

THE THOUGHT AND ACTION OF *THE FIRST SAIL*: NOTES ON EDITING
DOCUMENTARY

By

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To my Bike

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This thesis is a practice in applying the critical theories of documentary film to the processes and practices of actual production. This paper begins with a brief summary of the conditions leading up to the production of *The First Sail* and how the author came to find himself as the project's video editor. This role in the film's production spawned this current project: one that seeks to explicate the process of editing in light of relevant scholarly criticism on documentary film. Chapter 2 explores key issues of representation as discussed by documentary authorities Bill Nichols, Michael Renov, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Then, specific scenes and four versions of the film's introduction are analyzed and critiqued in light of the relevant literature. Finally, Chapter 4 revisits the editing decisions discussed in light of issues related to audience appeal and our own subject position as academic filmmakers.

CHAPTER 1 DESCRIPTIONS

In the summer of 2010, I fell upon an exciting opportunity to edit a new documentary film produced by Dr. Dragan Kujundzic at the University of Florida. At the time I was emerging from the first year of an M.A. program in Film and Media Studies and my production experience was, at best, preliminary. I had completed one seminar in video production the previous semester in which I produced a handful of experimental and documentary shorts that incorporated both original and found footage. In my mind, these first pieces reflect an intellectual and creative passion for capturing and composing video images and a semi-firm grasp of the editing technology¹. I discovered, in making these first video projects, something about the act of assembling images into sequences and the building up of these sequences into complete, whole entities excited me. Fortunately, around this same time, Dr. Kujundzic approached me with over twenty hours of raw footage and the enthusiastic intent to create a documentary focusing on distinguished American literary critic, J. Hillis Miller. I ardently leaped at this opportunity to pursue my escalating interests in video production and apply my critical and theoretical dispositions as a film student to the processes of creation.

The project came into being over the next several months. It began first with long afternoon telephone conversations wherein Dr. Kujundzic primed me on the work completed in the early summer. He and cameraman Georg Koszulinski, an accomplished documentarian and experimental filmmaker in his own right, had shot much of the principal footage in Deer Isle, Maine during the first week of June 2010. It

¹ All the videos completed in this seminar were shot in DV standard-definition and logged, captured, and edited using Final Cut Pro software on Apple G5 computers. I used this same technical scheme when working on the *The First Sail*.

was during this time that Dr. Kujundzic came upon the visual motif of sailing and a potential title for the film: *The First Sail*. He conveyed strong ambition that immediately caught my attention. This project was to include a feature-length documentary, a written transcript of the interviews with Miller, and an accompanying supplementary film that would include all the hours of interview footage taken in Maine. Working to create the documentary feature was assigned as my most immediate and primary concern and will be the principal focus of this thesis, one that hopes to analyze and illuminate the editing process in light of the critical theories of documentary produced by scholars and filmmakers.

My first task had obvious practical importance: to watch the Maine footage in its entirety, log and capture the images onto an external hard drive, and transfer the digital video onto DVD for review and transcription purposes. As I began to acquaint myself with the tapes (and, subsequently, with Dr. Kujundzic, Georg, Miller, and the space surrounding these individuals in the video frame) it dawned on me that I was transforming into a different kind of viewer, one included and engaged in the production process as opposed to viewing and evaluating the final product. As a student of film, I am generally almost exclusively exposed to this latter perspective and this new mode of viewing was something altogether different from digesting and configuring my own work. The cognitive sensation is difficult to describe but it was a mixture of confrontation and reticence: confronted by the sheer wealth of material that, somehow, needed to be sculpted into a recognizable shape and reserved about making the decisions involved in this process. These feelings instilled in me a sense of responsibility and duty to the material that has led me to take up this investigation to critically explore the varied and

difficult choices of editing from first-hand, personal experience. As I have learned from working on this project, the end result does not have a fixed, foreseeable teleology but, rather, non-linearly unfolds through complex ethical, aesthetic, and practical contexts.

This paper will first move through a discussion of some of the key theoretical issues related to documentary and representation. We can productively think of these issues as the points of departure from which we will explore more specific editing choices and sequences from *The First Sail*. This exploration will entail a close reading of specific scenes and their respective “alternate” versions. My hope is that this methodology will enable this paper to comprehensively explicate the editing decisions made in *The First Sail* and contribute to the ongoing dialogue between critical discourse and creative output

CHAPTER 2 CONSIDERATIONS, OR THOUGHT

The critical questions addressed to the documentary or ethnographic film—Why are ethical issues central to documentary filmmaking? How do documentaries differ from other types of film? What types of documentary are there? How have documentaries addressed social and political issues?²—are of no small scope and without definite, concrete answers. Questions related to the power, capacity, and rhetoric of the photographic image and its position in film theory are nexus points wherein the documentary film itself intervenes and illuminates theoretical discourse. That is to say, how documentaries function becomes of equal or perhaps greater significance than the substance of their content or argument. An examination of *how* a particular film's thesis materializes on screen will ultimately enrich our understanding of the medium's power and potential. The inevitable entanglement of documentary's form and content (and context) calls us, filmmakers and scholars, to explore the historical, aesthetic, and political implications of non-fiction film. In *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols astutely identifies this critical and creative drive, emphasizing how the mechanisms and devices of documentary play into larger epistemological conceptions of knowledge about the world.

The status of documentary as *discourse about* the world draws less widespread attention. Documentaries offer pleasure and appeal while their own structure remains virtually invisible, their own rhetorical strategies and stylistic choices largely unnoticed. "A good documentary stimulates discussion about its subject, not itself." This serves as many a documentarist's motto, but it neglects to indicate how crucial rhetoric and form are to the realization of this goal. Despite such a motto, documentary films raise a rich array of historiographic, legal, philosophic, ethical, political, and aesthetic issues. ("Preface" x)

² These questions structure the chapters in Bill Nichols' foundational text, *Introduction to Documentary*.

For the purposes of this study, these “issues” of documentary form and strategy raised by Nichols will be the criteria that constitute “good” and “bad” editing decisions. This distinction is not meant to be reductive in terms of evaluation but merely a gauge by which I will measure the value and effectiveness of certain editing choices. Naturally, more “practical” considerations such as continuity are also taken into regard and weigh heavily into these decisions (The notion of continuity in documentary is described by Nichols as adhering to “movements of logic” and “relayed through an argument” as opposed to the notion of spatial and temporal continuity characteristic of narrative/fiction films) (*Representing Reality* 20). These movements of logic in documentary continuity are also tied to a set of ideological implications that favor linear, rational ways of thinking and modes of presentation. Such modes contribute to the transparency or invisibility of documentary structure and strategy in same way that classic fiction film commonly follows natural laws of space and time to “make a plausible world seem real” and hide its “movie-ness” (*Representing Reality* 165). When this transparency is broken, usually by an editing style that attempts to reveal cinematic artifice or by Brechtian devices of alienation, we, the critical audience, gain access and insight into the inner workings of documentary and fiction film discourse, respectively. *The First Sail*, I believe, should continue the work of so many other films that directly addresses the interaction between form and content and the ideological issues bound to the aesthetic and technical decisions of motion picture production.

Part of being an effective editor necessarily involves striking a balance between theoretical ideals, functional and coherent structures of time, and the “watchability” factor. One cannot hope to make a perfectly ethical or politically conscientious film

without stagnating in a minefield of theoretical idealism. By the same token, it seems counterproductive to be so concerned with *how* a film makes an argument or recounts a historical event that nothing related to the subject matter is actually said.³ The same can be said for the opposite consideration: a documentary that displays little or no regard for its own conditions of production seems naïve and lacks an important ethical consciousness. In the end, I believe, we, the makers of *The First Sail*, want to create a piece that teaches and entices, while simultaneously reflecting on itself in a productive and progressive manner.

Similarly, in considering the *aims* of the documentary film, it is helpful to establish categories and distinctions that can be effectively invoked for the sake of organized and thoughtful discussion. Both Nichols and Michael Renov provide categorizations with respect to the differing “modes” and “tendencies” of documentary. Nichols identifies the modes of documentary as Expository, Observational, Interactive, and Reflexive while Renov places the four tendencies of documentary in their infinitive verb forms: to record, reveal, or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze or interrogate, and to express (*Representing Reality* 32; Renov 21). By no means are these two sets of categories bound to each other nor are they “pure,” discrete units. Renov succinctly describes these divisions as “capable of mobilizing explanatory power—at the level of metacriticism . . . [but] no ontological purity is at stake” (Renov 29). Nichols places his four modes in a more specifically historical context. He explains:

³ The exception to this would be if the subject of a film were the production of the piece itself or the act(s) of representation, or production, more generally. These films occupy the realm of “deconstructive reflexivity” described by Nichols in *Representing Reality* (72). Many examples of this kind of documentary exist, such as Trinh Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* (1983) and Orson Welles’ *F for Fake* (1973). Both of these pieces meditate on the processes of filmic creation in ways that produce and address productive and meaningful questions concerning authenticity, discursive authority, and ethnographic meaning.

The four modes belong to a dialectic in which new forms arise from the limitations and constraints of previous forms and in which the credibility of the impression of the documentary reality changes historically. New modes convey a fresh, new perspective on reality. Gradually, the conventional nature of this mode of representation becomes increasingly apparent: an awareness of norms and conventions to which a given text adheres begins to frost the window onto reality. (*Representing Reality* 32)

The dialectic described by Nichols does not totally exclude older conventions from impinging upon contemporary discourses and strategies. This is to say, conventions and devices often overlap, even if they are historically “out-dated” by contemporary assessment: “older approaches do not go away; they remain part of a continuing exploration of form in relation to social purpose” (*Representing Reality* 33). This schema offers the critical viewer (or, in this instance, critical participant) an extremely useful vocabulary to analyze the devices deployed in a documentary as relative to the individual aims, practices, historical context, and personal vision of a particular filmmaker. These modes also resist easy and conclusive categorizations that can bind the viewing of a film to certain prescribed notions of “authority” (i.e., each mode carries its own unique strengths and weaknesses, and one mode cannot be said to be holistically “better” than any other). Nichols’ four modes and Renov’s four tendencies represent a critical effort to explicate and explore the prowess of filmic technology, its ability to capture, augment, preserve, or manipulate both contemporary and historical reality.

The question at hand is now: how do these terms and categorizations of documentary serve the purposes of constructing and analyzing *The First Sail*? To address this issue, we must consider the film’s subject, J. Hillis Miller, and what ethical and political issues of representation are at stake.

J. Hillis Miller has become an icon in the world of literary criticism, specifically in the field of deconstructive analysis, over the latter half of the twentieth century and continues to contribute prolifically to the scholarly community. His status in the academic world grants him a certain *a priori* credibility in that his “fame” seems to be justified by his intellectual achievements, scores of publications, and the company he keeps and has kept (most notably, as the interviews reveal, Jacques Derrida). One of *The First Sails*'s major aims is to, I believe, present an image of Miller that most fully represents his status as described above and, furthermore, to let his credibility reveal itself naturally through his own eloquence and experience. This notion of letting one's subject “speak for him/herself” does not guarantee absolute reproduction of the context in which the initial speech act took place nor can the act itself, that of speaking in front of or to a camera, even be considered truly speaking for oneself. The very fact that a camera is present has already skewed notions of “authenticity.” However, the rhetorical devices of documentary film work to establish a kind of *ethos* for any speaking subject. Nichols, in his essay “Getting to Know You . . .”: Knowledge, Power, and the Body,” describes the conditions in which credibility or trust can be generated by images.

The reliance on testimony and commentary by witnesses and experts . . . raises problems of belief or credibility. Our willingness to agree with that which is said relies to a surprisingly large extent on rhetorical suasion and documentary convention. The filmmaker relays his or her tacit confidence in what is said to the viewer. (This is another “default” function in documentary: “Trust those who speak to the camera unless given reason to do otherwise.”) Iconic authentication (filling the background of the shot with evidence of the speaker's status—bookshelves, laboratories, authenticating locations in general) heightens credibility. (178)

Naturally, “iconic authentication” has the potential to be deceptive or misleading and there are many other dimensions of *ethos* beyond professional status, academic merits, or the amount of books one owns. On screen, however, such fragments of a

subject can be positioned and explored in such a way that they transmit information to the audience that, hopefully, elicits feelings of trust. In one way, iconic authentication works on the principle of synecdoche, in which parts of a subject's life and experience are presented to speak for the whole of his or her personage.

With respect to representing the words and experiences of J. Hillis Miller in *The First Sail*, the devices of iconic authentication are clearly desirable and necessary for generating trust and credibility, capturing Miller's vast intellect, and comfortably situating the audience in a position of reception and direct contact (at least as close to direct contact as the spatial and temporal separation of the film projection allows). This also identifies a major point to consider with each editing decision I make, giving me a tangible ethical criterion by which to judge these choices.

Although the notion of establishing ethos provides a productive and practical rubric to follow when making editing decisions, it is not entirely unproblematic. Creating such an image of Miller runs the risk of "mythologizing" him by placing his achievements and accolades in the foreground and not holistically representing him as a living, complex human being. In the final chapter of *Representing Reality*, Nichols persuasively links the use of synecdoche to this process of myth-making or the construction of "mythic icons" (261). He also notes the danger of this process:

---the historical person must suspend his or her historical agency and assume the more static function of a mythic or narrative figure whose full trajectory is known. This is only partially problematic for the deceased historical figure . . . but the living person is susceptible to the adoption of these very myths as aspects of his or her own self-presentation . . . (250)

In order to avoid this kind of reductive representation, one that encloses Miller as a "static function," the editing of the documentary should point to characteristics of the subject beyond the signifiers (synecdoches) of iconic authentication. Furthermore,

these signifiers should not be the primary focus of the film but serve the larger functions of ethical representation, that is, emphasizing Miller's dynamism and "humanity," and producing the favorable relationship with the audience described earlier. This mythic dimension of the subject is one of three "perspectives" on the body suggested by Nichols, a triad where "each [perspective is] representing a different dimension of our conception of self" ("Getting to Know You" 184). "The body of the social actor who is agent and subject of historical actions and events, situations and experiences" and "the body of a narrative character who is the focus of actions and enigmas, helpers and donors all propelling the narrative toward closure" constitute the other two dimensions (Ibid).

For our purposes in making *The First Sail*, the second dimension (body of the social actor) appears to be on the surface of Miller's representation and of the most immediate concern. The majority of the footage offers an exegesis of his agency and subjectification within a historical context, both cataloging his experiences and contributions to the field of literary analysis and providing a second field, a personal history and philosophy, that situates his body in the realm of truly "lived" experience. These aspects of his person, like considerations of his ethos, ought to be balanced and cater to the portrayal of Miller as a living, dynamic subject.

The narrative dimension of his presence in the film, in the traditional, diegetic sense of the term, is more difficult to see (although, at the time of this writing, we are in the early stages of editing and it would be unwise to foreclose on any structural or conceptual dimension). But, from the hours of interview footage I have cataloged, it is apparent that Miller's manner and way of speaking resist being confined to a consistent

narrative pattern or closure. He responds to questions and offers his views on subjects in a very thorough, extended, and often cyclical way, frequently ending in an elliptical nature and giving the audience a great deal more to consider. This is not to say that he does not come to definite or declarative conclusions during the interviews or that his words lack substance but, more directly, that the value and appeal of the footage, in my opinion, is in the intellectual processes we observe him experiencing as opposed to a discrete final product of these processes. Furthermore, the audience shares the intellectual process and is put in a position where the auto-didactic dimension of watching documentary that many viewers have come to expect is subverted by the need to actively participate in and follow Miller's thought process. In this way, a narrative structure grafted onto our footage would do violence to the subject and, most likely, push for an editing style that would cut out much of the labyrinthian richness found in the interviews. A more fitting narrative structure would be extradiegetic and reflexively explore the journey of making the documentary, chronicling the production process and finding narrative closure in the piece itself.

The nature and degree of this dimension of reflexivity is placed in a position of great importance for contemporary scholars of documentary. To what extent a viewer becomes engaged not only with the content of a documentary but with how the information is being presented can be usefully thought of as a spectrum of reflexivity. As suggested before, such reflexive aspects compel a viewer out of his/her passive state of viewing/receiving information and, to use Nichols' terminology, "emphasize epistemological doubt" and seek to "remove the encrustations of habit" with regard to accepting the images in a documentary film as true to life or carrying a specific,

prescribed meaning (*Representing Reality* 61, 67). Furthermore, reflexive strategies perpetuate an ongoing dialogue about the nature of representation itself. The implications of this discussion go beyond mere questions of filmic form or function and addresses issues related to the complex exchange of knowledge between individuals and media. Nichols declares:

Reflexivity and consciousness-raising go hand in hand because it is through an awareness of form and structure and its determining effects that new forms and structures can be brought into being, not only in theory, or aesthetically, but in practice, socially . . . The unquestioned givenness of ideological constraints can be juxtaposed with alternative positions and subjectivities, affinities and relations of production . . . As a political concept, reflexivity grounds itself in the materiality of representation but turns, or returns, the viewer beyond the text, to those material practices that inform the body politic. (*Representing Reality* 67)

As described here, beyond simply revealing the mechanisms of a given film's production, the reflexive mode suggests a clear set of ethical, political, and social ramifications outside a documentary's formal construction. The meditation on the *how* places these ramifications in a discursive field that directly links the generation and proliferation of knowledge (as housed within the documentary film) with the circumstances of production and the conventions of expression. In this sense, the "epistemological doubt" resulting from the reflexive mode represents an important rupture in the historical discourse of documentary, one that reveals a dangerous transparency with regard to modes of representation and a dimension of passivity with regard to the viewer. Our project should challenge the notions of transparency and passivity and address itself in a critical fashion.

In her very difficult but provocative and useful essay, "The Totalizing Quest for Meaning," Trinh T. Minh-ha more aggressively identifies what I have been calling the "passive viewer" as a stronger, collective element characterized by its "resistance to the

reality of film as film” (102). Her essay seems weary of how reflexivity functions in contemporary documentary and ethnographic film, suggesting that the space for substantial commentary offered by the reflexive mode is marginalized or re-appropriated by the forces that seek to maintain transparency of representation, to maintain the sources of power that dictate meaning and keep the viewer from questioning the very notion of stable meaning. She writes:

To deny the reality of film in claiming (to capture) *reality* is to stay “in ideology”—that is, to indulge in the (deliberate or not) confusion of filmic with phenomenal reality. By condemning self-reflexivity as pure formalism instead of challenging its diverse realizations, this ideology can “go on unnoticed,” keeping its operations invisible and serving the goal of universal expansionism. Such aversion for self-reflexivity goes hand in hand with its widespread appropriation as a progressive formalistic device in cinema because both work to reduce its function to a harmlessly decorative one. (101)

This decorative aspect of reflexivity calls us, the filmmakers, to the responsibility of moving beyond simply revealing our own methods and processes and to evaluate how they function within the context of our film’s subject matter and presentation, to simultaneously display J. Hillis Miller as a subject and determine how, and if, we can challenge the technological and ideological machinery of this display.

Trinh locates the value of reflexivity in the very idea that it challenges the transparency of the documentary film, the notion that filmed images carry a certain degree of ontological truth or meaning. Her own ethnographic work, particularly *Reassemblage*, places the documentary or ethnographic image under scrutiny, seeking to exfoliate the baggage of finding meaning and rather explore the nature of representation itself. Trinh follows many of her own guidelines as laid out in her critical writings. She outlines these thus:

as long as a maker abides by a series of “reflexive” techniques in filmmaking that are devised for the purpose of exposing the “context” of production and as long as the required techniques are method(olog)ically carried out, the maker can be assured that “reflexivity” is elevated to that status of scientific rigor. These reflexive techniques would include the insertion of a verbal or visual narrative about the anthropologist [documentarian], the methodology adopted, and the condition of production—in other words, all the conventional means of validating an anthropological text through the disciplinary practice of head and footnoting and the totalistic concept of preproduction presentation. (103-104)

Reassemblage deploys voice-over to “narrate” her own making of the piece and the stipulations and discursive tendencies of the ethnographic film, the effect being a verbal device deconstructing a visual presentation. This film “about” Senegalese women loosens the indexical bonds between the filmed image and reality and looks to unpack the processes of indexicality and the construction of meaning. In this sense, the piece unravels yet solidifies itself:

A work that reflects back on itself offers itself infinitely as nothing else but work . . . *and* void. Its gaze is at once an impulse that causes the work to fall apart (to return to the initial no-work-ness) and an ultimate gift to its constitution; a gift, by which the work is freed from the tyranny of meaning as well as from the omnipresence of a subject of meaning. To let go of the hold at the very moment when it is at its most effective is to allow the work to live . . . (105)

This notion of “letting go” should also be of great consideration to us during production. The editing choices ought to both express awareness of its context but also not restrict and stray from dictating meaning. It is clear that *Ressemblage* and *The First Sail* are two very different projects, but we can heed Trinh’s warnings and take her ideas about reflexivity into our growing list of conceptual and theoretical considerations for production.

Such a list could go on indefinitely and there must be a time during any project that one must stop considering and begin doing. The following section will take particular

scenes from *The First Sail* and provide close-readings in light of the considerations outlined above. I will look at several potential versions of the film's introduction and discuss how the editing choices establish the ethos of Miller and the reflexive dimension of the piece itself. I will also focus on a specific sequence plucked from the film's body and examine how it functions with respect to the film's extradiegetic narrative and the persistent ethos of Miller.

CHAPTER 3 ACTIONS (AND CONSEQUENCES)

This chapter seeks to examine the specific editing decisions made throughout the various stages of post-production. The idea, here, is not only to apply the theoretical principles discussed in Chapter 1 to the editing process but also to explore the variety of trajectories and perspectives available to us in an illuminating and productive manner. I will begin by examining several potential introductions to the film, focusing on how each functions as both an induction to the film itself and to the image of Miller as a subject. I will then take a sequence from the body of the documentary and follow a similar pattern of analysis but with more emphasis on how this particular segment functions as a discrete unit within the larger documentary structure.

For all versions of the introduction I have presented on this paper's supplementary DVD, there are three aspects that remain constant: the sound of the fog-horn and image of the light house on Deer Isle, Miller's voiceover about his affinity for sailing, and the images of Miller sailing from June 4th, 2010. Dr. Kujundzic thought it best to keep these elements in the first moments of the film in order to physically establish ourselves in the space of his encounter with Miller and to conceptually establish the motif of sailing in the film's texture and structure. He also perceived meaning in showing the lighthouse first, both as a marker of the film's location and as a metaphoric signifier of the cinematic apparatus. This metaphoric significance may not immediately be apparent to the viewer, who has no means of gleaning this meaning outside the fact that he or she is viewing a documentary film. Perhaps, though, contrary to the specific meaning Dr. Kujundzic has imbued into the image, the lighthouse stands as an open-ended signifier for Miller himself; it stands as a kind of monument in the physical space of his

surroundings and within the expressive or discursive space of our film. The image of the lighthouse does reoccur in the Extended Introduction. In this sequence, the viewer sees that Miller's doorknocker is shaped like a lighthouse. This echoing of images and the repositioning of it onto Miller's home suggests a set of associations between the image of the lighthouse and Miller's life and work. However, the way the Extended Introduction is currently edited, this connection remains ambiguous.

Introduction #1 begins with a fade-in on a stable image of this lighthouse, we then cut to a handheld shot of a harbor that eventually focuses on three men standing on a floating dock: Miller, his sailing assistant, and Dr. Kujundzic, who enters the frame for only a brief period of time. We are at first kept at a distance from our subject but through the handheld camera and insertion of the filmmaker in these first moments, we are establishing a practice of reflexivity that will re-surface throughout the film (Although, the way this shot is currently edited together, a viewer would not be able to discern Dr. Kujundzic's role in the film's production nor recognize the significance of him in this early shot). The next cut brings the viewer much closer to Miller, as he is preparing to board the dingy which will take him out to his sailboat moored in the harbor. His body is positioned with his back to the camera, suggesting both a withholding of his expression (which we will see much of later in the film) and the inevitable outsider-status of the filmmaker. The camera stays on Miller as he seems to have a difficult time getting into the dingy, showing his age and physical state. When I showed this cut of the introduction to Dr. Kujundzic he expressed unwillingness to include this part of the shot in the final film out of respect and in the interest of "good taste" (In the Extended Introduction I simply cut out the process of Miller boarding the boat for this reason).

This omission unfortunately breaks up the desirable fluidity of the long take, but the final decision will ultimately be out of my hands.

This reality of the director/editor relationship presents an opportunity to critically reflect on the dynamics of this working relationship and to account for the other forces at work in producing this film outside theoretical, aesthetic, and ethical considerations. The relationship between director and editor (which can also be read, in this context, as between professor and graduate student) is bound up in pragmatic issues that potentially have a more powerful influence on creative decisions than the guidelines and postulations discussed in Chapter 1. This other dimension of the production process is of vital importance to this discussion but less easy to pin down in traditional critical discourse. The particular example I discussed in the last paragraph, of whether or not to cut Miller's boarding the dingy, points to Dr. Kujundzic's personal and professional relationship and investment in our subject and his desire to represent him as respectfully as possible, i.e. not highlighting his weakened physical condition. Thinking along the lines of friendship and professional courtesy, this notion is sound and naturally fits with what I perceive to be Dr. Kujundzic's vision for this project. It is in tension, however, with the ethics of representation and underscores that no matter how good of an argument I can produce in favor of keeping the shot for ethical or aesthetic reasons, the fact remains that there are sensible and pragmatic concerns that, more often than not, override these other considerations. The director (professor) wields a certain power of the "final say" over the editor (graduate student). This assessment is not meant to condemn or bemoan the conditions of production but is simply an honest measurement of them. I believe this is a necessary and important part of this thesis because to

discuss any collaborative film project in only formal or theoretical terms would be to deny a very real aspect of the film's production and the structures of power implicit in the project.

Let us now return to the close reading of Introduction #1. We stay with Miller as he is paddled away to his sailboat, the camera walking down the dock in a jerky fashion with the microphone picking up the rumbling sounds of the ocean wind. These stylistic features of Observational documentary filmmaking, the long take and the handheld camera, effectively captures the sense of "being there" while also revealing the camera as a recording device operating in a specific space.

Miller's voiceover on sailing offers a great deal of insight into his personality and "context." Through this voiceover the viewer gains insight into his personal history (the fact that he was married at 21 and made gliders until then), imagination (his "fantasy life" and wanting to be "free of the earth"), and intelligence and eloquence (the fact that he makes a point of clarifying what he means by "flight"). The voiceover also indicates that he is responding to questions asked of him and we briefly hear Dr. Kujundzic's voice clarify his question to Miller. This feature of Interactive documentary will structure the interview footage to come and its inclusion in the first speaking part of the film forecasts this to the viewer.

After Miller's voiceover, he directly addresses the camera from his sailboat, at once maintaining and breaking the distance established by earlier shots of his body and ominously declaring his intent to "sail off into the distance." Such a statement seems to encapsulate the journey taken by the documentary itself, suggesting a metaphorical link between his physical movement across the water and the movement or journey of the

documentary to come. However this is perceived, the remainder of the shot offers a beautiful view of the water and a space to insert titles and credits. The small “imperfections” in this otherwise serene shot (slight jostling of the camera) again calls attention to the impossibilities of transparent representation and our desire to embrace the conditions of production.

Introduction #2 also begins with the sound of a lighthouse foghorn, but the first image is a long zoom-in to the lighthouse as opposed to a stable medium shot, as in Introduction #1. This zoom-in suggests the mechanized perspective of the camera and the prowess of the technology at hand. By presenting this image first, the film addresses its own technically constructed world in a dynamic fashion. Giving the title of the film during this first shot also works to frame the entire project within this notion. The cut to Miller’s back again establishes his body in the context of his environment while also suggesting the same kind of inevitable distance between subject and filmmaker described earlier. Our sense of place or environment is expanded by the next shot, a sweeping pan of the Maine coastline and long shot of seabirds just off shore. The birds provide a convenient visual hinge into the voiceover on flying and sailing while the natural, coastal setting also foregrounds the very grave discussion to come in the film concerning climate change and the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. When we return to Miller he is at a visual distance but heard in voiceover. In this version, I withhold his direct address to the camera in anticipation of using this segment at the film’s end as a kind of ellipsis, an open-ended assertion that will entice the viewer to want more of the subject.

Introduction #3 is the most condensed and economical of the four introductions presented on the DVD. We again locate ourselves with the shot of the lighthouse but then immediately jump to close-ups of seabirds floating in the waves. The editing decision is distinct from the other possible introductions in that it focuses on the minutiae of the land and seascape as opposed to the longer and more sweeping shots we have seen in the other versions. These images also serve to prefigure the flight metaphor used by Miller to describe his love of sailing. This version also more rapidly introduces the sailing motif in an effort to not linger on Miller's body. Dr. Kujundzic had instructed me to be "patient" with my editing decisions in the sense of embracing the long takes characteristic of the other versions and not rushing the material along. This third version is a deliberate deviation from that model and attempts to demonstrate how certain images can be economically assembled to pack in meaning and establish the key motifs of the documentary. I am personally fond of using long takes and keeping with a more observational style of editing in general but I did not want to simply pick one way of editing and simply run with it.

These three potential introductions were made early on in the post-production process and most definitely reflect an uncertainty of style or voice. But, they also offer valuable visual tropes and motifs that we may synthesize and incorporate into a more refined, coherent documentary. The Extended Introduction was assembled after more work had been done, new material discovered, and Dr. Kujundzic and I had discussed his vision a bit further.

The Extended Introduction follows many of the same visual pathways and transitions as the first three introductions. One key difference is the removal of Miller

struggling to board the dingy from the floating dock. As stated earlier, this was in the interest of “good taste,” an ethical consideration that is not without its merits, but I still think that the omission may be counterproductive to our aims of representing Miller in a dynamic and holistic fashion. Removing this portion of the take seems to gloss over the fact of Miller’s physical condition, which is typical of a man his age. To not acknowledge this would be to fall into the trap of “mythologizing” or reducing him to a “static function” as discussed by Nichols. Perhaps the issue of it not being “tasteful” is more related to its placement as one of the first images of Miller an audience sees. In order to address these issues of ethics and representation in *The First Sail*, I would like to see the clip remain how it is in the Extended Introduction but re-presented later in the film with Miller boarding the dingy included. Withholding and then showing the clip would, hopefully, draw a viewer’s attention to the significant effects of editing on their reception of the documentary (on any documentary) and generate a critical consciousness of the cinematic devices at work in both fiction and non-fiction film.

Another new development in the Extended Introduction is the move into the interior and domestic spaces that also give Miller greater context. These spaces are encoded with many of the iconic signifiers discussed by Nichols—shelves upon shelves of books, stacks of publications and manuscripts, notebooks, elegant Eastern wall paintings—all of which span across multiple rooms. These signifiers certainly work to “heighten [the] credibility” of Miller as a speaking subject but also visualize the discursive nature of his scholarly reputation. That is to say, the images of his workspace give life and body to his spoken and written (non-spatial and non-visual)

work in the field of literary criticism. The scores of publications we see on screen concretize his professional life.

Juxtaposing these physical objects is the digital display of Miller's large computer screen that the camera lingers on for quite some time. In this over-the-shoulder shot, the viewer glimpses a strange doubling of Miller's image between his appearance on the screen and his still image on the computer. This image of documentation-of-documentation suggests the paradox of the simultaneously ephemeral yet fixed nature of the photograph, its limited ability to capture reality in a fragmented but rich and expressive manner. This notion is complicated by the re-contextualization of Miller's photograph on the cover of a book written about him, which we see a short time later. This image is perhaps the closest we come to seeing an icon in the traditional sense of the term; coupled with Miller's own personable and humble manner of talking about himself, we begin to see the subject revealing himself in a way that, I believe, entices a viewer to learn more and keep watching. More importantly, this unfolding presents a multifaceted subject who resists being reduced to a scholarly reputation.

A voiceover by Dr. Pamela Gilbert, a professor of English at the University of Florida, emerges eleven minutes into the introduction, offering another means of contextualization to the image and body of Miller. This voiceover was originally an introduction to a lecture given by Miller during an academic conference on the life and work of Derrida and functions in this part of the film as an aural supplement to the images of iconic authentication that have "built up" the subject in the film so far. From the tone and almost colloquial manner of Dr. Gilbert's voice, a viewer can infer that this voiceover is not an authoritative, complete account of Miller but rather an outside

voice/perspective that intervenes into the thus far “closed space” of Dr. Kujundzic, Miller, and Koszulinski’s encounter. By “opening up” this envelope of space and figures, the image of Miller is enriched and illuminated. The publication dates, lists of published works and academic interests, and the anecdote from James Kincaid also provide the viewer with a tangible set of information that not only piques interest but also locates Miller in a specific cultural arena.

After Dr. Gilbert’s voiceover, the viewer is brought into another domestic space, one that is less charged with iconic signifiers and more readily recognizable as “ordinary” or “mundane.” In following Miller into his house and observing him disarm his wailing alarm system, walk through his kitchen, and enter a sitting room, the viewer gets the sense of the space being “lived in.” Furthermore, Dr. Kujundzic’s exchange concerning the “cat eating the computer mouse” highlights an issue most viewers could understand or relate to. This conversation provides a conceptual balancing force to the weight of Dr. Gilbert’s description of his accolades and respected position in academia and, I believe, will provide a conceptually and structurally sound transition into the first interview segment.

The “Climate Change/Auto Immunity” sequence was born out of an assignment that Dr. Kujundzic gave me to cut something centered on a topic that I thought was essential to include in the film from the interview footage taken in Maine. I found the notion of auto-immunity as summarized by Miller and put in the context of the recent BP oil spill to be at once incredibly insightful and arresting. It marks a very pronounced situation where the ideas of critical theory and philosophy are directly applicable to

understanding the nature and degree of a relevant ecological, economic, and political issue.

I cut this sequence with the intention of highlighting this connection through the use of images taken from Maine's natural environment. As the sequence begins, the sailing motif continues to pervade the imagery of the documentary. The movement of the sailboat across the frame suggests progress and movements forward in thought and argument. Furthermore, Dr. Kudjundzic's voice overlays the image and aurally frames the surroundings (harbor, motorboats, sailboats, tugboats) with this question concerning the oil spill. This relationship between voice-over and the natural environment is re-introduced toward the end of the sequence, when the seabirds and shoreline from the (potential) introduction are revisited and re-visioned in light of Miller's bleak remarks.

The long middle section, which holds on Miller's face as he summarizes Derrida's views and speculates on the "political field" in the United States, presents me with a unique challenge. Dr. Kujundzic insists that Miller's face and bodily movements as he thinks through his responses in the interview footage (his pensive expression, hand gestures, and the like) will have enough appeal to keep such a long, static shot on his face. There is certain fidelity to be found in maintaining such a shot, the desire to let Miller speak uninterrupted about such an important issue, but I would be failing to live up to the responsibilities of my role as an editor if I did not question the way this shot carries on as it does in this sequence. Maintaining the structure of the audio track is clearly of great significance, but how can I deal with the labored nature of the visual track without simply tacking on more images of the natural environment over it? These questions can perhaps be more productively addressed when the sequence is placed in

the larger structure of the documentary, but for now can be thought of a continued celebration of the long take.

Additionally, this segment reveals a tension between the traditional ethics of the documentary interview and Dr. Kujundzic's own proclivities and interests as a theorist (i.e. coaxing a response from a subject and adding to his or her commentary). We also saw this toward the end of the Extended Introduction when Dr. Kujundzic had to seemingly evoke a response from Miller concerning the "cat eating the [computer] mouse" as we do now, during the Climate Change/Auto-Immunity sequence, when he interjects a response during Miller's description of auto-immunity. It is clear that the relationship between subject and filmmaker is quite unique in *The First Sail* and does not conform to traditional interview procedures. In one sense, Dr. Kujundzic and Miller's exchange makes visible the presence and influence of the filmmaker, something that many documentaries try to efface. Making this aspect of their relationship known to the audience is arguably a more ethically sound practice than simply editing this dimension out of the film.

This being said, the relationship between Dr. Kujundzic and Miller is not entirely unproblematic. Nichols, in *Introduction to Documentary*, identifies some of the risks involved in this kind of relationship. He writes: "Filmmakers who choose to work with people already familiar to them face the challenge of representing common ground responsibly, even if it means sacrificing their own voice or point of view for that of others" (10). This is not to suggest that Dr. Kujundzic's interjection violates the sanctity of Miller's commentary but it certainly does point to an important issue that *The First Sail* simultaneously demonstrates and navigates. This notion of the filmmaker's voice

being “sacrificed” is less drastic in our case and is instead engaged in an active dialogue with the subject, forcing the reconsideration of interactive documentary practices.

The analysis offered by this chapter is meant to be both a critical self-reflection of my own practices and a potential tool to be referenced by other editors looking to consider the theoretical issues of documentary with regard the editing process. It is my hope that this sort of work will play a productive role in fostering new and experimental ways of creating non-fiction film.

CHAPTER 4 RECONSIDERATIONS

The final chapter of this work looks to examine the question of audience and our own relationship to the material we are attempting to present in *The First Sail*. This will involve revisiting some of the scenes discussed in Chapter 3 and critiquing them based on issues pertaining to the viewer's perception of the images and what meaning(s) they might carry versus our "privileged" position as both filmmakers and academics. This chapter is intended to be a thought experiment that will hopefully assist us in creating a sound, accessible, and engaging documentary while acknowledging the inescapable limitations of appeal inherent to any production.

This thought experiment centers around how a viewer of *The First Sail* would react to and interpret its images if he or she were unfamiliar with the life and work of J. Hillis Miller. Those of us involved in the film's production are already privy to the significance of Miller as a subject. That is to say, as academics in the Humanities making this film, we are clued into his status and importance in the field. For us, the simple act of seeing him and listening to him talk already carries a certain prescribed weight that has the potential to be totally lost on someone who does not have this "inside information." The task of this chapter, then, is to critically consider this perspective and evaluate the editing decisions made in light of the epistemological, pedagogical, and practical issues at stake. I will focus my analysis on the Introductions considering the images and information found within them would be the most pertinent for considering a viewer's response.

All the versions of the Introduction presented for this thesis have a great deal of information encoded in them that may not be immediately discernable to every viewer.

The beauty of the natural environment and Georg Koszulinski's subjective, cinéma vérité-style camerawork are both aspects that are immediately identifiable and appealing about this footage. However, the significance of positioning Miller within these spatial and stylistic contexts is not discernable unless a viewer is already familiar with him personally, professionally, or scholastically. These three potential introductions take for granted the filmmakers' positioning in relation to Miller and opt for an editing style that withholds giving explicit information about him, which is mostly accomplished by his own and Dr. Gilbert's voiceovers. In Introductions 1-3, the viewer is never really given a specific context for the images in the text itself. For all we know, the documentary to come will concern an elderly gentleman's love of sailing. Although Miller's voiceover hints at other aspects of his life and personality there are almost no visual or aural signposts for the viewer who does not know him or his work. One possible way to address this issue would be to reposition Dr. Gilbert's address, which seems to be the most descriptive and useful to the unknowing viewer, so that it foregrounds or frames the images of Miller's body and the sound of his voice. As it stands now, in the Extended Introduction, there is a kind of poetic delay in giving this information that assumes a great deal about the audience.

Another possible means of enriching the introduction for a lay audience would be to edit together the sailing footage and Miller talking about his life and work inside of his study, as we also see in the Extended Introduction. Cross-cutting between these two visual environments, the sailing harbor and his workspace, would both provide an unknowing viewer with information about him as an complex subject and maintain the representation of him as a dynamic, living person.

Additionally, the space of the University of Florida looms over the project and this should be acknowledged in the interest of being candid about our modes of production. This seems crucial in aspiring to reach the level of “scientific rigor” that serves to “validate” our film as discussed by Trinh and, at a more practical level, to locate the space of Dr. Gilbert’s voiceover. UF is already introduced, at least aurally (although this is also not discernable), via this voiceover. In the Extended Introduction, the fact that her words are clearly taken from some other source on some other occasion is left out of the editing and not acknowledged by the film. Briefly flashing images of this original source while Dr. Gilbert gives her introduction would serve to link the space of the documentary with the space of UF in a provocative and interesting way. Furthermore, the texture of the voice recording, with its echo and distortion, seems peculiar in the context of the Maine footage. By visually revealing the source of the voiceover, it is easier for the viewer to accept the properties of the audio recording that might otherwise feel odd. Visually connecting these spaces early on would much more forcefully and directly inform the viewer of both Miller’s significance as a subject and the scope and nature of *The First Sail* itself.

All of the suggestions I have offered are working toward creating a dynamic, ethical, and appealing representation of Miller that considers an audience that is not necessarily in such a close personal and professional relationship to him as the filmmakers. Clearly, we want to put our subject “out there,” so to speak, that he may be appreciated and acknowledged. But, perhaps more importantly, we want to accomplish this in a responsible and thoughtful fashion that resists taking for granted our own dispositions and presents Miller in a holistic way to the widest possible audience.

The notion that *The First Sail* has to be presented to a lay audience may not necessarily be a great concern for the filmmakers. If we are trying to be considerate of such an audience then the tactics and analysis offered in Chapter 4 are sound and valid with respect to pursuing this goal. But an alternative perspective may highlight that this documentary is not meant for a lay audience and that such issues do not concern us. This is to say, we may not be ethically compelled to make a documentary for such an audience. It may be one of the many goals of the project but it is not an ethical question. The idea of a privileged academic discourse embedded in *The First Sail* and whether or not this needs to be “translated” or made accessible is a separate issue beyond the scope of this thesis. I am presenting this alternate conclusion in the interest of maintaining an ongoing discussion concerning the form and function of non-fiction film and the role of academy in its production.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

David Rodriguez was born and raised in Miami, Florida. In his adolescence he found a love for percussion, reading, and radical politics that continues to fuel his creative endeavors. In 2005, he began his undergraduate studies at New College of Florida where he attained his B.A. in Comparative Literature. His undergraduate thesis, *Eulogy for Apollo: Synesthesia and Musicality in Andrei Bely's Petersburg and James Joyce's Ulysses*, explores the formal devices of Russian and European literary modernism through a study of the two novels. During his time as an undergraduate, David worked for three years in the New College Bike Shoppe as a bicycle mechanic and eventually a co-manager, an experience that developed into a mild obsession with general mechanics and technical processes. It was also during his time at New College that David became interested in film history and experimental cinema. Along with a small group of other New College students, David designed and implemented tutorials and independent study projects in film history, aesthetics, and theory. It was also during this time that he became acquainted with FLEX (the Florida Experimental Film and Video Festival) and it was this exposure that lead him to pursue a graduate degree from the University of Florida and to work with the festival's artistic director, Roger Beebe. After completing his M.A. in Film and Media Studies at UF, David will attend the Certificate Program at the L. Jeffery Selznick School of Film Preservation at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York in September 2011. David currently lives with one cat, Tegan, many half-assembled bicycles and broken musical instruments, and a large, messy collection of VHS tapes, vinyl records, and *Star Wars* memorabilia.