

**“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF THEATRE AND FILM**

DOCTORAL THESIS

*From Objectivity to Intimacy: A Critical Anatomy of Parental Figure Representation
in Contemporary Documentary Film*

Summary

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SUMMARY

Introduction

This work stems from my own experience as director of the documentary *Holy Father* (2020), about the relationship with my father who became a monk on Mount Athos. After my first film, *Constantin și Elena*, where I was afraid to mention that the protagonists were my grandparents, fearing the film would be perceived as a "family video," ten years later, when I decided to make a documentary about the experience of becoming a father and the relationship with my own father, I was certain that an extremely personal film would be successful.

What changed in the meantime?

The film industry developed toward accepting and even preferring subjectivity and intimacy, instead of the ideal of objectivity. The documentary transformed from a propaganda instrument or anthropological study into a medium of personal expression. The democratization of production means made possible the creation of personal, autobiographical films, with intimate experiences.

The phenomenon of the documentary about parents is relatively new – among the 62 international titles I have identified, only six were released before the 2000s. My research began in 2017 and continued throughout the production of *Holy Father*, but also after its release, until 2025. Throughout this entire period, I found no article on this specific topic, not even a comprehensive list of films that fit this category. So I created a comprehensive list, identified common elements and analyzed transversally all films in the research corpus, relating each time to my own experience.

Methodology

The basis of this research is the empirical method, based on collecting information through practical experience, case studies and discussions with directors. Essential in my approach was compiling the list of films that correspond to the research criteria – a list created from scratch and continuously completed, from 2017 to 2025.

To be included in the list, a film must be a feature-length documentary (over 58 minutes), have premiered at a festival or on television, and be about the mother, father, or both parents of the author. Among the 70 titles, 38 (54.3%) are about fathers, 21 (30%) about mothers and 11 (15.7%) about both parents. I had direct access to the authors of 17 films, including all 8 Romanian ones.

The transversal analysis identifies common elements such as the film's place in the author's career, types of protagonists, film themes and stylistics. Although I applied "mathematical" templates in analysis, with interesting results, I consider it essential to mention that we are dealing with very personal artistic products, where interpretations can be multiple and templates can prove useless.

Chapter 1: Documentary Film, from Objectivity to Reflexivity: Historical Landmarks

1.1-1.2 Definitions and Early History

The documentary, defined by Grierson as "the creative treatment of reality," was long overlooked as a subject of academic study. The first important theories appear only in the '90s with Bill Nichols and Michael Renov. Controversies about "how much of a documentary" a film is persist today, starting with Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). Although it illustrates aspects of the protagonist's life, *Nanook* is far from being ethnographic in the current sense. Flaherty romanticizes the way of life as being timeless and uses staged sequences. André Bazin calls it a "slightly romanticized documentary," Erik Barnouw mentions fictional elements, and William Rothman identifies completely staged scenes. Nevertheless, *Nanook of the North* represents the first film accepted as a narrative documentary, although it was produced when the distinction between fiction and documentary films did not exist.

1.3 From *Nanook of the North* to After World War I

The term "documentary" was established by John Grierson in 1926. During World War I, governments used documentary film for propaganda and influencing public opinion. In the 1920s-30s, three people shaped public expectations: Robert J. Flaherty (*uplifting entertainment*), John Grierson (*useful social story*) and Dziga Vertov (*provocative experiment*).

Vertov proclaimed that fiction cinematography is poisonous, defining the concept of *kino-pravda* – *cinematic truth* or *cinematic eye*. His film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) uses creative montage for political and stylistic propaganda. In the contemporary, Grierson established an institutional base for government-funded documentary in Great Britain and Canada, firmly separating documentary films from commercial entertainment.

Before and during World War II, documentary production took off with propaganda purposes. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) promoted fascism through symbolic images and patriotic appeals. The American response was Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1942-1945). Until this period, personal documentary was quasi-nonexistent due to high production costs.

1.4 The Documentary Revolution

The paradigm shift occurs for social reasons – a reaction to decades of propagandistic documentary, and technical – the invention of the camera-sound recorder synchronization system. This innovation, attributed to the group formed by the Maysles brothers, Robert Drew and Richard Leacock, reduces costs and makes filming with sound, in motion, by a single person, possible.

Documentary was no longer the prerogative of major studios. Revolutionary forms appear: *cinéma-vérité*, *cinematographic essays*, *non-narrative films*, *activist* and *personal films*. Activist filmmakers form groups dedicated to social change, like Jean-Luc Godard's "Dziga Vertov." The global phenomenon receives the name "Third Cinema."

Immigrants Maya Deren and Jonas Mekas, alongside Stan Brakhage, combine formal experimentation with subjectivity. The filmmaker becomes the main subject. Deren creates *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) with a second-hand Bolex camera, considered to be an essential example of American avant-garde film. Mekas, nicknamed "The Godfather of American avant-garde cinematography," creates *Walden* (1969), his first important diary film. Brakhage works on the *Dog Star Man* series (1961-1964) and the *Songs* cycle (1964-1969).

In Canada, Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx create *Les raquetteurs* (1958), distancing themselves from Grierson's expositive tradition. The film inspires Jean Rouch to define the *cinéma vérité* style, based on Vertov's *kino-pravda*. Other essential authors are Richard Leacock, Donn Alan Pennebaker and the Maysles brothers. Frederick Wiseman develops first-person ethnography with *Titicut Follies* (1967).

A quasi-prophetic film is *David Holzman's Diary* (1967), a mockumentary in which Jim McBride anticipates that portable equipment will make filmmakers turn their cameras upon their own person. In Japan, Hara Kazuo explores the limits of personal documentary with *Extreme Private Eros* (1974), obsessively following his former lover. Edward Pincus documents open marriage in *Diaries* (1971-1976), and Ross McElwee adopts the personal diary form in *Sherman's March* (1986).

Chapter 2: Personal Documentary Films: Theoretical and Critical Landmarks

2.1-2.2 Post-vérité Documentary and Bill Nichols' Documentary Modes

The term *post-vérité* suggests that truth, though necessary in documentary films, is no longer the absolute goal. In the context of documentaries about parents, emotion and convictions can be more important than absolute truth. Bill Nichols introduces the theory of documentary modes in *Representing Reality* (1991), identifying four organizational modes: *expository* (direct address, explanatory voice-over), *observational* (discrete observation), *interactive* (interaction between the director and the subjects) and *reflexive* (attention to the construction process).

The *expository mode* characterizes the documentarist movement of the 1920s-30s and most current TV documentaries. The *observational mode* appears as a reaction to the expository one, allowing the director to discretely record natural behavior. The *interactive mode* highlights dialogue and negotiation as central elements. The *reflexive mode* uses the same devices as other documentaries, but places them in a different light to draw attention to the effect.

In 2001, Nichols adds two modes: *poetic* (subjective interpretation, based on tone and atmosphere) and *performative* (construction of subjective truths significant to the filmmaker). Stella Bruzzi contests explanations about the *performative mode*, arguing that documentaries are implicitly performative through the director's intervention.

2.3-2.4 Barnouw and Renov: Authors' Motives and Documentary Tendencies

Erik Barnouw classifies documentarists according to the filmmaker's motivation, identifying roles such as *prophet, explorer, reporter, painter, advocate, poet, chronicler, observer*. His conclusion: "The documentarist has a passion for what he finds in images and sounds... He presents his version of the world."

Michael Renov identifies four fundamental tendencies of documentary filmmaking: *record/reveal/preserve* (recording and preservation), *persuade/promote* (convincing and promoting), *analyze/interrogate* (analysis and interrogation), and *express* (expression). These categories overlap and reflect the richness of non-fictional forms. Renov adds the essential component – the audience – completing the author-work-audience trinity.

2.5 Interdisciplinary Landmarks

In order to interpret documentaries about parents, I integrated concepts from psychology (narrative identity, attachment theory, transgenerational transmission of trauma), anthropology (autoethnography) and ethics (responsibility toward the other, consent in power relations). These interdisciplinary perspectives offer valuable instruments for decoding complex relationships between authors and parents, but their integration in this work is minimal, being able to constitute the basis for future research.

Chapter 3: Authenticity, Credibility, Intimacy

3.1-3.2 Auto-documentary and Family Documentary

Auto-documentary is a genre where the filmmaker centers on their own person, using film to explore and reflect upon their own life. Though subjective and intimate, it addresses universal themes that resonate with viewers. The progress of digital technology has opened the path for a new generation of documentarists, accessible cameras allowing teams to be reduced to a single person.

Family documentary implies a double filter: pre-existing knowledge and the external perspective of the documentary director. The author has a dual role, being simultaneously *insider* and *participatory observer*. Unlike documentaries where the author observes a slice of reality, without a personal relationship with the subjects, the author of family documentaries assumes a subjective position, from the perspective of an insider.

Critic David Edelstein declares himself horrified by the prospect of yet another personal film: "just what we needed: more exhibitionists with easy access to cameras and editing software," but still calls *Tarnation* (2004) "a masterpiece."

3.3 Documentary About the Author's Mother or Father

Documentaries about parents can be both auto-documentaries (when one's own person is a major concern in the film) and family documentaries (the parents being part of the family). Some authors are children of important public figures, the result often being biographical or tribute documentaries. Other authors use this approach to investigate mysterious episodes (paternity problems, disappearances, suicides), as a therapeutic process (healing after a parent's disappearance or accepting abuse) or to document apparently banal relationships, which can become extraordinary through intimate access.

Among the 70 analyzed titles, 38 (54.3%) are about the authors' fathers, 21 (30%) about mothers and only 11 (15.7%) about both parents. This asymmetry suggests the particular complexity of the father-son/daughter relationship and its cinematographic potential.

Chapter 4: The Film's Place in the Author's Career and Motivation for Making a Documentary About Parents

Among the 70 films, 40 (57%) are made at the beginning of the filmmaker's career and 30 (43%) by established directors. The authors' ages vary between 23 and 73 years old, with an average of 41.5 years. The 30-40 age category represents 47.8% of the total.

4.1 Career Beginnings

Families offer multiple advantages for beginners: access and trust (familiar environment, without need for official permissions), intimate knowledge (understanding context and dynamics), identity exploration (answers to "Who am I?", "Where do I come from?"), the therapeutic process (camera as a mediator for difficult subjects), universality (themes the audience resonates with) and budget considerations (reducing costs for travel and crew).

Carlotta Kittel's example with *He, She, I* (2017) perfectly illustrates access and trust: the director records the divorced parents' responses and creates a conversation through montage between two people who haven't seen each other since shortly after conceiving their daughter. Mila Turajlić in *The Other Side of Everything* (2017) uses intimate knowledge to explore the relationship with her mother, a political activist, in the apartment divided by the communist regime.

Even Benestad in *All About My Father* (2002) explores the parents' divorce and the father's passion for transvestism, creating a warm portrait of an unconventional family. Among Romanian titles, *Balkan Champion* (2006), *Timebox* (2018) and *O familie aproape perfectă* (2024) exemplify identity exploration through the relationship with one's parents.

Maxi Cohen in *Joe and Maxi* (1977) uses filming as a means to reconcile with her father dying of cancer, exemplifying the therapeutic process. Karin Jurschick in *It Should've Been Nice After That* (2000) interacts for the first time in 25 years with the father considered guilty for the mother's suicide.

4.2 Established Directors

For established directors, motivations differ: gained artistic freedom (reputation legitimizes personal explorations), artistic maturity and need for reflection (the return to self after documenting the other), recontextualization of personal stories (placing family stories in broad historical contexts), the ability to mobilize significant resources (funding for personal projects) and reconciliation with trauma or loss.

Chantal Akerman exemplifies artistic freedom with *News from Home* (1976), the first film (the oldest) in the research list, and *No Home Movie* (2015), her last film before committing suicide. Alan Berliner in *Nobody's Business* (1996) transforms the apparently banal story of his reticent father into a profound meditation on identity and life's meaning.

Wenguang Wu in *Treatment* (2010) describes the film as "an experiment to bring her back to life", referring to their deceased mother, using 12 years of previous filming. Doug Block in *51 Birch Street* (2005) transforms his father's remarriage three months after his wife's death into an investigation about marriage secrets.

Kirsten Johnson develops a unique strategy in *Dick Johnson is Dead* (2020), staging her father's fictitious death as a way to process cognitive decline. Sarah Polley in *Stories We Tell* (2012) uses substantial resources for elaborate reconstructions and the investigation of maternal identity.

4.3 Conclusions

Debut documentaries profit from the obvious advantages of the family environment, while established directors approach parental themes with already formed narrative instruments and artistic vision. This difference is reflected in the formal complexity and conceptual depth of the films.

Chapter 5: Types of Protagonists in Documentary Films About Parents

I identified five typologies of parental figures, though most protagonists incorporate multiple characteristics, and categories can evolve throughout the film.

5.1 The Conventional Figure

The conventional figure represents the parent presented in an apparent banality, becoming extraordinary through documentary exploration. I identified this figure in 24 films (34.3%). Oscar Berliner from *Nobody's Business* (1996) insists that his life "interests nobody," but becomes captivating through his resistance to documentation and contradictory dialogues with his son. Mike Block from *51 Birch Street* (2005) seems like a banal suburban father, but his rapid remarriage after 54 years of marriage reveals unexpected complexities.

Ross McElwee documents in *Time Indefinite* (1993) an apparently conformist family doctor from North Carolina, who dies suddenly during filming. Among Romanian films, Tudor Platon's parents from *O familie aproape perfectă* (2024) and Eugene Buică's from *Mrs. Buică* (2023) exemplify this category through apparent normality that hides complex stories and personalities.

5.2 The Mythicized Figure

The mythicized figure transcends everyday reality, becoming a symbol through absence, death or special status. I have identified it in 26 films (37.1%), thus becoming the most frequent category. Nathaniel Kahn in *My Architect: A Son's Journey* (2003) transforms the father architect's buildings into metaphorical substitutes of his presence, traveling globally to know him post-mortem.

Albertina Carri in *Los Rubios* (2003) presents her parents, who disappeared in the Argentine dictatorship, as mythical figures through primordial absence. Sarah Polley in *Stories We Tell* (2012) reconstitutes the memory of her deceased mother through contradictory testimonies, problematizing the notion of biographical truth.

Cloud Rock La Belle from *Beyond This Place* (2010) becomes a mythicized figure despite the appearance of being a loser – a "drug addict for 40 years", who prefers freedom instead of family responsibilities. Peter Wintonick from *Wintopia* (2019), an influential Canadian documentarist, is reconstituted post-mortem by his daughter Mira through his unfinished project about utopia.

5.3 The Traumatized/Traumatizing Figure

This typology explores the parent marked by devastating experiences or who becomes a source of trauma for children. I identified it in 27 films (38.57%). Types of trauma include: collective historical trauma, abuse, mental disorders, addictions, abandonment and secrets.

Historical trauma: Mila Turajlić in *The Other Side of Everything* (2017) explores post-Yugoslav trauma through her political dissident mother. Aliona van der Horst in *Love is Potatoes* (2017) discovers Soviet famine trauma through her mother's letters. Firouzeh Khosrovani in *Radiograph of a Family* (2020) reconstructs the parents' ideological division in the Iranian Revolution.

Abuse trauma: Karin Jurschick in *It Should Have Been Nice After That* (2000) explores domestic violence and her mother's suicide. Chico Colvard in *Family Affair* (2010) addresses sexual abuse committed by his father on the director's sisters, examining the victims' loyalty toward the aggressor.

Mental disorder trauma: Jonathan Caouette in *Tarnation* (2004) documents his relationship with a schizophrenic mother through over-exposed montage and distorted effects. Kathy Leichter in *Here One Day* (2012) explores her bipolar mother's suicide through left audio recordings.

Abandonment trauma: This type of trauma includes my own film, *Holy Father* (2020), about the reconciliation with my father, who became a monk. Rick Minnich in *Forgetting Dad* (2008) investigates the suspicion that his father's amnesia after an accident was simulated to escape responsibilities.

5.4 The Declining Figure

The declining figure documents the process of aging, degradation or confrontation with imminent death. I identified it in 13 films as the main figure. Kirsten Johnson in *Dick Johnson is Dead* (2020) documents her father's cognitive decline, staging fictitious scenarios of his death. Chantal Akerman in *No Home Movie* (2015) uses long fixed frames to capture the erosion of the maternal presence.

Ross McElwee in *Time Indefinite* (1993) contrasts film excerpts of his lively father with his sudden absence. Ondi Timoner in *Last Flight Home* (2022) documents the last 15 days of their father's life, who chose to undergo assisted suicide in California.

Among Romanian films, Nora Agapi in *Timebox* (2018) documents her photographer father's decline, confronted with the loss of vital space and of his archive. Andra Tarara in *Noi împotriva noastră* (2021) presents her schizophrenic father's mental degradation.

5.5 The Enigmatic Figure

The enigmatic figure manifests through the parent who keeps secrets or whose life contains mystery zones. I have identified it in only 4 films as the main figure, but in 23 as a secondary figure. Agustina Comedi in *Silence is a Falling Body* (2017) discovers her father's homosexuality hidden in Argentina's dictatorship. Lynne Sachs in *Film About A Father Who* (2020) gradually reveals that her father had nine children with six women, many siblings discovering each other only in adulthood.

5.6 Conclusions and Statistics

The mythicized figure predominates (34.29%), followed by the conventional (24.29%), the declining (18.57%), the traumatic (17.14%) and the enigmatic (5.71%). The prevalence of the mythicized figure in the case of post-mortem parents (13 out of 20 films) confirms the tendency to idealize the physically absent parent.

Chapter 6: Common Themes in Documentary Films About Parents

In this chapter I have identified four major recurring themes in the 70 films from the research list, all containing the conjunction "and," which might suggest the existence of eight distinct themes, but which are actually interdependent: *memory and identity*, *absence and search*, *trauma and secrets*, *mortality and immortalization*.

These four thematic directions offer a comprehensive cartography of creative and psychological impulses that motivate documentary films about parents. The authors' concerns can be considered universal: *origin*, *absence*, *trauma* and *mortality*. Most films contain elements from multiple categories, demonstrating the fluid and interconnected nature of family experiences.

6.1 Memory and Identity

This is by far the most frequent theme in documentaries about parental figures – I have identified it in 57 films (81.4% of total). The cinematographic approach becomes an instrument of genealogical and identity cartography, through which the investigation of the parental figure becomes simultaneously an exploration of personal origins. Films in this category answer fundamental questions like "Who am I?", "Where do I come from?", "What formed me as an individual?".

I found this theme particularly pregnant in films by directors aged 30-40 (50% of total films addressing memory and identity), a stage that coincides with the period of the consolidation of adult identity. Edifying examples are *For One More Hour With You* (2002, Alina Marazzi) which reconstructs the relationship between the director and her suicidal mother, *Everything is Copy* (2015, Jacob Bernstein) about his famous mother, Nora Ephron, or *On Football* (2015, Sergio Oksman) where football becomes the common language used for reconstructing the lost connection with the director's father.

6.2 Absence and Search

This theme is found in 25 films (35.7% of total), comprising documentaries centered on the parent's absence and the active effort of recovery. The camera often becomes an instrument of search and mediation in fractured relationships, and 64% of directors are at the beginning of their career, suggesting that the absence theme serves as a starting point for personal explorations.

The only example that has absence and search as the main theme is *Dawn* (2018, Carmen Torres), where the director sets out to search for the biological mother she never knew. I checked this theme also for my own film, *Holy Father*, because I started with the false premise that my biological father can offer miraculous answers to all the traumas I grew up with. Like Torres, I realized that no search offers magic solutions, but rather the parent's openness toward me was infinitely more important than any concrete information he could offer.

6.3 Trauma and Secrets

This category comprises 27 films (38.5%) that investigate painful family secrets or abuse experiences, using the documentary as an instrument of revelation and healing. The majority (81.8%) are made by filmmakers at the beginning of their career, between 31 and 45 years old, when they acquire the capacity to confront traumatic experiences from their childhood.

Among the 11 films that have trauma as a main theme are: *It Should Have Been Nice After That* (2000, Karin Jurschick) about paternal violence, *Tarnation* (2004, Jonathan Caouette) about a mother with mental disorders, *History of a Secret* (2003, Mariana Otero) about the clandestine abortion that led to the mother's death.

The documentary thus becomes not only an operation of unearthing truth, but also an exercise of ethical discernment regarding the balance between the imperative of authenticity and respect for family secrets.

6.4 Mortality and Immortalization

I have identified this theme in 37 films (52.8%) that address the parents' decline through aging or illness and the attempt to transcend this loss through the immortalization of memory. The films tend to portray parents as mythicized figures (16 films) or declining figures (13 films), the process of documenting parental death being inseparable from the exploration of the filmmaker's own identity.

Dick Johnson is Dead (2020, Kirsten Johnson) represents the most radical example, with the director documenting the decline of her father, who is affected by dementia, and staging various fictitious scenarios of his death. *Last Flight Home* (2022, Ondi Timoner) documents the last 15 days of the life of a father who chose assisted suicide, and *Getting Old Stinks* (2022, Peter Entell) approaches the aging process without beautifications. These documentaries transcend the personal dimension, becoming universal meditations about the human condition and mortality.

Chapter 7: Formal Approaches in Documentary Films About Parents

The documentary about parents represents a space of formal experimentation and aesthetic innovation. Films demonstrate a remarkable diversity of approaches, from observational rigor to visual experiment. These variations are not simple stylistic choices, but reflect profound conceptual and ethical considerations regarding parental figure representation and family memory articulation.

As the director of one of the analyzed documentaries, this research offered me the occasion to contextualize my own creation within the broader framework of the genre. I discovered that many of the dilemmas I confronted with are shared by other directors, but also that each parent-child relationship generates unique challenges and solutions.

7.1 Identifying Documentary Modes Defined by Nichols

I identified Bill Nichols' six modes in all films, finding that the majority (53) hybridize these modes. The *interactive/participatory* mode stands out as the most frequently used (24 films as main mode, 36 as secondary mode), demonstrating this approach's dominance in documentaries about parents. In second place is the *poetic* mode (13 principal, 24 secondary), followed by *observational* (11 principal, 25 secondary).

Among Romanian films, the only one using the *expository* mode is *Balkan Champion* (2006, Réka Kincses), while *Al doilea joc* (2014, Corneliu Porumboiu) fits the *poetic* mode through its radical experimentalism. The dominance of the *interactive* mode is not surprising, given the intrinsically personal nature of the analyzed documentaries.

The documentary about parents is defined by its capacity to adapt and combine diverse documentary modes to reflect the authenticity of a relationship that transcends formal categorizations.

7.2 Identifying Documentary Tendencies Defined by Renov

Applying Renov's four tendencies, I found that the *expressive* dimension is the most common in the film corpus. *Tarnation* (2004) uses digital manipulations to materialize the trauma experience, *Los Rubios* (2003) uses animation and performance to represent absence, and *Dick Johnson is Dead* (2020) invents fictitious death scenarios to anticipate processing loss.

The tendency to *record, reveal and preserve* is predominant in films that extensively use family archive, transforming it from a source of personal memories into material with significant narrative value.

The *analytical and interrogative* function predominates in films that methodically investigate family secrets, such as *Stories We Tell* (2012) or *51 Birch Street* (2005).

7.3 Narrative and Formal Strategies

I analyzed diverse modalities through which authors negotiate and represent the complexity of relationships with parents, from the creative use of family archive to strategies for representing absence and presence, temporality construction and the relationship with the viewer.

7.3.1 Home-video Archive, Voice-over, Non-linearity, Fictional Elements

Among the 70 films, 36 use archive filming or home-video. In *Tarnation* (2004), Jonathan Caouette uses vast autobiographical material filmed starting at age 11, digitally manipulated to reflect traumatic experiences. *Timebox* (2018, Nora Agapi) adds a socio-historical dimension, transforming personal collections into documents of political transformations in Romania.

31 films use voice-over, which seems surprisingly little to me for such personal films. *Nobody's Business* (1996, Alan Berliner) constructs the entire film around the tense dialogue between his voice-over and the interview with his reticent father. Among domestic titles, only *Balkan Champion* and *Tata* constantly use voice-over; in *Holy Father*, my voice appears only in the intro.

I identified fictional elements in 16 documentaries. *Stories We Tell* (2012, Sarah Polley) creates directed home-video films that aesthetically mimic authentic materials, gradually revealing their constructed nature. *Dick Johnson is Dead* uses fictional elements in an explicit and playful manner, transforming fictitious death scenes into therapeutic rituals.

7.3.2 Representing Memory, Absence and Presence

Memory is represented through diverse strategies that surpass the simple reproduction of events. *Silence is a Falling Body* (2017, Agustina Comedi) uses slow motion and grain to suggest temporal distance, and *For One More Hour With You* (2002) uses freeze-frame and repetitions to express the obsession of memory.

Films with post-mortem protagonists develop strategies to represent absence and construct symbolic presences. *My Architect* (2003, Nathaniel Kahn) uses the father's buildings as metaphorical substitutes of his presence, and *Wintopia* (2019, Mira Burt) transforms the father's unfinished filming into a space of posthumous collaboration.

7.3.3 Representing Time

Montage becomes an essential instrument for mediating between different temporalities. *Stories We Tell* uses elaborate match-cuts between reconstructions and authentic archive, and *Film About A Father Who* (2020, Lynne Sachs) uses associative montage that connects 35 years of filmed material.

Shot duration use varies significantly: *No Home Movie* (2015, Chantal Akerman) uses long sequence-shots to contemplate on the mother-daughter relationship, in contrast with *Tarnation*, which adopts alert montage with 1-2 seconds per frame. *Oxhide* (2005) uses only 23 shots with 5-10 minute durations to document the family life's daily rhythm.

The extended filming process becomes methodology and subject. *Film About A Father Who* incorporates material filmed over 35 years, *Cameraperson* (2016) gathers 25 years of career, and *Mrs. Buică* (2023) uses 20 years of filming. The most atypical case is *Al doilea joc*, which lasted exactly as long as the watched match – 90 minutes.

Chapter 8: Ethics of Representation in the Documentary About Parents

The documentary about parents raises fundamental ethical questions regarding the boundary between the director's right to tell their story and the parent's right to have their intimacy protected. I explored these dilemmas both theoretically and through my own experience, with *Holy Father*, by confronting complex ethical situations.

8.1 Consent and Autonomy

The consent problem becomes central in the case of parents affected by dementia. *Dick Johnson is Dead* (2020) raises questions about a person with dementia's capacity to evaluate the implications of their exposure, and the fictitious burial sequence seemed at least questionable to me – is it ethical to bring all those people into that situation and make them cry for a false situation?

The parent's explicit resistance becomes subject in *The Disappearance of My Mother* (2019), where the tension between the desire to film and the mother's refusal exposes the paradox of the personal documentary: the act of documenting can simultaneously become a gesture of love and a form of symbolic violence. *Nobody's Business* (1996) transforms this conflict into a structuring principle.

8.2 Family Secrets

The documentary about parents frequently functions as an instrument for investigating family secrets. *51 Birch Street* (2005) problematizes the legitimacy of making the deceased mother's journals public, and *Silence is a Falling Body* (2017) investigates the father's homosexuality in the context of a dictatorial Argentina.

Family Affair (2010) exposes a history of sexual abuse, balancing the testimony's imperative with respect for the recovery processes. These projects illustrate how revealing secrets about a parent inevitably implies other people, generating chain ethical dilemmas.

8.3 Authenticity and Fictionalization

Several documentaries fluidize the boundary between authenticity and fiction. *Stories We Tell* uses actors to recreate inaccessible moments, filming on Super 8 to aesthetically imitate authentic archives. *Radiograph of a Family* (2020) recreates moments from the parents' marriage through stylized images and fictitious dialogues.

Using actors to play the director's role in *Los Rubios* (2003) problematizes the testimonial authority and suggests the impossibility of unmediated access to the experience of trauma. Ethical implications depend on transparency, consent and narrative justification.

8.4 *Holy Father* – Ethical Dilemmas: Case Study

I confronted multiple ethical dilemmas during filming and editing. Paula's mother's reaction to the pregnancy news ("Vaffanculo!") was filmed without her knowledge, and Paula's vulnerability after the conversation raises questions about the exposure of intimacy. I debated this sequence much, concluding that I captured unstaged reality.

With my father, monk Calinic, I had problems related to the sequences showing beer drinking and swimming. I explained that I did not film a monk drinking beer, but filmed us, father and son, drinking our first beer together – the crucial moment when I gave him the news. The swimming sequence is the only one where we are both in frame and the only moment when he seems to care for me, like a father.

The birth sequence was the most intense and intimate. Paula never had problems with her inclusion, and her response to q&a questions erased my dilemmas: she finds it wonderful that I assisted at the birth, unlike most Romanian men who "traditionally are at the bar when their child is born."

8.5 Conclusions Related to Documentary Ethics About Parents

The documentary about parents represents a space of permanent ethical negotiation, where the classic issues of representation are intensified by the pre-existing relationship between the filmmaker and the subject. The paradoxical nature of it consists in the fact that filmmakers benefit from privileged access based on trust, but transforming the parent into a subject imposes an inevitable objectification.

It is impossible to establish absolute ethical rules. Each film represents a specific case for which ethical considerations must be calibrated to the nature of the relationship, the parent's nature and the effect on the family. Many ethical problems themselves become central subjects of the films, transforming ethics not only into a procedural concern, but into a visible dimension of these works.

Chapter 9: Public Reception

I approached the essential element of any artistic act: the audience that documentaries about parents reach. This could be developed in a subsequent work, analyzing from multiple perspectives how these extremely personal films are received.

Documentaries about parents have a remarkable presence in the international festival circuit. TIFF (Toronto) hosted premieres for no fewer than 11 films from the corpus, including *Stories We Tell* (2012) and *The Mother of All Lies* (2023). Sundance represents the second major platform with 7 films, among which *Tarnation* (2004) and *Dick Johnson is Dead* (2020).

Two films were Oscar-nominated: *My Architect* (2003) and *Salt of the Earth* (2014). *Stories We Tell* obtained exceptional critical success, winning the award for best documentary film from the National Board of Review. *Cameraperson* (2016) was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry for "its cultural, historical and aesthetic significance."

My Architect generated earnings of over \$2.75 million, and *Salt of the Earth* exceeded \$5 million globally. *Dick Johnson is Dead* obtained the perfect score of 100% on Rotten Tomatoes, being one of the few films in history with this distinction.

For an overview, I analyzed IMDb ratings: international films have an average of 7.25 (minimum 6.3, maximum 8.4), and Romanian ones 7.22 (minimum 6.8, maximum 7.6). It's remarkable that Romanian films maintain a consistent qualitative standard, with an almost identical average and higher lower limit.

Beyond awards and earnings, many films had significant cultural impact. *Los Rubios* is considered revolutionary in post-dictatorship Argentina, *Nobody's Business* entered MoMA's collection, and *Time Indefinite* is cited as one of the most important American autobiographical documentaries. These films demonstrate that documentaries about parents have the capacity to transcend personal experience and become durable cultural landmarks.

Research Conclusions

The research journey I undertook in the world of documentaries about parents was initially motivated by my own experience as director of *Holy Father* (2020). This double positioning, as researcher and practitioner, offered me a unique perspective, allowing me to identify connections, patterns and tendencies that I could filter through my own experience.

Original Contributions

The first significant contribution consists in identifying and cataloguing a representative corpus of 70 documentary films about parents – an unprecedented database in specialized literature. This corpus represents not just a simple enumeration, but the result of systematic effort conducted between 2017 and 2025, offering a solid foundation for present research and a starting point for future academic investigations.

I developed a specific taxonomy for analyzing this type of documentary, including typologies of parental figures (*conventional, mythicized, traumatic, declining, enigmatic*), common themes (*memory and identity, absence and search, trauma and secrets, mortality and immortalization*) and the relationship between the moment the film is created and the stage in the author's career. This original taxonomy offers a conceptual framework for understanding and classifying documentaries about parents, surpassing simple individual analyses.

The transversal analysis of the relationship between form and content allowed me to demonstrate how diverse narrative and formal strategies reflect the specific nature of the documented parental relationship. I explored the ethical dimension of representing parents, emphasizing dilemmas specific to this type of documentary: consent in the case of vulnerability, exposure of family secrets and responsibility toward parental memory. Integrating the personal experience of film creation, using my own documentary, offered me a deeper understanding of the analyzed processes.

From Objectivity to Intimacy

A historical analysis allowed me to understand how technological progress and socio-cultural changes facilitated the emergence of the personal documentary. The democratization of production means, begun in the '60s and accelerated in the digital era, blurred the boundary between professionals and amateurs, allowing directors to turn their cameras toward their own family.

This evolution reflects a profound change in the view on authenticity: if classic documentary films sought objectivity through distancing, documentaries about parents discover authenticity through personal involvement, assumed vulnerability and reflexivity. Paradoxically, the more personal and specific a documentary is, the more universal it can become in its emotional resonance. Analyzed films no longer aspire to the objectivity ideal promoted by genre pioneers, but openly assume subjectivity as a fundamental aesthetic and ethical principle.

Identified Patterns and Tendencies

Statistical analysis allowed me to identify significant patterns. I found paternal figure prevalence: 54.3% of films are about fathers, 30% about mothers and only 15.7% about both parents, suggesting the particular complexity of father-son/daughter relationship and its cinematographic potential. This asymmetry would merit deeper exploration in future research.

Another important pattern is the prevalence of debut documentaries: 57% of films are made at the start of the director's career, indicating the role that exploring the parental relationship has in defining the director's artistic identity. From the viewpoint of addressed themes, *memory and identity* represent the dominant preoccupation (81.4% of films), followed by *mortality and immortalization* (52.8%), demonstrating the documentary's function as an instrument of preservation and transmission of intergenerational memory.

Regarding formal approaches, I noted the hybridization of documentary modes, with a predominant *interactive/participatory* mode (34.29% as main mode), thus reflecting the complex and stratified nature of parent-child relationship. This formal flexibility demonstrates the documentary about parents' capacity to surpass rigid categorizations and adapt its form to the specificity of the documented relationship.

Ethical Dimension

In documentaries about parents, the camera simultaneously becomes an investigation instrument, mediator in fractured relationships, emotional shield and a means of trauma healing. The fundamental ethical dilemma comes from the tension between the author's right to artistic expression and the responsibility toward the intimacy of the parental protagonist. Unlike traditional documentaries, the documentary about parents starts from a pre-existing emotionally charged relationship that is defined by complex power dynamics.

The space of permanent ethical negotiation often becomes the central element of the film itself, generating formal innovation and conceptual depth. From *Stories We Tell* to *Dick Johnson is Dead*, documentaries about parents assume and expose their own ethical limits, inviting viewers to reflect on the nature of representing intimate relationships.

Romanian Films in International Context

The 8 analyzed Romanian documentaries demonstrate the domestic cinematography's synchronization with global tendencies. With comparable quality (IMDb average rating 7.22 versus 7.25 for international films), Romanian documentaries bring an additional dimension related to post-communist transformations. The relationship between collective historical trauma and personal-family trauma is explored with depth, reflecting the complexity of post-communist transition.

Personal Reflection

As the director of one of the analyzed documentaries, this research offered me the occasion to contextualize my own creation within the genre's broader framework. I discovered that many dilemmas I confronted are shared by other directors, but also that each parent-child relationship generates unique challenges and solutions. The experience of systematically analyzing 69 films similar to mine offered me not only a theoretical perspective, but also a deeper understanding of my own artistic approach.

Future Perspectives

This work opens multiple avenues for further investigation. Ethical aspects, the therapeutic dimension of the process, the relationship between collective and family trauma are just a few ideas for future research, based on this work's corpus, extended and updated.

The documentary about parents represents one of the most relevant tendencies of contemporary cinema, capable of offering not only innovative artistic explorations, but also answers to the fundamental need to understand, process and transmit relationships that define us as human beings. Through these films, personal memory interweaves with collective memory, offering both authors and viewers a privileged space for reflection on their own identity in relation to the familial, cultural and historical heritage.

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