Honeyland - Truth or Fable?: neo-realism, direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*

Bruce Eadie

Honeyland is a difficult film to categorise. Many see it as an ecological fable, with traditional, less destructive ways of treating the natural world being obliterated by destructive, market-driven new ways. The moral: we must change or destroy nature (and ultimately, the logic runs, ourselves). Whether we see the film as hopeful ("hope" being the theme of this year's festival) depends perhaps on whether we focus on the destruction or on the relationship between Hatidže Muratova the beekeeper and one of the boys who is her new neighbour. This boy, at least, wants to learn the old ways and so he might represent hope for the future in a younger generation.

The film is difficult to categorise, as fables and moral tales are conventionally fictional. Aesop was probably not intending his tales to be read as true-life stories. There is a suspicion that the narrative arc of the film is too perfect for a documentary. Like a feature film, the participants never look at the camera because the genre requires us to believe the camera doesn't exist. In almost every scene (bar at the very end) Hatidže wears the same clothes: she has evidently been asked to do so for continuity editing, so scenes shot at different times over the three-year shooting period can be edited into sequences that apparently unfold in a continuous and contiguous present.

The confusion about what we are watching – documentary or fiction – was replicated in the nominations the film received for the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020, where it was up for both Best International Feature (a fictional category) and Best Documentary Feature. You may say this doesn't matter. For many decades, there has been much blurring of genre categories perhaps especially in print: from Truman Capote's 1965 reportage-documentary-novel *In Cold Blood* to autobiography's now regular flirtation with fiction beginning in France in 1989 with the publication of Serge Doubrovsky's so-called 'autofiction', *Le livre brisé*. For Doubrovsky, his fictions are not fictional fictions but 'fiction[s] of strictly real events or facts'; fictions that are a route to the 'truth' not to its downfall.[1] Is this what we are dealing with here?

At this point, I should declare my hand. I am amongst a minority of viewers who, although recognising the beauty and the lyricism of *Honeyland*, felt uncomfortably stranded somewhere between fiction and non-fiction. For co-director Tamara Kotevska, this blurring of boundaries, far from being a problem is the aim: 'We try to follow one very simple rule of filmmaking: documentaries should look like fiction and fiction should look like documentaries'[2] and 'the line between documentary and fiction should disappear, a good story is a good story.'[3] But for me, like Richard Brody of *The New Yorker* magazine, the loss of this line made the film 'in equal measure gripping and frustrating, a work of nonfiction in which the elision of many factual elements, in the interest of compact dramaturgy, makes an extraordinary true story feel fabricated.'[4]

Other viewers – several posting on the Amazon Prime Video bulletin board – assumed the film was fictional, praising the use of non-professional 'actors' in the leading roles. If the film is fictional, it has much in common with Italian neorealist cinema of the immediate post-World War Two years: it explores the conditions of the poor; its characters exist within a simple social order where survival is the primary objective; the performances are mostly constructed from scenes of people performing mundane and quotidian activities; the characters are devoid of self-consciousness; amateur actors are in the leading roles with many of those roles being taken by children.[5] The archetype here is perhaps Vittorio De Sica's 1948 film *The Bicycle Thieves*. Or, to take a more recent example for comparison, if the film is fictional it has elements in common with many of Ken Loach's movies: the use of non-professional actors in narratives about the struggles of "ordinary" people.

But does this fiction / non-fiction divide matter? Are Brody and I just antiquated old fusspots? If *Honeyland* bears comparison to the classics of Italian neorealist cinema and the films of Ken Loach, then what's the problem?

For me, it is a question of the meanings one gleans from the film and the questions one can ask of the film. We, as viewers, respond to and are affected by fiction and non-fiction in distinct ways. Vivian Sobchack, the academic film theorist who was central to the revival of phenomenological approaches to film (particularly documentary film) in the 1990s, is eloquent on this point.

Sobchack makes distinctions between different genres of film on the basis of their *ontological* (she uses the term 'existential') status for the viewer as intentional objects. She divides film into three broad categories: the fiction film, the documentary and the *film-souvenir* or home movie. All screen objects in all these categories of film are equally physically absent and only have presence as images and recorded sound but 'this fundamental absence characteristic of all cinematic representation is always *modified* by our personal and cultural knowledge of an object's existential position as it relates to our own'.[6] The fiction film exists only on the screen and we glean our meanings from the relation between objects on the screen. As Sobchack puts it, the horizon of our attention 'is nearly isomorphic with the screen'.[7] But in our experience of documentary, and more so of the *film-souvenir*, we look both *at* the screen and *through* the screen; we are dependent upon the screen for knowledge but are 'also aware of an excess of existence not contained by it'.[8] Sobchack illustrates this difference with a description of the moment when we are watching a character in a fictional film walking through a crowded city and suddenly wonder if the people on the street know they are in a movie. In this *moment of wondering*, the viewer has switched from looking at the fiction *on* the screen to perceiving the images as documentary in nature and so looking *through* the screen to another reality behind it.[9] With fiction, the entire universe is contained within the pages of the text or by the edges of the screen. Even if we fantasise about a continuation of the fictional universe beyond the page or screen, our rational heads know it doesn't exist. De Sica's bicycle thief and his son don't have a *rest-of-their-lives* to live after the closing credits. If *Honeyland* is documentary, Hatidže and her bees do.

The nature of the intentional filmic object changes what we ask (and what we can ask) of the film and so changes the meanings that might emerge. And if it matters whether the intentional object is fictional or non-fictional, how did the non-fictional story of a woman who harvests honey, take on the appearance and the feel of a fable? I put my question to the film's co-directors, Ljubomir Stefanov and Tamara Kotevska, and there were several layers to their answer.[10]

The first concerned the genesis of the project that resulted in *Honeyland*. When the directors set out on the project, they had been commissioned to make a short ecological film about the River Bregalnica in central Macedonia. Soon they met Hatidže Muratova, Europe's last wild beekeeper, and decided to follow Hatidže on her daily round to highlight an ancient and dying practice that impacted lightly on the environment. But six months into the project, with the arrival of Hussein Sam and family in Hatidže's village, the story expanded again into one of social conflict and the clash of different approaches to life and nature. A short, elegiac, picture-driven and largely silent film about the environment and then bee keeping was ballooning into something much bigger.

For this new film, the directors would need to make several filming trips to Bekirlija, Hatidže's village, in order to follow the emerging story but the village's relative remoteness and lack of facilities (and of course limits imposed by the budget) meant the trips would be intermittent with gaps of time between them. This had consequences for the feel of the finished and edited film. The scene of the Sam family arriving is actually a recreation of their arrival. The film crew were not present when the Sams pitched up. When the crew did return and it became clear that these new arrivals had fundamentally changed the nature of the story, the question was how to tell – to show – the story of the arrival. Feature film narratives are picture driven and from the inception of the project the directors had taken an aesthetic decision that their film, like a feature, should be visually sumptuous and celebrate the tough beauty of the deep North Macedonian countryside. If this look was to be sustained, the Sams' arrival couldn't be revealed in interview or voice-over as is common in documentary. As luck would have it, the Sam's stay in Bekirlija was of necessity seasonal. In the autumn, the Sams went in search of winter pasture for their cattle, returning to Bekirlija the following spring. It is this "second" arrival in the second spring of filming, that we see on our screens. Recreated scenes told in pictures, like this one, are perfectly plotted; documentary is usually messier than this. This lack of messiness – this lack of amateurishness if you like – compounds the feeling that the intentional object is fictional. Another example is the documenting of the breakdown in relations between Hatidže and Hussein Sam. The tensions must already have been apparent when the crew arrived in Bekirlija following the Sams' arrival but the exigencies of a picture-driven narrative require us to see the breakdown unfolding in the "now" of the filming present. This would have necessitated a certain amount of reconstruction involving, I would imagine, the careful pairing of unrelated action and reaction shots to tell a story in pictures. It is these shooting and editing decisions, I think, that create the sense of unease felt by viewers such as myself and Richard Brody.

A second major problem the directors faced was linguistic. Hatidže, her mother Nazife and the Sam family all speak an obscure and rapidly disappearing Turkish dialect. They are some of the last remaining representatives of a much-diminished population of ethnic Turks living in the Republic of North Macedonia; the remnants of a large Ottoman Turkish presence greatly reduced over the last hundred years or so by forced and voluntary migrations. But neither Kotevska nor Stefanov speak or understand this dialect despite both of them being impressively multi-lingual. When it came to the edit, it was apparent that the cost of commissioning a translated transcript of all the spoken words in the film was prohibitive. The directors made an extraordinary decision to edit the film by tuning into the emotions, the affect and the body language of the protagonists as revealed in the "picture-track" of the rushes and to sideline the soundtrack with the spoken words. Translations and transcripts were only produced late on in the editing process when the raw material had been substantially pared down.

This decision, I think, in tandem with the (related) aesthetic decision to have a picture-driven narrative, explains why this documentary looks and feels like a feature film. The framing and shot choices in features often seek to capture and convey the emotional, psychological or affective state of an actor playing a part. By way of contrast, documentaries are frequently argument driven or chronology driven. That said, much of what is most telling in great documentaries comes from the viewer's emotional and affective engagement with the perceived emotional and affective state of the protagonists: their body language and facial expressions, their physical "tells", ticks, hesitations, rigidities and silences. There are many documentaries I could point to here but I will just mention *Shoah* as a towering example.[11] But to put emotion, affect and body language in the driver's seat in the edit suite – to let the emotional, affective and visual dictate how the film is constructed – is a radical move and opens up some fascinating possibilities for other documentary makers.

Perhaps there is a parallel here with clinical psychoanalysis. Ever since Bertha Pappenheim's (Anna O's) famous comment to Josef Breuer, psychoanalysis has been described as 'the talking cure'.[12] Its medium is words; words which reveal unconscious processes. Of course, over the years many practising analysts have looked beyond or behind the words to bodily and affective clues to underlying unconscious processes and states, but this aspect of the analyst's work has been under-theorised in much psychoanalytic literature. The exception is the theoretical output of a number of *post-* or *non-*Lacanian French analysts writing over the last forty years or so (and still writing).[13] As one of these theorists, Joyce McDougall, put it: '[t]he body speaks no known language, yet it serves, time and again, as a framework for communicating the psychic scenes of the internal theatre'.[14] For McDougall, any psychoanalyst worth his or her salt, must be attentive to these bodily clues. This array of largely visual clues sits alongside the analysand's words and together form the raw material the analyst works with. Analysts must be aware, André Green tells us, of a disparate array of clues, many non-linguistic, including 'thing-representation, word-representation, affect, corporal states, acts, and so forth'.[15]

Perhaps I am pushing the parallel too far but I think there are interesting possibilities for documentary-makers to follow McDougall and Green and the directors of *Honeyland* and to edit/analyse with the affect, with the visual, with the bodily tells and clues, alongside the words. One documentary that may already have achieved this, is Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*,[16] made, it should be said, by a director highly versed in psychoanalytic thinking and categories. It was praised by academic film theorist, Janet Walker, as a film where 'Body language, gestures, vocal inflection, and the "microphysiognomy" of the face are all crucial.'[17]

In *Honeyland* we have a documentary that looks and feels like a feature film; an outcome that was both intentional (the directors made an aesthetic choice) and structural or contingent as the difficulties presented by the remoteness of the village and the obscurity of the protagonists' dialect pushed the directors to reconstruct certain events for the camera and to assemble the film relying on the eye more than the ear. This notwithstanding, *Honeyland* is a documentary. You don't have to spend long in conversation with Tamara Kotevska to be convinced of her passion for what is sometimes called "the documentary project". A belief that it is the ethical duty of documentary-makers to tell the story without twisting, altering or embellishing the facts: to tell it how it is. As Kotevska insists, 'Nothing in the film is fictionalised.'[18]

But if the correct category for *Honeyland* at the 92nd Academy Awards was Best Documentary Feature and not Best International Feature, what sort of documentary is it? The film perhaps bears closest comparison to the *direct cinema* tradition of documentary-making; the style that emerged in the USA and Canada in the late 1950s and early 1960s and remains a model for many documentarians today. Direct cinema is observational. It is fly-on-the-wall. What the viewer sees on screen, is presented as if the film crew and camera were not present. If the viewer does decide to look (to think) through or behind the screen and consider the manner in which the film must have been created (which they are not invited to do), they are encouraged to think that the camera captured a reality *out there* without the camera apparently interfering with that reality or affecting it. The camera is a transparent window on the world; a world which carries on its business exactly as it would have done had the camera not been there. It is this direct-cinema approach that evokes, at least in my mind, the connection between *Honeyland* and Italian neo-realist cinema both in its subject matter, its careful plotting and in the transparency of the camera. De Sica and Rossellini, like Kotevska and Stefanov, don't ask their audience to ponder how their films were staged and shot.

But if you dig behind the screen and question how the documentary was made, it is apparent that direct cinema is a style of documentary-making in which protagonists are often asked to *act-out* or *enact* their ordinary lives for the camera. What the viewer is presented with are protagonists *playing* or *acting* themselves in a reconstruction of their ordinary lives. One of the great, iconic documentaries of direct cinema, the Maysles brothers' *Salesman,*[19] is in essence a dramatic reconstruction by a salesman of his own life in which the documentary director has asked the salesman to play himself in the style of an observational documentary. Just because the audience does not see the camera, does not mean the protagonists do not see it or are not profoundly affected and influenced by it. Direct cinema is no more *direct* than any other form of documentary. It is simply a form that does not uncover its own artificiality.

At the opposite pole to direct cinema is *cinéma vérité,* a style of documentary-making that also emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but this time in France.[20] Of the many contrasts between direct cinema and *cinéma vérité,* perhaps the most profound is the Brechtian or reflexive nature of *vérité* filmmaking. In documenting a subject, *vérité* unmasks the mechanics of the filmmaking process and the camera is acknowledged as actively creating what it then records. In *vérité* the viewer sees the film crew, sees the director, sees the camera; the viewer hears the questions that are put to protagonists; the viewer is ushered into the reality of the filmmaking process and is invited to make judgements about it.

But *vérité* doesn't merely acknowledge its own artificiality and constructedness, it takes the unavoidable fact of the intrusion of the camera into the world it is documenting and pursues it as a positive virtue. As Jean Rouch, the great pioneer of *cinéma vérité,* said:

> Yes, the camera deforms, but not from the moment that it becomes an accomplice. At that point it has the possibility of doing something I couldn't do if the camera wasn't

> there: it becomes a kind of psychoanalytic stimulant which lets people do things they wouldn't otherwise do.[21]

Direct cinema claims to record a reality out there that unfolds before the camera, whilst *cinéma vérité* acknowledges that it creates that reality in the artificial here and now of the moment of filming. It is a phenomenological approach to filmmaking not unlike the analytic session. Yes, both refer to a reality out there, to everyday life, to a personal history, but what is actually created is something new that emerges in the here and now of the filming or analytic moment.

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Honeyland is a beautifully-made, beautifully-shot documentary that has deservedly won many prestigious awards and received almost universal praise from those who have seen it. What I have tried to do in this paper, is to explore my unease about some of that perfection. In its looking and feeling like a fictional feature, I felt unsure as to whether I was watching an ecological fable or a slice of reality. It provoked in me a number of questions about what we as viewers are not seeing and about the constructedness of the film. In the end, it perhaps comes down to personal preferences. As a documentary-maker, I feel the viewer should be invited into the reality of the documentary-making process and that there is a line between documentary and fiction, although I acknowledge that drawing that line is not nearly as simple and straightforward as it might sound.

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[1] Quoted in: Catherine Cusset. 2012. *The Limits of Autofiction*. Conference paper (delivered at New York University conference on autofiction, April 2012). Available at: http://www.catherinecusset.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/THE-LIMITS-OF-AUTOFICTION.pdf. [Accessed 20 July 2017].
[2] From an interview with Tamara Kotevska in: Sharareh Drury (and Tyler Coates). 2019. "Oscars: How 'Honeyland' and 'For Santa' Portray Battles on Different Fronts." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 27 December. Available at: https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/oscars-how-honeyland-sama-portray-battles-fronts-1263514/. [Accessed 20 October 2022].
[3] From an interview with Tamara Kotevska in: Vittoria Scarpa. 2019. "Ljubo Stefanov, Tamara Kotevska – Directors of Honeyland." *Cineuropa*, December. Available at: https://cineuropa.org/en/interview/372054/ . [Accessed 20 October 2022].

[4] Richard Brody. 2019. "Honeyland Reviewed: A Gripping, Frustrating Documentary About a Beekeeper's Fragile Isolation." *The New Yorker (Magazine)*, (Front Row column), 1 August. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/honeyland-reviewed-a-gripping-frustrating-documentary-about-a-beekeepers-fragile-isolation. [Accessed 16 October 2022].

[5] I have largely lifted this admirably concise list of characteristics from the Wikipedia article on "Italian neorealism." Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_neorealism. [Accessed 6 October 2022].

[6] Vivian Sobchack. "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience." In *Collecting Visible Evidence*, edited by Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, 241-54. Visible Evidence, v.6. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, p. 242 (Sobchack's italics).

[7] Ibid, p. 245.

[8] Ibid, p. 246.

[9] Ibid, p. 246.

[10] Private Zoom conversation between the author and the two directors of *Honeyland* on 12 October 2022.

[11] Claude Lanzmann. 1985. *Shoah*. France: Les Films Aleph; Why Not Productions. [DVD: 2007. UK: Eureka! (The Masters of Cinema series)].

[12] Josef Breuer, and Sigmund Freud. 1955 [1893-1895]. "Studies on Hysteria." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited and translated James Strachey *et al*., 24 volumes. London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, volume 3, p. 30.

[13] A heterogenous collection of analyst-theorists (not necessarily French nationals) working in France or influenced by ideas emerging from "French" psychoanalytic institutions. For the best introduction to these theorists, see the edited volume: Dana Birksted-Breen, Sara Flanders, and Alain Gibeault, eds. 2010. *Reading French Psychoanalysis*. London; New York, NY: Routledge.

[14] Joyce McDougall. 1986. *Theatres of the Mind: Illusion and Truth on the Psychoanalytical Stage*. London: Free Association Books, p. 53.

[15] An array of clues that Green describes as 'heterogeneity of the signifier'. Quotation from an interview with Green in: Gregorio Kohon, and Rosine Jozef Perelberg. 2017. *The Greening of Psychoanalysis: André Green's New Paradigm in Contemporary Theory and Practice*. London: Karnac Books, p. 119.

[16] Joshua Oppenheimer. 2012. *The Act of Killing*. UK; Denmark; Norway: Final Cut for Real. [DVD: 2013. UK: Dogwoof].

[17] Janet Walker. 2013. "Referred Pain." *Film Quarterly* 67 (2): 14-20, p. 14.

[18] The paraphrase and quotation are from the words of Tamara Kotevska, spoken in the course of a Zoom conversation between the author and the two directors of *Honeyland* on 12 October 2022.

[19] Albert Maysles, David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin (1968). *Salesman*. US: Maysles Films Inc.

[20] Here, I must acknowledge that in most of the film literature, direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* are paired together as twins: *vérité* is the French take on direct cinema; direct cinema is the North American take on *vérité*. As will be clear from what follows, I fundamentally disagree with this view.

[21] Jean Rouch quoted in: Michael Renov. 2004. *The Subject of Documentary*. Visible Evidence, v. 16. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, p. 197.