

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF FILM-VIDEO AND MEDIA STUDIES

TO THE LOST, THE DAMNED, THE MAD, AND THE ONES IN LOVE

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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Film & Video and Integrative Arts
with honors in Film & Video

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of two parts: the writing portion and the short documentary film. The writing portion contains my research and production journal. *To the Lost, the Damned, the Mad, the Ones in Love* is a documentary following poet Jocelyn and about how she reveals her value, belief, personal relationships, and inner struggles in her poetry. Her poetry, in return, speaks for her in a voice that she could not attain in real life.

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Chapter 1 What is Documentary?

Documentary as Poetry/ Poetry as Documentary

Reading a poem is like watching a movie. They are never completely chronological. They are much more than nonsense. We read poems. We see poems. We see things in God's angle. We see things as first person. We see dust covering our body. We see letters written by a desperate worker. We see mothers crying for her husbands and sons. We hear them, too. We hear them talking. We hear them coughing. We hear a man telling his dream about choking. *The Book of the Dead*, written by Muriel Rukeyser, is one of the most representative documentary poetry books. Documentary poetry doesn't sound familiar to most people. Compared to traditional objective poetry, it is a rather young form. Poets combine source material with poetry writing. When reading *The Book of the Dead*, I feel like watching a documentary. There are interviews with workers, workers' families, and doctors. There are b-rolls---dust, furnaces, wheels, cornfield, etc.

*I know in America there are songs,
forgetful ballads to be sung,
but at home I see this wrong.*

The poem *Juanita Tinsley* gave me goosebumps the first time I read it. I saw a young boy. He could have enjoyed beautiful summer days. He could have run freely in the field. He could have fallen in love. He could have lived "stronger and free." But he didn't get a chance. In *Face of the Dam*, a father touches the picture of his girl for luck. He has been so unlucky for such a while. How unfair is it? do you also have this kind of feeling? We've done nothing wrong but we feel ashamed. We feel ashamed because we have better chance to fulfill the meaning of our own being. We are disturbed.

Many of us stop right here. We stop thinking deeper about it. We want to feel good about ourselves. Muriel Rukeyser takes one step more. She decided to write these all down. We always ask the question – are so-called "superior" people eligible to tell "the poors'" stories? I also wonder about this. But we do need people to tell these stories. These stories are happening. But we rarely see them.

As dark as I am, when I came out at morning after the tunnel at night,

*With a white man, nobody could have told which man was white.
The dust had covered us both, and the dust was white*

The dust paints him white. How ironic it is. As a black man working under a white boss, is there a time he suddenly realizes his color? He is different from his boss. He knows it. The moment he steps out of the tunnel, he realizes he is different from his wife, too.

The last poem, *the Book of the Dead*, brings an end to all the guilt, shame, disturbance. The Industrial revolution brought us modernization. Modernization brings us convenience. It also brings us a bigger and bigger gap between the rich and the poor. We can't rewrite the history. But we can write the future.

*and you young, you who finishing the poem
Wish new perfection and begin to make;
You men of fact, measure our times again"*

Agee's Documentary

"I might say, in short, but emphatically not in self-excuse, of which I wish entirely to disarm and disencumber myself, but for the sake of clear definition, and indication of limits, that I am only human."

Agee states his conflict and confusion in the first article of this book. He raises so many questions and we couldn't find an answer. Is he eligible to observe and decode other people's life? Does anybody have authority to do these? Is anybody better than others so he or she can judge others' lives? Yes, people read his writing and look at Walker's photographs. But are these second-hand materials trustworthy? Could we ever possibly fully understand others' lives?

I remember one time my film professor and I talked about Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. "Agee admires these people," my professor said. I nodded. I admire Agee's admiration, too. Agee said, "I am only human." All of us are only human. We, documentarian, try to see people the way they are, as humans. But indeed, when we are documenting people, especially those we have sympathy for, how eagerly do we want to see them as good people? We consciously or unconsciously ignore their "bad" side. But we are only human. We all have good and bad sides, which don't define us as good or bad people, but only human.

Many of these questions also disturb me when I was in Sri Lanka this summer, maybe in a slightly different way. I remember the time we sent our empty plates to our housekeeper. He is a skinny old local. We said "thank you." He smiled and hardly got out a couple of English words, "Sorry, I don't speak English." We talked about this later in the day. My friend said, "I am sorry, I don't speak any of his languages." Yes, that was exactly how I felt. What on Earth gives us this privilege. to come to the other end of the world and expect they speak our language? I truly know nothing about him. I remember his broken tooth when he smiled. But that's it. Nothing else. I remember the day when I left the girls' school. I remember they held my hands, weeping and telling me not to forget them. I won't forget them. But I ask myself what gives me the privilege to come in for a few days, take photos of them, and then walk out and leave them behind? Was I really helping them? Does anybody really need help from someone else? When I showed my photos to my parents, they saw poverty. But truly when I took these pictures, I only saw their beauty and happiness. But, didn't I notice their old clothes? Or did I just block these thoughts when I looked back to them?

Agee says that he is only human, just as those in Alabama and every corner of the world. People are just not that different. But meanwhile, there is no way for a person to know everything about another person. What Agee can decode is merely a fraction of a person's meaning of being, meaning of existence.

"His true meaning is much larger," as Agee says. We all exist in this world. Interestingly, in the part one of *The Country Letter*, Agee asks another question — "Do we really exist at all?"

My memory of reading *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* suddenly comes back to me. Milan Kundera likens our life to rehearsal. We never know what comes to us next. We are always improvising. Unlike theater, we are always in rehearsal. We never get to perform. Our friends or lovers are no more some strangers who coincidentally come to our side. If that's the case, do we really exist? Are we just some dusts floating in this world?

Agee is an outsider and participant. He lived with this family. He shared this family's happiness and sorrow. He was also the one staying up late and listening to their dream talks. It is hard, for all of us, to do this kind of documentary. Inevitably, we have to get involved to understand our subjects better. We have to get involved to capture the truest moment. But how do we keep our works objective if we are involved? In-depth documentary. We want the depth. We also want the characteristic of documentary. I don't know the answer now. Agee raises many questions. He is not giving an answer in this book. But maybe we all live our life to find certain answers. Maybe the process of finding answers is the life itself.

"I feel that if I can by utter quietness succeed in not disturbing this silence, in not so much as touching this plain of water, I can tell you anything within realm of God, whatsoever it may be, that I wish to tell you, and that what so ever it may be, you will not be able to help but understand it"

Chapter 2 Documenting as A Documentarian

Around this time last year, I took a collaboration class on documentary. It was a collaboration between two professors, a photographer and a poet. We were paired up in groups. Each group needs to do a documentary project on Renovo, a small town in Pennsylvania. One person takes photographs and the other one writes poetry. It was in that class that I met some active poets and decided to take on this thesis project on poetry.

I started researching, filming and collecting materials in September 2016. At that point, I didn't know what this film was about, which is the phase that maybe every documentarian goes through. I knew I wanted to do something on poetry. I hung out with people who are active in poetry club WORDS and all kinds of open mic in State College, people who writes on a daily basis, people who identify them as poet and people who don't, etc. We became friends and I got to know their lives, experiences, and struggles. I also learned the fact that Penn State English Department got rid of their creative writing program because of funding issue, which seems to be ironic if we think about the flourishing poetry landscape in State College. Through this process, I tried to immerse myself into this community, but meanwhile, remained an outsider. I constantly examine my positionality. As a documentary filmmaker, should I be a flyer on the wall? How can I capture the authenticity?

But the first thing I need to figure out, is the theme of the film. What do I want to document? Whose story do I want to tell? How I am going to do that? For all these questions, I didn't really have an answer. Often, the process of documentary filmmaking is a process of figuring out the storyline. Then I began to think about what I don't want. I am sure that I don't want this film to be an educational documentary that tells everybody what is poetry. I don't want to define anything. I don't want to just touch on the subject. I want something more personal, something deeper. I began narrowing down my interviewees to two poets, Jocelyn and Jane. Later on, I decided to follow another poet Abby, who is writing poems about abortion, and John, who brings the installation project poetry phone booth to State College.

Gradually, I get to learn about their poetry and how they express themselves through it. Not only do I learn more about them, I also learn more about me. One thing I realize is that I care about them. They are not just some random people that I can use for my film. They are my friends. We had many honest and memorable conversations. We shared thoughts that we won't share with most of people in our lives. If I am only a flyer on that wall, how can I obtain intimacy and honesty in my interview? Now that I am not just an observer, how should I keep my objectivity? How should I tell this story? I realize that I cannot tell a story that I don't care about. I have no intention to teach anybody anything or convey any kind of idea. I just want to invite the audience to this short trip to one person's heart. Here is this person. She is neither perfect nor good for nothing. She is just who she is.

I also started watching many short documentaries on Vimeo. I realize it is not easy to tell a good story, and it is even harder to keep audiences' attention. Short documentaries are usually between five to ten minutes. If it is over ten minutes, I don't really want to watch that. How can I tell a story in such short time? I realize that there is no way I can put so many poets in this one short film. Their stories are all worth being told, and being told well. In the post-production period, I decided to tell only Jocelyn's story in this film. I will continue working on the rest of it and hopefully it can turn into a series one day.

May She Be Granted Beauty And Yet Not
(“To the Lost, the Damned, the Mad, and the Ones in Love”)

Production Notebook

Scarlett Li

Spring 2017

PITCH

To The Lost is a documentary about poet Jocelyn. She reveals her value, belief, personal relationships, and inner struggles in her poetry. Her poetry, in return, speaks for her in a voice that she could not attain in real life. Through the lens of Jocelyn's life, this documentary looks at the intimacy and estrangement between a poet and her poems. Meanwhile, through her poetry, this documentary explores her identity and value as a human.

TREATMENT

Title:

“To the Lost, the Damned, the Mad, and the Ones in Love”

Director:

Scarlett Li, studying Film and Integrative Arts at Penn State University, is a visual storyteller. Her previous works include an experimental film *Parsley Girl*, a short documentary *The Days*, and a short film *Meteor Shower*.

Logline:

To the Lost, the Damned, the Mad, and the Ones in Love is a documentary following a poet Jocelyn and about how she reveals her value, belief, personal relationships, and inner struggles in her poetry. Her poetry, in return, speaks for her in a voice that she could not attain in real life.

Working Hypothesis:

Although the beauty of poetry has fascinated people for centuries, its recognition has dropped nationally. But there are still people believing in poetry. Poetry is never the answer, but questions one after another.

Theme:

“We may feel bitterly how little our poems can do in the face of seemingly out-of-control technological power and seemingly limitless corporate greed, yet it has always been true that poetry can break isolation, show us to ourselves when we are outlawed or made invisible, remind us of beauty where no beauty seems possible, remind us of kinship where all is represented as separation.”

---- Adrienne Rich (1929-2012)

T. S. Eliot said, “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion.” Through the lens of Jocelyn’s life, this documentary looks at the intimacy and estrangement between a poet and her poems. Meanwhile, through her poetry, this documentary explores her identity and value as a human.

Point of View:

Jocelyn is the storytellers in this documentary. She tells the story about herself. The juxtaposition of her stories will reveal the individuality of poetry but also the connection and empathy that poetry brings.

Structure:

The documentary will start with Jocelyn's voiceover. Her spoken words performance will be used too. In the rhythm and rhyme, the audience is drawn to the beauty of poetry. This also sets up the tone that the film is about poetry and poets. The rest of film jumps back and forth between poet's life and her poems. This film doesn't follow a chronological order and will not have a three-act structure. The structure of the film will be rather loose, like a poem, leaving the audience to gather information and interpret it themselves.

Style:

There will not be any talking head interview. The story unfolds with the voice of poet. The audience follow the poet and learn about her inner world. Natural b-roll and observational footage will be used to echo her poems.

In the future, this work might develop into a series. The series consists of "chapters". Different chapters feature different poets and have different theme.

Format: Length and shooting format, codec, frame rate, etc.

10-15 minutes

Apple Pro Res 422

24 fps

Canon 6D or Canon C100 will be used for this project to keep consistent image quality.

Audio: Shotgun mic, H1 Zoom Recorder, Lav mic

Timetable:

Pre-production: September - December

- Collecting archival material

Production: September - March

- Conducting interviews
- Collecting b-roll

Post-production: February - April

- Editing
- Finding music
- Reshoots

Budget:

- Travel & Lodging Expenses (to document subjects at poetry festivals, this may include trips to New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburg) --- \$600
- Food (when conducting interview) --- \$100

VISUAL REFERENCES

Cutie and the Boxer (2013)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YVezjywsJU>

- Shallow DOF
- Handheld Camera Movement
- Daily Observational Footage



The Great Beauty (2013)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kaZRwE07P-o>

- Slow Motion
- People and Surrounding
- Medium - Wide shot



EQUIPMENT

Production

Camera:

Canon C 100

Panasonic DVX 200

Canon 6D

Mic:

Shotgun Mic

Wireless Mic

Zoom H1 Handy Recorder

Post-Production

Adobe Premier

Logic Pro

LOCATIONS

Mainly - State College area

B-roll - New York, Ithaca, State College

BUDGET

Transportation expenses -- \$250

Food expenses -- \$200

Music -- \$100

KEY CREW

Scarlett Li

FULL PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

Sept 2016

- Researching on the subject
- Looking for potential interviewees
- Attending and filming poetry slams

Oct - December 2016

- Interviewing and filming Jocelyn
- Filming Jane

Jan - March 2017

- Transcribing materials
- Interviewing and filming Jane
- Looking for other potential interviewees

March - April 2017

- Interviewing and filming Abby (Poetry Workshop at nursing home)
- Interviewing and filming John Zigler (Poetry phone booth Project)
- Transcribing materials
- Editing

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ACADEMIC VITA

Academic Vita of Scarlett Sijia Li

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Education: Pennsylvania State University

Major(s) and Minor(s): Film & Video, Integrative Arts (majors);
Geography, Music Technology (minors)

Honors: Film & Video

Thesis Title: To the Lost, the Damned, the Mad, and the Ones in Love

Thesis Supervisor: Richard Sherman

Work Experience

Date Spring 2015

Title Creative Services Intern

Description Assisted producers in setting up equipment and helped with phone and social media in *After Abbey*, a post-*Downton Abbey* call-in talk show.

Institution/Company (including location) WPSU/PBS (State College, PA)

Supervisor's Name Kevin Conaway

Date Summer 2015

Title Malini Global Fellow

Description Served as photographer and videographer during the trip, edited photos and videos, and created infographics and collage for marketing use

Institution/Company (including location) Malini Foundation (Sri Lanka)

Supervisor's Name Valerie Handunge

Grants Received

The Carmen Finestra Senior Film Endowment Fund for the 2015-16 academic year

Community Service Involvement: Alternative Spring Break

International Education (including service-learning abroad):

Malini Global Fellow (Sri Lanka, May – July 2015)

Language Proficiency:

English, Chinese