

2014

Troika of Fortune Tellers

Sophia D. Kalin
Scripps College

Recommended Citation

Kalin, Sophia D., "Troika of Fortune Tellers" (2014). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 351.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/351

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Spring 2014 Media Studies Thesis

Тройка из гадалок

Troika of Fortune Tellers

A Look at Preserving a Bond, Tradition, and Memory
through a generation of Three Women

A Film by Sophia Kalin, Scripps College '14

My project, more than a documentary, is an oral history. The piece depicts the intergenerational relationship between three women: my grandmother, my mother, and I. I explore the Russian traditions that my Babushka has cultivated and shared among the three of us, in particular, the tradition of fortune telling. My film also addresses my grandmother's struggle with dementia. However, in spite of her fading memory, my Babushka is still able to recall upon the practice and process of fortune telling. This tradition has helped strengthen and preserve our connection.

My mother's narration provides the viewer with a small window into our world and a tradition that connects us. In spite of her fading memory, she has retained the tradition of fortune telling and the ritual of laying out the cards. Through my piece I intend to emphasize that although dementia robs people of memory, some things, such as my bond and my mother's bond with my babushka, do not fade. The cards are one way to preserve this bond.

I also touch upon my Babushka's background from her childhood in Ukraine to when she was working in the labor camps in Germany during World War II. This history provides insight into how my Babushka learned to read fortunes and why this interest was sparked in the first place. Included below is a piece from the narration in my film that explains this history:

“Fortune telling has a rich history behind it, the practice of reading the cards varies through each culture and each individual. Babushka learned from gypsies in the labor camps. After her mother died and the war started, Babushka was sent to work in a labor camp where she was brutally beaten. In the labor camps gypsies would tell fortunes in their barracks. Although they were shunned and treated the worst amongst the prisoners of labor camps, people would secretly go to them to have their fortune told in exchange for food stamps, clothing, bedding, anything to know what the future held. Babushka did not shun the gypsies, she gave a lot of what she had to them to hear her fortune and in turn, learn how to read the cards herself. I believe that at that time Babushka had her fortune read in order to know that there was a future, a hope of a better life.”

I consider my film a poetic piece of non-fiction. I do not intend to claim objectivity as I believe that a camera manipulates its subject and the process of editing creates a representation of reality as opposed to reality itself. My project does not incorporate the elements of a traditional documentary. I do not include talking head interviews or provide the viewer with an expository narration that explicitly places them within the world the camera captures. My footage depicts a sincere connection and a sense of nostalgia. In preparing to shoot I watched Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1983). My project echoes that style. In addition I sought inspiration from Alan Resnais’s *Night and Fog*. I noticed how these films, although documentaries, apply a lyrical, poetic approach to their subjects that incorporates several modes of documentary. Generally speaking documentary cinema has been compartmentalized into several main modes: expository, observational, performative, reflexive, and poetic. From these modes, countless other sub-genres and modes emerge to muddle documentary cinema’s definition. This dated definition does not apply to modern documentary nor does the dated notion that

documentary is an objective medium that maintains neutrality when observing its subject.

Modes, styles, and sub-genres alike, often intertwine in one piece.

Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* "signaled a new preoccupation" in filmmaking: "The relationship of film to the "new" visual technology of images...computerized imagery and its tentative promise, for the distant future, of enriching human consciousness and memory."¹ Marker composes stock footage, news clips, his own footage from a 16mm camera, and clips from Hayao Yamaneko, a Japanese video artist, to produce a meditation on the "indeterminacy of [today's] reality."¹ The film patiently moves from scene to scene, accompanied by a female narrator reading aloud letters from either Chris Marker or a fictitious author (remains unknown). His choice to use a female voice to narrate *Sans Soleil* sets up a partition between the filmmaker and the piece. The narration establishes an "essential schism between the gender of the voice and that of either the fictional writer...or the director."³ Marker remains absent from the piece, letting the images and narration lure himself and his viewers "into the joys and frustrations of creating with images."¹ The film pauses over each image, posing the question of what it means to record reality and memories. The director distances himself by having a female narrator but his poeticism and lyricism remains, however subtle, throughout the piece.

The images are both ethereal and industrial, placing the viewer in a strange space in some

¹ VanCauwenberge, Geneviève. *Chris. Marker and French Documentary Filmmaking 1962 - 1982*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

³ Bruzzi, Stella. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.

moments of the film. Marker's intention, some credits claim, is to position the viewer in this "nebulous" setting in order to reflect his own "perplexity about the relationship that cinematic representation can establish toward reality." Through his film Marker also points out the digital elements of contemporary film. In his own words when discussing *Sans Soleil*, Marker remarks upon the advances in technology and its accessibility saying:

"*Sans Soleil* was entirely shot with a 16mm Beaulieu silent film camera...and a small cassette recorder (not even a Walkman; they didn't exist yet). The only "sophisticated" device – given the time – was the spectre image synthesizer...This is to say that the basic tools for these two films were literally available to anyone. No silly boasting here, just the conviction that today, with the advent of computer and small DV cameras...would-be directors need no longer submit their fate to the unpredictability of producers or the arthritis of televisions, and that by following their whims or passions, they perhaps see on day their tinkering elevated to DVD status by honorable men."²

This universal access to film and film equipment allows for people all over the world to preserve memories. Video and photography "have a role to play for the individual."¹

Although it is a stylized representation of reality, it is still an important representation, an archival element that enables human consciousness and memory to sustain.

² "Notes on Filmmaking", essay by Chris Marker in booklet accompanying *La Jetée/Sans Soleil* DVD produced by Criterion

Another work that inspired my thesis project was Pedro Almodovar's film *Volver*. Most of Almodovar's work feature women of Spain and their complexity. He emphasizes the different layers and emotions of women in a vibrant and stylized fashion in a way that I have always admired. *Volver* in particular presents an amazing story about three generations of women. The pronounced and sensory photography of this film are sublime. I attempted to channel this style in my own film. Although not as exaggerated and elaborate, my work is inspired by the way Almodovar depicts his female characters. In addition to its visual beauty, *Volver* evokes a sincere sense of emotion and nostalgia between these women. There is a magic to the passion he brings to his films that resonate in his images. I relate to his closeness to his subjects. When talking about his work and his directing style, Almodovar speaks from the heart:

“After you see a film, it leaves its mark, like a current that goes between you and the film. This film, then, is now a memory, it has become party of my experience, that is, the experience of having been present and having felt it all. At that point, it's no longer a matter of paying a tribute or whatever; you become imbued with your conversations with your father, your mother, your brother...but all eventually becomes a part of you...when I create a film, that's how I work”⁴

When filming and editing my thesis, Pedro Almodovar's films, especially *Vovler*, influenced my thought process. I approached my film wanting to draw out the tenderness

⁴ Almodóvar, Pedro, and Paula Willoquet-Maricondi. *Pedro Almodóvar: Interviews*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2004. 147. Print.

between the three generations of women in my family and Almodovar's films invoke a palpable intimacy.

The filming process of my project went smoothly. I flew up to Northern California three times this semester to capture footage of my mother and Babushka. I did not have a detailed plan or storyboard for my shots because I did not want my film to appear staged. I knew what images I wanted to focus on and the space I wanted to create for the viewer but other than that I did not have a strict set of ideas I was to follow. While shooting, I focused on the iconoclastic imagery around my grandmother's room along with old photographs from when my Babushka and mother were younger, to establish a sense of memory in my piece. I also focused on my Babushka laying out the cards, a ritual she still remembers. I featured her and my mother doing the cards together to portray their relationship and how the connection with the cards. I ran into some trouble when trying to bring out my voice in my video. Initially I thought I would include myself more but as I continued to film I realized that I did not want to feature myself too much in the piece. I feel as though my voice is better represented from behind the scenes. The intimacy of these images reflects my emotion and my presence. There is only one scene in my project that shows my Babushka and I together. In spite of this, I feel that my connection to my subjects is very apparent. I took a lot of footage of the cards themselves and the several different layouts involved in my grandmother's style of fortune telling that she has taught my mother. I made sure to capture both of them doing

the cards separately and together as to convey the importance of the tradition and how it will continue on. My Babushka did not feel uncomfortable with the camera nor did she feel the need to act when I was filming her. I feel lucky to be so close to these two women and I feel that that shows in my thesis project. The only obstacles in filming I faced was that it was difficult to capture certain angles because my Babushka cannot move around very easily. There was a lot of sun in my Babushka's room that made it more difficult to film. Sound did not pose a difficulty because I knew I was going to mainly use narration for the piece and the sound that I did record with the camera came out smoothly. However, there are many birds at the care facility my Babushka lives in that chirp all day and I was not able to muffle their sound but luckily the noise does not distract from my footage. In fact, I learned to appreciate that background noise and found that it helped add texture and layers to the setting of my piece. The added layer of noise offers context into my Babushkas life and home in this care facility. This project gave me a chance to work more with a DLSR camera and experiment with different lenses.

Through trial and error I discovered how to adjust the camera settings and gain more experience behind the camera. I finished shooting in October but I decided to bring the camera home with me one more time during Thanksgiving to get a few more clips of my grandmother and the cards. It was this last trip where I actually captured my favorite footage. I have a lot of stock footage that are not included in this cut because of the time limit for the video. My decision to use my mother's voice, although not as politicized as Marker's usage or other works, engages these texts. Initially I planned to write out a

narration along with my mother to accompany the images. We composed a rough draft that I read out loud over a rough cut of my piece. The narration felt stilted and contrived, reminding me of Bruzzi's remark, which states the "images connotative function is reduced by the literalness of any accompanying text."³ To draw out the nostalgic emotion of these images and memories, I needed a less structured text. Thus, with a suggestion from Professor Kelly Sears, I decided to go in a different direction and record my mother just talking about my grandmother and the cards. Due in part to a lack of time and in part to technical limitations, I was only able to record her through skype using a voice memo on my iPhone. Playing back her voice, I realized I liked the way it sounded, almost like a phone conversation. Given our close relationship it was easy for her to be forthcoming. She spoke freely about my Babushka and fortune telling and the connection between all of us, as well as the pain she feels as she witnesses my Babushka's decaying memory. Her voice creates a fluid synthesis with the footage, establishing the genuine emotion that was present while filming. I prefer the free-style, conversational format of this narration. The moment I played her voice recording with my edited rough-cut, the images took on a new meaning and better evoked the poetic style I wanted to achieve. Her voice moves across the images and invites the viewer to reflect on this deep connection between three women. My mother is the strongest figure in my life, her honest words strengthen the piece more than a formal expository narration could provide.

Continuing on to Spring Semester I captured more footage of my mother and Babushka practicing telling fortunes. We took my grandmother to film her at her former home and some old friends came to visit as well. A lot of the footage I captured this semester was similar to the footage in the Fall in terms of content but this time around I had a better idea of what angles and shots I wanted, as well as what color corrections can be made in camera to avoid obstacles in post-production.

Post-production was more challenging than the filming process. I did not have a lot of practice with Adobe premier. Editing this project gave me a chance to learn how to use this software. When I looked at all my footage for the first time, I was overwhelmed. I knew that I wanted the project to combine elements of cinema vérité and poetic documentary, however, with all the footage I collected I did not know where to begin. The piece begins and ends with my mother laying out the cards on a table. As she performs this ritual, my Babushka's voice singing plays over the images. I wanted to show my mother doing the cards alone to signify the tradition carrying on to her. Although she doing the layout alone, the presence of my Babushka's singing symbolizes her physical presence and influence. My grandmother's voice opens the piece to introduce her constant presence in our lives. Her voice then fades into my mother's narration that plays over a majority of the film. I recorded several conversations with my mother but chose this one in particular because it explains my Babushka's memory and how doing these cards has established an even stronger relationship between all of us. The other recordings reference how my grandmother learned to tell fortunes and how my

mother and I both grew up doing the cards and going to see fortunetellers. Unfortunately with the time limit I was not able to include those conversations. I hope to continue this piece and incorporate more of the background history of my Russian heritage and this tradition of fortune telling. For this cut, however, I wanted to place the viewer into this world without providing an explicit description of what the cards mean or that my grandmother or mother are reading fortunes. This cut is more about how the cards symbolize our connection and the traditions that my Babushka still remembers. The viewer is more like a visitor into this cultural tradition. The film oscillates between images of my mother and grandmother separate and together. My one cameo serves to represent how this tradition passes through the three generations. I did not include fast cuts between each image, I want the piece to move patiently over each scene as all the images have a deeply personal meaning to the three of us. Once I became more nimble with Premier, although I still have a lot to learn, the editing process proceeded rather easily. I feel that my strong connection to my mother and Babushka helped me pace my project. I expect that because my film is so intimate, the viewers will be able to sense the emotional connection. to place the viewer within the context of Russian culture. and interactions between my mother and grandmother, I depict an impressionistic tribute to my Babushka and her influence on my mother and I. Imagery of the cards and the three of us laying out the cards or shuffling them run throughout the film.

Working on Adobe Premier this Spring was much easier. I felt far more comfortable with the software and I was able to finesse the sound and polish the color

and transitions far more smoothly than last semester. This film is significantly longer than last semester's version and contains a lot more explanation and insight into the world I am attempting to reveal to the audience.

Looking at my completed project I feel that I achieved what I had intended: a visual and oral account of this intergenerational relationship along with this Russian tradition. My project speaks to both my family and the intimacy of that connection as well as to the greater context of female spirituality. I wanted to evoke the importance of a woman's intuition and the validation of her emotions. I engaged what I had learned as a media studies major and through studying documentary film. This project is just the beginning, however. I hope to continue to add to this piece and record my Babushka's history and my mother's memories and to delve deeper into our tradition of fortune telling. As a woman hoping to become a filmmaker, I feel especially drawn towards the subject of women and all of their complexities. This piece not only honors my relationship with my Babushka and my mother, it also honors the relationship of all generations of women and the bonds we share with one another.

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