words, the trace—the result of the action onstage—on the faces of others. We are left to imagine the play, based on the responses it incites.

The film begins by showing a woman in a theater, crying. Like Nina, the woman is of Serbian descent, living in Croatia. Her voiceover describes the effect of what she has watched. As viewers, we assume she has seen the play. In reality, they filmed her after the play had already finished its run. Though she is in the original theater, she watches instead a near-final cut of Slijepčević's film. The faces we watch are not reacting to the things we think they are, yet the emotions and their progression are genuine. According to Slijepčević, proof of the emotional authenticity of *Srbenka* was the woman's reaction to it at the beginning, along with discussions with audience members at screenings. These confirmed that the film successfully evokes the unease of ethnic minorities that remains unresolved after the war of the 1990s. It is not the mechanical indexicality of the camera that gives the film its authenticity, as much as it is the power of the faces offering evidence of the intensity of the play, which in turn points to a larger social issue.

TRUE LIES AND PARTICULAR GENERALITIES: DOCUMENTARY PARADOX

Interventions, manipulations, and even “so-called lies” threatened, but did not immediately disqualify, a film from documentary status, according to Vladimir Perović. Perović agreed with

Slijepčević's characterization of a contract between filmmaker and viewer, yet he composed scenes in the name of the poetry of the story, to achieve a "higher truth." In an interview afterward, he described a film to me, *Kuća* (House) (Perović, 1989), as an example of a scene which recreates the basic drama of the characters' lives: An older couple in a large house sets the table for a nice dinner. They sit and wait in silence. A postman delivers a letter. The only words in the film are uttered when one asks the other, "Are they coming?" It is a film about generations of flows of migrant labor from Yugoslavia to Western Europe and those left behind. Perović carefully composed each shot, directing the couple and the postal worker as if they were actors. Yet, he insisted, this was their life, a life of waiting, of missing their children. Perović's documentary distilled the defining moments of a person's life into simple actions that he could capture on camera. These actions took on greater significance that could only be seen by stripping them from unnecessary distraction, such as excess language.

Perović said that as a filmmaker, one observed reality, which people called a mirror of reality. Yet if you look through a mirror, it does not reflect reality truthfully. Left appears on the right, and vice versa. As a filmmaker, dissatisfied with such a reflection, he could smash the mirror, pick up selected parts, and join them into a new mirror, one that also reflects reality, but reality "by me." Fiction films create a "paradox of using images of real particulars to create fictional worlds" (Lefebvre, 2021). Documentary creativity paradoxically uses images of partially fictionalized particulars in order to recreate real worlds. Tensions between documentary film's truth claims and artistic value form part of the term's origin story, when filmmaker John Grierson in the 1930s made a "separate claim" for documentary: "that in its use of the living article, there is also an opportunity to perform creative work" (Grierson, 1976, 21). The relevant contrast for Grierson is poetry versus fiction, rather than fiction versus nonfiction. Documentary creativity is a political stance and a culturally grounded act, but it is also an aesthetic exercise.

Some local film students who attended the masterclass told me that the unpredictability of documentary filmmaking intimidated them. Perović's approach appealed to them because they could claim greater control over the story. Documentary filmmakers have long looked ambivalently on the story. Documentary's (partial) rejection of the story lends it to experimentation because it allows the artist to explore technical possibilities in order to exploit physical reality. At the same time, the story—or "intrigue," as film and cultural theorist Siegfried Kracauer called it—can be useful in drawing attention to aspects of "potentially visual reality which only personal involvement is apt to summon" (Kracauer, 1960, 212). The story compels the camera, while it can also interfere with showing truths extraneous to the drama. Film scholars Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow have more recently called upon documentary to move "beyond" its over-reliance on story, which privileges, among other things, "feelings over analysis and passivity over action" (Juhasz & Lebow, 2022, 1). Documentaries made to look like mainstream fiction films, in particular, tend to uphold rather than disrupt dominant power relations involved in production (Sarlin, 2022).

A "creative" approach is not necessarily disruptive, but the intrigue can work toward political ends. Even seemingly manipulative elements, such as plot twists, can incite defamiliarization and political action (Brown, 2022). Slijepčević screened a key film from the Black Wave, *Crni Film* (Black Film) (Žilnik, 1971), which shows the director's work in provoking political debate. The camera follows Želimir Žilnik as he approaches a small group of men living without homes in his native city of Novi Sad and invites them to stay with him, his wife, and child, in their small flat. In the meantime, Žilnik asks townspeople and authorities what to do with these men. Suggestions range from prison to a fish market. Žilnik documents actively creates a story with real people. Eventually, Žilnik explains to his houseguests that he is running out of film, so they will have to leave, though no one has found homes for these men. As Schneider has argued regarding structural film, experimental film offers a critique of realism "through a direct engagement *with* and reflection *on* the material conditions of the film-making process, using as its medium the very material apparatus of film-making itself" (Schneider, 2021, 48, emphasis in original). By mentioning the lack of film track, Žilnik points

to the material constraints of filmmaking in shaping his intervention, but he does so while maintaining this intrigue, which enables him to show the shortcomings and hypocrisy of socialist Yugoslavia in failing to provide for all citizens.

Aleksandra, Nina, and the woman watching at the beginning of *Srbenka* were individuals who came to represent minorities in Croatia. Jahusz and Lebow charge story-driven documentaries with prioritizing the individual over the collective (2022, 2); yet, a second paradox of documentary is that particular existents often represent a general idea. Realist fiction films make use of documentary tendencies, often featuring nonactors, in order to give their films a sense of speaking to broader problems (Kracauer, 1960, 98–99). Only indexical signs stand in for an individual existent (Lefebvre, 2021). At the same time, deictic signs have the ability shift which particular existent is being referred to, depending on context (Silverstein, 1976). Perović concentrated a protagonist's world into a single scene or action. A couple becomes a vehicle for telling a personal story that conveys sociological facts about the region—outmigration for work and the social costs for local communities.

UNCANNY PROJECTION

In viewing Perović's examples of poetic documentary, some masterclass participants said the obvious staging and direction of non-actors created scenes that lacked a feeling of spontaneity. They felt forced. The fragility of animation can make the process uncanny (Jentsch, 2008). The movement created through cinema always implies its opposite; what has been animated onscreen can easily be de-animated, so that a “residual trace of stillness, or the hint of stillness within movement, survives, sometimes enhancing, sometimes threatening” (Mulvey, 2005, 67). Knowing that the movement could freeze or break down makes it exciting when it succeeds. The fragility of animation is the magic of it (Barker, 2024). Success or failure depends upon the positionality of the viewer, as well. In the interest of conveying a higher truth, then, some creative documentaries risked lacking the emotional energy that animated authenticity in others.

A common combination of fiction and natural materials includes documentary reenactment, which “introduces a fantasmatic element that an initial representation of the same event lacks” (Nichols, 2008, 73). Reenactment can result in documentaries that look very much like fiction films, or a mix of elements can create an uncanny uncertainty about the line between truth and fiction. In *Tito po drugi put među Srbima* (Tito Among the Serbs for the Second Time) (Žilnik, 1994), an impersonator of Marshal Broz Tito walks the streets of Belgrade in 1994, more than a decade after the Yugoslav leader's death and while war is ongoing in Bosnia. Žilnik again provokes, this time through reanimation of the dead leader, which prompts discussions of Tito's legacy as the project of Yugoslavia implodes. In this case, the willingness of Belgrade residents to interact with the impersonator as if he is Tito—whether with longing or blame for the leader—suggests the profound disorientation of Tito's interlocutors in trying to make sense of both the present and the past.

The fragility of animation can also lead to doubt or contestation. Perović and Slijepčević made documentaries in the regions of the world where they grew up, which gave them certain authority to make claims regarding a truth “by me” that overlooked inessential details. The film camp participants, coming from South America, South Asia, and other parts of Europe to film in small towns without speaking the language, were closer to Western anthropologists entering foreign territory, except that they lacked the time and language skills that would have enabled them to build relationships before beginning to obtain footage. Each team was working in a different town near the one where the masterclass was taking place. One production assistant that year had been on a team that filmed in his home town. While the others were busy editing, the production assistant was free to attend our masterclass, where he participated in our discussion 1 day to express a concern he had about their film. The central figure of this film, a young woman with green hair, is shown tearing down

death notices (Figure 3). This act represented the young woman's celebration of life in this otherwise sleepy town. They had used fake notices rather than destroying real ones, but the production assistant still wondered if they were “pushing it,” because townspeople might find it disrespectful and because the act was the director's idea. The production assistant was reluctant to condemn the director's decision but welcomed our opinions. As a story, he admitted, it worked.

The production assistant argues that the director had not only prioritized drama over authenticity but also presents this as up for contestation and refutation. His description of the status of the intervention as “pushing it” suggests an ethical dilemma—of when the director is allowed to intervene for the sake of the story, and when the intervention violates the trust of the townspeople who have allowed the team to film there. In this case, the “me” of the reality constructed “by me” was a director with only a few days' experience in the country. In other cases, locals asserted control over what and whom would appear before the camera. Participants in the camp admitted that time constraints created pressure to persuade people to be filmed. This negotiation often fell on the production assistant, usually the only crew member who spoke the local language. Students may have come up with particular documentary ideologies and artistic goals that were unsustainable within the constraints they

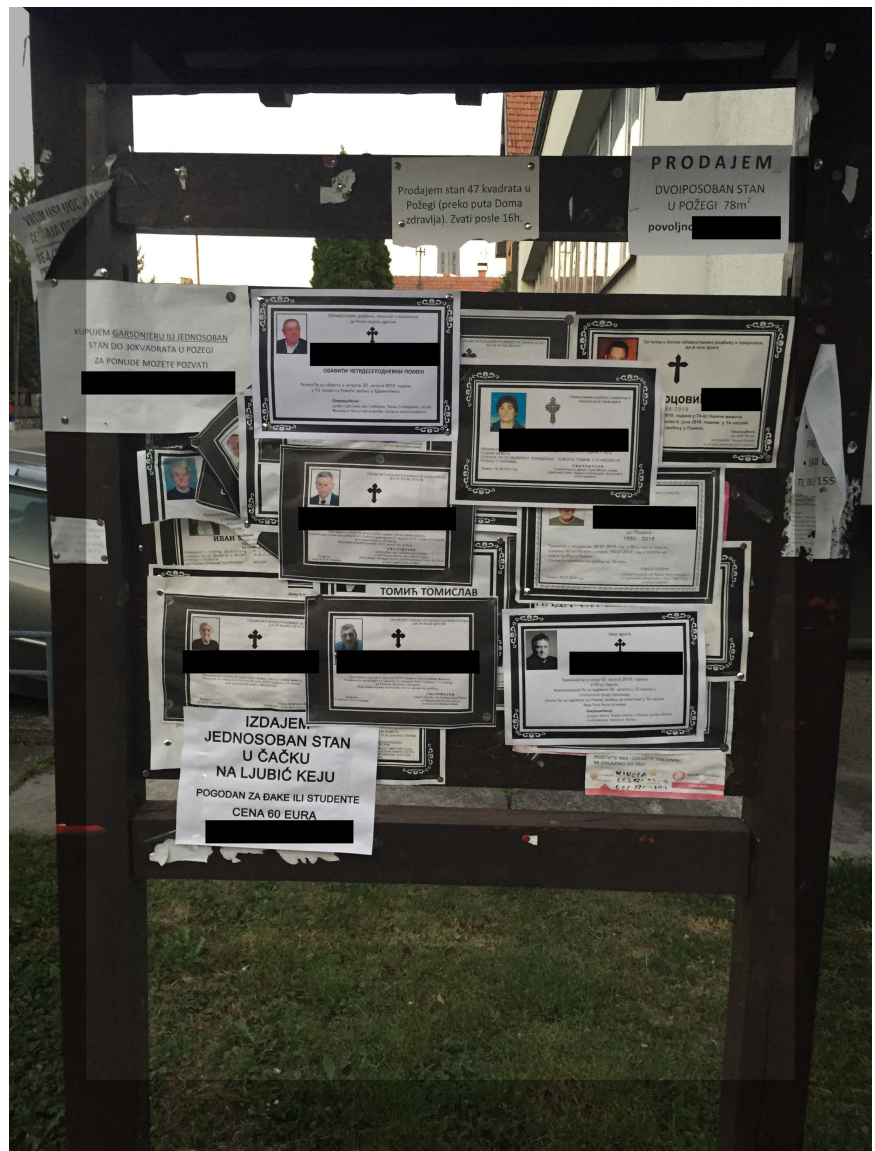


FIGURE 3 A bulletin board in Western Serbia, where the film camp is based, includes death notices and announcements for apartments for sale. Photograph by author, August 2022.

were given. Organizers nonetheless held that these limitations fostered collaboration and problem-solving that participants often described as “life-changing.”

Documentary ideologies include beliefs about who has the authority to deem a film of genuine documentary value. At the end of the camp and masterclass, community members, including those appearing in the films, are invited to a screening. This is a celebratory event, not a forum to complain about inaccuracies or to suggest changes. The most publicized markers of a documentary's success will be acceptance to film festivals, not the opinions of locals. However, the organizers of the camp return to these towns each year for the camp. It is important that the teams maintain positive relations with the townspeople, or the camp cannot continue. Organizers and townspeople I met at the screenings seemed to agree that some documentaries produced at the camp were more successful than others, but that the project nonetheless retained pedagogical value, and that its ability to bring together such an international group benefitted the artists and the community. The entire project of the camp required a delicate balance between the artistic vision of the students and the rights of the locals over their own representation.

CONCLUSION: ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPERIMENTS WITH AUTHENTICITY

As an anthropologist, I continually thought about how my colleagues would have condemned me for taking liberties in my field site without making interventions visible to the viewer. However, my fieldwork has persuaded me to lean toward more experimentation, as it is through interactions that unspoken understandings of the relationship between the real and the represented can emerge. Workshops and camps such as this one offer fruitful sites for following the emergence of higher truths onscreen because they do not pretend to be perfect. They are experiments in creating moments of authenticity, which we are then invited to animate through our experience viewing them. We might think of the documentaries made through the camp as akin to the project of ethnographic film, a productive experiment, even if the results are not always considered a success. Experimentations already taking place within field sites, such as the camp, offer provocations to develop new practices in ethnographic encounter.

This article began with the question regarding why documentary filmmakers in the former Yugoslavia desired a definition of documentary if their main goal was to complicate it. Documentary film animates authenticity using diverse indexical processes, moving the viewer between the represented and the real. Authenticity is not a pre-existing condition that creativity taints. It is achieved through creative means. It is the fragile but vibrant result of the efforts of filmmakers and the projections of the viewer onto a filmic world that makers and viewers agree to be, in some sense, real. The tenuousness and dynamism of documentary's attraction to and rejection of elements found in adjacent modes of film—experimental and fictional—serve as provocations to explore new possibilities for animating authenticity. Such insights might help us to consider the relationship between anthropology's own ambivalence regarding creativity and authenticity. We might let creativity infect us and push at the limits of legibility. If we begin with poetry and experiment, we might see what new forms of authenticity come to life as a result.

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ENDNOTE

¹The third instructor's sessions, focusing on the business side of documentary filmmaking, were much appreciated by participants, but fall outside the scope of this article.

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