

First-Person Filmmaking as Autoethnographic Exploration

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Abstract: In the domain of artistic scholarship, the application of first-person filmmaking in autoethnographic studies provides a distinctive avenue for merging individual narratives with broader societal contexts. This approach offers a nuanced bridge between personal experiences and expansive historical milieus. Grounded in this methodology, my research examines the lasting impacts of the Soviet era on the post-Soviet landscape. Growing up in post-collapse Moldova, a former Soviet Republic, within a mixed-cultural family, I was immersed in a tapestry of conflicting narratives. While Soviet cinema often romanticized its era, personal letters from my Russian grandmother, who died by suicide in 1989, presented a divergent historical insight.

In 2021, I decided to undertake a research expedition to my grandmother's homeland in the Urals to explore my unknown family history and unravel the secrecy surrounding her suicide. I carried a camera with me, intending to document my interactions with relatives and employ this tool to facilitate interviews and foster discussions. The camera played a dual role in my research. On one hand, it served as a communication conduit, functioning as an interviewing mechanism that allowed me to capture the stories and insights of my family members. On the other hand, holding the camera enabled me to distance myself from my familial role, assuming the position of a film director and researcher. This shift in perspective allowed me to transition from an active participant in family dynamics to an objective observer, offering a unique vantage point for my research. The resulting audiovisual material not only provided the basis for a compelling documentary film but also emerged as a crucial resource for my autoethnographic exploration of the Soviet legacy. This innovative approach challenges established cinematic norms and narratives, thereby expanding the horizons of documentary filmmaking within the realm of academic artistic exploration.\

Keywords: first person, documentary, art-based, autoethnography, Soviet Union, Russia.

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1. Introduction

My research began in 2020 when, in the archive of my father, I discovered old letters from his mother, my grandmother. She spent her entire life in the hinterlands of Russia in the Urals, never venturing beyond the Soviet border, and tragically died by suicide in 1989 during the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was born two years later and 2500 km away, in the newly independent Republic of Moldova, a former Soviet republic. After my grandmother's funeral, my father decided never to return to Russia, and his connection to his family there gradually faded away. Thus, I have never met my Russian grandmother, family, or visited Russia.

However, the testimonies of my grandmother, as conveyed in her letters, provided a new perspective on Soviet history and the lives of ordinary Russian people from the hinterlands – a perspective I had never encountered in my history classes, cinema, or within my family from Moldova. This discovery prompted me to embark on a journey with my camera, accompanying my father to Russia for the first time, with the aim of meeting my unknown Russian family, exploring its history, and gaining a deeper understanding of who I am.

What started as a very personal journey quickly transformed into a comprehensive autoethnographic research project and filming process, delving into Soviet history and its impact on contemporary post-Soviet society, with my camera assuming a pivotal role as a research tool.

2. Theoretical perspective on autoethnography in first person documentary

Autoethnography is a qualitative research and writing style that blends personal experiences with ethnographic research methods. Carolyn Ellis and Jones Holman define autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)”². This research method draws inspiration from autobiography, sharing a foundation rooted in personal experiences and narratives. Autoethnography, however, sets itself apart by embedding these personal experiences within specific cultural or social contexts. Unlike autobiography, which centers on the author's personal experiences, autoethnography explores how these experiences intersect with broader sociocultural contexts.

This approach gained prominence in the postmodern era, especially after the 1980s when scholars acknowledged the profound influence of language and

² Ellis Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, Arthur P. Bochner (2011), *Autoethnography: An Overview*, Forum, qualitative social research 12, no. 1.

paradigms on our perceptions of “facts” and “truths”.³ As a result, many authors shifted away from traditional research practices, leaning towards methods with a more literary or narrative nature, underscoring the significance of individual experiences in research across various fields, from anthropology to medicine.

However, as Patricia Leavy warns, placing oneself at the center of the research process comes with its own considerations and burdens.⁴ Autoethnography necessitates the researcher to embrace vulnerability, and this process can be challenging. The emotions experienced throughout this journey are unpredictable. Moreover, by exposing their personal life to the public, researchers relinquish certain privacies and invite potential criticism.

Conversely, Custer Dwayne argues that autoethnography is inherently therapeutic, and the act of writing about oneself in connection to a theory, experience, or belief is transformative.⁵ The vulnerability an individual embraces to revisit and share traumatic events from their private life, coupled with engaging in a dialogue about these writings with others, can foster additional growth and healing. It emanates from a heart that is open to exposition and vulnerability, reopening old wounds yet also generating the energy necessary for complete healing.

In documentary cinema, autoethnography is closely tied to the practice of first-person filmmaking—an approach where directors actively immerse themselves in the narrative, often becoming central participants in the story.

This cinematographic form traces its origins to avant-garde cinema, exemplified by films such as *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Человек с киноаппаратом*, dir. Dziga Vertov, 1929). However, it gained popularity in the last few decades alongside technological progress, leading to the accessibility of filming equipment and the widespread development of independent film productions. More and more film festivals are giving preferences to autoethnographic narratives in documentaries, selecting and awarding films such as *Radiograph of a Family* (dir. Firouzeh Khosrovani, 2020), which claimed the main prize at the 2020 International Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), one of the most prestigious festivals globally. In this work, Khosrovani intricately explores her personal family history against the backdrop of the Islamic Revolution. Another notable instance is the 2022 Acid Cannes selection, *How to Save a Dead Friend* (dir. Marusya Syroechkovskaya, 2022) which skillfully weaves together an array of the director’s personal home

³ Ellis Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, Arthur P. Bochner, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

⁴ Patricia Leavy (2020), *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice*, third edition, The Guilford Press, p. 57.

⁵ Dwayne Custer (2014), *Autoethnography as a Transformative Research Method*, Qualitative report, p. 9.

movies to depict the younger generation in Putin's Russia. Similarly, the 2023 Oscar-nominated *How Do You Measure a Year?* (dir. Jay Rosenblatt, 2022) explores a father-daughter relationship through the personal camera of the director who records his own daughter for 16 years on her birthday. A more recent example is the opening film of IDFA 2023, *A Picture to Remember* (*Фото на память*, dir. Olga Chernykh, 2023) which takes an essay-style approach to narrate the war in Ukraine from the perspective of the director and her family. Despite differences in form, theme, and approach, all these films begin with seemingly small family stories but skillfully navigate through broader and highly significant political, social, and cultural concepts in a profound and honest manner.

Numerous scholars have researched and contributed to the ongoing debates surrounding the diverse array of techniques, practices, and approaches of first person film. Some, like Jim Lane and Rachel Gabara, emphasize the autobiographical nature inherent in these films.⁶ Lane examines documentaries produced between 1971 and 1993 in the USA, delving into the intersection between autobiography and history and exploring the concepts of "public" and "private" within autobiographical documentaries⁷. He argues that in these films the directors become "agents of history" as their personal and public stories intertwine, creating an "unofficial" history.⁸ Moreover, Lane observes that protagonists in autobiographical documentaries are often unfamiliar to a broader audience. This lack of public recognition influences the documentary's structure, portraying stories not as comprehensive life syntheses but as isolated moments, reminiscent of fragments from a personal journal. Additionally, Lane highlights the complexity of these films in challenging conventional boundaries concerning presentation, representation, and referencing the real world in documentary filmmaking. He contends that autobiographical documentaries seamlessly incorporate subjective elements into the ostensibly objective realm of traditional observational or expository documentary filmmaking, presenting a unique approach.

Other authors, such as David MacDougall and Michael Renov, focus on the subjectivity of first-person films.⁹ MacDougall argues that the final subject presented in an ethnographic film combines the original subject with the filmmaker's subjective perspective¹⁰. In turn, Renov explores the evolution of subjectivity in the practice and theory of documentary film, from early

⁶ Alisa Lebow (ed.) (2012), *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, Wallflower, New York, p. 2.

⁷ Jim Lane (2002), *The Autobiographical Documentary in America*, 1st ed, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2002.

⁸ *Idem*, pp. 4-5.

⁹ Alisa Lebow, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ David MacDougall (1999), *Transcultural cinema*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

modernist avant-garde to personal digital video clips placed online, emphasizing the importance of subjectivity and interpretative creativity in documentary filmmaking over time.¹¹

Some researchers explore particular forms and approaches within first person narration film. Laura Rascaroli, for instance, directs her focus towards “essay films”¹². Within this domain, she delves into the notions of “*subjective*” and “*personal*”, expanding her discourse beyond the confines of documentary films to encompass a wide array of cinematic expressions. In her exploration, she scrutinizes not only anticipated filmmakers within the realm of documentary films like Jean-Luc Godard and Harun Farocki but also less conventional figures, such as Michelangelo Antonioni, aiming to contextualize the “personal camera” within a broader historical framework and identify its distinctive expressions.

Other authors extend their research beyond filmmaking practice. For instance, John Dovey delves into the evolution of narrative modes within mass media, noting a rising trend in employing personal and confessional narrative styles from a first-person perspective in mass media content.¹³ Dovey contends that this transformation aims to create a sense of vitality and authenticity. Simultaneously, this shift in the approach to what is considered ‘personal’ in media culture has led to a reduction in the space accorded to the idea of the ‘public’. On the other side, Karen Ishizuka and Patricia Zimmerman focus their studies on family and amateur films, highlighting their potential to become authentic audio-visual arts that offer profound statements about various aspects of life, from concentration camps to human rights, history, work, leisure, war, and culture¹⁴.

Although many authors have explored first-person narrative documentaries, Alisa Lebow is one of the first to attempt to systematize and offer a detailed overview of this cinematic form. In the introduction to *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* dedicated to the first-person film, Lebow analyzes various terms used by different authors to define this form, such as reflexive or self-reflexive films, auto- or domestic-ethnography, and performative or participatory films.¹⁵ However, Lebow argues that uniquely, the term ‘first person’

¹¹ Michael Renov (2004), *The Subject of Documentary*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

¹² Laura Rascaroli (2009), *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, Wallflower Press, London.

¹³ John Dovey (2000), *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*, Pluto Press, London.

¹⁴ Karen L. Ishizuka, Patricia R. Zimmermann (2007), *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, 1st ed., University of California Press, Berkeley.

¹⁵ Alisa Lebow, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-15.

encompasses the whole range of these related yet distinct practices and documentary forms.¹⁶ Lebow asserts that these films can embody various qualities, ranging from being poetic, political, prophetic, to absurd. They might be entirely autobiographical or only implicitly so, presenting either a self-portrait or the portrayal of someone else. These films often transcend a mere focus on the filmmaker and instead can center around someone close, dear, beloved, or intriguing. They may even extend beyond personal narratives to explore neighborhoods, communities, phenomena, or events. However, what unites all these forms and approaches is the mode of address in first person films. Lebow emphasizes that “these films ‘speak’ from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position, whether this is done in the first person singular or in the first person plural”¹⁷.

Despite the growing body of research on first-person documentary filmmaking, the predominant focus within existing studies lies in retrospective analyses of completed films. This approach tends to offer a constrained perspective on the actual creative processes, neglecting the inherent challenges and opportunities intrinsic to this cinematic form.

In this scholarly context, this article seeks to address a significant research gap by integrating extant literature with a nuanced analysis of personal experiences in crafting a documentary film centered on familial narratives. Employing this methodological framework, the study aspires to yield a more comprehensive understanding of first-person documentary filmmaking. The overarching objective is to establish a robust practice-based framework applicable to contemporary filmmakers. It aims to furnish guidance for those in pursuit of innovative approaches to documentary filmmaking or endeavoring to explore personal histories through the nuanced lens of first-person documentary narratives.

To attain this objective, the study is guided by the following research question: What specific challenges, advantages, and opportunities confront filmmakers in the creative process of approaching a personal subject and capturing close individuals, particularly family members, within the context of a first-person narrative documentary?

3. Methodology implemented in first person film production

The initial phase of the research and film pre-production lasted from 2020 to 2021 and involved a meticulous examination of both family archives and academic literature. First, I examined the letters of my grandmother and her photographs, sorting them by dates and attempting to juxtapose letters with

¹⁶ Alisa Lebow, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 1-2.

visual materials. Through a detailed process of transcription and analysis, I systematically decoded the narratives embedded in her words, aiming to understand her perspective on the Soviet era and the various family members mentioned in her letters.

During this phase, I contextualized my family history by conducting a comprehensive review of existing academic literature on Soviet history. Utilizing the works of scholars from diverse geographical origins and academic disciplines, I sought to comprehend various perspectives on the Soviet Union. This included insights from scholars outside the Soviet bloc and those from within the former Soviet territories.

I examined the viewpoints of American historian Martin Malia, who characterizes the Soviet Union as a tragic experiment incompatible with human nature.¹⁸ Additionally, I delved into the perspectives of Polish Jewish historian Moshe Lewin, who sees the Soviet socialist experiment as ambitious and visionary but acknowledges its failures, including repression, lack of political freedoms, and economic inefficiencies.¹⁹ Furthermore, I explored the insights of British historian Orlando Figes, who explores the deep impact of the Stalinist era on intimate aspects of people's lives, fostering a culture of fear and suspicion.²⁰

I also considered the works of Belarusian investigative journalist Svetlana Alexievich, who, traveling across former Soviet territories just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, collected testimonies revealing a surprising phenomenon.²¹ Despite the hopes for change in the late 1980s, her subjects still yearned for the lost Soviet empire. Over time, she observed a curious resurgence of Soviet elements across former territories, as if the regime's collapse had merely paused the era's influence.

This interdisciplinary approach enriched the first-person film pre-production by grounding it in a nuanced understanding of the historical forces that shaped individual and collective experiences. Additionally, this step helped prepare potential topics and questions for discussion with family members, as well as visualize the preliminary shooting plan. It allowed me to approach the filming process in Russia with a well-prepared framework, taking the position of the observer and director rather than an active participant in family dynamics.

¹⁸ Martin Malia (1994), *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia 1917-1991*, Free Press, New York.

¹⁹ Moshe Lewin (2008), *Советский век*, Translated by V. Novikov and N. Kopelyanskaya, Издательство «Европа», Moscow, p. 680. (СССР).

²⁰ Orlando Figes (2007), *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, Holt, New York.

²¹ Svetlana Aleksievich (2013), *Время секонд хэнд*, Время, Moscow.

The next phase involved my first trip to Russia with my father in the summer of 2021, where I explored the homeland of my grandmother and met my Russian family members for the first time. Given the unfamiliar setting and new acquaintances, I chose to film these encounters personally, without involving a film crew. This initial journey served dual purposes – it was both research on-the-field for my filmmaking practice and an exploration of my unknown family history.

Then, I analyzed the captured material, revisited theoretical knowledge from family archives and academic literature, and reflected on the filming process. Using these insights, I developed a plan to enhance subsequent filming sessions, identifying missing aspects and contexts from the initial footage.

The following filming took place in January 2022, six months after the first trip. During this visit, I refined the filmmaking process based on observations from the initial journey. I brought in an additional person to assist with filming and experimented with alternating between solo sessions and those involving an extra cameraperson. When selecting an additional cameraperson, my priority was to ensure that my family felt comfortable during the filming process. So, a crucial criterion was finding someone local who understood the Russian realm and could seamlessly integrate into their social circle. Another requirement was previous experience in first-person documentary filmmaking and an understanding of its specific working processes. The gradual inclusion of external team members aimed to familiarize my family with the filming process and address challenges observed in the initial sessions. Bringing in another person also enabled a faster and more diverse shooting approach, allowing us to simultaneously capture different scenes in two locations with distinct protagonists.

In subsequent filming sessions of the summer of 2022 and early winter 2023, I experimented with various filming techniques. This involved having the cameraperson film family members alone in my absence, introducing a more distant approach to capture a broader perspective.

4. Expectations

During the pre-production stage and before commencing the production of the first-person film, I held certain expectations. Firstly, I anticipated that having access to protagonists, particularly since they are my family members, would streamline the working process by allowing easier entry into their intimate spaces compared to working with strangers.

Secondly, I held the belief that a first-person film would afford greater narrative freedom. Being a part of the film meant I could film and refilm my surroundings at any time to address dramaturgical gaps. Additionally, I could write text and use my own voice in voice-over narration to guide the storyline.

Thirdly, I expected an abundance of visual material in the film from my access to the family archive, which had been analyzed in the initial research step. Fourthly, I assumed that crafting a storyline and building the dramaturgical arc would be straightforward since I already possessed knowledge about my family and its history. Moreover, I believed that the filming process could facilitate family dialogue, serving as a pretext for discussing the past, addressing difficult moments, and providing a pleasant way to spend more time with my father.

I envisioned that the project would function as a therapeutic aid for both my father and me, helping us cope with challenging memories, such as my grandmother's suicide, by engaging in discussions about difficult topics and using the filming process as a form of therapy. Finally, my hope was to achieve a positive resolution both in the film and in real life by reuniting the family and breaking the silence.

5. Challenges inherent in the production process

Between 2021 and 2023, I conducted seven filming sessions for my project. These sessions included three journeys from Moldova to the Ural region in Russia, each lasting 2 to 3 weeks, and four remotely directed shootings with a cameraperson in Russia. The initial session was undertaken independently, without a crew, to familiarize my family with the process and create an intimate setting for personal interviews. However, this approach presented both technical and dramaturgical challenges.

First, filming a documentary about my family meant taking on three simultaneous roles: director, cameraperson, and family member. Unlike autoethnographers who can separate field research and writing, filmmaking requires concurrent research and autoethnographic video recordings, making it challenging to distinguish between the roles of the researcher and participant in first-person narratives. I couldn't simply step back as a director while actively participating in family dynamics during the filming process. This challenge blurred the lines between my personal involvement, directorial perspective, and the unfolding story, challenging the conventional idea of directorial distance, as seen in observational or "fly-on-the-wall" documentary-making where the camera crew works as unobtrusively as possible.

Second, navigating the dual role of director and daughter, particularly when filming my father, posed significant challenges. In societies like Moldova or Russia, where patriarchal norms often designate the father as the primary authoritative figure, navigating the shift from traditional father-daughter dynamics to the unconventional roles of protagonist-director in filmmaking practice becomes complex. Balancing my role as a director with my father's established paternal authority tested the boundaries of our relationship. This

challenge required a careful renegotiation of our roles, not only within the documentary framework but also in our personal dynamics. Additionally, sharing the same apartment and space with my father during the filming process made it particularly challenging to distinguish moments for filming from private moments in life. Therefore, most of the filming took place outside our residence, leveraging the physical transition from a private space to an external environment to facilitate the shift from private life into the filming process.

The most significant challenge emerged in 2022 when Russia initiated the war in Ukraine. This presented both production and dramaturgical challenges, along with the psychological difficulties of continuing work on the film. Sanctions against Russia rendered it impossible to utilize any production funds for filming in the country. Additionally, new laws enacted by the State Duma in Russia, escalating repression and further eroding the rights of individuals, made it perilous to travel and film there. Furthermore, the outbreak of the war necessitated a reevaluation and reconceptualization of the entire film idea and project, prompting a complete rewrite of the script.

Simultaneously, the war brought historical traumas within our family to the forefront, causing family members to become more and more silent and distant. These challenges became potential hindrances to both the film's financing and production, as well as the continuation of the research. At the same time, these changes in the geopolitical landscape underscored the importance of this research and film.

Besides, the war brought historical traumas within our family to the forefront, making my family members more and more silent and distant. Our newly rediscovered and reestablished family bonds faced a new threat. At the same time, this tragic change in the geopolitical landscape, deeply affecting the personal lives of numerous families in the post-Soviet space, highlighted the importance of this research and film.

6. The potential of first person filmmaking practice

During the filming process, I discovered several opportunities and advantages inherent in first-person filmmaking that extend beyond the purely creative realm. Firstly, it served as a valuable tool for exploring family history, naturally fostering dialogue through interviews and reintroducing significant aspects into discussion. Secondly, the filming process became an indispensable research tool, capturing both audio and video elements during family member interviews and documenting their interactions. Unlike other methods, it surpassed mere textual information collection by highlighting subtleties such as body language, reactions, and even silence—elements that cannot be captured in the same nuanced way by alternative approaches.

Despite the technical challenges, filming alone without the participation of a film crew and physically holding the camera enabled me to distance myself from family dynamics, assuming the roles of an external observer, director, and researcher, thus effectively directing the film process. Directly monitoring reality through the camera's viewfinder provided flexibility and the ability to instantly observe and record interesting moments. Besides, the incorporation of a subjective point of view brought a distinctive visual dimension to the film, completely immersing the viewer in the narrative. This approach also provided a sense of flexibility and creative freedom during the filming process, allowing for deviations from conventional rules of composition and camera movement justified by the aesthetic of the subjective camera.

However, involving an external cameraperson also brought certain advantages to the filming process, enabling me to concentrate on dramaturgy rather than technical aspects. Additionally, this approach enhanced flexibility in organizing the shooting process, allowing remote direction without the necessity of frequent travel to Russia. Furthermore, it introduced diversity in image quality and composition, offering a fresh perspective from the camera person's point of view. Moreover, my absence during the filming process allowed my family members to open up in new ways.

The first-person filmmaking approach has demonstrated remarkable adaptability to changes in both social dynamics and geopolitical landscapes, allowing for the real-time documentation of shifting reality. This approach provides a unique inside-out perspective, unfolding individual and collective experiences, as well as the dynamics between the disappearing past and the present that carries memories and scars.

Beyond its documentary function, the filmmaking process has also had a therapeutic impact. It facilitated a profound exploration of my previously unknown family history, offering insights into my legacy. The methodical analysis through various aspects allowed for the mediation of dialogue among family members, fostering the reconstruction of the past and the restoration of strained family ties. Importantly, this approach encouraged open communication on difficult yet crucial topics, contributing positively to familial understanding and connection. It has also played a role in facilitating the potential intergenerational healing process.

7. Conclusions

Engaging in first-person film practice is a multifaceted pursuit, brimming with vast creative potential. Beyond serving as a creative exercise, it acts as a therapeutic outlet and a robust research tool, offering a unique lens to challenge

storytelling norms and historical narratives. This cinematographic form facilitates an intimate exploration of the past, seamlessly weaving together micro and macro aspects of individual experiences with broader social, geopolitical, and historical dynamics, opening novel pathways for understanding collective narratives.

While emotionally demanding and requiring directors to delve into personal and sensitive memories, both their own and those of close family members, this process involves a complex psychological and creative journey. However, when driven by profound motivation and decisiveness, first-person film practice not only serves as a powerful tool for researching the past and representing reality but also facilitates dialogue that is often unattainable through conventional means. This approach can encourage participants to engage in introspection, offering a means to reimagine both historical and personal experiences.

Given the ever-evolving geopolitical and social landscape, first-person film production, like any documentary, demands problem-solving skills, adaptability, and creativity. However, encountering obstacles in the production process should be seen as a potential storytelling opportunity. Moreover, an in-depth analysis of the production process, creating intervals between filming sessions, studying other first person films, learning from fellow filmmakers' experiences, and adopting directing techniques contribute to navigating the production process and infusing storytelling with innovative solutions.

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Filmography

- Man with a Movie Camera (Человек с киноаппаратом, dir. Dziga Vertov, 1929)
- Radiograph of a Family (dir. Firouzeh Khosrovani, 2020)
- How Do You Measure a Year? (dir. Jay Rosenblatt, 2022)
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