Changemaker

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Changemaker

by

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Abstract

*Changemaker* is a 20-minute narrative short film about a film student (played by me) who sets out to make a documentary about the process of making a documentary feature film. My character chooses to tell the story of Jonathan Eton, a Brooklyn-based New Zealand filmmaker, who is himself in the process of shooting a documentary about a wheelchair-bound homeless man living on the streets of Brooklyn. She follows Jonathan as he struggles to make his film work. In the process, she learns about what it takes to make an independent documentary film — from conception, all the way to getting accepted into a prestigious film festival.

Project Description

*Changemaker* developed organically out of my own personal experience. During my time in the IMA program, I worked and experimented with many different mediums: documentary, narrative short, screenwriting, animation, and photography. Documentary filmmaking remained my focus — specifically, documentaries on pressing social and political issues. But as I worked in this medium, what I found myself most interested in was what was happening behind the camera. Why did documentary filmmakers, myself included, make the films that we did? What draws us to certain topics and issues, while ignoring others? As documentary filmmakers, who were we? What were our goals? How did our diverse backgrounds and identities influence our decisions and points of view? And how did all these many different factors impact the way that we made our films?
After careful consideration, I came to the conclusion that the best way to explore this subject matter is through the medium of narrative film — specifically, a narrative film in the form of a documentary, or what some refer to as a “mockumentary.” This fictional documentary tells the story of a single documentary filmmaker from the point of view of my character. Not only did this format give me the space to explore the life and process of a documentary filmmaker, but it allowed a fictional version of myself as a filmmaker to be an active participant on the screen as well. Only by injecting my own character into the narrative and making “myself” an object of my criticism, could I fully get to the heart of the filmmakers’ dilemma.

Changemaker is a satirical comedy. It comments on and interrogates a particular type of popular genre of documentary filmmaking: character-based documentaries about social issues that have a dramatic narrative structure. These films — which are very popular today and can be seen at prestigious film festivals like Sundance, Tribeca, Berlin, and many others — try to raise awareness about important social issues and use storytelling techniques commonly found in Hollywood narrative dramas. They have the semblance of objectivity, but as filmmaker Jill Godmilow suggests, their documentary format masks the fact they are actually just another type of film genre and not unmediated reality — as, for instance, a celebrated documentary filmmaker Barbara Koppel believes, saying that the advantage of documentary over fiction is that “nonfiction films are real”. As Godmilow wrote in What is Wrong with Liberal Documentary:

“Though the liberal documentary takes the stance of a sober, non-fiction vehicle for edification about the real world, it is trapped in the same matrix of obligations as the fiction film -- to entertain its audience; to produce fascination with its
materials; to achieve closure; to satisfy. Certainly it is a vehicle for compassion. My question is: is that of any political use? Further, is not the production of compassion, perhaps, subversive of progressive political change?"

The filmmakers who create these types of documentaries usually stay invisible. We do not hear them. We don’t see them. It’s as if they don’t exist. Viewers are offered what seems like complete objectivity — showing things as they really are in the world. What stands unexplored are the people behind the camera. Who are they? What are their motivations? Why are they making this film? What are their values? What is their relationship with the film’s subjects? Can they be trusted?

These are the questions with which my film is concerned. I am turning the camera on the filmmakers themselves, and making them and their craft into my subjects. Through comedy, I imagine what it would be like behind the scenes of a documentary film production.

Research Analysis

One of the main inspirations for my project is *Las Hurdes, or Land Without Bread*, a 1932 film by Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Just thirty minutes long, *Land Without Bread* is one of the first works of documentary mystification — or, in today’s terms, one of the earliest mockumentaries. The film uses narration, a technique that was very common in documentary filmmaking at the time and known as the “voice of God”. It appears to be a straightforward ethnographic film about a region in northern Spain that is so destitute that its inhabitants don’t know what bread looks like. In reality, the film was a satire on the documentary films of the time. Buñuel was not only
criticizing the practice of showing exotic or “savage” people and places as a form of entertainment for urban western audiences by making a film about “savages” right here in his homeland but also mocking the fact that people believed everything they saw on the screen, and how easy it was to trick them just by using the obvious tropes that these films employed.

Buñuel presented *Land Without Bread* at a conference at Columbia University in New York. In his introductory speech about the project, he regaled the audience with absurd and heartless descriptions about his documentary filming process. He talked about how hard it was to film among these poor savages and how he and his crew were driven to desperate measures — including having to hide their food from the starving locals. It was all an act, but he stayed in character:

“We prepared only one meal a day, when we got back from work, and we devoured it like lions. Physical exercise and the morbid desire to eat because we were in the land where people did not eat contributed to this. During the first few days, we tried to have lunch at the place where we were working, but everyone came out to watch us eat. They stared at us eagerly, and the children dashed forward to pick up the peelings of salami or scraps of bread that we let fall. So we decided not to eat while we were working.”

Despite the fact that Buñuel was well known as a surrealist filmmaker who had recently worked with Salvador Dali on films like *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'Or*, as well the many clues he dropped that *Land Without Bread* was indeed a satirical ruse, people believed that the film was a real ethnographic film.

Not only were viewers horrified by the imagery of such abject poverty, but they criticized the filmmaker for his callous and unethical filmmaking practices, which supposedly included, among other things, animal cruelty. Audiences didn’t pick up on
the subversive and absurd nature of the film — thus proving Buñuel’s point: just putting a film into the form an ethnographic documentary automatically made it credible to audiences. As Jeffrey Ruoff, an Assistant Professor of Film and Television Studies at Dartmouth College, wrote in *Visual Anthropology Review*: “*Land Without Bread* exploits our gullibility and the willing suspension of disbelief the documentary form requests.”

*Land Without Bread* was an early example of performative satire that did social criticism through assuming the form of the media it critiqued. Even now, almost ninety years later, some anthropological anthologies still describe it as an ethnographic film, rather than satire.

As I explored the history of film, I realized the question of representation of reality was central to early film theory and practice. When filmmaking appeared one hundred years ago, filmmakers — not just Buñuel, but also pioneers like Dziga Vertov — questioned and interrogated this new form and its complex relationship to reality. Through their practice, these filmmakers understood that films that depict reality and capture real-life events are not objective truth, but present a filmmaker’s point of view — including their biases and overt intentions. Some of the earliest and most well-known documentary films from Russia were socialist propaganda films that did not even try to pretend otherwise. In the West things were not very different.

As Louis Menand, Harvard professor and American cultural critic, writes:

“Those early documentarians were not journalists. They were, by cinematic standards, scarcely even filmmakers. They were businessmen. The first man to charge admission to a movie, the French industrialist Louis Lumière, thought that the cinema was a novelty without a future. He got out of the production business, at which he had been fantastically successful, after two years. That was in 1897.”
Early documentaries therefore had politics the way that tabloids have politics: they flattered prejudice. They were indistinguishable from propaganda. They were also, like the dramatic films of the time, short. It was after the feature-length film became standard that the documentary acquired its distinctive political cast and became a medium of progressivism.”

As far as documentaries are concerned, many of the earliest documentaries (a term that was only coined in 1926) would not necessarily be called documentaries today because they were partially or wholly staged. They were staged not to present a fictional story, but to represent and convey something real — a sense of a place, its people and their customs.

For instance, Robert J. Flaherty, director of the 1922 documentary *Nanook of the North* wrote in his memoir that he wanted to “show 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.” But the problem, as Flaherty saw it, was that the way the Inuit lived was no longer truly authentic. To show these people’s true “former majesty” in its pure state, Flaherty resorted to staging entire scenes that captured their “authentic” life. One of these scenes included the hunt of a walrus carried out with a crude harpoon — something that the Inuit hadn’t done in a long time, since they used much more effective western rifles instead. In other words, Flaherty didn’t actually document the Inuit way of life of the early 1920s, but made a film exalting and portraying them as “noble savages” though his own lens of a colonial anthropologist.

As Menand explains, Flaherty used the same kind of approach in his other films as well:

“He [Flaherty] often cast the members of his screen ‘family’ himself. And, as he had with the walrus hunt, he persuaded his subjects to reenact abandoned
traditions. In Samoa, it was the practice of tattooing; in ‘Man of Aran,’ made in the Aran Islands, off Ireland, in 1934, it was a shark hunt. He had to bring in an expert to teach the locals how to do it.”

Many documentaries today — even ones that strive for objectivity — engage to various degrees in falsification and fiction. Directors cast their social actors, picking them for their charisma and screen presence. Directors create narrative arcs to their character’s life stories, picking and choosing what moments go into the film and which are left out. Directors script dialogue and do multiple takes of “real” events. They also film reenactments and hire actors to portray real people. This type of films are only partially real. They are what Fredrick Weismann describes as “reality fictions.”

All these directorial interventions can be minor and subtle, but in the end they add up. They differ from what Flaherty did in his films only in the matter of degree. As Weismann described his own films:

“There’s no such thing as an ‘objective’ film. I try to make a fair film. By that I mean that the final film is in a sense a report on what I saw and felt in the course of the shooting and editing…All the material is manipulated so that the final film is totally fictional in form, although it is based on real events.”

Yet today, this fictional aspect of the documentary form is rarely questioned by the mainstream filmmaking community. And that is what I am doing with my thesis film.

_Changemaker_ draws on Buñuel’s satirical approach to explore modern documentary filmmaking. And like Buñuel’s _Land Without Bread_, it performs social criticism of documentary filmmaking by assuming its form.
Buñuel is not the only one to use performative satire to do social criticism. There are a lot of examples — from Jonathan Swift with his pamphlet *Modest Proposal* to more recent examples in popular culture, including Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report*, Christopher Guest’s *This is Spinal Tap* and *Best in Show*, Chris Morris’s *Brass Eye* and Sasha Baron Cohen, who played eccentric characters like Borat, Ali G, Bruno, and Erran Morad to examine the biases of American society. *Changemaker* will pay homage to and engage in a conversation with this body of work.

I chose to use satire because it has been a highly effective way to perform social and political critique, and to draw attention to the issues being addressed. The satirical approach allows me to better get at reality. In his book *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Slavoj Zizek argues that directly looking at “reality” does not necessarily get at what he called the “Real.” Only through imaginative means can you potentially approach and represent something close to reality. Similarly,
Alica Lebow, a documentary filmmaker and scholar, argues that satirical mockumentaries can be more real than real documentaries.

“If the direct gaze can reveal nothing of the Real, then it follows that the satirical, that is to say wry, look of at least some mockumentaries may just create the proper context to catch a glimpse of the Real,” she writes in the article Faking What? Making a Mockery of Documentary. “One must look askance at mockumentary (i.e., not be fooled by it) in order to apprehend, enjoy, or see what it has to reveal.”

Changemaker is meant to be funny. But that does not take away from its effectiveness, but only strengthens it as a vehicle for social critique. Indeed, by being funny, it provokes a moral dilemma in the audience: Is it appropriate to laugh or should they be outraged?

Thesis Production Process

I first envisioned this film as a feature and developed multiple characters who, according to the plot, were documentary filmmakers participating in a film festival with their competing documentary films — something like Christopher Guest’s Best in Show. I would get to create not only the characters themselves but their documentary films. I thought this would be the best way to explore the topic and show the diversity that exists in the documentary genre — not only a diversity in the types of filmmakers, but the kinds of films and topics that they are interested in. Unfortunately, I had neither the experience nor the budget to pursue a feature length film. So after some initial screen tests with various characters, I narrowed down my focus to a single one: the character
of Jonathan Eton, a Brooklyn-based filmmaker from New Zealand, and built a short film around him and the movie he is making.

The casting took a long time. Initially I wanted to find a comedian for the part of Jonathan Eton and went to amateur comedy shows to find an actor who would play him. Eventually, I found a comedian who seemed to be a great fit for the role. I cast him and we started filming, but something was not working. I realized that I needed someone who wasn’t just a comedic actor — someone who could be funny by reading the script — but someone who knows the documentary industry from the inside and would be able to improvise “in character” and not just read the lines. Eventually, I found an actor who fit perfectly: Rowan Wernham, a personal friend and a New Zealand filmmaker. He brought a lot of personal knowledge about New York-based filmmakers — their culture, their lingo, and even mannerisms — to the character of Jonathan Eton and made him much more believable and real.

The subject of Jonathan Eton’s documentary is a homeless man named Eric living on the streets of Brooklyn. I envisioned Eric as remaining mostly voiceless and that his story would be told directly through Jonathan and the film he is making. That made casting for this part much easier. I offered the role to my husband, Yasha Levine, who is a journalist. One reason why this worked out so well is that about a decade ago, he worked as a journalist in Moscow. One of his assignments was to go undercover as a wheelchair-bound person to see how accessible Moscow is for the average disabled person. He wrote an article about his experience for the Moscow-based English-language newspaper, *The eXile*, where he worked as an editor. It featured photos of him going to various locations in a wheelchair, including night clubs and restaurants. This
provided me with photos of “Eric” that showed him in a wheelchair when he was younger and more successful, and before he ended up on the streets.

![Fig.2: Yasha Levine undercover as a disabled man and Evgenia Kovda in Moscow, 2007.](image)

The existence of these photos — and the fact that I could weave them into Eric’s fictional narrative — provided inspiration for the character’s backstory. I could visually show that not long before Eric had lost his fortune in the aftermath of the 2008 financial market crash, he had been a very successful trader working in Moscow who specialized in eastern European markets and had spent his weekends partying, surrounded by beautiful Russian women.
The bulk of the production happened in the winter and early spring of 2019, but I had actually started making the film more than a year ago. At first, *Changemaker* resembled more of a sketch comedy. It lacked a narrative arc or unifying plot, and mostly featured interviews with Jonathan Eton intercut with his documentary footage of Eric. I screened this version as a work-in-progress at Anthology film archives in May 2018 organized by my IMA colleague Cait Carvalho. Based on reactions from the audience and input from my classmates, I realized that giving snippets of interviews and Jonathan’s interactions with Eric is not enough. The film needed more structure and form. It needed to tell some kind of story.
I then consulted with my advisor, Andrew Lund. He suggested that I should maybe bring myself into the narrative. Following his advice, I decided to make myself a character and inject myself into the narrative. From that moment on, Changemaker took on another level of abstraction: it started to be told from the point of view of my own character, a film student who sets out to make a documentary film about what it takes to make a documentary. Andrew Lund's advice was exactly what was needed. He was right. Introducing my own character into the film helped pull the story together. It also added a layer of veracity to the film.

I received another very important piece of advice from my advisor, Sameh Zoabi. He suggested that I take a less dogmatic and statement-oriented position. The idea was
that I shouldn’t force my point of view on the viewer, but let the images unroll under their own momentum and allow them speak for themselves. So I changed my character to be more naive and open ended — a person who sets out on the journey of making a documentary without any preconceived notions about what she would find. In the end, this approach made the film much more natural and believable. In a sense, I take the viewer along for a journey of discovery — we do it together.

My voiceover frames the entire film. It’s what drives and links the narrative. So it took time to find the right tone for it. At first, I wanted to exaggerate my accent and make the tone of the narration very serious — almost in the style of Werner Herzog. But it didn’t work. It was too obviously forced and over-the-top, and it wasn’t believable. So I eventually I settled on using my natural voice to tell this fictitious story. What was interesting is that my real persona and my character’s persona became a blend of fiction and reality. Everything on the screen, including my own character, was fiction. But I was using my own voice to express my own real concerns and questions about the ethics and politics of documentary filmmaking — things that I had been thinking about during my time in the IMA program. Ultimately, the film’s narration becomes a blend of fiction and a kind of real documentary filmmaking.

The process of filming the scenes involved a mixture of scripted acting and improvisation. I planned out scenes in advance and scripted the dialogue. But I wanted my actors to improvise as they saw fit, I and gave them wide latitude to experiment with their characters. I would frequently have ideas about modifying a scene or adding bits of dialogue during a shoot. I’d huddle with my actors and we’d go with it. This loose way of filming allowed me to make discoveries on the set along with my actors.
At times, I molded and guided the direction of my actors’ improvisation by asking questions — which helped steer the narrative without breaking their acting flow. Christopher Guest uses a similar approach. I also employed the comedic method used by Sasha Baron Cohen and approached acting as reacting. As we filmed on the streets of Williamsburg, my actors stayed in character — sometimes getting heckled by pedestrians and interacting with them, even as they interacted with each other according to the script. At times I filmed these moments, which helped inject the film with a feeling of “reality.”

In the end, some of the best lines in the film came out of this hybrid process. I think it gave the film a more natural and “real” feeling. It didn’t seem scripted — which, as mock documentary, is exactly what I was going for.

The bulk of the production process lasted just under two months, although I used a small amount of footage that I shot a year earlier while I was experimenting with various characters and film versions. Most of the footage that went into the final cut was shot in February and March 2019.

I worked with cinematographer Tatiana Stolpovskaya, a colleague of mine from the IMA. I also filmed many of the scenes myself. The breakdown in cinematography work between myself and Tatiana was about 50-50.
The post-production process was the most time intensive part of the film. We shot many scenes and a lot of footage for a short film — much like you would in a real documentary. And so the editing process resembled that of a traditional documentary. I had to review many hours of footage and, because some of the scenes were improvised, I at times had to change the script to fit footage that worked — rather than use the scenes that I had envisioned and scripted. Probably the hardest part was to decide what to exclude. There were many scenes that I loved that I didn’t include in this version because, although they were funny, they didn’t move the narrative forward.

Making this film made me realize that I naturally gravitate towards comedy and satire as a way of tackling and analyzing important social and political issues.
Conclusion

I am satisfied with the way Changemaker turned out. I think the film is funny and successfully explores the social and political issues that underlie some forms of documentary filmmaking. I filmed it with virtually no budget — with just the help of friends and colleagues — and yet the final product closely resembles my directorial vision. I see Changemaker as a stepping stone. If possible, I plan on expanding Changemaker into a feature film, which would follow several filmmakers as they make their documentaries and compete for a prestigious film festival award. The feature would be called: Changemakers.
Fig. 7: Evgenia Kovda, Tatiana Stolpovskaya and Rowan Wernham planning a scene in the streets of Williamsburg. Yasha Levine, 2019

**Audience**

My project will work on different levels depending on viewers’ background and perspective. To some, it may appear real. They’ll see as it as a genuine film about a documentary filmmaker and their process and as a consequence they’ll be forced to think about what actually goes on behind the scenes and how other documentaries are made. Others will decipher the film’s satirical nature. If they are documentary filmmakers themselves, then they will be compelled to think about and interrogate their own filmmaking practice.
Despite the performative and comedic nature of Changemaker, I consider it to be a serious and thought-provoking investigation and deconstruction of the documentary form. Through satire, I’m offering people an opportunity to see documentary production with a new eye.

I will submit the film to various films festivals, including Sundance, Tribeca, and SXSW. I’m considering submitting the film in the short documentary category to see if my obviously satirical documentary can pass for a real one — in much the same way that Buñuel passed off his film, Land Without Bread, as a real documentary. At the same time, I might submit the film as a straight narrative short. I have yet to decide.
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