

Reflexive Documentary; Ternary Challenges of Production Process, Audience and Self-Consciousness

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Abstract—Studying filmmaking techniques is one of the ways which is applied to study representation of filmmaker's subjectivity in documentary films. The authors of this article opt to concentrate on studying "revelation of production process" to answer the question: Can we recognize the "revelation of production process" as a method in which to make audience self-conscious about the constructive role of filmmaker's subjectivity in Reflexive Documentary? Therefore, two documentary films, *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* (2005) and *Roger and Me* (1989) were studied in this respect. Our research methodology was based on deep interview. Consequently several scholars were chosen to be interviewed. They were asked to define the relation between revelation of production process and presenting self-consciousness to audience. Analyzing of our findings showed that there is not a simple relation between them. This led us to concentrate on studying complexities between presenting self-consciousness and reflexing the production process in reflexive documentary films.

Index Terms—Reflexive documentary, presenting self-consciousness, revelation of production process, being accidental, subjectivity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Chapman says, 'The trend over the last twenty years or so has been towards greater reflexivity and subjectivity...' [1] The inclination toward subjectivity has been challenging the definition of observational documentary as a way of presenting reality. There is an argument on the claim that documentary can produce objective similarity between pro-filmic events and the real, while this idea is under question and denied by some others. They focus on the point that film is a product of filmmaker's subjectivity and it represents the visual rhetoric of events from a definite point of view which is not the immediate representation of the real. This suggests that all the claims on the immediacy of representing the real prevents us from recalling the truth that film is an artificial product after all. As Kilborn and Izod indicate, 'they [reflexive documentarists] were reacting against the claims that observational documentary could achieve transparency. To them, the idea that television could show things as they have been had the camera not been there seemed impossible' [2].

Description of reflexive documentary mode has mostly been defined with two characteristics. First one contradicts observational views and the second one is questioning the

form of addressing the audience. Although there has almost been a consensus on the understanding of reflexive mode as a counter trend of observational thinking, there are many controversies on the definition, description and its other aspects. However, it is accepted that in a reflexive documentary the truth or certainty of the film is calling into doubt and question, there is less compatibility on how it happens. "Revelation of production process" can excite many discussions. The fact that whether the revelation of production process affects the viewer's self-consciousness is argued. There are some criteria which have been point of discussion on this process can be used to present self-consciousness to the audience. On the other hand, implicitly by defining this process as a 'negotiation between filmmaker and subject' and not a 'negotiation between filmmaker and viewer' [3], the function of presenting self-consciousness to audience has been rejected. These viewpoints are studied in this article. The two case studies help to find out how the revelation of production process described and interpreted.

II. THE ISSUE OF "REVELATION OF PRODUCTION PROCESS" AND "SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS" IN REFLEXIVE DOCUMENTARY

The concept of reflexivity generally comes from human science, especially anthropology. As Chapman says, 'nevertheless, anthropologists have, in the past, had a perception of themselves as objective social scientists... a notion that was gradually challenged by discussions about reflexivity' [4]. Reflexivity has been often defined as methodology, although it is theoretically described with concepts of "self" and "other". In the past and in ethnography, it was assumed that there are a lot of differences between the identity of "we" usually as western white and "other" as indigenous far-reaching local societies. These differences also suggested a kind of superiority of western white. Knowledge that is prepared by western scholars is presumed as an objective truth of indigenous local people and consequently ignored this point that it is just suggested a view of a western interpreter. Movies which were made with such a presumption were almost seen as a certain truth of indigenous people.

The idea of reflexivity challenged the notion of self and other by suggesting this presumption that behind any form of representation, there is a view of producer which is not an objective knowledge of other people and events, but it is just a view of a western interpreter- the challenge which finally prevalence the subjective approach to ethnographic films. This approach was often exemplified in films of Jean Rouch, Edgar Moran, Trinh Minh-ha and Nick Broomfield.

Manuscript received August 16, 2013; revised October 17, 2013.

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Regarding to this trend, reflexivity, as a methodology, tries to aware the readers about the role of producer in constructing the text. Dowling describes the reflexivity as ‘... how they [researchers] have influenced a research project’ [5]. Although he counts four types of reflexivity, it seems all of them share the concentration on revelation of production process as a common characteristic. The “reflexive” term in reflexive documentary shows that how this mode is influenced by recent ethnographical thoughts.

On the other hand, the genealogy of reflexive documentary has been either described by Bertolt Brecht theories and the concepts of “Alienation” and “realism” [6]. Corner indicates to a currency in television documentary which imitate the form of documentary to make a parody of it [7]. This currency is very similar to what Nichols describes as ‘formal’ reflexive. Whatever makes the picture of documentary realistic, such as “face to camera interview”, “handheld camera” and other techniques call into question by this way. They want to challenge beliefs about truthfulness of documentary forms. This manner refers back to Dziga Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) which revealed the production process in a binary way. First, creating a strange appearance of the real world by manipulating the speed of the film or using visual effects and second, by the revelation of the role of cameraman or editor in constructing the reality of the film. In Brechtian manner, these characteristics provide an unexpected view about the documentary which awakes audience doubts and questions to think why we admit documentary forms as a realistic way of telling the truth.

In reflexive documentary, both anthropology and film theories have played role in theorizing the mode. Although there are many common points in these two disciplines about reflexive documentary, some important differences show off at the same time. The most notable one which relates to this study is how these two fields present self-consciousness to audience. When Nichols tries to relate both ‘political’ and ‘formal’ perspectives to reflexive documentary says ‘both perspectives rely on techniques that jar us, that achieve something akin to what Bertolt Brecht described as “alienation effects” or what the Russian formalists termed *ostranenie*, or “making strange”’ [8]. This quote almost shows that Nichols theorizes the mode on the basis of film theories demanding a reflexive term. As Nichols suggests “the reflexive mode is the most self-conscious mode” by this he means that self-consciousness happens momentarily the film gives a shock to the viewers either formally or politically. Even once he exemplifies an ethnographic film of Trinh Min-ha, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), he mentions the moment that audience is shocked by knowing that interviewed women in the film are actors which director has selected them to narrate her research. However, Nichols theorize reflexive documentary with “alienation”, some other scholars suggest a different view about reflexive documentary in relation to the concept of “reflexivity”.

As Ruby speaks about reflexive documentary as a subject of visual anthropology, he has counted several conditions which can persuade us about the reflexivity of the film. He emphasizes, ‘only if a producer decides to make his awareness of self a public matter and convey that knowledge

to his audience is it possible to regard the product as reflexive’. He believes that not only producer has to be aware of his epistemology assumption and the process of production, but he also should be self-aware of what is necessary to reveal to audience to become self-consciousness. He indicates ‘... popular realization ... [of] the world, and in particular the symbolic world-things, events, and people, as well as news, television, and stories are not what they appear to be’ [9]. Nichols categorize this method as “participatory” documentary which concentrate on the interactive role of filmmaker as a part of subject. He implicitly state that this revelation of production process merely makes a ‘negotiation between filmmaker and viewer’ and mostly creates a voice that is received as a ‘negotiation between filmmaker and subject’ [10]. Unlike Ruby that directly speaks about the effects of the revelation of production process on addressing the audience.

This issue is also discussed by other scholars. Chapman, Kilborn and Izod describe some aspects of revelation of production process which intend to affect audience understanding of representation. Referring to Arthur’s term “aesthetic of failure”, Chapman describes the Michael Moore revelation of his role in *Roger and Me* (1989) as a way of giving awareness to audience about uncertainty of the film [11]. Scenes like Moore’s failing to interview with Roger Smith, ending discussion between Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960) about what they couldn’t accomplish and also sequences in *Voices of Orchid Island* (1993) which indigenous people prevent shooting. Kilborn and Izod indicate that ‘not infrequently film makers using this mode actually represent themselves in such a way as to invite the viewer’s ironic reflection on their ineptitude as professionals- the converse of the film maker as star’ [12].

Although Ruby declines the momentarily shocking interruption in documentary as being reflexive, he says, ‘while it is obviously impossible to reveal the producer and not the process, it is possible to concentrate on one and incidentally deal with the other’ [13]. In fact, presenting self-consciousness to audience via the revelation production process is not an easy accessible effect as it seems.

Unlike Nichols, in definition of reflexive mode, Chapman traces a direct line between Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s revelation of filmmaker self and Michael Moore’s presenting, but he immediately calls the function or motivation of “aesthetic of failure” into question. He writes, ‘... we need to ask why Moore, McElwee and Broomfield fetishize the “aesthetic of failure”. Is it because the problems they encounter ... or is it because of this is the only way they can get a film made’ [14]. In other word, it can make the whole film unreliable or fraudulently suggests a careless representation as an aesthetic point. This may convince us why Nichols does not consider the revelation of production process as a self-conscious negotiation between the filmmaker and viewer.

Finally, all these controversies imply that the issue is also into discussion. We discussed these issues in the case studies *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* (2005) and *Roger and Me* (1898). The study has focused on how these films reveal their production process and how it is interpreted.

III. METHODOLOGY

Studying the revelation of production process in *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* and *Roger and Me*, has been done by the qualitative interview- especially informant interview. The data of the article is provided by interviewing with six scholars in film, television and anthropology. Scholars who were interviewed in this matter were:

- Naser Fakouhi (researcher in anthropology PhD.)
- Azam Ravardrad (researcher in visual communication PhD.)
- Mohsen Bani Hashemi (researcher in television studies PhD.)
- Mohammad Tahaminejad (documentary filmmaker and researcher)
- Homaun Emami (documentary filmmaker and researcher)
- Mehrdad Oskoui (documentary filmmaker).

They have been interviewed deeply in a non-directive manner. Therefore there was not any definite framework to answer the questions. In other word, interviews continued spontaneously and questions were improvised. The films were presented on DVD and they watched a few days before interviews. These films were selected because of their revelation production process appearance. In the case of *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*, the Iranian context is also has been noted.

The data were analyzed by categorizing and coding on the basis of "grounded theory". However, Spradley and McCurdy do not recommend using of theory in cultural research because of predictability which it may give to the results [15], it is also stated that qualitative researchers have no way to use a kind of grounded theory [16]. In the qualitative interview, researcher by comparing the data wants to know how many theories are used in the field and how. Therefore, the literary of theories somehow is applied in, as it has done here. It is recommended that in scripting the data of qualitative interview we use a uniform style then the data are decontextualized and recontextualized.

IV. STUDYING REVELATION OF PRODUCTION PROCESS IN CASE STUDIES: TEHRAN HAS NO MORE POMEGRANATES AND ROGER AND ME

A. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*

The film produced in 2005 by Documentary and Experimental Film Centre (DEFC). It directed by Masoud Bakhshi. The duration of the film is 68 minutes and its format is 35mm. *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* ironically reviews Tehran's history by comparing the past and the present of this city.

The film is described as a reflexive documentary and these characteristics have been observed:

- Concentrating on construction of the film instead of proceeding directly to the subject
- The revelation of the producer and the production process
- Calling realism of the film into question
- Alienation and the experimental feature of the film

The outcome of interviews indicates that the reflexive characteristics of the film focus on presenting the filmmaker subjectivity. In one case, the beginning scene of the film is considered as a manifest to being reflexive. It is noted that the narration of the filmmaker which tells the story of how they can't accomplish the project implies us we are confronting to a reflexive story which will focus on how the film is produced or not be able to be produced instead of directly introduces its subject. It is told that *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* concord to reflexive mode because of its emphasis on construction. It is said that concentrating of filmmaker on construction can result in making less sense of realism to viewer since they think whatever introduce in the film probably is filmmaker's view about the subject not a certain reality about Tehran.

Revelation of filmmaker and production process is also considered as reflexive features of the film. Showing scenes that celluloid film tears or splice together in an editing room can convey the presence of the filmmaker and constructive role of filmmaking, it is told. Splicing footages together is considered as Brecht "alienation" which notifies audience that they are just watching a movie. Scenes like revealing the filmmaker, camera and crews, stammering of historical narrator and comical voice-over of filmmaker, all remind viewers that they are watching a movie. In addition, using such elements like different tempo, fast motions, much applying music, satires and fun tone of the film are mentioned as the reflexive characteristics. It is emphasized that filmmaker reveals himself by much use of stylistic statements.

Taking the truth of film under question has been regarded as the most evident reflexive element. Meanwhile, "Parody" is mentioned as the basis element of the film. It is best defined by contradiction between the voice-over narration and the footage of the film. In other words, its parody dominantly focuses on the content rather than the form, moreover, mixing fiction historical footage in B&W with original visual documents resembles as an evidence of reality. Another point of view suggests that *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* plays less with its structure and it funs more with people, content and historical information. In other word, its parody dominantly focuses on the content rather than the form. Also it is oppositely stated that the film stabilizes the director point of view because the filmmaker put his views in the pictures, since he superficially declines it in the voice-over. Therefore, because of the strength power of picture in comparing to voice, all the film constantly stabilizes the filmmaker's ideology.

More challenges are suggested about the reflexive features of *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*. It is told that revelations of the filmmaker and production procedure just follow attractiveness. Showing problems of production is considered as a technique which makes sympathy for filmmaker who is imagined as an oppressed character. There is a contradiction if these revelations of filmmaker's problems present audience's self-consciousness or not. On one hand, scenes which show crews, editing process, narrator's stammering and production procedure are exemplified for presenting self-consciousness to audience. On the other hand, the same scenes are indicated as the

evidences of “accidental” revelation of filmmaker. Sequences like introduction of crews and telling how they affect the production process are strongly exemplified as a clear evidence of filmmaker’s trying to show that the film is improvised and consequently suggest that there is no predefined theme in making.

To describe the “accidental” revelation of production process it is explained that probably there is no defined motivation to reveal the production and it may happen in editing room and mostly because of its narrating attractiveness for filmmakers. A scene that narrator’s mistakes are represented in voice-over, has been seen as an accidental attractiveness. In addition, it is mentioned that the director in *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* deliberately tries to show the process of production accidentally. In relation to this matter some scenes are exemplified that narrator says, ‘suddenly we remembered to tell about automobile companies’, ‘suddenly we remembered to go to Tehran highs and shoot a plan of the city’. It is told that with statements like these, filmmaker as though tries to show us that the procedure of the film has been accidental. It is concluded that this method helps the director to convince us that there has been not any defined point of view or predefined idea about the film. However we can find the convers in *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*. It is emphasized that in order to present self-consciousness to audience you should reveal your point of view and your opinion about the subject. It is told that when a filmmaker reveals his perspective to the viewers, they can more consciously accept it or disagree. The matter which does not only happen in *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* but it is deliberately tried to tell us that they have not any predefine idea about the Tehran. It is told that when a filmmaker tells the viewers about his perspective to subject, viewers can freely think and criticize the position and the description. In this way we can provide a self-conscious watching experience, it is told.

B. *Roger and Me*

It is the first feature film of Michael Moore which is produced by Dog Eat Dog in 1989 and distributed by Warner Brothers. Duration of the film is 91 minutes. *Roger and Me* tells the people of Flint story, a city in Michigan State in US, which confronts a lot of problems due to GM automobile company shut down. Moore as the filmmaker tries to find Roger Smith, GM dean, to persuade him to visit the town but he does not succeed.

Some modes are counted for the film but there is more indication to be a reflexive documentary. In one case, it is considered as “interactive” documentary which is defined as ‘director interacting with reality and analyzing it’. Even, it is mentioned that *Roger and Me* is an interactive documentary which uses the reflexive elements. In relation to describe the reflexive aspects of *Roger and Me*, these elements are indicated:

- Revelation of filmmaker and production process
- Over usage of music, archival footages and pictures

It is told that when the back scene events appear in the film the reflexive elements show themselves. In other word, the manner of construction includes the subject and the events of

the film. Description of the reflexive mode is defined by reducing the illusion of recording reality. It is mentioned that using much of the archival material in *Roger and Me* implicates to reflexive mode of the film. Much using of these materials and playful usage of fiction movies reveal the Moore’s approach that does not like to assume all the events are the pure reality. Moore’s presentation is noted from different angles. Appearance and clothing of Moore, wearing jeans and baseball hat, are considered as distinction which separates him from the official and tidy managers of GM factory, conversely assimilates him to the labors. It is mentioned that this appearance introduces him as the representative of labors whom his family had been one of them.

In one case, the representation of filmmaker’s childhood in the beginning of the film is seen just as attractiveness. It is compared with the Alfred Hitchcock’s presentation in his fiction films as an exploration of a famous character. It is concluded that presence of filmmaker on television and cinema is just a technique of attractiveness and we should not consider it as a method which reflects the subjectivity of filmmaker or methodology. However, it is told that Moore indicates to his approach but also it is noted that common viewers probably do not perceive it as a way of questioning about the film. It is told that sequences which place shots of well off people and the miserable together in the film may seem to special audience as a filmmaker’s statement which implicitly announces that well off people cause poor for flint labors, but it may not happen for common viewer and they perceive it as an exact or only truth of Flint events.

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Finally, it is told that both, *Roger and Me* and *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* suggest their approach is towards a certain truth, although they apply some ways which contradictorily present some questions about the film.

V. CONCLUSION

Interviews obviously show that the issue of presenting self-consciousness to audience is still into discussion and there are serious controversies about it. Different ideas which are suggested here about description of the relation between “revelation of production process” and “presenting self-consciousness to audience” seem to be summarized in two notable titles:

- Representation of filmmaker’s weaknesses can be considered as a technique to get audience sympathy and less perceived as a way of calling the truth of the film into question
- Revelation of filmmaker and production process however can reveal the perspective of filmmaker,

there is no guaranty to present self-consciousness to audience

In *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates*, the revelation of the filmmaker's weaknesses unlike what Chapman suggests with quoting the concept of "aesthetic of failure" not only is not seen as a motivation of questioning about the authority of filmmaker's role, but also it is considered as a technique which stabilized the ideology of filmmaker by sympathize audience with the director. Although in a similar approach of Ruby, revelation of production process in *Tehran Has No More Pomegranates* is denied by concepts like being "accidentally", the same happens to *Roger and Me*. It may show that Ruby's criteria like intentionally presenting the producer approach cannot make a guaranty to being reflexive.

Different definition of "presenting self-consciousness to audience" and "being reflexive" in two different disciplines of visual anthropology and film or media studies results in two ways of understanding and interpreting the form. This variety indicates to the unequal nature of the audience and how its related definitions can multiple. It also shows that documentary techniques do not have inherent credit or certain validity to present self-consciousness to audience. As we can see in the formal aspects of *Tehran has no more Pomegranates* or *Roger and Me*. As Nichols implicitly denied the effect of "revelation of production process" on presenting self-consciousness we can also conclude that the revelation of production process do not surely result in presenting self-consciousness to audience. Even though some criteria like "not being accidentally" or "informing the perspective of filmmaker" would be done. We can ask why we should name a currency in documentary history "reflexive", while we theorize it on basis of film theory and the concept of "Alienation".

While interpreting the form depends on audiences, it seems it would not be true to consider momentary formal features as a way of deconstruction. In this way, the same fault which reflexivity inserts on observational method in representing the real can be true for reflexive mode as well.

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