

# Blurring the Boundaries between Life and Death: A search for the truth within documentary re-enactments

Daisy Richards

University of Warwick

Correspondence: Daisy.Richards@warwick.ac.uk

---

## Abstract

*This article aims to engage with and problematise traditional ideas relating to re-enacted sequences within documentary films, and how these sequences might allow audiences a new and previously denied access to some level of so-called ‘truth.’ Positing that re-enactments essentially function as devices of distraction and fantasy, Bill Nichols (2008) sheds invaluable insight onto the nature of ‘truth’ in the use of re-enactments in documentary filmmaking. This article engages with, and attempts to build upon this existing scholarship, by performing a closer examination of the ways in which filmmakers deploy strategies of re-enactment in Carol Morley’s *Dreams of a Life* (2011) and Clio Barnard’s *The Arbor* (2010). Re-enactments are employed by their respective filmmakers not solely in order to present complete rejections of reality, but also to depict the filmmaking processes and the ways in which they have been ‘worked through’ to audiences in innovative and reflexive ways. Through the specific utilisation of stylistic features that directly and obtrusively call attention to a documentary’s status as documentary, filmmakers do not wholeheartedly reject real-life events. Instead, they continually draw attention to the artifice of their artworks, reminding audiences that there can, indeed, only ever be ‘a view from which the past yields up its truth’, and that these views are completely and wholly unstable and elusive.*

Keywords: Documentary, truth, film, Freud, reality, re-enactment.

---

## Introduction

The deployment, manipulation and treatment of re-enacted sequences within documentary filmmaking has consistently proven to be a controversial and contentious practice, from the ‘actuality’ films of the Lumière brothers, to the 1922 release of Robert J. Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (a polemical film which utilised the approaches of salvage ethnography to depict the trials and tribulations of an Inuk man and his

**Funding:** [See page x]

**Peer review:** This article has been subject to a double blind peer review process



© Copyright: The Authors. This article is issued under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial Share Alike License, which permits use and redistribution of the work provided that the original author and source are credited, the work is not used for commercial purposes and that any derivative works are made available under the same license terms.

family in the Canadian Arctic). Contemporary documentaries such as Andrew Jarecki's HBO mini-series *The Jinx* (2015) also recognise and struggle with the critical complexities of filmic re-enactments, as identified within a critical review written by Richard Brody, particularly when he lambasts the re-enactments within the series as nothing more than 'betrayals and debasements of the very stories their directors are trying to tell' (2015).

It is clear that re-enactments paradoxically garner huge amounts of both criticism *and* commendation in regard to the public reception of documentary films, and the academic discourses surrounding documentary filmmaking more widely.<sup>i</sup> These complexities must be explored in more depth in order for us to understand and make more sense of how re-enactments might allow audiences a new and previously denied access to some level of so-called 'truth.' Some critics posit that the use of filmic re-enactment within documentary is a tool of positive enhancement, used in order to accentuate and authenticate the reality represented by the film. Others, however, argue that re-enactment is used as an instrument by which to hyper-dramatise the events of a documentary in order to manipulate the emotions of viewers, and maintain the engagement of audiences, without the re-enacted sequences necessarily needing to bear any resemblance to actual events or occurrences.<sup>ii</sup> When Bill Nichols argues that re-enactments function as '*a* view, rather than *the* view, from which the past yields up its truth', he is attempting to engage with these complexities (2008: 80). Positing that re-enactments essentially function as devices of distraction and fantasy, Nichols sheds invaluable insight onto the nature of 'truth' in documentary filmmaking. This article engages with, and attempts to build upon this existing scholarship, by performing a closer examination of the ways in which a filmmaker deploys strategies of re-enactment. These re-enactments are used not solely in order to depict complete rejections of reality, but also to present their filmmaking processes and their ways of 'working through' to audiences in innovative and reflexive ways. Through the specific utilisation of stylistic features that directly and obtrusively call attention to a documentary's status *as* documentary, filmmakers do *not* wholeheartedly reject real-life events. Instead, they continually draw attention to the artifice of their artworks, reminding audiences that there can, indeed, only ever be *a* view from which the past yields up its truth.

In order to build upon Nichols' thesis, this article will engage with two particularly interesting and relatively contemporary documentaries which prominently feature the use of re-enacted sequences. Carol Morley's *Dreams of a Life* (2011) and Clio Barnard's *The Arbor* (2010) approach and engage with the concept of re-enactment in rather

different ways, arguably utilising their re-enacted sequences in order to suggest, provoke, reveal and uncover, with the re-enactments consistently alluding to the idea of a 'deeper' truth, or of a more 'authentic' version of events. The areas of the narrative and thematic impact of re-enactment sequences as contained within the films (in reference to the particular spatial and temporal filmic placement of these re-enacted scenes, and why they might have been arranged as such), alongside the examination of the stylistic and formal elements of the same re-enactments (in regards particularly to the construction of mise-en-scene, cinematography and framing) must be explored and investigated more thoroughly, in order for Nichols' argument to be expanded upon and legitimated further. Nichols, who argues that re-enactments function as a means by which audiences may encounter a 'version' of the truth, is valid. However, the limitations of this assertion must be recognised, because re-enactment itself must be figured not merely as the sole site from which a documentary 'yields' truth, but as the aesthetic and visual demonstration of the journey the filmmaker undertook to get to that particular 'version' of the truth. The re-enacted sequences within these two films arguably function as the imagined spaces in which the filmmakers (and their audiences) can reanimate the subjects of these documentaries, and tentatively explore areas of anxiety and of the unknown surrounding their investigations, an analytical tendency which can be directly related to Freud's psychological theory of 'working through' (2003). Freud's assessment that this 'working through' is a process by which an individual is able to recover by going over reclaimed material is critical to this discussion of re-enactment. I propose that this is the process that both Morley and Barnard undergo in order to create their own re-enactments. Each director uses the reclaimed material of the lives of their subjects in order to 'work through' anxieties relating to death, love, guilt, and blame. Nichols' stance, therefore, though undoubtedly insightful, does not grapple with many of the complexities it proceeds to unearth.

### ***Dreams of a Life***

The idea for the documentary *Dreams of a Life* emerged after director Carol Morley encountered a news story which described the death of a 38-year-old woman named Joyce Carol Vincent, whose remains were discovered in her London flat an astonishing three years after her death (Anon., 2006; Leith, 2006). Vincent's television was still on, and her body, surrounded by wrapped Christmas presents, was decomposed to the extent that the cause of her death could not be suitably identified by forensic experts. Despite the presence of gifts, no institutional alarms had been raised regarding a missing woman, and no family members immediately stepped forward to claim Vincent as their own, leading

Morley to create *Dreams of a Life* as an investigation into Vincent's identity. Though inspired particularly by Vincent's death, Morley's film also examines and challenges more general notions of modern society and community, in order to scrutinise and probe the circumstances of Vincent's death, and the idea that the deceased body of a young woman (who at one point had family, friends, employment and presents to give) could lie overlooked and undiscovered in a Wood Green bedsit for almost three years.

It is crucial to firstly acknowledge that all of the re-enactments within Morley's film deploy the use of an actress in order to represent the deceased Joyce Vincent (with the older version of Joyce played by Zawe Ashton, and the younger by Alix Luka-Cain). Nichols explores the ways in which documentaries outside of the observational mode often use re-enactment in order to depict an absent subject, as an 'attempt to resurrect people and lives no longer available to the camera' (2008: 74). Of course, because Joyce Vincent is deceased, she cannot be called upon to play herself within Morley's film, so the employment of an actress *representing* Vincent is completely understandable. Nichols, however, continues by exemplifying some of the issues that occur when the subject of a documentary cannot represent itself due to this absence, arguing that 'the subject must be reconstituted from available resources; a lost object haunts the film, and the attempt to conjure that spectre, to make good that loss, signals the mark of desire (ibid.: 75). Within these suggestions, Nichols is building upon one of his earlier arguments, in which he dichotomises the documentary film as having 'a body too many' and the fiction film as having 'a body too few' (1993: 177). These binaries refer to the idea that re-enactment within documentary contains 'too many' bodies because in actuality 'the bodies of those in re-enactments are "extras" – never matching the historical bodies they represent' and documentary *without* re-enactment conversely, 'too few' bodies (1994: 4). Passé neatly summarises Nichols' view here by surmising that films which rely solely on archival footage *without* the use of re-enactment 'lack both actors *and* the historical figure' (2013: 138).

As asserted, the historical figure within Morley's *Dreams of a Life* cannot be accessed within the film because she is deceased. The idea of the absent subject, and the consequently haunted text, can be directly connected to Renov's own suggestion that re-enactments within documentary subsequently function as 'works of mourning' through which both filmmakers and audiences can 'make good' on the loss of the subject through the creation of the documentary itself, and the resurrection of the subject through re-enacted sequences (2004: 121). This idea can certainly be applied to *Dreams of a Life*, in which Morley perhaps attempts to 'make good' on the loss of Joyce Vincent, the

woman who, apparently, nobody claimed, and nobody mourned. However, this thesis can also be extended, as it is perhaps arguable that the inclusion of an actress playing Vincent within the re-enacted sequences of Morley's film is not concurrent to *either* the proposition of a 'body too few' or a 'body too many' because it is, paradoxically, both. Ashton's portrayal of Vincent cannot possibly be 'matched' to the body it is attempting to represent, but an interesting development can be noted within the fact that there is also very little available archive footage of the real Joyce Vincent. This duality of the 'body too many' and 'the body too few' may lead to an extension of Nichols' ideas, namely hypothesising 'the body displaced'.

This physical and bodily 'displacement' can be recognised within the opening sequences of *Dreams of a Life*, which depict Vincent's flat as it may have been when her body was stumbled upon by debt collectors. The camera, a ghostly presence itself inside Vincent's bedsit, twists and turns as it takes a macabre tour around the kitchen, showcasing the dirt, dust and filth that has built up on top of ordinary elements of daily life (**Fig. 1**). The camera tilts and pans at various Dutch angles as it snakes down the entrance hall (**Fig. 2**), pausing slowly on the stack of unopened bills and letters that were presumably posted by visitors, unbeknownst to the fact that Vincent lay dead in her living room, just a few feet away. Shadows can be seen through the frosted glass of the front door, and a disembodied man's voice shouts through the letterbox. Suddenly, the door is forced open, and a hand reaches inside in order to remove the door-chain, whilst the seemingly 'startled' camera darts rapidly backwards, in a ghostly fashion. Within the next shot of the flat, however, the camera has shaken this 'ghostly' movement, and has reverted to a standard mid-shot as two men enter the flat, and presumably find Joyce's body.

Morley's decision here to focus on the reaction of these men, and to subsequently refuse to depict the body of Vincent, is clearly a choice relating to taste and ethics, but is also crucial as it actively reinforces the idea of the absent subject within the film. The re-enactment of the discovery of Joyce's body is certainly, as Nichols argues, *a* view from which the past yields up its truth, because it is rooted in the factual depiction of bailiffs forcing their way into Vincent's bedsit and coming across her body (a sequence of events which actually took place). Morley, however, exploits artistic licence in order to *represent* Vincent's flat, down to the details of a coat hanging on the hook by the door, and an egg cup covered in dust on the table. These elements of the film are not, and cannot, be based on historical fact. Morley, with her film being made eight years after Vincent's death, did not have access to Vincent's flat in the state that it would have been when her body was found.

Morley herself stated in an interview at the South by Southwest Film Festival that ‘there were no photographs, there was very little autobiographical information about Joyce Vincent’ (BYOD, 2016). This accentuates the idea that there was no system of indexicality that Morley could have referred to when re-constructing Vincent’s flat, again clearly supporting Nichols’ argument that re-enactment is, therefore, not *the* view by which truth can be discovered, because there is simply no way of knowing how Vincent’s bedsit may truly have looked when her body was found.



**Figure 1** The grime and dirt of Vincent’s bedsit in *Dreams of a Life*, reconstructed and re-inhabited by Morley



**Figure 2** The camera snakes softly around the flat in *Dreams of a Life*, leaning, swerving, and ducking in a ghostly and ethereal manner.

In the following sequence, Morley specifically chooses to re-enact a scene in which the bailiffs discover that, despite Vincent's death, the television set in her flat was still on, and was still broadcasting to a non-existent audience after almost three years. However, it is not the focus on the television that is so interesting, but Morley's choice to show her own documentary broadcasting *on* the television set within Vincent's flat (**Fig. 3**). Silverstone, in his elemental and invaluable work *Television and Everyday Life*, asserts that 'television has become embedded in the complex cultures of our own domesticity; we can no more think of television as anything other than a necessary component of that domesticity than we can think of our domesticity without, both in the machine and the screen, a reflection and an expression of that domestic life' (1994: 25). Within this, Silverstone is clearly demonstrating the irrevocable connection between the television set and ideas of modern domesticity, and this concept can be subsequently extended in order to be applied to Morley's film. The image of the television set left on in Vincent's flat is one that is referred to and explicated many times in both the original news articles that were published when her body was discovered, and also in the later reviews of *Dreams of a Life*. It seems to be of focal concern to critics, and to the general public, that the television set in Vincent's flat had remained on. This is, perhaps, because of the idea that the television has been traditionally thought of as the very device which simultaneously offers to viewers a sense of intimacy and isolation alongside feelings of inclusion and unity. As Spigel efficiently summarises, 'the television was often figured as the ultimate expression of progress in utopian statements concerning man's ability to conquer and to domesticate space' (1998: 13). Yet Vincent had passed away with her set still on, seemingly disconnected and estranged from the community she occupied.



**Figure 3** The television of the present moment ruptures the representation of the past in *Dreams of a Life*.

The linking of the ideas of the television set and domestic space uncovers clear suggestions regarding Morley's filmic commentary on modern society. Though *Dreams of a Life* does not (and could not, as will later be developed) blame any one individual or cause for the death of Joyce Vincent, it does suggest a critique of a contemporary society that offers more avenues of superficial, technological communication than any preceding generation, but that also 'allows' a young woman, portrayed as so vivacious, lively and warm, to die alone. Morley's decision to showcase *Dreams of a Life* on the television set in the re-enactment of the discovery of Joyce's body is utterly strange, and the text-within-a-text concept is completely jarring. The idea of Vincent's body, situated as being found in the *past*, watching a documentary about her own death which is taking place in the *present*, disturbs the idea of the objective documentary voice and disrupts the expectations of the relationship that 'must' exist between documentary and truth. Though debates on the nature of documentary filmmaking must be expanded upon (for instance, other authors<sup>iii</sup> have explored and will continue to explore the problematic idea that documentaries necessarily require any fragment of a relationship with the 'truth' to begin with) documentary films *have* traditionally been appreciated because of their ability to seemingly bring audiences closer to ideas of truth and authenticity in relation to their subjects. However, this sequence within *Dreams of a Life* clearly rejects this idea, and subsequently the idea of the objective documentary voice, as it makes no attempt to offer a realistic or 'authentic' view of the past. Instead, Morley chooses to represent a complex interplay of unstable temporality, which is itself inextricably linked to Freud's concept of the 'uncanny'. Within this sequence, Vincent's body exists as something specifically related to the home (the *heimlich*) and to the familiar (just like the television set itself) that is also altered or changed in some way so that it no longer quite represents the original object (the *un-heimlich*).

In relation to the uncanny, Wheatley argues that it is the 'blurred distinction between the real and the phantasmic [that] might also be read as the dissolution of boundaries between the familiar and strange, or the everyday and the disturbing' (2006: 7). Whilst Wheatley's argument refers to gothic television particularly, it also can be used to reflect upon Nichols' statement that re-enactments act 'partially as an awareness of the gap between that which was and the effort to return to it, whilst also affirming the presence of a gap between the objectivity/subjectivity binary and the workings of the fantasmatic' (2008: 79). The television set showcasing Morley's film *within* the film represents an uncanny engagement with the absent subject. Nichols' argument that the re-enactments presented within *Dreams of a Life* cannot be *the* view from which the past yields up its truth does hold true,



but this is precisely because of the instability created by these re-enacted sequences, which force the past into a permeable and transient state of being, connected and infiltrated by the ghostly presence of the present moment itself. In this way, Nichols' conjuring up of 'the view' of the past cannot exist, and yet neither can his idea of 'a view.' This is because these jarring re-enactments rupture the spatial and temporal site of the film in such a way that no definitive interpretations can be made. There are no views per se, there are just curiosities, feelings, conjectures, or suspicions.

Though the film does present some key moments in which archival footage of Joyce Vincent is unearthed and employed, the relative lack of this type of footage within *Dreams of a Life* also contributes to the idea that the re-enactments created do not allow the past to 'yield up its truth'. There is a particular scene, in which the young Joyce is shown to be singing a segment from the song 'Midnight Train to Georgia' in front of her mother (who died when she was 11) and sisters (who refused to participate in the making of the film). This scene is, of course, pure fantasy. Though the interviewees within the film state that Joyce did love to sing, and that she did have a mother of Indian descent, and two caring sisters, there is absolutely no reference to any memory or moment in which Joyce performs this particular song to her family as a child. There is an intriguing shot of Joyce's mother, played by actress Neelam Bakshi, that is pulled repeatedly in and out of focus within this sequence, which shows her picking up a camera and taking a photo of the young Joyce as she sings. This shot is significant, because it almost seems to deliberately draw attention to Morley's lack of directorial objectivity, whilst exaggerating the desire (as Nichols discusses [*ibid.*: 75]) of both the filmmaker and the audience, who understand that this fictional photograph can never be developed and subsequently never shown. This scene is pivotal in relation to the ways in which Morley can be read as 'working through' anxieties and desires relating to the making of her film. As discussed above, Nichols' theory of 'the body too few' must be examined, because it is clear that, within this sequence especially, bodies on screen are also able to act as 'bodies inhabited'. Bakshi, playing Joyce's mother, can be read as Morley's physical stand-in, her body the agent that the filmmaker cannot be, taking a first-hand photograph of a subject that Morley has found so elusive, so confusing, and intriguing. Bakshi's body, temporarily inhabited by Morley, and play-acting within a wholly imagined scene, is able to be there, in the same room as the living Joyce Vincent. Thus, Morley deftly weaves together her own desire for a more direct access to Joyce with the fabric of what she imagines of Vincent's actual childhood.

Photography, and the apparent lack of the film's access to any authentic footage of the subject, is a theme also identified and perpetuated within a sequence which *does* show real-life photographs of Joyce. These photographs are shown to be suspended, as if in mid-air, against a black background, whilst the song 'My Smile is Just a Frown' by Carolyn Crawford is overlaid, intermingling with the voice-over commentary of the interviewees, who comment predominantly on Joyce's physical beauty. The photographs, spatially suspended, also seem to temporally suspend the moments they depict (as all photographs do, being still image captures of any particular moment in time). Fradley, in his summary of Mulvey's *Death 24x A Second* (2006), assesses this idea, as he argues that film itself is a medium which cannot be divorced from the idea that it freezes the subject, and therefore pronounces it deceased. He argues that 'cinema's embalming of time [...] increasingly functions as a mausoleum of moving images, preserving them as undead phantasms doomed to an eternal repetition' (2010: 70). Within this, it may be argued that Morley's employment of the real photographs is not only an authentic reference to the real Joyce Vincent (thus, a representation of Nichols' 'truth') but an acknowledgement of the limitations of re-enactments in their efforts to depict an absent subject. Morley is perhaps acknowledging that the truth cannot be accessed within her re-enactments as they cannot feature the real Joyce. Thus, she suspends the few photographs of Joyce that she does have, in order to allow the audience more access to the real person, and perhaps subsequently, more access to the truth.

The most controversial sequence within *Dreams of a Life* also utilises 'My Smile is Just a Frown', which metamorphoses from a non-diegetic piece of music accompanying the photograph sequence, to a diegetic song within a re-enacted scene. The scene itself depicts Ashton as Joyce, singing the song into a hairbrush, just as Morley imagined the young Joyce doing many years before. This time, however, Joyce is presented as singing to her mirror whilst alone in her dark, dingy bedsit. Her glamour and beauty appear washed-out and inauthentic, and her facial expressions seem to contort between performative contentment and introverted depression, a reading emphasised by the fact that once the song ends, Ashton kneels, covers her eyes and appears to sob. This particular sequence garnered significant criticism because of the implications of the song in relation to Vincent's mental health and emotional state. Though Morley did assert that the creation of this particular fictional sequence was inspired by Agnes Varda's film *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), it undeniably accentuates the interpretation of Vincent as a woman with a troubled or traumatic past. It is particularly clear, within this sequence, that it is impossible for the re-enactment to

yield *any* truth, because in this case, it is entirely a work of hypothetical suggestion invented by the filmmaker, and engagingly performed by the relative 'body displaced' of Ashton.

The final sequence of Morley's film is perhaps the most significant in relation to the idea that re-enactments cannot offer up any fixed or stable 'views' of the past. Morley, up until this point in the film, has subtly showcased some of the 'solutions' to her own inquiry in regards to Vincent's death. It is delineated that Vincent had severe asthma, a peptic ulcer for which she was hospitalised, an isolated and perhaps lonely life, and a situation of domestic abuse from which she escaped. Ashton, as Vincent, is shown lying in front of the television (the way Joyce's body was found). She raises her arm into the air slowly, gazes despondently at the ceiling, and there is a sudden spark or rupture from the television as her arm drops back down. It is almost as if Morley represents a rupture in the television as a surrogate for the rupture in the collective knowledge offered herein, as there is no way of knowing what truly happened to Joyce in these final moments. This lack of knowledge contributes once again to the idea that re-enactment is not, in this case, *the* view from which the past yields up its truth, because that truth is, at this moment in time, inaccessible and incommunicable. The truth of Vincent's life is unknowable, and all Morley is able to do is hypothesise what might have happened to her.

### ***The Arbor***

Clio Barnard's *The Arbor* also similarly explores the relationship between the past and the present moment within documentary re-enactments. The film, which depicts the life of playwright Andrea Dunbar, focuses perhaps even more intently on the strained relationship between Dunbar and her daughter Lorraine. The opening sequence of the film shows Lorraine (played by actress Manjinder Virk) and her sister Lisa (played by Christine Bottomley) as adults, wandering around a house in which their mother Andrea is writing on the bed (**Fig. 4**). Just as *Dreams of a Life* blended the past and the present, *The Arbor* herein creates the same paradox, as the two women recall their experiences as little girls as they walk around the house which is evidently intended to be the house they actually grew up in.



**Figure 4** Andrea Dunbar writes on her bed, a figure of the past, as her children wander around the house in the present day in *The Arbor*.

Again, the film invokes the idea of the haunted text, as Dunbar is present within this house, despite having died when Lorraine and Lisa were both young. The women talk particularly of a memory they both have of Lorraine accidentally setting fire to their childhood bedroom in order to keep them both warm, and the fire itself blazes on the bed in the background of the shot, unnoticed by the women, like a superimposition of the past onto the present moment. The actresses as adults, then bang on the windows and shout for help in a re-enactment of what actually happened when Lorraine and Lisa were children. However, in the subsequent shot, Lisa then contradicts herself by stating that she is no longer sure whether it was Lorraine that snapped the door handle, locking them inside the room, or whether she actually did it herself. This combination of temporal malleability and the idea that the subjects of the documentary cannot recall the actuality of the events that took place themselves raises questions about how a re-enactment can claim to offer the truth in relation to the past, if the past cannot be recalled truthfully by participants in the first place. As Morley 'worked through' the past trauma of Joyce Vincent's life, attempting to discover more about what had happened to her before her death, so Lorraine and Lisa herein 'work through' their own experiences of the past they shared, and the mother they once knew. Within this sequence, Barnard is attempting to grapple with the challenges that come with representing the past, in any format. The past is unknowable, and all that Barnard is able to offer is her own representation of Lorraine and Lisa's representation of a representation of the past, and the fire in the house.

The concept of a text-within-a-text is also again exemplified by the following sequence in *The Arbor* which depicts the re-enactment of the original play text by Dunbar, on the real-life space of the Brafferton Arbor, in front of the contemporary residents of the Buttershaw Estate. Natalie Gavin plays 'The Girl' who is also meant to allegorically stand in for Dunbar herself (considering that the play is a quasi-autobiographical account of Dunbar's own experiences growing up on the same estate). As discussed within Walker's article on *The Act of Killing*, the re-enactment of historical happenings taking place within the same spaces in which they originally occurred is significantly symbolic, and *The Arbor* explicates this significance, exploring the idea of change and modernity (the re-enactment is watched by real-life residents of the modern Buttershaw Estate) whilst preserving and retaining the space of *The Arbor* as the site of the original events.

It is also crucial to explore the stylistic conventions of Barnard's film in relation to her use of actors and actresses to play the roles of Dunbar (who, in re-enactments, does not speak), Lorraine, Lisa and their respective family members. Barnard chose to have the actors lip-synch over the top of the recorded voices of the real participants of the documentary, as they describe their feelings, experiences and memories. The voices heard within the documentary's re-enacted sequences are those of the people being interviewed, and the film establishes this creative system from the outset, using a title card to explain that 'this is a true story, filmed with actors lip-synching to the voices of the people whose story it tells.' The acknowledgement of this severing of the actor's bodies and the participant's voices heightens the focus on performance and accentuates the tension with which the delivery of the story is told.

Within the use of this lip-synching technique, Barnard clearly establishes a jarring, displaced mode of viewing, with Lanthier commenting in that 'the paradox of establishing distance in order to penetrate creates a wholly unique documentary experience [...] the re-enactments are lip-synched to genuine audio interviews and photographed in meticulously staged environments [...] the anecdotes included are mouthed to the audience by actors who hauntingly and relentlessly break the fourth wall' (2016). This statement supports the idea that, particularly for Barnard, the re-enactments are perhaps meant to signify something wholly other than the truth of past, as Nichols suggests. Barnard herself stated that the lip-synching technique was used specifically in order to 'raise questions about the relationship between fiction and documentary – to acknowledge that documentaries, more often than not, have the same narrative structure as fiction [and] for the audience to be made aware that they are watching material that has been mediated' (in Falk, 2010). Herein, *The Arbor* clearly emphasises the deliberate estrangement of the

ideas of truth and re-enactment, and again, there is something specifically uncanny about how Barnard animates the bodies of the actors and actresses within her film, whose mouths move, but whose voices are never heard. Barnard requests of her audience a kind of utopian 'double-think' in relation to both recognising the artifice of her retellings and suspending disbelief so that the retellings themselves can be appreciated and understood.

In addition, Barnard clearly further employs the practices of traditional narrative filmmaking in a subsequent sequence within the film, in which it is revealed that the character of Lorraine has actually been narrating her story whilst incarcerated. The moment of this narrative discovery is shown as an unexpected announcement, with Barnard choosing to withhold the information up until this point. The film has depicted the death of Andrea Dunbar, and Lorraine's voiceover asserts, 'I remember thinking, things can only get better.' In the following shot, however, the camera pulls away from Lorraine, to show a prison guard locking the door of her cell, and the bars then obscuring the lens of the camera, placing distance between the audience, Lorraine, and the idea of the objective truth of the documentary, as the film has clearly withheld information in order to construct a plot device keeping audiences entertained and engaged. Nichols writes that 'fake' documentaries, and documentaries which acknowledge their artifice prompt us to question the authenticity of the documentary in general. He asks, 'what truth do documentaries reveal about the self; how is it different from a staged or scripted performance; and how can this be productively subverted?' (2001: 127) This is then extended by Juhasz and Lerner who propose that 'fake documentaries can readily educate viewers about the uncertain links among objectivity, knowledge, and power' (2006: 12). Though *The Arbor* cannot readily be constituted as a 'fake' documentary as such, Barnard's inclusion of filmmaking devices more widely associated with fictional films, alongside lip-synching actors, accentuates the idea that audiences are *meant* to be questioning the artifice of the documentary mode of storytelling and re-enactments in general.

The final sequence of *The Arbor* is once again subversive with regards to the film's portrayal of the relationship between Dunbar and Lorraine, which is predominantly depicted by Lorraine as one of neglect, abuse and bitterness. The final sequence depicts Lorraine being released from prison, but for the first time within the film, Virk does not lip-synch to the voice-over of the real Lorraine. Barnard instead finally utilises the traditional expository mode of documentary filmmaking, perhaps adding a degree of authenticity to her film which, before to this moment, was so intently focused on drawing attention to the artifice of re-enactment. Following Lorraine's re-enacted release from prison, Barnard chooses to

input authentic archival footage of Andrea Dunbar with the real Lorraine as a small baby. Dunbar's voiceover describes her relatively normal experiences as a writer and a mother after the publication of her play, and states, 'maybe it's just because Lorraine is a good baby, I don't know.' This sequence is *not* a re-enactment, and the choice to place it at the end of the film once again thrusts the film itself into a state of ambiguity, as Lorraine has continually theorised that her mother hated her and treated her differently because of her race, yet these images (seen as more authentic and trustworthy precisely *because* they are not re-enacted) seem to show Dunbar as a loving, caring mother to Lorraine. Nichols' statement that re-enactments are 'a view from which the past yields up its truth' seems to again be both supported and challenged by these explorations of Barnard's film, as the re-enactments shown are clearly *not* intended to be representative of the truth, countered as they are by the relative credibility and legitimacy of the archival footage shown at the close of *The Arbor*. Barnard's film is not a documentary concerned with the retrieval and presentation of the objective 'truth' of Andrea Dunbar's life as a playwright and mother. Instead, *The Arbor* is undeniably a film about Lorraine Dunbar's personal and completely *subjective* experiences living as Andrea Dunbar's daughter.

## **Conclusion**

Nichols' argument, though evidently applicable in many different ways to both Morley's *Dreams of a Life* and Barnard's *The Arbor* is, undeniably, limited. In stating that 're-enactments are *a* view, rather than *the* view, from which the past yields up its truth', Nichols is acknowledging the complexities of re-enactment as a mode through which the truth of a documentary might be discovered. However, it is clear that re-enactments do not function solely to, or as the sole site from which, the past can be seen as 'truthful' or 'honest.' The intentions of the filmmaker in creating the documentary must be acknowledged, and the medium of film itself accepted as an ambiguous vehicle of expression. Re-enactments, as uncanny as they undoubtedly are in re-animating the bodies of absent subjects, represent a completely subjective 'working through' process personal to the filmmaker. The re-enactment itself is the journey the filmmaker has undertaken in order to reach whatever they present as their (extremely unstable, completely speculative) version of events. In the same way that children use role-play as a means by which they can imagine situations, events, and their consequences, without actually taking any risks, filmmakers do through the use of re-enacted sequences. Through a process of playing with, manipulating, and giving life on-screen to the bodies of actors and actresses, once filmmakers have presented their interpretations of events, the game is left there, and the metaphorical dolls are discarded. It is this atmosphere

of uncertainty and inconclusiveness which gives the documentary film the power to attract and engage audiences.

## **Acknowledgements**

This author would like to sincerely thank Dr Cat Lester for her support and patient guidance throughout the writing and editing processes of this article.

## **References**

- Anonymous, (2006), 'Woman's Body in Bedsit for Years', *BBC News Online*, 14 April, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/4906992.stm>, accessed 20 January 2016.
- Brody, R. (2015), 'Why Re-enactments Never Work', *The New Yorker*, 20 March, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/just-say-no-to-reenactments-jinx-robert-durst>, accessed 20 January 2016.
- BYOD, (2012) 'Dreams of a Life - Interview with the Director Carol Morley on BYOD at SXSW Film Fest', [YouTube video], The Lip TV, 25 May, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FfY0K-toxGM>, accessed 20 January 2016.
- Falk, Q. (2010), 'Clio Barnard: Interview', *BAFTA Guru*, October, <http://guru.bafta.org/clio-barnard-interview>, accessed 20 January 2016.
- Fradley, M. (2010), 'Digital Time: Recent Work in Film Theory', *Film Quarterly*, 64 (1), 70-74.
- Fraser, N. (2013), 'We Love Impunity: The Case of *The Act of Killing*', *Film Quarterly*, 67 (2), 21-24.
- Freud, S. (2003), 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through' in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, London: Penguin, pp. 1-59.
- Juhasz, A. and J. Lerner, (eds.) (2006), 'Introduction: Phony Definitions and Troubling taxonomies of the Fake Documentary' in *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 1-38.
- Lanthier, J. J. (2011), 'Do You Swear to Re-Enact the Truth? Dramatized Testimony in Documentary Film', *IDA Magazine*, 1 May, <http://www.documentary.org/magazine/do-you-swear-re-enact-truth-dramatized-testimony-documentary-film>, accessed 20 January 2016.



Leith, S. (2006), 'How on Earth can a Woman Lie Dead for Two Years?', *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 April, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3624355/How-on-earth-can-a-woman-lie-dead-for-two-years.html>, accessed 20<sup>th</sup> January 2016.

Merin, J.(2014), 'Best Documentary Hybrids – A Curated List', *Cinema Citizen*, 27 September, <http://awfj.org/cinema-citizen/2014/09/27/the-best-documentary-hybrids/>, accessed 20 January 2016.

Mulvey, L. (2006), *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. London: Reaktion Books.

Nichols, B. (1993), 'The Voice of Documentary', in Renov, M. (ed.), *Theorising Documentary*, London: Routledge, pp. 174-93.

Nichols, B. (1994), *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, B. (2001), *Introduction to Documentary*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nichols, B. (2008), 'Documentary Re-enactment and the Fantasmatic Subject', *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (1), 72-89.

Passé, C. (2013), 'German Nonfiction Film', in Kazecki, J., K. Ritzenhoff and C. Miller (eds.), *Border Visions, Identity and Diaspora in Film*, Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, pp. 127-42.

Renov, M. (2004), *The Subject of Documentary*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Silverstone, R. (1994), *Television and Everyday Life*, London: Routledge.

Spigel, L. (1998), 'Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948 -1955', *Camera Obscura*, 16 (1), 9-46.

Walker, J. (2013), 'Referred Pain: *The Act of Killing* and the Production of a Crime Scene', *Film Quarterly*, 67 (2), 14-20.

Wheatley, H. (2006), *Gothic Television*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

**To cite this article:**

Richards, D. (2018). Blurring the boundaries between life and death: a search for the truth within documentary re-enactments. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 5(2), 26-43. Retrieved from: <http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk/index.php/exchanges/article/view/235>

<sup>ii</sup> An interesting example of this juxtaposition can be found within Jennifer Merin's (2016) acknowledgement of the controversy surrounding re-enactment in documentary. She goes on to counter that re-enacted sequences promote the best of documentary filmmaking 'without compromising the genre's standards of authenticity, transparency and journalistic ethics'.

<sup>ii</sup> This critical dichotomy (of understanding re-enactment within documentary as a negative and a positive addition) can be seen within two different discussions of Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012), both published in the Winter 2013 issue of *Film Quarterly*. Janet Walker argues that the re-enacted murders within Oppenheimer's film act as a more modern extension of Sigmund Freud's 1914 investigation 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through' as they are 'painfully but productively creative of an expansive territory where survivors and others may yet find *new* bearings and make *new* impressions on the landscape' (2013: 19). On the other hand, Nick Fraser appears to view Oppenheimer's re-enactments as wholly offensive and insensitive, stating that he hopes audiences 'will look at less-hyped, more modestly conceived depictions of mass-murder' (2013: 24).

<sup>iii</sup> Stella Bruzzi, and Michael Renov for example, within their respective publications on documentary filmmaking theory and practices.