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‘... and then you shoot them!’ A Conversation with Filmmaker Jorge Thielen-Armand

Steven Colburn

This conversation took place at the Frames of Representation global documentary cinema festival at the ICA in April 2017.¹ It also features practice-led PhD researchers Elena Dirstaru (University of Essex) and Helene Kazan (Goldsmiths). Armand is a filmmaker born in Venezuela who studied and is based in Canada.² His first film *Flor de la mar* focuses on a remote fishing village in Venezuela.³ His second film *La Soledad*, showing at Frames of Representation, features his childhood home in Venezuela.⁴ The conversation highlights the consilience of documentary as cinema and documentary as research. It aired shared concerns with the process of designing and producing cinema, along with reflections on becoming a filmmaker. This paper highlights the value of conversations between documentarians and researchers and identifies potential for sharing insights and comparing practices in the documenting of knowledge.

Becoming a Filmmaker

Jorge Thielen-Armand: I studied communications in a liberal arts school. I realised that filmmaking encapsulated all of the areas that I loved, particularly anthropology, photography and the study of visual arts. I took a class in international film history and a screenwriting class and started going down this path.

Steven Colburn: [*La Soledad*] could have made quite an interesting essay for a human rights course or you could have done it as a photography project.

JTA: I think the experience of making a film is very exciting. To go somewhere and talk to people, record them, immortalise them. In media studies classes we talked a lot about the role and power the moving image can have. It is different to reading an article about what is happening in Venezuela. When you see it in the face of a character, it is really powerful.

¹ ‘Frames of Representation: New Visions for Documentary Cinema’, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (21-29 April 2017). For further information see the Frames of Representation website <<http://www.framesofrepresentation.com/>> [accessed 15 September 2017].

² Jorge Thielen-Armand, ‘Biography’, <<http://www.tarmand.com/about/>> [accessed 15 September 2017].

³ *Flor de la mar*, dir. Jorge Thielen-Armand (self-released, 2015).

⁴ *La Soledad*, dir. Jorge Thielen-Armand (Biennale College, 2016).

Elena Dirstaru: I've made two films before. One of them, in Romania, was about women's rights in the Gypsy community. While I didn't have any personal connection to it, I did know a lot of the people before. I had built a relationship with them before I started thinking about making the film. That made a huge difference. It really helps to know the people [you are filming].

JTA: It's an essential part of this kind of filmmaking. If you just show up with a camera one day and say 'Hey, can I interview you?' you are going to get a very flat image. Much like a journalist who goes to a country and interviews people on the street, I would advise you to go there before shooting. Go visit, talk to people, photograph them. You can film a little but you go away, think about it, rewrite, and then make the film. I wish I did that with [my first] film because you never know what to expect. When you go on a research trip you learn so much.

Documentary Fieldwork

ED: Lots of the filmmakers at this festival seem to like the big crew approach to filmmaking. I don't think it works for the kind of films I want to make or the kind of person I am. I am interested in building a relationship with people. How do you feel about working with a crew?

JTA: It depends on the type of film you are making.

ED: Having a crew changes the type of film you are making, though, doesn't it?

JTA: Absolutely. With *La Soledad* I went on the research trip alone. The demo was shot by four people. A year later I found the money to make the film and I went back with a crew of twenty-five people. It was a very big challenge. As a director you have to set the rules for the crew. They didn't work like they would for a fiction film. We hired our cast to build their own sets in their house. They were taking real ownership of the film. It was beautiful how that process integrated the film [crew] with the cast.

I would never use any cinematographic language like 'action', 'cut', 'lights' or anything like that. It was always very casual. From briefing my crew, [we had] signs to say 'stop recording' but they would not really stop. I would turn around and we would keep filming. It was a very playful approach. I also briefed the crew and subjects to bring their own ideas to the film; what they thought we should do in a scene. Again to empower them into feeling we were really making something together and not just my vision

because filming is a collaborative art form. We filmed [their ideas] and sometimes [they] would end up in the edit because the film changes; what you write is different to what you film and what you film is different to what you edit and what you edit is different to the film the audience sees.

The lights we used were very minimal and always coming from outside. I didn't want the artifice [of the equipment] in the room. We would break rules. When you are filming you are not supposed to have the television on, you are supposed to create a fake television light because the speed of the frame rate is not the same as the camera. It creates a flicker. I found it important to have the real television because the kid would really engage with the television. We would film for a long time and she would forget we were filming.

SC: Did you tell your subjects afterwards that you carried on filming?

JTA: They sort of knew to trust me. They knew the synopsis of the film but they didn't know what we were going to do every day. Before filming there was training. We called it 'dynamics'. We didn't teach them how to act but we taught them how to react. How to look at each other, touch each other, be comfortable holding each other's gaze, to play and that everything is valid. If we shoot a scene and a loud ambulance goes by the scene is not ruined. An ambulance goes by and they react. It becomes part of the scene.

It is never going to be like real life because the camera is there. People get used to the presence of the camera and there are things you can do to make people comfortable. One of the values of the research trip is that you can help people react to the presence of the camera. It is something you can work through when you are doing the [dynamics] exercises. I would tell the camera operator to put the camera very close to their face so they get used to having the camera there. When real filming started there was a much bigger camera. Filmmaking is a very violent art. You come in, you block the street, you say 'action' and then you shoot them! You take their resources and then you leave. The interesting thing, and what I love about documentaries, [is] you can really reduce all of that.

SC: You are talking about *La Soledad* as a documentary but it is recreated and scripted. Where do you think the boundary is between documentary and fiction?

JTA: I try to not think about genres. I'm just making cinema. Reality is an interpretation. Everything is subjective. For me, *La Soledad* is a documentary because the people in the film are real and they are versions of themselves. Whenever you are making something where the people on camera are versions of themselves, for me, that qualifies as documentary. It is fiction as well because even though the narrative and the drama you see on screen is very much related to what is happening in their life there are, absolutely, fictional elements inserted. But they are not completely fictional. Even the search for the gold comes from the legend that I was told as a child: that there was gold buried in this house.

SC: It would have been very easy to extrapolate the story into something much more dramatic.

JTA: Yes. That was a challenge. How real do you make it? How fictional? If you are trying to make it fictional you should let go of reality, in order for the story to work. Drama needs certain elements for it to be effective. I wanted to make a straight up documentary but that was never going to be possible because my family members were not going to be interviewed about it. They owned the house and were going to kick out the people who lived in the house. The film was financed by Biennale College, run by the Venice Film Festival. It is for directors making their first or second feature films. They forced me to write a script. They told me 'write a script and throw the script out of the window if you want when you are finished'. But you have to know where you are going. I had to deliver the film in eight months.

ED: When I went to University and started to make documentaries it was all about 'you have to do this', 'you have to be ethical', 'you need to shoot in this way', 'you need to shoot in a way that makes it more realistic', 'you need to make these cuts', 'you can't ask people to re-enact anything'.

JTA: You hear stories of Werner Herzog [making] one of his subjects close and open a car door repeatedly as if he had OCD. When I was making *Flor de la mar* I interviewed a politician from the government institution that was responsible for money that disappeared. I was asking very direct questions and he started talking about another project they were doing. When I was editing the film I tried to make it [appear] he was saying something bad about the site. My producer was completely against it and forced me to take it out.

Funding and Stakeholders

SC: Biennale insisted that you have a script. Did they have any other requirements of you?

JTA: They gave me full financing for the film and the only requirements were that I premiere the film at the Venice Film Festival and their logo is the first and only logo that appears at the start of the film. They gave me complete control and I had mentors that I could ask questions. You can make your first or second feature film. It is important that you look at the requirements. It has to be a micro-budget film.

SC: Elena, you also have a funder for your research.

ED: It's helpful also in terms of telling people this is a film that is funded by the AHRC. My previous film was part of some festivals because the organisers found me on the CHASE website. It's fantastic but I don't think the money is the most important part of it. It's the access to a wide range of people who might be interested in it [the film].

JTA: I think it is important to note that having a financed film, with money from an institution that is not going to meddle at all in your creative decisions, is a very unique [situation]. I think that where most documentaries are commissioned for broadcast, they have a heavy say in how you are going to make the film. You don't always have full creative control.

ED: Would you consider making a documentary for TV?

JTA: It depends who you work for. Usually there is a pretty healthy relationship between the filmmaker and commissioner. I think I would because there is always something to learn in the filmmaking process. It is important to consider, when making a documentary for TV or making a documentary as a profession, there is an investment of time. I wouldn't sign up to make a TV documentary series that is going to take three years of my life. There is a trade-off between money and time that is very important in this lifestyle of filmmaking, but time is more important, no?

SC: You're also a photographer.

JTA: Yes I am, and photography for me is great for that purpose. There is very little post-production set up; you go in, take photos, deliver them to the editor then the client and you're finished.

ED: The films you have made so far have been very personal stories. Presumably, if you were going to move into television then you [would] have to pick broader topics?

JTA: You can find personal connections. You make them up. You are making a story about ‘pandas in the forest of x place’, you can find a personal connection. It is never going to be as strong as the one you want to make [to] your past, your country, or what is happening to your neighbour.

Memory, Nostalgia and Trauma

SC: A theme I picked out [in *La Soledad*] was memory. Your memories of living in the house but also a collective memory of the country. The stories about gold being hidden in houses spoke to a history, perhaps colonial, of the country. I’m interested in how useful documentary cinema is in capturing memories for other audiences, relative to other media such as the written word or more ‘academic’ approaches.

JTA: The film starts with a memory and the house itself is a memory and the film closes again with a memory. Memory, for me when making the film, was important. Not only from the personal connection that I have with the house and the story but also the collective memory of the country. It is a country that has changed radically in the past fifteen years. The government has worked to erase memory. They have changed the name of the country, the flag, the name of our currency, the time zone of the country, they changed everything in their way. The only thing they haven’t changed [is] the national anthem. I don’t know why. It is what these regimes do to stay in power. Now there is a generation of teenagers that were born under [Hugo] Chavez and it’s all they know. The rest is erased or talked about in a very negative way.

SC: What are the challenges, working under the conditions you are talking about where the government is systematically changing everything and you are trying to capture a memory from a period of time before things have changed?

JTA: I think the film is not really capturing but talking about the memories from the perspective of the present. I think also what drove me to make this film was the fact that no film had yet talked about what is happening in Venezuela in such a direct way. I don’t know if they will. I hope other people will make

films about what is happening today, because I believe in a type of cinema that is a kind of mirror that can create more understanding.

Helene Kazan: How do you deal with the issue of nostalgia and capturing memory? You want to tell a story but it is not necessarily about a nostalgic look. This is actually reclaiming history. Especially when you are talking about your home because that is such a complex space.

JTA: With *La Soledad*, it couldn't not be a nostalgic look because it is my past. When you are making something more broad there is a danger of wanting to idealise the past but I think it depends on you and your relationship with the subject and whether you are ok with romanticising the past. I don't think it is unethical for a filmmaker to take a stance.

HK: I feel sometimes that people put things aside because of nostalgia. They don't take the history of the country as seriously as they perhaps should.

JTA: It is a matter of where you want to go with the film. With *La Soledad* I was very interested in a narrative story. It is your choice and it is not [a case of] one is better than the other.

HK: I agree, people will witness in both ways. Narrating is important.

SC: You could, equally, overstate the importance of the broader context because, at its heart, *La Soledad* is a personal story.

HK: It's a struggle, because it's always a personal story. I also started off making a film about my experience of leaving my home during conflict. It's a very emotional moment.

JTA: When you make it personal you allow people to connect. If you feel that struggle, go and make it more personal, make it about yourself.

ED: I'm making a film in Romania about political prisoners during the Communist regime and they all tend to talk about their memories in a very superficial way. They are not subjective at all and I am trying to get them to be a bit more subjective, even to be a bit more nostalgic like you said.

SC: Do you think that is because of trauma?

ED: All the men I have spoken to were prisoners, not used to having any personal view of it. They will just tell me the facts of what happened. I have spoken to their families and they are much more subjective

and inclined to talk about what happened to their dad at that time. I think it might have something to do with the trauma. The fact they were imprisoned for nothing.

JTA: You either make them trust you or you move on and cast someone else. You are trying to tell a broader story. Going there and talking to people sometimes you will find different ways of telling the story.

ED: It is a part of my research; how people respond to interviews. I think it will be really fascinating to see how people react and the next stage will be to find people who are more open to talk about their experiences.

SC: There might be an opportunity to look at ways of developing a rapport with your subjects; maybe filming them for longer so the official response might crack a bit and give way to something a bit more personal. That would be an interesting perspective on interview techniques. How duration, how much time you spend with someone, affects the interview process. Where you start off with one person, you finish the interview with someone slightly different, who knows you a bit better.

Impact: Reception

HK: What has the response been [in Venezuela] compared to what you might have expected?

JTA: The film hasn't screened in Venezuela yet. We are planning the theatrical release for the end of June [2017], although my feeling is to postpone because of the turmoil there. It is the moment for a film like this but, in order for it to be effective, people have to be able to watch it and get to a cinema. The closest response I have had to a Venezuelan audience has been in Miami. There is a large Venezuelan diaspora in Miami who can understand and relate to the film in relation to leaving the country and returning. A very different response showing the film in Miami compared to showing the film in Venice. When I showed the film in Venice, and it will probably happen in London too, people were discovering for the first time what is happening in the country.

SC: Who do you make your films for?

JTA: For myself and also for a purpose: to show what is happening in Venezuela. I hope people watch it so I think about how I am going to make it.

HK: [My] second film, which is looking at an erased history of the effects of the Second World War on Lebanon and Syria, is focused at audiences here and in Lebanon.

SC: The ideal outcome for both of you would be that your films are seen in Venezuela and in Lebanon respectively. And they have an effect.

JTA: Yes, of course, you don't make it just to keep it to yourself. A film cannot be a film without an audience. It is important to think about the audience when you are making the film.

ED: I came to documentary film from a human rights perspective. I see my audience as anyone who wants to see or make films that will help certain communities get representation and raise awareness of their plight. The film I made in Nepal a couple of years ago didn't turn out to be a film that I would like. It [was a] very generic, informative documentary about women in rural Nepal. But it turned out to be a really fantastic tool for the activist that was in the film. She takes it to other communities and has used it to raise more money for her activities in the area.

SC: I'm conscious that, particularly for documentary cinema, the first place that a film goes is to the festival circuit. That is the first gatekeeping exercise for documentary cinema.

JTA: When you are making a film, and it's your first or second film, you want to keep making films. There are two personal objectives; making money [and] making your next film. With this film, and the last one, I have prioritised making the next film. You consider the festivals and go as far as thinking, 'This film is for which festival?' 'This is a Sundance film'. Maybe that sounds fake but you attend these festivals, meet the programmers and see what sort of films are for the festivals.

ED: At first we made it to various human rights festivals, which was really great. The biggest film festival it was at was the London Film Festival. It felt a bit odd to be in front of a big audience with this little film that I made!

JTA: There are the audience film festivals and the critic film festivals. There are festivals where you get invited, go there and not only meet the audience but also market the film. You have to go there and become friends with broadcasters, journalists, and get the word out about your topic. That is also an important role [of festivals]. You can also make a film that is straight for the internet or television. Some

[films] might be better suited for that. You can make a film for the web and reach even more people. It is all about the distribution that you want for the film.

Power Structures

SC: What do you think about the power dynamics of the set up? In academia you have a similar situation but the curators are peer reviewers. They are academics themselves who have gone through the process [of publishing scholarship]. Curators and film critics are not filmmakers. You have people who don't have the experience of making films largely deciding which films are...

JTA: ... going to be successful. It is a very complicated part [of the process]. Relationships are very important, however I don't think a good programmer would take your film if you can't stand behind it. The role of a festival agent is important because they know [the curator's] taste. My agent takes fifty per cent and all she does is send an email! Then [my] fifty per cent is split between the production company and the producers. With a screening fee of five hundred euros I am lucky if I end up with one hundred.

ED: Depressing...!

I would characterise the documentary cinema landscape as 'challenging' rather than 'depressing'. I hoped the conversation would uncover parallels between the experiences of practice-based researchers, where documentary cinema is the mode of practice, and documentary filmmakers. To an extent this was achieved by highlighting the similar experiences of being funded by an organisation such as Biennale College and CHASE, exploring the power structures, such as peer review and curation, which assign success, and noting the similar motivations for documentarians, whether seeking critical acclaim or research excellence. A more fruitful discussion would have given more time for the practice-based researchers to think about their methodologies in more detail and respond to questions and feedback from Jorge Thielen-Armand. The arguably prevailing hierarchy that favours critical acclaim over (research) excellence perhaps foreshadowed the dynamics of the conversation. Jorge talked at length about his

experiences and answered many questions where the researchers seemed happy to ask questions and listen to Jorge's insights.

Practice-based research is a relatively new approach to conducting research and obtaining a PhD. Universities are designed to support the study and production of books. Every university, to my knowledge, has a library. Not every university, to my knowledge, has a video production lab, with facilities to enable a significant number of students to produce a quantity (and quality) of audio-visual research. The current approach to practice-based research has also assumed that it will take the same amount of time to produce practice-based research as it does to produce the traditional circa 80,000 words PhD thesis (four years maximum). It seems to make sense for practice-based researchers to consider the work of pre-eminent practitioners in their respective fields to, at least, aid in the assessment of the time, space and support required to produce documentary research of a quality that will make a significant original contribution to their field.

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